

Future Earth Workshop on Sustainable Consumption in Asia

On the 15-16 of January, the Future Earth Regional Centre for Asia organised an international event on Sustainable Consumption in Asia. The first day was a public symposium arranged together with Kyoto University and the second day was held in the form of a workshop at the Research Institute for Humanity and Nature (RIHN). The two days explored the relevance and meanings of sustainable consumption in Asia, in particular in low- and middle income countries. The event aimed to strengthen the recently started Future Earth Knowledge-Action Network on Systems of Sustainable Consumption and Production (KAN-SSCP) by generating elements of a useful framing for research and action on SCP in Asia, and by providing input to region-specific engagement strategies for this expanding global network of scholars and practitioners.

Many of today's unsustainable trends, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and increasing socioeconomic inequality, are closely related with society's patterns of consumption and production. The need for drastic changes in these patterns has been recognized for a long time in the international policy arena. For example, the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was agreed in 2015, underscores the need for "fundamental changes in the way that our societies produce and consume goods and services." However, despite this strong recognition and a large number of related initiatives by governments, businesses and the private sector, a major shift in patterns of consumption and production remains elusive.

Most existing research on SCP, as well as most of the related practical experiences, comes from the global North. The relevance of this knowledge to the global South, where the majority of people currently consume relatively little, is questionable. Exploring where and how existing knowledge might be relevant in Asia, and to identify needs for new knowledge, is thus of high priority.

These are some of the insights that emerged from the event:

- The number of middle-class consumers in Asia has grown rapidly in recent years but in most Asian countries these groups still have limited buying power compared to the global North. For example, in India, household expenditure among the top 5 percent is at par with the poorest 20 percent in the United States, when differences in local prices are accounted for.
- The concept of "leapfrog development", where societies try to skip over certain high-polluting or resource-intensive stages of development and move directly to more sustainable practices, appears to have a potential role in Asia's future development. It involves not only the early deployment of better technologies but also the emergence of new lifestyles and behaviours, such as in the case on non-motorised urban mobility.
- When exploring opportunities to promote more sustainable lifestyles and consumption patterns,

awareness of each country's history is necessary. For example, India's experience of colonization, including both the institutional heritage of the colonization period and the critique of Western consumerism that was part of the liberation movement, is important to consider.

- Asia is a highly diverse region, not at least in terms of how governance works in practice. This has implications for how social changes can be pursued.
- The current wave of automation and the broadening application of artificial intelligence will have profound implications for Asia, affecting not only livelihoods but also consumption opportunities.
- Globally, a number of voluntary certification schemes have been developed in order to promote products with lower environmental impact and fairer production conditions. However, most of these schemes, such as Fairtrade and Rainforest Alliance, are still not very common in Asia.
- Governments are major economic actors by means of their purchasing. This means that they have a significant role in shaping more sustainable patterns of production and consumption.
- The problems of persistent poverty and resource-intensive outsized consumption are related and cannot be effectively addressed separately. This applies at different levels - globally as well as within nations.
- An area for future research and practitioner engagement is the relationships that shape complex globalised value chains, connecting low-income producers, powerful investors/corporations, and wealthy consumers.
- Cities are another potentially fruitful area for research and engagement, where public procurement could serve as an entry point for wider explorations of local factors that contribute to shaping residents' lifestyles and consumption patterns.
- SCP as a research field is highly complex and strongly influenced by power asymmetries. This makes it difficult for researchers engaging with practice to remain neutral and requires a high level of reflectivity - the ability to see how research questions, ways of framing issues, types of data, or analytical methods may be better aligned with the interests of certain actor groups than of others. A better approach than trying to be neutral can therefore be to be open about normative ideals and values.
- While many researchers and campaigners emphasise the need for changes in dominant economic and political systems, it is still meaningful to engage with policy and business practitioners for experiments, joint learning, and trust building.