
Linking policy and practice in sustainable production and consumption: an assessment of the role of NGOs

Chris Church

Community Environment Associates CEA, UK
E-mail: chrischurch@phonecoop.coop

Sylvia Lorek*

Sustainable Europe Research Institute SERI,
Sustainable Consumption Office,
Glatzer Str. 1, 51491 Overath, Germany
Fax: +49-2206-866775
E-mail: sylvia.lorek@seri.de
*Corresponding author

Abstract: The paper looks at NGOs activities in Sustainable Production and Consumption and obstacles being faced. It identifies lessons for policymakers seeking to engage civil society and makes recommendations on how academics can co-operate more effectively with civil society. Insights are drawn from recent studies on stakeholder involvement in the international political process and a series of surveys and semi-structured interviews. The authors identify four challenges. Effort should

- be planned more strategically
- link sustainable consumption to current priorities
- ensure better links between global and local and
- NGOs have to better link to other interest groups.

Keywords: Sustainable Consumption and Production; SCP; NGO; Marrakech process; governance.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Church, C. and Lorek, S. (2007) 'Linking policy and practice in sustainable production and consumption: an assessment of the role of NGOs', *Int. J. Innovation and Sustainable Development*, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp.230–240.

Biographical notes: Chris Church is co-director of Community Environment Associates (CEA) and has worked as a consultant since 1990. From 1984 to 1990, he worked for Friends of the Earth UK. He chairs the Board of the London 21 sustainability network and is on the Board of ANPED. He is an advisor to the UK Community Development Foundation (CDF) and has led research work for CDF and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. His current work focused on building the engagement of non-environmental Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations in work on climate change and sustainable development.

Sylvia Lorek is Vice President and Head of Sustainable Consumption Research at the Sustainable Europe Research Institute, SERI. She is working on studies and as consultant for national and international organisations and institutes (among them OECD, EU, EEA and UNEP). She is member of SCORE, the European scientific network on sustainable consumption. Additionally, she is engaged in civil society work on sustainable consumption.

1 Introduction

This paper reviews the role of NGOs in work on SCP and how that work impacts on policy and practice. The paper looks at what NGOs have worked to achieve, at what is being delivered and the obstacles being faced.

It will draw on this work to identify lessons for policymakers seeking to engage civil society in changing consumption patterns and make recommendations on how academics and other researchers can cooperate more effectively with civil society and local government.

The basic insights of the paper are drawn from recent studies on stakeholder involvement in the Marrakech Process. These evaluations ‘from the outside’ form the first part of the paper (Section 3). The second part (Section 4) is based on a series of 22 surveys and semi-structured interviews carried out in September 2006 with NGOs from 16 nations in the UNECE region.

The questions that will be addressed in the paper are:

- How effective are NGOs in delivering policy change?
- Do they have a role in infrastructure and if so how significant?
- Do their approaches to engagement (based around environmental concerns) need to change/develop to deal with SCP?

2 Sustainable consumption as a global challenge

Moving towards sustainable consumption will require two developments: First, sustainable consumption requires an increase in the *efficiency of consumption*, which can be reached via technological improvements. Improvements in the eco-efficiency of consumption mean a reduction in resource consumption per consumption unit owing to improvements in production processes or an efficiency friendly design, for example. Often, these improvements are win–win scenarios. Improving the efficiency of consumption can be seen as the necessary prerequisite for achieving sustainable consumption.

However, existing limits to Earth’s resources and to its capacity to serve as a sink for pollutants mean that *efficient* consumption can only be a *weak* version of sustainable consumption. As research on the so-called rebound effect has documented, achievements based on efficiency alone are very often overcompensated by a growth in consumption volumes (Greening et al., 2000). In consequence, a second development needs to take place to provide a sufficient condition for sustainable consumption: changes in

consumption *patterns* and reductions in consumption *levels* in industrialised countries. This sufficient condition requires changes in infrastructures and choices as well as a questioning of the levels and drivers of consumption and can be called *strong* sustainable consumption (Fuchs and Lorek, 2005). UNEP refers to it as the principles of dematerialisation and optimisation (UNEP, 2001).

3 NGO contributions to sustainable consumption: observed from the outside

NGOs are seen to play a strong and active role in the various campaigns to promote SCP. Many NGOs do ask the politically sensitive questions regarding consumption patterns and levels. Moreover, they contribute to the development of strong sustainable consumption governance by promoting the diffusion of alternative lifestyles and values (Fuchs and Lorek, 2005).

In its study, 'Consumption Opportunities' UNEP describes the tasks of civil society (NGOs) to support Sustainable Consumption in the following way:

- lobbying, cooperate monitoring, education, and information sharing to support dematerialisation as well as
- conscious choosing, conscious using, civic participation, cultural resistance, religious and spiritual development, and local debates to foster optimisation (UNEP, 2001).

This makes NGOs different from other relevant stakeholders – principally governments, governmental organisations and business – which concentrate on activities towards dematerialisation only as elements of their strategies (Arndt and Witt, 2006a).

Besides the difference in their levels of ambition environmental, development and consumer organisations are seen as being among the few stakeholder groups that direct all or at least most of their activities towards sustainability (Arndt and Witt, 2006a). The activities by NGOs are thus of special importance because of their potential influence on societal values. Arndt and Witt observed that direct influence on consumers is highest from consumer organisations and environmental organisations. Environmental NGOs not only create activating methods of campaigning: what helps them appear reliable at a practical level is that they motivate their own members and employees to shop and travel sustainable and support individual sustainability commitments that reflect lifestyles rather than shopping habits (Arndt and Witt, 2006b).

Timmer and Prinnet analysed three international campaigns towards sustainable consumption and production: their preliminary analysis about the potential impact of campaigns consider that success is more likely if

- political capital is already generated to support the campaign goals
- the campaign aligns with strongly held values
- vulnerable groups are given a convincing voice
- the campaign holds legitimacy with their constituents and larger publics.

Identified factors making a successful campaign less likely are:

- political decision-making is dominated by parties that exclude civil society actors
- questions are raised about the legitimacy, transparency and accountability of transnational civil society actors
- information is not available if the problems are poorly understood
- difficulties in working effectively across polarised values (Timmer and Prinnet, 2007).

3.1 Levels of activities

Sustainable consumption work by NGOs is playing a vital role at every level.

On the local level, they run public awareness campaigns, develop practical initiatives and search for better consumption opportunities in collaboration with local governments and local suppliers.

On national level, they are active lobbyists influencing regulations and other framework-setting for more sustainable consumption and working to phase out unsustainable consumption opportunities.

On the international level, NGOs push towards far-reaching agreements and documents that encourage framework-setting at the national level.

A survey among sustainable consumption entrepreneurs (active on the international level) identified the regional and local initiatives as a success factor for the whole process. These initiatives are seen to influence policymakers from the bottom up. DeWit expect that main institutions are more than open to listen to these initiatives, especially when the lack of confidence of citizens in official institutions is high. Local and regional initiatives are seen to make a difference and are key to make the change (de Wit, 2006). The value and impact of local action by NGOs has been assessed in the UK where clear environmental, social and economic benefits were noted (Church and Elster, 2002; Church, 2007).

The different levels still need to establish better possibilities for exchange of information and ideas and to ensure transparency. It is quite likely that the sum of practical behavioural and infrastructure changes at the local and regional level that will make a lasting difference. Also, it will be the political processes that ensure that good single examples and cases become common practice and support the development of a common and agreed policy.

3.2 NGOs at the international level

Within the political processes, work on sustainable consumption is still quite informal even if conferences and meetings – like in the Marrakech process – show formal elements (Batterink, 2006). Politics in a globalising world generally is no longer characterised by the interaction between states as the primary political actors. Non-state as well as supra-state actors are increasingly acquiring political decision-making capacity and authority, too (Rosenau and Czempiel, 1992; Messner and Nuscheler, 1996, 2003). In particular, new opportunities appear for active and to some extent autonomous roles of IGOs, business, and civil society in the design, implementation, and enforcement of standards and regulations. Scholars speak of ‘global governance’, i.e., global problem-solving and rule-setting that takes place even though a global government does

not exist (Fuchs and Lorek, 2005). As there is not one single, stable, central actor, the interaction between all of them is strategic and helps build a policy network on the meso-level (Batterink, 2006).

As mentioned earlier, business as well as IGOs and national governments (of industrialised countries) intend to frame sustainable consumption in terms of improvements in efficiency so far. Win–Win scenarios and “picking the low hanging fruits” are dominating the agendas. This is rooted in the weak position sustainable consumption still has in the ranking of business and governments (compared with issues such as growth). And as IGOs depend on image and financial resources from the former ones, not too much can be expected from this side. De Wit argues that the concept of Sustainable Consumption is still so vague because main players are scared to clearly identify their opponents. Only the NGOs do not always choose the diplomatic way but name their opponents. NGOs base work on their own convictions and blame their opponents where their convictions run counter to the cultural norm and values, e.g., (de Wit, 2006).

The status of NGOs is based on their image and support as is also the case with policymakers and entrepreneurs. But this is evaluated by their supporters according to other criteria. NGOs have to fulfil their function of controlling and showing their opinions in a watchdog role. So INGOs are seen as the controllers of the progress, on the one hand, but they have failed to put pressure cooperatively on the governments and business, on the other (de Wit, 2006).

A recent study lists six INGOs as the most important ones working on sustainable consumption (de Wit, 2006):

- Consumers International (CI)
- Friends of the Earth (FoE)
- International Coalition for Sustainable Production and Consumption (ICSPAC)
- International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED)
- North American Sustainable Consumption Alliance (NASCA)
- Northern Alliance for Sustainability (ANPED)
- World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF).

Section 4 reflects the status of sustainable consumption work and NGO activities from an internal perspective, based on a survey done among ANPED members.

4 NGO work: a self-assessment

Since 1991, ANPED has worked to build capacity among Northern civil society organisations through sharing of information, knowledge, and skills and enabled informed and effective democratic participation by civil society in local, national, regional and international decision-making in sustainable development policy and processes.

This overview of NGO perspectives is based on a series of 22 surveys and semi-structured interviews carried out in September 2006 with ANPED member NGOs from 16 nations in the UNECE region.

The aim was to find out:

- How far NGOs saw a focus on SCP as relevant to their work.
- What they understood this to mean.
- How they engaged.
- What might encourage more engagement.

The survey was of a clearly limited sample. All were ANPED members, and ANPED has work on SCP as its central focus. However, even within such a limited sample, there were significant variations in understanding, approach to the issues, capacity, and approaches to bringing about change. It is important to note that ANPED is a unique network in that it has an open membership and a democratic make-up. Its Board and membership is drawn from all parts of the UNECE region and any NGO can apply for membership (new members are agreed at the Annual General Meeting). ANPED has a strong internationalist focus and helps people to participate in international processes such as the annual meetings of the Commission on Sustainable Development. As such, it might be expected to attract groups who are looking to work beyond their normal spheres of operation.

4.1 Self-estimation

In fact, those surveyed described themselves as working primarily at a national policy level (90%).¹ Of the remainder, two worked primarily locally and one internationally.

Fifty percent are active in the ANPED SPAC Working Group (ANPED runs a number of semi-formal working groups to facilitate joint working across the region). The other 50% were engaged at different levels (10% said that they simply received information).

Forty percent said that they were involved in or following the Marrakech Process and another 45% said that they know a little and were keen to find out more.

Further analysis of this information suggests a core of surveyed groups who are actively engaged in work around SCP with a long 'tail' of groups whose involvement is progressively less: two appear to have no active involvement in SPAC-oriented work. This is explored further in the next section.

4.2 Evaluation of the work of NGOs and Governments

Ninety percent of those interviewed saw SCP as a common link for much work on environmental issues, while 10% saw it as "an interesting idea but rather hard to link to customary NGO work":

Further to these groups were asked how far SCP was a focus for their own work:

- 55% of those interviewed see it as a core of or central to their work
- 25% see it as a framework for their work
- 20% see some links with their work.

The NGOs were then asked how far work in their countries has gone around the development of a national action plan for SCP issues (as has been proposed as part of the follow-up to the 2002 WSSD), and on how they as NGOs had been involved in this work. Table 1 lists the findings.

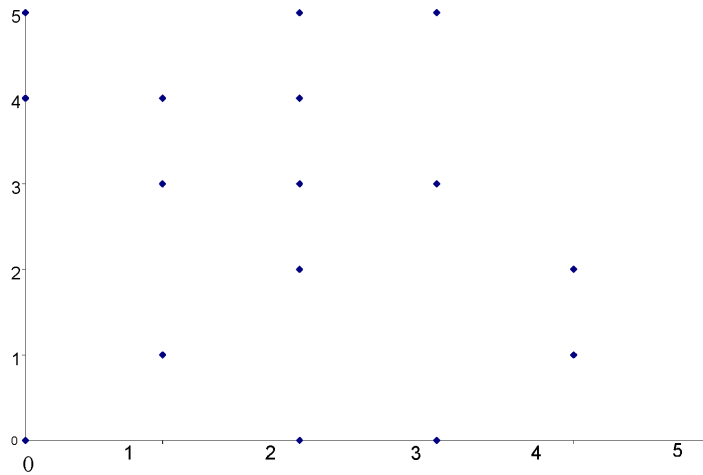
Table 1 NGO engagement in national work and their assessment of that work

		<i>Levels for each factor for the 22 NGOs surveyed</i>																					
Level of work in country		4	2	0	2	3	2	3	2	1	0	1	0	0	3	0	4	1	2	1	2	1	1
Level of NGO involvement		1	2	0	0	3	5	0	3	3	4	4	0	5	5	0	2	3	3	3	4	3	1

On a score of 0–5 (5 being ‘a great deal’), the average score was 1.7 for national action, and 2.4 for the engagement of the NGOs.

The data is mapped hereunder. This shows a scattering, which does not point to any great congruence between levels of government and NGO activity (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Mapping of government action against level on NGO engagement



Horizontal axis is level of Government action.
Vertical axis is level of NGO engagement.

Rather, it suggests that NGOs are more active (in their own estimation) even in two instances where they said that there was no significant government activity. It may thus be able to be that this says more about their enthusiasm than it does about outputs and outcomes, but it does also suggest or even confirm that the level of government activity on this remains low.

It might be desirable for future work to utilise other data (from bodies such as the EEA) to arrive at an objective level of activity on these issues by governments (it would be necessary to develop some suitable measures and indicators).

4.3 The linkages between a sustainable consumption perspective and other issues

It became clear that only perhaps two of the NGOs interviewed saw SCP as a key issue in its own right. We therefore asked the NGOs surveyed what issues they saw as being linked to this work. This provided some useful insights, and also suggests what the NGOs see as their main areas of work.

The issues mentioned (there was no prompting and no suggestions made by those surveying) and the percentages mentioning them were:

- Energy: 65%
- Chemicals: 40%
- Food: 40%
- Transport: 35%
- Waste: 20%
- Water: 20%.

Also mentioned by fewer than 20% of participants were Health, Housing, Agriculture, Nanotech, Ecological Footprints, Agenda 21, Ecological debt, Forests, and Education.

This suggests that even those NGOs active on the topic still see strong links to more 'traditional' environmental issues, and that if work on SCP is to become more than an academic exercise for small numbers of experts, it will have to make links to more mainstream policy debates, most notably around energy and climate change.

4.4 Building the engagement of NGOs

It is arguable that there are three principal roles that NGOs play in delivering change. These are:

- observing and influencing public and company policy
- developing the infrastructure to enable the policy to be implemented
- building the engagement of individuals and stakeholders through information, communication, and education who will then advocate for the policy and help develop the infrastructure.

In terms of work, the infrastructure is being and will be developed in many different ways, principally linked to the individual issues such as energy, food, transport, etc. It is unlikely that there will be much practical action that is directly or overtly labelled as being about SCP. It is also notable in the UK that very few of the voluntary sector groups funded by their government to work on a Sustainable Consumption-related programme use this phrase in their publicity materials.

NGOs will play a part in infrastructure development but as work on issues such as climate change and sustainable food production moves into the mainstream then that pioneering work will be less important. Developing engagement is also critical but again the mass media may do this more effectively and on a larger scale in many countries.

The key area for NGO engagement is thus quite likely to be around policy work: this will include moving the agenda forward and perhaps most importantly seeking to ensure that governments stand by what they agree to (e.g., the outcomes of MEAs). It may also include lobbying and advocacy work.

4.4.1 *The current situation*

With this in mind, it is instructive to consider what NGOs are doing and what they might do and in turn what would encourage them to more action. The survey asked NGOs what they actually did around SCP (offering a choice of four general activities) and what they would like to do (with more support or advice)

The results were:

- building engagement of other NGOs: 90% do this, 10% would like to
- work with business: 5% do this, 60% would like to
- work with local government: 50% do this, 30% would like to
- work on national policy: 30% do this, 60% would like to.

This suggests that NGOs are very happy to talk with each other on SCP, but much less keen to engage with business or national governments – the contacts where they might make the most difference. This suggests a significant lack of confidence and capacity and that ANPED as network organisation as well as governments and other interested stakeholders needs to address this issue directly.

The fact that half of those interviewed were engaged in some way with local government may be a legacy from Local Agenda 21 style activity but it also offers up some potential new ground around procurement policy. Recent discussions with NGOs at an ANPED meeting suggests that there may be a lack of understanding or the potential for work on procurement in this field (especially in Eastern Europe), but some NGOs are already having an impact on this.

4.4.2 *Developing work*

These issues had to some extent been anticipated and participants of the survey were asked what support they would like (from ANPED or other agencies). They were offered five choices and were asked whether each was a priority, whether it would be useful or whether it would not be helpful. The results for each are:

	<i>Priority (%)</i>	<i>Useful (%)</i>	<i>Not useful (%)</i>
Basic explanatory materials	60	25	15
Tool-kit for national / local action	70	20	10
Guidance on engagement in national policy work	25	70	5
Information on what happens in other countries	75	20	5
Regular information on the Marrakech process	80	15	5

It should be stressed that when these points were matched against the levels of action, then there was a notable divide between those engaged in Marrakech and keenest to know more, and those just starting out for whom the basics and tool-kits were priorities.

It is again noticeable that only 25% saw materials to help them engage with national government as a priority.

5 Overall conclusion

NGOs clearly have a role to play in the work on SCP both in terms of the specialist knowledge they can bring and also in terms of their role as representing the voice of civil society. They are keen to play this role. There is no doubt that a growing number of NGOs are engaging with groups dealing with SCP issues. However, there is still a clear lack of understanding about the emerging challenges of the issue. What seems to be necessary is to meet four challenges:

Linking sustainable consumption to current policy and practice priorities

To further convince local and national NGOs of the relevance of the topic to their current field of work such as energy or food better and more obvious links should be provided by those working on SCP issues. With the knowledge and information available in scientific research, this task should be one of adequate communication only. Most NGO work can be connected to a consumption and production component already. It only has to be made visible. The same seems to be true for and useful for the different stakeholders on the governmental side.

Linking better between global and local

Sustainability and thus sustainable consumption and production need action at every level within society. If there is no coherent linking with the policy agenda then ambitious local projects are no more likely to solve the problems than the high level talk shops in the global context. Coherent positioning and linking is necessary from local to global and back as well as from global to local and back. Thus timely information about the political processes is as necessary as a valid pool of examples from local initiatives that serve as best practice but also show that the concrete relevance effects of higher level decisions are monitored.

Linking better with other interest groups

At the local and national level and in case to case decisions more opportunities for exchange, dialogue and collaboration with business and governmental organisations would be useful.

At the international level, the adoption of new political strategies by the relevant NGOs is the challenge. Given the current alignment of interests to limit activities on win-win, improved coalition building of NGOs with academia and developing countries seems likely to provide some new basis for increased political effectiveness. Moreover, as part of their strategy, such coalitions should start a political debate about the location within IGOs of the work on sustainable consumption. Even if NGOs and academic research depend increasingly on public and financial support such coalitions are most likely to remain the only potentially significant driving force for strong sustainable consumption governance.

Acting more strategically

Traditional governmental ‘guidance and leadership’ is being increasingly supplemented by the use of wider governance approaches. Decision-making may now depend on factors such as powerful individuals, ‘windows of opportunities’ (e.g., during natural catastrophes) or the right balance of majorities in decision-making bodies. NGOs (as well as the other actors) should learn from the positive aspects of this and be prepared with positive contributions to feed in as soon as such situations appear.

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Note

¹The figures are presented as percentages, round for simplicity to the nearest 5%. Owing to multiple answers in some questions the percentages total over 100%.