

Sustainable Consumption Behaviour

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Introduction

Sustainable development came to forefront in an earth summit held in Rio, Brazil in 1992. The sustainable development goals, known as global goals adopted by member states of United Nations Organization (2012, Rio de Janeiro) give a call towards sustainable consumption and production as one among the 17 goals towards achievement of sustainable development. Thus Sustainable consumption and production helps in fulfilling our dreams towards a sustainable and qualitative development that ensures efficient utilisation of resources (energy and water) with minimal discharge of waste and pollution. Thus ensuring the sustenance of the larger system of Biosphere and the subsystem of the economy. The paper reviews the importance and difficulty for achieving the 12th development goal. The difficulty arises because of the fact that human behaviour is subjective, many are having different values and attitudes towards sustainable consumption, some have strong environmental values, some others with moderate values and some with no value at all. Behavioural insights have an important role in influencing the consumption behaviour and easing the effort towards sustainable consumption. The paper tries to look into the role of deliberate action plans targeted in changing the behaviour of individuals towards sustainable consumption. An attempt is made to identify the deliberate measures that could impact on the consumption behaviour of the people.

We humankind are demanding more than the available resources which the Mother Nature could actually serve, the end result is the scarcity and the ecological imbalance and the resultant unsustainability. The over consumption restricts the consumption potential of the future as well as the present generation. The ecological footprint of developed countries is five times that of developing countries. Experts estimate that there will be addition of 2 to 3 billion consumers by 2050. Consumption is made for the survival, welfare and well being of people and the very survival, welfare, and well being is possible only with sustainable development. A responsible consumer will take care of the well being of ecology, economy and the society in their entire consumption chain with the efficient use and harmless disposal of waste.

Much importance is given to sustainable consumption and production for the good future of the planet. At 1940 Oslo Symposium all the participants are advised to use minimum natural resources and less emission of pollution and minimum disposal of waste, so that it will not jeopardise the needs and survival of the future generation. It is crucial time to consider the fact that the growth and human well being are not complementary to each other. In present situation the growth is achieved at the cost of environmental sustainability. People consume what is produced and producer will supply what the consumer will demand, so sustainable consumption also needs sustainable production. Sustainable consumption came in to

international dialogue at United Nations Conference on environment and development held in 1992. The new concept of both Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) was first acknowledged as a fundamental part of sustainable development at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development. 10 year framework programme has been framed by The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) on Sustainable Consumption and Production patterns (SCP), the United Nations Environment Programme (UN Environment) serving as its Secretariat. The programme helps to find information on the quality of goods and services and thus urging consumers to engage in sustainable consumption. It ensures the collaboration of all stakeholders (government, business, consumer, mass media, education and research institutions, NGO,s)

The sustainable consumption is influenced by social and cultural factors such as family, education, religion, peer groups, infrastructure etc. Education gives better understanding on the impact of consumption on environment the effects of sustainable consumption on environment. Low literacy in India prevents the drive towards sustainable consumption. The economic and social policies are determined by political factors and these political factors will further shape the consumption and production patterns in the country (Spaargaren 2003). Environmental education and public awareness programmes are sponsored by state and central government and advocacy groups (Marten et al 2005). There is a bureau of energy efficiency in India set up in march 2002 under the provisions of energy conservation act of 2001 provides a legal framework for energy efficiency initiatives in India

Critical evaluation of unsustainable consumption

Over 70 percent of the earth's ecosystem has been degraded over the past 50 years. It is estimated that the resources needed for industrial growth and consumption will rise to 170 percent of bio- capacity by 2040. Rapid population growth is the major driving force and it is expected that the population will be near to 9 billion by 2050. The 20th century was marked by remarkable progress in the well being of the population with considerable increase in job creation and resultant income generation, investments in public infrastructure, urbanisation and overall increase in production activities. All these economic development and growth has been achieved at the cost of environmental degradation. Extensive use of both renewable and non-renewable resources has been accompanied by a growth in waste and pollution. The resources use has been increased considerably from less than 10 billion tonnes to 70 billion tonnes in 2010(UNEP 2011), with the end result of climate change, reduced food security, inadequate water availability and certain kind of pollution. Natural resources needed for the current pattern of consumption and production requires 25 and 30 tonnes of material per capita, per annum (wiedmann et al, 2013).

Human development requires maintenance of minimum standard of living. The Human development indicators such as education, health and standard of living at purchasing power parity require some amount of resources. Research has shown that the relation between human development and amount of natural resource are highly non-linear (Steinberger and Roberts 2010). It is found that the consumption pattern of people especially the young and

educated ones of the developing countries converge with consumption style of the developed countries.

Sustainable consumption cannot be achieved without sustainable production. Still there remain confusions regarding sustainable consumption on whether it meant to consume less or consume differently or consume responsibly. As UNEP says sustainable consumption is not about consuming less, it is about consuming differently and consuming efficiently. There are some basic needs in our life but our consumption is going far ahead of the basic needs. For the efficient consumption what needed simultaneously is the efficient production and exchange. To consume more sustainably we need more sustainable products to consume. So sustainable consumption can be made possible to a large extent with the help of sustainable production. The production of green goods requires organic raw materials, such requirement demand high level of transfer of technology and research and development activities. Such initiatives increases the cost for producing green goods than the non-green goods

Why attainment of sustainable consumption so difficult

Attainment of sustainable consumption is a very difficult process because of the reason that it is subjective and different person perceive it a different manner. Some feel sustainable consumption as necessary and will change their consumption fully in a manner which is desired. While other category intends to change but fail to act as desired. There are some who neither intends nor acts to change their consumption. There remains a gap between intention and action. Individuals intends to be more responsible but ultimately results in irresponsible action. Many research shows that people are more concerned on environment, but in most cases this concern did not translate in to pro-environmental behaviour. Individual cognitive dissonance prevents the significance of action which is going to affect them personally.

Habitual behaviour influences a lot on the sustainable consumption, Research by academics at Duke University discovered that 40 percent of the actions that people take are habitual actions because they no longer requires deliberate consideration or effort and most often it occurs in consumption. Even though we know that the consumption of fast food, alcohol, physical inactivity, major deaths irrespective of age occurs due to above said consumption activities.

The peer groups can influence and this influence tends to be stronger at times of uncertainty. Some feel that sustainable consumption is not personally relevant. Major consequences of our consumption activities are not seen immediately. For example our society is unnecessarily wasting our water bodies and as a result it consequences and cost to the society and the nature is not felt immediately, we see here a lack of long vision on the future of our environment.

Role of behavioural science towards sustainable consumption

Behavioural science unlike old theories of consumer behaviour gave real insights in to the nature and complexities of human behaviour in process of decision making. People usually make mental shortcuts to evaluate choices and sometimes make decisions very quickly. The

findings from the field of behavioural economics when applied in policies and programmes will have had a profound influence in shaping the consumer behaviour in a way that is expected. Some countries use behavioural science in formulating policies. Incorporating behavioural insights in policies and programmes will incentivise community to “nudge”, (i.e. a rational self obligation) towards pro environmental consumption (Thaler and Sustein, 2009). Nudging can be practised through following initiatives discussed below.

Eco labelling helps in creating awareness on sustainable consumption. Eco-labelling includes energy labelling (cars, household appliances, lighting, televisions) organic labelling (food) and the blue angel label (sanitary tissues, cleaning and washing products). In many countries government set targets for the market shares of environment friendly products. Reduce those consumption with higher carbon footprint by means of using public transportation, efficiency in energy consumption, reducing the waste generated by following the waste management process of reduce, reuse and recycle.

Community discourses had been developed for sustainable consumption. Many movements that took place in connection with community discourse includes “simplicity circles” (discussion group that enquire on simpler ways of living), “Eco team approach”. This approach could help people who have consistent attitude in favour of environmentally sustainable consumption, but do not have sufficient information to do so and those who believe that they alone can’t do alone but only with the help of the community. Eco team is a group consisting of neighbour’s religious groups which emphasise on changing the household behaviour regarding recycling, water use, energy use, and transport. In Denmark green footprints have been placed pointing the way to rubbish bins in order to motivate consumers not to dispose wastes elsewhere.

Mobility management programmes is gaining popularity in Europe, Australia, United States and Japan. These programmes give feedback on the mode of transportation opted by the people. In Japan such programmes are referred to as travel feed back programme (TFP). Awareness is given to people to initiate towards sustainable transportation with the help of personalised communication, incentives and thus encouraging sustainable transportation methods. The city of Sweden put forward a campaign called “No ridiculous car trips”, that urge people to cut short their travel using cars at short distances.

Conclusion

Education could help in achieving the goal towards sustainable consumption but many developed countries with high quality education and much advancement in science and technology are ignorant on the well being of environment which eventually makes ones being at danger. The more the society is educated the more it is ignorant towards responsible consumption. When public and private authorities finance research and development activities with a bulk of money to leap forward to advanced phase of development, their initiatives towards sustainable development activities is negligible. Social institutions can play a significant role in achieving our long wish for sustainable development. Social institution includes family, religion, government, economy and education. It should be kept in mind that it is our social responsibility for a social cause. Strict punishment and at some

time incentives help to curb unsustainable consumption activities. A punishment or an incentive will make people believe in the way that is desired for a sustainable consumption.

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