Consumption and environment - ecological economic perspectives

Consumption and environment – ecological economic perspectives Summary Research on issues related to consumption and environment has grown rapidly since the middle of the 1990s, and several disciplines as well as transdisciplinary fields have contributed to this development. The present papers constitute a small part of this wave of interest, and they are mostly framed as belonging to ecological economics. The collection starts with an introduction to the field of consumption frameworks within ecological economics and then follows a series of papers on more specific issues. The introductory overview outlines the background and the characteristics of the new wave of consumption and environment studies with a specific focus on ecological economic contributions. First, the roots in environmental research are described, and the breakthrough for the interest in consumption. Then the specific motivation for dealing with consumption in ecological economics is presented. Basically, ecological economists agree that there are limits to the material growth of the economy, and that these limits have already been reached or exceeded. As there is an ethical challenge to increase environmental space for the poor, the affluent have to reduce their appropriation of natural resources and pollution capacity. Technological changes can contribute to this reduction, but efficiency improvements will hardly be sufficient and have to complemented by curbing consumption growth. Based on this motivation, ecological economic research on consumption deals with five broad questions: a. How can consumption be conceptualized? b. What are the environmental impacts of consumption? c. What are the driving forces behind growing consumption? d. How does consumption relate to the quality of life? e. How can consumption patterns be changed? The paper reviews briefly a number of contributions on these questions and then adds a few words on the development of consumption research in general, as this is important to understand the research taking place at the point of intersection between consumption and environment. The concluding comment emphasizes that the intersecting field is still in its infancy. To emphasize how my work relates to ecological economics, the following papers have been organized according to the research questions presented in the overview, and not chronologically. Usually, ecological economic research on consumption is problem-orientated and not defined by a theoretical ballast in consumption theories. An important task was thus to search for relevant theoretical inputs and to apply these to the new agenda, implying that some of the work has the character of surveys. Two papers concern the conceptualization of consumption. The paper Economic growth and the environment - or the extinction of the GDP-dinosaur introduces the theoretical discussion on the basic economic concepts of production, consumption and value. The paper argues that if we seriously want to address environmental and distributional problems, we will have to develop different terms and to manoeuvre in the direction of other goals than growth in the GDP. Some of the very old discussions about the foundations of economic theory regain actuality, and the paper re-examines questions such as: what have we got at our disposal by means of production, and what are the costs? This theoretical discussion is carried on in the paper Work-related consumption drivers and consumption at work, as the main part of this paper deals in detail with the conceptual distinction between production and consumption. It is argued that the concept of consumption and the distinction between production and consumption cannot be given precise and useful definitions in an ecological economic framework. The focus must be directed towards the appropriation of nature through different activities, irrespective of whether these traditionally have been called production or consumption. However, from a sociological viewpoint it can make sense to refer to different domains of everyday life, such as the domains related to work and to the home, respectively, and this understanding lies behind the more empirically based discussion in the paper concerning work-related consumption drivers and consumption at work. The main message is that domestic consumption is encouraged by work-related factors and that activities, usually conceived as consumption activities, also take place at work and should also be considered when strategies for promoting more sustainable life patterns are developed. Two papers concern the environmental impacts of consumption. In the paper The environmental impact of changing consumption patterns: A survey I deal with the question of decoupling from the point of view of consumption: will the composition of consumption change in the direction of more environment-friendly goods and services when income increases? It is argued that an overall assessment of the environmental impact is most appropriately based on an input approach, and different empirical studies applying this approach are surveyed. The conclusion is that the historical changes in the composition of consumption seem to have done little to counterbalance the environmental effects of growth. In the paper Is consumption becoming less material? I go more into detail with the possibilities for changes in a more sustainable direction, particularly related to the prospects for increased consumption of services. The paper questions the idea that consumption patterns will change, almost by themselves, in a more sustainable direction, because consumers come to a certain degree of satiation with material goods and therefore demand more services. On the basis of national account statistics and a closer analysis of specific consumption statistics, it is argued that, historically, the increase in public services has been a positive change, while the contribution from private services has been limited. Furthermore, the future possibilities of increasing environmentally benign services meet serious limitations, so active policies are needed to overcome these. Three papers consider the driving forces behind growing consumption. The paper The dynamics of willingness to consume applies a cross-disciplinary approach in a broad search for the driving forces behind the willingness to consume. Throughout the exposition two questions are explored: 1) Why are productivity increases largely transformed into income increases instead of more leisure? 2) Why is such a large part of these income increases used for the consumption of goods and services with a relatively high materials-intensity instead of less materials-intensive alternatives? Three groups of explanations are explored: socio-economic, socio-psychological and socio-technical explanations. The paper concludes with some reflections on the political implications of the analysis. The search for driving forces is carried on in the paper New technology in everyday life - social processes and environmental impact. This paper focuses more in detail on the formation of everyday life and how it changes over time. Technological change is often seen as an important part of the solutions to environmental problems, however, when technological change is seen from the perspective of everyday life, this image becomes more complex. Technological renewals form integral parts of several of the dynamic forces behind consumption and thus contribute to the growing quantities of
consumption, and some technological changes are integrated with the processes which change everyday life more profoundly and thus influence the environment in the long run. Whereas the previous two papers are mainly theoretical, the paper Consumption dynamics and technological change - exemplified by the mobile phone and related technologies reports on an empirical study. The paper is based on a research project regarding households' first-time acquisition of new consumer goods. The project includes many different products, but the present paper concentrates on mobile phones, which are among the fastest growing categories of consumption goods. The study illustrates how consumption drivers are deeply embedded in the considerations, themes and complexities of everyday life, showing few signs of satiation in the short term. Moreover the findings on domestication indicate that some environmentally costly trends in everyday life appear to continue. All three papers in this section emphasize that consumption is an integral part of everyday activities and that most consumption is motivated by all the best intentions. It is not easy to argue that individuals would simply do better with less consumption, because they could then concentrate more on other values in life. Therefore, we face a dilemma when consumption growth ought to be curbed for environmental and distributional reasons. However, it should also be stressed that there is no clear connection between increased consumption and an improved quality of life. This is highlighted in the paper Some themes in the discussion of the quality of life which is the only paper dealing mainly with consumption and the quality of life. The paper argues that 'the good life' depends on many different aspects, some of which are in conflict with increased consumption for the individual. This is particularly obvious when the collective aspects of the good life are taken into account, such as environmental qualities, risks, social inequalities etc., and when humans are considered to be not only egoistic, but also ethical beings. It is thus possible to imagine social changes implying less consumption concurrent with improved social and environmental conditions of life. None of the papers in the collection focus mainly on how to change consumption patterns, although several papers consider political implications in the conclusion. The low priority given to specific suggestions relates to the present situation where the main political conflict does not concern how to deal with the problems, but rather how to define and understand the problems. There is no consensus about the character and scope of the problems, as it is illustrated by much long-term economic planning in relation to the welfare state and globalization, which is carried out with little consideration of environmental aspects. Thus, my work is mainly concerned with the fight over understandings – how should the challenge be conceived, how are the problems embedded in the socio-economic system, and which approach should be applied, if we really wish to face the challenge.

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