

SUMMARY



**CRITERIA AND IMPULSES FOR CHANGES TOWARDS
A SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION: APPROACH PER
SECTOR**

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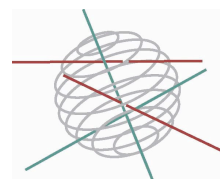
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*Part 1:
Sustainable production and consumption patterns*

	SUMMARY
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Aims of the study

The general aims of this research were twofold :

- Analysing the requirements of a sustainable consumption policy in Belgium through stakeholders' standpoint (including public authorities and consumers) and available political tools.
- Uncovering the most favourable product categories today in order to develop a product policy in Belgium. Within this framework, drawing up a set of concrete recommendations for these product categories.

These recommendations are detailed in specific dossiers appended to our report. In the present summary, we will skim sector studies and retain the results that allow drawing general conclusions.

Context of the study

Since the Rio Declaration and the Agenda 21 publication, the sustainable consumption issue arose continually. One of the conclusions of the first Earth Summit indeed emphasised that the production and consumption patterns of the North were not sustainable and should consequently change. The phrase “sustainable consumption” has been extended in its use but still lacks a well established definition, inasmuch as qualitative and quantitative boundaries are hotly debated. It seems nowadays recognized that our production and consumption patterns are not extendable to the whole planet, by lack of natural resources. Questions are however plentiful about the means of reorientating lifestyles; and interrogations are not less animated about the objectives of our economic system — let us only mention the notion of “essential needs”, reasserted by the Brundtland Commission.

The OECD gives the following definition of sustainable consumption: it is “the use of goods and services that responds to basic needs and brings a better quality of life, while minimising the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life-cycle, so as not to jeopardise the needs of future generations.” In this document, sustainable consumption is acknowledged as a relative and dynamic notion: it is specific to a place and to a problem, and it can evolve with time.

Among driving forces of consumption, the OECD quotes: self-interested motives (price, quality, individual taste, lifestyle); socially-rooted motives (culture, self-identity, social context, environmental and social concerns). Rising per capita income, demography and changes in lifestyles have led to more individualised choices. Technology, institutions and infrastructures are equally important factors in consumption trends. It can be added that markets have been extended and diversified, resulting in an ever increasing supply; information (logos, labels, and mainly marketing) have been developed; western households have been involved in a logic of product addition — more and more tasks are assigned to apparatus. The number of households increases for a given population, for their mean size is decreasing. This (non comprehensive) list points to the complexity of parameters upon which a policy should act in order to change actors' behaviours. The OECD states the well-known correlation between income and consumption, but does not question the steady growth in incomes. In a few words, the OECD urges **not to consume less, but to consume better**.

In this very broad context, and under European Union impulses, Belgian federal authorities have been embarked in “**product policy**”. A product policy aims at pondering a product category in its several dimensions in order to make stakeholders aware about their environmental and social impacts along the whole production and consumption chain. In this respect, rather than starting from an environmental problem and looking at the different emission sources, one starts from products in order to understand their impacts on the environment at the different phases of their lifecycles (raw material extraction - production - distribution - use - disposal) so as to compare

sustainable development since they require the participation of stakeholders, and in particular consumer organisations, which can contribute to give the market trends towards more “sustainable” products.

Product policy therefore encounters the important difficulty of coordinating the several actors in the Belgian political and legislative context, where competencies are relatively scattered. All this leads to plead in favour of an approach per sector and per stakeholder within product categories.

It is often emphasised in the literature that sustainable consumption is not an easy goal to fulfil.

Technical trails (eco-efficiency, dematerialisation) are usually met with scepticism, either for economic reasons (assumption of too strong growth in productivity) or for social reasons (weak inclination to swap goods for services). It seems (to optimistic people) that the solution lies in changing our patterns of production and consumption. Focusing on sociological models that unfold constraints experienced by consumers, allows to discard simplistic views of consumers as individuals and to come across relationships that give hope to changes. So, numerous scholars suggest that wishful modifications can only come from collectively organised people, through either NGOs or citizens groups (eco-teams, etc.) Other researchers assert that “consuming” is only one aspect of each person, and adding other dimensions as citizenship and working is essential in order to consider again our ways of consuming. In this respect, it is noteworthy to observe that political discourses talk mainly about employment and wages, but very little about products or habits of consuming. Where are products and consumption society presented? On television, in adverts! In discourses, production is still more valuable than consumption.

Research process and methodology

Our research has been conceived as a sequence of tasks that leads to a three-stage selection of industrial sectors and product categories further studied. These three stages are described in the next sections. The rest of this summary will be devoted to the essential results of our research.

Stage 1. Identification of the points of change and resistance among the actors: selection of relevant sectors

Our research began with an analysis of stakeholders’ positions, through two kind of resources: 1) analysis of texts edited by the different actors; 2) interviews with representatives of the concerned actors. Groups of actors that have been studied and requested are the following: public authorities competent in Belgium about product policy; representative organisations of enterprises; worker unions; non governmental organisations dealing with environment or North-South relations; consumer organisations; individual consumers (through focus groups); administrations as consumers.

Among possible ways of implementing a product policy, two are immediately obvious: 1) managing volume and quality of consumed products; 2) influencing practices and behaviours in production and use. In both cases, the role of enterprises and consumers appears to be of the utmost importance. We have consequently particularly analysed enterprises — which construct and sell products that shape the market supply — and consumers — who represent the market demand. Concerning the enterprises, we took advantage of data provided by the *International Business Environmental Barometers* (conducted in Belgium in 1996, 1997 and 2001 by the Enterprise-Environment Centre, member of our team). We led *focus groups* in order to get knowledge of the behaviours of individual consumers. By means of this qualitative study, we interviewed different consumers about their purchase and use habits, confronting them to “sustainable development” criteria.

At the end of this first stage, we were able to assess how stakeholders uphold a product policy, notably in function of the political (regulatory, economic, socio-cultural) tools they urge. We were also able to find out activity sectors for which “sustainable” changes are expected and perceived as

Stage 2. Analysis of product categories

On this basis, we have selected **five product categories**. We have operated this selection in a spirit of an exploration of possibilities and a determination of required conditions for the development of a product category. We could also have been led to other kinds of products.

We firstly asked the persons interviewed to determine industrial sectors in which a possible progress could be achievable regarding sustainable consumption. We cross-checked these assertions with the *International Business Environmental Barometers*, which show which sectors are the most willing to evolve. We then obtained a list of about twenty product categories, and we developed a **list of criteria in order to select** five categories of products to be more deeply analysed. These criteria relate to:

- the products themselves (main ecological and social impacts of products; existence of a varied market; possibility of substitution; interest shown by stakeholders)
- the arrangement of our selection (diversity of kinds of uses; diversity of studied sectors; synergy with other research projects; balance between ethical and ecological questions)

Applied to the set of pre-selected products, these criteria result in the following pick:

- **Office papers**
- **Jeans**
- **Big white electrical appliances**
- **Household paints**
- **Textile detergents**

In a second time, we have led a technical exploration for each of the five product categories, based on available studies, interviews with enterprises and federations of enterprises, and focus groups dedicated to each product category. The results of these researches are gathered in five files appended to the final report, which can be read independently.

Stage 3. Scenario testing at roundtables

The last stage of our research consisted in organising two roundtables in order to **test different scenarios with varied stakeholders** in relation to the analysed product categories. The five technical files have been evaluated on the basis of the fruitfulness of the identified scenario. After evaluation of the five files, it appeared that neither jeans nor office paper were offering enough opportunities to carry on the research. It seemed productive, however, to gather textile detergents and washing machines files in order to study the possible interactions between these two product categories as well as regarding production and utilisation. We have also organised a roundtable on household paints.

During these roundtables, we have submitted our propositions of recommendation to the different stakeholders, and we were then able 1) to prioritize propositions, 2) to discuss propositions that seemed to be both the most interesting and the most feasible.

Results

Varied support of stakeholders

According to our bibliographical study and our interviews, we noticed that all the stakeholders declare to support the sustainable consumption project. This support is however quite varied among the different stakeholders.

Regarding the role that public authorities should play, we have established that there is an opposition between, on the one hand, NGOs and labour unions, and, on the other hand, enterprise federations. This observation is no surprise, for it is consistent with numerous remarks and positions that one can find in literature and in advice Councils. Representatives of NGOs and unions reckon

these actors finds expression in divergent points of view about recommended political tools to achieve a sustainable consumption: regulation on one side, voluntary agreements on the other. When questioned, public authorities representatives cannot decide between both trends: they emphasize the importance of direct regulation, while insisting on the fact that it must not be too inflexible nor state-controlled. Therefore, voluntary agreements and partnerships have to be put forward even if the role of public authorities remains the setting of targets, producers having the choice of the means to achieve these goals. They think that it is more and more difficult to implement regulatory tools.

The analysis of the results of the *International Business Environmental Barometer* shows that the market and business sector has little impact on the implementation of environmental measures by enterprises. Corporate actors and public authorities have got more influence. The most influential stakeholders are national and international legislators, managers and employees. Consumers do not seem to represent a weighty pressure on enterprises in environmental matters. In practice, consumers do not contribute, for the moment, to modify production policies, even though they have, theoretically, the power to.

Focus groups of consumers have allowed us to identify several profile types, namely distinct attitude and behaviour logics. These profiles can vary in function of products. Faced to the complexity of the stakes, consumers usually feel powerless to integrate the different sustainable development parameters in their consumption choices and behaviours. Consumers are inclined to follow their personal priorities, to satisfy their priority needs; they can integrate parameters “respectful of sustainable development” only if these can be integrated in the dynamics of their personal motivations of consumption, which vary according to the individuals. On the basis of the focus groups results, we can conclude that communication campaigns aiming at the dissemination of sustainable development would fail. Such campaigns would reach, at most, only those of the consumers who are already aware of the problem. If one wants to convey sustainable development notions, one has to be professional and with clear goals while talking about expected behaviours and their benefits to targeted consumers. Since the concept of sustainable development appears to be poorly known, and contradictory, it seems more suitable to increase awareness regarding different behaviours for economic or health reasons rather than in the name of sustainable development.

Most of focus groups interviewees consider that the most efficient tools to change their behaviours are regulations that apply to everybody: they want to conserve their freedom of choice, but within a framework strictly controlled by authorities, which, for instance, would ban not environmentally friendly products. Some behaviours identified as “good for the environment” are not spontaneously adopted, and would be only in a compulsory frame: “I would do it if I had to and if I have the guarantee that other people will do it.” Some consumers want to stand apart from the others in having ecological behaviours. Some are eager to save money and are prompt to calculate their purchases as investments. However, it seems that most consumers need above all to identify themselves to a social group and to act along with a social norm.

Following the focus groups results, “ethical” criteria look less promising than “ecological” criteria (contrary to the results of some surveys). In the focus groups, the consumers who declared to buy “ethically” labelled products belong to a profile confident about the given information, whereas those who buy “ecological” products stated that they are well informed about products features. Some even think they can assess their impacts.

Range of tools

Three types of political tools are usually discriminated within the sustainable development framework: (i) direct **regulatory** instruments (command and control) concern all the legally constraining tools such as laws, standards and other obligations; (ii) **economic** instruments concern

The efficiency of the so-called socio-cultural tools of information and communication is often overestimated in official texts, which pave the way for product policy. These texts rightly emphasise that *ranges of tools* are needed, inspired by the different types of political tools. Real ranges are however generally unbalanced for socio-cultural tools are out of context. Following our study, it appears that socio-cultural tools should rather go with the other kinds of measures in order to inform consumers about possibilities and orientations. No measure, if taken alone, is able to modify consumption behaviours lastingly; it is indispensable to develop a range of solutions in order to respond to the different expectations of consumer profiles, and to adapt communication to these different target groups, because the claims that can convince some consumers will have no effect on others.

Consumers are not only influenced by product features but also by the range of effective choices and the kind of product supply. As consumers cannot evaluate the environmental quality of products on visible characteristics, they have to refer to other visible signs, among which context (shop) and brand are important. Meanwhile, they usually refer to their own experience, or to that of their close relatives. It is in a particular market, defined and shaped by companies and retailers, that consumers make their decision. The demand for more environmentally friendly products could increase, but this increase will not precede other actions needed to modify the market. We stress on the public authorities' role to shape the market demand.

Information is necessary but not sufficient: this should be underlined again and again. Information is useful to *inform* a practice, namely to give it a new form. But a practice depends on many other constraints. A range of tools is not a heteroclite set but a consistent arrangement of tools with a precise goal.

A communication model that makes the various consumer profiles desirous of consuming differently is still to be developed. Such communication should not only strengthen motivations, improve the image of saving behaviours, and offset advertising injunctions to consume ever more, but also highlight how environmentally friendly consumption patterns can be a source of pleasure.

Benefits from roundtables

The course of the two roundtables was one of the happy surprises of our research. On this occasion, we had indeed the opportunity to obtain some information otherwise unavailable, and participants seemed fulfilled by the discussions that occurred. During interviews with some enterprise representatives, we had met people who were not able to put forward strong declarations for they did not feel covered up by their hierarchy. Roundtables seemed however to have enough importance to bring executive staff along. Those people could then unfold the information and data they possessed, notably survey results about their customers.

It would therefore be fruitful to keep on this experience by organising real product panels (as in Denmark for instance). Some participants coming from three sectors (big whites, detergents, paints) seemed indeed ready to embark on prolonged discussions. We have among other things taken notice of enterprises calling for collaboration with NGOs to disseminate environmental information. Product panels are places where scenarios could be tested, and notably new constraints (e.g. planning of increasingly strict regulation) in order to bring enterprises to make long term choices. Here is a list of conditions we find necessary (but not sufficient) for the good working of this method:

- Presence of representatives of all stakeholders (enterprises, federations of enterprises, retailers, NGOs informed about consumers, public authorities, scientists).
- Dynamic industrial sector.
- Attendance of varied enterprises, and particularly those that are the most advanced at the environmental and social levels.

- Good knowledge of the consumers' aspirations regarding the studied products: this gives evidence to enterprises of the reliability of the process.
- Limited number of participants.
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Which possibilities for a sustainable consumption?

In all stages of a product life cycle, it is often the utilisation stage that is the most unknown but also the most intensive in terms of impact. Laboratory tests (e.g. on washing machines) are primarily standardised to compare products. But variables of actual use by disparate consumers are generally unknown. Enterprises know for sure their customers through a series of profiles (it is the purpose of marketing), but they do not very well know how consumers use the products they sell. Moreover, enterprises rarely disclose data as strategic as marketing surveys results. Therefore, in using marketing tools to analyse consumers' attitudes and behaviours, we have entered a field which had not yet been taken up regarding sustainable consumption. We have of course used marketing tools with other goals than enterprises, but in this way we were on an equal footing with them, a fact they acknowledged in greeting our work during roundtables. We henceforth cannot give credit to simplistic representations of consumers that one can find in some stakeholders' claims or studies (notably in economics). We suggest that a well understood sustainable consumption policy has to use the mighty marketing tools, to be exploited with other ends. So it can be unreliable to replace a product by another (more ecological) without taking into account its various uses, namely the different consumer categories. Other marketing applications can be quoted as well: consumer segmentation requires that dematerialisation be not seen as a simple substitution, for it will depend strongly on the profiles considered; socio-cultural tools should be developed in function of the different 'lifestyles' of the consumers.

During roundtables, we have started a positive dialogue with **retailers**. These stakeholders are often forgotten in the analysis of sustainable consumption, whereas they play a very important role in product distribution, information and good practices relating to these products. Retail outlets appear crucial, for instance, to inform consumers that the products they are buying are not harmless for the environment. But a warning, even when placed close to a product, will not be sufficient for potential purchasers to modify their habits. We think that the moment of a product handling (when purchasing or first use) is a good circumstance to raise consumers' awareness, provided they receive the information. There is a lot to be done via interactions between purchasers and acquired or used objects. Using objects as a socialisation process of certain practices is a trail to be developed. Ecodesign should not only be limited to the production stage or to a passive use, but also contribute to orientate use and to instruct users towards more sustainable behaviours.

One of the fundamental limits of a product policy approach lies in the analysis by product category rather than by function. But to imagine substitutions, it is required to think in terms of functions. Such a global approach would mean integrating the socio-cultural aspects of consumption. An approach by product categories does not allow to rethink the innovation system globally.

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