

# Rethinking Development: People Centred Approach to Sustainable Consumption

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## ABSTRACT

The question of economic and social development has been a constant theme of international debate since the 1950s. But, over these years the objective of universal well-being remains unfulfilled. In some respects it seems further away than ever. But despite many mistakes and failed initiatives in the past, we can see just as many signs of hope and some clear paths to a brighter future. We need to rethink development, building upon what has worked and rigorously rejecting failed approaches.

One lesson we have learned is that people must be at the centre of development-not only in the traditional sense that people are the engine of change, but also in the less-traditional sense of development that puts people first. People are the critical factor in development: firstly in terms of their numbers and the social, health, economic and environmental consequences of their actions; and secondly in terms of the decisions they make concerning the size of their families and the way they live their lives. People-centred development also means full community participation at both decision-making and implementation levels.

A second lesson is that development must be sustainable and environmentally sound. If economic development destroys the earth's natural resource base in the process, it is self-defeating. The other aspect of sustainable development is population growth; the numbers of people must be in balance with the resources to sustain them, or the whole system will collapse.

This paper is a systematic effort towards assessing the sustainable consumption initiatives specifically recycling programs, energy efficient living, and organic food systems in terms of what they represent, what they may lead to, where they came from, and whether they are or can be successful. The paper concludes with some reflections on how sustainable consumption initiatives can be made more effective using people centric approach.

## Keywords

**Sustainable development, Sustainable consumption, People centred approach**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainability is gaining ever attention and debate across all the forums. The subject ranks high on the legislative agendas of majority of governments; media reporting on this topic has proliferated, and sustainability issues are of increasing concern to ordinary citizens around the world (BCG Report, 2009)

The term sustainable consumption emerged as a key issue and a major challenge in 1992 at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, since then it has become an increasingly important policy element in national sustainable development strategies. Ten years later, at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, the

international community was called upon to improve global living conditions and to "encourage and promote the development of a ten-year framework of programs on sustainable consumption and production (SCP) in support of regional and national initiatives to accelerate the shift towards SCP."

Presently there is little consensus in defining sustainable consumption and it is widely recognized to be a contested concept [Seyfang, 2009] which embraces 'competing discourses' [Hobson, 2006]. One definition provided by United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) is "The use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimizing the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations." While some authorities and individuals offer definitions others draw attention to the intrinsic difficulties in constructing such a definition. A number of definitions of sustainable consumption mirror mainstream definitions of sustainable development. More simply Dahl [Dahl, 2009] suggests that 'sustainable consumption refers to the need to stay within the global sustainability of resources'.

Jackson [Jackson, 2006] has reviewed and summarized a large number of definitions but notes that adopt different positions not only on 'the extent to which sustainable consumption involves changes in consumer behaviour and lifestyles' but also on whether sustainable consumption implies 'consuming more efficiently, consuming more responsibly or quite simply consuming less'. Jackson further argues that 'the dominant institutional consensus' is that sustainable consumption 'is to be achieved basically through improvements in the efficiency with which resources are converted into economic goods'. More generally a distinction can be made between 'weak sustainable consumption' and 'strong sustainable consumption'. The former has been defined as 'choosing products and services that either are less resource consuming, or less burdening for the environment, or less destructive for those people actually producing them' [Jones et al. 2009], while the latter embraces 'increases in the (eco-)efficiency of consumption (often via more efficient production patterns or an efficiency friendly design) and fundamental changes in consumption patterns and reductions in consumption levels in industrialized countries'

## 2. THE PEOPLE CENTRIC APPROACH

The question of economic and social development has been a central theme of international discussion at different forums since the 1950s. But, over all these years the idea of universal well-being remains disappointed. In certain aspects it seems further unachievable. But despite of numerous mistakes and unsuccessful initiatives in the past, we can see just as many signs of hope and some clear paths to a brighter future. We need to rethink

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development, building upon what has worked and carefully rejecting failed approaches.

The first lesson we learned is that the development must be people centric not only in the traditional sense where people were considered as the engine of change, but also in the less-traditional sense of development that puts people first. People are the critical factor in any development process: firstly in terms of their numbers and the social, health, economic and environmental consequences of their actions; and secondly in terms of the decisions they make concerning the size of their families and the way they live their lives. People-centered development also means full community participation at both decision-making and implementation levels.

The second important lesson we learned is that, the development must be sustainable and environmentally sound. An economic development activity that destroys the natural resource base in the process, are self-defeating. The other aspect of sustainable development is population growth; there must be a balance between number of people and resources to sustain them, otherwise the entire system will collapse.

### 3. Ensuring Sustainable Consumption in India

India is one of the most populated countries on earth where nearly 15 percent of the total global population resides. It is also privileged to have a large percentage of natural resources and biodiversity on earth. The ambitions India to become developed country within the next 10 years, suggests that the trends in India are more geared towards rapid economic growth. Despite cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Hyderabad are being highly congested and populated, want to modernize, be sophisticated, trendy and competitive further provides evidence that India has already embarked on the vision of rapid economic growth as a strategy for the upliftment of their living standards.

The entire world is looking towards India as market of largest consumers on earth, housing one third of the global poor, holding the ownership to a large percentage of the world's natural resources, does pose a serious challenge towards achieving sustainable consumption not only in India but also on the entire planet.

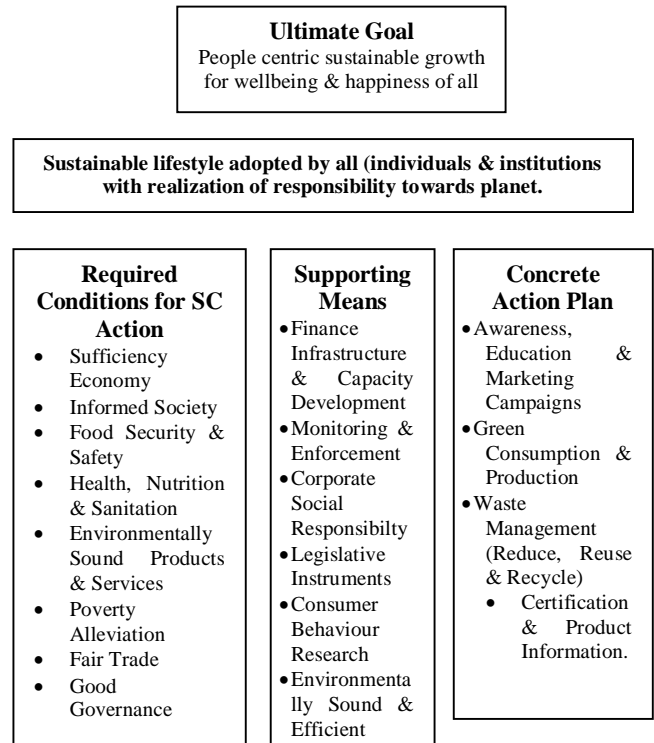
The question in focus is whether India can meet the challenge and at the same time whether it is ready to meet it? The present generation may hold the answers as their ambitions, determinations, actions and commitments will directly impact on the environment and livelihood at large.

### 4. THE MAIN CHALLENGE IN ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION IN ASIA

Since the Earth Summit, a number of meetings and discussions have addressed sustainable consumption. The Soria Moria Conference (1994) provided a definition of sustainable consumption. The United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development Ad hoc Inter-Sessional Working group on fiancé and changing consumption and production patterns met in March 1996 to identify key issues, conclusions, and possible recommendation and policy options for consideration by the UNCSD at its fourth session.

However, the movement towards sustainable consumption is still in its infancy. There has been little movement from the international forum to the development of national sustainable consumption strategies. The discussion of goals and objectives is underway and a number of programs and policies already in place.

These include reduce, reuse and recycling programs, education programs. Some sustainability and social upliftment attempts through corporate social responsibility (CSR) and Social Responsibility Investment (SRI) projects are made by the large corporate companies in the region. Unfortunately the main focus of most of these efforts are based on corporate image building and economic benefits rather than actual community or consumer welfare and development objectives, and therefore fails to deliver the goods to the people. Providing "Better Living Standards" and "Quality livelihood for all" is the primary challenge in achieving sustainable consumption for people in India.



**Figure 1: Model to Achieve Sustainable Consumption in India**

## 5. ENABLING REQUIRED CONDITIONS FOR SC ACTION

### 5.1 Sufficiency Economy

The first priority for our country is to become a developed economy in next 10 years. Hence, most of the national development policies are geared towards rapid economic growth. Although Sustainable Development is used as a term in National Development Policy the actual focus is on economic and social sustainable development rather than a balance with environmental sustainability.

With all our efforts to achieve a rapid economic growth, we need to learn from the mistakes of west otherwise, we will also end up losing our cultural identity and destroy the environment as well. Therefore, the concept of sufficiency economy is essential to be followed. Sufficiency economy has two broad dimensions i.e., Self Sufficiency and Adequacy. The former means the country attempts to provide for itself with the utilization of available resources. The concept of adequacy is based on the framework of contentment.

## 5.2 Creating an Informed Society

Creating an understanding about harmful consequences of unsustainable consumer behaviour and benefits of positive consumer behaviour can be a strong tool to achieve sustainable consumption goals. While there is a big gap in waste management capacity of our country at the same time there is a lack of consumer knowledge and discipline to handle the waste.

Weak consumer movements, insufficient input in the basic education and lack of adequate financial resources are the major reasons for low level of consumer awareness.

## 5.3 Providing Food Security & Safety

One of the biggest challenges of India still remains to be feeding the large population at least one meal a day. The challenge of food security is both in terms of providing sufficient food supplies and also assuring the health and nutritional standards at the same time. The overuse of chemicals in agriculture, genetically modified food production and marketing, inadequate capacity in storage and distribution, lack of sanitation and other health standards observed in food processing, marketing and preparation, and escalating prices due to unfair trade practices are the main threats to food security. There is a need to fast track the organic food movement in India and organic labeling and green marketing should be used to penetrate into mass consumers.

## 5.4 Assuring Health, Nutrition & Sanitation

Sanitation, Nutrition and safe drinking water are the unmet needs which shall be addressed as a priority. Although, health and sanitation is the priority in achieving sustainable consumption, still the country has very low per capita availability of fresh water as compared to developed countries. In 1947, per capita availability of fresh water was 5150 cu mt. and in the year 2000, it was measured to be 2200 cu mt. By 2017 India will be water stressed, per capita availability will be only 1600 cu mt.

The level of public expenditure on health in India is among the lowest in the world. As per the UNDP Human Development Report 2004, India ranks 173 among 177 countries in terms of public expenditure on health. Indian government also needs to address the issue of accessibility and affordability of health services if sustainable and better living standards are to be achieved.

## 5.5 Developing Environmentally Sound Products & Services

A sustainable economy is one dominated and driven by the demand for, and supply of, environmentally friendly and environmentally enhancing products and services, which in turn safeguard and enhance human well-being. A defining indicator of a sustainable economy, accordingly, is the share of environmentally friendly and environmentally enhancing products and services as a whole in total output and employment. To promote and improve sustainable consumption India needs to develop environmentally sound products and services. The two main service sectors that need prime focus are energy and transport.

## 5.6 Poverty Alleviation

The fruits of economic growth have not benefited everyone uniformly. Some are left behind and some others are not touched by the benefits of economic growth. It is proved globally that the so-called trickle down effect does not work in all the societies and India is no exception to this. The country cannot claim economic growth when a section of the people are marginalized to the

periphery of the society. The rapid economic growth process should accelerate the access to services like education and health services for all, especially the marginalized citizens.

## 5.7 Fair Trade

“Fair Trade is a win-win for all stakeholders, including corporates, producers and consumers. While corporates get brand respectability, producers get their due return and the consumer has the satisfaction of buying a product which is ethically made and environment-friendly.”

India continues to suffer in an unfair trading regime of the world. Labour and services of the region continue to be exploited by multinational corporations and also by inter-regional trading mechanisms. Unethical subsidy regime and undue pressure to remove social protection subsidies needs greater political debate and control in the country. Also, low wages for labour and inferior products into the markets continue in large scale and threaten sustainable life styles to emerge. Regional trading agreements need to address the issues of fair trade for poor to benefit. As much as world is in transition towards finding sustainable consumption life style, India too is striving to find ways and means of regulating unsustainable consumption practices. In these efforts, it is critical that India government show more political will power and integrity in ensuring fair trade for their citizens.

## 5.8 Good Governance

The high rate of economic growth coupled with comfortable foreign exchange reserves and rising sex figures have imparted in them a growing confidence. The world is also looking at India with respect and considers India and China as ideal economic growth models. India is aiming to have a high growth rate with focus on equity. Although these two objectives are not always contradictory but the conflict arises when scarce resources are diverted to meet the demands of the growing middle class or business houses by ignoring the needs of the poor. The imperatives of democracy, however, are forcing Indian political leadership to look deeper into the causes of poverty, inequality and suffering of the common man. In this on-going debate, major shifts in national value system has somewhat gone unnoticed and/or under-emphasised by academicians, media commentators and India-watchers. While good governance is expected from the national legislative and administrative sectors, it should also be noted that business and civil society too should effectively practice good governance for a society to achieve better living standards as a whole and therefore sustainable consumption

## 6. DESIGNING A CONCRETE ACTION PLAN

### 6.1 Awareness, Education & Marketing Campaigns

The belief that an informed society acts responsibly towards sustainable consumption requires issue specific and targeted communications and educational programmes. Awareness within critical target groups such as politicians, government officials, NGOs, Business and Industry needs concentrated efforts if consumers are to be ensured with sustainable solutions. The SME sector is in critical need of education on benefits and techniques of sustainable practices to ensure consumer protection, sustainable resource management and environmental conservation.

## **6.2 Waste Management Reduce Reuse Recycle – Effective way to go green economically**

Ways to reduce, reuse, and recycle, whatever possible, is to save money and reduce waste dumped in landfill and other form of pollution. The key to reducing the amount of waste which is dumped and to reduce pollution is to make less waste in the first place, items where possible, or find alternative uses for them and recycle as much as possible so the materials can be used to make something new. Recycle also helps in reducing or saving our precious natural resources.

## **6.3 Certification & Product Information**

The main focus under certification and product information has been discussed under standards setting & information and eco-labelling.

India do have set product quality standards for both consumer products and health product. Though legislation is satisfactory to address the issues of consumer protection the enforcement capacity needs serious attention. The issue of inferior and sub-standard goods continues to the extent of life threatening levels. Food production in India needs serious evaluation to ensure any level of sustainable consumption in the region. While malpractices in quantity, quality and standards have become part and parcel of market, the more serious violation of toxic contamination and manipulation not only goes unnoticed but also is under-dealt by law enforcement.

The second issue of environmental labelling which is seen under the different categories such as ecolabel, organic label or even energy efficiency label is far beyond being a successful process. Most of these programmes are an extension of the environmental or organic movement. Such eco-labelled products are more a fashion or prestige item for the upper consumer class that has the purchasing power. The fact that such eco-labelled products are less in quantity, high in price and lacks mass accessibility has weakened its potential to be a greater option towards sustainable consumption. India will need to address this issue of producing eco-products for import markets while also promoting eco-products for national consumer's consumption.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

In India, as a policy framework or a strategy sustainable consumption is not present. Though, strategies for sustainable consumption are implanted in different legislative and voluntary mechanisms such as national development strategies, environmental laws, national poverty reduction plans as well in numerous socio-economic and environmental programmes. Most importantly sustainable consumption prevails in the forms of simplistic life styles still surviving in numerous communities across the region.

India's people still remain under poverty line without access to basic human needs such as clean water, adequate food, proper clothing and decent housing. The government should necessarily revamp the entire public distribution system in the country. It should ensure that the poorest, i.e. below the poverty line (BPL) population gets the maximum benefit from the PDS system. In all other basic need issues like health, education, etc. the involvement of the community is a must. Unless people are empowered or motivated to take part in the development process, the sustainable development programmes are not likely to succeed. One of the most important issues regarding sustainable consumption is the right to consumer education. Though the Department of

Consumer Affairs is taking some steps in this direction, the result is not very impressive. A strong consumer movement, which seems to be lacking, is necessary in the country for people centric development.

Thinkers from government, academia, civil society, business and all stakeholders and individuals have a tremendous responsibility towards creating a people centric approach for wellbeing and happiness of all.

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