

Expression of Interest – Knowledge-Action Network on Systems of Sustainable Consumption and Production

Agenda 21, signed by 178 countries in 1992, stated that “the major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production.” Ever since, Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) has been an integral part of international policy making on sustainability and in the most recent global agreement, the *2030 Agenda*, world leaders committed to make “fundamental changes in the way that our societies produce and consume goods and services.” There is thus strong recognition at the highest policy level of the need for a shift to SCP and it is for good reasons that it is one of the eight Key Challenges identified in Future Earth’s 2025 Vision.

Research on *sustainable consumption* and *sustainable production* has had affinity over the past two decades, but substantive interaction has not fully taken root. This is due to distinct histories of the respective fields and their different disciplinary competencies. Work on sustainable consumption has typically been carried out within sociology, psychology, anthropology, human geography, ecological economics, and political economy, while research on sustainable production has primarily engaged scholars in engineering and industrial management. Attempts to study the dynamics of complex production networks and value chains through a sustainability lens, such as work done on environmental justice, have not managed to secure strong academic standing. A similar divide also exists in the policy community. National governments have long experience in addressing the adverse impacts of production, and do so by employing a range of approaches and tools. However, it is only in the last couple of decades that they have made efforts to address sustainability challenges from the consumption (or demand) side, and they are still struggling to come to grips with how this can be done effectively.

Research on SCP has also been arrayed on a continuum ranging from “weak SCP” (which studies the efficacy of individual behavior-change interventions premised largely on consumer education and eco-labeling and, separately, the development and deployment of more efficient and less polluting technologies) to “strong SCP” (which is focused on the macro-structural factors underlying prevailing production-consumption patterns). While adherents of weak SCP concentrate on achieving reductions in the adverse effects of goods and services on a per unit basis, generally by emphasizing enhanced efficiency, proponents of strong SCP contend there is a need to achieve absolute reductions in aggregate energy and materials throughput. Achieving this more ambitious objective is likely to entail the development of coordinated and aligned suites of policy measures that curtail volumes of production and consumption and to raise critical questions about social and economic equity, continued economic growth, and individual and societal well-being. Accordingly, many governments, at both national and subnational levels, have incorporated SCP in their strategies and plans, but their interventions have mostly been based on weaker and disaggregated SCP perspectives and actual achievements have been correspondingly modest. Current circumstances suggest the need for more vigorous transdisciplinary collaboration between researchers and practitioners in the design and deployment of policy options based

on stronger conceptualizations of SCP and centered on factors that frame and guide lifestyle choices.

The proposed Knowledge-Action Network (KAN) seeks to address the two disconnects indicated above, namely 1) how to forge a more integrated understanding of sustainable consumption and sustainable production and 2) how to increase the societal/policy relevance of strong SCP. We deploy the notion of Systems of Sustainable Consumption and Production (SSCP) to emphasize the need to address and transform whole provisioning systems for goods and services, including consumption practices and production conditions, as well as life-cycle impacts. To promote a more systemic approach to SCP and how it can be pursued in theory and practice the proposed KAN aims to strengthen collaboration between the communities of researchers and practitioners that are currently focusing on either production or consumption, including actors and decision makers positioned within or influencing value chains. Recent work on sustainable agriculture and food, and on design for sustainability, offer some valuable insights on how to pursue more systemic understanding. We further seek to increase awareness of the need for more action based on strong SCP perspectives and to build and disseminate knowledge on how this can be done in practice. An important part of this endeavor will be to improve understanding of opportunities for and obstacles to the uptake of strong SCP approaches and to be prepared to take advantage of fortuitous circumstances when they arise.

In line with these objectives, the KAN will co-design studies, co-generate knowledge, and initiate other activities around three focal themes as detailed below.

- *Ecological macroeconomics and political economy of a transition to sustainable lifestyles:* There are widespread indications that the macroeconomic conditions that facilitated development and subsequent entrenchment of consumerist lifestyles are changing in the face of declining capacity for economic growth (secular stagnation), demographic aging, growing inequality, shifts in the organization of labor, changing government priorities, increasing volatility regarding resource availability, climate change, and other factors. These changes are still mostly affecting wealthy countries but will have both immediate and longer-term consequences for low- and middle-income countries as well. Some scholars have characterized these developments as constituting a shift toward a post-consumerist system of social organization. If this is the case, what kinds of alternative provisioning practices (how people meet their need for food, housing, mobility/connectivity, and so forth) might we envision that are consistent with such circumstances? Under these conditions, what are the prospects for more sustainable and secure lifestyles?
- *Urban metabolism and sustainable provisioning systems:* Cities and their surrounding regions are critical nodes for, and sites of, production and consumption. It is at the city-scale that many of the societal and physical infrastructural conditions of daily living are produced, giving municipal governments (along with civil society organizations and social entrepreneurs) unique leverage to shape local production and consumption processes, with consequences extending far beyond city boundaries. Yet, municipal governments have limited understanding of cities' "footprints" - the material flows

associated with these production and consumption processes, their social and environmental ramifications, and how city-level actions can help in addressing such issues. While the governance challenges of transboundary problems are not themselves new or uncommon, the scale and complexity of contemporary global value chains—and their socioeconomic and ecological implications—requires new conceptual approaches and methodological tools. This theme aims to explore the action space at the city-scale, but also to identify challenges that cannot be meaningfully addressed at this level.

- *Social Change Beyond Consumerism*: Extant theories of social change typically privilege changes in production (organization of work, availability of capital and resource endowments, innovation, and industrial technologies) rather than on evolving adaptations in consumption and the interlinkages between consumers and producers. Similarly, social experimentation involving new consumer practices as harbingers of more expansive change has had, outside of the field of marketing, low scientific salience. Recent years have given rise to significant interest among practitioners in developing and scaling up alternatives to dominant consumption routines including the "sharing economy" (both communitarian and for-profit varieties), downshifting, maker spaces, and various grassroots innovations and lifestyle experiments, but significant uncertainty surrounds their potential contribution to transitional dynamics more broadly. This focal theme will bring together theoretical studies and real-life experiments, and based on social learning among stakeholders, develop an understanding of viable future pathways for social change beyond consumerism.

This Expression of Interest was developed by a group of SCP experts with different disciplinary backgrounds and long experience in practitioner engagement (see Appendix 1). Two events were instrumental to its drafting: 1) a two-day workshop with fifteen participants, held in Kyoto in March 2016 and organized and funded by the Research Institute for Humanity and Nature (RIHN) and the Regional Centre for Future Earth in Asia, and 2) a webinar on 24 May with approximately thirty invited SCP scholars. A listserv has been established to facilitate follow-up communication among the participants of these two events. A draft version of this proposal was shared with these colleagues and received comments, input, and expressions of support from many of them.

The core group leading the proposal-development process has close connections with members of the consortia formulating related KANs, especially the groups on Cities and Transformations. There is also a strong linkage to the United Nations Ten-Year Framework of Programmes on SCP, and in particular the Programme on Sustainable Lifestyles and Education. The close relations with these efforts provide opportunities for useful synergy and collaboration. In the future drafting of a Research and Engagement Plan (REP), care will be taken to design activities that are complementary and mutually supportive of these related initiatives. The core group is also closely affiliated with the Sustainable Consumption Research and Action Initiative (SCORAI), an international knowledge network of over 800 SCP professionals.

As part of the process of preparing a REP for consideration by both the Scientific and Engagement Committees we anticipate holding workshops with key figures involved with

each of the three focal themes. These events will be devoted to formulating specific projects to engage researchers, practitioners of sustainable lifestyles, and policy makers. If the prospective KAN is successful in meeting its short-range funding targets these events will be held on a face-to-face basis (and a funding proposal has thus far been submitted to the National Socio-environmental Synthesis Center at the University of Maryland and other proposals are anticipated over the next few months). If fundraising progress is slower, these workshops will be conducted on a virtual basis. In addition, the core group leading development of this initiative has been holding discussions with a major academic publisher about establishing a new journal aligned with the KAN and at present it seems that this venture will be launched in early 2017. Additionally, planning is underway for the prospective KAN to host a major conference on systems of sustainable consumption and production in mid-2018 (to be held in Europe).

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