



Strong sustainable consumption governance – precondition for a degrowth path?

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to link two debates and literatures at the cutting edge of sustainable development research and governance: sustainable consumption and degrowth. Interestingly, these literatures have only recently started to exchange and integrate insights, despite their similar interest in the fundamental systemic challenges to sustainable development. The paper argues that this lack of connection is due to a predominance of perspectives in sustainable consumption governance that focus almost exclusively on questions of efficiency gains. This “weak sustainable consumption” governance, however, is not able to address the challenges to sustainable development arising from overconsumption in general or the rebound effect and distributive issues in particular. In contrast, a “strong sustainable consumption” perspective provides a basis for a promising inquiry into the linkages between consumption and sustainable development as well as a fruitful exchange with degrowth. Specifically, it allows the delineation of relevant insights on the role of values in governance, obstacles to political reform, and promising political strategies for the degrowth debate and literature.

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1. Introduction

Humanity is facing a variety of serious sustainability challenges. On the environmental side, its global warming and resource scarcity. On the social side, we observe increasing inequity. At the same time, a reliance on growth, innovation and technological solutions builds a locked-in situation in a system, hindering an effective targeting of these challenges if not contributing to them. Beyond the effects on humans themselves, further burden is placed on the biosphere and biodiversity. All this calls for radical changes (Tukker, 2008), as discussed in the degrowth debate.

The starting point of our argument is the assumption that the sustainable consumption¹ debate and literature can provide important information on need and strategies for radical changes to the degrowth debate (and vice versa). Admittedly, this is only the case for the part of the sustainable consumption debate that focuses on what we term strong sustainable consumption (sSC), i.e. a sustainable consumption approach focusing on the question of

appropriate levels² and patterns of consumption, paying attention to the social dimension of well-being, and assessing the need for changes based on a risk-averse perspective. Much of the sustainable consumption literature is dominated by what we would term a weak sustainable consumption (wSC) approach, i.e. an approach focusing on improving the efficiency of consumption (primarily via technological improvements). Such an approach, however, is limited when it comes to providing solutions to today's sustainability challenges due to its lack of attention to questions of justice, its inability to deal with the rebound effect and its neglect of overall limits, for example.³

If one wants to insert insights from the sustainable consumption debate into the degrowth debate, therefore, one first needs to separate the wheat from the chaff. On that basis, then, it is easy to show that sSC speaks directly to the core interests of the degrowth debate. In fact, both approaches, sSC and degrowth depend on each other. Strong sustainable consumption governance as

² In our argument, we take what was formerly called a “Northern” perspective as described by Galbraith (1958) or Schor (1999) and has become the perspective of the global consumer class. We are focusing on a reduction in consumption and the environmental and social burdens that consumption causes see Dauvergne (2008). The situation of people with low consumption capacities, see Sen (1999), is taken into account in the argument only in so far as the reduction targets of the affluent have to be high enough to leave resources and ensure sustainable consumption for those under-consuming, too.

³ See, Hanley et al. (2009).

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¹ Scholars and political decision makers often use sustainable consumption with different meanings in mind. In this article, sustainable consumption is used to refer to sustainable resource consumption, taking into account the complete product life cycle (for an analysis of alternative uses of the term sustainable consumption see Lorek, 2010). Sustainable resource consumption involves the consumption patterns of industries, governments, households, and individuals as Agenda 21 points out.

a comprehensive approach to the pursuit of sustainable development is a precondition for degrowth. At the same time, sSC governance will not be achievable without a societal acceptance of degrowth.

The implications for research and governance arising from an sSC perspective, therefore, offer a promising basis for a fruitful exchange between the sustainable consumption and degrowth debates and literatures. Specifically, sSC research can make valuable contributions to degrowth's existing discussions on necessary changes, political stumbling blocks as well as potential strategies. In terms of scenarios for the future of our societies, sSC can turn a degrowth path from the widely assumed 'worst case scenario' into a promising strategy for avoiding (eco-)system collapse. Latouche compares a planful degrowth strategy with a 'healthy diet voluntarily undertaken to improve personal well-being', while negative economic growth can be compared to starvation (Latouche, 2010). We would argue that sSC can provide recipes for the diet.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 briefly reminds us of the core challenges faced by human kind, which both degrowth and sustainable consumption scholars aim to address. Section 3 focuses on the different facets of the sustainable consumption literature, contrasting weak and strong sustainable consumption and elaborating the merits of an sSC perspective in general and for the degrowth debate. Section 4, then, links sSC to degrowth. It first surveys relevant insights from sSC research and then develops implications of a strong sustainable consumption perspective for governance towards degrowth. Section 5 concludes the article by summarizing the argument.

2. The common challenge

Since the beginning of the sustainable development debate (Brundtland, 1987; Norwegian Ministry for the Environment, 1994; United Nations, 1992) the global situation has hardly improved in the overall picture. Humanity meanwhile uses about 40% more resources in one year than nature can regenerate within a year (Global Footprint Network, 2010). The non-renewable resource crude oil – the centre of the global industrialized economy – has potentially reached its peak supply already. A detailed assessment of more than 800 oil fields in the world, covering three quarters of global reserves, has found that most of the biggest fields have already peaked and that the rate of decline in oil production is now running at nearly twice the pace as that calculated just two years ago. Newly discovered oil fields are smaller and in most cases the oil is more difficult to extract (Campbell and Laherrère, 1998; Hirsch, 2005, 2008; IEA, 2008). Many existing alternatives face their own potential shortages as well. Critical minerals needed, for example, for photovoltaic energy production are scarce and their calculated demand is up to 6 times higher than the current extraction rate (Institute für Zukunftsstudien und Technologiebewertung, 2009). There is not enough land to satisfy world energy demand with bio-fuels, which moreover compete with food production in terms of land use (Heinberg, 2003; Kunstler, 2006). Given the threat of climate change, fossil fuels can also not provide an alternative. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warns that we are far from achieving the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions necessary to keep global warming below the official goal of 2 degrees and that governments only have until 2015 to introduce the required changes (IPCC, 2007). Similar challenges exist with respect to the provision of a sustainable food supply, biodiversity, and general eco-system health. With foreseeable limits of (cheap) oil and the lack of alternatives and with the enormous costs our protein heavy food consumption patterns impose on global eco-systems, our energy based highly industrialized and globalized lifestyle is

obviously under strain. It is not just a matter of how to produce goods with less energy or how to transport them around the globe. It also challenges our lifestyle, where and how we live, work, eat and relax.

And this has just been the environmental perspective. In addition to resource shortages and environmental problems, we face critical social challenges. Use patterns are dramatically uneven around the world. An average inhabitant of Europe consumes three times as many resources as an inhabitant of Asia and more than four times as much as an African. Inhabitants of other rich countries consume up to 10 times more than people in developing countries (SERI, 2000). In addition, social cleavages are widening even within the rich countries.

These challenges motivate efforts of both sustainable consumption and degrowth scholars and activists. While the sustainable consumption literature, at least initially, has tended to emphasize the environmental side of the problems a bit more, the degrowth debate has tended to pay somewhat more attention to the social challenges. Both debates, however, are well aware of the two dimensions of the challenges ahead and, importantly, their interaction.

3. Sustainable consumption – separating the wheat from the chaff

The recognition of the above challenges induced a multitude of political and scientific activities to foster changes in the sustainable consumption and production patterns. As one of the earliest international gatherings on the issue the Oslo Symposium on Sustainable Consumption was held in 1994. It defined sustainable consumption as

... the use of services and related products which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimising the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as the emissions of waste and pollutants over the life-cycle so as not to jeopardise the needs of future generations. (Norwegian Ministry for the Environment, 1994)

This definition has formed the basis for the Sustainable Consumption Work Programme of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (1995) (CSD) and countless governmental and non-governmental meetings and publications since. According to it, sustainable consumption seeks to achieve a good life for everyone within the constraints of the Earth's capacity.

However, two perspectives on how to reach sustainable consumption have developed, which the following sections elaborate. They show that the two perspectives are based on different conceptual assumptions. What we term the 'weak sustainable consumption' approach is rooted in market approaches and technological optimism. Strong sustainable consumption, in turn, emphasizes social innovation as a starting point and strategically takes a technologically pessimistic position. Observing the two sustainable consumption discourses from a bird's eye perspective, we point out that sSC shares names and partially history with wSC but that it, in fact, has closer links in goals and approaches with the degrowth debate.

3.1. Weak sustainable consumption

The wSC approach assumes that sustainable consumption can be achieved via improvements in (energy) efficiency resulting from technological solutions, and, frequently, that these technical solutions will spread through markets due to consumer demand. Tracing the history of global sustainable consumption governance, Fuchs and Lorek (2005) have shown how this approach achieved

dominance in political and scientific contexts over time. It is nowadays called the concept of “Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP)” in official discourse and further increased its popularity with the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg 2002 (WSSD, 2002) and the resulting “Marrakech Process to develop a 10 Year Framework of Programmes for SCP” (UNEP/UN DESA, 2010). A multitude of publications and projects have developed under the heading SCP. They tend to give emphasis to best practice and often single product advice to consumers. As a result of the focus on commodities, on products and services, one of the major elements of this discourse is to encourage consumers to play their roles as active market actors and to take responsibility to buy green or more sustainable products (European Commission, 2008). In fact, wSC is a greening approach for selected products, for some individuals or a few lifestyle groups rather than a coherent and comprehensive concept for sustainable development (Hartmann, 2009). Fedrigo and Hontelez (2010) therefore renamed the SCP concept ‘Sustainable Consumer Procurement’. In this vein, the documents of the European Commission on sustainable consumption, such as its “Sustainable Consumption and Production and Sustainable Industrial Policy Action Plan” (European Commission, 2008), for instance, talk about “smarter consumption”, “better products”, as well as “global markets for sustainable products”.

Changes in consumer demand can lead to changes in the markets, of course. Water saving appliances and so-called “white goods,” like washing machines and refrigerators, are typical examples of products, for which a rise in consumer demand for more efficient products led to significant improvements in average energy consumption rates. Still, other appliances like TV sets have failed to become less resource consuming over time. Here, improvements in energy efficiency resulting from technological innovation are more than made up by the higher energy use associated with ever increasing screen sizes.

Without doubt a product-based (and partly service-based) approach relying on technological development and its success in the market is a necessary step towards sustainable consumption. It is not a sufficient step, however, as we will explicate after having introduced the sSC approach.

3.2. Strong sustainable consumption

The sSC approach is based on the assumption that changes in consumption levels and patterns are necessary to achieve sustainable consumption. The approach emphasizes the need for a reduction in overall resource consumption instead for product-based individual consumption and the guiding perspective as thus refers back to the roots of the sustainable consumption agenda developed at the Earth Summit in Rio 1992 (Cohen, 2010; Fuchs and Lorek, 2005; Jackson, 2006; Princen et al., 2002). Moreover, the sSC approach reaches beyond consumption as an economic activity taking place in markets based on monetary values and stresses non-material contributions to a ‘good life’ (Layard, 2005; Marks et al., 2006). Further on, it considers people not only in terms of their function as consumers, but as citizens as such and accepts the social embeddedness of consumption decisions. Thus, sSC pays attention to activities like neighbourhood exchange, community or subsistence work and attempts to increase human well-being through social structures (Manzini and Jégou, 2003) and the way time is used, for instance (Jalas, 2002; Maniates, 2010; Spangenberg and Lorek, 2002) instead of material possession (Hofstetter and Madjar, 2003). In doing so, it overcomes the partly artificial distinction between production and consumption which is rooted in the economic distinction between business and households (Röpke, 2009) and helps to include resource use provided without

entering the market, like food provision from subsistence production. This way an sSC perspective helps to build a bridge between individual consumption and resource management (Mont and Bleischwitz, 2007). Through an integration of the social dimensions, furthermore, sSC also addresses questions of social coherence or gender issues, for example (Schultz et al., 2001).

The most challenging point for sustainable consumption governance is the effective provision of human well-being. As such, sustainable consumption needs to be linked to the question of the good life (Di Giulio et al., forthcoming). In practice, this means that we have to consider the quality of services and the degree to which they meet human needs. The well-being effect can be expected to be quite high, when the service or product fulfils basic needs like food or shelter. It can just as clearly be expected to be less high, if the service is one’s 20th pair of shoes, however efficiently and fairly they might have been produced and traded. Sustainable consumption implies channelling resource use towards those consumers where marginal utility is highest. This indicates, in turn, the need to ensure that reductions in material consumption fall to those with the lowest marginal utility of consumption, the wealthy (Beddoe et al., 2009).

3.3. Separating the wheat from the Chaff

If one compares the two approaches described above, it becomes obvious that wSC might be a necessary strategy for the pursuit of sustainable development, but that it clearly is not a sufficient one. Its biggest obstacle appears to be the blind trust in future technological solutions, which are supposed to help solve the problems of resource scarcity, and the associated inability to address the rebound effect as well as issues of social justice. Considering the ecological and social challenges we face, slight adjustments within the system relying on technological solutions and a product-based sustainable consumption approach will not suffice to foster the radical changes needed for achieving sustainability. At best, this approach can postpone disasters (Garner, 2000).

Borrowing from Costanza (1989), then, one can argue that in order to reach sustainability in the context of insecure technological development (as well as environmental uncertainty) we should perhaps strive for the best in technological innovation, while maintaining a pessimistic view and pursuing risk-averse policies, at the same time. Only in this way, we can avoid disaster in the case that technological innovation fails to deliver solutions. It is a pathway worth pursuing, even if it is at the price of only moderate (economic) development. And in the case that technology can fulfil the expectations to solve the problems, sSC governance still is most likely the better option. With its emphasis on social aspects it runs less the risk of furthering a highly asymmetric distribution of wealth. In other words, for sustainable development the radical and systemic changes indicated by the sSC perspective will be necessary for allowing the greatest potential for a good life for everyone within the carrying capacity of the earth.

4. Linking sSC and degrowth

The explicit goal of sSC to enable everybody to live a good life is promoted by the degrowth movement, as well. While emphasizing the goals of social equity (or also democratic participation) even more, the degrowth literature also aims to solve the challenge of scarce resources and their use and distribution (Flipo and Schneider, 2008; Research and Degrowth, 2010). Like sSC, degrowth inquires into the possibilities of and need for changes in fundamental paradigms in the interest of long-term societal sustainability. In this context, the insights on political obstacles and opportunities, which sSC research

has gained, may provide a useful contribution to the degrowth debate. In terms of politics, moreover, sustainable consumption – even if recently mostly used in its weak form – already has a step in the door in policy processes on all levels of governance. Degrowth, in turn, offers the societal component that much of sustainable consumption research and governance lost, while getting occupied with the weak SCP debate. To combine the strengths of degrowth and sustainable consumption research, therefore, could be beneficial for both sides. Here, however, we will concentrate on the potential contribution of sSC to the degrowth debate.

Three areas exist, in which sSC can most clearly provide interesting insights for the degrowth debate: the role of norms and values in governance for sustainable development, political obstacles to governance for sustainable development, and political strategies for governance of sustainable development. The following sections discuss each in turn.

4.1. Norms and values in sSC governance

If one reflects on sSC governance at the surface level only, one might expect it to be about voluntary personal sacrifice. Yet, this would be a misinterpretation of the concept. Two arguments may be given against this, both relating to the urgency of change delineated above. The first argument focuses on the term “sacrifice” (Maniates and Meyer, 2010). It suggests that rather than sacrificing well-being, individuals trade long-term environmental and social sustainability against moderate reductions in current economic growth, if we act soon enough, i.e. as long as a sufficient wealth in resources allows room for steering (Princen, 2010). In this context, non-material factors, such as social cohesion and equity, belongingness, participation, or safety – can increasingly contribute to well-being and balance necessary reductions in material use as soon as some basic level of material need fulfilment is ensured (Rauschmayer et al., 2008; Scitovsky, 1992).

The second argument focuses on the emphasis on “voluntary” and “personal” choices in the above perception. Given that the individual is deeply embedded on societal, economic, and political structures, sSC governance and similarly degrowth governance will have to focus on the need for structural changes, which, in turn, is where governance if not government becomes important. After all, the individual frequently has little ability to change relevant structures, and – given that society does not just have cooperative facets, but also competitive ones associated with free-riding incentives – willingness to change them. This does not mean that individual, voluntary approaches should not be appreciated. However, groups and movements such as the voluntary simplicity movement (Doherty and Etzioni, 2003; Elgin, 1993; Maniates, 2002), which has recently gained attention in marketing concepts such as LOVOS “Lifestyle of Voluntary Simplicity” or voluntary downshifting (Hamilton, 2010), tend to include small sectors of society, only. These approaches form an important contribution to sSC governance in affluent, over-consuming population groups, but they do not suffice to solve system-wide problems. Several scientific approaches have started to explore governance opportunities for the kinds of substantial structural reforms that are needed, i.e. that would go beyond the inclusion of external costs in prices or other market-related approaches. These approaches include System Innovation research (Tukker, 2008), Evolutionary Economics (Boulding, 1991), or Critical Realism (Archer, 1998; Bhaskar, 1978; Lorek, 2010), for example. However, much works remains to be done.

Importantly, saying that sSC governance is not about voluntary, personal sacrifice is not meant to imply that sSC and degrowth governance are not related to questions of values. Albeit, they are about societal values rather than merely individual ones, about long-term values rather than short-term gains, and about

prevention and risk aversion rather than environmental and social gambles. In this context, the sufficiency principle elaborated in the sustainable consumption literature fits well. Again, sufficiency interpreted as an individual approach does not carry far enough. Rather, as Princen (2005) argues, the idea of sufficiency needs to be an organising principle for society.⁴ Such a structural focus on governance based on the principle of sufficiency does indeed seem to be necessary. Alcott points out that resource consumption avoided through individual acts of sufficiency is quite likely made up by other groups of the emerging consumer class and does not increase the amount available for those, who are most in need of an increase in consumption (Alcott, 2008; Beddoe et al., 2009).

4.2. Political obstacles

A second area, in which sSC research can contribute relevant insights to the degrowth debate, is the analysis of political obstacles to the necessary reforms. Here, the dominance of wSC in global sustainable consumption governance provides important insights into the adverse winds sSC governance has experienced and degrowth governance is likely to experience. Strong sustainable consumption governance faces the challenge that it is much more attractive for consumers, business, and therefore political decision makers to believe that they only need to buy and produce better products than to have to fundamentally change lifestyles and perhaps buy and produce less goods. One of the major challenges for strong sustainable consumption – as for degrowth – is that it is not in line with the dominant political and societal worldview, mainly the belief in economic growth as recipe to cure all ills.

As Fuchs and Lorek (2005) have shown with a stakeholder analysis of global sustainable consumption governance consumers, business and political decision makers both in governments and IGOs tend to find themselves locked into the “more-is-better” paradigm when it comes to consumption (Jackson, 2009; Princen, 2010; Shove and Walker, 2010). Contrary to frequent claims of the increasing environmental activism of consumers and the growth of corporate citizenship—which much hope in the more optimistic sustainable consumption literature is based upon—the prospects for broad support for sSC strategies from consumers and from business are rather dim. On the consumers’ side, studies have frequently shown that consumers report more ecological intentions than their actions show, that consumers face serious structural constraints even when they have the best intentions, and that the individualization of consumer responsibility ignores the disincentives against sustainable consumption existing in consumer society.

The business sector, in its broad majority, sees the promotion of eco-efficiency as its role with respect to sustainable consumption and tends to reject any responsibility for consumption levels. Moreover, much of today’s global economy is set up for the provision of mass consumption and the associate necessary inducement of ever increasing levels of consumption. There is only limited room for enterprises to distinguish themselves or their products on the basis of social and environmental conduct with corresponding price margins, given both consumer incentives for free-riding as well as limited consumer capacities for information management. Both, consumers and businesses, in turn, influence governments’ positioning towards sustainable consumption. Since consumers are also voters, their opposition reduces the inclination of governments to agree to appropriate international policy measures. Business, in turn, has obtained increasing influence on governments due to its

⁴ Other values discussed by Princen (2010) as necessary foundations of sustainable development are intermittency, capping, and the sacredness of sources.

financial and institutional resources and its increasing legitimacy as a political actor as well (Fuchs, 2005).⁵

Even IGOs increasingly restricted their focus since the early phases of global sustainable consumption governance due to the political sensitivity of the issue, as an analysis of their sustainable consumption activities over time has shown (Fuchs and Lorek, 2005). The one exception to a focus on wSC, UNEP's "Consumption Opportunities" (UNEP, 2001) report, which discussed not only efficient consumption (dematerialisation) but also different consumption (changing infrastructure and choices), conscious consumption (choosing and using more consciously), and appropriate consumption (questioning levels and drivers of consumption) was widely ignored for a decade, even by UNEP itself.⁶ For the WSSD and the Marrakech process, global sustainable consumption governance returned to a limited focus on wSC.

Finally, the dominance of wSC in global sustainable consumption governance is a function of the institutional embedding of sustainable consumption governance. It is greatly facilitated by the fact that the task of working on SCP in opinion-leading countries and regions tends to rest in (frequently economic) ministries and departments, specifically units that formerly dealt with business support and integrated product policy (IPP) (Fuchs and Lorek, 2005; Rehfeld et al., 2007; Rubik and Scholl, 2002; Scheer and Rubik, 2006). This dates back to the times when production was perceived as the main burden for the environment. As a result, the perception of sustainable consumption as an aspect of product policy is quite understandable. Strong sustainable governance just like degrowth governance, thus, clearly requires appropriate institutionalizations.

4.3. Political strategies

The third area, in which sSC research can contribute to the degrowth debate, follows from the two areas discussed above and is the question of promising political strategies. A variety of starting points for heading the adverse winds specified above exist, according to sSC research. They include the promise of a carrot and stick approach, the fostering of social innovation, the sharpening of NGO strategies, and demands for responsible government.

4.4. Carrot and stick

To better motivate sSC and degrowth governance, a two-pronged strategy seems necessary: that is, a carrot and stick approach (Lorek, 2010). The stick in this case is to create a sense of urgency. This means promoting the idea that reducing consumption is not an option, but is going to come anyway. There are evident ecological limits that we can either actively anticipate or passively allow to overcome us. Ensuring a soft landing instead of a hard one solely depends on the ability of proponents of sSC and degrowth to get the message across in due time (Princen, 2010). Promising approaches to make the urgency visible at least for policy makers are currently under way, including the construction of a new set of indicators on sustainable consumption by the European Environmental Agency (Watson et al., 2010).⁷

⁵ The largest support for the uptake of sustainable consumption on the global policy agenda has come from some committed countries (Fuchs and Lorek, 2005). But as various examples have shown, such commitments easily die away with a change in government.

⁶ Interestingly, it seems to be rediscovered recently in the context of knowledge brokerage linking the communities of science, policy, pro-growth and beyond growth (Scholl, 2011).

⁷ The set of indicators on sustainable consumption, which they are just implementing, includes a number of innovations including the consideration of fundamental questions such as: 'are we living within ecological limits, and reducing global environmental pressures caused by our economic activities while improving our welfare?' and 'are the right framework conditions in place to ensure we get there?'.

The carrot in this case is to better bring to attention that a shrinking of economic processes is not as much a disaster as mainstream economics suggests. Alternative measures of well-being (New Economics Foundation, 2009; Stiglitz et al., 2009) can help to overcome the political addiction to growth (van Griethuysen, 2010). It is important to better highlight elements of well-being independent of increasing material consumption. Examples like the US initiative "Take Back Your Time" for reducing working hours and extended holidays are a valid contribution to sSC governance without explicitly focusing on consumption (Maniates, 2010). Also, an expanded public discourse on happiness can help pinpoint the limitations of increasing human well-being through material consumption (Hofstetter and Madjar, 2003; Layard, 2005).

4.5. Social innovation

Important drivers for sSC governance are also likely to come from social innovation. Countless initiatives are on the way within all of the relevant consumption clusters housing, mobility, food and energy. They include the provision of services with an explicitly sustainable character, neighbourhood centres, and alternative, local currencies (Seyfang, 2004, 2007, 2009).⁸ Consumers and citizens are central in innovations that promote sufficiency, and hence have the potential for disruptive innovation, which can change the logic of the dominant consumption-production systems (Lebel et al., 2010; Maniates, 2010; Reusswig, 2010; Zoysa, 2010).⁹ Innovation can also occur in regulatory arrangements, of course, for instance in the form of strategic niche management (Geels, 2002) or the fostering of new social practices (Shove and Walker, 2010; Verheul and Vergragt, 1995). Importantly, however, successful sSC governance depends on a proper exchange between different levels of governance, in order to avoid the limiting of the impact of social innovations to societal niches discussed earlier. The actions at different levels need to be coordinated so that ambitious local initiatives can be supported by national and international institutions and can feed back their results and experiences into national and international processes (Lorek, 2006; Umweltbundesamt, 2002). Thus, timely information about political processes is as necessary at the grassroots level, as a pool of local initiatives is needed to inspire national and international sSC governance.

4.6. Sharpen NGO strategies

Thirdly, NGOs need to sharpen their strategies for successful sSC and degrowth governance with improved coalition building and a fostering of societal debate on the need for real change and supportive societal values.¹⁰ First, improved coalition building and re-orientation towards sustainable consumption would be

⁸ Many innovations in sustainable consumption have already originated from bottom-up processes of civic innovation, such as organic farming (Smith, 2007), wind power (Reusswig et al., 2010) and car-sharing (Mont, 2004). The societal movements on degrowth, mainly the practical experiments in southern Europe, similarly provide a fruitful basis for further development (Lietaert, 2010).

⁹ See also recent research on user-led innovation (Von Hippel, 2005) and social movements as innovators (Jamison, 2001).

¹⁰ These aspects are also being pursued by a recent initiative "SMART CSOs": the development of new narratives emphasizing values and new models of societal organization, the embedding of systems thinking in NGO practice, and the fostering of cross-sectoral collaboration in pursuit of the creation of a new global movement (Narberhaus et al., 2011). As an additional point, the initiative aims to engage funders in the move towards transition.

beneficial.¹¹ For a broad majority of NGOs, there is still a lack of clear understanding about the nature and pivotal challenges of the issue (Church and Lorek, 2007). Yet, most NGOs working on isolated topics such as energy or food, voluntary simplicity or cleaner production can easily link up to a sustainable consumption perspective (Barber, 2007). This awareness that their different tasks have a common goal can strengthen their voice and their potential to bring about change. After such a strategic re-orientation, the possibility to work jointly towards a degrowth path seems much more likely.

Secondly, NGOs need to strengthen their catalyst role by fostering societal debate and communication about values (Akenji, 2007). NGOs are in a key position regarding the development of values and visions of sustainable consumption and fostering citizen engagement (Lorek and Lucas, 2003; Meadows, 1996; Spangenberg and Lorek, 2003). Such a vision and value building role is required similarly for degrowth, as the research on the influence of aspirations and priming on personal and societal well-being shows that acceptance of degrowth policies in the population is not given for the time being (Matthey, 2010).

As part of the strategic re-orientation, NGO campaigning for sustainable consumption has to overcome the habit of promoting sustainable (in fact merely green) consumption based on traditional marketing strategies. NGOs need to distance themselves from wSC as well as from addressing consumers merely as consumers, rather than as citizens. Instead of encouraging individuals to adopt simple and painless behavioural changes that have limited impact, NGOs have to engage in the real issues and talk about the relevant values and promote alternative models of societal organization. Studies have confirmed that an appeal to self-transcendent, intrinsic environmental and social values is more likely to lead to a spill-over into other patterns of behaviour than an appeal to financial self-interest or social status (Kasser, 2011; Schwartz, 1992; WWF, 2008; WWF, 2009).¹² An interesting example for the promotion of alternative models is provided by an NGO coalition in Hungary, which aims to design a policy process for capping resource use (CEEweb, 2010).

4.7. Governmental responsibilities

Finally, successful sSC governance as well as successful degrowth governance will depend on governments taking responsibility and making tough choices. Capping and the protection of sources in the interest of societal sustainability are unavoidable (see also Princen, 2010). It is governments' responsibility to phase out unsustainable consumption options (Church and Lorek, 2007) or carry out choice editing as it is called lately (Maniates, 2010). The current debate on sustainable consumption in political circles, unfortunately, tends to focus predominantly on the policy strategy of information provision. Huge efforts are made again and again to increase the use of informational instruments. The policy instrument of information provision, however, by itself frequently is hampered in its effectiveness by information overflow, conflicting interests, as well as poor instrument design. There is ample evidence, moreover, that hard policies like regulatory instruments and economic instruments are most effective when it comes to the pursuit of sustainable

development (ASCEE Team, 2008; Lorek et al., 2008; Rehfeld et al., 2007).

Related to this overuse of informational instruments is the retreat of government in favour of governance. The governance approach, i.e. the integration of non-state actors in policy design and implementation (for example, in the development of Sustainable Consumption Strategies or Action Plans) can work well, under certain conditions.¹³ One core condition is some form of interest alignment between the relevant non-state actors and the policy objective in question. As discussed above, such an alignment of interests exists only to a limited extent in sSC governance. As long as national governments understand their roles in the governance of sustainable consumption as one of providing opportunities for the exchange of opinions and voluntary commitments that are not controlled, a significant drive towards sSC governance will fail to materialize (Berg, 2006). In consequence, pressuring governments to take responsibility is a crucial strategy to pursue.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we have aimed to develop a basis for a fruitful contribution of the sustainable consumption literature and debate to the degrowth literature and debate. As a first step, we have identified the strong sustainable consumption perspective as the relevant part of a sustainable consumption focus. We have shown that the strong sustainable consumption perspective is highly relevant for the degrowth debate and literature due to its ability to address the core challenges to sustainable development arising from over-consumption, the highly asymmetric distribution of resource use, and the normative underpinnings of the current growth model, in particular technological optimism. Degrowth is impossible to achieve without a turn towards strong sustainable consumption. At the same time, the potential for strong sustainable consumption governance depends on a much better societal acceptance of degrowth. As such, strong sustainable consumption research and governance can strengthen the arguments for degrowth, and vice versa.

Of course, this article could only provide a first step towards an improved exchange between the two debates and the creation of a common basis for learning. The expansion of this inquiry and subsequent discussions in broader fora are highly necessary. Yet, we hope to have provided a ground for a substantial rise in mutual interest and debates.

Where do we go from here? What are the important areas for further research? In general, one has to acknowledge that considerable knowledge on sSC and increasingly on degrowth exists. What is lacking is political action, and the above discussion has highlighted obstacles to this action as well as possible strategies for its pursuit despite the existence of these obstacles.¹⁴ Yet, there are a number of areas in which further research most effectively can support the development of political action.

To increase the speed of change, research can increase the sense of urgency and make the need for action more visible. It needs to come up with clear and time-bound targets of what has to be reduced by when, if we want to remain within our ecological limits. Those scenarios have to highlight the social costs of inaction and the risks for social security from a local to the global level. Scientifically solid targets have to serve here as orientation points for political and societal development (EEA, 2008).

To foster reforms, however, research can not only provide concrete scenarios but also support normative change. We have to

¹¹ Increased political effectiveness can also result from improved coalition building between environmental NGOs and other civil society organisations such as academia or trade unions and a resulting louder voice.

¹² Psychological research has also pointed out that benevolence related words like forgiving, helpful, or honest encouraged people more to volunteer time for social activities (Maio et al., 2009).

¹³ For a critical perspective on (global) governance, see (Hewson and Sinclair, 1999; Fuchs, 2007).

¹⁴ See also the discussion of the knowledge action gap by Lebel et al. (2006).

overcome the barriers in mainstream thinking resulting from the dominance of economic reasoning, today. An important contribution here is the development of alternative ideas about how to measure and communicate what contributes to human well-being. While the need for such measures is increasingly recognised (European Communities, 2007; New Economics Foundation, 2009), further substantial research is needed to find solid answers (Stiglitz et al., 2009). This is where the scientific and partly political discourses on sustainable consumption and degrowth (Flipo and Schneider, 2008; Hinterberger et al., 2009; Kallis et al., 2010) should link up, in particular. Both strains of research could help to overcome the reservations of proponents of wSC to economic shrinking and their trust in green growth. Research on this topic is overdue (Lorek, 1993), as it has the potential to develop scenarios showing that a shrinking economy does not have to lead to social decline (unsustainable degrowth) and that degrowth with an increase in or at least stability of well-being is possible (Bilancini and D'Alessandro, 2010; Jackson, 2009; Spangenberg, 2010).

Further research should also pay additional attention to the social aspects of sustainable consumption. Our knowledge on how to shift those social innovations from the micro to the macro level, in particular, needs to be improved (Manzini and Jégou, 2003; Seyfang, 2009).¹⁵ Furthermore, for the full assessment of goods and services within the context of sustainable development, social and socio-economic life-cycle assessment (LCA) should complement the environmental one. While a first approach has been made to develop guidelines for such an approach (UNEP, 2009), there is an urgent need for carrying out such LCAs empirically.

Finally, NGOs could benefit from better support by research in the form of guidance, not only on what to effectively campaign for, but also on how to best achieve political influence. New and better strategies of lobbying and campaigning might develop more quickly, if there is closer cooperation between science and practice (Tunçer et al., 2009). Likewise, research can highlight institutional opportunities and constraints for NGO involvement in governance processes. While constraints frequently lie in power asymmetries vis-à-vis market actors, particularly promising opportunities for effective involvement based on the discursive power of NGOs can also be identified.

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¹⁵ Interesting supplements in this context are for example the work of Spaargaren (2003) on consumption infrastructure, Schor's (1999, 2004) social-cultural studies on consumer society.

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