



# **Sustainable Consumption and Lifestyles and the Need for Economic and Cultural Change**

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# Overview

1. The need for change beyond consumerism
2. What is sustainable consumption?
3. Small-scale initiatives as change agents
4. Windows of opportunity
5. Communicating sustainable lifestyles
6. Conclusions

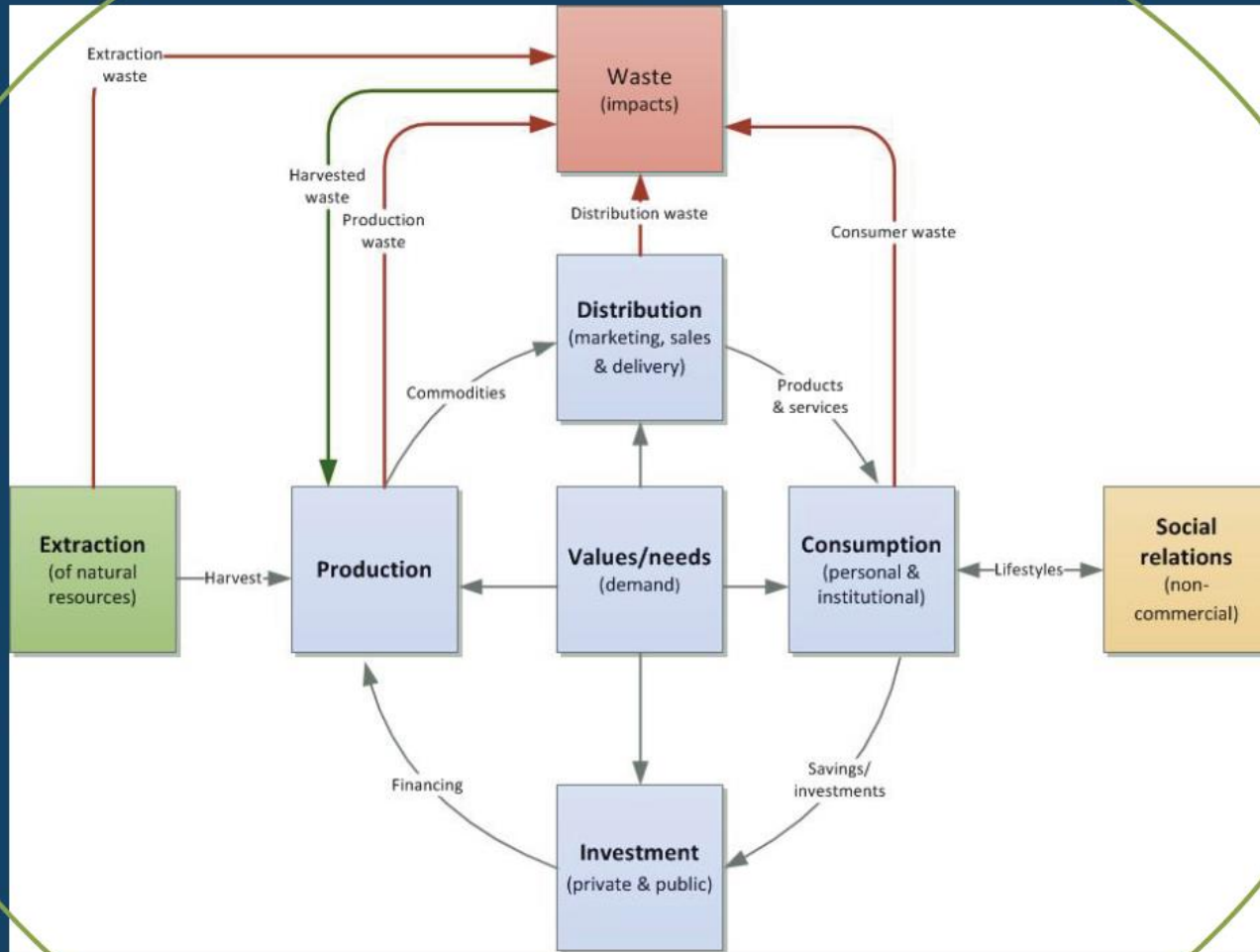
# 1. The need for change beyond consumerism



# 1. The need for change beyond consumerism

- Consumption is big part of the economy: 60-70% of GDP
- Climate change mitigation cannot be reached through technologies alone
- Appealing to final consumers to reduce their consumption is not very effective
- Consumption is part of complex system, which includes production, trade, the economic and financial system
- How to change such a complex system?

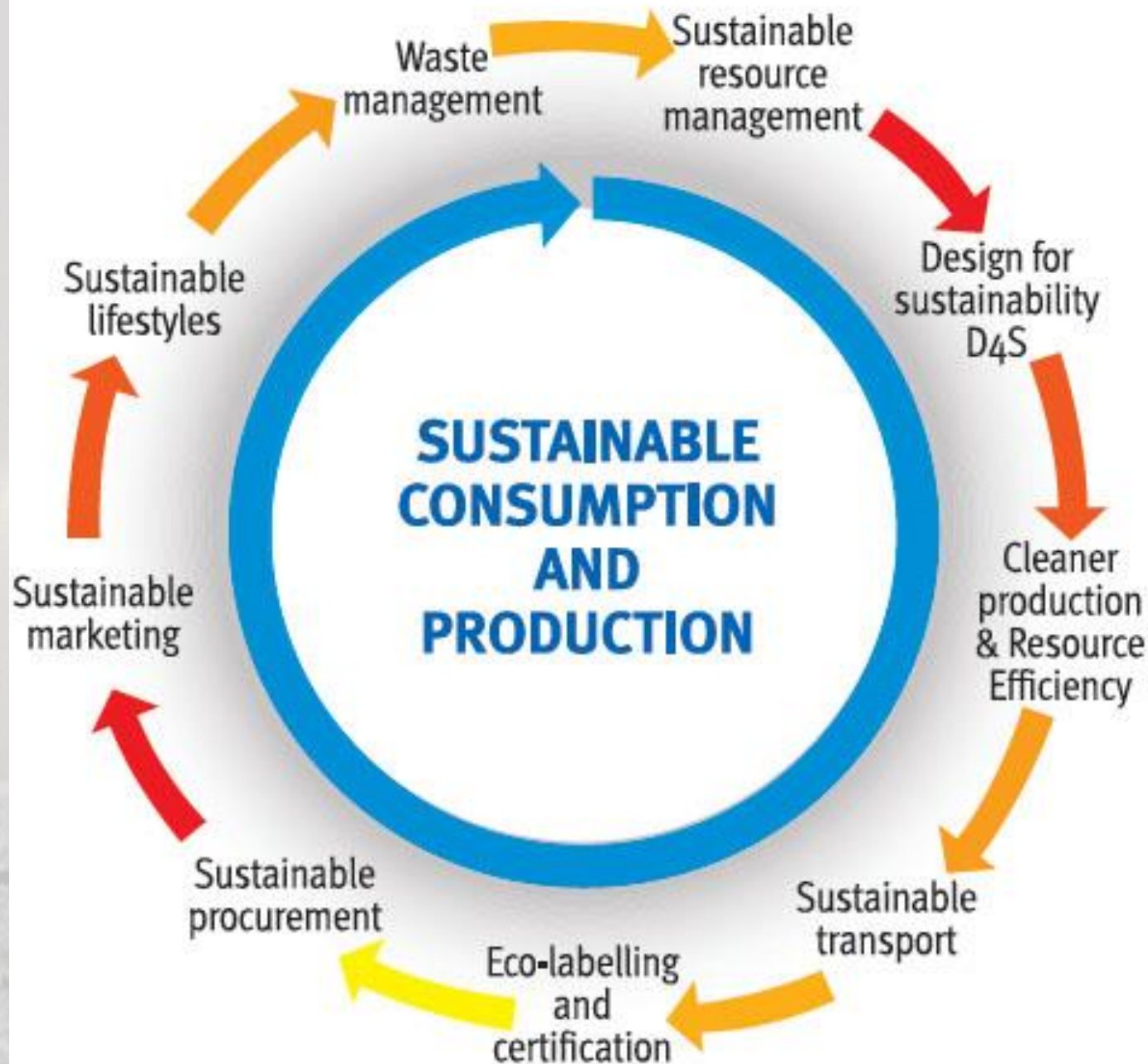
# Consumption and Production systems



## 2. What is sustainable consumption?

- *“...the use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimizing the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations”*

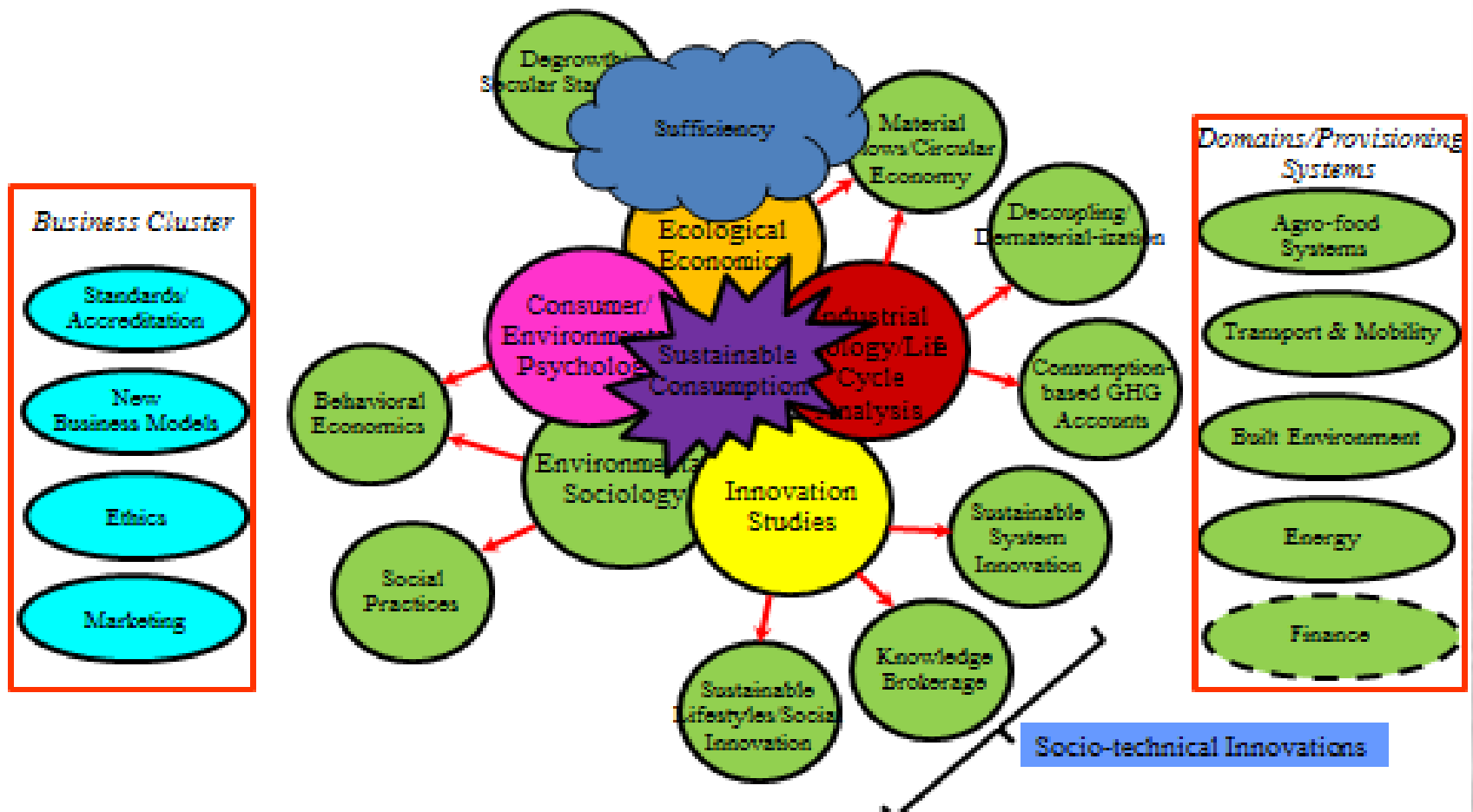
(Oslo Roundtable on Sustainable Production and Consumption, 1994)



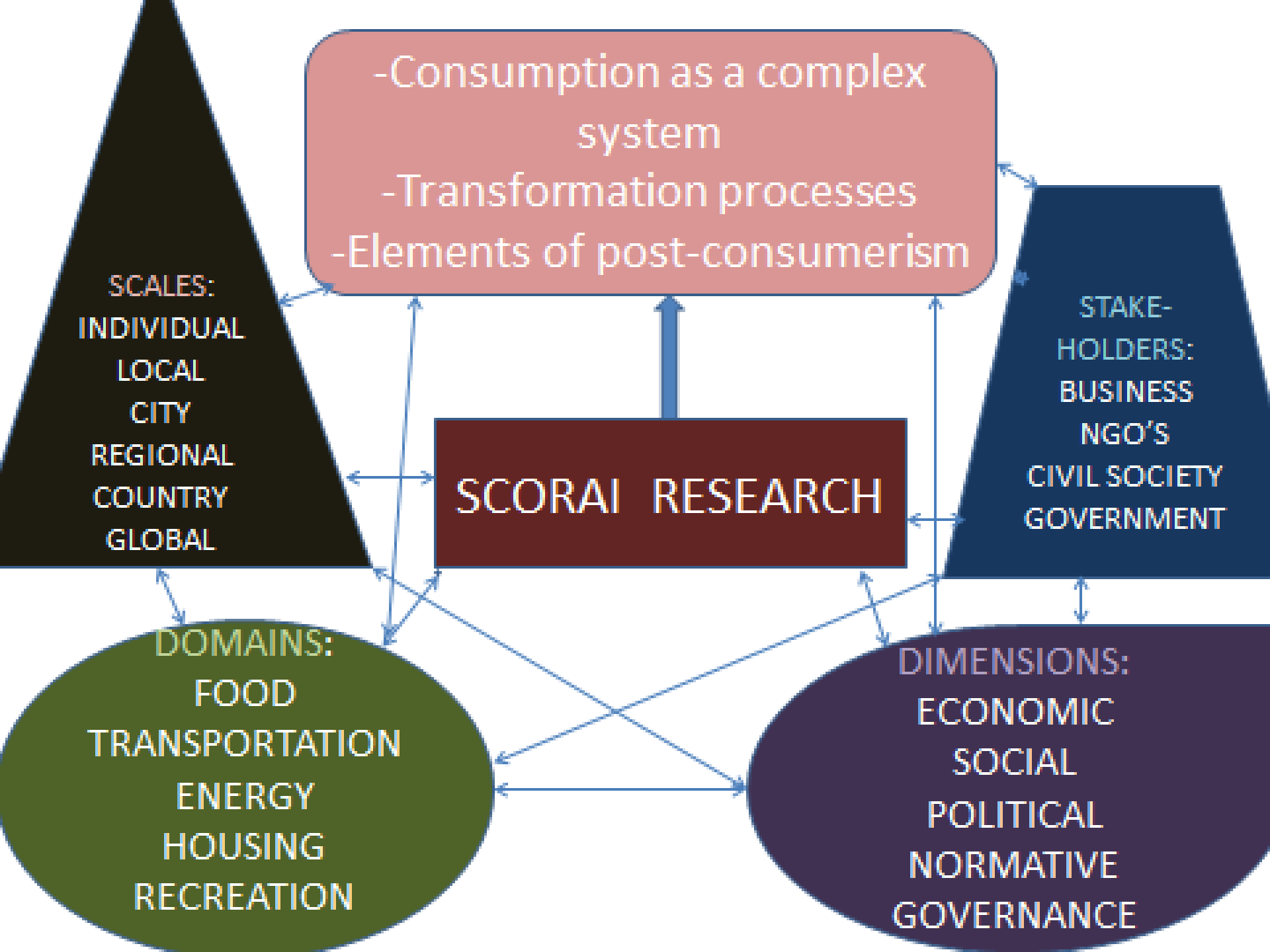
Source: <http://www.unep.org/resourceefficiency/Home/WhatisSCP/tabid/105574/Default.aspx>

# Research on sustainable consumption

Sustainable Consumption (~2015–Present): Post-consumerism?







-Consumption as a complex system  
-Transformation processes  
-Elements of post-consumerism

SCALES:  
INDIVIDUAL  
LOCAL  
CITY  
REGIONAL  
COUNTRY  
GLOBAL

SCORAI RESEARCH

STAKEHOLDERS:  
BUSINESS  
NGO'S  
CIVIL SOCIETY  
GOVERNMENT

DOMAINS:  
FOOD  
TRANSPORTATION  
ENERGY  
HOUSING  
RECREATION

DIMENSIONS:  
ECONOMIC  
SOCIAL  
POLITICAL  
NORMATIVE  
GOVERNANCE

# From consumption to lifestyles as part of complex systems

- *“A sustainable lifestyle minimizes ecological impacts while enabling a flourishing life for individuals, households, communities, and beyond. It is the product of individual and collective decisions about aspirations and about satisfying needs and adopting practices, which are in turn conditioned, facilitated, and constrained by societal norms, political institutions, public policies, infrastructures, markets, and culture”*

(Vergragt, P.J. et al (2016) Fostering and Communicating Sustainable Lifestyles: Principles and Emerging Practices,  
UNEP– Sustainable Lifestyles, Cities and Industry Branch,  
<http://www.oneearthweb.org/communicating-sustainablelifestyles-report.html> )



### 3. Small-scale initiatives as change agents

Many conceptualizations of small-scale initiatives:

- grassroots innovations
- Bounded Socio-technical Experiments
- the non-commercial sharing economy
- social innovations
- experiments in socio-technical niches

They explore - on a small scale - alternatives for present systems of provision and needs fulfilment

# Examples



- urban agriculture,
- slow food
- community-owned power generation,
- ride sharing and other platform economy exchanges,
- cohousing,
- eco-villages,
- local currencies
- credit unions

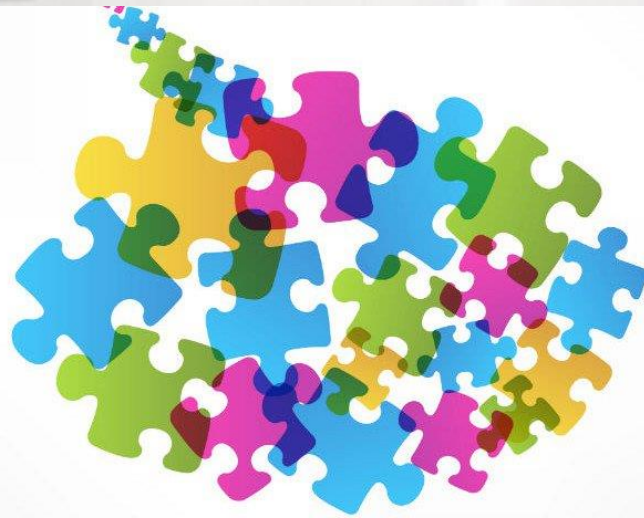


# characteristics

- often local
- driven by individuals and small groups
- who share a vision
- of a sustainable future;
- and acknowledge that change begins at the local level
- and that they need to explore and exploit
- “interstitial spaces in the current system” (Olin Wright)

# Higher order learning

- From: “how to replicate small-scale initiatives; and how to scale them up?” to
- how to identify, preserve and diffuse the higher order learning that takes place in these initiatives?



# Definition of higher order learning

- *“.....participants re-examine, and possibly change, their initial perspectives on the societal needs and wants ... as well as the approaches and solutions; examine and place the particular project in a broader context of pursuing a sustainable society; examine, and possibly change, their own perceived roles in the above problem definitions and solution; change views on the mutual relationships among each other relative to the specific project or the broader societal context, including mutual convergence of goals and problem definitions; change their preferences about the social order as well as beliefs about best strategies for achieving them.”*
- Brown H.S., Vergragt P.J., (2008) Bounded Socio-Technical Experiments as Agents of Systemic Change: The Case of a Zero-Energy Residential Building, *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 75, 107-130.



In addition to learning: initiatives need to have directionality: keeping in mind the broader context:

- **Macroeconomics:** Does the initiative contribute to the necessary shift toward an economy that is less dependent on consumption?
- **Ideology.** Does the initiative contribute to reframing the perspective on improving human well-being through means other than market fundamentalism?
- **Culture:** Does the initiative contribute to a cultural shift toward an understanding of good life as less dependent on consumerism?
- **Technological innovation:** How can the new technology be applied to fostering lifestyles of less consumption and consumerism?

## 4. Windows of opportunity

- “Nurturing novel modes of social organization in the fractures of the dominant system” (Olin Wright)
- niche experiments may destabilize incumbent socio-technical regimes (or systems of provision) especially if landscape factors (such as the threat of global climate change) become aligned with niche experiments (such as alternative energy collaboratives) (Multi Level Perspective)

# Examples of windows of opportunity

- The 2008 Great Recession provided a missed opportunity to change the financial and economic system
- calamities because of economic unbalance
- climate change and other ecological disasters,
- political instability,
- mass migration because of climate change and water scarcity,
- crises in food provision or public health,
- Crises through cyber/ICT failures.

# Intentional windows of opportunity

- social movements against growing unemployment and underemployment
- protests from millennials priced out of gentrifying cities
- challenge to the industrial food production system from the public health sector fighting against obesity and diabetes
- technological innovations, such as self-driving cars

## 5. Communicating sustainable lifestyles

- Communication and education are essential tools for systemic change
- In a recent report for UNEP we argued that small-scale experiments provide opportunities for learning; and that learning can be diffused and communicated
- An interesting example was a project in Hungary, where low-income participants learned about the sustainability of their present lifestyles; and how to take pride in it



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Climate Change



## FOSTERING AND COMMUNICATING SUSTAINABLE LIFESTYLES

PRINCIPLES  
AND EMERGING  
PRACTICES  
- FULL REPORT -

United Nations Environment Programme



## 6. Conclusions

- sustainability cannot be achieved through new technological innovations alone; it also requires deep changes in consumption patterns.
- This requires a combination of government policies, changing business models, changes in infrastructure, and bottom-up initiatives.
- The power of small-scale initiatives could be greatly increased with directionality
- The most important gain from such small scale initiatives is higher order learning among stakeholders
- Deeply participatory communication campaigns based on the principles delineated in the UN Environment report can be effective facilitators of such diffusion of learning.

# Thank you

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- [www.scorai.org](http://www.scorai.org)

## Social Change and the Coming of Post-Consumer Society

Theoretical advances and policy  
implications

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