



# » Outside view

## LOFTY GOALS, PRACTICAL CHALLENGES

Sustainable consumption is not just for other people – but taking it seriously means weighing up all the options.

### ► PROFILE

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Here I am, yet again, on a plane. Not that I don't know that this is the most climate-damaging mode of transport. But how else am I meant to get to my meetings in the capital, to my lectures at the university, and to my staff and project partners, who are scattered all over Europe? Video conferences and Skype mean massive gains in time and resources but they're no substitute for face-to-face discussions. And how can I keep in contact with friends all over the world and my family in the US without getting on a plane? What's more, how can we possibly tell young people that they shouldn't be exploring the world, making new friends and experiencing other cultures in the interests of personal growth, just as we did? We can't, surely.

There are conflicts of interest wherever we look. It's hardly surprising. After all, sustainable development is a form of development that depends on our awareness. It means devising strategies to deal with the fundamental conflicts of interest between our own quality of life and the finite nature of the Earth's environmental and social resources, relying on efficiency, consistency and sufficiency. So in order to maintain my

credibility, not least in my own eyes, I've created a set of habits for myself to mitigate these conflicts – because resolving them is impossible. I offset my carbon emissions with Atmosfair (the automated payment machine at Stuttgart Airport is very handy; the process takes two minutes). I take the train for journeys of up to four hours (and choose the 100% green energy option for my rail travel). We generally spend our family holidays on an organic farm in Styria. At home and at work, regional, seasonal, organic food is generally available. I buy recycled paper, MSC-certified fish, FSC-certified wood and timber products, and organic cosmetics with no animal testing. Sustainable investments, energy-efficient heating and green electricity are a given. And in a designer city like Copenhagen, with its plethora of ethical and sustainable fashion labels, there's no need to compromise when it comes to looking stylish.

But is all this actually doing any good? It's certainly not enough to offset the carbon emissions from my flight today. I could drive my car for a year and still only produce the same emissions as one transatlantic flight. So is it a drop in the ocean? A sop to my conscience, the



modern-day equivalent of the mediaeval sale of indulgences, this time aimed at concerned academics? Is sustainable consumption possible at all, or is it a contradiction in terms – an oxymoron? Doesn't consumption always involve the use and destruction of materials and resources, the degradation and exploitation of the natural world and social values? Here at my own institution, we have just found out how many 'slaves' we theoretically employ – and it's an alarming number (you can work it out for yourself at [www.slaveryfootprint.org](http://www.slaveryfootprint.org)). And this with a staff of young people, all of whom undoubtedly achieve the highest scores for their values and motivation to engage in

options – provided that you are sufficiently committed and your household budget stretches that far. Thanks to transparency initiatives, consumer information websites like the German Council for Sustainable Development's 'Sustainable Shopping Basket', eco-labels, some more credible than others, codes to scan on your smartphone and other independent information offers, consumers can easily find out about a product's green credentials and whether it raises any social or ethical issues. But as neuroeconomic studies have shown, this requires considerable time and mental effort on the part of the consumer, who has to search for, understand, evaluate and weigh up all the information. And very few labels are suffi-

ciently clear, impartial and credible that they can be used as a 'mental short-cut' and a substitute for one's own research. There is a need for action by policy-makers here: labels should include the criteria used in the award process, be up-to-date, be independently verified and should themselves be subject to quality assurance or certification. There's definitely a need to remove the more nonsensical and confusing ones from the market, leaving a handful of trustworthy labels, as Baden-Württemberg's Consumer Affairs Commission has shown.

consumer choice. 'Sufficiency' is the most radical form of sustainable consumption, but it is also the most difficult to explain and to demand and promote politically. In the words of a well-known critic of growth: 'Abundance is not about how much you have – it's about how little you need.' But for politicians, this is dangerous terrain. We need only recall the outcry from the German car industry when Baden-Württemberg's new Prime Minister, Winfried Kretschmann from the Greens, commented, in one of his first interviews after his election, that it's not about selling more cars; it's about cutting car sales and achieving better mobility. It's a similar situation with consumption options which generally lead to less materialism, such as 'use, don't own' schemes and shared ownership, shared use or leasing. This trend is particularly strong in cities with anonymous, individualised lifestyles: here, it's just as much about creating a community as it is about self-help and money-saving. Urban wasteland is being used as never before for community-based vegetable-growing, for example. Here, the allotment movement has given rise to urban gardening in a very real sense. Repair cafés are also springing up as community events and are all about fixing items like mobile phones and printers. And local communities are competing to see who can save and generate more energy.

Today's sustainable consumption has many faces – and fashions. Shabby chic is no longer the only style in town: in Denmark, the home of great design, innovative business models are emerging at the interface between the formal and the informal sectors. They include clothes libraries as a sustainable approach to designer fashion, and online swap shops for kids' stuff. Consumption is no longer all about consuming: it's also about producing, modifying, upcycling and making creative use of all that we have. ■

## Labels should cover all relevant criteria, be up-to-date and independently verified, and undergo quality assurance.

strategic consumption. In consultant-speak, they are classic examples of the 'Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability (LOHAS)'\* demographic.

In fact, sustainable consumption is a relative concept. Some consumption options are more, or less, sustainable than others; some are 'greener', score higher on social justice, are more economical, kinder to animals, or more efficient. They have a longer lifespan, are easier to repair, and are more equitable. In most areas of consumption, it's now fairly easy to choose between these

So is there any such thing as sustainable consumption? Yes, indeed – a decision to do without a product entirely, or to postpone consumption for the time being, is a genuinely sustainable con-

\* Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability (LOHAS): this describes a demographic group whose lifestyle is determined by principles of health awareness and healthy and sustainable living.