



# ”SUSTAINABILITY AND CONSUMPTION – NEAR-TERM AND LONG-TERM STRATEGIES AND INTERVENTIONS”

by **John Thøgersen**

Private consumption is often considered the end goal of economic activity and economic and political success is to a high extent measured in terms of a country's ability to increase private consumption, implicitly or explicitly as a proxy for its ability to fulfil its citizens' consumption needs. In the richest countries of the world, this goal is particularly salient in times of recession, where stimulating private consumption usually captures the centre stage of the policy process.

In developing and emerging countries, the goal of increasing private consumption is more persistently salient. The government of the world's most populous country, China, has recently declared that converting the country from an export- and investment-led to a consumption-led economic model is a key goal for the period 2011-15 (the 12th five-year plan).

On the other hand, private consumption is increasingly viewed as an important cause of environmental degradation and policy discussions on environmental sustainability increasingly turn to private consumption for solutions.

A large and growing share of climate gases and other serious emissions is directly related to private consumption, and even more is indirectly related. Reflecting this, there is a large and increasing focus on the actions and responsibilities of private households in terms of contributing to solving climate and other environmental problems.

In industrialised countries, presumably much more than in emerging and developing countries, private consumers to a large extent accept a share of the responsibility for solving these problems. However, when it comes to changing behaviour in ways that reduce their “ecological footprint,” consumers everywhere respond much more reluctantly.

Several reasons for this attitude-behaviour “gap” have been identified in previous research, one of them being lack of availability of alternatives that are both clearly superior from a sustainability point of view and at the same time not unreasonably compromising other important consumer interests, including affordability. On the other hand, due to the increasing focus on sustainability issues, consumer needs for products and solutions that do not harm the environment or the possibilities for future generations to fulfil their needs have become more salient.

Many companies have responded to this implicit or explicit consumer demand by devel-



oping new products and solutions targeting sustainability needs, with varying degrees of success. One reason is the compromises of other consumer interests, as mentioned before. Another is that, unfortunately, not all of the alleged “green” solutions live up to the claims made, which has led to accusations of widespread “green-washing” and a need for authorities such as the Danish Consumer Ombudsman to more precisely regulate the use of “green” claims by companies. “Green-washing” undermines consumer confidence, even in serious “green” products and solutions.

Balancing the goals of consumption growth, especially in poorer countries, and environmental sustainability is one of the most serious, and most difficult, challenges facing the international community; one that calls for innovative solutions.

During the preparation of COP15, most attention was addressed to climate change policy options that will show their results in the long term, at best, such as inducing new, low-carbon energy technologies and creating cap-and-trade regimes for emissions. Sustainability policy obviously needs a long-term perspective. However, it is also important not to ignore the near term.

A balanced long- and near-term focus is needed for at least two reasons:

- the risk of severe and perhaps irreversible harms in the near term, such as the risk of moving into an unstoppable increase in global temperature above two degrees Celsius within a few decades, and

- the realisation of the promises of the long term solutions may depend on many small and gradual changes in the near term.

As regards the latter, it seems reasonable to assume (but it still remains to be systematically researched!) that by involving citizen-consumers in activities to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and other environmental harms, one also paves the way for their acceptance of long-term policies, and adoption of products and solutions integrated in or following from these long-term policies.

According to calculations by researchers connected to the National Academies in Washington, DC, there is a substantial potential for near-term reductions in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by altered adoption and use of available technologies in homes and nonbusiness travel. They estimated the plasticity of 17 household action types in 5 behaviourally distinct categories by use of the most effective documented interventions that do not involve new regulatory measures. These interventions vary by type of action and typically combine several policy tools and strong social marketing. According to their estimates, through national implementation of these interventions the U.S. could save 123 million metric tons of carbon per year in year 10, which is 20% of household direct emissions or 7.4% of U.S. national emissions, with little or no reduction in household wellbeing.

Calculations such as these are understandably uncertain, but they illustrate that the potential of household action in the near term deserves increased attention in the context of climate policy.