Consumerism vs. sustainability: the emergence of new consumer trends in Poland [EN]

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Introduction

Switching to a path of sustainable, harmonious economic growth has been the subject of much discussion in developed capitalist economies for quite a long time. Gone are the days of uncritical fascination with indicators such as fast GDP expansion, without any critical reflection about growth's side effect, often spilling over beyond control, known as negative externalities. The political conflicts with their economic consequences, steep business-cycle reversals, bearish trends on capital markets, and finally the real threat of a global economic and financial crisis, emerging in the recent months, all these have confirmed sceptics' misgivings and many observers' calls for having the sustainable growth idea eventually put into practice. An important companion to sustainable growth is sustainable consumption, involving a reasonable use of consumer goods in an attempt to balance the global ecosystem, with the future generations and the planet's survival in mind. Launching sustainable production and consumption is a major priority of the EU, many national governments and international bodies. A question then arises of whether these requirements find any reflection in day-to-day behaviours of the Poles. It motivated the author to start an empirical research project on sustainable
consumption in Poland, based on the findings of his own questionnaire study. The survey's goal was to learn whether, and in what degree, Poles' consumer behaviours are compatible with the patterns of moderate, environment-friendly sustainable consumption, or whether they depart from these patterns, and if so, where. Such a confrontation seems pretty warranted: after all, restraining Poles' aroused consumption appetites looks nothing less than an uphill struggle. Having lived through 20 years of tough systemic transformation, the Polish consumer only very recently tasted the fruits of economic growth in the form of fast rising consumption. They may, therefore, find self-restraining their consumer aspirations – the essence of sustainable consumption – hard to understand and accept. To verify this hypothesis, a questionnaire survey using the method of Computer-Aided Telephone Interview (CATI) was conducted in late July and early August 2008. It covered 200 respondents in Warsaw, in the 24–45 age brackets, who are active consumers in the prime of life and at the apogee of their respective carriers. The choice of research venue reflects the realisation that Warsaw, in addition to being a major urban centre and the country's administrative capital city, enjoys a special status as national 'capital of cool', where new consumption patterns emerge and then spread around the country.

The concept of sustainable consumption: its essence and major tenets

In today's globalised economy, where the awareness of environmental constraints on contemporary economies has been increasingly sinking in, the environment has become a challenge for the whole planet. The model of unsustainable consumption – resource-plundering, expensive and inefficient – has been increasingly questioned in favour of a sustainable model, where people draw on consumer goods and services with restraint and a sense of responsibility for future generations. Politicians, economists and analysts (perhaps with the exception of orthodox liberal extremists) no longer regard economic growth as a panacea for all problems and ailments of the contemporary world. As has been known for quite a long time, in addition to the desired, positive effects, economic growth entails negative side effects – environmental pollution, a global ecosystem thrown-off balance, widening standard-of-living differentials – which pose global challenges, thus forcing a revision of the prevailing patterns of thinking and acting. Many economists and sociologists point out that an aggressive consumerism – the driving force behind economic growth – is a path to quick depletion of the planet's unrenewable resources. Calls for embracing sustainable development, to be accompanied by a moderate and responsible consumption, have therefore multiplied, requesting conscious consumers of the new type to demonstrate greater sensitivity and responsibility in respect of the environment, and buy only such papers that do not involve energy-intensive production methods and do not lead to resource depletion, environmental pollution, etc. (Jastrzębska-Smolaga, 2000; Kozłowski, 2000; Łuczka-Bakuła, 2000; Pierce, 2000; Southerstone et al., 2004). Sustainable development is usually defined as harmonious, not upsetting the delicate global ecosystem, not entailing resource depletion, and not producing uncontrolled social and economic spillover. According to a definition by D. Pierce and R.K. Turner, it consists in "... maximising net benefits from economic development, while at the same time protecting and ensuring a reproduction of long-term utility and quality of natural resources." (Pierce and Turner, 1990, p.11 – retranslated) So understood, economic development is not confined to increasing per-capita incomes, but also includes improvement in
other elements of social welfare, among them structural change in the economy and society as a whole.

Coming as an indispensable complement to sustainable development is sustainable consumption, which could be described through the following characteristics:

• a balanced relationship between consumption and savings

• stable living standards and consumers' material situation

• widespread environmental awareness

• a limited number of people who consume while not working (harmony between the individual's roles as producer and consumer)

• prices of eco-friendly goods and services taken into account in consumers' budgets

• an appropriate pattern of material consumption on the one hand and, on the other, direct consumption of eco-friendly products and non-material components of welfare

• emphasis on such forms of consumption, which involve low environmental and social costs

• following, in practice, the principle of inter- and intra-generational justice; growing welfare of some consumer groups must not restrict welfare-improvement opportunities for other groups and next generations (Kiełczewski, 2008, pp.62, 70). Promotion of sustainable consumption is of paramount importance for the environment: assuming that one day the consumption levels of the highly developed world were reached by all countries, this would require ten times as much of natural resources as the planet is capable of supplying. As pointed out by the environmentalists, the oft-embraced imperative of growth at any price, stimulated by a continuous arousal of consumer aspirations, leads to the depletion of unrenewable natural resources and upsets a delicate balance of the global ecosystem. It is, therefore, demanded that consumption should shift towards greater environment-friendliness, as reflected in the following behaviour (Janosz-Kreslo and Mróz, 2006, p.220):

• using consumer goods in a frugal and rational manner

• purchasing less of such goods whose consumption involves the use of unrenewable natural resources and creates dangerous post-consumption waste

• purchasing and using such consumer goods, which do the least damage to the environment

• consuming eco-friendly goods (mainly as far as food is concerned), without chemical additives, preservatives, etc. (Jastrzębska-Smolaga, 2000, p.23). As demonstrated by findings of a research conducted for the European Commission, most of the adverse environmental effects are accounted for by 40 product and service categories. In so important fields as raw materials and energy consumption, toxic emissions and farming, three categories generate as much as 70% of the negative environmental consequences – even though they
represent only a half of total consumer spending. These are:

- food (meat, dairy products, etc.)
- transport (primarily road haulage and air transport)
- construction (International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2005).

The notion of sustainable consumption involves a strategy to influence consumer demand and behaviour towards such a pattern of natural resources' use and economic capacity's utilisation, which ensures that needs are met and quality of life raised for all consumers, while at the same time reproducing the nature's capital for the benefit of future generations. The consumption pattern that meets these criteria, poses no major threats to the environment and discourages an intense exploitation of natural resources is referred to in literature as green consumption, ecology-friendly consumption or eco-consumption. While accounting for just a small fraction of global consumption, it nevertheless offers a promising sign of the contemporary consumer's increasing environmental awareness and will no doubt be gaining in importance. This expectation is confirmed by the growing demand for clean products, which pose as little burden on the environment as possible, by requiring low raw-material and energy inputs and not involving large amount of troublesome and costly waste. Such products are made from renewable and reusable resources and are safe for people's health, a matter of considerable import for consumers. The market for clean, eco-labelled products has been expanding vigorously, especially in sectors such as paints and dyestuffs, detergents, household chemicals, household appliances (refrigerators, freezers, washing machines, dish washers), which are important for people's health and family budgets. In highly developed countries, goods in the energy classes A and B account for an overwhelming majority (90%) of purchases (Southerstone et al., 2004). A switch towards consumers' more environmentally friendly behaviour will no doubt be furthered by new trends such as abandoning voracious consumption, giving up attitudes oriented to possessing more and more of new status-symbol goods, and turning to some forms of public consumption, such as public transportation. Some consumers with a high level of environmental awareness opt for the use of second-hand products, which are much cheaper and whose value tends to fall at a slower pace than is the case with latest-generation technology gadgets (for example, second-hand cars account for 65% of the EU's automobile market). These trends should be assessed as fostering sustainable consumption, by prolonging products' life-cycles and forcing producers to give more consideration to the durability of products on offer.

The emergence of a consumer society in Poland

With the rise of the capitalist system and a market-driven economy in Poland, conditions have been provided for gradual increases in wealth and living standards and for a better satisfaction of consumer and household requirements. After decades of an economics of shortage, an enforced consumption asceticism was being abandoned. While the initial period after systemic transformation was tough for many consumers and households (owing to the transformation shock, a steep fall in real income, hard budget constraints, etc.), their
financial conditions began to improve gradually (although not without polarisation and income stratification), their purchasing power was on the rise and a philosophy of consumerist hedonism was making inroads. This was particularly true of the recent years, reflecting a booming economy and the favourable effects of the country's EU accession in 2004. Polish society's growing wealth manifested itself in rising sales of an array of consumer goods, especially pronounced in 2007 when a total of 292,000 new cars were sold, of a combined value of US$ 7 billion (Maciejewski, 2007). Purchases of apartments and houses, especially in big urban centres, received a boost from cheap mortgage credits, whose 2007 value reached 57 billion zloty, or some US$ 18bn, according to figures from the Polish Banks Association. The real estate market began to show signs of overheating towards the end of 2007, and in 2008 it was brought to a standstill by a tumbling domestic demand, responding to the global financial crisis, tighter access to mortgage loans, etc. Other factors influencing consumption growth in recent years include an increase in real incomes, appreciation of the domestic currency, broader access to consumer credit and growing consumer aspirations among large segments of Polish society. With a stronger zloty, imported consumer goods got relatively cheaper, as did foreign travel, attracting more and more Poles. These trends were checked in 2008, especially in the latter half of the year, reflecting the crisis fallout and a depreciating zloty. Recent years saw powerful manifestations of a globalisation of consumption in Poland, fed by the expansion of the internet, peoples' increased international mobility, a persuasive hedonistic pressure in the media and the increasingly popular practice of shopping in pedestrian malls, those temples of consumerism, where many Poles engage in their popular pastime, described by sociologists as recreational shopping. Eating out is another trend characteristic of developed consumer societies. Owing to factors such as changing lifestyles (with emphasis on work and career), fashion, rising incomes and growing wealth, Poles have increasingly been turning to restaurants, catering establishments, etc. Eating-out expenditure rose 19% in 2006 and is more likely to continue growing in coming years. These developments demonstrate that consumption and the related materialistic set of values have been gaining ground in Polish society. In the light of this, it will be interesting to confront the concept of sustainable consumption with the Polish realities. It seems that the changes in consumer behaviour in Poland over the past years, as marked by enchantment with the philosophy of consumerist hedonism, will be hard to reconcile with a pursuit of sustainable consumption. This would be all the more difficult to achieve, given the need for Poland to close a civilisational distance to developed western countries, which requires that economic growth should continue at a high pace.

**Introducing sustainable consumption in Poland**

While excessive, unsustainable consumption is still seen in Poland as a marginal issue, related to a tiny fraction of society, there are worrying signs – for example, waste growth, waste disposal difficulties or big city congestion – which suggest that in the years ahead it will grow to pose a major development challenge for the Polish economy. With a heavy weight of raw-material- and energy-intensive sectors, the Polish economy's efficiency (also in respect of the limited natural resources) is much lower than in the EU as a whole. The problems posed by accumulation and treatment of waste, and emissions of greenhouse gases and toxic substances are on the rise. And in step with increasing living standards of Polish consumers and households,
behaviour patterns unfavourable to the environment have been emerging and strengthening. Poles have increasingly been turning into a 'throw-away society', pursing slavish consumption practices, which generate enormous amounts of refuse. Poland's international commitments require the country to reduce considerably the amount of domestic emissions, largely generated by power plants and industry. The idea of sustainable consumption and production is embraced by government programmes, such as the "Strategy for changing production and consumption patterns towards sustainable development", adopted in October 2007. It draws on recommendations from other documents (e.g., "Poland 2005: Long-term strategy of sustainable development") and goals set by the EU, the United Nations and the OECD. The Strategy proposes to launch and popularise arrangements, which will further a sustainable pattern of economic growth and minimise its adverse impact on the environment. Its major tenet is to reduce resource consumption and eliminate negative interdependencies between the expansion of power generation and its damaging impact on the environment.

Other lines of action include supporting environment-friendly projects and promoting pro-ecology consumption patterns (http://www.mg.gov.pl). An important element of such new environment-friendly consumption patterns is provided by organic food. Its sales in Poland are put at US$ 65 million by 62 International Consultants, and at between US$ 100 million and US$ 200 million by the Institute for Healthy Lifestyle Research and Development. Even if one finds the actual level to be higher than these estimates, it will still be less than 1% of the food market, which the PMR research agency values at US$ 65 billion in 2007 (Drewnowska, 2007).

According to estimates of IERiGŻ farm economics institute this proportion is going to increase to between 3% and 4% by 2013. To illustrate Poland's distance to other countries in this respect, it may be noted that in the UK, a leading European market for organic food, almost every third product to be purchased in 2010 will have an organic certificate. According to Datamonitor institute, the global market for organic food rose 13.6% in 2006 to reach US$ 36.7 billion, and by 2011 is expected to expand by another 83%, to US$ 67 billion (Drewnowska, 2007). Therefore, for the challenges of sustainable development to be met, new lifestyles and consumption patterns should be promoted. This offers wide room for action and public education, to be conducted by NGOs in collaboration with government agencies, local government, schools, universities, etc. One good example here is the consumer education campaign "Buy responsibly – your money shapes the world", targeting young people, and conducted by the Polish Green Network and Gaia Club. In ten of the country's 16 voivodships (regions), it offered school lessons in eco-friendly and society-friendly consumer behaviour, covering these subjects:

- marketing basics, with emphasis on manipulation techniques
- sustainable products and their marking (eco-labelling)
- local and organic food
- water saving and consumption rationalisation
- waste products (types of packaging and their environmental impact, segregation and recovery)
- energy and its impact on climate
fair trade and corporate social responsibility (http://www.klubgaja.pl/projekty/kupuj_odpowiedzialnie/).

The campaign aimed to bring it home to young consumers that everyone, through their consumption choices, may demonstrate loyalty to a given set of values and make a difference – and that every zloty spent recklessly may affect the fate of people, animals and nature. Through their conscious choices and behaviours, consumers may support charities, Third World producers (for example, by buying Fair Trade items), the local market, organic farms, etc. Given the low level of consumer awareness in Poland, the promotion of sustainable lifestyles, making it possible to meet the challenges of sustainable development, assumes great urgency. The importance of initiatives encouraging conscious, responsible and harmonious consumption stems from the fact that a process to inculcate sustainable consumption patterns in Poland is only in a nascent state.

Polish consumer behaviour and the concept of sustainable consumption: findings of empirical research

To find out whether sustainable consumption ideas can be spotted in Poles' consumer behaviour, a study involving CATIs was conducted in later July and early August 2008 among 200 respondents in Warsaw area. The choice of Warsaw reflected the conviction that the capital city is the place where new consumer trends come to the surface and whence these trends spread around the country. Warsaw consumers have relatively high disposable incomes, are well educated and represent a higher level of consumer awareness. An important measure of consumer awareness is provided by the manner of shopping and the accompanying thoughts and reflections. Proceeding from this point of view, one can assess the rationality of consumer choices and their conformity with sustainable consumption recommendations. With this intention in mind, respondents were asked a question sounding out their consumer awareness and concerning various aspects of sustainable consumption. The distribution pattern of replies hardly offers grounds for much optimism (cf. Table 1). Some 70% of those questioned admit not to think at all, or think rarely, about who made the product and who profits from it, and only a third gives a thought to the idea of buying or hiring a second-hand product instead of purchasing a new one. Some encouragement may come from respondents' pragmatism: over three-fourths think about whether they need the purchased item. But, on the other hand, for 61% it is not a problem whether the environmental requirements were respected in the production process, and some 58% do not care whether the components of the purchased product are safe for the environment. The picture of respondents' awareness is still bleaker when the broader context comes into play: the question of whether producers support local communities is not given (or rarely given) a thought by 84% of those questioned; whether direct producers get decent pay, by 82%; whether they work in acceptable conditions, by 73%. Things look a bit more promising when it comes to issues such as producers' observance of fair-information-and-advertisement requirements, and product testing on animals: a half of those questioned think about the former and 46% about the latter. In seeking to put sustainable consumption patterns into practice, it is important that they should not only be instilled in consumers' consciousness but also be translated into everyday behaviour. In this context, let us have a look at respondents' replies about various aspects of shopping and households' everyday operation (cf. Table 2). The picture we obtain is by no means unequivocal. Throwing away unconsumed food often/always was admitted by 28% of the respondents, and 56% declared doing it rarely. A large proportion
professed segregating garbage on a daily basis or frequently (67%). More than a half admitted not to switch off electrical appliances and radio/TV/computer equipment and leave it on standby, thus adding to electricity consumption. On the other hand, it is encouraging to learn that 64% of those questioned go shopping with a reusable bag or reuse one-side-printed paper sheets, and that 77% give to others things they need no more. The situation inspires less optimism when it comes to conscious shopping: 30% of the respondents owned up to impulse shopping often or always and 17% confessed realizing after the fact that the purchase was useless. As far as consumer awareness is concerned, the picture obtained from the survey is pretty optimistic. It looks like the respondents understand well the sustainable consumption notion, at least in respect of its basic characteristics. For 82% of those questioned, it is associated with buying only such amounts as are needed; for 93% its meaning includes garbage segregation, 88% link it to appliances recycling, and 86% associate sustainable consumption with buying eco-friendly, eco-labelled products. Buying products untested on animals is associated with sustainable consumption by 63% of the respondents; buying still usable second-hand products, by close to 70%; avoiding plastic bags, by nearly 80%; avoiding single-use packaging, by 73%. To 76% of those surveyed, sustainable consumption means reasonable budget management, debt aversion, and living within one's means, and 88% identifies the notion with reasonable shopping and resisting pressures from people around them, the media, etc. These attitudes largely seem to be more declarative and not quite reflected in actual consumer behaviour, given the level of household borrowing and the Polish consumer's high susceptibility to advertising, as indicated by empirical research findings. As the present survey demonstrated, the respondents have no problems in associating sustainable consumption with what could be termed as 'politically correct' behaviour, promoted by the media and various institutions involved in public education. Typical associations set in motion by the 'sustainable consumption' notion have to do with the following areas (cf. Table 3):

- water and electricity consumption
- treatment of waste products
- food consumption
- renewable energy
- organic farming.

But other, more subtle connotations (genetic engineering in food production, substance use, tests on animals, trade in exotic species) remain unknown to the respondents, as indicated by the distribution of replies to questions sounding out the sustainability associations. In addition to consumer awareness, the implantation of sustainable consumption requires much of multifaceted action in the spheres of production, distribution (including retailing) and – last but not least – widespread educational campaigns. In practice, behaviour compatible with sustainable consumption standards still faces a host of barriers. Asked about such impediments, the respondents pointed primarily to eco-friendly products' high prices and also to the mental barriers reflecting insufficient knowledge and ignorance of benefits from purchasing eco-friendly products.
Some 30% of those questioned fingered the causes for which consumers are responsible, such as:

- idleness and lack of consumer awareness
- consumerist attitudes
- Poles' individualism and egocentrism (cf. Table 4).

The study revealed a certain inconsistency in respondents' opinions about various aspects of sustainable consumption in Polish realities (cf. Table 5). On the one hand, an overwhelming majority of the respondents demonstrate high levels of environmental consciousness and "ecological empathy". The opinion "You have just one life to live and you should live it to the fullest" was contested by 72% of them. As many as 86% subscribed to the view that Poles should now focus on the consequences of excessive consumption, with the future generations in mind; while a considerable proportion (33%) agrees with the claim that Poland has the right to make up for the lost years, even at the expense of non-sustainability, and 28% believe that Poland can ill afford to pursue a policy of sustainable consumption. Those questioned have a scathing assessment of environmental awareness in Poland and Polish society's consumer behaviour: nearly, 70% agreed with the opinion that Poles revel in consumerism and do not care about eco-friendliness, and 58% found that Polish consumers' behaviour does not comply with European standards for sustainable consumption. The respondents are also sceptical about the performance of the organisations and institutions tasked with the advancement of sustainable consumption: 44% agreed with the claim that NGOs do nothing to bring home to Poles the dangers of excessive consumptions, and 68% shared the view that the environment-polluting companies in Poland get away scot-free. To 77%, only external pressure, to be exerted by the EU, can force Poland to revise its consumption attitudes towards sustainability. Public education on sustainable consumption came under equally strong fire, with as many as 82% agreeing with the sentiment that parents fail to lead children by example of how to live in harmony with the natural environment. Respondents propose a wide spectrum of measures to be taken to bring Polish consumer behaviour closer to the patterns of sustainable consumption seen in highly developed countries with high levels of environmental awareness (cf. Table 6). Put in the forefront are educational activities pursued at all levels by various institutions and organisations, indicated by close to a half of the respondents (48%). Next come promotion in the media of eco-friendly behaviour and good practices, indicated by 46%, and then the restrictive measures, i.e., punishment of polluters (31%). Other proposals include waste recycling (27%), development of waste treatment infrastructure (24%), resort to renewable sources of energy (15%) and state funding for the roll-out of new technology (13%).

Summing up the findings of the research, one can express the hope that the critical (partly, self-critical) diagnosis and the proposed lines of action, as presented earlier, testify to sustainable consumption's increased weight in the consciousness of Polish consumers. It is desirable that this translates into positive changes in consumers' behaviour and consumption patterns, remembering how much still remains to be done here.

Conclusions
Polish society has been increasingly resembling the modern consumer societies of developed western countries with all attendant advantages and drawbacks – on the one hand, we have high living standards, access to the global offering of consumer goods, opportunity to narrow the civilisational distance; on the other, the cult of possessing, commercialisation of social interactions, threats to the natural environment, etc. Hedonistic models of consumer behaviour, characteristic of the cosmopolitan global culture, have been absorbed at a fast pace. This brings up the question of harmonisation of various aspects of economic growth and advancement of sustainable consumption patterns, commensurate with the global challenges of the 21st century. The findings of the described empirical research confirm the initial hypothesis about Polish consumer behaviour's being at odds with the archetypal sustainable consumption. But, it is encouraging that in respect of some aspects of their own consumption, people realise the need to give up the present practices and they know which way to follow in search of the change. The advancement of sustainable consumption in Poland is a tall order indeed. After decades of ascetic consumption, the Polish consumers will not be easily persuaded to exercise self-restraint, the more so as the world of industry, commerce, media and advertisement sends them compelling signals with enticement to increased consumption. This constitutes a major challenge for central government, local authorities and consumer-education NGOs, while also providing them with room for initiatives and actions to further sustainable consumption.

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References and Websites


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