



WORLD SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT SUMMIT

BEYOND 2015: PEOPLE, PLANET & PROGRESS



Lifestyles, Production and Consumption: Key Challenges for Sustainable Development

October 6, 2016 | 10.00 to 12.00 noon

Venue: Hall No. 3, Vigyan Bhawan

A 'sustainable lifestyle' is a way of life that can meet the basic needs for well-being of everyone, without jeopardizing the needs of future generations. Globally, the lifestyles of large sections of the population are not sustainable; let us understand the three main reasons for this. First, people consume more resources than can be replenished by the planet, thus, depleting the reserve of natural resources for future use. It is estimated that given current levels of consumption, by 2050, with a population of 9.6 billion, we would need three planets to sustain ourselves. Second, excessive consumption generates waste that cannot be absorbed by nature, leading to environmental pollution, global warming, and ozone depletion. These issues have posed serious threats to living organisms on the planet. Third, overconsumption deprives the poor of their basic needs and prevents them from improving their quality of life, resulting in social injustice, inequities, and conflicts.

Therefore, the transition towards sustainable lifestyles has emerged as a critical issue in the contemporary discourse on sustainable development.

International efforts to promote sustainable lifestyles

The Rio Earth Summit (1992) identified for the first time 'unsustainable patterns of consumption and production' as the major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment. The Johannesburg Summit (2002) called for the development of a global framework in support of national and regional initiatives to accelerate the shift towards sustainable consumption and production. The 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns (10YFP), developed through consultative process, was adopted at the Rio+20 Summit (2012). The five initial programmes under 10YFP include—(i) consumer information; (ii) sustainable lifestyles and education; (iii) sustainable public procurement; (iv) sustainable buildings and construction; and (v) sustainable tourism, including ecotourism.

'Ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns' was adopted as one of 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Eleven targets under this goal include, implementation of the 10YFP, sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources;

reducing the global food waste at production by half, improving supply chains and consumption levels; substantial reduction of waste through prevention, reduction, recycling, and reuse; sustainable public procurement practices; environmentally sound management of chemicals and other waste, rationalization of fossil fuel subsidies, etc.

The Paris Climate Agreement (2016) recognized that sustainable lifestyles and sustainable patterns of consumption and production will play an important role in addressing climate change and that developed countries have to take the lead in this direction.

Transitioning towards Sustainable Lifestyles: Key Challenges

Over the past two decades, the global community has attempted to address the challenge of sustainable production and consumption and has sought to raise awareness of the necessity of rethinking the way products and services are produced and consumed.

National governments should be key stakeholders in this process. However, the systems of production and consumption are so deeply embedded into the structures of the economy, the technological processes of production, the management practices of marketing and supply chains, and the behavioural choice of consumers, that policies or legal frameworks cannot be the sole deciding factors in this transition.

Sustainable production and consumption must also be supported by sustainable technology, sustainable agriculture and industries, sustainable transport and communications, sustainable habitat, and above all sustainable ways of living.

Therefore, sustainable lifestyles are central in the transition towards sustainable patterns of consumption and production. Lifestyles are shaped by collective choices of individual consumers. Increasing awareness about the harmful impacts of unsustainable ways of living and the multiple co-benefits of sustainable lifestyles on individuals, society, economy, environment, and the future generations can therefore, play a decisive role in the movement towards sustainable lifestyles. Sustainable choices can also be facilitated through easy availability of sustainable goods and services at affordable prices.

There are signs that domestic material consumption in developed regions is diminishing—from 17.5 tonnes per capita in 2000 to 15.3 tonnes per capita in 2010—even though it remains significantly higher than the value for developing regions, which stood at 8.9 tonnes per capita in 2010.¹ Material consumption in developing countries is bound to increase with a reduction in poverty and the increase in demand for goods and services by a growing consumer class.

However, this need not follow the trajectory of developed economies. Most developing countries have traditional knowledge and values which support sustainable lifestyles. These should be encouraged and promoted through research, exchange of ideas, dissemination of good practices, and political support. These practices are beginning to influence consumer choices even in developed countries, through the growing popularity of vegetarianism, holistic health care, among others. While developed and developing countries are globally targeting the same objective, which is to reach sustainable levels of production and consumption, the specific choices available to inhabitants of these countries will be determined by local and regional contexts.

¹ Report of the Secretary General of the United Nations to the General Assembly on 'Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals', No A/2016/75 dated June 6, 2016.

In order to introduce these radical changes, a new approach of well-being is necessary. The gross domestic product (GDP), an indicator of the production of richness, should not be the only indicators of development and quality of life. These changes in consumer attitudes and behaviour must be supported through sustained research, education, and awareness, as well as by regulation and the delivery of sustainable products and services.