Analytical Brief on Climate Ambition and Sustainability Action

February 2020 | **Session Brief for WSDF 2020**

Values and Lifestyles for Sustainability
Role of States, Businesses and the Individual

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Key Questions >>>

- How are current lifestyles around the globe, particularly of the urban-rich, harming our planet?
- Which key lifestyle categories should be the focus for various interventions? What measures can be taken by policymakers, business sector and youth?
- How can individuals and societies achieve the objective of sustainable lifestyles, and what values need to be cultivated?
- What interventions will be crucial for achieving sustainable lifestyles in terms of awareness, regulatory shifts, research, and market instruments?

Introduction

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change identified lifestyle and behavioral changes as important mitigation options, including dietary changes (IPCC 2007). The United Nations Environment Programme defines sustainable lifestyle as a "cluster of habits and patterns of behavior embedded in a society and facilitated by institutions, norms and infrastructures that frame individual choice, in order to minimize the use of natural resources and generation of wastes, while supporting fairness and prosperity for all" (Akenji and Chen 2016). The onus of the culture of living sustainably, however, should not only fall on the individual. For sustainable lifestyles, governments and businesses have to be nudged so that policies and market instruments are also in place. Often ignored is the role of the state and government institutions, who can shape better policies, along with the role of the business sector for providing more sustainable goods and services.

Impact of human lifestyles

A sustainable lifestyle would mean each person on earth using about 1.8 global hectares (Wackernagel et al. 2006). However, the Global Footprint Network shows that globally our lifestyles are not sustainable. According to 2010 estimates, on average, the per capita appropriation of the earth was 2.7 global hectares (GFN 2010). Five gigatons of CO_2e can be sustainably absorbed by the planet each year and in per capita terms, our fair share is about 750kg of emissions per year (UNESCO and UNEP 2011). The global average, however, is currently two tons per person per year, more than double the fair share (ibid.). Our consumption habits are putting our resources levels at high risk.

According to the Global Resources Outlook, annual global extraction of materials grew from 27 billion tonnes in the 1970s to 92 billion tonnes in 2017 (UNEP 2019).

The urban factor

Today cities are associated with 60 per cent of all Green House Gas (GHG) emissions, consume 78 per cent of energy, consume 75 per cent of natural resources, and account for 50 per cent of all waste (UN 2018a). Transport and buildings are among the largest contributors to GHG emissions. By 2050, the number of people living in urban areas is expected to reach 6.3 billion, roughly two-thirds of the global population (UN 2018b). The extra pressure these new urban consumers will place on the world's increasingly scarce resources will exacerbate existing tensions between the world's wealthiest 10 per cent, whose lifestyles contribute half of global carbon emissions, and the growing numbers of urban poor, who are responsible for only 10 per cent of carbon emissions (Akenji and Chen 2016).

Domains of lifestyles

Researchers have been able to identify key domains where consumption and lifestyles have the highest environmental impacts (Akenji and Chen 2016; García-Mira 2018; Randerson 2009). The top three domains that have the largest impact are food and agriculture, housing and building construction, and mobility and transportation. Globally, almost a third of food harvested is wasted or lost; contributing to this are changing dietary trends, particularly in urban environments which increasingly favor more resource-intensive (GHG producing) foods such as processed foods and meats. This occurs in a global context where, in 2018, 1 in 9 people were hungry and 1 in 8 were obese (WHO 2019). Farm animals are a big cause of climate change and about 30 per cent of GHG emissions from food production are directly contributed by farm animals (FAO 2019). The building sector contributes up to 30 per cent of global annual GHG emissions and uses up to 40 per cent of all energy, while the transport sector is responsible for 13 per cent of GHG and 23 per cent of CO2 emissions from global energy consumption (UNESCO and UNEP 2011). The growing electronics field also significantly contributes, in the form of e-waste, which accounts for two per cent of global CO2e emissions (ibid).

Policy outlook and reasons for optimism

There are encouraging signs that society is beginning to understand the impact of our daily choices. Terms like "quality of life" and "sustainable lifestyles" regularly appear in the media, illustrating that people are already weaving sustainability into their daily lives. Fortunately, sustainable lifestyles are a part of global policy conversations. The Twenty First Conference of Parties, whose outcome was the Paris Agreement made it clear that sustainable lifestyles and Sustainable Patterns of Consumption and Production will be key in the fight against climate change. The global policy agenda now specifically references sustainable lifestyles, as evidenced by the Paris Climate Change Agreement and the recently adopted Sustainable Development Goals. Goal 12.8 sets the target: "By 2030 ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature" (UN 2015).

Changes in lifestyles and consumption patterns that emphasize resource conservation can contribute to developing a low-carbon economy that is both equitable and sustainable. This includes inculcating values like buying local and seasonal foods, adopting organic farming methods and reducing meat consumption. Usage of public transport, carpooling, low-carbon sports, ethical shopping and sharing, reusing and recycling electronic products should be encouraged. Goods manufactured through unethical process should be boycotted. For energy production and usage, countries, need to lower their use of fossil fuels and rely more on renewable energy sources. The transition to a sustainable lifestyle requires important urban transformations whose primary goal is to guarantee an increase in the efficiency of resource management, an improvement in the quality of life and greater environmental resilience.

Questions

From the above discussion, the following questions become relevant:

1. How are current lifestyles around the globe, particularly of the urban-rich, harming our planet?
2. Which key lifestyle categories should be the focus for various interventions? What measures can be taken by policymakers, business sector and youth?
3. How can individuals and societies achieve the objective of sustainable lifestyles, and what values need to be cultivated?
4. What interventions will be crucial for achieving sustainable lifestyles in terms of awareness, regulatory shifts, research, and market instruments?

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The brief series, brought out jointly by the World Sustainable Development Forum and the Protect our Planet Movement, seeks to highlight a topical issue relevant to the realization of the sustainable development goals and ambitious climate actions. This brief is to feed into the discussions of the Second World Sustainable Development Forum to be organized in Durango, Mexico (5-7 March, 2020).

About WSDF

The World Sustainable Development Forum (WSDF) is a not- for-profit organization incorporated separately in Europe, Norway and the U.S. Its North American arm WSDF-NA, headquartered in Washington, DC carries 501c3 tax exempt status. WSDF is a global initiative to promote and mobilize global action for effective implementation of both the Paris agreement on climate change and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the UN General Assembly. WSDF's relevance and role lies in acting as a facilitator for helping with implementation of actions required under these two sets of agreements.

About POP Movement

Protect our Planet (POP) Movement believes that the impacts of climate change will not affect a single country but the planet, in its entirety. POP believes that the power of the youth of the world will unite and to address this challenge. POP believes that the time to act is now and that knowledge is the true currency of changing the future.

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