

# Between Research and Politics

The concept of “sustainable consumption” in Scandinavian research

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# Sammanfattning på svenska

## Bakgrund och syfte

Miljöproblem, fattigdom och välbefinnandssjukdomar – allihop är de dagsaktuella utmaningar för det globala samfundet. De har också det gemensamt att lösningsförslag på dessa problem kan uttryckas inom ramen för konceptet *hållbar utveckling*, som har vunnit spridning efter Brundtlandkommissionens lansering av begreppet 1987. Under 90-talet kom hållbar utveckling att användas inom Förenta Nationernas arbete, bland annat genom arbetet med Agenda 21. En vidareutveckling skedde också av begreppet och i den handlingsplan som världsmötet i Johannesburg 2002 lade fast fanns *hållbar konsumtion* med som en viktig del.

Det ökande intresset för dessa frågor i allmänhet och handlingsplanen i synnerhet har lett till en lång rad initiativ; på den politiska arenan har det bildats regionala utvecklingsnätverk, genomförts nationella utredningar och inom EU har en rad projekt sätts på gång med fokus på hållbar konsumtion; på det vetenskapliga fältet har forskarnätverk skapats, konferenser ordnats och forskningsmiljöer upprättats.

Syftet med denna rapport är att kartlägga nordisk forskning som relaterar till hållbar konsumtion. Begreppet – både relativt nytt och svårdefinierat – berör alla upptänkliga aspekter av människans tillvaro, vilket har fått vitt skilda discipliner att intressera sig för hållbar konsumtion. Rapporten gör därför inga anspråk på fullständighet i kartläggningen, men den presenterar nordiska forskare och forskningsmiljöer inom en mångfald av ämnen, som på olika sätt relaterar till en diskurs som skulle kunna etiketteras som hållbar konsumtion. Rapporten är författad inom ramen för forskningsprogrammet Hållbar Konsumtion på Centrum för Konsumtionsvetenskap (CFK), Handelshögskolan vid Göteborgs Universitet. Utgångspunkten för rapporten har varit ett tiotal intervjuer, med personer knutna till CFK:s nätverk genom gemensamma forskningsprojekt. Utifrån dessa intervjuer har en genomgång av relevant litteratur genomförts.

## Hållbar konsumtion – vad är det?

En slutsats av intervjuerna och litteraturgenomgången är att hållbarhetsbegreppet inte enkelt låter sig definieras. Det vanligaste sättet att komma förbi svårigheten är att göra en referens till Brundtlandrapporten och sedan stanna vid en allmän definition, som inte upprör någon. Problemet med ett sådant förhållningssätt är,

förstås, att begreppet riskerar att förlora i analytisk skärpa, så att det enda som återstår till slut är politisk korrekthet.

Två aspekter har identifierats för att tydliggöra hållbarhetsbegreppets komplexitet; för det första handlar det om man sätter människan eller naturen i centrum för analysen; för det andra handlar det om hur man ser på möjligheten att i beslutssituationer skaffa sig all relevant information. I rapporten argumenteras för att olika perspektiv på hållbarhet kan konstrueras utifrån dessa två aspekter, som var och en har något viktigt att säga om hållbar konsumtion. Snarare än att försöka komma fram till en slutgiltig definition, bör man ta fasta på dessa, delvis motstridiga, aspekterna av hållbarhet.

Konsumtionsforskningen har formligen exploderat de senaste tjugo åren, vilket kan kopplas till såväl inomvetenskapliga som samhällsliga förändringar. Genom impulser från bland annat kognitiv psykologi, antropologi och menings- och moralfilosofi har bilden av konsumenten blivit mer komplex. Konsumenten har blivit en allt viktigare politisk aktör, samtidigt som forskning pekat på hur sociala sammanhang – som familjen – påverkar konsumentens beslutsfattande. Denna mångfacetterade bild av konsumenten understryker ytterligare behovet av att vi förmår att handskas med ett hållbarhetsbegrepp som inrymmer flera olika dimensioner.

### **Aktuell forskning**

I Brundtlandrapporten betonas att frågan om hållbar utveckling måste betraktas ur ett helhetsperspektiv; såväl miljömässiga, ekonomiska, sociala som kulturella aspekter bör finnas med och behandlas tillsammans. De senaste årens forskning har också visat att frågan om hållbar konsumtion måste behandlas på alla nivåer – från den enskilde konsumentens vardagsval, via lokala politiska initiativ, upp till nationella handlingsplaner och överstatliga överenskommelser. Det är därför inte ägnat att förvåna att forskning om hållbar konsumtion bedrivs i många olika miljöer och inom flera akademiska discipliner – varav ett representativt urval presenteras nedan.

Forskning kring hållbarhet och konsumtion bedrivs i en rad olika konstellationer. I Göteborg koordineras forskning om miljöfrågor och hållbar utveckling av Göteborgs Miljövetenskapliga Centrum (GMV), som är ett tvärvetenskapligt nätverk bestående av över 400 forskare. Forskarna är anslutna till nätverket men bedriver sin forskning på respektive institution. På andra ställen, som Internationella Miljöinstitutet (iiece) i Lund, har man samlat forskare inom ramen för ett institut. Verksamheten startades 1995 och är en av Nordens ledande

forskningsmiljöer för hållbarhetsfrågor. Inledningsvis var verksamheten i huvudsak produktionsorienterad, men under senare har forskningen alltmer kommit att beröra konsumtionsrelaterade aspekter av hållbarhet. Under 2003 startades även forskningsprogrammet FLIPP (Furthering Lifecycle considerations through Integrated Product Policy), som ett samverkansprojekt mellan Internationella Miljöinstitutet och Chalmers Tekniska Högskola.

På senare tid har det också bildats en rad forskningsinstitut med bäring på hållbar konsumtion inom företagsekonomi; hit kan Sustainability Research Group (SuRe) vid Handelshögskolan i Stockholm, The Marketing & Sustainability Research Group vid Århus Universitet och Center for Business in Society (CBS) vid Handelshögskolan i Göteborg räknas. Forskningen vid dessa institut kretsar kring ansvarsfrågor och företagande, de icke-statliga organisationernas roll i modernt företagande samt effekter av miljö-/rättvisemärkningar.

Attityder och beslutsfattande utgör fortfarande en viktig del av forskningen kring hållbar konsumtion och här utgör Psykologiska institutionen på Göteborgs Universitet en ledande nordisk forskningsmiljö – inom ramen för Research Unit for Environmental and Societal Decision Analysis (Ruseda).

Forskning med ett mera kulturellt perspektiv återfinns inom Nätverket Konsumentnära Livsmedelsforskning som koordineras av etnologiska institutionen, vid Lunds universitet. Nätverket bidrar till kunskapsbildning om hur producenters och konsumenters tänkande och agerande inom livsmedelsområdet förhåller sig till varandra.

Ett sista exempel på miljöer är de nationella centrum för konsumtionsvetenskap som återfinns i tre av de nordiska länderna: Statens institutt for forbruksforskning i Oslo, Konsumentforskningscentralen i Helsingfors samt Centrum för Konsumtionsforskning i Göteborg. Dessa institutioner har forskare anställda från ett brett spektrum av akademiska fält och frågor kring hållbar konsumtion har vunnit allt större insteg i deras verksamhet.

## Slutsatser

Rapporten presenterar en översiktlig bild av ledande nordiska forskare, miljöer och nätverk involverade i forskning kring hållbar konsumtion. Vidare problematiseras begreppet hållbar konsumtion och en slutsats som dras är att fältet har mer att vinna på att acceptera de motstridiga tolkningar som finns av begreppet. Därigenom möjliggörs en kritisk diskussion som kan generera nya forskningsfrågor och i förlängningen nya sätt att hantera de stora utmaningar som mänskligheten

står inför. Rapporten visar också att många forskare betonar hållbarhetsfrågans komplexitet och att tvärvetenskapliga ansatser behövs för att skapa en nödvändig mötesplats mellan olika discipliner – men också som ett sätt att skapa ett fruktbart samtal mellan akademien och politiken.

I de intervjuer som inledningsvis gjordes ställde jag frågan vilka områden de intervjuade själva ansåg skulle bli viktiga i framtiden, med avseende på hållbar konsumtion. Svaren varierade, förstås, men två huvudsakliga spår kunde iakttas. För det första lyftes möjligheten fram att betrakta tiden, snarare än pengar, som en knapp resurs. Tankarna uttrycktes som ett intresse för den del av konsumtionsforskningen som berör livsstilsaspekter som *Slow*-rörelsen och *sufficiency*-begreppet. För det andra återkom flera av de intervjuade till behovet av forskning som försöker förstå konsumenter utifrån teorier om vardagsmönstrens betydelse och hur konsumtion återspeglar människans behov att skapa mening genom sina handlingar.

Hållbar konsumtion är ett aktuellt ämne i det offentliga samtalet. Forskningen rör sig nära det politiska området och här ligger förstås både möjligheter och faror. Jag vill avsluta med att betona att den betoning på mångfald som genomsyrar rapporten inte skall tolkas som en brasklapp för att forskarsamhället inte kan bestämma sig. Tvärtom, den mångfald som forskningen pekar på öppnar nya möjligheter för politiken – eller som professor Tim Jackson uttrycker det:

Governments are not just innocent bystanders in the negotiation of consumer choice. They influence and co-create the culture of consumption in a variety of ways. [...] As this review attempts to demonstrate, a genuine understanding of the social and institutional context of consumer action opens out a much more creative vista for policy innovation than has hitherto been recognised. Expanding on these opportunities is the new challenge for sustainable consumption policy. (Jackson, T., 2005, *Motivating Sustainable Consumption*)

## I. Introduction

On the eve of the new century environmental problems, world poverty and life-style illnesses have taken center stage in the public debate. These are all issues that could be addressed within a framework of 'sustainable development'. The combination of political initiatives and different discursive interpretations of sustainable development has made the concept highly politicized (Redclift, 2005). As will be argued in this report, this is not necessarily a bad thing.

Following the legacy of the Brundtland Commission and the Agenda 21, the World Summit in Johannesburg in 2002, decided to develop a ten-year framework program to speed up the transition of the world's consumption and production patterns (UNEP, 2006). Agreements were made to promote the inclusion of social aspects and environmental costs in the price of goods and services, to develop new tools for consumer information and promote public procurement of environmentally sound goods and services. The World Summit also designated the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to take a central role in the international efforts towards achieving sustainable development, by providing data and information to governments world-wide. The Summit's *Plan for Implementation* provided new impulses to specifically address the issue of 'sustainable consumption' (UNEP, 2002).

On the European level there have been a number of initiatives. Sustainable European Regions is a network of 10 regions across Europe, organizing events and bringing together sustainable development expertise on a common platform to discuss best available practice and develop new policies and solutions. The network has produced various policy reports and case studies on regional best practice (SER, 2004). Another example is the European Roundtable on Cleaner Production, which in 2004 changed its name to European Roundtable on Sustainable Consumption and Production. The inspiration for changing the Roundtable's name came from the World Summit and its mission is to be a European forum of experts who meet regularly to stimulate and facilitate the dissemination and implementation of innovative experiences on sustainability. Yet another example of this is the network Sustainable Consumption Research Exchange (SCORE), which acts as one of the European Union's central support structures for the Summit's *Plan for Implementation*; by organizing workshops and conferences. The SCORE Launch Conference took place in 2006 in Wuppertal, Germany. The conference provided an opportunity for input of case studies on mobility, food, and housing for the next, practical phase of SCORE. The aim of the conference was to build a broad platform for presenting work of science and



scientists that may be of direct relevance for the activities of the 10 Year Framework Task Forces.

Also on the national level, the issue of sustainable consumption has gained momentum – in the borderland between research and politics (Hertwich & Katzmayer, 2004; TemaNord, 2004). In the UK, a Sustainable Development Commission has been formed, with Professor Tim Jackson – from the Centre for Environmental Strategy, University of Surrey – as chair of the Economics Steering Group. The commission's mission is to advise on sustainable consumption and behavioral change (Jackson & Michaelis, 2003). In Sweden a commission, led by biologist Stefan Edman, was appointed in 2004; its mission was to prepare a plan of action, derived from the concept of sustainable consumption. It resulted in a report – *Bilen, biffen, bostaden: hållbarare laster, smartare konsumtion* – where a selection of proposals were made on how to promote more sustainable patterns of eating, living and traveling (Edman, 2005). The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency [Naturvårdsverket] has also produced several reports dealing with different aspects of sustainable consumption (Mont & Plebys, 2005; Sanne, 2006; Andersson, 2004).

Parallel to this process, the consumer side of sustainability issues has been recognized in different academic fields. Firstly, international journals have published special issues on sustainable consumption – emphasizing that the production and consumption of goods and services are inextricably interwoven as a single integrated system (Hertwich, 2005; Luskin, 2007; Turkki 2005). Secondly, networks have been formed to support research and to develop the connections with organizations outside the academic world – such as Göteborgs Miljövetenskaplig Centrum (GMV) in Sweden and The Consumer Citizenship Network in Norway. Thirdly, a growing number of international workshops and conferences have been organized to address issues of sustainable consumption – such as Research Committee 24 on Environment and Society, the Nordic Environmental Social Science Research Conference, and the International Society for Ecological Economics.

Yet another example of the increased academic interest for consumer studies was the formation of a national center for consumer research at the School of Business, Economics and Law in Gothenburg in 2001. The purpose of the Center for Consumer Science (CFK) is to gain knowledge of consumption and consumption patterns, which is relevant for researchers, authorities, the industry, organizations, and consumers. CFK serves as an interdisciplinary forum for consumer researchers nationally as well as internationally. This report is part of the designated 'Sustainable consumption' research program at CFK, but issues of

sustainability are also brought up by several other programs at CFK. In two other Scandinavian countries there are similar national centers for consumer research – National Institute for Consumer Research (SIFO) in Norway and National Consumer Research Center (Konsumentforskningscentralen) in Finland.

### **The making and purpose of this report**

The purpose of this report is to present a picture of the current research relating to the concept of sustainable consumption; what areas have been investigated and what questions have been posed? The focus of this report is based on research from the Scandinavian countries: Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland.

The issue of sustainable consumption is being addressed by a large number of academic disciplines; during the course of writing this report I have discussed the issue of sustainable consumption with physical resource theorists, human ecologists, economists, psychologists, ethnologists and marketers. For a deeper understanding of the challenges that face mankind in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this is naturally a good thing, but it also makes the preparation of an overview a difficult task. Given the diversity of academic fields engaged and the fuzziness of the concept under scrutiny, it is impossible to make an exhaustive overview or to present a clear-cut research front.

The point of departure for this report was interviews, which I conducted with representatives from a wide range of academic fields. The researchers were either positioned at CFK or associated with CFK through joint research projects (the persons interviewed are listed under References). The interview was focused on three issues:

- (1) The researchers' view of the concept of sustainable consumption.
- (2) Identifying areas where research has been conducted, but also possible future areas related to sustainable consumption.
- (3) Identifying leading Scandinavian researchers, environments and networks in their respective fields.

Using the information gathered in these interviews, I identified leading researchers and environments as well as ongoing projects and questions of interest for future research. Furthermore, I discovered several overviews discussing different aspects of sustainable consumption. These research overviews were often produced as government reports, but written by leading scholars of the field and they proved very fruitful in the making of this report (Jackson & Michaelis, 2003; Jackson, 2005; Mont & Plebys, 2005; Sjöström & Åhlström, 2005; Holmberg, Steingrimsdottir & Svensson, 2006; Heiskanen & Pantzar, 1997; Røpke, 2005).

To pursue the aim of this report, Part 2 provides a discussion of the concept of sustainable consumption. It identifies some principal perspectives on sustainability, adopted in the debate, and points out the possible use and misuse of this concept. Part 3 offers an overview of research from the Scandinavian countries that have brought up sustainable consumption, from a wide range of academic fields. Drawing from the interviews, Part 4 focuses on possible areas and questions for future research. I conclude with some of my own reflections which were generated while working on this report.

## 2. The Concept

This part of the report dwells on the concept of sustainable consumption; not because I want to argue for an absolute definition, but because I believe that a slight complication of the matter can prove to be fruitful. In making this report, the complexity of the concept of sustainable consumption has been pointed out repeatedly, in both the interviews made and in the studies read. However, in most cases the discussion ends there, with the apparent risk that the meaning of the concept is diluted to ‘environmental friendly’ (Mont & Plebys, 2005; Sjöström & Åhlström, 2005; Heiskanen & Pantzar, 1997; Andersson, 2004). Following Redclift (2005) and Jackson & Michaelis (2003) this apparent common ground is unfortunate; they argue that there is a need to deepen our understanding of sustainability in order to vitalize the field and that this could be done by discussing the assumptions behind different approaches. The ambition here is to take a humble step in that direction. Firstly, five perspectives on sustainable development are presented. Secondly, some trends in the development of consumer theory are highlighted. Finally, the amalgamation of these two fields – into sustainable consumption – is briefly discussed. The hope is that the presented framework can foster the discussion on what an interdisciplinary research approach has to offer the issue of sustainable consumption.

### Five views on sustainable development

As pointed out above, the concept of sustainable development is not easily defined. In the following section of this report, five perspectives will be shortly presented. They all relate to the basic question of how to define a sustainable development path. The presented typology draws on Söderqvist, Hammer & Gren (2004), but similar arguments are made in Redclift (2005) and Jackson & Michaelis (2003). The arguments are biased towards ecological aspects of sustainability, because these have dominated the discussion. However, I will argue that some of these perspectives could be used to more clearly incorporate cultural and social aspects of sustainability.

The first perspective would define a development path as sustainable if the well-being (or utility) of the individuals does not decline over time. One important aspect of this line of argument is the possibility of substituting shortages of one resource with others. In other words, it is no problem to run out of oil, as long as we are able to find alternative fuels – the important thing is that the utility of driving a car is not threatened. This perspective highlights the changing nature of the world and puts trust in the dynamics of a market-driven economy to cope with

changes through the ingenuity of entrepreneurs and price-sensitive consumers. Of course, this puts a lot of pressure on the price mechanism to function according to economic theory; or alternatively, a lot of pressure on politicians to correct prices through political measures. Beside the issue of correct prices, two other complications can be raised: How are we to handle other species than humans and how do we value the well-being of future generations?

From the second perspective sustainable development would be defined as a situation where the stocks of natural resources are not diminishing over time. Behind this perspective lies a notion of limited possibility to substitute for natural resources; despite our ingenuity we are still dependent on basic 'services' provided by the eco-system for our survival. It is argued that there are therefore good reasons for being restrictive in the consumption of non-renewable resources. One way of pursuing this perspective is to argue for a reduction in total economic activity, and thereby consuming fewer natural resources. Apparently, this perspective has been criticized for having a static view of the world and it is clearly at odds with the dominating economic theory.

The third perspective can be viewed as a, more dynamic, variant of the second. This perspective focuses on the productive capacity, instead of the stock of a resource. The argument is that a development can be labeled sustainable, if the yield from natural resources is not declining over time. Following this line of thought, Herman Daly (1990) argued that: the harvesting of renewable natural resources should not exceed the re-growth, the amount of waste produced should not exceed the ability of the ecosystem to degrade it and the extraction of non-renewable resources should be compensated by the development of renewable substitutions. This perspective – like the second – puts the ecosystem on center stage. For people more affiliated with an anthropocentric view of the world this is a provocative stance. Furthermore, in order to find a sustainable yield one also faces the problem of spatial demarcations. On what level should the criteria be met: on a global, national or regional level or even on the level of individual biotopes? To put it differently, can the extraction in one area be compensated by actions taken in another? Is it acceptable that deforestation in the northern part of Sweden is compensated by plantation in the southern part of Sweden – or in other parts of the world? In addition, a point of criticism is that the focus on yields – instead of stocks – can foster measurements of narrow economic productivity, for example in forestry. This, in turn, may threaten biodiversity, which is so central in the following perspective.

The point of departure for the fourth perspective is that nature is characterized by non-linearity, multiple equilibriums, thresholds and inherent uncertainty. The argument is that models for sustainable development must incorporate these fundamental facts. Nature and human society are interdependent systems and the information upon which we base policies and strategies is always limited. The idea of man controlling nature is simply not a viable concept of what is happening. The conclusion of this perspective is that mankind needs to adopt a more humble approach and view the interaction between man and nature as a continuous learning process. Furthermore, in order to create and sustain social, ecological and economical system two concepts are essential – diversity and resilience. Resilience can be defined as the magnitude of external shocks a system can be exposed to and still maintain its internal structure and function. The concept of resilience is often associated with diversity, since when a variety of subsystems can perform the same function, the system as a whole is not as vulnerable to unexpected events.<sup>1</sup> And lastly, the fifth perspective is possibly the most controversial. This approach draws on the inherent uncertainty, already mentioned, and the argument is that sustainable development has to be based on the capability of societies to make decisions that are perceived as legitimate. The first three perspectives can all be criticized on the ground that they require a lot of information that we simply don't have. According to this fifth perspective the object is not to find *the* definition – in technical and quantitative terms – of sustainable development; policies and programs that politicians launch can always be accused to be based on (partly) uncertain premises. Instead, the real challenge is to develop the mechanisms of negotiations, so that all groups in the society can make their voice heard. From this perspective consensus is the only possible foundation for sustainable development. Issues of legitimacy, therefore, become essential – from the local, via the national, to the global level.

In short, the idea that there is an undisputable definition of sustainable development is superficial, and if you try to pursue such an idea you run the risk of stripping the concept to a level of political correctness. On the contrary, it is clear that sustainability can be defined from radically different views of the world. Hence, I would argue that future research can feed off these controversies, by paying close attention to these differences.

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<sup>1</sup> For an account of the concept of resilience and the connection to sustainable development, see Folke et al 2002.

## Consumption in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

The consumer is now a god-like figure, before whom markets and politicians alike bow. Everywhere, it seems, the consumer is triumphant. Consumers are said to dictate production; to fuel innovation; to create new service sectors in advanced economies; to drive modern politics; to have it in their power to save the environment and protect the future of the planet. (Gabriel & Lang 2006, p.1)

In *The Unmanageable Consumer*, Gabriel and Lang emphasizes the prominent role of the consumer in our time. However, this position does not mean that the consumer is always seen as 'god-like'. The authors also point to the opposite picture present in the contemporary debate – the consumer as a weak and passive creature, manipulated by evil market forces. Consumption, it seems, is just as an elusive concept as sustainable development (Gabriel & Lang, 2006; Ekström & Brembeck 2004). Gabriel and Lang argue that a non-problemized use of the concept threatens to turn consumption into a meaningless cliché. Instead – in order to feed off the controversies – they spend the rest of the book portraying the fragmentation, volatility and confusion of modern consumption. This central role for the consumer at the turn of the century has sky-rocketed the interest for academic consumer research; studies in psychology, economy, marketing, anthropology and sociology have all invented different representations of the consumer (Gabriel & Lang, 2006; Arnold & Thompson, 2005; Röpke, 2005; Gifford, 2002; Jalas, 2002).

During the past twenty years, consumer research has ventured into a whole range of new topics (Ekström 2003). Within the rational choice tradition 'adjusted' social psychological models of consumer behavior has been launched. The basic tenet of the rational choice theory – that we act to maximize our own benefit – remains unchanged. However, the commensurability of the underlying utilities is not universally assumed and attempts are made to explain the underlying expectancy-value structure of consumer attitudes (Jackson, 2005). Another strand of research has circled around normative conduct. Critics have argued that rational choice models eschew the discussion of moral behavior; they argue that incorporating moral beliefs raises the models' predictive power. The task has been to clarify the chain of influence from the value sets of individuals to the emergence of personal norms to act in a given way (Stern et al, 1999; Thøgersen, 1996). Another way of thinking about decision-making is found within the tradition of cognitive psychology, where the role of routines is emphasized. This research has shown

how habitual behavior can generate negative structural features, such as 'lock-ins', despite good intentions from all concerned (Jackson 2005).

One central point of criticism of rational choice models is aimed at the models' assumption of sovereign individuals. This critique has spurred some social theorists to further investigate how our behavior can be seen as socially embedded constructions. This strand of research has shown how the emergence of behavioral patterns can be motivated by solidarity within groups and competition between groups (Thøgersen & Ölander, 2002; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). Researchers in psychology, anthropology, sociology and marketing have also found interest in the connection between our behavior as consumers and the 'meaning of consumption'. From different perspectives, they all argue that personal identity is an emergent property of social relations and that these relations are shaped through our daily acts – such as acts of consumption. Naturally, there is no consensus as to what extent consumers are actually 'free', but the most important conclusion is that consumption – free or not – is used in the incessant construction of identity and self (Wilk, 2003; Wilk, 2006; Belk, 1988; Holt, 1995).

### **Sustainable consumption**

In one of the interviews I conducted, the researcher said that the concept of sustainable consumption is best understood and used from a negative point of view. "Actually we don't know what is sustainable to any degree of certainty." He/she said, and continued: "However, we can be pretty certain that much of our behavior today is *not* sustainable". The interviewee said that this position could be a fruitful point of departure for research on sustainable consumption, arguing that meaningful research questions can be posed in relation to things where it is obvious that current consumption patterns are *not* sustainable. This makes sense, returning to the development in consumer research. Available information is always scarce and individuals' cognitive abilities are limited – we make decisions based on group solidarity and religious beliefs. All this points to a view of sustainability where its meaning is not decided once and for all. On the contrary, such a position seems related to the second and the fifth perspective of sustainable development. Some consumption patterns are deteriorating our essential stock of natural resources, but in order to address these problems it is just as important to understand the process behind the public debate and the dynamics of political decision-making.

Furthermore, sustainable consumption is not only about minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials. The Brundtland report emphasized the interdependence of all levels of existence and it clearly stated that social, cultural,



ecological and economical aspects had to be taken into account in order to generate a meaningful concept of sustainability (UNEP 1987). This means that issues like health, human rights and gender equality also have to be incorporated, making it even more difficult to present a conclusive definition. As will be shown in Part 3, the main part of the research conducted within a sustainability framework has been environmentally-oriented. The development of other aspects of sustainability – and elaboration of the interdependence between these issues – still needs to occur to a large extent.

This need to expand and problemize the meaning of sustainable consumption also seems to call for interdisciplinary approaches – a call often heard in the academic literature (Heiskanen & Pantzar, 1997; Mont & Plebys, 2005; Røpke, 2005). Investigations have to be made within specialized fields, but interdisciplinary meeting places are essential if one wants sustainable consumption to maintain an encompassing and yet comprehensive concept. Such a concept must feed off the many controversies, inherent in the discussion on sustainable development as well as in contemporary consumer research.

### 3. The Research

When contemplating the development of consumer research it becomes clear that the role of the consumer in society can be described in disparate ways. The view of the consumer as a sovereign decision-maker has been questioned. Instead, a more complex view is emerging. Gabriel and Lang (2006) describe this span from the ‘god-like’ consumer seen by some as the new bearer of democracy and economic prosperity, to the manipulated consumer who needs to be protected by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and government policies. Consumer-related issues have to be concurrently addressed from the individual level to the level of national and international bodies. Thus, in this part of the report I will use this multi-level approach to present current research on sustainable consumption. In the first section, research which analyses individual consumers will be presented; in the second section, research revolving around NGOs and companies take center stage; and in the last section, governments are the objects of analysis in the presented research. Naturally, the levels are not discrete categories and the organizing principle pursued here should not overshadow the basic tenet that all levels are at work at all times, in a complex interaction with each other.

The aim here is to present the richness of the field and give references to important work, researchers and environments within a burgeoning field sustainable consumption. The problem is of course deciding on what research to include in this kind of report. One solution would be to include only research explicitly using the concept of sustainable consumption. However, such an approach would eschew the overview, because the concept is quite new and the use is unevenly distributed among research which would qualify in the definition discussed earlier. What I have tried to do here is to present research explicitly using the concept of sustainable consumption, but also to include work that was mentioned in the interviews to be part of a sustainability discourse. There is a bias towards ecological aspects and I would argue that the reason for this is that it reflects how the concept (so far) has been used.

#### The individual

Despite the critique towards the sovereign-consumer-view, this does not mean that the individual level of analysis is passé. In the following section, I will present research in two areas – decision-making and political consumerism – where the individual consumer is an important object of analysis.

### *Determinants of choice*

Organic food is a relevant area where a lot of research has been conducted and where the individual is an important object of analysis. Grankvist's (2002) *Determinants of Choice of Eco-Labeled Products* is a representative work. Firstly, he wrote this thesis at the Research unit for Environmental and Societal Decision Analysis (Ruseda) – at the department of Psychology in Gothenburg – which is a leading research environment in its field in Scandinavia. Professor Anders Biel is head of the Ruseda. Secondly, Grankvist studies the factors that are influential in different phases in the transition from purchase of conventional to environmentally friendly or eco-labeled products (Grankvist, 2005; Biel et al, 2006). This research relates to the basic research on how people individually or in groups predict and evaluate different courses of future actions, integrate such judgments, and make choices (Gärling & Golledge, 2000). Several overviews of this strand of research have been made, where attitudes and decision-making in everyday shopping take center stage. This research has not been restricted to the field of psychology, but also includes economy and marketing (Holmberg et al, 2006; Ekelund, 2003; Sjöström & Åhlström, 2005). Part of this research has been conducted within the large project *MAT21* (FOOD21). The project ran from 1997 to 2004 and was an interdisciplinary research program concentrated at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, but research was also carried out at the universities in Uppsala, Gothenburg, Lund and Umeå. The overall goal of the *MAT21* program was to define sustainable conditions for food production and consumption.

A slightly different perspective on the consumer can be found in *Nätverket Konsumentnära Livsmedelsforskning* (Network for Food-Oriented Consumer Science), which was started in 1999. Lund University and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU), Alnarp, founded this network to strengthen food-oriented consumer science research in the southern part of Sweden. The network's co-ordinator is ethnologist Håkan Jönsson from Lund University (Jönsson, 2005). The multidisciplinary network takes a cultural perspective in which the focus is placed on the meaning of food products and meals as conceptualized by producers and consumers. A similar approach is taken in the research program Food and Health at CFK, where values, practices and artifacts in relation to meals, food and eating are studied in order to develop suggestions regarding actions, implementation and evaluation (Brembeck et al 2005; Brembeck et al 2006). The interest for food-related consumer research is wide-spread in the Nordic countries, see the overviews mentioned. Denmark, for example, has a long-standing tradition in food industry and this resulted in the establishing of the research center MAPP in 1991. MAPP is part of Center for Advanced Food Studies, at Aarhus School of Business, that coordinates food research in Denmark. MAPP has had an extensive

collaboration with Denmark's Technical University, Danish Institute of Agricultural Sciences, Danish Institute of Fisheries Research and Danish Meat Research Institute. MAPP has also participated in a number of EU projects concerning consumer-oriented issues. MAPP was evaluated in 2005 by an international advisory board. Here it was concluded that Danish food research is among the best in the world and MAPP was praised for both its research and dissemination.

Transportation is another area which is essential to research on sustainable consumption. Of course transportation can be studied on all levels, from individual decisions to long-term planning as part of national infrastructural politics. The Environmental Economics Unit at the School of Business, Economics and Law in Gothenburg has extensively published works on the relationship between consumption and transportation. For example, Dahl & Sterner (1991) and Sterner (2006) have analyzed how gasoline demand is correlated to fuel taxes. Johansson-Stenman & Martinsson (2004) have studied how people derive utility from the self-image constructed when choosing what car to buy. Another environment is the Transportation research unit (TRUM) at Umeå University. TRUM was founded in 1981 with the aim of promoting interdisciplinary research in the field of transport. TRUM concentrates on aspects of social science and behavioral/cognitive science pertaining to passenger transport. For example, how individual and group decisions about travel and means of transportation are made and how habits and routines concerning transportation can be changed to safer and more eco-friendly patterns have been studied. Another perspective on the Swedish transportation system can be found in Falkemark (2006), which provides an historical account on the 'emergence of a non-sustainable transport system'.

#### *Political Consumerism*

It has been noted that studies of shopping cannot be limited to economic considerations, such as quality and price. With arguments close to that of the Brundtland report, it has been argued that social, ethical and political issues are embedded in the act of shopping. This has given rise to research focused on shopping as a form of practical politics – political consumerism – where the individual is still the object of analysis. As argued by Michelletti (2003) the phenomenon has traditions dating back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, even though the term 'political consumerism' was coined during the 1990s. By introducing the concept of 'individualized collective action', Michelletti discusses how changes in the political landscape at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century politicized consumption – making the consumer increasingly intertwined with global markets and global

politics. Action is taken on an individual basis, but the political dynamics can only be understood if the action is viewed in its collective context. Michelletti provides an overview of the field, but she also presents a specific study, dealing with green political consumerism activities in Sweden.

Other aspects of political consumerism have also been studied in recent years. Jonsson (2006) elaborates on the movement known as Voluntary Simplicity, exploring how consumers create, maintain and communicate a lifestyle using consumption practices which reflect a voluntarily restricted consumption. Similar themes are studied in Mårtensson & Pettersson (2002). In Karlsson (2005) another aspect of political consumerism is analyzed; a group of young people active in the Red Cross were interviewed about their relation to the concept of Fair Trade. The Nordic Council of Ministers has published the proceedings from the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Seminar on Political Consumerism, which was held in Oslo 2004. This publication provides an extensive overview of Scandinavian research, dealing with political consumerism (TemaNord 2005a).

#### *Complicating the story – children and households as consumers*

So far, I have focused on research where the individual consumer is the object of analysis. But, what about the family as an entity of consumption? In many studies the household is the obvious entity of analysis, for example in discussions of energy consumption (Nässén & Holmberg, 2006; Lassoe 2000, Perrels & Sullström, 2004; Lenzen et al, 2006; Vringer et al, 2007; Reinders et al, 2003). See also Grønhøj (2002), where sustainable consumption patterns are discussed while taking the social interaction of the family into account. But the importance of a household perspective is also apparent in research dealing with children, since their role as consumers are so heavily influenced by their dependence on the family. In Johansson (2005) the contradictory views about consumption that adults mediate to children are illustrated in a study of ‘tweens’ (age 8-12). The study shows how tweens are viewed as important customers as well as vulnerable victims that have to be protected. Children’s role in the modern consumer society has also been studied Ekström (1995; 1999). See also a recent study by Björneloo (2006), analyzing how teachers interpret and incorporate the concept of sustainability in their teaching.

Applied Human Ecology – also known as Home Economics – has a long-standing tradition using the household as the object of analysis. Helena Shanahan is a professor in Applied Human Ecology, conducting research at CFK in Gothenburg. Shanahan (1998; 2003) presents in two overviews an introduction to the field Applied Human Ecology – offering a chance to better understand the

interdependence of household and welfare, on a local as well as on a global scale. Shanahan notes:

The central position of the household in all human societies justifies attention. When seen in total, the magnitude of the flow of resources being transformed in households is impressive. About two-thirds, of the national income in Sweden is managed by households, and households are accountable for over 54 percent of the private consumption of GNP. Another example is energy; households consume one third of the total energy consumption in Sweden. (Shanahan, 1998)

A household approach is also the point of departure in the research program SHARP (Sustainable Households Attitudes Resources & Policy), where researchers from Luleå University of Technology, Umeå University and University of Linköping participate. Political, economic, legal, psychological and time-geographical methods are combined to employ a bottom-up perspective. Questions of policy legitimacy are emphasized in order to understand how environmental policies and intentions are perceived and implemented within Swedish households.

A quite different approach can be found at the School of Health Sciences and Social Work, at Växjö University. Professor Tapio Salonen has been the coordinator of an EU-financed research network called Social Exclusion and the Development of European Union Citizenship. Here, the situation of underprivileged groups within the welfare state is analyzed. The family is an important unit of analysis and cultural/social aspects of sustainability takes center stage (Salonen & Hjort 2003).

### **The organization**

The global challenges of population growth, environmental problems and social inequality cannot be addressed by any single organization. However, a notion has grown that due to the corporations' resources, technology and global reach they are important actors for a passable strategy to meet the global challenges facing mankind (Hart, 1997). While the modern corporation has been a dominating institution since the beginning of the last century, the importance of NGOs increased dramatically during the 1990s. The number of NGOs have exploded and their role on the international scene has been institutionalized, as part of a larger transformation of politics at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Boli & Thomas, 1999). In the following, research using the organization as the object of analysis for issues concerning sustainable consumption will be presented. This is done by using two different points of departure – production and communication.

### *The production approach to consumption*

During the 1960s and 1970s, the incipient awareness of environmental problems forced the producers of goods to acknowledge the impact of its emissions of toxic materials on the surrounding environment. In an effort to battle these problems companies concentrated on cleaning its emissions. During the 1980s, this was complemented by different kinds of recycling schemes. Both of these solutions were costly, but during the 1980s the business community also started to address the environmental issues in terms of business opportunities, within a framework of total quality management (Heiskanen & Pantzar, 1997). In its 1992 publication *Changing Course*, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development introduced 'eco-efficiency'. This was a concept for creating more goods and services while using fewer resources throughout the entire life cycle – including reduction in material and energy intensity, reduced dispersion of toxic materials and improved recyclability. It was argued that the increase in resource productivity would also create a competitive advantage (Braungart & McDonough, 2002). During the 1990s this approach of continual improvements has been criticized for being insufficient. The challenge of reaching a level of sustainable consumption, it was argued, was something totally different; Schmidt-Bleek (1993) launched the idea that we had to reduce our use of natural resources by a factor of ten. To quantify the effects of the environmental impact of consumption patterns several new measurements were constructed – such as material input per service unit (MIPS), carrying capacity and ecological footprints (Mont & Plebys, 2005; Heiskanen & Pantzar, 1997). The developments led the European Commission to present a strategy in 2001, called the Integrated Product Policy (IPP). The aim of the policy is to contribute to products that cause less environmental stress from a life-cycle perspective – through stimulating a market for greener products. A wide variety of instruments are part of the IPP, ranging from market-based approaches to legislation (Malcolm, 2005). The effect of these events has been that the interdependence between production and consumption has been stressed. The special issue of the *Journal of Industrial Ecology* is a typical illustration of this (Hertwich, 2005).

One of the leading environments for this kind of research is the International Institute for Industrial Environmental Economics (IIIEE), at Lund University in Sweden. The IIIEE focuses on the development and practical testing of innovative tools, methodologies and approaches which support preventative solutions to environmental problems. Attention has shifted away from the process of production, towards service of products and the act of consumption. So, despite the industrial orientation, the IIIEE emphasizes that sustainable solutions have to integrate a complex set of ecological, economic, technical, social, and cultural issues. An illustrative example is Mont and Plepys (2003), where they present a

review of literature and applications of the product service systems. In 2003, the IIIIE started a joint research program with Chalmers University of Technology called FLIPP (Furthering Lifecycle considerations through Integrated Product Policy). The program studies firm behavior, product-oriented environmental policies and the development of integrated product and service offerings in manufacturing firms. Apart from the research, IIIIE also produces policy reports for national and international bodies (UNEP, 2002; Mont & Plebys, 2005).

One important strand of the expanded form of industrial-oriented research is the life cycle analysis, LCA (Mont & Plebys, 2005; Heiskanen, 2002). Hertwich (2005) provides a critical review of different LCA approaches, in relation to the concept of sustainable consumption. The LCA is not only applicable to durable consumer goods; Carlsson-Kanyama & Faist (2000) analyze the greenhouse gas emissions from a variety of foods. They conclude that CO<sub>2</sub> and energy use is an inadequate measure of food chain emissions since methane and refrigerant emissions are very considerable. Comparing four sample diets, the study concludes that the domestic vegetarian diet produces the lowest level of emissions for the highest level of nutrients, followed by the domestic non-vegetarian diet. Seasonality is highlighted as an important indicator of greenhouse gas sustainability (See also Carlsson-Kanyama, 1998).

In 2005, the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm appointed Göran Finnveden to lead the newly founded Environmental Strategies Research (fms). Fms is engaged in interdisciplinary studies and the focus is on what a sustainable city might look like, and to explore methods for the assessment of environmental impacts of various systems – to provide a better understanding of how society interacts with technology.

At the University of Aarhus, John Thøgersen is the research group manager of Marketing & Sustainability. The aim of his research is to contribute to the understanding of companies', organizations' and consumers' individual and collective transaction activities, with the focus on activities that lead to environmentally problematic consequences. A second aim is to be an active part in the development of strategic and operational solutions to affect such activities. The research of Marketing & Sustainability is anchored in theory and method from especially economic psychology and marketing.

### *Communication*

It has always been important to companies how they are perceived in the public eye. However, the PR side of running a business has become increasingly prominent in recent years. Debates – often initiated by NGOs – have revolved



around the ways in which corporations can play an active role in internalizing environmental and social concerns into their enterprise. In *Strategic management: a stakeholder approach*, Freeman (1984) advocates the standpoint that a business goal cannot be limited to share-holder value. During the 1990s this standpoint has been elaborated in theory by researchers and in practice by companies (Åhlström & Egels-Zandén, in press). The acceptance has not been uniform in the business community, but the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has been rather successful since the World Business Council for Sustainable Development included it in their work. For example, the Nordic Council of Ministers has published an analysis of 50 listed companies in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. The companies were characterized and rated according to their focus on sustainability and corporate governance. The analysis showed that larger companies were generally leading the way, that CSR had the largest embeddedness in Sweden and that sectors with high general potential risk to the environment were prominent in the CSR area (TemaNord, 2005b).

In order to support knowledge development in the area of CSR and sustainable development, The Sustainability Research Group (SuRe) was formed in 2003, at the Stockholm School of Economics. Its focus is on the development of new business models based on criteria for social and environmental responsibility – including partnerships for sustainability, narrative constructions of corporate social responsibility and socially responsible investments. The School of Business, Economics and Law at Gothenburg University is also integrating CSR into its activities. Within the Center for Business in Society, research is conducted on the new roles and responsibilities of corporations in society (Egels-Zandén & Wahlqvist, 2007; Egels-Zandén & Hyllman, 2006; Palmås 2003).

Related to CSR and the movement of political consumerism is the issue of labeling schemes – guaranteeing organic and/or socially just producing conditions. In recent years, there has been a growing interest from both producers and consumers towards labeling schemes like the international *Fairtrade* and the Swedish *KRAV*. From a producer's point of view there is of course the possibility that a label can ensure better payment for its goods; from the consumer's point of view labeling can help to make political consumerism possible. In their article of the interdependence between consumption in the north and sustainable communities in the south Shanahan and Carlsson-Kanyama (2005) argues that the loss of feedback to consumers in the north hinders a sustainable development. Drawing from previous research they highlight both positive and negative impact of labeling schemes. In a Nordic review Leire and Thidell (2005) present research

on consumer perceptions of product-related environmental information (See also Ossiansson & Fuentes, 2006; Klintman & Boström, 2004; TemaNord, 2005a; Holmberg et al, 2006; Taylor et al, 2005).

Tourism is an area which attracts the attention of both private companies and political representatives and due to the external effects of tourism the concept of 'eco-tourism' has been launched (Eligh et al, 2002; Welford et al, 1999). When new attractions and arenas of experiences develop, new questions arise: What are the consequences of this increasing flow of tourists? What kind of strains does it put on the environment and is it compatible with an ambition to remain as an ecologically prosperous and sustainable region? (O'Dell & Billing 2005)

### **The Government**

The need for political involvement in the search for a sustainable way of life is obvious. One of the most striking examples of the inability of the current system to cope with the challenges is the data presented by a number of leading researchers on the issue of conserving wild nature. Drawing from available data the authors conclude that the ongoing rapid conversion of wild habitat is as economically short-sighted as it is morally problematic – they estimate the overall economic benefit of an effective global program for the conservation of remaining wild nature to be at least in the ratio of 100 to 1 (Balmford et al, 2002).

Nonetheless, the role of government in the sustainable development debate is contested. On one hand, the idea of sustainable consumption is argued to be in forefront of the development – with its call for service-intensive consumption and new environmentally friendly technology. Here, governments are asked to facilitate the transition, for example through a green tax shift and investments in basic research. On the other hand, the call for a reduction in the level of consumption is a delicate matter, since consumption is so closely related to the prevailing notion of economic growth. Furthermore, consumption is usually associated with 'choice' and suspicion rises when governments want to make these choices for us (Mont & Plebys 2005). The research presented in the following come from different fields and its questions differ; however, they all relate to the role of government and the issue of sustainable consumption.

Consumer policy is one area where the role of government is discussed. Thøgersen (2005) argues that consumer policy can empower consumers to change lifestyles and to be successful policy must loosen external constraints that hinder this transition. Sanne (2002; 2006) analyzes these constraints – lock-ins – arguing that

some of these circumstances are deliberately created by players with vested interests. While Thøgersen and Sanne have a more economic perspective, Janhonen-Abrughah and Palojoki (2005) approach the issue of consumer policy from a social and cultural perspective. They analyze multicultural integration work in Finland and argue that practical consumer education and home economics foster both cultural integration and an awareness of consumption patterns.

The role of the government and consumer policy is not only discussed in terms of the most efficient way of changing individual behavior. Equally important is the role of community planning, greatly affecting dwelling and transport patterns – two essential sectors in the debate of sustainable consumption. Paglia (2006) analyzes the dynamic between newly-generated traffic and decision-making in infrastructural investments (See also Hultkrantz, Chuanzhong & Nerhagen, 2003). Høyer and Holden (2003) study the relationship between household consumption and ecological footprints. They offer a review of the international research literature and argue that the concept of a *compact city* is an important step towards reducing the ecological footprints related to dwelling patterns.

Academic proponents of sustainable consumption have marshaled considerable evidence over the past decade to support calls for more efficacious ways of life. It has been argued that one of the reasons that policymakers continue to resist such recommendations is that the proposed changes oppose the dominating tenets of neo-liberal economics (Redclift 2005). For example, Seyfang (2004) shows how the UK strategy for sustainable consumption is biased towards individualistic, market-based and neo-liberal policies. Cohen (2006) calls for new forms of partnerships among actors in the democratic process, which can foster a critical dialogue – making a more complex idea of sustainable consumption take root in the policy sphere.

Climate change, streams of refugees and sweat shops – the list of challenges is long and it is becoming all the more obvious that these issues have to be addressed on a higher level than the nation state. The UN initiatives mentioned in this report lie in the area between research and politics and are important in this respect. As argued by Fuchs and Lorek (2005), the lack of commitment to strong sustainable consumption among International Governmental Organizations can be explained by their relative weakness as actors in global governance and the existence of strong opposing interests. Johansson-Stenman (2004) offers a slightly opposing view, arguing that rich countries in a free unregulated market may still undertake globally efficient investments in environmentally friendly technology, given the existence of limited non-paternalistic altruism.

In conclusion, the concept of sustainable consumption has been firmly established in Scandinavian research during the past decade. The concept is now used in all kinds of academic disciplines – from physical resource theory to marketing and anthropology. There have been publications in international journals, participation on international conferences, formation of research centers and networks. Scandinavian researchers are also well represented on the international level when it comes to writing reports for political bodies or to participate in expert panels. The research has been biased towards environmental issues and on how to promote ecologically sound behavior. However, there is a growing number of researchers trying to expand the scope of the sustainability agenda – incorporating issues like policy legitimacy, corporate responsibility, gender inequality and international politics. Such a widening of scope would also imply that the hitherto domination by research on food and transport would be broken. Furthermore, going through the large and diverse amount of research, it becomes clear that sustainable consumption is relevant on all levels – from the individual to the global – and because all levels interact continuously, the inherent complexity of sustainability has to be acknowledged and addressed.

## 4. Concluding remarks

The last part of this report consists of two sections. Drawing on the interviews conducted, I will point to some areas of future research. Then, I will round off with a few concluding remarks.

### Looking ahead

Some of the potential future areas of research mentioned in the interviews were separately brought up by several researchers. One these areas had to do with the understanding of the consumer. If we accept the complex picture of the consumer presented by current research, then the incorporation of a sustainability perspective is also a multi-faceted task. There is a need for research that explicitly studies the individual consumer and the power of everyday routines – we need to recognize how small obstacles in everyday life are important in shaping society. In more concrete terms, this could mean analyzing how consumer behavior relates to the organization of grocery stores or social dynamics (like the family). However, it could also mean analyzing how the construction of ‘meaning’ affects our consumption patterns. These are issues where social sciences and interdisciplinary approaches are needed in order to bridge the gap between the technical solutions of science and the everyday life of the consumer. In addition, this would possibly help us to better understand how to delegate the responsibility for change between politics, the market players and the individual consumer. (Wilks, 2006; Lann & Thorsell, 2005; Solér 1997)

Another recurrent theme in the interviews dealt with how we spend our time – and not just our money. For many people in the modern society, time is a resource just as scarce as money. Moreover, the quality of life is not easily correlated to households’ amount of consumer durables. Sustainable consumption, then, would be about the adaptation lifestyles as much as it is about the buying of goods. References to concepts like ‘slow’ and ‘sufficiency’ are used in several interviews. The researchers viewed these concepts as interesting for the future, but pointed also out the difficulty in using them for academic research. (Warberg & Larsson 2007; Sachs 1999; Parkins & Craig, 2006; Jalas, 2002; Easterlin 2002)

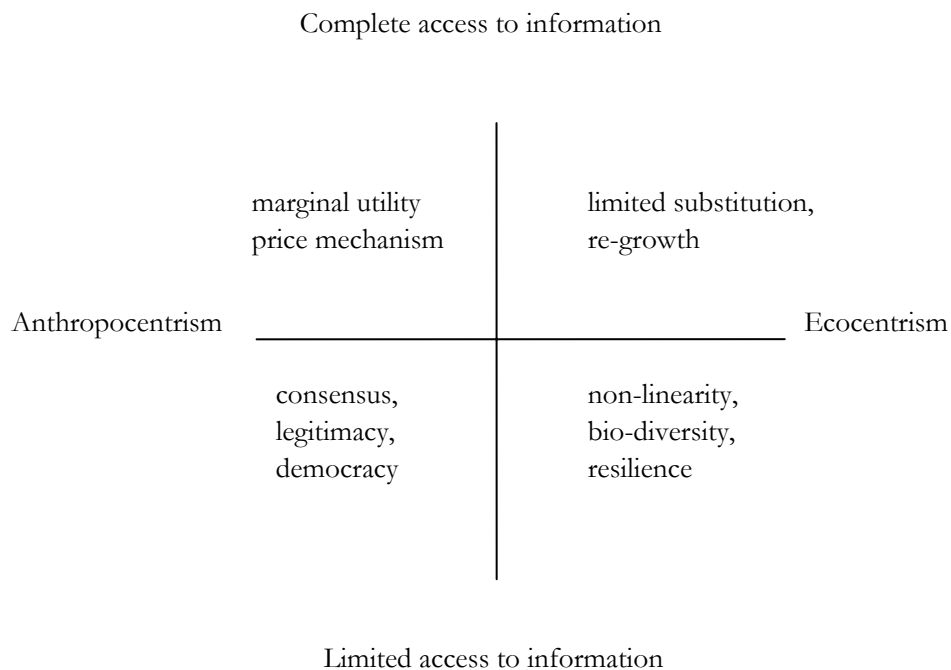
The need for future research dealing with gender aspects of sustainable consumption was highlighted in the interviews, relating to the social and cultural aspects of sustainability. A gender perspective could generate questions like: Who has the capability of consuming certain types of goods and services? How does the

design of goods and services break up with (or reinforce) prevailing gender structures? (Berner, 2003; Landström, 2004)

### Between research and politics

The purpose of this report has been to present current research relating to the concept of sustainable consumption. To pursue this task I started with a discussion on sustainability and consumption, making it clear that sustainable consumption can be used to express radically different views of the world. To illustrate this complexity I have summarized my position on sustainability in Figure 1, which is based on two variables. The first variable represents an anthropocentric (humans first) or ecocentric (nature first) view of the world. The second variable represents the view on information and decision-making, whether information is available or limited.

Figure 1. Different perspectives on sustainability



It seems as if the five perspectives presented in Part 2 fit into this figure. The upper left-hand corner represents a neo-classical approach to sustainability, with its emphasis on individual consumers making informed choices based on marginal utility transmitted through the price mechanism. The upper right-hand corner would represent perspective 2 and 3, emphasizing the human is always an integral part of the ecosystem and the limitations to substitute nature with man-made capital. The lower right-hand corner would represent perspective 4, where uncertainty is used to make a case for being cautious and preserving bio-diversity. Finally, the lower left-hand corner would represent the fifth perspective, where the inherent uncertainty is used to advocate the development of political processes to handle the challenges of sustainability. The point here is to underscore that none of the perspectives can claim to have the ultimate definition of sustainability. Or, to put it in a positive way, each of them has something to offer the discussion of sustainable consumption. Thus, by using different disciplines and different perspectives on sustainability there is a possibility of looking at all sides of sustainable consumption. I would argue that the need to continue to feed off these controversies is a strong case for interdisciplinary approaches.

With environmental issues climbing on the political agenda, the different interpretations of sustainable consumption has another important implication – politicization. This is not necessarily a bad thing. It points to the need for the social sciences to expose the assumptions of the competing discourses. Hopefully, such an analysis could foster new ways of thinking within the research community. Furthermore, the politicization of a contested concept can also be useful, from a political point of view. Professor Tim Jackson makes the following – positive – summary of the topic of politicization:

Governments are not just innocent bystanders in the negotiation of consumer choice. They influence and co-create the culture of consumption in a variety of ways. [...] As this review attempts to demonstrate, a genuine understanding of the social and institutional context of consumer action opens out a much more creative vista for policy innovation than has hitherto been recognized. Expanding on these opportunities is the new challenge for sustainable consumption policy. (Jackson, 2005, p. xiii)

If the words ‘governments’ and ‘policy’ are changed to ‘researchers’ and ‘research’, then it also summarizes a challenging position for the future academic field of sustainable consumption.

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### Relevant links:

Centrum för Konsumtionsvetenskap (CFK) [The Center for Consumer Research]:  
[www.cfk.gu.se](http://www.cfk.gu.se)

Göteborgs Miljövetenskapliga Centrum (GMV) [The Centre for Environment and Sustainability]: [www.chalmers.se/gmv](http://www.chalmers.se/gmv)

Institutionen för Service Management, Campus Helsingborg:  
[www.msm.lu.se/index.php?id=206](http://www.msm.lu.se/index.php?id=206)

MAPP [Centre for research on customer relations in the food sector]:  
[www.asb.dk/research/centresteam/centres/mapp/about.aspx](http://www.asb.dk/research/centresteam/centres/mapp/about.aspx)

Mat 21 [FOOD 21]: [www-mat21.slu.se/eng/thisis/presentation.htm](http://www-mat21.slu.se/eng/thisis/presentation.htm)

Nätverket Konsumentnära Livsmedelsforskning [Network for Food-Oriented Consumer Science]: [www.pedagog.lu.se/consumersciencenetwork](http://www.pedagog.lu.se/consumersciencenetwork)

Sustainable Households. Attitudes, Resources & Policy. (SHARP):  
[www.sharpprogram.se](http://www.sharpprogram.se)

The International Institute for Environmental Economics at Lund University:  
(iiee): [www.iiee.lu.se](http://www.iiee.lu.se)

The Sustainability Research Group (SuRe):  
[www.hhs.se/DSection/Research/Sustainability.htm](http://www.hhs.se/DSection/Research/Sustainability.htm)

The Sustainable Consumption & Production branch of the UNEP:  
[www.uneptie.org/pc](http://www.uneptie.org/pc)

Transportation Research: [www.tft.lth.se/Sweden.htm](http://www.tft.lth.se/Sweden.htm)