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Eco-warriors in the supermarket? Evaluating the UK sustainable consumption strategy as a tool for ecological citizenship

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**ECO-WARRIORS IN THE SUPERMARKET?:
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STRATEGY AS A TOOL FOR ECOLOGICAL CITIZENSHIP**

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Abstract

Ecological Citizenship is a potentially ethic-based motivation for changing behaviour towards more sustainable lifestyles. It describes citizenship as activity taken in the private as well as public sphere, and with regard to a common humanity transcending the boundaries of nation states. This paper examines ecological citizenship at perhaps its most mundane, yet its most ubiquitous and fundamental level – the choices and actions which individuals and households make on a daily basis, in the supermarket and on the high street. It deals with changing consumption patterns, consumer behaviour and lifestyles, and how these relate to environmental and social demands for sustainability. Sustainable consumption has become a core policy objective in national and international arenas, despite contested understandings of what it might mean in practice. The mainstream policy interpretation of sustainable consumption and the UK strategy is described, which relies upon individual consumers to make environmentally-motivated private decisions in order to deliver sustainability. This approach is critically evaluated on two fronts. First, a number of market failures are identified which compromise the integrity of the proposed model. Second, failures to achieve the desired impacts are revealed, which significantly limit the scope and ambition of mainstream sustainable consumption strategy. Responding to these limitations, an alternative conception of sustainable consumption is proposed, and three examples are given of practical tools and initiatives which overcome some of the obstacles faced by the mainstream approach. These are: the Measure of Domestic Progress national accounting index, localised organic food supply chains, and community currencies (time banks and LETS). The alternative strategy promotes ecological citizenship by re-creating social and economic institutions for environmental governance according to different value regimes. By combining improvements to the mainstream policy strategy, with explicit support for a diversity of alternative approaches which build new social and economic institutions for consumption, governments could harness the energies of ecological citizens to make significant strides along the road to sustainability.

Key words: sustainable consumption and production; ecological citizenship; government policy; environmental decision-making; institutions

1. INTRODUCTION: CITIZENSHIP IN THE SUPERMARKET?

Citizenship is a hot topic for environmentalists. Seeking to define and embed a new 'environmental ethic' in public debates and discourses, environmentalists aim for a rationale for changing behaviour towards more sustainable lifestyles motivated by an ethical position, rather than simply responding to superficial incentives. In this way, an environmentally-informed morality implies particular types of political relationships – the nature of citizenship – between strangers, across generations and even across species (Dobson, 2003). Citizenship is also a hot topic for consumers. Individual shopping and consumption behaviour are increasingly seen as a public arena of activism, and environmentalists are encouraged to put their money where their mouth is and 'do their bit' by buying 'green' or 'ethical' goods – a strategy for sustainable consumption proposed by the UK government (DEFRA, 2003). This paper explores the social implications of a particular type of environmental citizenship, and critically examines sustainable consumption policy and practice in the UK in order to assess its effectiveness as a tool to allow people to act upon their motivations to be ecological citizens.

But first, the nature of this citizenship should be described. In its traditional guises within liberalism and civic republicanism, citizenship concerns the status and activity of individuals in the public domain, in relationship to the state. Liberal political philosophy emphasises the rights of individuals, and the environment can be incorporated through a new language of environmental rights (Bell, 2004). For example, the human right to a habitable environment (as a prerequisite to all other rights) may be a sufficient claim to ensure action for sustainability. More controversially, the rights of non-human species can be argued for – challenging existing notions of who counts as a citizen – have been debated within liberalism. The second major strand of traditional citizenship thought is civic republicanism, which emphasises the duties and responsibilities that citizens have to act in the interests of the common good. Environmental responsibilities are easily introduced to this approach, as there is a great resonance with the concepts of self-sacrifice for the greater good and being an active citizen which run through green politics, encouraging people to associate the implications of their daily activities with the state of the wider environment. This dualistic notion of individuals acting according to either their personal, private interests or the collective public good is well developed within civic republicanism. Sagoff (1988) splits personal motivations into 'consumer' and 'citizen' interests, and argues that they are always in competition: the challenge is to find ways to ensure decisions are made according to 'citizen' rather than 'consumer' interests.

Citizenship is a politically contested and historically evolving term, however, and recent developments in feminism and globalization have prompted challenges to the traditional understandings of citizenship, which have ramifications for environmentalism (Dobson, 2004). Feminism argues that the traditional constructions of citizenship are not at all universal, and are gendered and inappropriate for many women, and that the private sphere is a legitimate space for the gaze and practice of citizenship - 'the personal is political!'. When environmentalists speak of the need to change our daily actions, for example through improving energy efficiency in the home, or cycling rather than driving a car, they are describing the private sphere as a site of citizenly activity. At the same time, cosmopolitanism claims that people are citizens of all humanity rather than particular states. Clearly this perspective resonates with environmentalism which describes us all as inhabitants of the Earth, with global environmental problems to solve which transcend state boundaries.

While clearly falling outside the traditional definitions of citizenship in terms of political *status*, these two challenges are based upon theories that citizenship is very much about *activity*, and that citizenly activity for the common good can take place at any scale, in private or in

public. Given the transnational nature of the environmental problems facing humanity, it seems reasonable to adopt a notion of citizenship which extends possibilities for participative action to all people in all areas of life. It is this conception of citizenship which Dobson (2003) calls 'ecological citizenship', and it represents a clear departure from Sagoff's dualistic understanding of private and public interests and activity: ecological citizenship explicitly defines private 'consumer' behaviour as political and a space for collective action for the common good. In this way, ecological citizenship rises above traditional understandings of citizenship to embrace new possibilities, in particular the development of consumption as a site of political activity and sustainable consumers as a key element of government strategy. What then are the obligations of an ecological citizen?

Dobson's ecological citizenship uses the 'ecological footprint' metaphor (Wackernagel and Rees, 1996) as a touchstone for understanding the obligations of ecological citizens as a justice-based account of how we should live, based upon private and public action to reduce the environmental impacts of our everyday lives on others. In this model, each of us is responsible for taking up a certain amount of ecological 'space' in the sense of resource use and carrying capacity burden, and this space is expressed as a footprint on the earth. It is assumed that there is a limited amount of ecological space available, which should be equitably distributed among all inhabitants. The ecological footprint of a western consumer includes areas spread across the globe, and impacts upon people distant in space and time. The footprints of people within industrialised nations are much larger than that of, and indeed have negative impacts upon the life chances of, the inhabitants of developing countries. The burning of fossil fuels, for example, has multiplied almost five-fold since 1950, threatening the pollution-absorbing capacities of the environment, and the consumption differentials between developed and developing nations are extreme (UNDP, 1998).

In this way environmental and social inequity and injustice is visualised. An ecological citizen's duties are therefore to minimise the size and unsustainable impacts of one's ecological footprint – though what is sustainable is of course a normative rather than technical question (Dobson, 2003). Ecological citizenship is non-territorial and non-contractual and is concerned with responsibilities and the implications of our actions on the environment and on other, distant people; a similar model, called 'planetary citizenship' is put forward by Henderson and Ikeda (2004). Developing this idea into a practical network application, Alexander (2004) explains "Planetary Citizenship is about identifying with the Earth as a whole and the whole of humanity, about working towards a collaborative instead of a competitive world, with a re-shaped economy driven by social and environmental need rather than financial pressures." In both these cases, the challenge is to find mechanisms and initiatives which enable and encourage people to act as ecological citizens, in other words, to reduce their ecological footprints. 'Sustainable consumption' appears to meet that need.

This paper examines mechanisms to practice ecological citizenship at perhaps its most mundane, yet its most ubiquitous and fundamental level – the choices and actions which individuals and households make on a daily basis, in the supermarket and on the high street. It deals with changing consumption patterns, consumer behaviour and lifestyles, and how these relate to environmental and social demands for sustainability. 'Sustainable consumption' has become a core policy objective of the new millennium in national and international arenas, despite the fact that its precise definition is as elusive as that of its predecessor on the environmental agenda, sustainable development. Current patterns of consumption are, quite clearly, unjust and unsustainable; the extent and nature of the transformation required is hotly debated, reflecting as it does competing deep-rooted beliefs about society and nature (Seyfang, 2003a; 2004a). For some, it is sufficient to 'clean up' polluting production processes and thereby produce 'greener' products (OECD, 2002; DEFRA, 2003); for others, a wholesale rethinking of affluent lifestyles and material consumption *per se* is required (Douthwaite, 1992; Schumacher, 1993[1973]). In both these

conceptions of sustainable consumption, one of the principal actors for change is the individual consumer, regularly exhorted to 'do their bit' to 'save the planet' by purchasing recycled goods and demanding ethically-produced products, for example (DETR, 1999b).

In this way, sustainable consumption is clearly identified as a tool for practising ecological citizenship – requiring individuals to make political and environmental choices in their private consumption decisions which take account of the interests of people distant in space and time. Now that consumers, corporations, NGOs and policymakers are all accorded with the duties of citizenly behaviour, does this new age of responsibility result in more effective environmental stewardship? In order to answer this question, this paper will critically evaluate the UK policy model of sustainable consumption as a tool for ecological citizenship. It first reviews the debate about sustainable consumption and describes two competing perspectives: one concerned with reform of the mainstream, and another more radical alternative. It then appraises the mainstream policy model of sustainable consumption in the light of ecological citizenship goals, and identifies a number of failures. Turning to the alternative perspective of sustainable consumption, a number of initiatives are discussed which are able to overcome the limitations of the mainstream model in enabling individual consumers to be good ecological citizens. Finally, the policy implications of this analysis are drawn out in order to nurture ecological citizenship.

2. SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION: SHOPPING TO SAVE THE PLANET?

"Today, helping to save the planet may be as easy as buying a sweater at J. Crew or a Madonna CD from Amazon.com... e-commerce is expanding the opportunity to 'do the right thing' for Mother Earth."
(Gardyn, 2001)

The term 'sustainable consumption' entered the international policy arena in Agenda 21, the action plan for sustainable development adopted by 179 heads of state at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. This was the first time in international environmental discourse that over-consumption in the developed world was implicated as a direct cause of unsustainability. The proposed solutions included promoting eco-efficiency and using market instruments for shifting consumption patterns, but also that governments should develop 'new concepts of wealth and prosperity which allow higher standards of living through changed lifestyles and are less dependent on the Earth's finite resources and more in harmony with the Earth's carrying capacity' (UNCED, 1992: section 4.11). These two proposals – the former suggesting reform and the latter a radical realignment of social and economic institutions – represent competing perspectives of the nature of the problem and its solution, and illustrate some of the tensions inherent in a pluralistic concept as contested as its predecessor, sustainable development. For the purposes of this paper, these two approaches shall be termed 'mainstream' and 'alternative' perspectives on sustainable consumption (see also Seyfang (2004a), Jackson and Michaelis (2003) and Jackson (2004b) for other reviews of sustainable consumption discourses). Each approach holds promise as a tool for ecological citizenship, for enabling individuals to make political decisions with their consumption behaviour to reduce the ecological footprints and unsustainable impacts of their behaviour. This section of the paper will discuss the mainstream policy approach to sustainable consumption as embodied in the UK strategy, and critically assess its potential as a tool for ecological citizenship.

2.1 Mainstream Policy Frameworks for Sustainable Consumption

In 2003, the UK Government unveiled 'Changing Patterns', its strategy for sustainable consumption and production, as a response to the European Union's commitment to develop a 10-year framework for sustainable consumption and production which was made at the 2002 World Summit for Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. It defines sustainable consumption and production as: "Continuous economic and social progress that respects the limits of the Earth's ecosystems, and meets the needs and aspirations of everyone for a better quality of life, now and for future generations to come" (DEFRA, 2003:10). This definition closely matches the government's approach to sustainable development set out in 'A Better Quality Of Life' (DETR, 1999a), which is founded upon a belief that stable and continued economic growth is necessary, and is compatible with effective environmental protection and responsible use of natural resources ('cleaner growth'). Sustainable consumption and production thus emphasises the 'triple bottom line' of economic, social and environmental progress, and the importance of ensuring that achieving improvements in any one of these areas does not undermine the others. It acknowledges that there are 'some limits to the capacity of the Earth's ecosystems to absorb pollution and provide natural resources ... [so] the only way to maintain economic progress in the long term without approaching these limits is to *decouple economic growth from environmental degradation*' (DEFRA, 2003:11, emphasis in original).

Given this basis for action, the UK strategy put forward builds on previous government action to increase resource productivity and efficiency, directed towards reducing the most important environmental impacts such as climate change, rather than absolute resource use. The practical measures to achieve this decoupling of economic growth from environmental degradation are principally a range of market-based measures for transforming production

and consumption patterns within an overall framework of continued economic growth: making the polluter pay, eco-taxes, promoting innovation in industry, government purchasing initiatives, consumer education campaigns and instituting voluntary eco-labelling schemes to facilitate effective demand for sustainable products. The strategy makes it clear that sustainable consumption and production are cross-cutting policy issues which have repercussions in many different areas: for example the strategy intersects with developments in energy, water use, transport, education, consumer issues, taxation, trade, agriculture and waste management, and it will be an important test of the embeddedness of sustainable development within government policy to see how far the overarching goal of sustainable consumption and production is translated into policy and action within each of these different areas.

In the late 1990s, the OECD began researching what sustainable consumption might mean to member states, and concluded that market failure was the prime cause of unsustainability. In this strongly libertarian perspective, governments are therefore expected to correct prices and provide regulatory frameworks to influence producers to be more eco-efficient and offer consumer choices of 'green' products (OECD, 2002). This perspective on of sustainable consumption has become widely adopted by governments, and is echoed in the UK strategy, hence its description here as the 'mainstream' model. In this approach, the agenda has narrowed from initial possibilities of redefining prosperity and wealth and radically transforming lifestyles, to a focus on improving resource productivity and marketing 'green' or 'ethical' products such as fairly traded coffee, low-energy light bulbs, more fuel-efficient vehicles, biodegradable washing powder, etc.

This demonstrates how from its auspicious beginnings at Rio, the term 'sustainable consumption' has evolved through a range of international policy arenas, and its definition narrowed as it became more widely accepted as a policy goal. The more challenging ideas became marginalised as governments instead focused on politically and socially acceptable and economically rational tools for changing consumption patterns such as cleaning up production processes and marketing green products. Sustainable consumption is implicitly defined within the UK strategy and other incarnations of the mainstream policy approach as the consumption of more efficiently-produced goods, and the 'green' and 'ethical' consumer is the driving force of market transformation, incorporating both social and environmental concerns when making purchasing decisions. This policy relies upon 'sustainable consumers' to demand sustainably-produced goods and exercise consumer choice to send market signals, for example using consumer fora such as Green Choices (www.greenchoices.org) which promises 'a guide to greener living' and Green Home (www.greenhome.com), an online store for environmentally-friendly goods, and Ethical Consumer, the UK's alternative consumer organisation which publishes investigations into firms' social and environmental records (www.ethicalconsumer.org). Ethical consumerism is a growing trend. The 2003 Ethical Purchasing Index reported that total sales of ethical products rose by 44% between 1999 and 2002 to £6.9bn, while the market share this represented grew by 30%. Boycotting and ethical non-consumerism was a major force among consumers too: 52% of consumers reported boycotting a product during the previous year, and two-thirds said they would refuse to buy a firms' products if it was associated with unethical practices (Demetriou, 2003). As Maniates notes, "Living lightly on the planet" and "reducing your environmental impact" becomes, paradoxically, a consumer-product growth industry' (2002:47).

2.2 Evaluating Mainstream Sustainable Consumption Strategies

The previous section discussed the objectives and mechanisms of mainstream sustainable consumption policy, and identified how ecological citizens might play their part in transforming the market. This approach to sustainable consumption assumes that

consumers know, and care about the social and environmental implications of their consumption habits, and have the motivation and opportunity to act on that knowledge to change their behaviour – in other words, to behave as an ecological citizen when they make purchasing decisions. Furthermore, it assumes that messages sent to producers through the market have their intended effect in terms of transforming production practices. Each of these assumptions is challenged here, as a number of limitations are identified which compromise the effectiveness of the model.

2.2.1 Market Failures

Given that mainstream sustainable consumption is a market-based tool for change, the effectiveness of this mechanism is the first thing to examine, and there are failures of pricing, measurement and information to consider. The present economic system externalises the environmental and social costs of economic activity, and so sends producers and consumers the wrong signals. For example, fuel prices do not account for the costs of climate change, and aviation fuel is subsidised further as it is not taxed. This unwitting subsidy that the environment makes to the economy ensures that particular activities, such as transporting food around the world by air freight, or maintaining a transport infrastructure geared for private motor cars, appears economically rational (Pretty, 2001). The UK strategy for sustainable consumption and production recognises this problem and indicates some areas where full-cost pricing is being introduced, for example through the landfill tax or climate change levy on energy (DEFRA, 2003), but even these measures are politically fraught and easily derailed, with unpredictable social impacts as shown by the recent disruptive fuel protests triggered by a small increase in duty for petrol and diesel.

Second, it is a truism that what gets measured, counts, and the key indicator of wealth (and proxy of wellbeing) is GDP which makes no distinction between activities which enhance quality of life, and those which do not (expenditure on pollution clean-up technology, for instance). This results in economic policy designed to increase GDP and targets of continual economic growth (DETR, 1999a; DEFRA, 2003). The UK's Commission on Sustainable Development claim that sustainable development must not be linked to economic growth, as the government have done, as they are 'tying it to the very economic framework that was responsible for unsustainable development' (SDC, 2001:para 32). While the UK government has adopted sets of social and environmental indicators as part of its sustainable development strategy (DETR, 1999c, 2000), these are 'add-ons' to the principal economic indicators. Until more accurate measures of welfare are fundamentally accepted by governments, the national economy and the market will continue to frustrate the efforts of consumers who wish to practice ecological citizenship in the marketplace as they will be unable to signal a wish for development not reliant upon indiscriminate growth.

Third, ecological citizens seeking to make their preferences known in the marketplace face several information barriers, for example a lack of information about environmental and social implications of consumption decisions, or issues of credibility and consistency of marketing information relating to sustainable products. Some of these are the target of government action to improve market efficiency, such as public awareness campaigns and independent labelling schemes seek to overcome these obstacles (Holdsworth, 2003).

2.2.2 Equity Failures

A second set of problems which reduce the effectiveness of the mainstream sustainable consumption policy model as a tool for ecological citizenship is that even assuming an efficient market mechanism, the desired transformations can be elusive. In this section several factors are discussed where inequitable power relations and social institutions serve to reduce the impact and influence of consumers seeking to behave in an ecological citizenly manner.

The vulnerability of voluntary changes is a key problem. In the case of both green and ethical consumption, most corporations only responded to public pressure when their reputations or sales were at stake, thanks to activist groups such as Corporate Watch and Ethical Consumer. While consumer demand may be the *carrot*, it is high-profile and potentially damaging media reports into the less palatable aspects of firms' activities which provides the very necessary *stick* to prompt changes in corporate behaviour (Pearson and Seyfang, 2001). Even these voluntary changes are vulnerable to erosion and shifting trends. In the UK, Littlewoods clothing stores were a major participant in the Ethical Trading Initiative, but a change of management led to its withdrawal from the ETI and its ethical trading team being closed down, as corporate responsibility was not seen as an important issue to consumers (ETI, 2003). Green consumerism was a trend during the early 1990s, but as a result of changes in consumer preference during the 1990s, sales of 'green' ranges of products fell and many supermarket own-brand ranges of 'green' cleaning products, for example, were discontinued (Childs and Whiting, 1998). These examples suggest that the social or environmental improvements made as a response to consumer pressure have been rescinded as attention shifted, rather than taken up as new minimum standards, and that 'left to their own devices, [transnational corporations] are likely to fulfil their responsibilities in a minimalist and fragmentary fashion... they still need strong and effective regulation and a coherent response from civil society' (UNRISD, 2000:90).

A major criticism of the mainstream model of sustainable consumption through market transformation, from an ecological citizenship perspective, is that it is a citizenship of the market, and purchases are the only votes that count. Individuals may not be able to act on their ecological citizenship preferences for a variety of reasons, and therefore are unable to influence the market. These barriers include the affordability, availability and convenience of sustainable products, as well as feelings of powerless, that individual action will not make any difference, disenchantment with corporate green marketing and preference for products that are not available, such as an efficient, clean and safe public transport system (Holdsworth, 2003; Bibbings, 2004). In addition, consumers have a number of different motivations for consumption, and the neo-liberal conception of sovereign consumer as rational satisfier of wants is in decline (see for example Fine, 2002; Miller, 1995). Patterns of material consumption exercised through the marketplace embody multi-layered meanings above simple provisioning, for example aspirational consumption, retail therapy, self-expression, a need for belongingness, self-esteem, self-validation, a political statement, an ethical choice, status display, loyalty to social groups, identity, etc (Jackson, 2004b; Burgess et al, 2003). Accordingly, these motivations may be incompatible with ecological citizenship urges for sustainable consumption.

A further factor which prevents mainstream sustainable consumption being an effective tool for ecological citizenship is the category error which pits individuals against global institutions to solve global problems. Sustainable consumption as defined in mainstream policy relies upon the summation of many small acts of atomised consumer sovereignty to shift the market. However, the environmental problems which this strategy seeks to address (such as climate change) are global in nature and require negotiated, collective efforts to resolve. Furthermore, the institutions which currently propagate unsustainable consumption are also global, such as the World Trade Organisation whose rules prevent governments favouring fairly traded or 'green' imports (Tallontire and Blowfield, 2000). Transforming these institutions to serve ecological citizenship requires collective strategic action (Manno, 2002). While 'green growth' and 'market transformation' offer the promise of an environmentally-friendly future which does not threaten the political or commercial status quo, green consumerism and individualisation of responsibility for the environment belies the powerful institutions and interests at stake. Maniates (2002) states that "when responsibility for environmental problems is individualized, there is little room to ponder institutions, the nature and exercise of political power, or ways of collectively changing the distribution of power and influence in society" (p.45). These are serious failings of mainstream sustainable

consumption for ecological citizens, as by definition their objective is to recreate institutions to enable radically different lifestyles.

2.2.3 Institutional Failures

Ecological citizenship entails reducing one's unsustainable impacts upon the environment and other people, and may therefore require an absolute reduction in consumption to reduce the size of ecological footprints, and quite different social institutions to facilitate those choices. How does the mainstream sustainable consumption model meet this need? One barrier to effectiveness is that 'institutional consumption' decisions are made on a societal level, rather than by individuals, and only products and brands with which consumers are familiar are subject to transformative consumer pressure. Institutional consumption which includes producer goods, public procurement (purchasing by the state for building and maintaining roads, hospitals, schools, the military, etc accounts for half of all consumption throughout Western Europe) and most investment products are outside the hands of individual domestic consumers, according to Lodziak (2002).

Levett et al (2003) argue that while the market defines an ever-expanding range of goods and services to choose from, it cannot, by definition, offer choices outside itself. For example, a person might choose one brand of washing machine over another because of its greater energy-efficiency, but what they cannot easily choose is to purchase collectively and share common laundry facilities among a local group of residents. Consumers are effectively locked in to particular consumption patterns by the overarching social structures of market, business, working patterns, urban planning and development (Sanne, 2002; Bibbings, 2004) and are not at all 'free to choose' the consumption patterns they desire due to these market constraints (Paavola, 2001). Hence while ecological citizens struggle to use their limited influence to transform the market through mainstream channels, the constraining institutional factors which delimit the choices available are being reproduced socially, and the major consumption decisions are being made out of the public eye, away from market pressures.

This section has assessed the scope and potential of the mainstream policy model of sustainable consumption to be a practical tool for ecological citizenship, and has found it to be limited by a number of factors. These relate to the efficiency of the market mechanism, and the ability of that mechanism to effectively deliver the outcomes ecological citizens desire. Despite these limitations, it would be premature to dismiss the mainstream model of sustainable consumption entirely, not least because of its ubiquity and apparent political acceptability (though of course these are inversely related to its ability to challenge current institutions!). The approach does appear to achieve significant benefits in terms of raising awareness of the social and environmental impacts of behaviour, and encouraging individuals to think about these and reflect upon the difference they can make through their consumption patterns. It may be that this process is the first step on a journey towards greater education and activism concerning ecological citizenship, and there is certainly scope for strengthening the improvements which mainstream sustainable consumption can make – ie through government regulation, addressing market failures, supporting firms in transforming their activities etc.

Therefore it is clear that mainstream sustainable consumption, as practised in policy arenas and embodied in the UK's strategy for sustainable consumption and production, is a poor tool for ecological citizenship, but may nevertheless be a useful stepping stone on the way, for firms and consumers alike. The next part of the paper examines alternative initiatives for sustainable consumption.

3. AN ALTERNATIVE STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

Despite the direction the mainstream policy framework and the UK strategy for sustainable consumption has taken, the challenge laid down at Rio not only to promote greater efficiency in resource use, but also to re-align development goals according to wider social and environmental priorities rather than narrow economic criteria, and to consider the possibilities of lifestyles founded upon values other than material consumption, has not fallen on deaf ears. These ideas are common among the 'new economics' or 'deep green' environmentalist literature, and include radical re-organising of economies to be more localised, decentralised, smaller-scale, and oriented towards human well-being and environmental protection. Key writers in this field emerged from the environmentalist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, reacting to a nascent economic globalisation and the promotion of western-style industrialisation as the only route to progress. Schumacher's 'Small Is Beautiful' (1993 [1973]) is a landmark text in this field, setting out a call for an economic system subservient to the demands of participative social cohesion and environmental protection and based upon principles of subsidiarity – making decisions at the lowest practical level, consuming as locally as possible to the site of production, and valuing the services provided by the environment and by people outside the market in a 'whole-life' economics (Brandt, 1995).

The central point of departure of the alternative approach to sustainable consumption from the mainstream model, is the question of economic growth. Mainstream strategies for sustainable consumption assume this is a necessary prerequisite, despite the failings of indicators such as GDP as the discussion above has shown. These alternative sustainable consumption proposals argue that the 'growth illusion' (Douthwaite, 1992) masks hidden social and environmental costs and is deceptive in the benefits it brings. The alternative, new economics approach rejects this fundamental rationale of neo-classical economics by describing instead a 'steady state' or 'no-growth' economy (Daly and Cobb, 1990) which meets social and economic needs and forges qualitative development divorced from economic growth (Robertson, 1990). Coalescing an agenda of popular activism for change that embodied these principles, such as localism, new indicators, solidarity workers movements, consumption as political action, voluntary simplicity, social capital generation, etc, Ekins (1986) brings together activists and commentators in a statement of the emergent 'new economics' strand of thought, and working backwards from this, Ekins and Max-Neef (1993) set out the growing agenda of economic analysis grounded in considerations of social, ethical and ecological realities. In practice, this entails rebuilding systems of provision in order to cut absolute levels of consumption in developed countries so that the ecological footprints of modern industrialised societies may be reduced – ideas which resonate strongly with ecological citizenship as described above. So, given this coherence of language and goal, can the alternative approach put ecological citizenship into practice?

This alternative perspective on sustainable consumption currently exists largely outside the policy framework – its radical messages are not welcomed by policymakers, and with the exception of Agenda 21, no international strategies have embraced these ideas. Nevertheless they are strongly represented by networks of grassroots initiatives and community activists, many of them inspired by the Rio Summit itself, working to challenge existing practices, and create new social and economic institutions which allow people to enact these values in their daily lives (Shell Better Britain Campaign, 2002). Three practical examples of such tools are described below, in order to illustrate the ways in which the alternative perspective on sustainable consumption underlies initiatives which overcome the limitations of the mainstream model, and enable more effective ecological citizenship behaviour. Each of the examples is built upon an understanding of the economy which values and recognises the fundamental importance of the environment and society as prerequisites for the monetary economy. Within this framework, sustainable consumption

and ecological citizenship entails different lifestyles, values and institutions to that of the mainstream approach.

3.1 Measuring Progress

The first example of new tools and instruments used by proponents of this perspective is indicators which redefine 'progress' and 'wealth' and create new national accounting mechanisms to reflect well-being, for example the Measure of Domestic Progress or MDP. This index finds that while GDP has increased rapidly since 1950, MDP has barely grown at all. The divergence is more noticeable in the last 30 years, as GDP has grown by 80% but MDP has fallen during the 1980s mainly due to environmental degradation, growing inequality and associated social costs, and has still not regained the peak achieved in 1976 (Jackson, 2004a). As this report states: 'every society clings to a myth by which it lives; ours is the myth of economic progress' (Jackson, 2004a:1). Alternative approaches to sustainable consumption require governments and society to rethink the purpose of economies – is it to increase welfare, or to boost economic activity? – and design policies which achieve the underlying goals, rather than their proxies. To return to an assertion made earlier, what counts is what gets measured, and development goals will always be geared towards the chosen indicators. MDP is found to closely match life-satisfaction indexes, which have not risen significantly for 30 years, and so this measure might be a good example of an alternative national accounting mechanism which embodies and so promotes the values of ecological citizenship. Consuming more, simply put, does not make us happy, healthy, wealthy or wise, and this view, for a long time considered 'taboo', is finally starting to be heard in mainstream forums (Reeves, 2003; Levett et al, 2003; Porritt, 2003; Jackson and Michaelis, 2003; Ekins and Max-Neef, 1993; Douthwaite, 1992).

If development is really about improving well-being, then once this underlying objective is accepted, it is possible to conceive of many ways in which this can be achieved while reducing material consumption, resource use and conventional economic activity – in other words meeting the ecological citizenship objectives of reducing ecological footprints. Manno (2002), for example, describes an economy of 'care and connection' where 'non-commodity' goods are produced and exchanged. These are goods and services which embody qualities which cannot easily be mass-marketed and sold, and they are typically produced locally to the site of consumption, embodying webs of relationships, and are collectively owned. This is in contrast with highly commoditizable goods and services which are standardized, free of social relationships, mobile, convenient and with clear private ownership properties, and represent larger ecological footprints than their non-commodified alternatives. From this analysis, ecological citizens should challenge the commercial, political and legal forces which currently favour commoditization, to produce instead locally significant social economies, where collective ownership and co-production takes precedence. The following two cases attempt to achieve these aims.

3.2 Local Food Supply Chains

A second example of alternative sustainable consumption is that of localised food supply chains. These aim to strengthen local economies against dependence upon external forces, avoid unnecessary global food transportation (cutting 'food miles') and reconnect local communities with farmers and the landscape. In the case of local organic production, there is the added environmental benefit of improved land management, and consumers identify organic food strongly with better health, nutrition, and food safety (Saltmarsh, 2004; Pretty, 2001; Jones, 2001). In these cases, consumers are overcoming the limitations of market pricing regimes by *voluntarily internalising* the normally externalised environmental and social costs and benefits of local organic food production, and are making consumption choices according to these new relative values rather than market signals. They are giving a

positive value to local economic and social connectivity, environmental conservation, and known provenance and quality – in other words authenticity – and considering the negative costs of global food transportation, pesticide use and industrial agriculture. These consumers are clearly behaving as ecological citizens, seeking to reduce the size of their footprints, in the face of pricing patterns which encourage them otherwise.

Research with Eostre Organics, a producer cooperative in East Anglia, has found that while the market for organic food has grown in recent years, there are still large stumbling blocks to overcome. These are, first, the fact that local organic produce costs more than imported conventionally grown food, and secondly, difficulties expanding into supplying the public sector despite government recommendations to hospitals and schools to source food supplies locally and organically where possible. In these cases, infrastructure weighs against local sustainable food supplies - for example, the largest hospital in Norfolk does not have a kitchen to feed its patients - as well as social acceptability - organic food is still regarded as cranky by those in authority – and so the potential growth of sustainable food consumption through public procurement is hampered (Seyfang, 2004b; Morgan and Morley, 2002).

How effective can this sort of approach to sustainable consumption be? While market signals continue to misdirect, small groups of committed ecological citizens form a small niche following their values rather their purses, but the incentives are clearly against them. If pricing were corrected, for example by removing the Common Agricultural Policy subsidies to intensive industrial farming, plus internalising externalities, it would of course become economically rational to consume in such a way, encouraging more people to do so. In the meantime, consuming locally produced organic food is the privilege of a minority who can afford to do so, and who have the time and ability to purchase through consumption channels that may be less convenient than mainstream supermarkets. Their efforts to support alternative systems of provisioning may become more inclusive in future if its market grows, and if pricing is corrected.

3.3 Green Money and Community Currencies

A third example of a tool to put the alternative perspective on sustainable consumption into practice is that of non-market exchange mechanisms, such as community currencies. Despite claims that commoditisation is inevitably spreading and eliminating non-commodified exchange, there is evidence that non-market exchange (informal exchange networks and community currencies, recycling, second-hand goods etc) is still a powerful force in industrialised economies (Williams, 2004). Furthermore, consumers choose these alternative exchange networks for a variety of reasons, not least affordability, but also to experience and strengthen the anti-materialist values such consumption embodies (Seyfang, 2001, 2004c,d; Leyshon et al, 2003; Manno, 2002).

Community currency initiatives to promote alternative models of economic exchange, needs-satisfaction and socially-embedded development are plentiful. For example time banks use time as a currency to build social capital and cohesion while nurturing reciprocity and mutual aid, and everyone's time is worth the same – a key attraction for socially-excluded participants. They have grown rapidly in the UK in the last five years, and in 2002 there were 36 active time banks, with an average of 61 participants each, who had exchanged (given or received) a mean of 29 hours each. This equates to 2196 participants in total, and nearly 64,000 hours exchanged (Seyfang and Smith, 2002). By 2004, there were 68 time banks up and running, according to Time Banks UK (www.timebanks.co.uk). Time banks promote engagement in community activities, and have great potential as an enabler of civic engagement in public services provision and local decision-making. Local Exchange Trading Schemes (LETS) aim to build communities and strengthen local economies through a system of multilateral barter; they are usually community-run initiatives, whose members

exchange goods and services for a virtual local currency. LETS has grown to about 300 schemes in operation at present, with an estimated 22,000 people involved and an annual turnover equivalent of £1.4million (Williams, 2000). LETS also encourage sustainable consumption activities in a number of ways: they promote local suppliers of food and other goods; they promote sharing resources among members of a community; and they encourage recycling of goods, as members find a market for their unwanted items (Seyfang, 2001).

In addition to meeting economic and social needs, these community currencies enable people to construct new collective institutions for economic governance which reflect more equitable values. These exchange mechanisms utilise different conceptions of 'wealth' and 'value' and 'work', and are socially inclusive and accessible by all – indeed, time banks attract the most socially excluded groups to participate and exchange services – thereby overcoming the limitation of affordability witnessed with mainstream sustainable consumption strategies (Seyfang, 2001, 2003b, 2004c; Seyfang and Smith, 2002). Non-market exchange is therefore a space for expressing political vision about economic, social and environmental governance – in other words, for ecological citizenship. Time banks and LETS have so far been small scale initiatives, but both display great potential for achieving significant impacts in terms of enabling sustainable consumption and greater active citizenship if adopted on a wider scale. The main policy obstacles include interfaces with the tax and benefits systems, which penalise some participants who earn community currency, and a need for sustainable long-term funding to develop effective community social economies, as well as a need for government to recognise the shift in behaviour, consumption and attitudes that could emerge through utilising alternative exchange mechanisms such as these.

The three examples given here provide a small taste of what alternative sustainable consumption might mean in practice. They each appear to overcome some of the obstacles faced by mainstream sustainable consumption strategies in enabling ecological citizenship through redesigned social and economic institutions for exchange, provision and measuring progress, but still encounter barriers preventing them from achieving more widespread impacts. They require government support to succeed both in terms of funding and also through changes in social attitudes, institutions and infrastructure, but have the potential to achieve a great deal alongside more mainstream strategies.

4. CONCLUSIONS

“Given our deepening alienation from traditional understandings of active citizenship, together with the growing allure of consumption-as-social-action, it is little wonder that at a time when our capacity to imagine an array of ways to build a just and ecologically resilient future must expand, it is in fact narrowing.” (Maniates, 2002:51).

Sustainable consumption has been proposed as a tool for encouraging ecological citizenship, which entails shrinking ecological footprints. The UK’s sustainable consumption and production strategy embodies what is termed here a mainstream policy strategy reliant upon motivated consumers. A critical analysis of this approach has identified that the mainstream policy approach to sustainable consumption is an ineffective tool for ecological citizenship. However, it may be a useful first step along the path to greater reflection and awareness of sustainability issues and their relationship to individual behaviour, and is arguably a necessary complement to the alternative approach, and there is much that governments can do to improve its effectiveness. They can get prices right, improve information flows, measure appropriate indicators of progress, and introduce ‘ratcheting up’ regulation to prevent backsliding in social and environmental performance.

Nevertheless, there are significant problems with an approach which burdens individuals with the responsibility for achieving sustainable consumption. In seeking to make the necessary changes to their consumption patterns, however, ecological citizens ‘see that their individual consumption choices are environmentally important, but that their control over those choices is constrained, shaped and framed by institutions and political forces that can be remade only through collective citizen action, as opposed to consumer behaviour.’ (Maniates, 2002:65-6). As Burgess et al assert, “an individual cannot be expected to take responsibility for uncertain environmental risks in a captured market. It is asking too much of the consumer to adopt a green lifestyle unless there is a social context which gives green consumerism greater meaning” (2003:285). Therefore, to build a social context consistent with an enabled ecological citizenry, governments must look to the alternative perspective to sustainable consumption which aims to provide this context through radical changes to lifestyles, infrastructure and social and economic governance institutions, in order to redirect development goals and reduce absolute consumption levels through redesigned systems of provision and measurement – thereby reducing ecological footprints.

Though small in scale at present, initiatives which allow people to practice ecological citizenship values are important carriers of pluralistic visions, and could potentially grow and thrive if surrounding social conditions and social institutions – the context - were more favourable. This could be achieved through government action to support these grassroots initiatives, and most importantly, to allow them the space to thrive by ensuring that existing policies do not undermine their ability to develop. This point is crucial: alternative initiatives for sustainable consumption do not require top-down government control, but rather the ability to grow and flourish outside of the mainstream without being squeezed out of existence by a policymaking process which is blind to their contribution to sustainable consumption and ecological citizenship. There is a need for diversity and pluralism in social institutions – for a ‘better choice of choice’ for consumers (Levett et al, 2003). Governments could intervene to shape consumer choices in the greater public interest, by acting to shift social values, by publicly questioning the rationale of continual economic growth, and by forcing firms to take certain actions instead of relying on corporate consumer-driven self-governance. They could support other social institutions such as churches and schools in encouraging citizens to question materialistic lifestyles, and set an example through public procurement in choosing sustainably produced products.

It is increasingly evident that the implications of the most mundane consumption choices have implications around the globe, and consumers are exhorted to choose responsibly and embrace the political participation opportunities offered with every shopping trip. Ecological citizenship offers a practical, every day framework for understanding and expressing action which reflects a sense of justice about environmental and social matters through collective efforts to change the institutions which reproduce unsustainable consumption. By combining improvements to the mainstream policy strategy, with explicit support for a diversity of alternative approaches which build new social and economic institutions for consumption, governments could harness the energies of ecological citizens to make significant strides along the road to sustainability.

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