



The green economy and consumption: gender just?

Background paper by:

Ines Weller

University of Bremen, Green Economy Gender_Just Committee

Translation: Rebecca Hudson

The Rio+20 conference took place in Rio de Janeiro in 2012 as a follow-up to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, which made history in the same location 20 years ago. The concept of the “green economy” will be one of the major topics. The green economy is a type of economic activity “that results in improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities” (United Nations Environment Programme 2011).

In cooperation with the Deutscher Frauenrat (German Women’s Council), the Frauenpolitischer Rat Land Brandenburg (Women’s Policy Council of the Federal State of Brandenburg), the Katholische Frauengemeinschaft Deutschlands (kfd) (Catholic Women’s Association of Germany) and the Verband deutscher Unternehmerinnen (vdu) (Association of German Businesswomen), genanet – focal point gender, environment, sustainability has initiated a project with the aim of getting involved in the debate on the “green economy”, in which the women’s and gender perspective has not so far been included.

In providing a fundamental discussion paper, as well as supplementary background papers on topics such as the relationship between the care economy and the green economy, gender-just consumption in a sustainable economic system, and what will be required of the financial markets as a result (to be published in June 2012), we aim to encourage women and their associations and initiatives to participate in the debate on a sustainable ways of living and engaging in economic activities. What contribution can we make so that goods are consumed and produced more fairly, in a greater spirit of solidarity and with a much lower impact on the environment? However, we also want to find out how we will benefit if sustainable social change becomes reality.

All of the papers are available as PDF files at <http://www.genanet.de/diskussion.html?&L=1>.

Introduction

Despite the ambitious objectives drawn up at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, it has not been possible to trigger a trend towards sustainable development in recent years. Now there are great expectations of the green economy concept, particularly in the context of the Rio+20 conference in June 2012. A report by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) played a major role in propagating this concept. UNEP perceives the green economy as a transformation of the entire economic system (UNEP 2011). Its report lists the improvement of human well-being and social equity combined with a significant reduction of environmental risks and ecological scarcities as the overall aims of a green economy (UNEP 2011: 16). In this report, UNEP uses eleven key sectors as examples to describe how these aims are to be met and how the green economy can facilitate growth and employment without placing further serious burdens on the environment. The Heinrich Böll Foundation's Green New Deal concept is similarly concerned with "ecological reform of the economy and restructuring of the energy system, as well as with social inclusion and a sustainable society" (Heinrich Böll Foundation 2011: 2¹).

The green economy agenda thus includes far-reaching reforms of currently unsustainable modes of production and consumption. What role is assigned to private consumers? How are their responsibility and scope for (co-)shaping change² perceived? These questions address long-standing debates on the relationships between sustainable patterns of consumption and production from a gender perspective. The theory of the "feminisation of environmental responsibility", which was first developed using the example of German waste policy in the 1980s, forms one part of the discussion (Schultz/Weiland 1991). Schultz and Weiland used this term to explain that the extra housework caused by separating rubbish primarily fell inside women's area of responsibility at the time.

Given the – at least minor – changes in the traditional gender-specific division of labour in private households, this theory can now be extended to "feminisation or privatisation of environmental responsibility". Its basic assumption is that the debates on sustainable patterns of consumption and production tend to inflate private consumers' scope of influence and turn their conduct into a moral issue (Weller 2004). This imbalance is problematic in two ways: firstly, it runs the risk of not taking other relevant and (more) influential actors in complex supply systems sufficiently into account in the development of strategies and concepts to promote sustainable patterns of consumption and production, thus endangering the effectiveness of these strategies; secondly, this leads to the problem that demands for equal opportunities and gender justice are also not properly addressed. Both aspects can play a part in the implementation of the concepts falling far short of expectations and in only some of the aims being met.

¹ Translator's note: the page numbers for quotations from the Heinrich Böll Foundation's report, "Green New Deal: Die Zukunft beginnt jetzt!" ["Green New Deal: The Future Starts Now!"] refer to the original German text. The translations are my own, as there is currently no official translation of this text.

² Consumers' power to shape change should be understood in a broad sense here. It involves their capacity to influence the development of products, decisions, technology and policies.

Perception of the importance of private consumers in the context of the green economy

In the first instance, green economy instruments and strategies for changing production and consumption primarily focus on companies, the economy, policymakers and the state (UNEP 2011). Green economy concepts portray the role of private consumers in a familiar way in that such consumers are only regarded as highly important in terms of their demand and purchase decisions. Consumers are even portrayed as the “main drivers” of a green economy in some key sectors listed in the UNEP report. For example, the report states the following as regards the waste sector: *“Change in the consumer demand is a major determinant underlining the potential greening of the waste sector”* (UNEP 2011: 303). UNEP thus concludes that there is a need for instruments to educate and inform consumers in most of the key sectors.

Consumers are also mainly perceived as very influential in their role as purchasers in the Heinrich Böll Foundation’s Green New Deal. *“However, consumers can influence the switch to greater ecology in their consumption decisions”* (Heinrich Böll Foundation 2011: 9). A high level of responsibility for transformation towards a green economy is attributed to consumers: *“Switching to ecological and fair production will only appeal to companies if consumers are willing to buy ecologically and socially manufactured products”* (Heinrich Böll Foundation 2011: 10). As a result, education and information aimed at private consumers also plays an important role in this concept: *“But sustainable consumption is also possible on a low income. More education, information and guidance are needed. For example, making your own lunch from fresh ingredients is cheaper than buying tinned or frozen food. And using energy efficiently also saves money”* (Heinrich Böll Foundation 2011: 10).

The generalised assumption that private consumers are of great importance and wield major power to shape change will be critically explored from a gender perspective in the following sections.

Specifying and relativising private consumers’ responsibility and power to shape change

Two further aspects should be mentioned before we look at private consumers’ responsibility in more detail. Firstly, it should be pointed out that the aim of the following is not to fundamentally question private consumers’ scope of influence either in general or specifically in the context of a green economy. Instead, the question is how and to what extent consumers or various consumer groups can make their influence felt and what prerequisites are needed to this end. From the gender perspective, one must also ask whether, or to what extent, private consumers’ influence has been inflated and whether other influential and powerful actors may have disappeared from view.

Secondly, it bears reminding that the expectation that private purchase decisions can exert political influence draws on a fundamental idea from the second wave of the women’s movement in Germany after 1968 (genanet et al. 2011, Wichterich 2012). At the time, the idea that “the personal is political” politicised supposedly private consumption and private day-to-day behaviour. In more recent discussions, this idea has been expressed in the concept of political consumerism that points out the dual role of consumers and citizens (“consumer citizen”) (Stolle/Micheletti 2005, quoted in

Schultz/Stieß 2009). The positive examples of such an exertion of influence show that purchasing boycotts, that is, non-purchase of products that are ecologically or socially problematic, are often involved. One such successful example was the boycott of goods from South Africa during the 1980s. Women in particular used this boycott to protest against the apartheid policy in South Africa (Micheletti 1999, quoted in Schultz/Stieß 2009). A second example of a successful exertion of influence by private consumers was, and is, the boycott of genetically modified food (Krägenow 1998). Food production conditions were thus influenced, at least in Europe, to the extent that far fewer genetically modified crops were grown (Klaffenböck 2005). Women participate disproportionately often in these types of political consumption. Unlike the thinking in the context of the green economy, this is not merely a matter of “buycotting”, that is, exerting influence through the deliberate purchase of products that are manufactured fairly and ecologically, but also of exerting influence through boycotting, the non-purchase of goods. However, this option, which is also important in the green economy, is not discussed there.

Examining private consumers’ scope to shape change: the example of food waste

Fundamentally, one must first ask what types of scope to shape change are held by private consumers. Unlike other actors such as the economy or policymakers, private consumers can usually only exert influence on the design and supply of products indirectly and reactively by buying or not buying them. Consumers are not responsible for deciding which products should be sold on the market or which features products should have. The basic decisions on construction and design that influence the use of resources and the environmental burden of a product over the course of its entire life cycle are thus not made by consumers, but rather by other actors from the fields of manufacturing, science and research, as well as from the political and administrative spheres (Huber 2011). The phenomenon of “fake off” shows that private consumers can be downright misled. This occurs when appliances like coffee makers or espresso machines appear to be switched off, but are in fact still consuming energy. (Böde 2000).

Furthermore, the extent of private consumers’ scope to shape change is still generalised and inflated today. This is shown below by the current example of the heated debates on food waste. The German Federal Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection commissioned a study to determine the amount of food waste in Germany more precisely and to develop measures to reduce waste. The study found that 61% of the food waste in Germany comes from private households, while only 5% comes from wholesale and retail trade, and 17% comes both from large-scale consumers and the food industry (Kranert et al. 2012). According to this calculation, private consumers generate 81.6 kilos of food waste per person each year on average. A survey of private households came to a similar conclusion (80 kilos) (Rosenbaum 2011). The press release by the Federal Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection presents the findings of the study as follows: *“According to the study, the majority (61 percent) of this food waste comes from private households... Private households throw away about 6.7 million tonnes of food every year, according to the study. The average German throws away 81.6 kg of food per year. 65*

percent of this food waste could be either partially or completely avoided." (Federal Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection 2012).

The figures seem to be unambiguous. According to the study, private consumers cause the largest share of food waste and thus appear to be mainly responsible for the large amount of waste. This evaluation is exacerbated by the statement that 65% of this food waste could have been completely or at least partially avoided. This means that on average every person in Germany unnecessarily throws away 53.04 kilos of food per year. However, it is worthwhile taking a critical look at the basis of this calculation.

Firstly, it must be noted that agriculture is not included in these figures. This sector was disregarded in the study for pragmatic reasons. Only the amount of food waste generated by the food industry, large-scale consumers, wholesale and retail trade, and private households was determined. However, a study by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) shows that agricultural production plays an important role in the amount of food waste. According to the study, relevant waste streams do indeed come from this sector, depending on the food group. The agricultural sector's shares of food waste vary from 2% (grains) and 9.4% (fish and seafood) up to 20% (fruit and vegetables) (FAO 2011). If this actor were included in the total amount of food waste, the percentage of waste generated by private households (as well as that of the other three sectors) would decrease significantly.

Secondly, when assessing this finding, one should bear in mind that the quality of the data of the four phases taken into account varies considerably. While the data used for the food industry and wholesale and retail trade are based on estimates with large fluctuation margins, "food waste in households was examined most closely" (Kranert et al. 2012: 180)³. The authors of the study point this out themselves, but do not draw any further conclusions. However, the following number game shows that the shares of food waste can shift significantly depending on the data used from the four phases. If the maximum value of the data – rather than the medium used to calculate the above-mentioned figures – is assumed for the four areas, the share of food waste generated by households falls from 61% to 50.3%, while the share for the food industry rises from 17% to 30.6%. (These are my own calculations based on the data provided by Kranert et al. 2012). This number game raises a fundamental question about the influence of the differences in the degree of detail of the data.

Thirdly, there are grounds for looking critically at the differentiation between avoidable, partly avoidable and unavoidable food waste. Avoidable food waste is defined as discarded food that "*was still fully fit for human consumption at the time of discarding or would have been edible if [it] had been eaten in time*" (Kranert et al., abridged English version 2012: 5). Partly avoidable food waste results from "*different consumer habits*", with crusts and apple skins mentioned as examples (Kranert et al., abridged English version 2012: 5). The study does not make clear how the term, "avoidable food waste", is

³ Translator's note: unless otherwise stated, the page numbers for the study by Kranert et al. refer to the original German text, as the official English translation is an abridged version. I have used quotations from the abridged English version where possible.

defined. At any rate, this definition involves considerable room for interpretation, which in turn allows space for implicit moral judgements. Moreover, the differentiation between avoidable, partly avoidable and unavoidable food waste is generally only applied to private households (Kranert et al. 2012: 151). This differentiation does not seem to be important and/or workable in the other sectors, that is, the food industry, wholesale and retail trade, and large-scale consumers. In this respect, the definition itself reveals a tendency to make moral judgements about private households' waste conduct.

The best-before date plays an important role in this context. Many consumers use this information as a basis for deciding whether to eat food or throw it away, without realising that the date is only partly helpful. The manufacturer defines the best-before date. This means that manufacturers can exert major influence on the amount of food waste. Nevertheless, the measures for avoiding food waste set out by the Federal Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection have only been aimed at consumers so far. The thinking is that consumers need to be better informed about the meaning of the best-before date. The ministry's website provides such information in short films, brochures and a statement by the federal minister who clearly expresses her opposition to changing or abolishing the best-before date on food (www.bmelv.de/EN). Private consumers are thus made responsible for using the best-before date "correctly". On the other hand, influential actors from the food industry are not made responsible for amending the best-before date system or using it differently, nor is there any discussion on how this could be achieved.

The example of food waste shows how private consumers' power to shape change is still inflated and turned into a moral issue today. This focus is one of the factors that lead to other (more) influential actors disappearing from view. In addition, it is to be feared that measures and concepts based on an inflated power of private consumers will only be partly effective. This should also be taken into account in the development of measures to implement a green economy and the expectations of private consumers on which this is based.

Prerequisites for an effective exertion of influence by private consumers

Consumers need well-founded, easily recognisable and trustworthy information on products' manufacturing conditions in order to be able to shift their purchase decisions to sustainable and fairly produced goods (Schultz/Stieß 2009). The basic problem here is that only information on sustainable and socially compatible goods is usually available, for example, in the form of labels or eco labels. On the other hand, information on conventional products' manufacturing conditions is generally not available. For example, consumers are not provided with information on which textile chemicals are used in the production of conventional jeans, how high resource use is, and under which working conditions the jeans were manufactured. They only receive this information, or at least some of it, if they decide to purchase eco jeans. However, that is no easy task given the mass supply of textiles.

The textiles example also reveals a further problem concerning information on the ecological and social features of ecological clothing. This sector now has such a wide range of labels and tags, with major differences between them in terms of accuracy and range, that they actually are more likely to confuse consumers rather than to provide them with information. For example, the *Verbraucher Initiative (Consumer Initiative)* lists 23 different labels for the clothing sector in its information page. It describes ten of these labels as “recommendable”, nine as “somewhat recommendable”, three as “not recommendable” and one as “misleading” (www.label-online.de). Consumers need to invest a lot of time and effort in order to find their way around this label jungle. This difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that textiles whose labels are recommended are mainly sold online or by mail order, but are hardly available in fashion retail outlets or discount stores. In this sense, environmental information can involve problems that make its acceptance and implementation in daily life significantly more difficult.

A counterexample – labels stating the energy consumption of domestic appliances such as refrigerators, televisions and washing machines – shows that it does not have to be this way. The background is an EU directive stipulating that all of the domestic appliances sold on the market must include this label so that potential purchasers can make and use a direct comparison. A reduction in the average energy consumption of the appliances in question has been achieved thanks to this label (UBA 2010). The organic label for food is another counterexample, as the requirements of the relevant EU regulation must be met for this label to be awarded. This means that consistent and binding criteria apply and the organic label can provide fundamental transparency on organic food.

However, apart from these few successful models, a major information asymmetry between producers and consumers can generally be noted. As long as this exists, a basic prerequisite for consumer choices that could support a green economy will not be met. Without this, consumers will not only be made responsible for purchase decisions, but also for looking for and evaluating the available information prior to purchase. This search for information is not only very time-consuming, but also quickly hits a brick wall because of the above-mentioned information asymmetry between producers and consumers. This plays a role in the continuing privatisation and feminisation of environmental responsibility.

Furthermore, it is often forgotten in these debates that not only private consumers, but also the state and economy demand goods and services. In 2011, gross domestic product in Germany was used as follows: private consumption 57.4%, state consumption 19.5%, gross investments 17.9% and exports 5.2% (Federal Statistical Office 2012). Hence, demand from the state and economy is indeed relevant and these two consumer groups should definitely be included in the concepts of a green economy.

Limitation of private consumers’ scope to shape change to their demand as purchasers

The focus on purchase decisions remains problematic in the debates on private consumers’ responsibility. Even in the context of the green economy, citizens are often

merely perceived as purchasers and their scope of influence is derived from this role. However, this is an unsatisfactorily limited perspective in many ways.

For example, the living and working conditions of citizens on low incomes or those at risk of poverty, who include a disproportionate number of women, disappear from view here. The fact that consumers can exert significant influence particularly through their patterns of use and their approach to products is still not taken into account. Consumers can use products for a longer time, thus postponing the purchase of a new product. They can also share products and goods with other people, thus extricating themselves from the prevailing focus on individual ownership. These (new) forms of joint consumption, which are also expected to help save resources, are currently becoming more important. For example, not only the number of car-share users is rising, but completely new concepts such as *tamyca* (Take my car), a private online service for peer-to-peer car lending, are being set up. Other examples include clothes-swapping parties or urban gardening on shared allotments where food is produced locally, thus contributing to self-sufficiency in the city (Botsman/Rogers 2010, Bund 2011). These new forms of consumption support citizens' power to shape change outside traditional money-oriented market activities. By turning consumers into producers or traders of goods, new types of influence become available to them. This can significantly strengthen their power to shape change in the interaction between production and consumption. However, this potential has not yet been addressed in the concepts of a green economy, although it will be essential to recognise and exploit it in order to bring about sustainable and gender-just development in societies.

Conclusion

Private consumers' scope of influence as purchasers should not be overestimated and strained in the concepts of a green economy either. In order for this scope to become effective in the first place, the right sort of conditions must first be created. Changes are needed, particularly in the asymmetry in terms of information and scope to shape change that exists between producers and consumers, but also in the structural and political parameters. However, private consumers' purchase decisions can only be expected to make minor contributions to the necessary fundamental and radical changes of the current patterns of production and consumption. The discussion paper on a gender-just green economy underlines this: "It is not enough merely to question private consumer behaviour. What is produced, where and how it is produced, how goods are marketed, and who benefits from sales revenue must also be examined" (Genanet et al. 2011: 4).

A fundamental rethinking of the material and value basis of economic activities, of production *and* consumption, thus becomes a new challenge for sustainable and gender-just development. This would include basing the development and design of products, technologies and services on the question of their contribution to a "good life". Different consumer groups, as well as actors from the economy, political sphere, science, research and civil society need to work together to seek and find answers to this fundamental question. What does a "good life" mean? For whom is it? Which/how many goods and services are needed for a "good life"? What demands must be made of their production,

design and use in the context of the aims of sustainable and gender-just development? How can the different ideas and expectations of different consumer and citizens be addressed and included in the objectives of sustainable and gender-just development and the green economy? A broad societal discussion process needs to take place in order to answer these and other questions. To this end, new forms of cooperation must be developed, while learning processes that take into account the different conditions, interests and aims of the actors involved, particularly citizens and private consumers, need to be designed. A change of perspective is vital in these debates. This would mean that consumers are no longer perceived as the sole addressees and demanders of goods, that the development of products and goods is primarily based on their being suited to a “good life” rather than merely on technical developmental logic and economic profit maximisation, and that production and consumption are understood as overall systems in their mutual relationships.

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Contact

Green Economy: Gender_Gerecht
LIFE Bildung Umwelt Chancengleichheit e.V.
Dircksenstr. 47
10178 Berlin
Germany
Tel. +49 (0)30 308798-35
Email: roehr@life-online.de
www.genanet.de/greeneconomy.html

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