

Chapter 1 Institutional Change for Strong Sustainable Consumption

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1 Introduction

The current austerity policy in Europe, resulting in stagnant or declining disposable incomes for the majority of the population, are the result of neo-liberal growth policies. They illustrate brutally to the rest of Europe what has been an encroaching reality to some countries over the last decade: that economic growth of the economy does no way guaranty increasing income of the populations' majority (an expectation based on the post-war experience), let alone an increase in welfare or quality of life. However, so far the hope for betterment in foreseeable still hides the ugly face of globalised casino capitalism behind a veil of ignorance. On the other hand, if neoliberal growth policy were replaced by degrowth politics, *ceteris paribus*, stagnant income would result as well – a limited median income growth could be achieved by redistribution of wealth (which is anyway necessary due to justice concerns).

In this situation, celebrating an accidentally shrinking economy as an achievement for degrowth and the environment is politically fatal as it equates a painful situation with environmental progress and offers a whole arsenal of policy campaigns to the defenders of the status quo. Instead, while the dominant political narrative of perpetual growth fading as we move from the age of abundance to the era of frugality, a new definition fitting resource constrained development conditions is necessary: sustainable consumption does no longer mean the voluntary doing without making use of existing consumption options (which were part of an overall unsustainable development and of limited effectiveness due to rebound effects) but the ability to lead a dignified life / maintain or enhance the quality of life despite shrinking resource availability.

Max-Neef et al. (1989) distinguish human needs like subsistence, protection, affection, creation, identity and freedom from the means by which humans satisfy them, the satisfiers. Whereas human needs can be considered an anthropological constant, satisfier choice varies with factors like culture, wealth and the products on offer. Rather obviously, many needs are best satisfied by non-commercial services, such as care in a family or amongst friends, and not by products. However, whenever products are involved, truly sustainable consumption is about choosing true satisfiers, not about neglecting needs.

2 Environmental Space

2.1 The Concept

This definition matches the two Brundtland criteria for sustainable development, i.e. overcoming poverty while respecting environmental limits and sees consumption as a mechanism of self-realisation and life style choice within the available environmental space which steers clear of both environmental and social unsustainability. This has been operationalised by the Environmental Space concept in the past, distinguishing a space for free choice of consumption patterns from two zones of unsustainability: the domain of environmentally unsustainable overconsumption and the one of socially unsustainable underconsumption (Spangenberg, 1995; 2002). The upper limit of consumption, the “ceiling of the environmental space” was defined by the needs to reduce CO₂ emissions to a global per capita level in line with limiting global climate change, and the need for a dematerialisation of production and consumption reducing the global resource consumption by about 50%. Again assuming a universal right to environmental space use, equal for every citizen of the Earth, this led to reduction targets of 90% for the overconsuming affluent countries.

The lower level, called the “floor of the environmental space”, is not that easy to define, since as a socially required measure it is more a relational than an absolute demand. However, the criterion defined was that it must be sufficient to allow for a dignified life, which includes the opportunity to actively participate in the processes of the respective society (politics, culture, and many more). Thus not only essential needs (often defined as physiological demands) need to be met, but psychic and social needs as well. Human well-being, a good life, universal human rights (including social rights) and the extended definition of health by the WHO are related to this definition; in Latin America this line is “linea de dignidad” (already Adam Smith emphasised the necessity to provide all people with the means to lead “a life without shame” – not necessarily for “keeping up with the Joneses”).

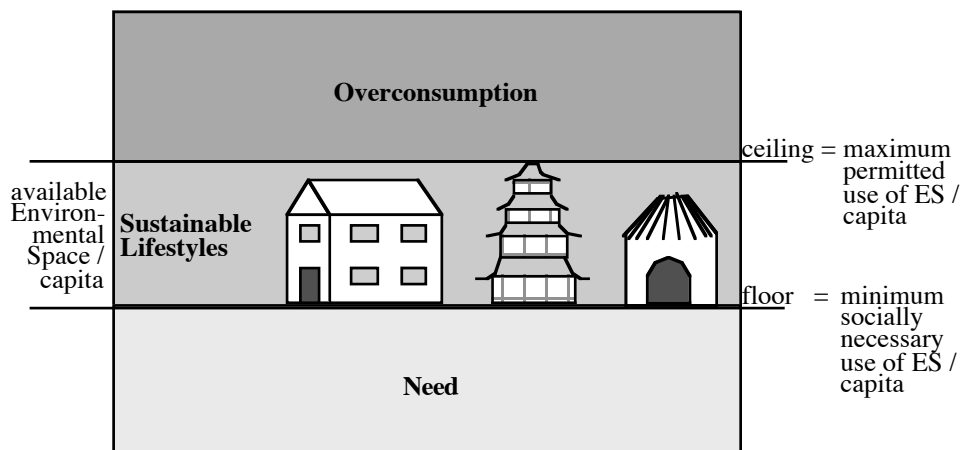


Figure 1: The environmental Space concept. Source (Spangenberg, 1995)

2.2 Environmental Space revisited:

2.2.1 The “planetary boundaries”

The information base for defining the delineations has improved significantly in the last couple of years, although the basic approach has remained the same. For the “ceiling”, the

“safe operating space for humanity” defined by Rockström et al. (2009) provides an extended empirical basis, emphasising the key dimensions to care for because a significant (biodiversity, nitrogen cycle) or slight (climate) transgression of the acceptable limits to damage has already occurred, or is soon about to happen (phosphorus cycle, ocean acidification).

2.2.2 The “social protection floor”

For the floor and its diverse operationalisations in different countries, the concept of a “social protection floor” developed and propagated by the ILO in collaboration with the WHO plays a similarly important role (ILO 2011). It emphasises the necessity of society-specific approaches, based on comparable quality criteria derived from the objective of “relieving people of the fear of poverty and deprivation, delivering on the promises of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (p. xxii). For this behalf it suggests measures and institutional reforms (supported by the International Trade Union Confederation) to achieve both, basic income security, and universal access to essential affordable social services.

2.3 Consumption implications

Defining upper and lower limits to resource consumption can be done for individuals or for societies. However, the character of the two dividing lines is a different one: the *linea de dignidad* criterion necessarily applies to every citizen (no one should live below it), constituting a right to a minimum income based on the criteria mentioned. For the upper limit, an overshoot of individual consumers could be tolerated, from a global point of view, as long as the average of the respective society remains below the “ceiling”. While an individual obligation to stay below the threshold would immediately introduce a maximum income, expressed in resource consumption units, a society wide definition would require deciding about a maximum acceptable spread between the lowest income (the floor) and the highest permissible income which would have to be adjusted regularly, in line with the development of the average consumption, to guarantee that the ceiling is not broken.

Thus considering natural resources a common heritage of humankind and basing calculations on the principle of equitable sharing are basic ethical approaches which still apply today, and they are contextualised now by the desire for improving social justice, in and between societies and countries. Assuming that past growth rates are neither achievable nor desirable in affluent countries, and aware of the fact that the recent increases in relative poverty happened during periods of relatively high growth, A call for a degrowth policy (slimming the economy in physical terms) followed by a similarly physically defined steady state economy are plausible. However, if growth is no longer a reliable option, improved justice can only be brought about by redistributing consumption options from the rich to the relatively poor. The “ceiling” helps to make this abstract demand operational.

Furthermore, an upper limit to resource consumption (implemented most effectively through a limit on income, and the resulting increased equality in income distribution is a significant contribution to sustainable consumption. It not only reduced the overconsumption of the rich systematically, but also reduces status competition and thus the psychic consumption necessity (Strasser 2011).

Such a change of definition of what substantial or strong sustainable consumption does in fact mean, requires institutional changes on all levels, from societal organisations via institutional mechanisms to institutional orientations.

3 Institutions I: orientations

Starting with the latter, this includes the change of orientation from “more consumption” to “less but better consumption”, because – as Mario Giampetro described it – “in a world full of people with increasing expectations but a plummeting level of resources per head, it should be perfectly clear that we are heading for troubled water” It can be pioneered and spear-headed by the current high consumption groups, for example as part of postmodern lifestyles emphasising either green values or – much more frequent and powerful – the health benefits accruing from abstaining from certain forms of consumption. The successful movements for the prohibition of alcohol in the 20th and of smoking in the 21st century are based on health arguments, the individuals called LOHAS (Lifestyle Of Health And Sustainability), mostly high level consumers promote a lifestyle of better, not less consumption.

Regarding the environmental impact, a quantity factor and a quality effect have to be distinguished: sustainable consumption politics has to develop restrictions affecting the rich and the dirty, which are often but not necessarily the same. Whereas a minimum level of expenditure is necessary to meet basic human needs, disposable income above that level can be used to increase the quantity or to improve the quality of consumption. If budgets are constrained (which they usually are), quality improvement expenditure increase are crowding out volume increases, and vice versa. This is rather the opposite of the eco-efficiency approach which argues with win-win situations, i.e. financial gains from less resource intensive consumption. However, as the money saved is spent again, savings are reduced by a rebound effect whenever a win-win is claimed. The size of the rebound depends of spending pattern chosen for the money saved: for more quantity or more quality.

But can changing household consumption really make a difference? On the one hand, there are obvious limits to the freedom of choice for household members, not only due to financial restrictions, but also to social processes (the social identity function of products makes individual changes difficult: the peer group effects) and the fact that each consumption decision is taken in a multi-actor framework where for each actor the degree of freedom of choice is co-determined by other actors (Spangenberg, Lorek 2002). On the other hand empirical studies from Switzerland have shown that the difference between low polluting and high polluting households is significant: controlled for expenditure levels, the variance of impacts (here determined as GHG emissions) varied between half as much and twice as much than the average. Although only realised by a relatively small group, obviously there is a potential for significant improvements if people adopt the low impact behavioural pattern – but also a risk of much higher additional damage if the high pollution life style emerges into a role model, already today, due to the asymmetrical distribution of impacts, the influence of high polluters on the total Swiss performance is twice as high as the one of low polluters. The author concludes that “policy makers are well advised to consider measures designed to tame the high emitters and prevent the dissemination of their consumption patterns” – a combination of motivation and stigmatisation processes seems to be necessary, but not (yet) available, plus legally set limitations supported by financial incentives: strong sustainable consumption policies need to combine the effects of external regulation with extrinsic and intrinsic motivation (Girod 2009).

However, what characterises – at the same level of expenditure – those groups of consumers which have a particularly high, and those with a particularly low pollutant profile? Low polluters are characterised by purchasing patterns which in all environmentally dominant fields of human consumption (Spangenberg, Lorek 2002) opt for low impact choices: regard-

ing construction and housing, they live in younger buildings, with less fossil fuel consumption for heating, and show a lesser share of single family detached houses. Regarding mobility, they buy less expensive cars, show less car use, and less overall mobility. Regarding nutrition, their meat consumption is lower, and they tend to buy more organically grown food. While high polluters opt for quantity and show more flights, low polluters spend the money they save by eco-efficient consumption on better quality (organic food) and more leisure, a sector with below-average specific pollutant emissions.

However, better consumption absorbing the gains from eco-efficiency to avoid rebound effects can only be an improvement relative to a certain level of expenditure, a significant but relative decoupling. In order not to be overcompensated by income growth, additional measures like income capping still make sense. In order to comprehensively address the rich and the dirty, it is important to distinguish between wealth, standard of living / affluence, and well-being / quality of life (figure 2).

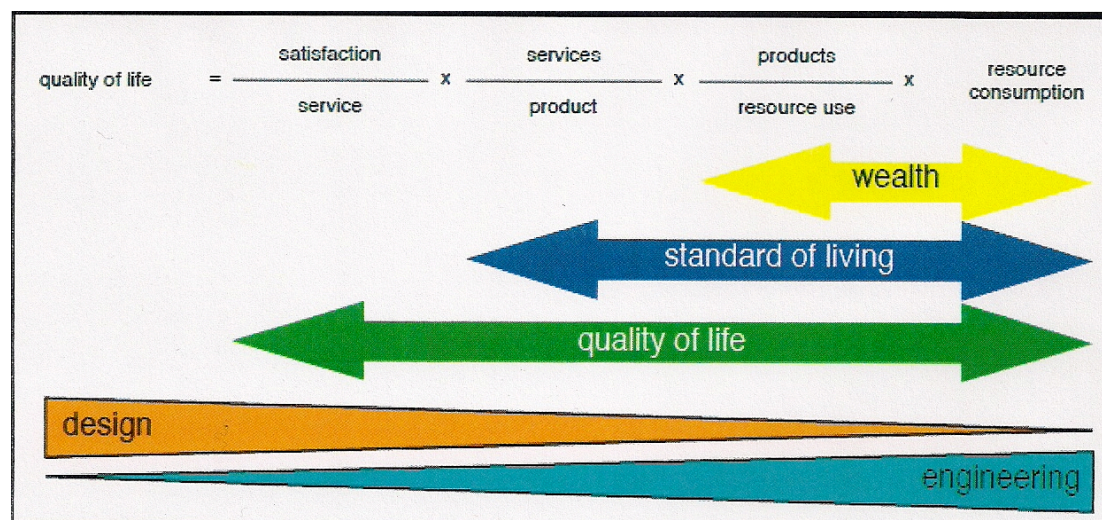


Figure 2: Efficiencies, their contribution to quality of life, and the contributions of engineering and design. The influence of design is stronger closer to the consumer side as it influences not only the product but also the consumption behavior. Engineering is crucial for the development, functionality and efficiency of products. Product ownership relates to material wealth, whereas the standard of living refers to the services enjoyed and includes nonmarket services. Its environmental impact is determined by the production (products/resource) and product efficiency (services/product). Satisfaction efficiency/satisfaction/service) is the key to a low consumption good life, a qualitative component implying social and institutional criteria (Source: Spangenberg et al. 2010)

Since medieval ages, the term wealth is used to describe a stock of assets sufficient to live a decent life on them; not only the volume, but the ownership is decisive. As opposed to that, the standard of living is a more recent term, a notion pointing at flows of services (income, rent, interest) derived from the stocks of wealth. What counts is the access to the flows, the right to use them at one's own discretion, not the ownership as such. A focus on the standard of living requires a consumer identity based on access to and command over services – the insistence on ownership is then somewhat anachronistic. Today such a shift from ownership to access is visible, but it is far from sure that it will indeed transform consumption behaviour: such trends flourish with confidence and optimism towards the future, and tend to be undermined by social insecurity and precarisation leading to a re-traditionalisation of behavioural routines in times of crises (Kraemer, 2002).

The situation is particularly challenging with transport: cars are not just service delivery machines for transport, but more than most other consumption items prestige objects important for status demonstration objects of emotional identification as means of expressing an actual or a desired identity. Changing to a smaller car is a social status setback; however, completely giving up car ownership and changing to active (walking, biking) and public transport, plus occasionally using shared or rented cars, can be accepted as a lifestyle choice without status loss. Ownership of an expensive car is one aspect of individual status seeking (small but expensive sports cars can have a high reputational value – the size that matters is the one of the price tag, plus for many men the top speed), but a highly mobile lifestyle is a social phenomenon professionally enforced by globalising business and in private life (although the delineation tends to be more and more difficult) by social relations which are no longer locality based but rely on the ability of like minded people to organise themselves, with physical distances playing a minor role (lifestyle communities on the web are an extreme example). These are some of the reasons why despite overwhelming arguments (individually health benefits of physical activity and pollution exposure reduction, collectively air quality improvement and accident risk reduction) a reduction in car ownership and use is not taking place, and monetary quantifications (a net gain of up to 50,000 €) have not motivated individuals, as little as the annual public health gain of 33 € per capita has set politicians in motion (Rabi and de Nazelle 2011).

Thus better but unlimited consumption is not an environmentally sustainable option (just as unqualified consumption reduction is not socially sustainable). Only once an upper limit to consumption has been established and where necessary enforced, significant effects are possible if the front runners act as and are recognised as new role models. Then this transition can reach the middle class, representing the bulk of consumption decisions. When “less but better” has become the “normality” of consumption decision principles, shaping the standard search routines of shoppers, we are getting closer to substantially sustainable consumption.

Consuming quality products with an extended life span, repairable, upgradable, made from environmental benign material in socially and environmentally responsible production processes has several implications. On the one hand, it reduces resource consumption if (and only if) the extended use time of products overcompensates the additional resource input used for higher quality (Spangenberg 1995). On the other hand, as it will make products more expensive, it further reduces the number of products bought, while enhancing the number of services available from any product over its lifetime: the ‘psychic income’ (Fisher, 1906) may even increase while the waste volumes decrease (waste time is life time minus use time). Buying better products (i.e. better satisfiers of essentially unchanged human needs, Max-Neef et al., 1989) is furthermore a way of reducing consumption while avoiding rebound effects.

However, this requires a new kind of products. The challenge to design for sustainability DfS is to provide products which are not only efficient during the production and dissemination phase, but are also real satisfiers offering increased satisfaction efficiency (Blincoe et al. 2009; Spangenberg et al., 2010). That requires some innovative thinking on developing and marketing products: if they are to be more sustainable during their use phase, this use phase must be extended, product replacement postponed, fashion partly ignored. Schmidt-Bleek called that “designing antiques”, products people do not want to give up and replace, but value and maintain. This can be achieved for instance by enhancing the emotional attachment to a certain product by designing them to be personalised, or even entering co-design/co-create by designing products tailored to an individual’s specifications (Ninimäki and Hassi, 2011). “Fertile products” can be assembled (and thus repaired), modified and brought into

their final shape be the consumer, creating a new feeling of ownership (Fuad-Luke 2008). However, if some manufacturers offer higher quality, longer lasting products, and they are bought, maintained, upgraded and repaired despite the cost involved, this will provide business opportunities for those involved in post-counter and/or post-consumer dealing with products (REconomy), but for those involved in extraction, refinement and mass production the future would be bleak.

For the lowest income group, their request for secured consumption options is justified (up to a socially sustainable level), but the secured or increased consumption levels which are necessary to allow for an active participation in the respective society should be understood as just that, a social insurance, not the first step on the consumption escalator. Thus the communication of the concept must always emphasise both, that every human deserves the “floor”, but no educated person would wish to consume above the “ceiling”, and thus it is good to impose limitations.

Of course such a redefinition of attitudes, as necessary as it is, is difficult. Consumption patterns are part of our cultural heritage and change is usually slow. In the three domains of household consumption dominating the environmental impact (construction and housing, nutrition, mobility) it has been a long standing privilege of first the nobles (and religious representatives) and then the “rich and the beautiful” to publicly squander resources as part of expressing their superior position. However, while this was socially and democratically problematic (to say the least), it was not environmentally critical. However, these attitudes and role models shaped lower class desires; their struggle for improvement of the living and working conditions imitated life styles of higher classes. As fulfilling some of these consumption aspirations became possible with Fordism (although the workers had to pay a high price through Taylorism), economically driven and socially desired mass production turned into mass production from an environmental point of view. The roots of unsustainability are indeed deep, but those of counter-movements against such privileges and wasteful lifestyles are just as old as those patterns themselves.

3.1 Institutions II: mechanisms

Both the floor and the ceiling require institutional mechanisms to be implemented, however different ones for different income strata – besides an anti-poverty policy an anti-wealth policy is necessary, too (less popular amongst decision makers, but frequently resonating with ordinary people, regardless of their overall political orientation).

For the lowest income strata, an unconditional minimum income is required, part of which should not be paid out in money but in – mostly physical – goods and services. It could be realised as an extension of the existing social security systems, now providing the “floor” transfer income. This is not to repeat the past experiments which replaced monetary pay-out schemes by provision of goods like clothing or school books, often violating the human dignity of those affected and justified by economists with the suspicion that recipients would always misuse the transfers they receive (which says little about the recipients but a lot about those economists). The scheme suggested here follows a different approach and aims for the opposite effect, i.e. for strengthening human self-determination; it is a rights-based approach, as begging for charity is not in line with human dignity. Its core is providing a free supply of a certain minimum, sufficient for a dignified life, of water, electricity, heating, mobility etc. to help sheltering the poorest members of society against the impacts of volatile resource markets. Even the most effective welfare state cannot react to price hikes caused by market volatility without a time lag, and thus those which have neither a disposable income high enough to buffer these hikes by reducing the consumption of other, non essential items, nor enough savings to bridge the gap, are exposed to energy poverty and water cut-offs in the

case of monetary transfers, but sheltered from them by the provision of a physical supply floor. Such a basic income, consisting of physical and monetary components could replace pensions, unemployment benefits, scholarships etc., topped up by additional payments in case earned entitlements are higher than the floor level.

The income loss this implies for the utilities involved should be compensated by progressive pricing systems, which would simultaneously establish incentives for saving resources for the better-off, while including an element of socially desirable income and asset redistribution. This could be a first step towards a change of the pricing system including bans on all financial incentives supporting consumption increases like “buy two get three” offers, reduced prices per unit in case of buying more or larger packages, etc. In particular degressive price structures for energy, water etc. should be replaced by progressive ones as they are not only stimulating consumption but also socially unfair: as the rich consume more (in terms of money, but also regarding resources, see Lorek and Spangenberg 2001) than the poor, the result of degressive pricing is that the rich pay less per unit of consumption than the poor. Regarding changing price structures and thus the economic dynamics by changing the institutional framework, this is not yet the end of the story: imagine that resource extraction licences (coal and ore mining, gas and oil drilling, water abstraction, quarrying etc.) would not only define limits of area and duration, but also of volumes: Then all of a sudden the incentive structure would be changed from one promoting as-rapid-as-possible exploitation to one where the entrepreneur must carefully consider how to spread the extraction over time. Other symbolic examples refer to automobility: why have railway managers a car and a driver and do not use the rail (they have a free ride anyway)? Why does a step forward in the career usually mean a larger, and not a more efficient company car? Examples abound where consumption promoting institutions limit alternative options and undermine their credibility by making “bigger is better” to the motto of status good competition, not “better is better”.

The situation is different for the highest income strata, as substantial or strong sustainable consumption requires enforcing absolute limits to their resource consumption. Only few of the highest income group will voluntarily give up part of their wealth and consumption; here less motivation to change their orientations and more institutional mechanisms restricting consumption are needed. This could be achieved, for instance, by introducing a maximum income, realised e.g. by income caps or by taxation above 90% for all income higher than a certain threshold (as it was the case in the USA in the pre-Ronald Reagan era). Add to that sufficiently high levels of property tax, inheritance tax and wealth tax, plus corporate taxes above the income tax level, a financial transaction tax etc., and neither the public deficits nor financing the social floor is an insurmountable problem any more. Re-establish the functional income distribution of just 35 years ago, in the late 1970s, and all financial problems of the welfare state are solved: empty public coffers are just the one side of the coin; the other has been accumulating private wealth. As only the rich can afford a poor state and with it the erosion of quantity and quality of public services, redistribution plus a slim but not starving state are sustainable development imperatives.

Is that just radical NGO talk, impossible suggestions, with no chance to resonate with the population at large? In France, the leading contender in the presidential race does not think so. He promises a 75% top income tax on those earning above € 1 m a year, which including social charges means well above 90%. He also wants to increase the annual wealth tax on assets worth more than € 1.3 m, and increase the tax on dividends – and he leads in the polls, with his lead less under threat from the conservative president (who already raised corporate and income taxes and now promises to tax those leaving the country for tax reasons, like the USA) but more from even more radical left. Mr Hollande has claimed that his “main opponent is the world of finance”, and it hardly a surprise that Anglo-Saxon liberals cry foul and

consider the whole French debate as misguided by politicians and media, interpreting the suggested taxation as a signal “about the way France treats financial success” (The Economist, 2012). However, out of the few people affected by the 90% payment obligation, the vast majority comes from the financial industries (and the others have reached this salary level only in the last decade, again stimulated by the financial sector. The standard threat is that with higher taxation these brainy business leaders would leave the country doing so – a challenge realistic only for the sector which has no physical production, finance, the failed business sector producing no real values but speculative bubbles, with obscene bonuses and profit margins a parasite on the real economy. Every country should be glad to get rid of such unproductive blood suckers in order to stabilise its overall economy, and promote undoing the structural damage they have caused in the last decade. That includes readjusting the salary structures across the business sector (another societal mechanisms in need of change) –the existence of the tax rates suggested above would make the introduction of an upper limit to salaries an easy task.

It remains to be seen, however, which alternative means of distinction will develop once income levels are no longer suitable for this behalf, and if they are in line with sustainable societal development. Economists’ arguments that such high taxation rates would lead to the flight of all the bright and the talented do not only contradict past experience (the income differentials have been much higher in the USA than in Europe for most of the time since WW II), they also refer only to a very small group of overpaid top earners, most of them in the banking and speculation sector, which any decent society would be happy to get rid of. The society in this case must be the European one, of course, and the progressing harmonisation of the fiscal systems throughout the EU could better be used for this purpose instead of enforcing neoliberal deregulation and austerity policies. Furthermore the pension system must be reformed and transformed from private to public systems, to reduce speculation and base secure pensions on employment and income developments.

One of the most important mechanisms in an ageing society is the way society cares for the elder, retired, first active and later in need of caring. The current practice is one trying to reduce the retirement period, force people to work by threatening them with old-age poverty if they stop paid work at the time they had been promised they could do so – and indeed old age poverty has been reintroduced at the beginning of the century in the countries where it had been overcome, and enhanced where it had been omnipresent before. That is one reason to apply the floor principle with its physical transfers also to the pension system.

The second effect to be taken into account regarding the pensions is the ongoing promotion – also by many governments – of private pensions; their success became possible as governments announced they would not keep their earlier promises to guarantee a decent retirement payment. The effect of the privatisation (besides the forced savings reducing consumption and thus economic activity, and the enormous financial volumes cashed in being channelled to speculative investments as there is a shortage of lucrative real-world investment opportunities, not least to the reduced consumption and employment, thus co-producing the series of bubbles and their bursting, “burning” billions of Dollar, Euro, Yen and Pound of social security saving) are politically dangerous, constitution a Procrustean bed for future economic and social policies of whatever government is elected: With a rising share of voters in retirement age, no government can ignore their demand for a secure, decent, non-declining (and at best significantly increasing) pension. With a public system this implies that salaries should be high and full employment reached, because then social security payments are high and pensions secure. With a private system, the money comes from the economic success in the same year, but this time not from the workforce but from the corporate surplus. So each and every government trying to make the pensions secure has to do its best to increase corporate

profits, even if this goes against salary levels and full employment, and it is currently the case. Besides that, pension funds are highly growth-oriented investors: privatisation of public services is socially as much as environmentally unsustainable. At least those private systems which had to be saved by governments when rushing rescue banks and insurance companies, and which are now in state ownership or custodianship should be forced to return this activity into the hands of public institutions.

4 Overall conclusion Change agents needed

The real question for modern society now is how we can find a way to create a sublimation of these two elements: a Partnership that *is* the Leadership.

The suggestions made are not equivalent to overcoming consumption based capitalism, but would modify it significantly. Thus although the resistance would be enormous, those supporting such a transformation could not be stigmatised as revolutionaries and utopians, in particular as all proposals are based on past experience abroad, practices in past or existing societal subgroups, or on ongoing discussions. Thus the agents involved are first of all the “usual suspects”, including also trade unions, ethically motivated members of religious groups, and consumer organisations.

A new potentially powerful group are those middle class persons which after long striving for a better life now feel betrayed in a situation where also white collar workers subjectively feel the threat of precarisation. Their key motive is the loss of certainty regarding their future, and the decreasing possibility to plan one’s own life. Sustainability communication would be well advised to address this aspect in future campaigns and communications.

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