

The user values as indicators of sustainable consumption shift

Author Aija Freimane

Art Academy of Latvia, Kalpaka blvd. 13, Riga, LV1086, Latvia

Email: aija.freimane@lma.lv

Abstract

Concept of Sustainable consumption and production (SCP) is contradictory in aiming to sustain and to improve quality of life for the next generations and still consume and produce, enabling consumption as the drive of economy. SCP definitions do not discuss significance of the human factor in providing sustainable systems as it is discussed by Vezzoli and Manzini (2008) that „in future decades we must be able to move from society in which well-being and affluence are measured by the production and consumption of goods to one in which people live better, consuming (much) less.” Such option is acknowledged also by Jackson (2009) that “people can flourish without more stuff, but economies can only survive if they grow”.

Preference of the lifestyle is dependent on every individual’s choice, although designers as socially and ethically responsible professionals facilitate not only reasonable social, environmental and economic development, but also communicate the actual needs and values of the society. Coherency of the social values and the actual needs are not as much tangible goods as social collaboration process of being together; co-designing social enterprises, services and systems, where the designer has the role of a mediator, process guide and communicator and context supervisor.

The aim of the study is to discuss the society’s value system and correlation with sustainability from point of view of the inconsistency paradigm: the need to produce and consume more, to develop technology, and the public willingness to live in sustainable communities and to manage households in a sustainable way. The study discusses conflicting values and needs of the society and economy where the most important individual values are social and environmental but job is needed as an economic asset for implementing these values. People do not note the significance of consumption in their life, but point out local and regional context, admitting that „small is beautiful” (Schumacher; 1973). Do contradiction of economic and social needs and desires in the context of value system manifest confusion of design and design education and its contribution to sustainability? It should be discussed whether emergence of intangible design forms is the answer to the changing society's value system and protest to the overconsumption and overproduction as the means to sustain continuing lifestyle.

Keywords: values, SCP, goals, well-being and prosperity

Introduction

Sustainable consumption and production as antimony of sustainable community development

People as consumers or users determine their system of values, assumptions and life principles and acceptable performance. Interwoven set of psychological characteristics (including values and personality) provides the very basics of executive activities for life as process of goal-oriented action (Smith & Hitt, 2005; 112; 128), where values are evident as goals of one’s life and their fulfilment by the appropriate action. Following one’s values is preferable state of human-being. Values show our priorities when the decision is needed to be done to fulfil self-set needs. Also values in people’s life are qualitative and quantitatively they do not tell anything about one or other preferences. They are indicators of qualitative and sustainable consumption habit shift and fulfilment of people as users needs. Price of products and services do not tell anything about its true value. „It simply shows that something

is expensive or inexpensive. Only when quality comes in to play it can be determined if something is better or worse.” (Zec & Jacob, 2010; 13) It shows that values as qualitative indicators are of an essential importance on habit formation and their shift.

Available definitions of sustainable consumption and production (SCP) do not discuss human or social factor significance on providing sustainable and qualitative life system. (UNEP&UNEP, 2010). Sustainable production and consumption patterns involve only disputable range of actions, such as “eradicating poverty, making trade and environment policies mutually supportive, eliminating environmental harmful subsidies, promoting the transfer of technology and financial resources, the promotion of democracy and human rights, the efficient operation of markets, and achieving greater international cooperation” (Oslo Roundtable). Listed activities do not refer to acting person and its responsibility, who is user of the system and user of every action of the particular activity as an end result. Sustainable consumption as an action is preference of the particular life style as expression of an individual and collective values and lifestyle.

Revaluation of society values and wishes as the end result of consumption in different scales has occurred since 2008 as facilitator of economic and financial crisis. Indicators and ratings that specified well being and prosperity of the too-much-consumption habits become of no value in degrowth economy. Prosperity measured as quantitative consumption testifies Javon’s paradox deadlock of sustainable social, environmental and economic system as continuous provider of welfare system. Invention of novelties to enhance revenues, speeded exchange of ideas with the help of technologies to materialize growth of welfare (Ridley, 2010; 252), has not provided satisfaction and prosperity in circumstances of rigorous austerity or the modern economy of shortage when people need to learn to live, behave and find satisfaction in some other manner.

Also, only few economists warned about approaching economic and financial crisis in 2008, there are evidence that draw attention to the need of change of particular consumption habits. Hence Western-European population will need new low-consumption systems, state Vezzoli and Manzini in 2008, pointing out that „in future decades we must be able to move from society in which well-being and affluence are measured by the production and consumption of goods to one in which people live better, consuming (much) less” (Tukker, Charter, Vezzoli, Sto, & Andersen, 2008)”. That well-being and prosperity is not the same as consuming more, indicates Jackson: “people can flourish without more stuff, but economies can only survive if they grow” (Jackson, 2009).

As the society and economy are changing, resources are decreasing and overproduction appears, sustainable performance by designers should change not only in thinking of environmentally friendly use of resources during production process, but even more – they must keep off any backing of planned obsolescence and conspicuous consumption. It should correlate with the shift of the society’s values and current needs, which is not so much about necessity to create new, tangible material goods than socially collaborative process, where designers has the role of facilitator, mediator, communicator and the function of context general supervisor. “We are entering in the era of limits; the cycle of mass production and mindless consumption that defined the industrial age is no longer sustainable. Design thinking needs to be turned toward the formulation of a new participatory social contract.”(Brown, 2009; 178) Preference of globally promoted environmentally friendly production and eco lifestyle is evidence of emergence of new and planned consumption trend rather than option for sustainable lifestyle as a value and attitude which is not bound to endless consumption and production. Presumption confirms also Agenda 21 action plan (1992), where SCP has been defined as need to change consumption and production habits particularly in industrially developed countries. Examining the corresponding time such a need did not occur in the countries which were living in the planned economy or economy of shortage until 1991. Analyzing from the 21st century view point it is possible to say, that partly forced voluntary simplicity, recycling and re-use on the household scale, consuming local or regional products (Vadovics, 2008; 313) were the foundation and still are preconditions for the fair sustainable community development. In this context question of free choice needs to be discussed: whether community agrees and develops on the basis of equal values, appropriately consuming less, or consumption of the society is an indicator of wellbeing and status where individuals rival and comparison is a unit of measure which leads to the spiral of overconsumption and overproduction and therefore to the endless circle of the quantitative welfare index. As community consists of individuals

who are living in the particular area, fulfilment of people's values is regarded as base of the individuals and community value consumption.

Also Oslo Roundtable (Oslo Roundtable) deduced that complex "sustainable production and consumption can only be achieved by sharing responsibility among citizens and communities, building partnerships for sustainable consumption between different sectors of society, and reinforcing the values that support sustainable consumption". Above mentioned definition in time perspective demonstrates precondition of collaboration, sharing and emphasis on values of the local residents and communities as creation of sustainable consumption habits that in contrary to the economy of individualism, rival, comparison and over-consumption have not been accordingly proceeded for the last twenty years. Also policy planners and developed countries were aware that sustainable consumption as an umbrella term brings together issues, such as meeting needs and the quality of life, improving and increasing resource efficiency, minimising waste and taking a life cycle perspective into planning, they continued to facilitate and develop over-production economic models not only in Western European countries but also in the developing economies. Oslo Roundtable indicated that value issue is a subject that needs to be taken into account. Oslo Roundtable depicts that policy planning and globally good will documents are so general, that they not only fail in determining specific action plans for local and regional action, but also are too withdrawn from the main focus - of the end-use of goods and services and its user basic values. Bearing in mind, that „the end-use focus offers a tool to identify strategies, instruments and facilities necessary to empower consumers to act sustainably” (Oslo Roundtable), in this research people (users and consumers) both personal values and aims will be analyzed as SCP triple bottom line and needs that are crucial to fulfil values as life goals.

Methodology

Primary qualitative methods were used for particular research. Structuring of values, goals and needs in social, environmental and economic groups (Lockwood & Walton, 2008; 110) were done by respondents during creative focus group sessions systemizing individual values, needs and goals into collective ones.

There were 236 respondents surveyed in the age of 20-65 years to name their personal values and those why are they living in the particular country of residence. Iterative method was used in focus groups to cluster and systemize respondents' personal values in three aspects of sustainability into social, environmental and economic values. Later on every respondent was asked to name what would be needed to fulfil one's values to achieve goals by living and working in particular country of residence. "Goal setting may serve as mediators of external incentives and personality." (Smith & Hitt, 2005; 130) Iterating individual goals into collective ones respondents were working in the focus groups.

Analyzing and discussing the research the system created by respondents user social, environmental and economic values and needs to accomplish a purpose was kept. Needs by respondents are expressed as social and environmental values, but goals as fulfilment of economic values.

Research was conducted and economically and socially inclusive or middle-class respondents participated in the focus groups. Socially deprived and socio-economically elite respondents were not included into this research. Two-thirds of the respondents are living and working in Latvia (North Eastern Europe) and the rest is representing Western-Europe, North-America and India. Particular environmental value dominance over social and economic values explains prevalence of Latvian respondents whose immediate tie with the nature in culture and historic paradigm had been significant for the inhabitants of specific country. Significance of nature and emphasis on environmental values were not stressed by any other group of respondents.

Secondary data and information was analyzed during research process as ground for the research question setting.

Research

There is discussion in the context of sustainable consumption and production about using sustainable principles of creation products and services. Are we bearing in mind nice, functional and useful goods thinking of our collective values and goals which include also our personal ones? (Zec & Jacob, 2010; 14) Answers on this matter was searched during investigation process asking individual questions and looking for fulfilment of shared needs and goals as interconnection with individual personal values and their manifestation into action or materialization.

Analyzing respondents' personal values as collective values as most important were mentioned social values: family, friends, native language, roots, identity, sense of nationality, belonging, culture, origin, traditions, experience, competence, freedom of speech and choice, bearing responsibility for ones actions. Social values as most important were indicated by all respondents apart from their country of residence, nationality and age. Therefore it is possible to assume that exactly social values will be those shifting sustainable consumption paradigms in the future.

Environmental values were highlighted as two-thirds of the respondents by self choice in long-drawn perspective are living in one country specific cultural region, where strong ties with nature has been for centuries and therefore such values as 4 seasons, Baltic Sea, forests, mushrooms, land, animals, history, homesickness, food, safety and culture were stressed. Environmental values were not mentioned of great importance by respondents from Europe and other countries. Respondents living and working in North-America, Western-Europe and India in their lists of values did not mention any environmental values that are so essential to Latvians.

Of least importance respondents indicated economic values, listing just employment, competence, food and heirloom or newly acquired property. Employment behind the family as a value is referred by all respondents but newly acquired property is typical value to the respondents of North-Eastern-Europe.

If in our value scale social and environmental values were mentioned as the most important ones than fulfilment our goals and needs, we have to call to economic and social aspects. Respondents say that material well-being, social insurance, survival, personal economic rise (flourishing), well-being, prosperity, recognition in profession, creating new services, products and possibilities, living in a private house, owning a car and having educated children, great kids, being creative, feeling safe and needed are the most important goals to reach. As important as economic needs there are also social needs: identity, creativity, peace and security, harmony, self-development, good relationships, delight in everyday life, family and children and to being a good person in this world, doing the best and helping my loved ones, enjoying life.

Integration and language barrier as an essential need were stressed by respondents who do not live in their native country to be able to reach settled goals in their country of residence. In contrary, those who live in their native country mentioned that living in the nearby places where relatives is an essential factor to fulfil their values. For these respondents it is important to live within the social values system being together with the family in everyday life not once a week or even more seldom. Respondents mentioned ensuring old age, preserving nature and to live and think green as environmental goals.

„Fundamental belief system must change to reconcile with our true place in nature. We will finally learn that our economy is a subset of natural system, not the long view of the world.” (McLennan, 2004; 247)

VALUES	SOCIAL	ENVIRONMENTAL	ECONOMIC
	Family; Friends Native language Roots Identity Sense of Nationality Belonging Culture; Origin Traditions Experience Competence Freedom of speech and choice Bearing responsibility for ones actions	4 seasons Baltic Sea Forests Mushrooms Land Animals History Homesickness Food Safety Culture	Employment Competence Food Property
NEEDS as AIMS	SOCIAL	ENVIRONMENTAL	ECONOMIC
	Identity Creativity Peace and security Harmony Self-development Good relationships Delight in everyday life Family and children	Ensure old age Preserve nature Live and think green	Survival Personal economic rise (flourishing) Well-being Prosperity Recognition in profession Creating new services, products and possibilities Live in private house Own a car Have educated children

Table Nr.1. Most significant people values and needs as goals; A.Freimane, 2012

Based on the research I can conclude that none of the respondents named consumption goods as a value directly. Therefore Aristotle's saying in *Nichomachean Ethics* that “without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods”, was right according to the answers of respondents about

values of their life. Although consumer goods provide symbolic value in semiotically and in the language in which we are communicating to each other and that goods really mean to us: family, friendship, sense of belonging, society, identity and social status (Jackson, 2009; 50-51) research findings do not confirm this.

Discussion and conclusions

The research defines that our desired outcome is social well-being, prosperity, living well and satisfaction. All of these named statuses have polisemantic aspects. For one person status means consuming more but for the other – being together by consuming less. It marks our lifestyle as attitude and the way of living and our consumption habits. Looking at ecological footprint, consuming less provokes long term approach as social and environmental continuity and human size economy. Such lifestyles as slow-down or downshifting, user voluntary simplicity or living in ‘the economy of shortage’ or rigorous austerity outlines structure of sustainable society.

By sustaining on-going production and consumption for the market (production/consumption) sake economy it is possible to talk about short term approach. Such approach has developed a global consumer society where relations of the individual rivalry and comparison dominate. Focus on individual ownership and consumer goods developed and sustained conspicuous consumption and planned obsolescence. Understanding that there is no longer possibility to economize as global market economy demands, there is possibility to develop „sustainable design process that requires a change in several fundamental ways: willingness to do things differently than what is conventionally assumed; requires expanded collaboration between disciplines and a greater focus on process; it requires the use of a holistic thinking process by key decision makers.” (McLennan, 2004; 210) Therefore it is possible to claim, that rethinking our ways of living and organising our everyday life, making life cycle approach incorporation into decision-making and development process are steps toward sustainable lifestyle. According to the research findings user values are the ones to alter the way we socialize, exchange ideas, share, educate and build identities. The system should not fulfil ambitions of professionals and economists; they should strengthen and enhance societies and humans as micro prosperity with limited resources consuming less. (Tukker, Charter, Vezzoli, Sto & Andersen, 2008; 145).

Defined shift contradicts to the current SCP approach, which still fulfils consumers’ needs as wishes (wants), considers goods as value and identity and marks SCP as universalized trend - sustainable production and consumption based on planned indoctrination of eco (sustainability) and promotion of eco-sustainable lifestyle as trendy behaviour and attitude towards the future. „Green business needs to be more than a market niche. It can’t be something off to the side; just for elite” (Makower, 2009; 273) Aristotle says that goods become commensurable in relation to needs – the unit of value is a need or demand. (Politics) Therefore facing needs as values (necessity) when we have to make our consumer preferences, we set up our priorities of the life as preference of the lifestyle. Presuming user (consumer) personal social values as the most important in the SCP triple bottom line is possible to define shift of sustainable consumption. Following Aristotle that economy (household management) is economy only because it has relation with people, users value ‘locally created solutions can ultimately lead to national models for community-based social services’, believes Hillary Cottam. (Brown, 2009; 211)

„By understanding social values that motivate different segments of the public to action (Makower, 2009; 274) there is possible to make a shift also in valuation assessment criteria of design education process and methods from the end-result oriented towards sustainable social process. As process is linear in time, proposed education for continuity* would transfer value, behaviour, knowledge and skills to enable people, individually and collectively, to develop attitudes and to become actors of change and to interact positively with their natural, social, economic and cultural environment (*concept developed based on UNEP definitions (2010) “education for sustainable consumption”; “education for sustainable development” and “environmental awareness / education” emphasizing time perspective).

Quality of life, satisfaction and sense of fulfilment is fundamental. It is assumed that our success is dependent on the ability to use self capacity – knowledge, skills and creativity. Design and creativity as a planned structure and diverse use of methods into practise giving rise to user values, could ensure valuable input to the individual, community and state continuity. To live sustainable lifestyle and practice sustainable risk management thinking needs to be used. Lifting the user social values as sustainable consumption shift leads to the ‘strategic choice under bounded rationality’ that forms potential environmental and institutional incentive. (Smith & Hitt, 2005; 112; 113)

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