

Eugene Memo: The Role of Cities in Advancing Sustainable Consumption November 2014

Cities in North America have an important role to play in building prosperity and wellbeing while promoting lifestyles that are compatible with the limits of natural systems. The consumption of materials and energy in high-income cities is a significant factor in driving climate change and resource depletion. Increasingly, government agencies, industry organizations and experts in the research community are calling attention to the need both to consume less and consume differently. Cities can and should take action to make this possible.

In October 2014, members of the Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN), the Sustainable Consumption Research and Action Initiative (SCORAI) and other policy experts met in Eugene (Oregon, USA) to review relevant research and explore the actions that cities could take to promote sustainable consumption and wellbeing at the municipal scale.

A clear consensus emerged from this dialogue: ***to facilitate human and ecological wellbeing, we must transform the economy so that it serves what we value.*** This objective is ultimately less about increasing material wealth and more about enhancing the hallmarks of the good life to which everyone aspires: time with family and friends; strong community ties; a sense of belonging; personal growth through new skills and knowledge; meaningful livelihoods, good health and other life-qualities that transcend mere income and material consumption.

Such a transformation requires a shift in cultural values and a re-design of urban economies and communities to reduce material and energy throughput while simultaneously improving the quality of life for all people. Advancing sustainable consumption in cities also entails supportive systemic change at the national and global levels: these multi-level changes enable the fundamental and necessary shifts in culture and markets that make the transition possible.

We need such powerful ideas to open a new way of advancing urban sustainability. Participants in the workshop came away committed to delving more deeply into potential municipal government strategies and to building a policy framework for new research and local action.

Why?

Urban sustainability initiatives are typically grounded in the principles of resource efficiency, conservation and stewardship, and we have all benefited from their successes. But with the compounding social and ecological problems we face, we must re-assess conventional solutions and identify those promising innovations that can foster more fundamental change.

To begin, we acknowledge that an economic system dependent on continuous growth in material and energy consumption is fundamentally at odds with the very real limits of the natural systems available to support it. There is solid scientific evidence that the world is in ecological overshoot. Estimates suggest that we are currently consuming the equivalent of 1.5 times the resources and energy our planet can sustainably produce. Our expanding global economy brings with it a growing ecological deficit as the market fails to capture the true cost of such growth. Climate change, environmental degradation and resource depletion are symptoms of an economic system living

beyond its means; we may already have entered an era of uneconomic growth in which the (largely unaccounted) costs exceed the readily measured benefits.

We cannot look to technology advances alone to solve our problem. In a world with a growing population and expanding consumption aspirations, sustainable or “green” technologies are not sufficient to ‘decouple’ the economy from our supporting ecosystems. Efficiency gains cannot offset growing demand and instead lead to further expansion in production and consumption, creating a vicious cycle. The International Energy Agency concludes that reducing resource depletion rates will not be achieved by efficiency gains in isolation. The transition toward renewable energy requires absolute reductions in demand.

Rising expectations worldwide create an additional challenge: *current North American consumption levels cannot be replicated on a global scale or even maintained in North America.* Any meaningful discussion of changing consumption has to address fair sharing of the world’s ecological and economic output and advance solutions that reverse growing inequality. There is widespread recognition that the relatively wealthy are consuming far more than their share, while others are left without even the basics.

There are indications that new ways of understanding prosperity are emerging. Public opinion in the US supports the notion that we would be better off if there were less overall consumption and greater equality. There is increasing evidence that more material wealth over a certain threshold adds little to happiness, and may actually undermine wellbeing. Some young people are rejecting high-impact suburban lifestyles to adopt lower impact ways of life. New forms of ownership and exchange, often aided by technology, are appearing in cities across the world with growing interest in sharing, borrowing, renting and repair. New business models and enterprises are developing to reflect longer-term and social interests. The continuous economic growth paradigm itself is now increasingly being challenged; other social and ecological indicators that are superior to per capita gross domestic product (GDP) as measures of general wellbeing are being proposed.

Guiding principles for local actions:

1. **Envision prosperity as a holistic, integrated concept:** Real prosperity supports individual, social and ecological dimensions of wellbeing. Aggregate wellbeing should be the goal of progress in the pursuit of social and economic development. That means satisfying basic needs -- food, shelter, mobility, security, education, and health -- while also ensuring true personal and community development (‘development’ implies getting ‘better’ and not just getting ‘bigger’). There are real biophysical limits to growth and we must advance human prosperity within these limits.
2. **Commit to equity and social inclusion:** Highly unequal societies are not sustainable. By committing to sustainability with social justice we also commit to equity in designing projects and policies, and in evaluating progress. Municipalities should support alternatives that provide households of all income levels with better ways to meet their needs, freeing up time and resources for the things that really matter: time with family and friends, access to nature and recreation, community volunteerism, building memories, and acquiring new skills.
3. **Enhance social capital and resilience:** As cities build toward more compact, cohesive and livable communities, urban form must align with more collaborative, reciprocal and interdependent patterns of human interaction, including consumption. People living in close proximity have more opportunities to share idle resources, to launch small-scale commercial ventures and to build community engagement and cohesion. Sustainable urban form fosters both informal and commercial exchange, augments social capital and builds stronger neighborhood networks and resilience in the process.
4. **Advance sustainable local economies:** A strong and diverse local economy promotes human

wellbeing by: providing a cushion against global financial shocks; responding to new business opportunities and emerging needs; strengthening local communities; and creating novel livelihoods. Consumers are becoming more interested in access to goods and services than in personal ownership. This trend opens new opportunities for locally-based service-oriented businesses. Cities should focus on creating incentives for building thriving local economies and on removing perverse incentives that undermine them.

5. **Keep the big picture in mind and work toward the long-term:** Taking a systems approach enables us to target our efforts at the appropriate level (macro, meso, micro) and take advantage of interactions across scales. We consider the interconnectedness and interdependence of systems, both short and long term effects, and the local and global consequences of our actions. Cities can focus on integrated programs and actions that lead strategically toward more sustainable consumption patterns in the short- and long-run.
6. **Collaborate with diverse partners to take action and leadership:** Advancing sustainable consumption requires interaction and engagement across sectors (public, private, civil society, academia, media, communities) to co-create and take action together. Cities can facilitate connections among people, sectors and activities to catalyze change.
7. **Experiment and learn:** Advancing sustainable consumption in cities requires a commitment to sharing lessons on effective initiatives, monitoring and evaluating approaches, learning from mistakes, and embracing emergence and the unexpected. Cities benefit from engaging and consulting with the research community to gain from their insights.
8. **Set goals and measure:** Learning and progress over time is supported by clear goals and measures that indicate whether our actions are moving us forward. GDP per capita is an inadequate measure of human wellbeing. New indices must be developed and deployed to evaluate progress and in choosing among alternative policies and projects.
9. **Combine structural and systemic change with education:** Awareness programs on their own are limited in advancing systemic change but are effective when cities combine structural and institutional changes with educational programs.
10. **Take action and leadership:** Cities must be opportunistic as well as strategic. They should mobilize their assets, engage local allies and partners, and embrace the need to learn-by-doing; cities should be thoughtful risk-takers and openly self-reflective in assessing the results. As cities, we can lead through convening, demonstrating, leveraging, and activating others, and by creating incentives and disincentives to move sustainable consumption, economies, and communities forward.

Looking forward

The Eugene workshop highlighted several promising areas for local government action that deserve exploration and development. These include housing, mobility, economic development, procurement, infrastructure development, spatial planning, regulatory review, implementing green and smart technologies, engaging arts and culture in envisioning sustainable futures and others. Cities can also collaborate with the local business community, neighborhood organizations and researchers to test ideas and highlight new opportunities. But to build support for this work, cities have some immediate needs:

- 1) Development of clear and compelling framing and dialogue on sustainable consumption in their local context. This is essential to generate understanding and collective action among city leadership and community stakeholders and to explore how each partner can use the issue to address their priorities.
- 2) Guidance on actionable programs and policies that have the greatest potential to advance more sustainable consumption patterns.

The partnership that made this workshop possible can provide the foundation for meaningful steps in the future. SCORAI, USDN and all the workshop participants are committed to continuing this work so that cities have the tools they need to fulfill their role in advancing sustainable consumption.

The Role of Cities in Advancing Sustainable Consumption Workshop participants included:

Babe O'Sullivan, Sustainability Liaison, City of Eugene
Lindsey Foltz, Equity and Human Rights Analyst, City of Eugene
Laura Hammond, Community Outreach & Participation, City of Eugene
Matt McRae, Climate and Energy Analyst, City of Eugene

Sustainable Consumption Action and Research Initiative (SCORAI)

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Maurie Cohen, Associate Professor, Humanities, New Jersey Institute of Technology
Philip Vergragt, Research Professor, Clark University; Fellow, Tellus Institute
John Stutz, Senior Fellow, Tellus Institute
Jeffrey Barber, Executive Director, Integrative Strategies Forum

Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN)

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Jo Zientek, Deputy Director, Environmental Services Department, San Jose
Terry Moore, Planning Director, ECONorthwest
Christy Shelton, Principal, Cascadia Consulting Group

West Coast Climate and Materials Management Forum

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Ashley Zanolli, Environmental Engineer, US Environmental Protection Agency Region 10
Leslie Kochan, Waste Reduction Specialist, Oregon Department of Environmental Quality
David Allaway, Policy and Program Analyst, Oregon Department of Environmental Quality
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Tom Bowerman, Project Director, Policy Interactive
Tiy Chung, Fulbright Scholar, Clark University; Communications Advisor / Researcher, SCORAI
James Goldstein, Senior Fellow, Tellus Institute
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