

Sustainable Citizenship: Opportunities and Barriers for Citizen Involvement in Sustainable Development

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Introduction

The project *Sustainable Citizenship* studies the barriers to and opportunities for sustainable action on the part of individual consumers in Sweden. This choice of subject matter is motivated by research showing the importance of consumer behavior as a key factor behind climate change, the role of private consumption in perpetrating environmental and social injustices, and the general problems that governments and civil society have had in convincing individuals to exercise constraint in their consumer practices (IPCC 2007; Cultures of Consumption 2007; Spargaa- ren 2006; Dobson 2004; Berglund & Matti 2006; Princen et al. 2002). "Barriers to action" have been found to inhibit the incorporation of the tenets of sustainable

development in important common practices like shopping for oneself and one's family in high-income countries (Hobson 2003). The project investigates how individual citizens think about sustainable development in relation to private consumption and if concerns for sustainable development affect their consumer choices and practices. Its general research questions are: (1) Do Swedish citizens have the necessary prerequisites to be sustainable consumers? (2) Do they think about the consequences of their consumer choices and practices for sustainable development? (3) Do they exercise sustainable judgment in their consumer choices and practices? (4) Why/why not is this the case?

Theorizing Sustainable Citizenship

The project takes its point of departure in on-going scholarship which studies how individuals can play a role in the promotion of global sustainable development in the era of globalization, free trade, and individualization. This scholarship finds that traditional political solutions are insufficient for global sustainability because traditional governmental measures (regulatory politics and litigation) are not and possibly cannot effectively solve global environmental and social justice problems that require trans-governmental action and behavioral change on the part of individual citizens (Ruggie 2008). Therefore, scholars increasingly focus on the personal responsibility of citizens in globalized politics.

Some political philosophers (e.g., Dobson 2004; Pellizzoni 2004; Young 2006; Goodin 2003) have been developing new models of political responsibility that they believe better fit today's global problems.

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A practice focused on in their writings is consumption. Several political scientists theorize about the consumer market as a global arena for sustainable development and “individualized collective action” as a form of political responsibility-taking to work against environmental and social justice wrong-doings in everyday settings (Micheletti & McFarland 2009; Micheletti 2003). Environmental sociologists stress that consumption is a decision-making arena or junction that joins citizenship and consumer practices (Spargaaren 2006). Like voting and other forms of political action, they conceive it as filled with potentially conflicting values as well as political capability and socio-economic constraints of high relevance for sustainable development. For them, consumption is, therefore, an arena for the “ethical problematization” of our lifestyles (Clarke et al. 2006) and individual consumers are important responsible political agents for sustainable development. Together these theoretical efforts point out that consumption forms a vital part of citizenship because citizens in their societal role as consumers are increasingly important for politics in general and for sustainable development in particular.

The concept of sustainable citizenship is part of this theoretical development. It involves an understanding of citizenship as a total practice of responsibility between individuals and their political, social, economic, and natural environment. Citizenship in this conception is not only a formal relationship of duties and rights between the political individual (the citizen) and the state but also a multi-faceted relationship that stretches the spatial, temporal and material bounds of citizenship from its traditional national-state setting to that of the global economy (cf. Lister 2007).

Are Swedes Sustainable Citizens?

The project has theoretical and empirical aims. It will contribute to the theoretical development of the concept of sustainable citizenship and empirically investigate how, how well, and why/why not individual citizens contribute to sustainable development through their consumer practices. This section presents the project’s empirical studies, which use decision-making on common consumer goods to study citizens’ understanding of the role that they play and can play in sustainable development processes. The empirical studies involve specific questions on individual citizen’s factual knowledge about sustainable development, how well they accept its underlying values, their attitudes and values about their personal responsibility for it, the help or “triggers” (information and encouragement) they receive from government, civil society and others in informing themselves and developing an understanding of their role in it, and if and how all this affects their consumer practices and choices. It studies how individuals think and act about frequently-purchased common consumer goods that include a set of sustainability dilemmas involving all three pillars of sustainable development (economics, the environment, and social justice). The barriers to action discussed in the literature and investigated in the project include information deficits, socio-economic considerations, value orientations, convenient and time-effective consumer routines, perception of the ineffectiveness of individual action for problem-solving, and problems in integrating new information into old routines (e.g., McKenzie-Mohr 1999; Hobson 2003).

Method triangulation characterizes the project, which includes a national repre-

sentative survey and three case studies, both of which investigate and map different categories of citizens (gender, age groups, socio-economic divisions, lifestyles, political identities, value groups, etc.). The representative survey will be conducted together with another project financed by the Swedish Council of Research, "The Ecological Citizen: An Empirical and Theoretical Study of the Prospects for Ecological Citizenship" (Sverker Jagers and Johan Martinsson, Department of Political Science, Gothenburg University). The survey will generate aggregate comparisons between groups of citizens, provide general findings on citizen attitudes, values, and action, and where possible allow for comparisons over time. Survey results will be used to design the case studies. The case study method, a preferred strategy for studying new subject areas (Yin 2003), will create detailed knowledge at the individual level with the help of a variety of qualitative methods. Results from the case studies will be compared with each other to better understand differences in how citizens view their role in sustainable development. Case study results will be compared with those from the representative survey.

The survey augments previous research on political consumers in Sweden and elsewhere (see Micheletti & Stolle 2005; Strømnes 2005; Tobiasen 2005; van Deth forthcoming). This research points to the importance of further studying individual decision-making regarding consumer goods and the sustainability trade-offs that consumer decision-making can imply. It also points to the need to probe more into consumer practices and the contradictions between sustainability-friendly attitudes and values, on the one hand, and unsustainable action, on the other. Survey findings will allow for con-

clusions about (1) consumer trust in and use of current information from public agencies, civil society, corporations, and others on sustainable development and the kind of public and other information that is necessary for sustainable consumer practices, (2) whether public agencies and others offer consumers the right kind of help (information and encouragement) to understand the relationship between their consumer practices and sustainable development's three pillars, (3) the values of importance at the individual level for the realization of sustainable development/consumption, (4) the role of consumer perceptions of personal responsibility for sustainable development, (5) the barriers that inhibit more sustainable consumer practices, and (6) how well sustainable development as a value system is embedded and reproduced in consumer practices and micro processes in Swedish society.

The three case studies (see below) investigate how citizens relate to and reason about common, highly-purchased consumer goods (see below) and will contextualize the survey findings with more questions about past consumer practices, information understanding, specific product choices and consumer practices, communication and contacts with public agencies and other institutions, sustainability dilemmas and trade-offs on particular consumer goods, sources of motivation for sustainable consumer practices, and barriers to action. Different qualitative methods will be used in the case studies. The choice of cases—toys, affordable clothing, and labeled food—is based on previous research showing that these consumer goods involve several dilemmas of relevance for a study of sustainable citizenship. They are also consumer goods purchased in large quantity and

capture different segments of the consuming population.

Each case study investigated the project's general research questions and a series of more specified research questions developed for the case at hand. The case study on toys will also study how schools, gendered peer pressure, and information and knowledge about toy sustainability (e.g., costs, personal safety, environmental risks, and global social justice) affect consumer preference, choice, and practice. Gender aspects of toy consumer practice will be emphasized. This case will focus on parents of small children and child caregivers. Specific findings will aid our understanding of how the values of sustainable development are communicated to parents/caregivers and children and from parents/caregivers to children. In the case on affordable fashion we study the sustainability problems of short-lived mass-produced clothing and shoes. It investigates how young (the common 16-29 year old category) women and men understand the sustainable footprints that they leave behind when clothing shopping and from their apparel consumer practices. Aspects to be studied in detail are the relationship between young people's clothing dreams and their purchasing patterns, the role of commercial advertisements and other information for clothing preferences, and whether information and knowledge about clothing sustainability (as illustrated by corporate social responsibility for human and workers' rights and activist campaigning against global garment sweatshops) play a role in consumer choice. The consequences of the gendered importance of looking good for sustainable development are emphasized in this case. Case findings will aid our understanding of the role that sustainable development plays in young

shoppers' lives and help explain previous political consumer research reporting that Swedish university students give less concern to clothing sustainability than those in other countries (Stolle et al. 2005). The case study of food focuses on organic, fairtrade and the "nyckelhål" labeling schemes for consumer food choices and follows up political consumerist survey research on grocery shopping (Micheletti & Stolle 2003; Stolle et al. 2005) and EU research on the role of consumers in animal welfare (Cordis 2007). Food labels are some of the most developed schemes now in existence. They inform consumers about the sustainability risks to the environment and global social development of different food products. The case investigates specific sustainability trade-offs when "sustainability information" in the form of food labels is readily available. It studies how middle-aged people and particularly women (the largest group of political consumers) view the relationship between their food choices and sustainable development. The case will identify barriers to action in situations where information on sustainability is readily available on supermarket shelves and through a variety of information campaigns and labeling schemes.

Importance of the Project and Expected Research Results

The project's main contribution is theoretical and empirical knowledge on the barriers to and opportunities for more sustainable citizen practice. The project further develops political consumerism scholarship theoretically by integrating it in the above-mentioned on-going research as well as methodologically and empirically

by using more and different methods and measures to study actual cases of consumer choice and practices and the “sustainability dilemmas” experienced by individuals and involved in the purchase of common consumer goods. It will also contribute with knowledge on the mechanisms that can trigger necessary individualized responsibility for sustainable development. Important aspects here include such thresholds for action as information deficits, trust in information providers, socio-economic considerations (education, income, residence, etc.), gender, and individual incentives and values. The project’s case studies and survey findings will be related to previous and on-going research and provide useful knowledge about attitudinal and behavioral trends in political consumerism and sustainable citizenship. The project will give a socio-economic/demographic, knowledge, and value portrait of Swedish “citizen-consumers” and offer findings on their ability and willingness to take personal responsibility for sustainable development. It will also contribute to the methodological discourse on measuring new forms of political action. Project results will have practical application in that they can be used in the formulation of public information and measures to improve citizen understanding of and participation in sustainable risk management.

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