

Artículo de revisión

Sustainable consumption, the social dimension

Consumo sostenible, el ámbito social

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ABSTRACT. - This review contributes to a deeper understanding of what quality of life means from the perspective of sustainable consumption. It presents the differing motivations of consumers, and the contributions of the rich and poor to unsustainable patterns of consumption. This paper opens the discussion regarding the complex relationship between consumption, values, identity and the mechanisms for making purchase choices in a globalized context, and analyzes this in light of the relevant literature. Smaller, more localized economic models are described as positive strategies for considering new ways of perceiving a simpler and more local lifestyle as positive for the environment. This paper emphasizes the importance of cultural and ethical values, which are directly linked to consumption patterns.

KEYWORDS: Sustainability, identity-seeking & consumption, values & consumption, unsustainable consumer behavior, wellbeing & consumption.

RESUMEN.- Esta revisión contribuye a un entendimiento más profundo acerca del significado de calidad de vida desde la perspectiva del consumo sostenible. Se presentan diferentes motivaciones de consumidores, así como también la contribución de los ricos y pobres a los patrones no sustentables de consumo. Esta revisión abre la discusión sobre la compleja relación que existe entre consumo, valores, identidad y los mecanismos para tomar decisiones de compra en un contexto globalizado y a la luz de la literatura relevante. Los modelos económicos más locales y simples son descritos como estrategias positivas por considerarlas formas nuevas de percibir un estilo de vida más sencillo y positivo para el ambiente. Esta revisión enfatiza la importancia de los valores culturales y éticos, los cuales están directamente ligados a los patrones de consumo.

PALABRAS CLAVES: sostenibilidad, identidad, valor y consumo, comportamiento insostenible, bienestar.

INTRODUCTION

Production and consumption are processes inherent to human existence, development, and growth. Consumption primary goal is to satisfy the needs of individuals and communities, and to create the conditions for a dignified life. This concept is well-known in Ecuador as “Sumak Kawsay”, or Good Living (Acosta 2013), which forms part of the current Ecuadorian Constitution (León 2017). However, there are different elements in the production and consumption process that lead to environmental, social, economic, and political impacts in the course of satisfying the need to achieve a dignified life, for both individuals and communities (Fuchs 2016). Nevertheless, the dignified life for humans does not of-

ten take into consideration the wellbeing of other living organisms that contribute to building resilience in the environment. Sumak Kawsay adds the concept of harmony with nature to the perception of good life for humans (Acosta 2013).

Humans tend to have expectations exceeding their actual needs, leading to a misperception between what are considered desires and what are needs, and thus creating a context of environmental unbalance and social injustice that affects both the environment and society. The Declaration of Oslo (Gerbens-Leenes and Moll 2006) defines sustainable consumption as the efficient use of natural resources and services in response to human needs to achieve the highest quality of life based upon



Figure 1-2: Farmers' markets, community supported agriculture (CSA) and Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) developed by agroecological producers and consumers promote consuming local produce, avoiding unnecessary packaging, transportation, freezing and processing of food. These initiatives reduce enormous amounts of costs to all actors in the chain and help building community bonding both among producers and consumers. Photo credits: Michael Ayala Ayala 2017. Taken in La Esperanza, Ecuador.

equitable social development. Needs and desires are vaguely defined because of their complex interaction with different contexts and circumstances (Fuchs 2016). At present, this complexity makes consumption patterns the cause of negative environmental impacts, and if both global and local initiatives are not implemented soon, it will undoubtedly place the achievement of a good life at risk for future generations. The social dimension of unsustainable consumption patterns is described by Mortensen (2006) as influenced and manipulated by advertisements that interfere in individual choices. On the other hand, Fuchs (2016) claims that this subject can be discussed from two points of view: from an efficient production-consumption approach, or from a completely distinct approach that explores consumers' behavioral patterns. This paper embraces Fuchs' second option and presents evidence to support that choice. Wellbeing has been poorly explored as regards sustainable consumption, since it is more related to personal and cultural perceptions of needs and desires.

The Transition Towns Network (TTN) is an international movement that promotes local initiatives to strengthen community resilience and autonomy as a strategy in tackling climate change, dependence on fossil fuels and an unsustainable capitalist model. This movement envisions production, consumption and distribution as being more local, and emphasizes that re-localization results in a more satisfying lifestyle and engages community members in a more equitable fashion (Brangwyn & Hopkins 2008; Feola 2016). TTN's contribution to the discussion of sustainable consumption lies in the enhancement of local production-consumption-distribu-

tion chains, which ultimately supports sustainable consumption behavior. One section of Agenda 21, Chapter Four (United Nations Conference on Environmental Development 1992) has been useful in establishing the value of its objectives and activities to achieve progress in this field. We have also investigated some of the inconspicuous motivations for unsustainable consumption, such as identity-seeking and the search for acceptance, especially among vulnerable groups of consumers like teenagers. We have found interesting cases to illustrate oppressive capitalist intrusions into rural communities, which have affected self-esteem and the self-concept of locals to the point that community members, who originally perceived themselves to be living a dignified life, suddenly see themselves as poor, hopeless and in need of external charity (Norberg-Hodge 2011).

In the literature we have also found interesting cases which advocate and implement good practices and strategies for consumer engagement using authentic values and tools to challenge unsustainable consumption patterns. These initiatives cover different elements of sustainable consumption, replacing the hegemony of oligopolies and oppressive capitalist systems with more democratic, participatory, locally-focused and autonomous economies. This paper demonstrates the relevance of non-technological solutions, without denying their importance in the process of tackling unsustainable consumption. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the social dimension of sustainable consumption and its relationship to the perception of wellbeing. Our aim is to contribute to the debate regarding sustainability, and it is our hope that this paper will prove useful to academics, students, and

consumers, as well as to inform policy-makers in their task of creating more resilient communities.

The Rich, the Poor, and Their Contribution to Unsustainable Consumption.- Agenda 21, in Chapter Four (United Nations Conference on Environmental Development 1992) addresses unsustainable production and consumption patterns, and links poverty to environmental degradation; however, it also mentions the different elements that drive consumption to unsustainable situations, in which consumers demand more resources than their local environment has the capacity to provide and regenerate (Shiva & Emmott 2000). Agenda 21, Chapter Four has three main objectives. The first two objectives are related to efficiency in production and consumption processes, and make reference to action through public policy. Only the third objective relates to the reinforcement of values, which is this paper's focus. This third objective states the importance of transferring environmental technologies to developing countries. We do not emphasize the technological aspects of sustainability here, because it goes beyond the position of transferring technologies to developing countries, as stated at the end of the third objective of Agenda 21, Chapter Four. The Agenda 21 position may sound somewhat arrogant when not accompanied by a *mea culpa* from the countries that create a larger footprint as a result of their unsustainable consumer behavior. It is difficult to state at what point consumption becomes unsustainable. One approach could be to consider the moment at which the resources needed to produce goods or services reach a point when they can no longer regenerate. One tool for assessing the impact caused by a product or service is Life Cycle Analysis (LCA); (ISO 2018). LCA measures the cradle-to-grave impact in terms of outputs and inputs, energy use, and raw materials. It also examines the impact the product or process has on the environment and human health. LCA should be used as a wake-up call and as a source of information for policy makers, industries and consumers in general to make informed decisions prior to determining which product or process to choose.

Agenda 21, Chapter Four claims that poverty causes stress on the environment, but it clearly concludes that the main global causes of environmental degradation and unbalance are unsustainable consumption patterns in developed countries (United Nations Conference on Environmental Development 1992; SD21 2012). This unbalance is caused not only by environmental and economic factors, such as the depletion of natural resources, but it is also embedded in the social sphere. It is perceived that wealthier consumers have more access to natural resources due to their greater economic capacity, and consequently place more pressure on resources than the poor. However, it is important to consider the diffe-

rent elements that can be used to characterize consumer behavior, such as age, biases, access to information, attitude, gender, local environmental awareness, cultural and educational background, knowledge, peer influence, season, and, of course, the emotive aspects of consumers and income (OECD 2008; UNEP 2010). One thing that strongly drives consumer choices, however, is personal values (Auty & Elliot 2002; UNESCO 2010; Norberg-Hodge 2011). Mirzaei and Ruzdar (2010) state that consumer behavior is a mental, physical and emotional process that operates before, during and after the purchase. They establish that purchasing decisions for buying cars, for example in Iran, are more related to a social dimension, as well as to income and education. They highlight three social factors that influence car purchases: reference groups, social status, and family; however, in their study, social status and family influence were the most important factors. Social status is described as the respect that society pays to the role of an individual or a group. That respect is associated with the society's expectations, which operates as the trigger for acquiring a particular item or service. The family is also described by Mirzaei and Ruzdar (2010) as the first reference group for a consumer's decision-making process. The family is perceived as the primary purchasing unit, which varies according to the nature of the family.

In a larger context, consumers from developed countries demand resources beyond the carrying capacity of their own ecosystems. This demand is consistent with the tendency of liberalizing global trade, which promotes exports from poor areas. As a result, cash crops oriented towards global commerce compete against the production of staple foods for local consumption, creating scarcity, lower self-reliance, and more poverty, especially in developing countries (Shiva and Emmott 2000; Shiva 2002; Norberg-Hodge 2011). The conflict between desires and needs has produced a distortion in many consumers' consumption patterns, mainly because consumption capacity seems to be an indicator of achievement in contemporary societies, especially in the so-called Western World. A 2012 report from Sustainable Development (SD21 2012) notes that North Americans consume around 90kg of resources per day, compared to 10 kg for consumers in Africa. This example helps to illustrate the massive inequality and discomfort that these extravagant consumption patterns, by becoming socially accepted in the wealthier countries, can create in other parts of the world (Burgess 2003; Norberg-Hodge 2011). It is widely acknowledged that consumption helps economic growth, and hence it is encouraged by governments and mainstream media as an indicator of a healthy economy. The assessment of the achievements of Agenda 21 in terms of sustainable consumption are embarrassingly poor. The growth of the planet's



Figure 3: Overconsumption is mainly motivated by perceptions of fulfillment, wellbeing, pertinence, and status. Photo credits: Angelo Bonavita. Taken in Manchester UK. 2017.

ecological footprint has increased rather than decreased since Agenda 21. In addition, an increase in consumption has not contributed to an increase in coverage for basic needs in the world's most impoverished areas. A large part of consumption increase is due to emerging countries such as Brazil, India and China (SD21 2012). Avenues for procuring goods and services expand and are ever broader and more inviting for consumers. Trends continue to evolve in terms of items and purchasing methods. For example, in recent years, Cyber Monday (dedicated exclusively to the purchase of technology items) has become more popular than Black Friday in the United States. Additionally, online shopping continues to grow, and sets new sales records yearly (The Balance 2017). Evidence shown by Mortensen (2006) illustrates how the increase in GDP in a sample of European countries did not visibly increase greenhouse gas emissions; however, the consumption of energy was positively correlated to the increase in GDP. In the same text, Mortensen (2006) shows the disproportionate environmental footprint of high income countries in comparison to low income countries. It also illustrates a large gap between the footprint of a country like Poland in comparison to Finland, which helps to understand the uneven patterns among countries located in the same continent. It is illustrative to consider that, in 2010, Ecuador had a

GDP of USD 4 677, Finland USD 46 202, and the US USD 46 400, compared to their footprint during the same year which was 2,26; 8,46 and 12,22, respectively. These numbers confirm the relationship between GDP and footprint in a very dramatic way (World Integrated Trade Solution 2018; Go Green 2018). On the other hand, the literature depicts the link between energy consumption, GDP, and loss of resilience in ecosystems (Lozano & Gutiérrez 2008; Zhang & Cheng 2009). Whereas general GDP is still the conventional indicator of a society's progress and development, evidence exists that it is not the best tool for measuring people's equity, wellbeing or happiness, as stated by Schumacher (1974) in his classic, "Small is Beautiful". Gazi et al. (2016) also link economic growth with ecological footprint, and recommend looking for trade-offs, deep changes in consumption patterns, more efficient use of resources, and cleaner technologies. As a result, consumption patterns are the key to a more sustainable existence for both humans and the environment.

Consumption and Values. - Some governments have begun initiatives to inform and educate citizens on how to reduce energy, water, gas and fuel consumption; they are, however, more focused on reduction of carbon emissions than on addressing the root cause of the problem,

which at present is perceived as more related to cultural values (Mortensen 2006; OECD 2008; Queensland Government 2009; Australian Government 2010). It is evident that a large proportion of industrial processes have reached high efficiency standards in terms of resource use and waste production in the recent years; nevertheless, the behavior of consumers with high purchasing capacity has led our planet to a more unsustainable situation than ever (SD21 2012).

Massive consumption events such as Black Friday, Christmas, Santos Reyes, Cyber Monday, and Boxing Day are examples of the extravagance of that problematized herein. The Black Friday (2011) website shows persuasive deals, including easy access by shoppers to stores, on-line malls, and smart phone applications designed to invite consumers to spend their money. One thing that draws attention is the expected increase in number of shoppers each year, and the trend towards spending more money than ever, despite the economic crisis at a global scale (Black Friday 2011). This paper does not wish to problematize only the irrational money expenditure, but also the loss in family and community values. The tradition of spending time with the family for Thanksgiving Day in the United States and Canada is shifting towards the new tradition of going out to shop, affecting previously existing cultural values and perceptions of quality of life. Shopping becomes more appealing to young people than sharing quality time with the family and friends. Similarly, in Australia, Boxing Day sales are a phenomenon that prevents families from spending holidays together, and pushes them to join the crowd of shoppers instead (McCoy & Meyer 2017). Even in countries such as Ecuador, Black Friday is becoming a trend in advertising campaigns, especially in malls and large retailers (Black Friday y Cyber Monday: entre descuentos, bomba y un plan de compras 2017). Ecuadorian shoppers may not know the origin of Black Friday, but retailers take advantage of the novelty value to increase sales. There is even a growing tendency towards reshaping spaces for religious practice by designing and fitting convenient spaces for spirituality consumption within commercial areas such as malls. Shopping malls are sarcastically called “commerce cathedrals in a market religion” (Nynäs & Pessi 2012), which depicts both the nature of faith and its alternative modes of consumption, and the co-existence of religious practices within commercial secular spaces. Problematic enough is a chapel embedded in a shopping mall; what we see in urban contexts nowadays in Ecuador is that a growing number of families visit to the shopping mall on a Sunday or a pay day to window shop, eat at the food courts, practice their faith, spend time with family, and also to purchase goods and services (author’s personal observation in Quito, Ecuador, December 2017). There

are values such as the perception of beauty and appearance that are big sellers; however, we will not focus on them because of their direct connection with deep cultural values that can be very localized and context-based. They require a more careful and comprehensive analysis. Sumac Kawsay values such as the encounter with nature, in opposition to dominance over nature, ethical behavior, and a spiritual relationship with the environment, are missing in most of the examples presented above (Acosta 2013).

Identity-seeking Behavior.- Compulsive buying is addressed by Dittmar (2005) as a symptom of a psychiatric disorder, directly derived from materialistic values and as the result of a morbid identity-seeking behavior. Objects have different meanings for different people and cultures, and people tend to purchase objects or services to feel associated with those meanings (Auty and Elliot 2001). In fact, a large proportion of purchases in some groups are not oriented towards the satisfaction of basic needs, but rather, a desire for adherence to and acceptance in a social group. The impact of fashion in the construction of identity is specifically described by Auty and Elliot (2001). Moreover, they problematize self-construction and the need for acceptance from a community. Social acceptance is a result of social interaction, and becomes an important element in identity construction, which is both individual and collective. Consumption prompted by identity-seeking behavior is discussed in-depth by Norberg-Hodge (2011), the author of *The Economics of Happiness*, a film released in 2011 which addresses self-perception of poverty. The film depicts a case study in Ladakk, a small village in Tibet, where harmony with nature and the community used to preserve centralized tradition prior to the invasion of western culture and tourism. Ladakk locals used to have few material possessions, but a genuine feeling of the good life and fulfillment. However, with the arrival of tourism and people from other cultures, a shift in the locals’ self-perception occurred and began to create disappointment with their own culture. A similar case is described by Norberg-Hodge (2011) in the Peruvian Andes, where teachers inculcate children that their own traditional lifestyle and customs are humiliating practices of the past, and not something to be proud of.

The previous examples help to illustrate the link between the identity and self-perception of individuals and groups who are predisposed to abandon their own perception of wellbeing in pursuit of foreign values and beliefs. The easy adoption of foreign beliefs speaks to the fragile appropriation of their own elements of identity, and the expectation of patterns, habits, and customs from outside as an attitude of acceptance of the external oppression from societies that feel entitled to rule over the needs and

wants of other groups. In contrast to the cases described above, Sumac Kawsay enhances the reconnection with ancestral values (Acosta 2013); although in some cases, its discourse may be too romantic.

New Horizons.- Stutz (2006) states that overconsumption is mainly motivated by perceptions of wellbeing, but policies are not focused on challenging the real causes of the problem. The Sustainable Development 21st century report (SD21 2012) is clear in affirming that Agenda 21, Chapter Four does not propose real solutions to causes of unsustainable consumption. What is more, Agenda 21 does not open the discussion about the role of large corporations and international economic governance, especially the World Trade Organization (WTO) policies which are not supportive of such initiatives. Vulnerable consumers are sometimes victims of astute advertising campaigns which take advantage of previously described elements, such as the search for acceptance by young consumers or the offer of a false perception of fulfillment and pertinence (Auty & Elliot 2001).

However, not all consumers accept a vulnerable position in this game. There are new tendencies to directly tackle the problem of unsustainable consumption through the creation of networks that take advantage of the local potential of communities to increase their resilience through the creation of different initiatives. One example is the TTN, as described by Feola (2016), who adds robust scholarship to the area of sustainability from a grassroots perspective, rather than focusing only on complicated technological solutions. TTN initiatives promote a shift to new paradigms and understandings which clearly challenges conventional neoliberal and capitalistic approaches. It seeks reduction of communities' dependence on external resources, especially fossil fuels, by teaching people how to grow their own food, how to obtain their own source of energy, and how build their houses with local materials (Brangwyn & Hopkins 2008). In terms of food chains, there are interesting initiatives in Ecuador such as agroecology, which functions with Sumak Kawsay as motivation, with a clear focus on fostering food sovereignty whilst challenging agro-industrial hegemony (Gortaire 2016). Agroecology connects producers and consumers to create supportive networks that give urban communities access to good food from rural, peri urban and urban producers. Initiatives such as farmers' markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS), developed by agroecological producers and consumers, promote the consumption of local farmers' produce and avoid unnecessary packaging, transportation, freezing and processing of food. Short food chains, such the latter, result in an enormous reduction of costs for all

actors in the chain and help to build community, among both producers and consumers. Autonomy, sovereignty, and fair trade are just a few of the positive points of these types of food chains, but perhaps the most important contribution is the change in the perception of food, which is viewed not as a merchandise, but as an element of development for the stakeholders (ALAI 2016).

Movements like Occupy Together and Adbusters (Adbusters 2011; Occupy Together 2011) confront the assumed predominance and oligopoly of power that corporations have over governments' policies and decisions. These movements have a broad range of claims, including food security and sovereignty, which is an issue that the Economics of Happiness (Norberg-Hodge 2011) and Shiva (2000) address as well. They reveal that big corporations decide what consumers should eat, and the ways in which globalization weakens the social and economic infrastructure of the poor world through the deregulation of global actions (Shiva 2002). The negative part of globalization affects not only producers, but consumers as well, because it prevents them from making informed choices—for example, when corporations lobby the government against the labeling of food containing genetically modified ingredients. These concerns about the lack of public participation inspired current social movements to start initiatives for small scale economic systems, in which citizens (consumers) develop decision-making mechanisms to envision, design and build resilience in their communities. Good examples are the TTN and Occupy movements (Brangwyn & Hopkins 2008; Occupy Together 2011) Pino (2017) presents an illustrative case study from Ecuador as an example of the development of local participatory guarantee systems in many Ecuadorian communities, which are in the process of building trust between producers and consumers. They have found alternative ways of engaging participation by stakeholders in the production and consumption processes. This alternative way of facilitating consumer access to good food and incentivizing food production in rural communities is a clear challenge to conventional food chains that had been monopolized by a few large retailers in Ecuador. (Figure 1-2, 3) Pino (2017) also describes the relevance of participatory guarantee initiatives, as they are more localized and inclusive in comparison to organic certification by third parties. This Ecuadorian case study also provides cohesion among the initiatives of provincial governments, local governments, non-governmental agencies, organizations of consumers and producers; and hence it has a political element that helps to build intercommunal resilience.

Community initiatives are important, but they need to find a way to work together in the construction and im-

plementation of local and central government agendas, to have long lasting results, and also to avoid contradictions and ambiguities. UNESCO (2010) suggests that we should think critically prior to making the decision to buy something, by asking ourselves if we really need it and if we ourselves could produce the item, or if it could be produced by local hands. However, the question goes even further when it draws attention to the product life cycle, which assesses the different stages of the process, including the extraction of raw material, waste management, transport, production, packaging, wholesaling, retailing, use and disposal when the goods cease to be used, or when their life span is over (Mitchell 1997; UNESCO 2010; ISO 2018).

CONCLUSION

Consumption has different implications in terms of fulfilling consumer needs and wants, because it is uniquely linked to personal perceptions that are both complex and problematic. These perceptions have their origin in values and beliefs, and therefore consumer choices depend upon those perceptions. As a result, environmental and social impacts directly depend on consumers' choices. This paper presents the contributions of the rich and the poor to the problem, and it is evident that the demand for resources, energy, goods and services is higher when consumers have more income, and hence more potential to consume. The role of international regulations and initiatives, such as Agenda 21 Chapter Four, have not helped towards making progress in this regard. These initiatives have left out the importance of regulating large consumers (polluters), such as transnational corporations, and their influence in the international regulatory sphere. It can also be seen that vulnerable consumers are defenseless at both the local and international level, because large corporations have the resources to lobby and manage regulations to benefit themselves, rather than consumers. However, it is very important that attention be given to the new initiatives that have originated with consumers, and which are directly challenging the hegemony of oligopolies. These include valid initiatives that promote participation by stakeholders, including local and provincial governments; the promotion of short food chains with their own guarantee systems; and the recovery of community values through the reaffirmation of their own priorities and goals. This paper is focused on non-technological contributions to responsible consumption; however, this is not to subtract value from other strategies —such as more efficient technologies for resource management, production and consumption, legal and market-based instruments, taxes, tariffs, subsidies, visualization of hidden costs to reduce market distortion and fraud, etc., — which have not been discussed or cited in this paper.

A strategy for understanding unsustainable behavior which affects both social and environmental matters should, in the least, provide a good understanding of the different perceptions of needs and desires, and understanding of quality of life, progress, growth and development in society. Solidarity with the poor, awareness about the environmental impact of daily decisions, and an individual commitment to educate ourselves, should also be elements to consider when proposing public policy and when designing a strategy to tackle unsustainability. The construction of social infrastructure to support local initiatives that provide communities with resilience to boost a relative self-sufficiency of food, energy and housing is an essential factor, as stated by the Transition Towns. Public participation and less influence by corporations would help to push forward policies to enforce more sustainable productive processes and consumption behaviors. Last but not least, it is important to consider an intergenerational approach, in order to consider the needs and wants of future generations in terms of availability and access to resources, the right to enjoy a healthy environment and a robust social structure which would guarantee that communities achieve their goals.

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