

POLICY PAPER

Why sustainable consumerism is good but not enough

Helena Škrdlíková

- **In the last few years, great emphasis in climate change debates has been placed on consumers and their personal contribution to the greenhouse gases emissions. Media, internet and scientific studies provided numerous suggestions on how consumers can, through their choices, either help with mitigating climate change or contribute to making it worse. Not governments, not companies, but everyone who has the power to buy and consume is now responsible. In fact, there have never been more people actively making conscious choices for the sake of the environment.**
- **Although there are many positive aspects of sustainable consumerism and there are areas where the change for the better can be achieved by consumers themselves, relying merely on consumers to solve the global climate change crisis might not be enough.**



Why sustainable consumerism is not for everyone?

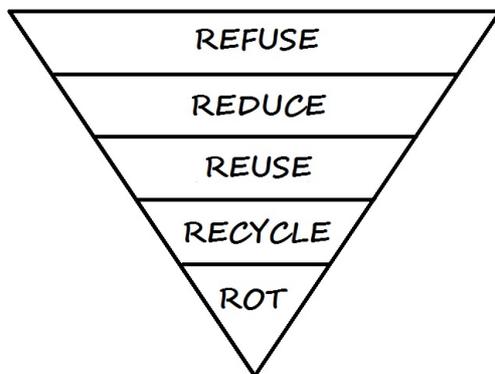
1. **It is just for the privileged.** The main reasons being money and time. Buying organic food, switching to a vegan diet, following the trends of slow fashion or renovating the house to be more energy efficient all might be a way to lower one's carbon footprint, however, not everyone is able to contribute the money and time these lifestyle changes require.
 2. **People do not want to live differently.** Sustainable consumerism is easier said than done and often requires one to go against social norms and do something differently than the rest of the society, which might not be the most comfortable or enjoyable thing to do.
 3. **Consumers cannot affect the whole lifecycle of the products.** Even if the consumers eliminate the negative aspects of their purchase, they cannot affect the whole lifecycles of the product.
 4. **Sustainable consumerism might hinder real change.** Focusing entirely on personal choices diverts the attention, will and even money as it emphasizes our role as consumers as opposed to that of active citizens, who have the power to change things beyond the reach of their credit cards. Some might even argue that the only benefit of sustainable consumerism is that one does not have to feel guilty about their impact on climate change.
2. **Creating the demand for more sustainable products.** Despite many business' attempts to not only be profitable but also useful for the society, profit will always remain the most important goal. But what if all customers decided to become sustainable and stopped buying non-sustainable products? In this case, businesses would have to change their practices not to lose their customers.
 3. **Making sustainable lifestyle easier for others.** If a sustainable consumer fulfils his/her goal and really figures out how to consume everything in a sustainable manner, he/she will try to share this knowledge with others, making it easier for others to follow.
 4. **To not seem like a hypocrite.** Sustainable consumerism might not solve the global climate crisis alone, but it is better than doing nothing. Moreover, for a person that is openly not indifferent about our nature and climate, it is a moral imperative, otherwise they can be perceived as hypocrites.

Reduce, reuse, recycle: Is this mantra effective or do we need more actions by the governments to move forward?

This paper takes a closer look at the different approaches to reduce the amount of waste produced. The attention is given to the zero-waste approach: be it a lifestyle of consumers who are trying to lower their production of waste by their own sustainable and conscious shopping choices, a policy of companies which are trying to effectively use every resource, or the waste management systems governments are implementing to achieve better efficiency. Good results can be found in all kinds of attempts, but the greatest reduction of waste can only be achieved by the cooperation of all the aforementioned stakeholders.

Why should everyone apply some aspects of sustainable consumerism?

1. **Motivating others.** If a consumer lowers the carbon footprint of his/her consumed goods, this reduction is insignificant on a global scale. However, if a consumer positively influences other consumers to make greener choices and reduce emissions, one person will lead to more people, and the results could be quite impressive.



Source: <https://trashless-society.com/zero-waste-was-bedeutet-das-eigentlich/>

The main mantra of the so-called zero-wasters is known as the "5R pyramid": refuse, reduce, reuse, recycle and rot. In other words: refuse the things we don't need, reduce the consumption of the things we do need, reuse the things we already have, properly recycle the waste we produce, and make sure any biodegradable waste is composted. The rest of the waste that does not fit in the 5R pyramid will unfortunately end up in landfills or be incinerated, creating further greenhouse gas emissions.

The main waste, which zero-wasters are trying to avoid, is the plastic one and specifically single-use plastic waste such as bags, bottles and food packaging. Reducing this type of waste can be achieved by consumers themselves, by companies which can redesign their product packaging, or by governments introducing regulations for this type of waste.

Plastic bags

Zero-wasters refuse plastic bags in shops and bring their own shopping bags, reuse bags from previous shopping, or reduce the number of bags needed by cleverly organizing the shopping and thus fitting more stuff into less bags. As easy as it sounds, the struggle remains that this would never solve the problem of waste from plastic bags

entirely because not every consumer actively tries to avoid them.

But how to make people who do not care about sustainable consumerism use less shopping bags? The answer has proved to be financial motivation. When the compulsory fee of 5p per plastic bag was introduced in Scotland, the number of bags sold in the first year dropped by 80%.¹

In Rwanda, the government went even further. The usage of plastic bags has been prohibited and violators of this law face heavy fines or even jail time. Typical fines are around 50 000 francs (US\$ 61, € 67).²

In some countries, governments would not introduce this law if it were not for the consumers who demanded it. In the island state of Bali, the campaign "Bye, bye plastic bags" was led by people who were upset about plastic bags and who did not want to just stick to reducing their own consumption. In the beginning, the campaign to prohibit plastic bags on the island started as a project of elementary school pupils but later with the support of other citizens, the governor promised to fight for this law³.

Plastic bottles

Zero-wasters do not use plastic bottles and have their own reusable ones. But yet again, not everyone uses their own water bottle and despite all the attempts to use fewer plastic bottles, their numbers actually keep increasing every year. The solution again can be in financial incentives. In Germany, where it is compulsory to sell PET bottles with a deposit, the current returning rate is 95-98%.⁴

Food packaging

There has so far been little attempt by governments to tackle the waste from food packaging. Reducing waste from food packaging is a challenge, which has proved itself

1

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/apr/17/scotland-plastic-bag-usage-falls-after-5p-charge-introduced>

² <https://plasticoceans.org/rwanda-plastic-bag-ban/>

³ <https://assembly.malala.org/stories/bali-plastic-bag-free>

4

<https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.productstewardship.us/resource/resmgr/imported/German%20Packaging%20Case%20Studies%20Apr09%20Power%20Point.pdf>

to be best tackled by consumers, as you can see on the example of the Czech Republic below.

The Czech Republic, zero waste movement and the government

According to the statistics of EKOKOM, in Czechia, 69% of plastic waste from packaging in 2017 was recycled.⁵ However, what could look like an amazing recycling rate is actually a misleading figure. This figure shows all the packaging, which ends up in a waste sorting line, where the plastic is assorted according to its future possible usage. This process of waste assortment is already considered as recycling in the statistics. But only PET bottles and PE foils can be really recycled in the true meaning of the word, i.e. turned into a new product. The rest of the plastic ends up in a landfill or is turned into a solid alternative fuel, widely used in the cement industry. Even if this plastic is incinerated, statistics register it as recycled. Despite the fact this figure is misleading and does not show us the amount of plastic recycled, it is true in one fact: Czech people are capable and willing to responsibly deal with their waste.

In fact, one of the largest amount of package-free shops per inhabitant in Europe can be found in the Czech Republic. All 28 of them were opened in the last three years during which the zero-waste lifestyle became popular. Companies used this popularity and started to answer the demand for more sustainable, zero-waste products. However, despite this surge in zero-waste consumers, shops and products, the average amount of waste produced in the Czech Republic in these three years kept increasing.⁶

Now when it is obvious that people do not want to produce so much waste anymore, the Czech Ministry of the Environment seems to acknowledge the fact that waste, especially the plastic one, is a serious problem but it unfortunately fails to deal with it at the right level.

When the new 2018 Circular Economy Package was introduced, the Ministry of the Environment suggested the lowest goal for plastic recycling possible. At the same time,

it started a campaign "Dost bylo plastu" ("Enough with the plastic already"), which bases all reduction of plastic waste on voluntary agreements with companies to reduce their plastic usage. This campaign seems to be completely wrong. It looks like the ministry is trying to say: The only solution to the problem of excessive plastic waste is through sustainable consumption (and production).

But why does the ministry not take it upon itself to ensure the implementation of a law that would make it difficult and expensive to produce this type of waste? Only seven companies⁷ have signed the agreement so far and we as consumers are once again left to vote with our money and shop with the companies that have signed the contract. The only good result of the campaign in terms of the law is that finally there is an official statement by the National Institute of Public Health about taking out food or drinks into customer's own dishware.

Fortunately, the Ministry of the Environment and its "Dost bylo plastu" campaign is not the only campaign aiming at the reduction of plastic waste. Greenpeace and its "Plast je past" ("Plastic is a trap") campaign aims exactly where it should: on the government, which has the real power to enforce new laws. Unlike the "Dost bylo plastu" campaign, in which consumers are asked for passive support of companies reducing plastic waste, the "Plast je past" campaign tries to motivate people to not only be customers, but also to be active citizens who have the power to change the way things are. Not just with their credit cards but also with their voices and opinions. To this day, more than 76 000 people⁸ have signed a petition, which asks the government to accept the EU plastic waste regulation in its most strict quotas.

⁵

https://www.ekokom.cz/uploads/images/mira_recyklace_2017.jpg

⁶ https://www.mzp.cz/cz/news_171017_OD

⁷ https://www.mzp.cz/cz/news_181906

⁸ <https://www.plastjepast.cz/>

Conclusion

There is no sustainable future without sustainable consumers but sustainable consumerism without direct action is just a green indulgence. Therefore, to effectively tackle the environmental problems, the effort must come from consumers, as well as from companies and governments.

Helena Škrdlíková

Helena Škrdlíková studied Environmental studies and sustainable development at the Palacký University in Olomouc and is a co-founder of Czech Zero Waste initiative.

Prague Climate Talks is a project aimed at establishing a platform for continued high-level discussion on the complex issue of climate change. Throughout a series of debates it will bring together experts and professionals from varying relevant fields as well as members of the general public.

The project is co-organised by **EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy** and **Glopolis** in cooperation with **Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Prague** and under the auspices of the **UN Information Centre Prague**.

