

The Route to Responsible Living: Doubting, Discovering, Daring and Doing

Victoria W. Thoresen

Abstract Dramatic changes have characterized many decades, but the transformations of the past thirty years have forced individuals as well as governments and businesses to question many of the choices people make and to revise existing definitions of human prosperity and happiness. Climate change, life-style related illnesses, and environmental degradation are growing concerns which have led to calls for greater collaboration and social justice and have fueled the search for alternative ways of living. “Development”, implying unlimited material and economic growth, is no longer the panacea it once was believed to be. “Social responsibility” now encompasses a far wider set of people affected by a person’s lifestyle choices than in the past. “Sufficiency”, the condition where one’s basic needs are met, has yet to become more equitable than minimal survival for many and luxury existence for a select few. There have been many participants in the processes of rethinking and reorienting the path humanity is following. The Partnership for Education and Research about Responsible Living (PERL) has made significant contributions. This article looks at the evolution of concepts related to sustainable development. It reflects on some of the developments within education connected to sustainable development and it examines briefly available evidence of changes in behavior. The results of this limited research and other more extensive investigations indicate that while a paradigm shift appears to be taking place, there is still a continued need for transformation of our inner lives and outer conditions in order to achieve a more dynamic coherence between the material and non-material aspects of life leading to responsible, sustainable living.

V.W. Thoresen (✉)
Hedmark University College, Elverum, Norway
e-mail: victoria.thoresen@hihm.no

1 Introduction

Creating “a global agenda for change”, as the World Commission on Environment and Development was asked to do in (1987), demanded multilateral collaboration and a world-embracing vision. The Commission’s report, *Our Common Future*, was a “call for a common endeavour and for new norms of behaviour on all levels and in the interests of all.”

How have the concepts focused on in *Our Common Future* evolved? To answer this question, the research behind this paper has examined the progressive elaboration of the concepts of sustainable development, sustainable consumption and production, green growth, sustainable lifestyles, prosperity and well-being. These closely related concepts have all been subject to political formulations, stakeholder definitions and academic reflection. They have been affected by the increasing flow of information about climate change and human development. The concepts have, at times, been modified, in order to be more inclusive, and, at other times, changed in order to elaborate specific aspects of more overarching goals.

How has the focus on responsible, sustainable living influenced research, formal and informal education? There are curricula, courses and materials which focus on these themes. The UN Decade on Education for Sustainable Development is over and a follow-up Global Action Program is being launched. The 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production adopted by the international community in 2012 includes a program on sustainable lifestyles and education. Evaluations reviewed in this research indicate some influence some places; however, there remain many areas where these concepts are not yet known or understood.

Has a paradigm shift taken place which provides new frameworks for the emergence of new behaviour? A thorough evaluation of this question is beyond the scope of this article, but it is possible, based on available international reports, to identify partial answers to these questions both on the level of policy making as well as on the level of “bottom-up” local and regional initiatives. The global community has committed itself, as never before, to fostering sustainable development. A wide range of civil society trends and individual consumer actions can be registered. However, significant inroads on the pressing problems which are the result of unsustainable systems and ways of living cannot yet be detected. What remains to be examined in further research are the mechanisms which help new conceptual understandings lead to significant behaviour change.

2 Theoretical Base and Methodology

This article stems from reflections on theories of social development which identify significant changes resulting from a series of cumulative shifts in attitudes and practice. Application of Kuhn’s (1996) theory of paradigm shifts to social

sciences has provided a framework for examining the conceptual and behavioral changes of the last three decades. Has there been a paradigm shift in terms of how people understand their role as stewards of nature, co-creators of a global community and guardians of the future? And, if so, has this shift resulted in modified behavior?

This is a qualitative study that examines global strategies of vision-building and central social trends from 1987 to 2013. It includes factual data and anecdotal and empirical evidence collected from a wide range of international and national reports and evaluations. Since this article deals with sustainability, lifestyles and education, it is descriptive and normative.

3 The Evolution of Concepts or “Doubting Business as Usual”

We are being compelled to rethink totally the social contracts that underpin our societies. (Bindé 2004)

Sustainable development has been a difficult concept for many to grasp and the source of much controversy and debate. Interpreted broadly, it has been considered to encompass fundamental sociological, ecological and economical transitions leading to a completely new world order. Defined more narrowly, it has been seen as a slogan for small adjustments made to enable the existing systems to continue with slightly less negative impacts.

Epistemologically, the very word, sustainable, implies maintaining, upholding and confirming a status quo. This is in direct contradiction to the notion of development which lies at the core of the environmental, social and economic change indicated in existing documents and strategies about the transition to sustainability. Nonetheless, it is this concept which, perhaps for lack of anything better, has been the basis for dialogue and international cooperation for almost three decades. Sustainable development was defined in *Our Common Future* (1987): “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. It contains within it two key concepts: the concept of needs, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs.” This definition has since gained acceptance around the world as representing a new paradigm for dealing with present problems and putting society back on a course where the resource base of civilization is not being undermined and growth is more equally distributed.

Political explanations of the concept of sustainable development were voiced most audibly at the Stockholm Environment Conference of 1972, at the first Rio World Conference on the Environment in 1992, at the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002 and at the World

Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in 2012. The concept has become an integral part of international implementation plans such as Agenda 21 (1992) and the Marrakech Process (2003–2011). It has entered global assessment processes such as the Human Development Index and the Global Reporting Initiative. The post-2015 agenda for following the Millennium Goals will center on “Sustainable Development Goals”.

Already in 1998 the Human Development Report provided this definition of consumption as it is related to development:

Consumption clearly contributes to human development when it enlarges the capacities and enriches the lives of people without adversely affecting the wellbeing of others. It clearly contributes when it is as fair to the future generations as to the present ones. And it clearly contributes when it encourages lively, creative individuals and communities. But the links are often broken and when they are consumption patterns and trends are inimical to human development... Consumption patterns today must be changed to advance human development tomorrow.

A substantial part of the debate on what constitutes sustainable development has been about sustainable consumption and production. Sustainable consumption and production (SCP) has been defined (UNEP 2010a, b, c) as: “The use of services and related products, which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as the emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle of the service or product so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations.” SCP has, until recently, been considered as a process of pollution-reduction and increase in energy-efficiency gained through analyzing the life-cycle of the product and “de-coupling or dematerialization” (greening) production, usage and product disposal. It has, to a large extent, been seen as the responsibility of industry and governments.

After the concept of sustainable consumption entered the global discourse, the concept of “green growth” was also introduced. It was supported by the OECD in their Strategy launched in 2011. Green growth was originally defined at the fifth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development in Asia and the Pacific, as being a means of achieving sustainable development. “Green growth” focuses on synergizing economic growth and environmental protection, building a green economy in which investments in resource savings as well as sustainable management of natural capital are drivers of growth (UNESCAP 2012). Green growth is a concept highlighted more often in documents and plans within Asia than elsewhere for the time being.

Parallel to the emergence of the concepts of SCP and “Green Growth”, was the evolution of consumer awareness to encompass not only consumer rights but also consumer responsibilities and sustainable consumption. This process began in the 1970s in the USA. In 1999 the revised U.N. Guidelines for Consumer Protection encouraged U.N. member countries to promote consumer education especially in accordance with education for sustainable development. In 2003 the Consumer Citizenship Network (the predecessor to PERL, the Partnership for Education and Research about Responsible Living,) reintroduced the concept of consumer citizenship which had originated in Canada. Based on the realization of the central

role that individuals have both as consumers and as active citizens, this concept strove to bring an interdisciplinary understanding to the concept of sustainable development in which economic and social dimensions were highlighted as well as environmental ones.

Meanwhile, calls were being heard for redefining “progress” and changing measurement tools used to determine “developing countries”, “wealthy nations”, or “well-to-do communities”. The “Beyond GDP” project initiated in 2007 by the European Union, OECD and World Wildlife Fund questioned whether material income was the best indicator of progress. The Human Development Index Reports (2006–2013) reported that while some countries lacked noticeable monetary growth some were able to provide greatly improved welfare for their citizens; whereas not all countries with increased wealth were able to boast equally advancing social conditions.

The consequences of the imbalances of present consumption patterns, with extreme overconsumption in parts of the world at the expense of those unable to meet their basic needs, has also led to processes redefining concepts of “prosperity” and “well-being”. Some critics claimed that the very concept of “sustainable development”, fails to advocate reduction in material standards of living (consumerism) or a slow-down of the accumulation dynamics (Selby 2006). Other have emphasized the need for a shift of focus from the concept of “sustainability” to “well-being for all” (Giddings et al. 2002). The Global Happiness Index provided relevant data on life quality and well-being as did the widely published report, *Prosperity Without growth* (Jackson 2009). No longer was sustainable development a concept merely about environmental stewardship. It had evolved to include the issues of equitable distribution of resources, socially responsible production and lifestyles which enable humans to flourish.

Sustainable lifestyles, as a concept, began to be included in the global conversations instead of just sustainable consumption because it was understood to include a wider range of activities than consumption. Lifestyles are the way people (groups and individuals) live their lives—what they do, why, with whom, where, how and what they use to do it. This includes everything from the food they eat and how they interact with others, to the way they get around. Lifestyles define a person or a group’s identity; how values, aspirations, social positions, religion, psychological and political preferences are expressed (UNEP 2014). Ways of living based on sufficiency and moderation or “simple living” proved that not consuming, or consuming less could define one’s lifestyle as much as how or what one consumed.

4 Research and Education or “Discovering Alternatives”

Already in 2005 over 250 researchers called for a global research agenda (Tukker et al. 2006) which focused on sustainable consumption in order to provide a scientific, evidence-based foundation for the transition to sustainable living.

During the course of the last decade extensive global scientific reports such as UNEP's series of Global Environmental Outlook publications, including the Global Outlook on Sustainable Consumption and Production Policies: Taking Action Together (2012), The State of the World reports, the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Reports, the Human Dimensions of Climate Change reports, etc. have been compiled about sustainable development, many of which have also focused on aspects of sustainable consumption and helped to identify ways forward. Research emerged which analysed consumer behaviour not only from the perspective of market-related interaction but also from ethical, psychological and sociological perspectives. The Partnership for Education and Research about Responsible Living (PERL) contributed to this research with annual publications and conferences as well as with compilations of best practices from around the globe.

The U.N. Decade on Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) recognized the need for education for sustainable consumption as an essential part of education for sustainable development and contributed to developing education for sustainable consumption (ESC). The DESD midway strategy (UNESCO 2009) took up the issue of ESC directly:

Education for Sustainable Consumption is a core theme of Education for Sustainable Development, and it is essential to train responsible citizens and consumers towards lifestyles based on economic and social justice, food security, ecological integrity, sustainable livelihoods, respect for all life forms and strong values that foster social cohesion, democracy and collective action.

The Consumer Citizenship Network and PERL assisted the Marrakech Task Force on Education for Sustainable Consumption, led by the Italian government, in the production of *Here and Now! Education for Sustainable Consumptions Recommendations and Guidelines* (UNEP 2010a, b, c).

Regional Centres of Expertise, a program run by the UN University as a part of the UN Decade on Education for Sustainable Development, connected citizens in over 127 cities to search for ways to transform their communities into more sustainable ones.

Educational methodologies such as the use of case studies (for example: UNEP/UNESCO's YouthXchange materials) and investigating social innovation in one's neighbourhood (such as LOLA: Looking for Likely Alternatives) have proven to have had positive effects on student's ability to identify new pathways towards sustainable lifestyles. PERL has also developed a popular set of active learning toolkits dealing with the use of images and objects to assist the learning process on these topics. The introduction of interdisciplinary, future-oriented, practical pedagogical approaches to responsible living has reportedly helped some teachers to address the above mentioned problems. The extent to which this has happened, is, however, fully not yet documented as the final reports from around the globe on the UNDESD show.

Educational networks, like PERL, are growing. A 10-Year Framework of Programs about Sustainable Consumption and Production was adopted in 2012 and the program on Sustainable Lifestyles and Education was launched in

November 2014. The follow-up program to the UN DESD, entitled the Global Action Program (GAP), has been started with the intention of promoting education which leads to more sustainable, responsible living.

The GAP program seeks to build on the evaluation of the UN DESD where it was pointed out that, among other things, more holistic, values-based approaches to ESC and ESL must be developed that:

- focus on the quality of life for all;
- stimulate creativity and strength of character;
- increase synergy between relevant actors and conditions which enable ESC and education for sustainable lifestyles;
- foster global citizenship.

Increasing numbers of countries are producing national strategies for education for sustainable development which deal with the topic both as an independent subject area as well as a theme running through many subjects and projects. The number of online courses and documents on the subject has also grown since significantly since 1987 though specific statistics for this are unavailable.

5 Changes in Behavior or “Doing What One Preaches”

Be the change that you want to see in the world. (Gandhi)

The concepts used by the global community aim at change which involves more than mere statements of purpose, future scenarios and mapping pathways. Are local communities creating infrastructure that facilitates sustainable lifestyles? Is there a new generation taking steps towards sustainable development? Are they becoming active stakeholders demanding more sustainable products and services? Are they searching for alternative lifestyle choices such as “slow food”, “slow living”, non-shopping days, sharing, etc.? Evidence indicates that young people are leading movements for revision of existing economic systems, and appealing for greater transparency and accountability by governments and business. Changes in knowledge and attitudes are apparent but there are few measurements of the extent of these changes and if any form of “tipping point” is being reached.

The Global Environment Outlook 5 (UNEP 2010a, b, c) report confirms that many cities across the globe have chosen to integrate sustainability into their urban planning and projects. ICLEI (Local governments for Sustainability, a network of 1020 local communities in 86 countries) documents a wide range of initiatives based on policy decisions and implementation on local level. Numerous local governments have joined together with other stakeholders in their communities to consult and identify ways to increase the sustainability of their neighbourhoods. Projects connected to the Marrakech Process on Sustainable Consumption and Production were also a means of recruiting individuals and groups who dared to look in new directions to find and carry out innovative solutions.

Trends have been documented that prove that people are not only talking about sustainable lifestyles but are trying to make their lives more responsible and sustainable. The trends are diverse in character and categorizing them is not an easy task. General trends which have had a positive impact on the transition to sustainable lifestyles can be categorized as follows:

- Identification and reflection on values/future,
- Social learning, community consultation and co-creation,
- Collaborative consumption,
- Voluntary simplicity/self sufficiency,
- Safeguarding sustainable traditional knowledge and lifestyles,
- Policy initiatives,
- Creation of sustainable spaces and innovative technology,
- CSR/Fairtrade,
- Education for Sustainable Consumption/Education for Sustainable Lifestyles,
- Indicators for assessment,
- Public participation in defining/planning community development
(UNEP, Pathways to Sustainable Lifestyles [2014](#)).

The Euromonitor International 2013s Top Ten Consumer Trends show, as the above list indicates, the fact that present trends move in different directions, which often appear contradictory. While many consumers seek luxury and instant gratification others “struggle for better work/life balance, the concerns of eco-worriers, an appreciation of frugality and imperfection and a longing for the authenticity of home and community.” (Euromonitor International [2014](#)). Social media plays an increasingly important role in how people make their daily lifestyle decisions as the “longing for the warmth of home and local networks” appears to grow. Healthy eating is a top priority for consumers in many parts of the globe as is “the thrifty lifestyle” characterized by shared ownership.

A common factor reflected in reports such as the Euromonitor is that the transition to responsible living is not a linear trail forward. It is a process which moves in many directions simultaneously and is strongly influenced by cultural, natural and technological conditions. It involves many different actors taking a multitude of varied initiatives. Above all, it appears to be strongly tied to a pattern of social learning which includes consultation, implementation, reflection and adaption. To facilitate these processes, international and regional multi-stakeholder platforms have been created.

Civil society organizations have contributed to this process. They have taken on the task of questioning existing systems; informing about impacts of unsustainable consumption and production; and giving visibility to innovative alternative lifestyles. These grass root organizations appear to be a dynamic driving force behind the “common endeavor” leading to new norms and behavior. Through advocacy campaigns online, information apps, advertisement campaigns for alternative lifestyles, they help chart new pathways and encourage the public to “join the movement to sustainability”.

Civil society organizations have also contributed to actual shifts towards increased collaborative consumption. “The convergence of social networks, a renewed belief in the importance of community, pressing environmental concerns and cost consciousness are moving us away from top-heavy, centralized and controlled forms of consumerism towards one of sharing, aggregation and openness.” (Botsman and Rogers 2010).

Many civil society organizations contributed to the content of the World Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) where it was hoped that the “marriage” of sustainability and development was to take place. Interest organizations have even played a significant role in the drawing up of the contents of the proposed post-2015 agenda Sustainable Development Goals. For the first time in history, input was welcomed online from one and all to identify new pathways.

6 Challenges Along the Way or “Daring to Be Different”

While research indicates that there is evidence of change in behavior towards more sustainable, responsible living, it also shows that there are complex problems related to the change processes (United Nations: Global Energy Assessment 2012). The problems vary from region to region, but they tend to fall under one or more of the following categories:

1. Human development needs and concerns,
2. Environmental concerns,
3. Well-being/health conditions,
4. Concerns around education for sustainable development,
5. Governance issues (community, national and international levels).

Describing the particular problems under each of the above mentioned general categories requires more detail than it is possible to give in this article. However, the following description (UNEP: Pathways to Sustainable Lifestyles 2014) of barriers to the “common endeavour” of creating new norms and behaviour gives a brief overview:

1. Economic and social systems and structures which predominantly continue to replicate unsustainable development pathways and brown economy approaches;
2. The hegemony of globalization and trade in driving development pathways;
3. Lack of shared understanding and limited or non-existent knowledge on alternative development pathways, economic approaches and sustainability solutions;
4. Lack of coherent, integrated and participatory governance structures and systems;
5. Citizens’ limited ability to influence wider systems of society that precondition and determine many patterns of development, consumption and production;

6. Systemic lock-ins and inertia for change;
7. Education's continued replication of rational, linear, and disciplinary thinking, as well as its focus on abstract and conceptual knowledge;
8. The prevalence of consumerism as the defining factor of modern socio-cultural norms and values;
9. Media and advertising's continued promotion and idealization of high-consumption lifestyles, as well as their lack of addressing pertinent issues around sustainability and climate change.

A large part of the discussion about the transition to sustainable lifestyles has revolved around the question of who is responsible for the current wasteful, socially unjust and economically unsustainable patterns of consumption and production: is it the rich, industrialized nations that have controlled resources, or the governments that may have failed to create appropriate infrastructures or to regulate unsustainable production and consumption? Is it the producers of unsustainable products; the advertisers who fuel the demand of such products or the consumers who purchases and disposes of such products? Could it be parents and teachers are actually responsible for preparing to live in a sustainable manner? These arguments have in many cases led to the fragmentation of responsibility, each sector blaming the other and expecting the other to "clean up the mess".

But despite these problems, leaders of the world, with the assistance of contributions from individuals and groups across the globe, agreed in 2012 at the World Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) that the major focus of endeavor for the coming years must be to eradicate poverty and create a more equitable, just world in which sustainable consumption and production contribute to human development, social inclusion and environmental stewardship (The Future We Want [2012](#)).

7 Conclusions

The evolution of concepts related to sustainable development can be characterized as a paradigm shift towards a greater focus on the human dimensions of development. In connection with this paradigm shift changes in behaviour towards more sustainable lifestyles have clearly taken place the past thirty years, but the extent and impact of these are not easy to identify. So far, most measurements have been related to CO₂ emission levels of households, to the exclusion of other changes which have to do with human development, health, governance, collaboration, etc. Challenges and barriers to the changes called for in 1987 remain complex and extensive. Education for responsible, sustainable living has expanded and appears to continue to grow.

Seen together, the above developments indicate movement towards a greater collective recognition of our role as members of one human family, interdependent

on each other and on nature. They provide examples of the ability to expand one's vision to be world-embracing. They infer that attitudes of global citizenship and the skills of consultation, flexibility, systems-thinking and change management are maturing. Although far more research is needed, it may be assumed that:

Broader visions of human purpose and prosperity are moving from the periphery to the center of public discourse. It is becoming clear that the pathway to sustainability will be one of empowerment, collaboration and continual processes of questioning, learning and action in all regions of the world. It will be shaped by the experiences of women, men, children, the rich, the poor, the governors and the governed as each one is enabled to play their rightful role in the construction of a new society. As the sweeping tides of consumerism, unfettered consumption, extreme poverty and marginalization recede, they will reveal the human capacities for justice, reciprocity and happiness. (BIC 2010)

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Responsible Living

Concepts, Education and Future Perspectives

Thoresen, V.W.; Doyle, D.; Klein, J.; Didham, R.J. (Eds.)

2015, XVI, 283 p. 39 illus., 18 illus. in color., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-15304-9