

SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION



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INTRODUCTION

We need drastic action to address the global crises of climate change and biodiversity loss. To do this we need to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, waste and resource use from across all sectors.

As the consumer movement, we can add particular value by focusing on the sectors that involve consumers as end users, where legislation is created and where consumer organisations have the experience, expertise, legitimacy and space to act – energy and food being two of the largest. This is also where the consumer movement could have the biggest impact.

This briefing focuses on the role that consumers can have to create change and help build towards a more sustainable, circular model of consumption.

THE SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGE

We are currently locked into a fossil-fuel based, high-waste model that ties growth to resource use. It is vital that our global model of consumption is changed. But that it is done in a way that supports, rather than undermines, progress on the challenges of poverty, hunger, inequality, poor health and inadequate housing. These problems damage communities across the world and are felt most keenly in the global south – also where climate change is having a huge impact.

Global commitments

Leaders from around the world have come together to address the climate crisis and biodiversity loss. The most important of these global commitments are:

- [Climate goals \(Paris 2015\)](#) - The Paris Agreement aims to keep the global temperature rise this century well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase even further to 1.5 degrees Celsius.
- [Sustainable Development Goals 2030 \(SDGs\)](#) - the SDGs are an ambitious set of 17 global goals with targets for 2030 that set out a new paradigm for economic and social development and contain many goals related to environmental challenges.

However, we are predicted to [fail in meeting all of the sustainable development goals](#), and [the Paris Agreement](#). To change this requires speed, multilateral action, and intensive global effort.

What is sustainable consumption?

Sustainable consumption aims to increase resource efficiency and fair trade while helping to alleviate poverty and enable everyone to enjoy a good quality of life with access to food, water, energy, medicine and more.

Sustainable consumption will not only help us ensure that a world exists for future generations, but it can deliver more immediate benefits. For example, supporting people to turn away from [poor quality, unsafe biomass fuel](#) will not only benefit the environment but peoples' health.

A just transition

A transition to a more sustainable economic model can happen in an equitable or inequitable way. We believe as well as safeguarding our essential natural resources, any transition also needs to deliver social justice, human rights and needs.

Any future system must offer fair prices, safe and high-quality products, open access, respect for human dignity and privacy as envisaged by the core consumer rights and needs.

"What the citizens of the UK believe they send for recycling is actually dumped in our country"

Malaysian Minister,
Yeo Bee Yin.

It must not have any inequitable mechanisms, unfair incentives or punishing options and instead must engage and motivate consumers, making sustainability the easy and fair choice. Not doing this increases the likelihood of a backlash against sustainability efforts and leaving consumers behind.

OVER CONSUMPTION - A GROWING PROBLEM

If everyone lived the [lifestyle of the average person in western Europe](#), we would need three planets to support us, while American lifestyles would require five planets.

As people in emerging economies have increasing disposable income, we are seeing more demand for consumer goods taking further resources out of the planet. [Earth Overshoot Day](#), the day of the year we consume all of earth's resources has been getting earlier and earlier. In 2019 it was 29 July. Everyone needs to reduce the amount they consume and change the ways they do it.

MOVING TO A LOW ENERGY, CIRCULAR ECONOMY

An answer to the problem of over consumption is to move to a [circular economy model](#). This moves away from "take, make, dispose" model to one where waste is designed out of the system, and a model of reuse and regenerate is used. This means using less, more efficiently, as well as designing products that can be repaired, reused or remade.

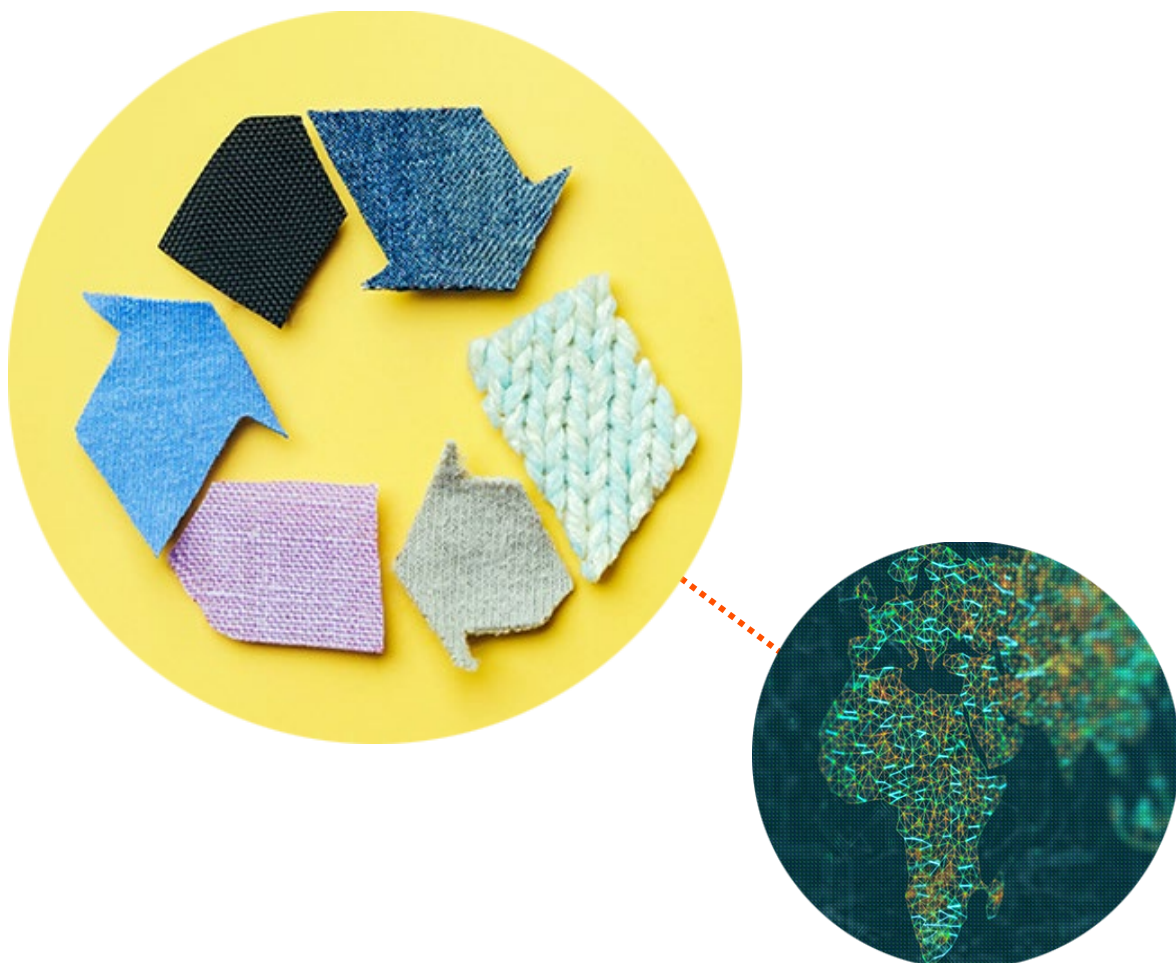
If used, this model would help reduce climate change and reverse biodiversity loss. There are already some good examples of companies taken on this model. For example [Timberland is making shoes out of recycled tire rubber](#), DyeCoo has developed a way of [dyeing cloth that doesn't need water, and uses no chemicals](#), other than the dyes themselves.

See The Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP)'s [circular economy diagram for a visual representation of this concept](#).

'Decoupling economic growth from resource use is one of the most critical and complex challenges facing humanity today.'

Report of the UN Secretary-General

[The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2018](#)



THE CONSUMER'S ROLE

People across the globe are starting to understand the urgency of the environment crisis and already [see it as one of the major threats to their country](#), concerns which have risen significantly since 2013.

Consumers are an essential component of any system of production and consumption and are critical to the success of any change.

The choices you make as a consumer are an opportunity to influence the world around you and drive change. Some key ways consumers can influence the world around them are: through their choices of what products and services to use, how they use them, how they dispose of them when they come to the end of their lifecycle, and pushing for system change from supply chains or changes in regulation.

However, even as a powerful economic group within the current model, consumers do not always have the ability to influence the system at the scale required. Understanding and unlocking consumers' ability to influence the system more will help deliver faster and more meaningful change.

A system refers to all the parts of an industry – from production, retail, consumption and disposal. It addresses at the interlinks between the different points and takes an overview of the whole process.

1. The choices we make

Demand for sustainable products is increasing – particularly amongst younger consumers. [A global study](#) found that 66% of consumers say they're willing to pay more for sustainable brands. However, various studies find the actual purchases of sustainable products to be in the 20-30% range ([here](#) and [here](#)).

Generally, sustainability is not the easy choice for consumers and requires effort on their part to research or identify the right purchase, changing behaviour or requires paying more.

Consumer choice has a power outside of the actual purchase. By calling for better infrastructure around your sustainable purchase you can encourage further uptake of sustainable products. For example, if you buy a reusable water bottle, you may then call on your local government or business to provide free water for you to fill it up. Once more places provide free water, more people buy reusable water bottles. Consumers are a powerful piece of the circular economy.

Barriers to consumers choosing the sustainable option must be broken down, whether this is increasing access, affordability and meeting consumers' needs.

For the goals to be reached, everyone needs to do their part: governments, the private sector, civil society and people like you.

The United Nations

Households consume 29 per cent of global energy and consequently contribute to 21 per cent of resultant CO2 emissions.

The United Nations

2. The way consumers use products and services

Energy

Access to energy is one of the key drivers of inclusive growth but energy production and use is also one of the major contributors to GHG emissions and climate change.

In many less economically developed parts of the world, some consumers have no access to energy, In [Africa just over 40% have access](#), and [globally around three billion people rely on health damaging fuel fires](#). Critical issues include uncertain supply and prices, particularly in places that are heavily dependent on energy imports or where there is the risk of extreme weather.

However, renewable energy is growing (7.9% in 2018) – [a third of global power capacity is now based on renewable energy](#). But making the switch to renewable energy can be a daunting task for consumers.

Consumers need to have easier access to safe, sustainable and affordable energy, with clear information about ways to reduce their energy use.



Our **Yemeni member** campaigned on the safe use of solar energy systems as a solution to energy problems faced by consumers, especially during the conflict in the country.

Our Dutch member Consumentenbond **runs an energy collective**, where consumers come together for greater bargaining power. Energy companies bid for their collective business, with the winning provider committing to supply 100% European green energy.

Food

Food systems contribute up [to 37% of global greenhouse gases](#). Food production, especially animal agriculture, is causing high energy consumption, [deforestation, greenhouse gas emissions, and excessive water use](#). [60% of our plastic](#), much of which comes from the food industry, ends up in landfills or our environment. Farming and agriculture have played a part in the significant loss of soil biodiversity and genetic diversity in crop and livestock species. Of the 6,000 plant species cultivated for food, [only nine account for 66 percent of total crop production](#). These challenges are exacerbated by the fact that by 2030, the world will need to feed an additional one billion people globally.

Consumers can play a role by eating seasonal, locally grown food, with less animal products, and by buying food from producers who use more sustainable practices. For example, [a plant-based diet cuts the use of land by 76% when compared with eating meat](#), so replacing the amount of meat you eat with alternative protein sources is one way to be more sustainable. But meat consumption is growing in some areas of the world. In Asia it is predicted to [rise 78% by 2050](#) (although still only bringing meat consumption to around current [North American levels](#)).

Global food production threatens climate stability and ecosystem resilience and constitutes the single largest driver of environmental degradation and transgression of planetary boundaries.

Eat Forum, [Food Planet Health](#)



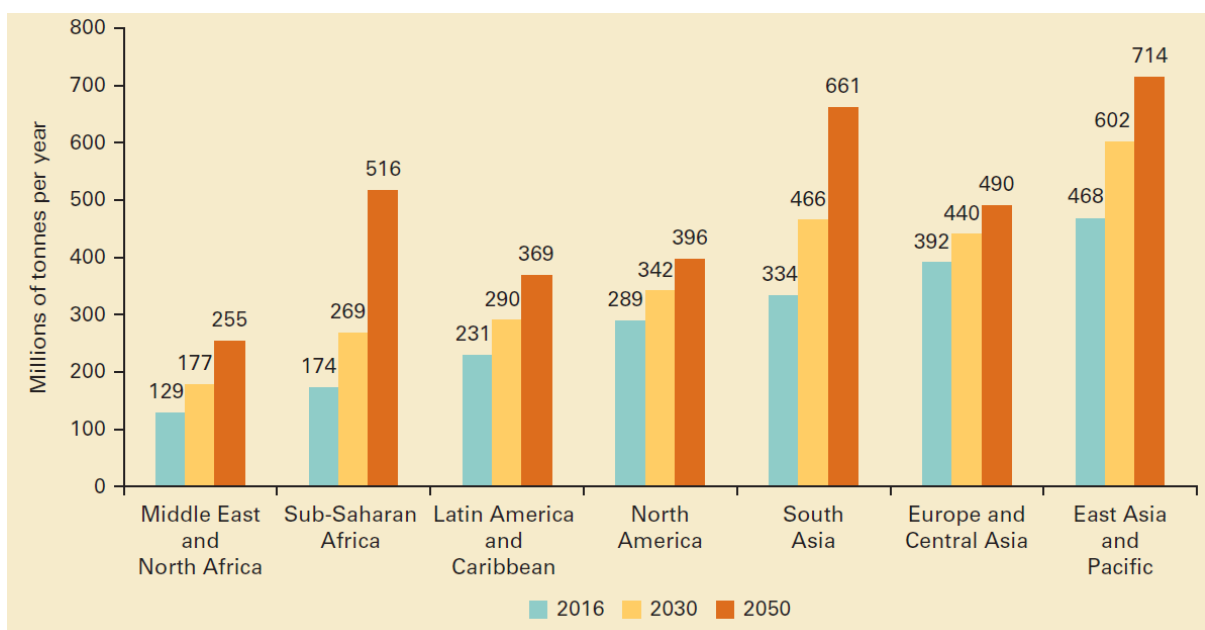
CPAG in Gambia educates consumers about ecologically friendly foods, and builds awareness of the health and environmental effects of pesticide use in farming.

OCU, Spain ran a **consumer education campaign** on food waste and seasonal eating that reached 19,600 people. OCU produced promotional material including leaflets, games, recipe suggestions for re-using leftovers and calendars showing when to buy seasonal fruit, vegetables and fish.

3. How consumers dispose/ reuse products

On average people [generated 0.74 kilogram of waste a day](#), about the weight of two full cans of soup. Countries with high incomes (16% of the world’s population), generate 34 percent of its waste.

- Global waste is [expected to grow to 3.4 billion tonnes by 2050](#), more than double population growth over the same period.
- [30%- 40% of all food produced worldwide is lost or wasted.](#)
- Globally only [9% of all the plastic ever produced has been recycled](#), 79% is in landfills, dumps or the environment and 12% has been incinerated.



[The World Bank](#)

E-waste

[50 million tonnes of e-waste is produced each year](#). This is predicted to rise to 120 million tonnes by 2050. E-waste releases a number of highly toxic chemicals, effecting both the area where it is stored and the people who are responsible for processing it. Researchers recently found [eggs from chickens from the Agbogbloshie area in Ghana's capital, Accra](#), where residents break up waste to recover metals, contained 220 times the European Food Safety Authority limits on chlorinated dioxins, amongst other harmful substances.

If we were more efficient with our e-waste, not only would we remove a significant polluter from the environment but we could recoup some of the material value of our spent devices, [globally this amounts to \\$62.5 billion](#).

"It is hard to imagine even 50 million tonnes, yet this is equivalent in weight to 4,500 Eiffel Towers, enough to cover an area the size of Manhattan - and that's just one year's worth of the e-waste we create."

Blog for World Economic Forum by: Guy Ryder, Director-General, International Labour Organization (ILO) Houlin Zhao, Secretary-General, International Telecommunication Union (ITU)

Altroconsumo in Italy asked 200 consumers who were about to change their old electronic appliances to add a GPS tracker. They found that despite consumers thinking they were disposing of them responsibly, 40% of the products they tracked were not taken to appropriate recycling sites. This research added to the evidence that more stringent controls are needed for e-waste disposal. Altroconsumo are now communicating with the Ministry of the Environment on what a solution could look like.

CEJ in Mexico put environmental pollution and organic production on the agenda of public debate. Through a series of radio shows and school workshops, CEJ were able to help consumers and producers alike understand that significant organic production will not be possible in Guadalajara if the pollution of the Santiago River is not addressed. They managed to negotiate with local schools to perform workshops and talks in almost 20 elementary schools and high schools in the Upper Santiago River Watershed, discussing the theme of this initiative with students and professors.

4. Calling for change

[73% of consumers](#) say they would definitely change their consumption habits to reduce their environmental impact, but there are a number of barriers in the way – price, access, information overload. Consumers can call for change on these barriers, they can demand more supply chain transparency, they can lobby Governments to implement legislation or incentives for better practice. Consumers are already very active on environmental issues – with [climate strikes](#) and [boycotts of unsustainable brands](#), and this has huge potential to go further.

WHAT DO CONSUMERS NEED

To be able to make the environmental choices we all need to make, consumers need access, and information. There also needs to be the infrastructure behind the scenes that matches the commitment that consumers are making. Sustainable consumption needs to be the easy choice.

We need to work to reduce the confusion around how to buy sustainably by ensuring that producers, retailers and policymakers do all they can to make products safe, durable and resource-efficient; before providing clear, reliable information to guide consumer choice.

New technologies

There are major challenges up ahead and we will need new technologies to support us to meet them. Some of the ways technology can support more sustainable consumption:

- Creating lab grown or plant-based meat alternatives
- Smart energy metres to monitor individuals and city-wide energy consumption
- Electric cars
- IoT sensors helping energy companies [reduce emissions \(and eliminate waste of saleable gas at the same time\)](#).

Our Belgian member Test-Achats/TestAankoop is responding to the challenge of e-waste with a web reporting tool called **Trop-vite-use** to create an evidence base of products which people think have worn out too quickly. This will help advise consumers on what to buy and demonstrate demand for longer lasting products to manufacturers.

Consumers Association of Penang (CAP), Malaysia is committed to tackling decreasing levels of biodiversity by promoting seed saving and sharing among farmers, gardeners and the public. They are aiming to reintroduce traditional hardy varieties of seeds, minor crops, local species of vegetables and rare herbs. CAP hosted a seed sharing fair for gardeners and farmers in 2018, with an online seed sharing network established afterwards.

THE ROLE OF CONSUMER ORGANISATIONS

Consumer protection, and the consumer movement can play an important part in building a more sustainable world.

Consumer protection and empowerment has always been inherently concerned with achieving healthy, sustainable environment, fair resource allocation and economic systems that work for people as consumers.

The consumer principles as defined by the UN can also be a useful tool when arguing for a more just transition to a sustainable, circular economic model.

Some of these explicitly mention sustainable consumption, others are critically important when thinking about meeting SDGs and circular approaches.

- Access to essential goods and services
- Protection of vulnerable and disadvantaged consumers
- Protection from hazards to health and safety
- Promotion and protection of consumers' economic interests
- Access to adequate information to enable informed choices
- Consumer education, including education on the environmental, social and economic consequences of consumer choices
- Availability of effective dispute resolution and redress
- Freedom to form consumer groups and organisations and present their views in decision making processes
- The promotion of sustainable consumption patterns
- Protection in e-commerce not less than that afforded in other forms of commerce
- Protection of privacy and the global free flow of information

WORLD CONSUMER RIGHTS DAY

'The Sustainable Consumer' has been chosen by our Board and Council as the topic for World Consumer Rights Day 2020.

World Consumer Rights Day will focus on involving and empowering consumers to make the sustainable choices needed to meet the Sustainable Development Goals. We want to reduce the confusion around sustainability by ensuring that producers, retailers and policymakers do all they can to make products safe, durable and resource-efficient, and sustainability the easy choice.

We are asking members to use World Consumer Rights Day as an opportunity to work with a local school, college or university and organise a session with a small group to talk about sustainable consumption. We will then bring the information together from around the world to paint the global picture.