





Executive Summary

The Pressing Sustainable Consumption Issue

Sustainable Consumption (SC) refers to "the use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimising the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardise the needs of future generations" – a definition set out at the Oslo Symposium on Sustainable Consumption in 1994.

Now, more than twenty years have passed, how well has this important concept affected our consumption pattern? How serious have people taken it and how mindful have they brought it into real actions in their daily lives?

While the world population continues to expand, human consumption pattern has resulted in resource depletion, pollution, environmental degradation and climate change, pushing the earth towards its limits. It is predicted in 2020 that, if we do nothing to diminish our impact on climate change, as soon as in the 2030s, ice caps and crucial ice sheet would continue to melt and swell sea levels by 20cm, 60% of coral reefs would be highly endangered, and that dwindling crop yields would push 100 million more people into extreme poverty, and climate change-related illnesses would kill an extra 250,000 people each year.¹

Over the past decade, there were heated discussions on SC across the globe. International organisations, governments, environmental groups, academia and consumer groups have been seeking effective ways to promote SC, some programmes have excelled at empowering consumers with sufficient product information, while some others encourage SC behaviour by making it easier and more appealing, such as through the use of incentives, legislations, and/or good practices adopted by business sector.

In developing Hong Kong into a more sustainable city, the Hong Kong Government has mapped out various strategies, targets, policies and action plans, as well as implemented education programmes in relation to sustainable development, including SC, such as reduction of energy consumption, carbon emission and waste disposal. Businesses have been catching up the trend and the community has also been becoming more aware about SC. Yet, its pace is lagging behind the global trend. There are still a lot of challenges on the city's road to achieve its sustainable goals.

Hong Kong is a high consumption city. It stands out as a big user of water resources among its international peers² and ranks second in terms of per capita seafood consumption in Asia.³ Although it is not a self-sufficient city in terms of production, with limited manufacturing and farming activities, there is no lack of consumption choice. Loads of choices of products imported worldwide are easily available just around the corner. Being a hustle and bustle city, people are in pursuit of convenience. They are buying into a culture of disposability instead of approaching product purchases as sustainable options.

The COVID-19 pandemic evolved in 2020 has brought drastic changes to the community at various levels and to people's daily lives in many ways. It offers the world an opportunity to build recovery

¹ World Economic Forum. (2020) Here's what to expect over the coming decades.

² Civic Exchange. (2019) Modernising Hong Kong's Water Management Policy PART I.

³ Our World in Data. According to the quantity of fish and seafood supply per person in 2017, the top three places in Asia were Maldives (90kg), Hong Kong (71kg) and Malaysia (58kg).

plans that will reverse current trends and change our consumption and production patterns towards a more sustainable future.

It is high time that Hong Kong should quicken its pace to catch up with the global development of achieving sustainability. It should respond promptly to ways to drive changes with joint efforts of all stakeholders, including consumers, businesses and the Government, to build a sustainable city.

This Study

With its vision on advocating SC, the Consumer Council (the Council) published its first in-depth report on the subject in 2016. The report presented findings from a baseline survey conducted in 2015 (hereafter collectively referred as the "baseline survey") which revealed that consumers were fairly concerned and aware about the impact of their consumption behaviour on the environment, but did not always act consistently to reflect this concern. Consumers had to be more determined and motivated themselves to change their behaviour.

As a tracking study of the baseline survey, the Council conducted an in-depth study to review the latest local and overseas development on the subject after five years (this Study), with a view to finding out the status of change in consumer attitude and behaviour for formulating recommendations for stakeholders to join hands in promoting SC in Hong Kong. Despite the challenges encountered in the fieldwork amid the COVID-19, this Study was completed with strong support from the respondents.

This Study took a mixed-method approach comprising consumer surveys through telephone and on-street face-to-face interviews with a total of 1,517 respondents aged between 15 to 64, focus group discussions, and desk research on relevant experience in thirteen jurisdictions.

Tracking of Consumers' Knowledge, Attitude and Behaviour

This Study found that while most respondents perceived their consumption behaviour only had an average impact on the environment and perceived they had an average understanding towards the concept of SC, they could in general relate SC to most of its aspects, in particular energy conservation, waste reduction and avoid pollution in production. Also, a majority of the respondents were concerned about product information related to the pollution caused by the products during their production process or usage, and the lifespan of product. While the respondents have improved in acknowledging the benefits of energy conservation and waste separation, various barriers such as recycling outlets not being enough or too far away, or lack of knowledge on waste separation had held them back from taking further actions. Of the six common recyclables, only around 30% of the respondents always or usually recycle metal, glass or small home appliances, whereas about half of the respondents always or usually recycle clothes, paper and plastics. On the flip side, around 30% of the respondents indicated they seldom or never recycled paper or plastics, such percentages have increased since the baseline survey was conducted. In other words, it indicated that there are more consumers who do not recycle papers or plastics. Focus group discussions of this Study revealed that consumers lack confidence in how recyclables were managed after their collection by the relevant parties. Some consumers believe that recyclables were probably dumped into the landfills together with other garbage, and hence they did not see any point in spending effort to recycle items to save the environment.

In terms of consumer behaviour, there was a high (over 70%) take-up rate of behaviour which could bring tangible benefit (e.g. save money), easy to do or with accessible information, for instance buy appliances with Grade 1 Energy Label, give priority to purchase products with environmental label, buy claimed water-efficient products, avoid excessive order, avoid buying single-use products and repair broken domestic appliance. There are significant increases in the percentages of respondents who bought appliances with Grade 1 Energy Label, claimed water-efficient products and avoided single-use products as compared with the baseline survey. However, only around 60% of the respondents tried eating more vegetables and less meat to reduce the environmental impact or paid attention to return policies when shopping online to avoid wastage of unsuitable products. This Study also showed that less than half of the respondents borrowed seldomly used items (more respondents strongly disagreed/disagreed that they had such behaviour as compared with the baseline survey); gave priority to simple packaged or packaging-free products; used less air conditioners as much as possible (fewer respondents did so as compared with the baseline survey); or gave priority to local produce (which can reduce carbon footprint by transportation). Only 35% of the respondents preferred organic food (which avoids using pesticides and thus causing less harm to the environment).

As regards motive and support, there is improvement in both aspects. When asked their willingness to pay extra for products or services produced or provided along the principle of SC, a vast majority (87%) of the respondents indicated they were willing to pay an extra 5% or more, which in general has increased as compared with the baseline survey (around 70%). However, more than one-third of the respondents perceived the availability of such products in the market not enough or not enough at all. At the same time, close to 50% of the respondents suggested they did not usually purchase such products or services, with "not enough information", "too expensive" and "not easy to acquire" being the greatest hurdles. Whereas, a mild growth in willingness to commit more to support SC was observed – 68% of the respondents in the current survey as compared with 63% in the baseline survey. Respondents indicated they would even commit more if the Government, retailers or service providers did more or if they were provided with more information to help them understand how to practise SC.

Update on Sustainable Consumption Index (SCI)

Briefly, there is progress, albeit marginally, in consumers' awareness, attitude, behaviour and readiness towards SC over the past five years. As reflected by the Sustainable Consumption Index (SCI), the score of "Consumers' Awareness and Attitude" has increased from 74 in the baseline survey to 77 in the current survey; while "Consumers' Behaviour and Readiness" has increased from 69 (Consumers' Behaviour) and 65 (Consumers' Readiness) in the baseline survey to 71 in the current survey. Although most sub-indexes have improved, the score of the sub-index "Recycling Behaviour" remains unchanged. In summary, a lower score of "Consumers' Behaviour and Readiness" as compared with "Consumers' Awareness and Attitude" reflects that there is still a gap between consumers' awareness and their behaviour in reality, in particular their participation in recycling.

Our city needs appropriate and effective policies and measures, as well as support from the businesses, to facilitate behavioural change of consumers to narrow such gap and ensure Hong Kong develops in a sustainable manner.



Learnings from Other Jurisdictions

Thirteen jurisdictions were selected for in-depth desk research for experience and good practices in promoting SC, with a view to explore valuable references for adaption to Hong Kong. They were selected based on various factors, for instance their good performance in sustainability and comparable social and economic structure. The review showed that efforts were made in these jurisdictions in removing the barriers in driving SC through the carrot and stick approach and with the help of technology and innovation:

- Enabling choices and safeguarding consumers' right to know by information provision: Guidelines on "Green marketing and the Australian Consumer Law" in Australia sets out principles for businesses to consider when practising green marketing; Anti-Waste Law for a Circular Economy in France lays down policy on labelling to facilitate sustainable choices by prohibiting "biodegradable" claim, applying a repairability index and providing information about the availability of spare parts; Environmental Technology and Industry Support Act in South Korea provides a legal basis to punish false eco-labels; the Logo for Products with Reduced Packaging (LPRP) in Singapore enables consumers to identify products that have reduced the amount of packaging materials.
- Promoting waste reduction and recycle: Deposit and refund system for beverage containers are applied in **Denmark**, **Germany** and **Luxembourg**; charges are imposed on waste disposal in **South Korea** and **Switzerland**; mobile apps are used in **Denmark** and **Japan** to help rescue surplus food; interactive map of recycling points in **Switzerland** facilitates consumers to locate recyclables drop off points; several types of single-use items, such as plastic straws and disposable cups, are banned or on which restrictions will be imposed in Vancouver, **Canada**; supermarkets in the **UK** are taking initiatives in reducing plastic waste; in **France**, there is law that specifies the waste hierarchy in the case of food waste and prohibits large supermarkets from throwing away good quality food approaching the "best before" date; in **Singapore**, there is mandatory packaging reporting which requires regulated businesses to submit annual reports on the types and amounts of packaging they put on the market; in **Taiwan**, Waste Disposal Act obligates household to separate waste and the 4-in-1 Recycling Programme established Recycling Fund which subsidises the recycling disposal system, it also conducted trial programme to reduce container waste of food delivery services by awarding consumers who return their recyclable containers.
- Promoting product repairability and durability: Legislations in France restrict the practice of planned obsolescence and extend the duration of the legal guarantee for a product; in Sweden, tax deduction for repairing services (i.e. clothes, shoes, bicycles and appliances) helps extend product lifespan and waste reduction.
- Promoting sustainability lifestyle: South Korea and Taiwan have launched award earning and redemption programmes which help consumers incorporate SC into their daily lives. Green Credit Card in South Korea awards users eco-money points when they purchase low-carbon and eco-friendly products, use public transport and save utility rates including electricity, water, and gas. The eco-money points can be redeemed for cash or use for various purposes. In Taiwan, Green Point App awards users green points when they purchase green products, take public transport and participate in eco-friendly activities. The green point can be redeemed for green products, used for discounts when purchasing green products and green services.

Government's Recent Initiatives

In February 2021, the Government launched the Waste Blueprint for Hong Kong 2035, which advocates a vision of "Waste Reduction • Resources Circulation • Zero Landfill" by setting a mediumterm target to gradually reduce the per capita municipal solid waste (MSW) disposal by 40%-45% and increase the recovery rate to about 55% by implementing charging for disposal of Municipal solid waste (MSW), and a long-term target to move away from the reliance on landfills in the long run by developing adequate waste-to-energy facilities. By taking forward actions under six major areas: waste reduction, waste separation, resources circulation, industry support, innovation and cooperation, and education and publicity, the blueprint expects that the city will no longer need to rely on landfills for direct disposal of its MSW, if the proposed waste-to-energy infrastructure with adequate treatment capacity can be in place by around 2035.

About the same time, the Government also launched two public consultations, namely the Producer Responsibility Scheme (PRS) on Plastic Beverage Containers and the fourth phase of Mandatory Energy Efficiency Labelling (MEEL) Scheme. Along the principle of "polluter pays" and the concept of "eco-responsibility", the former requires the sharing of responsibility by all relevant stakeholders for the collection, treatment, recycling and proper disposal of end-of-life products to avoid and minimise the environmental impacts caused by them. Through the provision of rebate, the scheme also incentivises consumers to actively participate in the recycling of plastic beverage containers. As for the latter, it proposes extending the coverage of MEEL to include three additional types of products, namely LED lamps, gas cookers and gas instantaneous water heaters, on top of the existing eight types of products.⁴ It is expected that, through effective waste collection and management system, provision of suitable incentives and available labelling information, behavioural changes of consumers could then be induced and a sustainability lifestyle could be cultivated.

Council's Recommendations

Despite the modest improvement in consumers' awareness and behaviour in supporting SC, the realisation of the vision to build Hong Kong as a sustainable city is a long road ahead and requires strenuous efforts from consumers, businesses and the Government to take solid and prompt actions, in order to catch up the international pace of development in SC.

On one hand, consumers need to challenge themselves to realise their belief in SC by taking up more SC behaviours; on the other hand, businesses and the Government need to promote behavioural changes of consumers by facilitating consumption choice and recycling management. The Government's latest Waste Blueprint for Hong Kong 2035 updates its strategy in reduction of waste and carbon emission; and its vision in the building up of a circular economy, but a wider scope of initiatives is needed both in the short term and long term. Based on the findings of this Study, the Council puts forward, from the perspective of consumers, recommendations for the consideration of all stakeholders concerned in addressing barriers experienced by consumers, with a view to enable their behavioural changes and building Hong Kong into a more sustainable city.

⁴ The existing eight types of products include: room air conditioners, refrigerating appliances, compact fluorescent lamps, washing machines, dehumidifiers, televisions, storage type electric water heaters and induction cookers.

A Tripartite Relationship between Consumers, Businesses and the Government

Sustainable * Living



Businesses

Adopt sustainability principle in product life cycle and value chain

Adopt sustainable principles along the value chain, from design, production to end-of-life disposal



Provide accurate information about the sustainability of products and services



Set measurable sustainability targets and roadmaps



Consumers

Strengthen drivers for behavioural change: Facilitate consumption choice and recycling management



Nurture SC understanding and culture through public education and creation of support platform



Strengthen availability and choice of products and services with relevant incentives



Rebuild recycling habit by convenient, stringent and transparent waste management system

Government

Establish policies and legislations to nurture consumers' behavioural change and ensure businesses' sustainable production and responsibility



Promote research in advancing SC related pattern



Establish long-term and holistic policy to foster recycling and sustainable industry



Introduce legislation and enforcement measures to achieve specific SC goals



Drivers for Behavioural Change of Consumers

Nurture SC Understanding and Culture through Public Education and Creation of Support Platform

This Study found that only close to one-fifth of the respondents reckoned themselves fully understood or quite understood the concept of SC. Consumers reflected that they rarely heard about "SC" in daily life, or had only learnt little about it in schools. Also, comparing to other occupation groups, more retirees and homemakers reflected as they did not know how to recycle or separate waste, it was not easy for them to do so.

Recommendation (1): To nurture consumers' understanding on SC and develop a SC culture in the society, the Council recommends that public education on this aspect should be strengthened. In order to instil SC value in our children at a young age, the Government may review the current school curriculum and explore approaches to strengthen the curriculum to stress the incorporation of SC in every part of the daily life, e.g. all the way from selection, purchase, use to discard. To facilitate consumers to enquire, search and receive relevant information, the Council proposes that a single and easily accessible platform be developed, such platform should provide a quick-to-respond mechanism for consumers to enquire for the types and ways to recycle their waste at home. It may also consolidate various SC-related information, for instance to report the progress of the city's development such as, resources usage and waste statistics.

Strengthen Availability and Choice of Products and Services with Relevant Incentives to Encourage Consumption

This Study revealed that 36% of the respondents thought the availability of sustainable products were not enough or not enough at all. Without sufficient and suitable supply of products or services, consumption could be limited even though consumers have a good sense in practising SC. Experience of other jurisdictions also suggests that effective use of incentives could help promote SC as a lifestyle and put SC actions into habit.

Recommendation (2): The Council recommends businesses to grasp the SC trend in enhancing the availability of products and services which are produced or provided along the principle of sustainable consumption and production. As for the provision of incentives, the Council recommends the point-saving and redemption of the Government's existing GREEN\$ Electronic Participation Incentive Scheme be modified to attract consumers' participation in the scheme and in turn promote consumer behavioural changes. For instance, apart from putting recyclables at the recycling outlets, the scheme may reward points to consumers who buy sustainable or environmentally friendly products or services or save utility rates. The earned points may be used to redeem cash or coupon, or for use to buy sustainable products with discount.

Rebuild Recycling Habit by Convenient, Stringent and Transparent Waste Management System

As reflected by the SCI, there is a general improvement in all the sub-indexes, except that of "Recycling Behaviour" which remains unchanged. Apart from the obstacles of "recycling outlets not enough or far away from home" and "laziness/troublesome", focus group participants also expressed their lack of confidence in the current recycling management system.

Recommendation (3): Firstly, to address the issue of convenience, the Council suggests that the recyclables collection network, in terms of both quantity and location, be substantially expanded

and easily searchable online. Secondly, more stringent requirements should be imposed to monitor performance of contractors of the recyclables collection services, so as to ensure the recyclables are collected properly and delivered to downstream recycling facilities, instead of dumping at landfills together with other garbage. Lastly, information as to the quantity of the recyclables collected, recovered and used as secondary raw materials, should be properly recorded and disseminated through public accessible channels, such as the support platform as stated in Recommendation (1), on a regular basis. The Council believes big data technology can be applied in collecting and analysing relevant data to support SC development in this regard.

Role and Responsibility of Businesses

Adopt Sustainable Principles Along the Value Chain, from Production to End-of-life Disposal

This Study found that there was a significant number of the respondents who were concerned about excessive packaging of products; gave priority to products with simple, environmentally friendly packaging or packaging-free; avoided buying single-use products; and were willing to repair broken appliances. However, some focus group participants expressed that they did not always patronise repairing services due to previous bad experience and high price. The fact is that there is a demand on sustainable products and services.

Recommendation (4): The Council recommends that, in enhancing the availability of sustainable products and services, businesses should adopt the concepts of circular economy, optimal use of resources and waste reduction in all production stages and along the value chain, for instance, from design, production, sale and distribution, product lifespan to collection, disposal and recycling of end-of-life products. Such products or services should be provided at a reasonable price. Effective use of incentives can also encourage consumers to purchase. Examples of actions which the businesses could explore may include a shift to sustainable materials; provide sustainable options; provide end-of-life product collection services; and extend product lifespan as well as provide affordable repairing services.

Provide Accurate Information about the Sustainability of Products and Services

Lack of information is the hurdle always suggested by consumers which hinders them from taking up more sustainable actions. This Study found that more than two-thirds of the respondents were willing to do more if they had more information. When asked the reasons why they did not usually purchase sustainable products or services, "not enough information" was the top reason chosen by the respondents.

Recommendation (5): The Council recommends businesses to provide reliable, useful, appropriate and substantiated information about the sustainability of the products and services. Such description should not be ambiguous or misleading. Environmental labels certified and accredited by credible and authoritative third party are preferred. With the help of information technology, businesses may also provide production information and labels in a more friendly and convenient way, as well as allowing consumers to receive updates on the products.

Set Measurable Sustainability Targets and Roadmaps

Consumer research found that almost 6-in-10 of the respondents were willing to give priority to companies which embraced environmental protection and sustainability. Similarly, nearly 7-in-10 of the respondents expressed they were willing to commit more in SC if businesses do more on sustainability.

Recommendation (6): To drive for change, the Council recommends businesses to set clear targets and roadmaps by following these steps: review the sustainability status of the current business model, production line and value chain; set sustainability strategy and targets, which should be practical and measurable; conduct training to staff; present targets to the public; monitor progress through third party assessment and make necessary corrections; and report progress and explain irregularities through different means on a regular basis.

Role and Responsibility of the Government

Promote Research in Advancing SC Related Pattern

By leveraging on advancement in information technology, SC initiatives can become more efficient, effective and convenient. Basic research on resources usage and waste generation pattern, sustainability of current production and consumption pattern, as well as advanced technology enabling SC, can provide valuable data and ideas for discussion and development of policies and action plans, driving changes towards sustainable production models and provide sustainable alternatives to consumers and motivate them to support the required behaviour.

Recommendation (7): The Council recommends the Government to invest in studies, investigations and innovations which help the promotion of SC pattern. Such research is not necessarily being conducted solely by the Government itself, on the contrary, the Government could set up funding mechanisms to encourage involvements from all stakeholders (e.g. businesses, NGOs and academia). Apart from the current Recycling Fund and Green Tech Fund, the Council recommends to set up more different types of funds or expand the existing funding schemes to support research of different nature and scope, such as pattern of both resources usage and waste generation of different community and business activities; sustainability of existing products and services in the local market; innovative technology for producing sustainable products and services; advance waste management and promote behavioural changes of consumers.

Establish Long-term and Holistic Policy to Foster Recycling and Sustainable Industry

To foster the recycling industry, a long-term and holistic policy is needed, which may include multiple elements, for instance, regulation, infrastructure, incentives, levies or subsidies.

Recommendations (8): The Council recommends the Government to establish mechanisms to foster recycling, directing the flow of recyclables, from disposal, collection to recovery. Such mechanisms may include deposit refund systems (or rebate systems), extended PRSs, recycling mandates, collection and waste-to-resources infrastructure, and for special areas to impose levies or subsidies. In improving quality of recycled materials and creating market, the Government may invest in technologies such as artificial intelligence and higher-quality washing systems which can improve sorting and the quality of recycled materials; provide funding and lay down policy to create a common marketplace for both raw materials and recyclates. The Government may also explore provision of funding or incentives to entrepreneurs that have adopted sustainable production policies to introduce, produce or provide sustainable products or services, and to recognise their achievements and contributions.

Introduce Legislation and Enforcement Measures to Achieve Specific SC Goals

Examples are observed in Australia and South Korea where legislation and guidelines are in place to improve the accuracy and usefulness of environmental claims and to combat deceptive labels; France where there are laws to promote product lifespan; and EU where legislation is enacted to ban single-use plastics and ensure "right to repair". These are good references to introduce legislative instruments and enforcement measures to help achieve specific SC goals in the long run.

Recommendation (9): The Council recommends the Government to consider enactment of legislation in the following areas: introduce specific regulation on environmental labelling to combating green washing and misleading labels; regulate single-use plastics; mandate "right of repair" for specific products at a reasonable price and for a sufficient period of time (e.g. at least 10 years for commonly used household electronic appliances, such as washing machines, refrigerators and televisions); and mandate minimum warranty period (e.g. 2 years).

The Way Forward

In summary, there is moderate progress in consumers' awareness, attitude, behaviour and readiness towards SC over the past five years. However, there is still a gap between consumers' awareness and their behaviour in reality, in particular their participation in recycling. Key drivers for behavioural change to meet the city's SC vision are identified as facilitating consumption choice and recycling management.

This Study's findings point to the fact that there is an urgent need of a substantial change of consumer behaviour to achieve sustainable development of the city. SC is not a luxury or a leisure activity. It should be a part of our daily lives. In recent years, the Government has invested more resources in strengthening relevant promotion work, such as education, research, infrastructure facilities and action plans, and the effect of some new initiatives is remained to be seen. To realise the city's SC goals, more measures have to be implemented to catch up the pace. In view of the pressing sustainability issues, such as waste reduction (in particular plastic waste), climate change, reduction of biological resources, etc., all stakeholders, including consumers, businesses and the Government, should do their part to change their modes of consumption and production in all aspects of life and business activities. The Council believes that by making good use of information technology and innovative business models, SC can be achieved more effectively. The Council calls for all stakeholders to join hands in that endeavour in order to propel Hong Kong towards being a more sustainable and prosperous economy.



香港北角渣華道191號嘉華國際中心22樓 電話:28563113 傳真:28563611 電子郵箱:cc@consumer.org.hk 網站:www.consumer.org.hk

22/F, K.Wah Centre, 191 Java Road North Point, Hong Kong Tel: 2856 3113 Fax: 2856 3611 E-mail: cc@consumer.org.hk Web: www.consumer.org.hk

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