



~ Concept Note ~

Three-Part Webinar Series

Grappling with the Question of Sustainable Consumption in the Global South

Organized by the *Working Group on the Political Economy of Sustainable Consumption and Production* (Future Earth Knowledge and Action Network on Systems of Sustainable Consumption and Production)

(September 15th, 22nd; and 28th, 2021)

Time: 6:00AM to 7:30AM (Pacific); 3:00PM to 4:30PM (Central European Time); 6:30PM to 8:00PM (India); and 10:00PM to 11:30PM (Japan)

Introduction:

How to talk about sustainable consumption in the Global South (GS)? The question is often a non-starter. Mainstream sustainability discourse usually holds that the GS is poor and therefore, this question is irrelevant. Unsustainable consumption is purportedly only a rich world problem. Yes, it most certainly is a rich world problem and the rich world needs to take primary responsibility, but it is not only a rich world problem. The GS is also confronted by this question in unique ways. This webinar series seeks to unpack this challenge and by doing so, advance an appropriate vocabulary and knowledge-action agenda from the perspective of the GS.

Rationale:

By acknowledging the role of consumerism or luxury energy-intensive consumption practices in causing environmental degradation, the discussion on sustainable consumption and production, now even enshrined as a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG-12), has gained a lot of momentum in the last few decades. However, much of this discussion has focused on consumption patterns and lifestyles in the Global North (GN). This is useful in its own right, but is also limited. In the GS, the developmental discourse in its uncritical and conventional sense dominates policy discussions on sustainability. Embedded in this developmentalism is a simplistic notion of reproducing the economic institutions and material conditions of the GN, the “high mass-consumption societies” imagined by W. W. Rostow. Given the crushing

poverty that is still the reality of a large section of the GS, an uncritical embrace of development is perhaps understandable. But, is it justifiable?

First, the goal of advancing human well-being is a far more complex process than what the dominant neoliberal development discourse allows. The latter remains committed to an unfettered expansion in the production and consumption of commodities and globalization, regardless of costs to well-being, empowerment, ownership or environmental deterioration. More immediately, we need to acknowledge that a sizeable population of the GS is to some degree integrated into global production-consumption systems operating at unsustainable levels, while many others aspire to do so when enabled with enough disposable income and class mobility. An appreciation of the imperial and ecological history of both the GN and Development, would clarify that aspiring to replicate the high mass production-consumption societies of the GN is a disastrous policy stance. The social and ecological space to do so is not available. How to acknowledge these realities as well as the need for development in policy discourses? Second, and relatedly, a form of production-consumption of goods and services able to meet human well-being preferences and priorities is urgently needed in the GS's context of significant deprivation. And it has to be an arrangement that does not exacerbate, but instead mitigates, inequality and injustice. How to redirect the discursive and material dimensions of political and economic arrangements in the GS, and GN, for this purpose? This is the GS's unique challenge. This webinar series is an effort in that direction.

How then to approach sustainable production-consumption in the GS? What is the vocabulary for economic development that can go beyond the prevailing mass production and consumerism-fuelled 'growthism'? An exploration of this discourse should not merely borrow the conceptual schema from other contexts as there are existing works (both academic as well as action-research) from the GS (e.g. *Anubandh, Economy of Permanence*) that broadly discusses the need to adopt production-consumption arrangements and economic paths beyond the ones received from the "developed" nations. The primary objective of this series of webinars is to find a vocabulary to situate this discourse in the GS.

WEBINAR 1: (September 15th)

From UnSustainable Consumption to Sustainable Production-Consumption Systems:

The present and dominant discourse on sustainable consumption largely centres around an emphasis on lifestyle choices of individuals. This approach, with its focus on individual behaviour for realizing social change towards sustainability, builds on a neo-classical economic framing of individuals as rational economic beings, having sovereignty over their wants. The webinar asks why such a framing of sustainable consumption falls short, generally, but with an emphasis on the GS. The primary concern explored here is that it embeds an uncritical embrace of, and failure to problematize, the dominant development discourse in discussions on sustainability in the GS. Moving away from "sustainable consumption and production" (SCP) to a language of "production-consumption systems" introduces a political economy framing that better captures the discursive power of Development over individual options, aspirations and the notions of good life.

Such a reframing helps rescue “SCP” from the minimally effective frame of individual actors making rational choices. Instead, by locating production (in political economy terms and not “green production” as in industrial ecology) at the front-end, it can bring attention to the intersection of enabling conditions such as inequality, injustice, extractivism, obsessive productivity, and manufactured aspirations that makes consumerism and “high mass consumption societies” possible.

Panelists: [Rajeshwari Raina](#) (India); [Jayati Ghosh](#) (India/USA); [David Barkin](#) (Mexico)

Moderator: [Manu V. Mathai](#)

Guiding questions for the panel:

1. Why look beyond the prevailing neo-liberal emphasis in “SCP” on consumption and lifestyles or even “green production”?
2. How does reframing “SCP” in terms of the political economy of production-consumption systems change our vocabulary?
3. How to engage and advance this alternative vocabulary against the dominant development discourse and practice in the GS?
4. What may be the limitations and pitfalls of this political economy language? How might they be averted or addressed?
5. Are there discursive innovations, partnerships, synergies and resonances that may be helpful in this context?

WEBINAR 2: (September 22nd)

Delineating Notions of the “Good Life” Beyond Consumerism in the GS:

With 85% of the world’s population the development trajectory of the GS is going to delineate the path to sustainability for the world. Driven by corporate-led globalization, most of the developing countries have attached the prevailing neoliberal economic model, whether seemingly democratic or authoritarian, to developmentalism. The very fact that this dominant economic model intrinsically demands unimpeded capital investment and production supported by consumers’ insatiable desires makes the search for alternative economic models imperative, especially so for the developing world. In other words, conceptualizing alternative models becomes crucial as sustainable production-consumption cannot be achieved in any form without bringing fundamental systemic change away from the prevailing neoliberal model that thrives on productivity and consumerism. On the other hand, this capitalistic economic model fetishizes the wealthy and valorizes aspirations that shape socio-culturally held notions of good life towards overconsumption. There are however several examples of alternative value systems that look beyond homogenized definitions of a good life oriented towards individual material possessions and opulence in the GS and elsewhere. A thorough bottom-up understanding of those good life definitions, as attempted by initiatives such as *Vikalp Sangam* and *Beun vivir*, seems critical in delineating socio-cultural and techno-economical pathways for “leapfrogging” for the GS to address the

concern of rising inequality without breaching sustainability limits. This webinar would help in stitching these diverse perspectives to allow the larger pathways to sustainable and just future for all to emerge.

Panelists: [Sharad Lele](#) (India); [Uchita de Zoysa](#) (Sri Lanka); [Miriam Lang](#) (Ecuador)

Moderator: [Soumyajit Bhar](#)

Guiding questions for the panel:

1. How to problematize the hegemonic discourse in the GS that fetishizes overconsumption in the GN and portrays “everyone in this world is going to lead a life of unexamined material overabundance and that it is a matter of time before technological innovations make that a reality”?
2. What are alternative social and economic arrangements for the GS that can embrace broader definitions of wellbeing and lead to a sustainable and just society?
3. How to develop better understanding of existing or emerging definitions of the good life that attempt to decouple human wellbeing from unsustainable utilitarian policy proposals?
4. What are the factors and subsequent processes that can make such alternative definitions politically resonant and socio-culturally desirable?
5. What are the challenges and critiques of adopting those alternative definitions in the GS?

WEBINAR 3: (September 28th)

Building Knowledge-Action Solidarities:

This webinar focuses on the *how* of social change. It records that challenge as one of changing the “enabling conditions such as rising inequality, injustice, extractivism, obsessive productivity, consumerism, and manufactured aspirations that drive overconsumption” to more just, humane and sustainable ways. Borrowing a phrase from Amartya Sen’s *The Idea of Justice*, what this webinar seeks to model is a marriage of “indignation or wrath” against inequality and injustice with “argument and reasoning” to overcome this status quo. The goal can also be restated using language from Pierre Bourdieu in his discussion of *The Logic of Practice*, which stresses that “without violence, art or argument” the status quo tends to prevail. The challenge then for this webinar is to envision, perhaps even model a coming together of knowledge and action that moves away from the prevalent narrative of “translating science to inform policy” to one where “knowing and doing” are no longer distinct ontologies. The challenge is not one of translating for the other, but one of building solidarities to bridge hitherto separated domains.

Panelists: [Ashish Kothari](#) (India), [Rasigan Maharajh](#) (South Africa), [Nnimmo Bassey](#) (Nigeria), Ivonne Yanez (TBC; Ecuador)

Moderator: [Manu V. Mathai](#)

Guiding questions for the panel:

1. How can co-producing knowledge-action be advanced as an imaginary for higher education in the Anthropocene, as well as in the allied spaces of funding that determine the boundaries of research, policy advocacy and activism?
2. How to question power in these ways against a background of legal frameworks and increasingly authoritarian political dispensations that often criminalize rather than protect the interrogation of injustice and scrutiny of capital accumulation?
3. How to step beyond “partnerships” and build “solidarity” between Knowledge and Action in the GS? I.e. How can academics from the GS and GN build solidarity with activists to advance sustainable production-consumption systems?
4. What are the pitfalls of such an imagination?

FORMAT OF THE WEBINARS

Each webinar in this series is planned for 90-minutes. Following a 5 minute welcome and introduction to the webinar by the moderator, each of the invited speakers will have 10 minutes to respond provocatively and constructively from their perspective to the concept note and the guiding questions. This will be followed by 30-minutes for questions and comments from the audience. Next, the speakers will share 20 minutes to comment on what they see as interesting themes from each other, as well as any comments from the audience that they want to emphasize. The final 5 minutes are reserved for concluding remarks from the moderator.