

Sustainable consumption can create sustainable production

Speech by Bengt Ingerstam, president of the Swedish Consumer Coalition, Sweden

In the final document from the Johannesburg Conference 2002 it is often mentioned "Sustainable production and sustainable consumption". Let us taste the difference just changing the place of two words: "Sustainable production and sustainable consumption" or "Sustainable consumption and sustainable production". In the first case it gives the impression that business and producers will start to solve the problems, so we can wait passively and will be able to consume in a sustainable way. In the other sentence we might think that sustainable consumption is a first step towards sustainable production or a necessary base for it. This is in fact also the case, and I think the first way of expressing things, production before consumption, is related to an old way of thinking, on many levels in the society, that production and job opportunities is the base for the growth and development of the society, at least since the industrialisation started.

Why have I chosen the subject for my speech: "Sustainable consumption can create sustainable production?" It is simply because I strongly believe that consumers must be actively involved and not stay passive waiting for a better world. Producers must have more clear messages from consumers about what we want and need, otherwise they produce what they want and are forced to use publicity and other marketing tools to tell us what they want us to buy. This is an utmost costly way and is not at all good for a sustainable development. In my home country 25 % of the active working hours goes to pay the costs for publicity, inviting people to buy wrong things or just more than they need. This of course is against the sustainable common interest, maybe sustainable for the single producer.

We are facing two different systems here, one part want as much money as possible from consumers for their products and consumers want as much products as possible for their money. More value for the money and less money spent is according to my view a sustainable philosophy.

The main scope of the market should be to satisfy the needs of consumers. But in the last centuries with industrial expansion and the growth economy it has become a place where it is possible to earn money stimulating people to buy for satisfying abstract and created needs. This is not a market economy any more, but a market place where some people and companies can make more money and get shares to increase in value, that means in fact not an increased production but multiplying money. Some leading business gurus talk about growth, necessary for development. But that is not the growth we need for a sustainable future society and wellbeing for the worlds growing population.

The growth we need is an increase in efficiency, getting more out of less energy, minerals, human energy (manpower), longer product life, higher quality and less needs for repair and a higher satisfaction rate from what we consume. Life is not only work, there is also a need for social relations, recreation, time for family, culture and time for relax. Let us call it intellectual growth contra capital growth.

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Sustainable consumption is today, more than ever, a question of turning up and down many deep-rooted concepts. But why should we, as citizens and consumers, remain only a big source of money, buying power and manpower? For the benefit of whom?

Consumers all around the world have insisted to say no to genetically manipulated food as an example. There are no advantages for us, but the representatives for GM industry use more and more aggressive campaigns to force it upon us. We have noted the dramatic and offensive attacks on organic farming recently, being an obstacle for their interests. It is far from thrust building. We, the population, is well aware that we need to conserve the biological diversity to survive and we do not want to give all this in the hands of a few profit thirsty multinationals, that want to have patents on the base for life and the monopoly over farmers and consumers. Why have they first of all approached our food supply? That's because food is power.

Sustainability therefore starts with the basic consumers needs, including the biological diversity, equity and fair sharing of resources, social respect for all people and respect for all kind of life, in soil, sea, in water and in the air, as well as for soil, water and air. Those last consumables are in fact essential for life, but now more and more of interest is shown from some big trans-national companies, that want to have the control over it. Why else does Coca Cola grow rapidly on selling water?

Sustainability demands also taking care of a lot of things. It has nothing to do with interest rates on money and funds. We must for example take care of our big oceans, the sea and lakes and floods. It is not only a question of water, but those are our biggest collector of solar energy, heating up the water, helping the organisms of life to grow and become, at the end, food for land living consumers.

The same care we have to pay for our landscape, the soil. Next to the water-covered area of the earth, soil is the second largest collector of solar energy, in fact the only energy that we can use in a sustainable community. Intensive chemical cultivation for food production has for too long time been permitted, to increase yields, quantities and profit. We understand it, as consumers and informed citizens, but are only taken as "funny environmentalists" by "big business". Their short sighted view should be regarded as "irresponsible profit hunters" instead.

We also need clean air for all life on earth, to survive. That is sustainability. But too much have been done in the past to destroy water, land and soil and air. We know it as environmental problems, but it is also a problem of industrial growth and forced increase of consumption. Let's take a few examples.

Every second in the developed part of the world is
252 ton of fossil fuel used
22 tons of iron are taken out from mines
51 tons of cement is used
1,3 cars are produced
400 000 kWh is produced as electricity

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Take into account that we still have 5 out of 8 billions of inhabitants that want to reach our “western” living standard.

Let us have a view on the carbon dioxide emission also, a big threat to our survival and sustainable future. In the US the emission is 6000 Mtons/year, and in Asia it is 5200 Mtons/year. For Africa the figure is only 750 Mtons/year. The same emission calculated on individuals are 20 for USA, 1,5 for Asia and 1 for Africa, as tons/capita.

Here we can easily see another impossible development. If 5 billion people want to live as the Americans, we will have a total earth collapse. The only way is that Asia brings down their emission due to probably CO₂-intensive production methods and the Americans start to use bicycles.

Let me tell you what is going on now on the streets in Stockholm. It is at the same time a warning to some big countries in Asia, that they should not follow our bad example, going by car whatever they must do. A big campaign is launched to distribute maps for bicycle riders in our capital town Stockholm. The congestion in the traffic and consequently emission of CO₂ and pollution is a disaster. The average velocity for a car is in particular areas lower than 5 km/hour while by bike it is 15-20 km/hour.

Now some more practical observations on sustainable consumption.

We need to focus on less than more, smaller than bigger, less of everything, less energy used for obtaining something as so. Also a radical decrease in the “not necessary consumption”, but it will hurt the industrial growth. At the same time we will have more free time and maybe a happier and more social life. Let’s be honest, isn’t it hard to take care of two cars, a house in town and one on the countryside, in the mountain or at the sea, a motorboat at the sea or a scooter in the mountain house, maybe a few horses and another caravan to go around between our places.

A wise sentence is “a dollar can’t be used more than once”. Therefore it is important for us, as consumers, to evaluate carefully how to use it, to get the best value out of the buying power. That means “more value for money”. It also means that we have to get more knowledge and more information about goods and prices. Lower prices and at the same time lower quality is not an intelligent way of spending our buying power, earned by hard work. It is on the other hand quite different than avoiding spending more than necessary. If I spend 13:95 SCr in one shop and 24:90 in another shop for a tin of sardines of the same brand and size you can call me a fool. Spending almost the double in money means that I have to work twice the time for the same consumption. There are many such examples and our organization is at the moment running a campaign in Sweden to cut our household expenditures, for food only, with 30 %. It also includes some changes in consumption patterns, as more beans and less meat, to have the same protein intake.

The consequences spending less must result in working less, giving more people a chance to a job, and a cutting in tax financing of unemployment. This will as a result have a double effect both financially and environmentally. All lowering of consumption have a positive effect on environment problems and saving resources. The same is valid for less working efforts.

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A good way of decreasing the unsustainable environmental situation is obviously to decrease consumption, working hours and spending of money.

To end up, money is our instrument as consumers for a sustainable choice. As citizens, on the other hand, we have no other choice than a sustainable choice. It is a matter of survival and if we do not survive there will be no more consumption that create production, so the choice is easy for all of us. Let´s count also on the consumers for a sustainable future.

Thanks for your attention.