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# Self-Providing as a Catalyst of Sustainable Consumption

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## Introduction

In the following paper I raise the issue of the individual and social pre-conditions for aligning consumption with sustainable principles. It is assumed that the social organisation of consumption is fundamental for achieving sustainability. Looking beyond market based transaction this paper is based on an analysis of informal consumption. How does practicing non-market based consumption influence individual consumption as a whole? Can such practice contribute to adjusting consumption as a field of social practice to principles of sustainability? Specifically, what grows from the experience of making, and being able to supply yourself with certain goods without depending on the market? What resources of social innovation are being released over the course of this experience?

To find answers to these questions, an empirical qualitative study was conducted. The starting point is an understanding of consumption as a social and economic practice going beyond purchasing goods and services on the market. From this perspective consumption also includes exploring and using your own productive capacities. Furthermore it is assumed that the experience of self-providing influences individual market based consumption, both through the gaining of knowledge and competences and through changes in individual attitudes and orientations. To answer the questions raised above it is necessary to first examine the practices of informal consumption and to reveal if and how self-providing and making affect individual consumption patterns.

In the following, the term 'sustainable consumption' is defined and its scientific and political connotations are examined. Subsequently, informal or non-market based consumption is described in the context of its relevance for sustainable development and the design of the study is laid out. The third section presents an analysis of the most significant empirical findings.

Finally, the results are discussed from the aspect of what preconditions sustainable consumption requires, and a model describing how consumption as a social sphere of activity can be governed is suggested.

## **Sustainable consumption – implications, contradictions, blind spots**

The term ‘sustainable consumption’ has emerged from the discussion around the paradigm of ‘sustainable development’.<sup>1</sup> Consumption in this context is marked as a topic or field of sustainable development. At the same time, the term creates an image of appropriate or responsible consumption. This brings to light a central characteristic of the compound ‘sustainable consumption’: the normative image evoked lies in an open contradiction to the institutional structures influencing or even determining the social and economic field of consumption.

In German-speaking regions, consumption research in general is strongly influenced by conservative economic theory and quantitative scientific paradigms. Perspectives on consumption as a socio-cultural phenomenon are less common since an approach such as ‘material culture studies’ is scarcely developed (Eisendle & Miklautz 1992, 14). This negligence holds the danger of ignoring the socio-cultural constructedness of the central term of consumption research. Consumption in the German-speaking discourse is mostly understood and treated as a function of capital and labour. From this perspective, the consumer is seen solely as a bearer of acts of consumption, which can be varied only along those economic parameters. A more inclusive concept of consumption and, along with that, a reinterpretation of the term slowly appear as the principle of sustainability becomes more accepted. Against this background, what becomes apparent is that research on sustainable consumption isn’t just a specific aspect of consumption research. Rather, it creates a certain tension towards the paradigmatic orientation of the hegemonic discourse on consumption.

Forms of informal consumption so far have hardly been considered in scientific research and political discourse on sustainable consumption

(Rat für Nachhaltige Entwicklung 2010; World Business Council for Sustainable Development 2008). Naturally, there is hardly any quantitative data on informal economic activity and so its analysis requires a different methodological approach than usual in consumer research. On top of this, there is a general lack of attention to the relevance informal consumption may have for consumption as a social field and a scientific topic, especially regarding the challenges of sustainable development (Schor 2005, 38). Hegemonic positions still consider technological advancement in combination with market forces as a suitable way to handle the increasing negative consequences of non-sustainable economic policies, like climate change and energy crisis. For example, the United Nations Environmental Program UNEP orients its policy around enhancing technology based eco-efficiency in consumption and stresses explicitly that sustainable consumption does not mean consuming less (Fuchs & Lorek 2005, 268). Meanwhile, there is more and more evidence that sustainability cannot be achieved solely on the basis of technological advancement, without fundamentally restructuring in particular the economic sphere and along with this the existing system of provision (Schor 2005; Seyfang 2009; Shove 2010). In reference to these positions, this paper argues that sustainable consumption is closely related to individual experiences, attitudes and orientations, and therefore requires processes of social innovation to form and disseminate.

## **Informal consumption in the context of sustainability**

From an economic perspective, consumption describes a usage which in its nature and scope is determined by available income on one side and market offers on the other. From a business perspective, consumption is the final link in a chain of events from production to distribution. It is regarded as part of a process where primary resources are excavated and transformed into marketable goods, with the intension of selling them at a profit. Both perspectives, economic and business, anticipate a consumer who simply chooses from different market goods and whose choice is

mainly determined by price (Cooper 2005, 58). In this conception consumers appear to be limited in their activity to basically comparing and buying products (Cogoy 1999, 386).

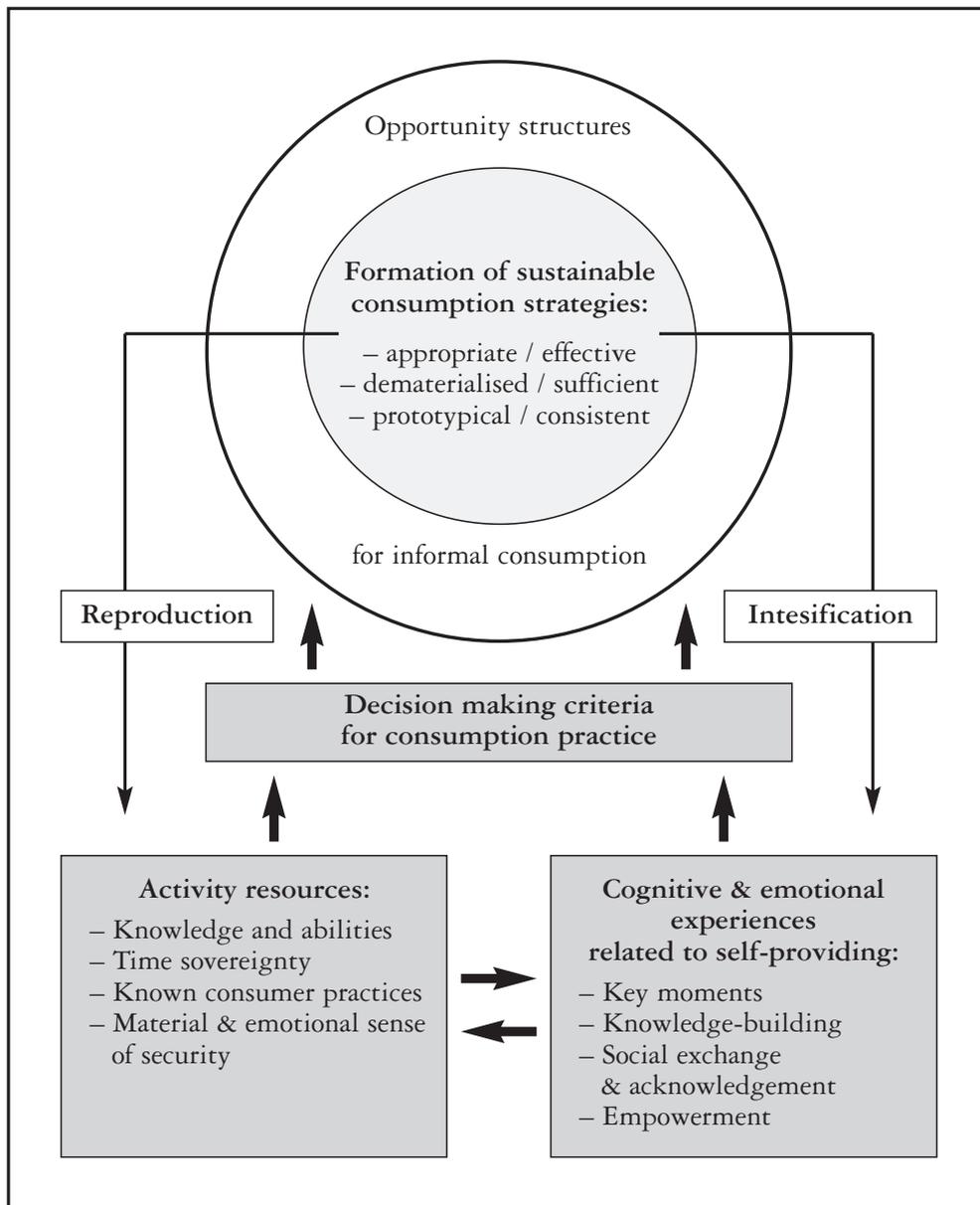
Social sciences open a different perspective on consumption as an activity going beyond purchase and market parameters. Accordingly, a sociological approach introduces a whole new set of relevant factors, like orientation, competence, social practice, ideology, cultural framing (Jackson 2005; Miller 2006; Shove 2007). For this paper consumption is defined as a comprehensive process, including all social activities necessary to maintain the desired way of living (Cogoy 1999, 386). This definition comprises aspects of being and doing, rather than reducing consumption to having and buying. In short, consumption is understood as combining market based and non-market based activities (Cogoy 1995, 170). The former is demand for products and services available on the market, the latter includes producing goods and making available services for immediate use: making and self-providing.

The theoretical relevance of this perspective for analysing interdependencies between consumption and sustainable development lies in the following: First, consuming via self-providing depends on time, ability and knowledge and therefore cannot be individually extended the way market based consumption can. Secondly, there are indicators suggesting that experiences, knowledge and abilities gained from self-providing shape individual consumption as a whole. Finally, by examining this form of informal consumption, additional insights can be gained into what systems of provision emerge from such practice and whether they encourage more sustainable forms of consumption.

Sustainability as a normative concept is understood, with reference to the Brundtland Report, as a social state where human needs are being satisfied in a way that does not deprive future generations of their ability to do the same (Hauff 1987; 46). The term basically refers to a qualitative systemic status and thus cannot be described with quantitative measures. Accordingly, sustainable consumption in this study is understood as a qualitative dimension and is defined as the developing and strengthening of values and structures suited to establish forms and levels of consumption which in the long run do not deprive future generations of their ability to satisfy

their needs. Based on these definitions, the following research design was developed for this study:

**Figure 1. Research design to assess influences of self-providing on consumer practice**



Data acquisition was based on qualitative interviews with 13 practitioners, meaning people who consider themselves makers or self-providers. The interview guide assesses what experiences have led them to their practice of making and what experiences they draw from it, and how the experience is affecting their preferences. Secondly, it asks for individual resources, addressing material resources and security as well as abilities and knowledge. Thirdly, it inquires about criteria for purchasing decisions, specifically concepts of normality, economic concepts, and product related knowledge.

## Empirical findings

Twelve codes were extracted from the interviews, which were subsumed in four thematic clusters for further analysis. In the first cluster *Images of a good life* interviewees talked about meanings and impacts of making in relation to their needs. Furthermore, they repeatedly brought up the influence of making on their sense of time and how as a consequence they organise time differently. A third complex in this cluster describes the added value making entails, and the special quality of life growing from self-providing.

An image brought up repeatedly by the interviewees to describe the nature of their needs is reduction. What is being evoked by their descriptions is the empty space between few tangible objects. These are items that people feel tied to, accordingly they are of a lasting nature and there are few occasions for shopping. The reduction of complexity implied and the potential gain of sovereignty over time appear as two underlying motifs, and as the desired quality of life. Lack appears as space, not as a void; reduction as a main principle is identified as the appropriate and consequent choice. Regarding time management, several statements express the conviction that the making process does not mainly take time, but it also yields available time. From the point of view of the practitioners, time sovereignty is being enhanced because the process of making is experienced as time spent on meaningful activity. These people even explicitly articulated the view that it is up to everyone to find time for self-providing. This point of view needs to be understood in the con-

text of the structural time sovereignty of the interviewees – which at the same time is a state they choose to arrange for. The third code of this cluster is related to the process and results of self-providing. It is stressed that this allows the realisation of own conceptions, it is identified as an opportunity for learning, and the results allow you to experience success. In addition some statements point out a certain and unique quality of the results as another benefit from making.

The second thematic cluster, *Potentials for designing sustainable infrastructure*, comprises three codes: The interviewed practitioners describe forms of empowerment they experience and how they gain competences and activity resources. Included are also statements on economic concepts and values, especially when described in relation to the experience of making. Thirdly, the interviewees' criteria for consumption-related decision making are outlined.

Regarding the learning effects from making, interviewees repeatedly pointed out that people generally tend to shy away from taking on forms of producing. Meanwhile, they stress that this is not primarily due to objective difficulties. Instead, a psychological barrier is described, which apparently can be overcome by doing things. An even more profound impact on personal development is seen in self-awareness growing from the ability to independently satisfy individual needs. This ability to satisfy own needs seems to have an effect on need structure. It seems that self-providing leads to an expansion of the individual frame of activity, practitioners acquire additional skills and competences, both physical and psychological. It becomes apparent that self-providing generates immaterial resources which become available for exchange and thus for the building of social and economic capital. More tangible interrelations between self-providing and the economy are described too, e.g. when handmade products are used for exchange, both in a gift economy and in informal exchange. In this context the interviewees characterise their own economy not as a minimisation of expenses while maximising income. Instead, it becomes apparent that due to the overall reduction of spending on consumption there is financial latitude which is being used to purchase regional, organic and fair trade products – although these are often more expensive.

The cluster *Aspects of a strategy of sustainable consumption* contains four codes: One is statements concerning origins of a product and relevance for consuming it. Furthermore the issue of how interviewees consider their own use of resources is documented in this cluster. The last two refer to their understanding of consumption and describe practical consequences drawn by the interviewees for their individual consumer practice.

From the statements of almost all interview partners it emerged that regionalism is the main criterion for consumption decisions about groceries, which is even more important than organic certification. This preference was explained with the enormous energy usage for transport. Regionalism in this context is defined as close proximity to the producer and sometimes in addition as a short supply chain. What speaks from these reflections is attention and interest for conditions of production and mechanisms of distribution. Furthermore, the interview partners expressed a strong awareness of the resources running into their consumption. On several occasions they described strategies of reuse and re-appropriation as part of their consumption routines. Items that are sorted out as garbage by others are looked at as useful material. Some explained how reuse is directly relevant to the forms of self-providing they practice. Generally, purchasing groceries and consumer goods, that is market based consumption, is seen as socially embedded. Most interviewees maintain and appreciate personal contact to the producer or at least to a specialist retailer. Preferences for certain forms of production and distribution – and thus against others, considered unfair or unsustainable – are not based on expectations of individual monetary advantages. More than anything, being able to practice fair or sustainable consumption is considered a question of personal attitude and of being ready to create a practical individual framework.

## Conclusions

The empirical results presented above provide a couple of answers to the question of how experiences, competences, preferences and orientations gained from self-providing affect consumption and how this contributes to the advancement of sustainable consumption. The interviews with

practitioners result in statements on what images of a good life lie behind making and the respective consumer practices. Furthermore the analysis provides insights into the concepts of value related to those images. What is being stressed is simplicity as an ideal, which is relevant in two dimensions: inwardly, to leave room for the production and assignment of symbolic meaning, that is immaterial production; outwardly, to be able to relate to what is there, to use regional resources for material production and consumption. The interviewees conceive wealth as wealth of time, as based on immaterial assets. Furthermore, it became apparent that engaging with your own productivity is of concern in the following regards: The process of production is considered a form of self-expression and self-determination. At the same time, individual productivity provides an occasion for social interaction and appreciation. According to these findings, making serves as a medium which allows individuals to experience themselves as a cause and to become visible as such.

To be able to fabricate something for own consumption is basically to be able to satisfy own needs. This experience seems to help clarify those needs and thus lead to more reflected consumption. What is being described is a shifting of needs from the material to the immaterial dimension. At the same time, self-providing is a learning experience and opens up additional individual opportunities. Another point that emerged is how making orients the practitioners' attention towards immediate, available resources and thus how it contributes to regionalising and decentralising exchange – or more generally speaking economic practice. Thirdly, the analysis shows that the practitioners interviewed anticipate conditions under which a product is being made. They express a holistic view of consumer goods, considering the production process, especially labour conditions and the ecological and social impacts these all have.

What can also be identified on the basis of the findings are patterns of sustainable consumption, practical applications of the view of consumption described. Those include consideration for how a good is being produced and distributed and if those modes are in line with principles of sustainability. Reuse is being practiced and material values actively kept in use. Most of the forms of consumption interviewees describe take place in the context of social interaction. This applies both for non-

monetary exchange and for market based transactions. Not to consume certain products and services that do not conform to individual standards of fairness or sustainability is seen as an explicit part of the consumer strategy, as a long term way of influencing existing systems of provision.

In addition to these findings, the analysis also points at structural factors hindering the emerging and spreading of forms of sustainable consumption. Inhibiting is the fact that within market based consumption it is generally not possible to find out about the negative side effects of consumption-related production and distribution. In addition, sustainable consumption is being obstructed simply by the lack of products on the market – or generally options for consumption – fulfilling sustainability criteria as expressed by the interview partners. As a consequence of this lack, access is more difficult and the individual efforts required are greater, characteristics of a dilemma of structural change. This hindering factor is theoretically even more significant, since according to the interviewees, individual consumer practice is by many not regarded as having any structural or social effect. This dynamic can also be described as a structural dilemma. Finally, the statements point at a lack of political regulations aiming at crowding out or transforming unsustainable products and services.

In summary, the following main conclusions can be drawn to explain the relevance of informal consumption for governing the field of consumption in regards to sustainable principles: First of all, it became apparent that self-providing and making affect the individual practice of consumption by providing experiences and generating competences. Secondly, the research demonstrated that making and applying own productive capacities shape individual economic orientation. Integrated perceptions of economic processes are being cultivated as part of the self-providing process. As a consequence, consumption drifts towards reproductive economic strategies and practices and thus is implicitly oriented around principles of sustainable consumption. Thirdly, it turned out that making as a phenomenon mobilises resources for processes of social innovation. Related experiences and interactions raise individual awareness for social responsibility and motivate commitment, thus mobilising social capital on the structural level.

In a final analytic step the findings deduced from empirical data are further interpreted regarding the question of individual and social requirements for sustainable consumption. The preceding sections have dealt with effects of self-providing on individual consumption and consumption practices oriented towards principles of sustainability. In addition, it could be shown how economic orientations, understood as normatively shaped perceptions of economic processes and as a practical understanding of economy, are being influenced by the experience of self-providing. To conclude, some further thoughts on correlations between self-providing and economic orientation and the relevance for sustainable consumption are developed.

### **Self-providing and economic orientation**

Over the course of this analysis it became apparent that the experience of making and self-providing brings forward a specific economic orientation. This orientation is based first and foremost on a self-conception as an economic entity, as actively participating in the economy as a social sphere. This disposition implies a sense of responsibility for the design of economic structures and for the consequences of economic activity. It can further be expected that such a self-conception goes along with an enhanced sense of independence. This sense of independence may be related to given systems of provision or it can refer to structures of formal economy and gainful employment. Making opens up individual opportunities for informal work, potentially leading to an expansion of local exchange. An economic orientation as characterised above suggests a non-materialistic concept of value. Material values in this context are not primarily regarded in terms of their exchange value but in terms of their use value and symbolic value. Ideally such a disposition practically implies that goods are not being accumulated but acquired as needed and consumed.

The economic orientation described is characterised by socially embedded concepts and practices of exchange and allocation. It is reflective of an inclusive concept of economy, based on a long term perspective and a sense of invisible and unintentional consequences, and is thus implicitly in accordance with sustainable principles. The economy is not regarded

as a means of accumulating material value but of organising reproduction. Such an orientation also rejects the principle of continuous growth. It practically comes hand-in-hand with a preference for decentralised systems of provision, which in turn is a precondition for the formation of such structures and for their existence. Such a development adds to localisation and thus to a more sustainable form of economic exchange. By doing so, it also contributes to lowering interference and improving resilience.

A reproductive understanding of the economy also means looking at value creation in the context of production and consumption. What counts from this perspective is not only the product and its value but the distribution of costs and benefits being generated. In terms of consumption, this perspective implies an increased readiness to incur additional expenses for sustainable products and services. It once more suggests a preference for regional economic exchange since regionalism allows insights into the mechanisms and results of this distribution. Economic activity designed according to these ideas draws first and foremost on regionally available material and human resources. At the same time the total costs for environmentally and socially responsible consumption decrease when following this economic orientation. This effect occurs in relation to other costs since individual cognitive dissonance drops, and also because prices for consumer options are being assessed differently – not primarily on the basis of monetary prices.

### **Formation and dissemination of sustainable systems of provision**

The analysis demonstrated that the experience of making and competences gained from it influence individual consumer practice profoundly. These effects are likely to introduce a low level of usage and a reduced ecological footprint. Beyond that there seems to be a shift amongst practitioners in the implicit understanding of consumption: it is being actively marked as a social field. To do so, informal as well as market based strategies are being developed to cover needs in more sustainable ways. These efforts are motivated by personal dissatisfaction with given systems of provision. Dissatisfaction becomes virulent as a result of the

experience of self-providing, through which deficiencies of globalised industrial production in regards to usage of resources and fairness of distribution become apparent.

Secondly, the developing of sustainable systems of provision and strategies of consumption is motivated by the realisation that there actually are choices. As demonstrated, making releases individual creative potentials, it provides a frame both for covering own material needs and for the production of symbolic meaning. This way, potentials for an implementation of sustainable consumption are being enhanced and activated. Beyond that, individual production and the related exchange generate social capital, which in itself can support social innovation.

A change in consumer preferences is required to establish more sustainable systems of provision. Such a change of preferences is part of the described shift in economic orientation, which is being triggered by the experience of self-providing. This is where the cycle of theoretical argumentation and empirical proof is consummated. What can be outlined is a dynamic where individual economic orientations shift towards sustainable principles and consumer practice changes accordingly. In addition, social forces for innovation are being mobilised. As a consequence, more sustainable systems of provision are being formed, disseminated and supported. It becomes apparent that in the long run both sides of consumption are affected by the dynamics released via self-providing as a consumer practice. Even more, the interdependencies described appear as a development which can theoretically generate its own requirements. Considering the structural dilemma consumption as a social sphere of activity is trapped in, this is probably most relevant when asking for approaches to govern this sphere in any socially, economically or ecologically desirable direction.

## Note

- <sup>1</sup> A common definition refers to the Brundtland Report and describes sustainability as a social state in which human needs of today are being satisfied in a way that future generations are not limited in satisfying their needs. See Hauff 1987, 46.

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