

Producing and Consuming Sustainably in North America

A Regional Overview of Initiatives and Strategies Promoting Sustainable Consumption and Production

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This paper aims to provide background for the Session 2 discussion on “the current status of sustainable consumption and production in North America,” highlighting some of the initiatives underway and what “might help frame a regional approach.” The three questions posed for the session are:

1. How can we best characterize the current SCP activities in North America?
2. What specific existing SCP programs or activities in North America do you think are most successful and why?
3. What is currently driving adoption of SCP in all parts of North American society (business, government, communities and individuals)? What drivers will be most important in the future?

Key points

1. **A decentralized, regional movement continues to evolve.** A widespread and diverse range of individuals, organizations and initiatives continues to evolve throughout North America, forming a growing sustainability movement addressing the equally diverse production and consumption patterns underlying major environmental, social and economic concerns.
2. **This movement consists of many different communities of practice.** This movement does not follow a master plan or guidelines but rather takes shape as a decentralized, bottom-up evolution of diverse *communities of practice*, each focusing on a particular production/consumption pattern or leverage point and involving a particular configuration of stakeholder groups and individuals.
3. **Evaluating “success” is difficult as this concept and its measures are also changing.** No single standard of “success” exists to assess these different initiatives. Each must be evaluated within its own context and stated aims in terms of the particular production/patterns the initiative aspires to change. Many of these initiatives challenge traditional definitions of “success,” seeking to change the economic rules and current measures of wealth and progress. Globally, progress towards the “overarching objective” of changing unsustainable production and consumption patterns ultimately depends on success in reversing the “worsening social and environmental trends” resulting from those patterns.² New measures and methods of monitoring and assessing progress and success are needed at all levels.

4. **The political context is changing: Until recently, “sustainable consumption” has been viewed as politically and economically risky, in contrast to “sustainable production.”** Since the end of World War II, when frugality was a patriotic virtue, the post-war notion of sustainable consumption has been negatively associated with a reduction in consumer buying (i.e., reduced economic growth) and living standards. The investment costs of “sustainable production,” have been more positively linked with higher returns from eco-efficiency innovations and “green” markets. However, current economic and environmental concerns are driving the shift towards a more positive view of sustainable consumption.
5. **These current practices are each part of an evolving vision of a sustainable economy, yet the movement towards this is fragmented.** Today’s economic, environmental and social crises cry out for new thinking and practical solutions leading to a sustainable economy (i.e., sustainable production and consumption). Each of these communities of practice offer part of an evolving vision and movement towards this overarching objective. A major challenge lies in bringing these parts together. Yet some of these communities display a kind of “practitioner provincialism,” speaking in specialized jargon within close familiar circles, resulting in knowledge gaps with other practitioners as well as the wider public and decision-makers.
6. **Regional support efforts could encourage and improve cooperation, exchange of knowledge and tools, and visibility of practices.** There is an increasing need to overcome the fragmentation within this movement, to bridge the gaps in knowledge, cooperation and vision. There is also a need to bridge the gaps outside the movement, to build greater understanding and support among the wider public, media, and decision-makers. A concerted regional multi-stakeholder effort could provide support in partnership with sustainability practitioners, helping to overcome these gaps. A regional effort could engage and encourage communities of practice to share their stories and priorities with each other and the public, improving overall understanding of how their efforts interlink within the broader sustainability movement. A regional multi-stakeholder effort could work to build political and financial support from institutional decision-makers as well as the wider public.

Producing and consuming in North America

Responding to the challenge raised at the 1992 Earth Summit to “reduce and eliminate unsustainable patterns of production and consumption,” North America has demonstrated widespread and growing leadership adopting and applying sustainability values and principles to the way we produce and consume goods and services (see Appendix, Tables 1-2). On the production side, Canada and the United States have and continue to make significant innovations and improvement through energy-efficient and reduced-emission technologies, buildings, products and services, as well as greener supply chains. On the consumption side, many households and consumers have become more environmentally aware and responsible in their

Figure 1

Voluntary simplicity



lifestyles (see Figure 1), recycling and reusing, buying and investing more responsibly according to local, ethical and environmental values.

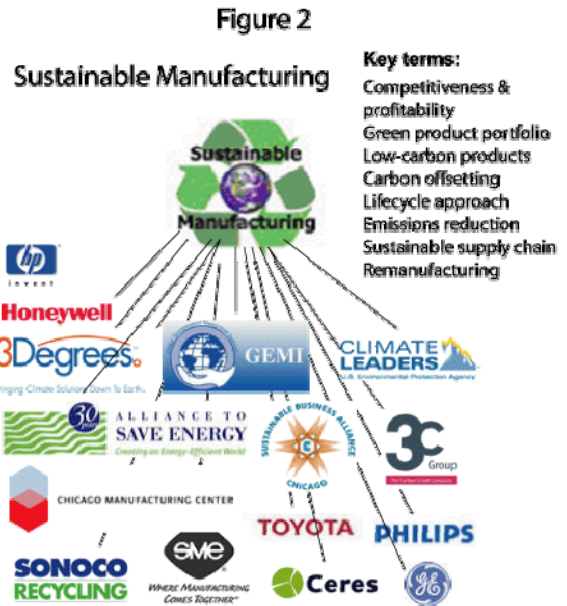
However, as pointed out in the 2002 UN Secretary General's 10-year review of progress since the Earth Summit,³ despite the impressive improvements in technological efficiency and growing public awareness and responsibility, the global social and environmental trends continue to worsen due to increasing consumption and production. Yet without any official national or regional governmental action plans on sustainable production and consumption, such as might be packaged for the Marrakech Process, a “bottom-up” movement promoting these ideas, practices and policies throughout the region continues to evolve and grow. In turn, governments from the municipal to the federal have introduced many important innovations -- without guidelines from a master policy plan on sustainable consumption and production or significant attention from the mass media.

Clearly many challenges and obstacles remain in the path towards a sustainable regional economy. Too many still equate “sustainable consumption” with a reduction in living standards and “sustainable production” with an increase in costs. However, with the recent financial crisis, climbing energy and food prices, and global warming becoming household conversation, citizens, communities and institutions are showing a growing interest and need to identify new approaches to meet daily needs and lifetime goals. It is time for these sustainability practices and strategies to come out of the shadows and receive the public attention and support they need and deserve.

A regional movement towards sustainable economies

There are hundreds of sustainability initiatives active throughout the region dedicated to changing unsustainable production and consumption patterns. We find these practices at all levels – from the household to local community, from the state/provincial to national and global. They involve a range of different players or stakeholders: businesses, governments, labour, public interest organizations, academic researchers and individual citizens and neighborhood groups. Some operate alone, some in partnerships and others function as part of formal or informal networks.

These initiatives may target a particular sector of the economy, such as food and agriculture, transportation, housing or tourism, or a cross-section of these. They speak to a range of different audiences, from the public to professional groups to government policymakers. They also target a range of different environmental, social and/or economic



concerns to their constituents, such as climate change, children's health, urban sprawl or economic insecurity. Their approach and strategies range from designing and marketing energy-efficient, carbon-neutral products and services to re-defining the personal and institutional meaning and measures of wealth and progress.

The complexity of considering all these factors can be daunting when trying to assess the nature and extent of this regional movement of people, organizations, and initiatives towards sustainable production and consumption. Yet they have one thing in common: They all address, to varying degrees, the underlying, root causes of major environmental and social concerns. In this effort they each target particular leverage points within the current system and cycles of production and consumption. They each strive to bring sustainable solutions to those concerns and ultimately improve the quality of life for everyone.

Identifying sustainability initiatives

Given the many factors determining and defining this spectrum of sustainability initiatives, how best to assess and provide an overview of this movement?

In 2003, members of the North American Sustainable Consumption Alliance (NASCA)⁴ faced this question in a study conducted of sustainable production and consumption initiatives in North America.⁵ NASCA is a regional network launched in 2001 to bring together organizations from Canada, the United States and Mexico exploring and promoting sustainable consumption and production practices and policies.⁶

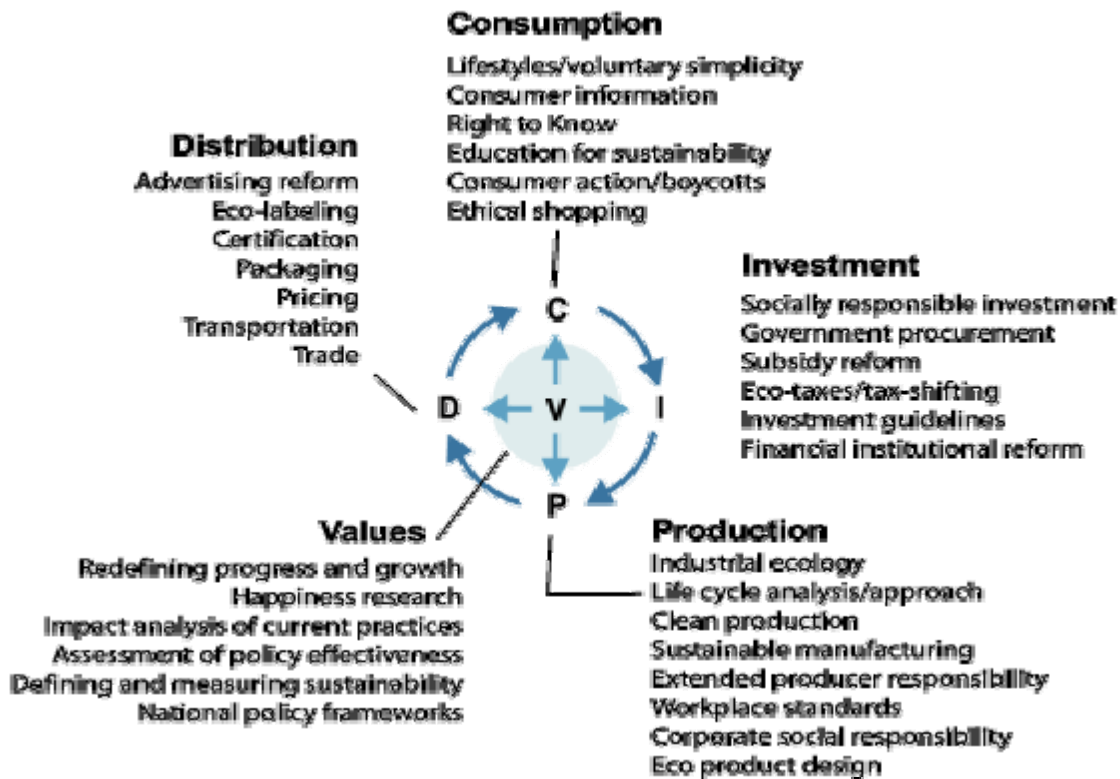
The study highlights the huge diversity of initiatives focusing on different aspects of the production/consumption system (see Figure 3; also Tables 1-2). Some initiatives and strategies focus primarily on *consumption*, in turn more specifically on particular aspects of consumption, such as lifestyle changes (see Figure 1) shopping choices such as ethical shopping, green consumerism, boycotts on sweatshop labor, consumer protection rights, product use, recycling, re-use, and product knowledge.

Other initiatives focus primarily on changing *production* patterns. Some cover a wide range of processes such as lifecycle analysis, industrial ecology and clean production (see Figure 2) while others target more specific parts of a product's lifecycle such as product design and extended producer responsibility. One set of strategies may be viewed as more of a management approach (e.g., corporate social responsibility), including company codes or principles, and company sustainability indicators and reporting.

Other strategies aim to influence not consumption or production patterns directly but instead focus on leverage points within the consumption and production system, such as *distribution* or marketing of products and services. These initiatives aim more at influencing the processes in between product and consumers such as sales, advertising, labeling, packaging, and transport. This is also the area of trade such as fair trade, environmental technology export, international marketing of green products.

Another extremely important group of sustainability initiatives and strategies are those targeting the *investment* decisions which ultimately shape production. The current financial crisis now focuses public attention and scrutiny to this realm of decision-making, thus giving more weight to initiatives addressing those decisions. These include procurement initiatives, socially responsible investment, subsidy reform, and financial institutional reform.

Figure 3. Strategies and Leverage Points



Finally, there is a cluster of initiatives focusing not on any single production/ consumption area, but rather on the underlying *values* shaping consumption, production, investment and distribution decisions. These initiatives aim at redefining conventional concepts of wealth and progress, at researching “happiness” and sufficiency, as well as initiatives defining and promoting sustainability and sustainable production and consumption (such as the current discussion of a regional North American framework supporting sustainable production and consumption efforts).

Engaging communities of practice

The engagement of practitioners takes place within a social context. Most initiatives do not operate in isolation but within “communities of practice,” groups of people “who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.”⁷

The different practices and strategies addressing the various aspects of production and/or consumption are at the center of a range of different communities of practice, each with its own unique culture. The members often have their own language (i.e., jargon and acronyms), conferences or study groups, friendships and publications. They work at different scales from the local level to the national to the international.

It is useful to then consider the various communities of practice evolving around the key leverage points within consumption, production, investment, and distribution.

There are also organizations or movements that unite many communities of practice such as NASCA (an affiliation of NGOs, academia, and government organizations promoting sustainable consumption and production) and BALLE (an affiliation of mostly small and entrepreneurial business networks in the US and Canada).

Towards a regional cooperative framework

In 2005 NASCA organized a workshop with representatives from several of the important communities of practice entitled “Towards a North American Framework for Achieving Sustainable Production and Consumption.”⁸ Participants agreed that a regional framework of cooperation is indeed needed and could provide a valuable function by promoting the exchange of information and experience, dialogue and collaboration among different organizations and networks.

Clearly these communities of practice each have an important story to tell about their contributions to achieving sustainability by addressing those aspects of current production and consumption patterns responsible for many of today’s environmental, social and economic problems. Many of these stories are known and appreciated by relatively small audiences, yet collectively they represent a practical and powerful response to rising public concerns.

A regional cooperative framework or approach could encourage and help those communities of practice tell their stories to the public, and at the same time draw public awareness and support to this important work taking place on their behalf. This calls for outreach and building bridges of understanding among groups that do not necessarily always communicate with each other or the broader public.

¹ North American Sustainable Consumption Alliance (NASCA).

² United Nations, *World Summit on Sustainable Development Plan of Implementation*, 2002; United Nations, *Implementing Agenda 21: Report of the Secretary-General*, 2002; United Nations, *Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21*, 1997.

³ United Nations, *Implementing Agenda 21: Report of the Secretary-General*, 2002. Paragraph 83: “...although progress has been made in improving eco-efficiency in the countries of the ECE region and in de-coupling environmental and economic developments, these gains have been offset by overall increases in consumption. More natural resources are being consumed and more pollution is being generated.”

⁴ In partnership with the Commission for Environmental Cooperation, Environment Canada, UNEP and others.

⁵ See www.nasca.icspac.net/

⁶ The main objective of the study, involving telephone interviews with representatives of 200 such initiatives, with the results available on a public online database, was to provide “best practice” examples of initiatives which might be replicated by others.

⁷ Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, William M. Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, Harvard Business School Press, 2002: 4.

⁸ For more on the results of the 2003 survey of initiatives and the 2005 roundtable, see Jeffrey Barber, “Mapping the Movement Towards Sustainable Production and Consumption in North America,” *Journal of Cleaner Production*, Vol. 15, Issue 6, 2007.