

# Politics for sustainable consumption and production patterns

By Gerd Scholl and Frieder Rubik



**H**ousehold consumption is an emerging issue for public policies. In Europe, private households are responsible for a quarter of final energy consumption and produce two thirds of all municipal waste (EEA 2005). The entire environmental burden from households is primarily driven by areas such as food and drink, private transport and housing, including household appliances (Tukker et al. 2006). The majority of consumers claim to be aware of the ecological and social impact of their daily consumption routines, but their green attitudes do not always translate into environmentally friendly behaviour and concrete actions (European Commission 2006). This is no surprise:

- Consumption is a complex issue, as it responds to physiological as well as social needs. Moreover, consumers are strongly driven by habit and convenience often takes precedence in pressured daily lives. Hence, identifying appropriate points of intervention and suitable policy strategies is not an easy task.
- Until today public policies that explicitly address the environmental and social effects of consumer behaviour, beyond waste management strategies, are not very well developed (e.g. OECD 2008). Though several countries have set up action plans, the sustainability challenges from consumption have not yet been addressed properly.

Against this background, the special issue intends to discuss current and future options for policies promoting Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP). As *Spaargaren* argues, the potential can only be exploited if consumption and the associated social practices are acknowledged as a genuine policy issue. He identifies three forms of political commitment by citizen-consumers on environmental change in globalizing modernity that need to be addressed by policy makers. How this challenge is dealt with practically in European countries is depicted by *Ryder*, using the example of SCP policies in the UK, and also by *Szlezak* et al. on the basis of an EU-wide compari-

son. They present an overview of selected national SCP strategies and conclude, amongst other things, that the main focus of existing strategies lies in the ecological aspects of consumption and production and that consideration of social aspects does not usually go beyond the employment potential of planned action.

In the following, two examples illustrate how current policies could be further developed. Reusswig provides a discussion on carbon dioxide labelling, a topic which has gained momentum during the last months and which is high on the agenda of business representatives. A second innovative approach is presented by *Perrels* and *Katajajuuri*, who propose a new policy design linking individual emission monitoring and bonus systems with carbon footprints. In addition to these ideas, *Scholl* et al. present the latest evidence on innovative European policy approaches particularly aimed at fostering sustainable consumption patterns. They formulate policy recommendations that might contribute to more effective policies and they address, amongst others, the role of the retail sector as a gate-keeper to sustainable consumption, which is elaborated on in the last contribution by *Oosterveer*. He discusses the impact food retailers have on commodity streams and, thereby, on consumer choices and he puts forward good economic and social arguments for them to actively promote more sustainable food provision.

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