

Sustainable Consumption and Production : Why is it Important?

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“The situation the Earth is in today has been created by unmindful production and unmindful consumption. We consume to forget our worries and our anxieties. Tranquilising ourselves with over-consumption is not the way” - Thich Nhat Hanh

Goal 12 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations is to “ensure sustainable consumption and production (SCP) patterns.” It means being mindful about what, how, and how much we produce and consume so that the earth’s resources are used judiciously and preserved for future generations.

SCP is important because human beings exert extreme stress on the planet and its resources. Every living being relies on the planet for the basic needs of air, food, water and shelter. In addition, humans exert a special kind of stress on the planet, an exponential pressure to provide beyond the basic needs such as bigger houses, nicer cars, the latest gadgets and appliances, entertainment, fashion items, annual vacations and so on. It is estimated that the world population will reach 9.5 billion by 2050.¹ The number may not mean much until we consider that 70 percent of the world’s population is predicted to live in resource-intensive urban areas and 3 billion middle class consumers will join the global economy by 2040.² Put simply, it means more people with greater wants will consume more.

Our consumption (and production) pattern is problematic because we only have one planet with finite resources. If we keep consuming and producing like we do currently, there will come a day when the earth can no longer provide us with the resources necessary to fulfil our unlimited wants. Forget the wants, the earth may, in fact, be unable to provide us with what we need: clean water, air, food and basic shelter. Another facet of the state of humanity is that while we have made good progress in addressing poverty, 1.2 billion people are still living in extreme poverty

1 Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, World Population Prospects: The 2012 Revision. Vol. I (ST/ESA/SER.A/336) and II (ST/ESA/SER.A/345) (New York, United Nations Publications, 2013).

2 Ibid.

today.³ So, on one hand we have rich people “wanting more” and, on the other, we have poor people “needing” the essentials. Additionally, not all our wants are superficial. After all, is it all that bad to want better healthcare, more varieties of food, longer lives, better education, safer communities, better roads, more telecommunication and comfortable lives for our families and children? No. Thus our governments, our businesses, and we as individuals engage in a whole lot of human activity in pursuit of better lives.

Unfortunately, all the human activity comes at a cost to the planet, be it aimed at meeting needs or fulfilling wants. Geologists have declared that we have entered a new epoch since 1950, “the Anthropocene” where human activity has an incredible impact on the environment of the planet. For instance, human activity has pushed extinction rates of animals and plants far above the long-term average, increased levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere at the fastest rate in 66 million years, put so much plastic in the waterways that microplastic particles are now omnipresent, doubled the nitrogen and phosphorous in our soils in the past century with fertiliser use, and left a permanent layer of black carbon (airborne particulates from fossil fuel burning) that affects human health, visibility, ecosystems, agricultural productivity and exacerbates global warming.⁴

Therefore, considering 1) the unlimited human aspiration and increasing disposable income 2) the need to alleviate poverty and provide decent living standards for the entire world’s (growing) population and 3) the incredible impact of human activity on earth, we must find solutions and compromises. Perhaps the Middle Path is the way. In other words, in order to ensure that development addresses the need of all humanity while removing excessive stress on the planet, adoption of sustainable patterns of consumption and production is an imperative. Sustainable living in its truest sense may be achieved only if we radically change our consciousness. Whether it is checking population growth or letting go of all our wants and desires (beyond the basic necessities), debating roles of economy and technology or rethinking current systems and institutions, these “big questions” are difficult to answer and even more complicated to achieve. Therefore, in the absence of such a transformational shift in our paradigm, adopting Sustainable Consumption and Production practice is a viable and immediate solution in alleviating some of our pressure on the planet.

3 World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, Global Monitoring Report 2013: Rural-Urban Dynamics and the Millennium Development Goals (Washington, D.C., 2013), p. xi, 22, 25.

4 Carrington, Damian. August 2016. The Anthropocene epoch: scientists declare dawn of human-influenced age. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/aug/29/declare-anthropocene-epoch-experts-urge-geological-congress-human-impact-earth>

Bhutan and Sustainable Consumption and Production

Bhutan has captured the world's imagination as a nation following a unique development trajectory. The pursuit of happiness through the Gross National Happiness (GNH) philosophy can at times seem lofty and abstract: we want our development to be equitable and sustainable while taking due consideration of our environment, our society and our culture, all under the umbrella of good governance. It seems like a monumental task and an extremely expensive affair for a small, landlocked, developing country. In fact, it seems like an idealistic and esoteric goal. However, we must take pride in the fact that we are on to something. While our GHN philosophy is unique, we are certainly not alone in the desire to realise a balanced approach to development. The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to "end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all" demonstrates an international aspiration for balanced and harmonious development.

Ironically, for a country that follows the GNH philosophy, Bhutan has not advanced much in adopting sustainable production and consumption patterns. There are 11 targets for Goal 12 which includes reduction of food waste (including post-harvest losses), sound management of waste (including chemical waste), reduction of waste generation, incorporation of sustainable practices in industries, sustainable public procurement and adoption of sustainable lifestyles. Judging by the current practices of government offices, businesses, and individuals in Bhutan against those targets, we are barely sustainable. For instance, a study carried out in 2014-15 by the Sustainable & Efficient Industrial Development project showed that Bhutanese industries lacked even the most basic energy efficiency and sustainability practices (such as energy auditing, and waste management efficient machinery).⁵ A survey carried out among a few schools in Thimphu for the EGO to ECO Challenge indicated that students (K-12) had little or no idea about what the term "sustainability" meant. Although teachers responded that they had a fair understanding about sustainability, none of them felt confident about their ability to teach it. The survey also indicated that most students (and thus families) do not practice simple sustainable habits (carpooling, turning the tap off while applying soap, unplugging appliances when not in use, etc).⁶ A series of research conducted by the Green Public Procurement in Bhutan (GPP Bhutan) project reveal that public authorities in Bhutan do not have a mechanism in their tendering process to consider social and environmental impacts while purchasing goods and services and investing in infrastructure. The research

5 <http://www.switch-seid.org/>

6 Impact Evaluation Report, <http://egotoeco.net/reports/>

7 Market Assessment of Green Goods, Services and Works, <http://gppbhutan.bt/project-publications>

also showed that there are little or no sustainable alternatives in the market which limits consumers from making sustainable choices.⁷ A major reason why we fall short in adopting SCP practices could be that we lack the knowledge and technical expertise around adopting sustainable practices, which is understandable since Sustainable Consumption and Production is a fairly new topic in the international scene as well. However, it is also true that, although there is a general awareness about sustainability, Bhutanese individuals and organisations lack the commitment and initiative to take bold actions for adopting SCP.

Despite the findings noted above, Bhutan does well in putting policy instruments in place to encourage the practice of SCP. For instance, the National Environment Commission is undertaking several SCP-related policy initiatives in Bhutan such as mainstreaming SCP into national policies, supporting sustainable hotels, sustainable public procurement, integrating SCP learning in vocational education and initiating paperless office operations in the public sector. The Department of Renewable Energy (DRE) has developed an Integrated Energy Master Plan. In order to discourage fossil fuel-based transport, the government imposes a 5 percent green tax on fossil fuels and a 5 percent green tax on import of fossil fuel-based vehicles. In 2008, Bhutan's tourism policy changed from "high value — low volume" to "high value — low (environment) impact" indicating a strategic direction towards sustainable tourism. The 11th Five Year Plan has the objective to achieve "self-reliance and inclusive green socio-economic development". In the same vein, the latest Economic Development Policy (EDP) 2016 aims to incorporate various sustainable aspects in Bhutan's economic growth by prioritising energy efficiency, better building and product standards and local production and consumption.

A Step Towards Adopting SCP Practices in Bhutan

Due to our development philosophy and the visionary leadership of our Kings, the policy settings are very favourable towards Sustainable Consumption and Production. The next step is to roll up our sleeves and actually start doing something. This section provides one idea each for practicing SCP by three key organisations: government, industries, and educational institutes.

An idea for the government: In a small country like Bhutan with a relatively large public sector that has significant purchasing power (around 60 percent of annual government budget is spent in procurement), changing public procurement practices in favour of sustainable goods and services would have a major positive impact in Bhutan. While there are various policies and implementation instruments to encourage SCP as presented in the section above, in order to catalyse real action,

the government can in fact use its position as the single largest consumer to demand environmentally-friendly and socially-responsible products so that businesses start introducing those products in the Bhutanese market. Once the government becomes the role model, individuals too will have access to sustainable products that they can purchase and consume.

An idea for industries: As the key player in adopting sustainable production, industries (especially large ones) could start to adopt sustainable practices and to integrate sustainability information into their annual reports. By reporting on sustainability, companies can become an integral partner in achieving sustainable development goals. While government policies and a vision for sustainable development are noble efforts, without real partnership with the private sector, development will hardly be sustainable (or equitable). By investing in energy-efficient facilities and machinery, managing industry waste in the most environmentally-friendly manner and introducing sustainability assessment tools specific to their industry, Bhutanese companies can begin modelling sustainable production practices.

An idea for educational institutes: Educational institutes could begin to incorporate SCP topics in their curriculum. Providing information and knowledge on SCP through research and in curriculum is crucial to-

- a) Help government make their decisions
- b) Help industries adopt better practices
- c) Educate the future generation of sustainability-oriented individuals.

Including general SCP topics in K-12 education and specific courses in college and higher institutions would be an important first step towards ensuring conscious consumption in the future.

Conclusion

In a world where progress is defined by economic development, pursuing GNH essentially requires Bhutan to leapfrog conventional practices. And attain better development outcomes. Pursuing sustainability requires a careful balance of meeting our economic and environmental goals instead of solely focusing on conserving the environment. By adopting SCP practices, Bhutan would actually be demonstrating GNH in action. As sustainable consumers and producers, we would bypass inefficient, polluting, and costly phases of development and jump directly into building a sustainable society.

The biggest tragedy that is although we are guided by GNH philosophy, Bhutan tries to catch-up with the rest of the world; and quite frankly, in the current technology-driven, fast-changing world, we may never be able to truly catch-up. Perhaps we should try paving a new path to progress that is adjusted to the local context. Perhaps we could pursue SCP through applying Buddhist wisdom and concepts such as interconnectedness, dependent co-arising, karma and non-materialism? The challenge and thus the opportunity for us Bhutanese is to connect new and foreign knowledge with old and native wisdom in order to showcase sustainable development.