Future Research Agenda for Sustainable Lifestyles

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS:
TRENDS AND SUPPORTING PRINCIPLES
ENABLERS OF SUSTAINABLE LIFESTYLES
RESEARCH APPROACH

D6.1 Sustainable Lifestyles Research Agenda
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EUROPEAN COMMISSION
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SEVENTH FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME

SPREAD
Sustainable Lifestyles 2050

ABOUT SPREAD
Sustainable Lifestyles 2050

Principal Report Authors	Matthijs Uyterlinde (ECN) Koen Straver (ECN) Oksana Mont (ULUND) Casper Tigchelaar (ECN) Sylvia Breukers (ECN) *With inputs from the project consortium, project advisors and the European Social Platform on Sustainable Lifestyles*
Project Coordinator	Collaborating Centre on Sustainable Consumption and Production (CSCP) HagenauerStraße 30. 42107 Wuppertal, Germany Tel + 49.202.45 95 8 - 17 Fax + 49.202.45 95 8 - 30 www.scp-centre.org Cheryl Hicks, Project Director: cheryl.hicks@scp-centre.org Nora Brüggemann, Project Manager: nora.brueggemann@scp-centre.org Rosa Groezinger, Project Manager: rosa.groezinger@scp-centre.org
Project Consortium	Ashoka, France Demos Helsinki (Demos), Finland Ecoinstitut Barcelona (ECOI), Spain Energy research Centre of the Netherlands (ECN) EuroHealthNet, Belgium Politecnico Milano (Polimi), Italy Regional Environmental Center for CEE countries (REC), Hungary The International Institute for Industrial Environmental Economics at Lund University (ULUND), Sweden The Northern Alliance for Sustainability ANPED), Belgium
EC Scientific Officer	Perla Srour-Gandon
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FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE LIFESTYLES

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SPREAD
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In the SPREAD Sustainable Lifestyles 2050 European Social Platform project, a diverse group of societal stakeholders from business, research policy and civil society participated in the development of a vision for sustainable lifestyles in Europe by 2050. The Research Agenda is a key deliverable of the SPREAD Sustainable Lifestyles 2050 project.

AIM OF THE RESEARCH AGENDA

The SPREAD Research Agenda is a future-oriented document that aims to support EU policy makers in the formulation of future research programmes, including the EU Horizon 2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation of the European Union, which will address societal challenges and enable sustainable lifestyles.

Taking today's societal problems and the present state of research as a starting point, the Research Agenda defines the key themes and research issues that need to be addressed in order to overcome these challenges and facilitate the development of sustainable societies. The Research Agenda describes the challenges for social scientific research to better understand the complex interactions between the various elements and conditions that shape lifestyles, and the processes of change towards more sustainable lifestyles. It provides an overview of themes and topics that require further research and analysis.

The Research Agenda is relevant not only for European research policy, but also for national, regional and even local research programmes and projects on sustainable lifestyles. The main focus is on research challenges from an EU perspective. Europe's position in the global context is also considered. For researchers, this agenda seeks to provide an outline of current research gaps and future research opportunities, as identified throughout the SPREAD project.

The process of developing the research agenda

The Research Agenda is the result of several processes and outcomes of the SPREAD Sustainable Lifestyles 2050, European Social Platform project. The baseline research "Sustainable Lifestyles: Today's Facts & Tomorrows Trends" contains an inventory of current trends and promising practices concerning sustainable lifestyles. It was followed up by several forward looking activities with different stakeholders initiated to make the intended 'end goal' of sustainable lifestyles in 2050 more visible and viable:

- The SPREAD European Social Platform for Sustainable Lifestyles, with over 500 members, also provided input to the Research Agenda;
- iFuture workshops created a 'peoples forum' that reached out to individuals and households in four European countries (Finland, Germany, Hungary and Spain) to identify different motives and values behind everyday consumer choices and behaviour in Europe;
- Visions and scenarios were created to focus on possible future sustainable lifestyles and to illustrate what sustainable futures might look like;
- A Roadmap towards sustainable living in Europe in 2050 has been created, in which barriers and gatekeepers for sustainable lifestyles have been identified and pathways are mapped to opportunity areas to get on track to sustainable living 2012-2050.

All of these outputs, i.e. existing literature, expert insights, questions raised by members of the European Social Platform and iFuture participants have been integrated in the Research Agenda.

For background reading we recommend the SPREAD Baseline Report "Sustainable Lifestyles: Today's Facts & Tomorrows Trends" and the "Sustainable Lifestyles Scenarios 2050: From Global Champions to Local Loops". More practical ideas regarding future action are addressed in the "EU Sustainable Lifestyles Action Roadmap 2012-2050".

In the Baseline Report four lifestyle domains were introduced that require deeper investigation: consuming, living, moving and health & society. Throughout the SPREAD project, these four domains have been utilized as a narrative principle. In the Research Agenda, the icons depicted below are presented to illustrate how the described research challenges and questions relate to these four lifestyle domains (Table 1).

Table 1 Four lifestyle domains

	**Consuming**	food, household and leisure consumer products
	**Living**	the built environment and homes
	**Moving**	Individual mobility and transport
	**Health and society**	individual and society wide-health and equity

Supporting principles of sustainable lifestyles

There is no commonly agreed definition for sustainable lifestyles. The most widely cited definition is that of the Westminster Centre for Sustainable Development (2004) that defines sustainable lifestyles as: *"patterns of action and consumption used by people to affiliate and differentiate themselves from others, which: meet basic needs, provide a better quality of life, minimize the use of natural resources and emissions of waste and pollutants over the lifecycle, and do not jeopardize the needs of future generations"*.

This definition acknowledges that lifestyles comprise all actions, preferences and values that allow us to fulfil our needs and aspirations. Lifestyle is how we prefer to live, spend our time, interact with others, who these others are, where we live, where we shop and what we consume. Lifestyles serve as "social conversations", in which people express their social position and psychological aspirations to others. Since many of the signals are mediated by goods, lifestyles are closely linked to material and resource flows in society. In order for current lifestyles to become sustainable, they need to be accommodated within resources

and emissions that can be assimilated by our one planet and that should be distributed fairly among people.

Defining sustainable lifestyles

In order to define sustainable lifestyles, the SPREAD project linked sustainable living to planetary resource limits. Specifically, the SPREAD project made use of the material footprint measure to define material intensity of a sustainable lifestyle that takes place within the planetary boundaries. Our research demonstrated that although the current material footprint of an average European lifestyle is around 29 tonnes per person, a sustainable European lifestyle should use approximately 8 000 kgs of materials per person per year. These 8 tonnes comprise material footprints from the use of household goods, food and beverages, to everyday mobility and tourism, electricity, heating and housing.

This definition of sustainable lifestyles is based on the amount of resources that would support sustainable living. However, SPREAD research confirms that 'one size does not fit all'. Sustainable solutions and their introduction, implementation and scaling up need to be tailored to specific contexts: physical, geographic, social, economic, or cultural. The share of each consumption domain in the average material footprint depends on individual values, needs and aspirations.

From unsustainable trends to sustainable lifestyles

In order to identify how we can reach sustainable lifestyles, it is necessary to understand current (un)sustainable trends and behaviours. To foster the shift towards a sustainable future within the limits of our resources, we need to clarify what the desired future would look like. Current unsustainable trends, such as the increase in individual and household consumption in terms of energy and material per capita consumption, cannot be stopped or changed overnight. On the other hand, trends to shape our consumption into a more sustainable direction are emerging. For example, survey data reveal a growing awareness among young European adults (18 to 25) of sustainability issues in general.

To reverse unsustainable trends, we need to understand not only the impact of these trends on sustainable living, but also the drivers of these trends – both on institutional level and in terms of technology and individual behaviour and consumption. On the macro-level, it is necessary to understand uncertainties and conditions that relate to trends such as digitalization, consumerism, behaviour change, urbanization, ageing etc. Another research challenge lies in the analysis of unintended social consequences of environmental solutions, e.g. rebound effects. Research is also needed to obtain insight in geographical and cultural differentiation of (un)sustainable lifestyles, values and consumer behaviour patterns. On the micro-level, knowledge is lacking on the dynamic processes of how individual and household consumption patterns appear, how habits form and then disappear and how everyday practices can be changed over time.

Future research directions and topics to support sustainable lifestyles

Looking more specifically at trends which can change the unsustainable patterns within the EU, SPREAD research has identified eight enablers of sustainable lifestyles that require further research. For each enabler, the societal challenge, the justification of research relevance and the research challenge have been identified. Table 2 contains a summary of key research challenges for these enablers. The Research Agenda provides an overview of the state of the art in existing research and the gaps in the current research. Each enabler concludes with specific topics and research questions and suggested methods, research approaches and design.

Table 2 Eight enablers of sustainable lifestyles: knowledge gaps and key research challenges

Enabler of sustainable lifestyles	Knowledge gaps and key research challenges
1. The economic system	• Development of alternative macro-economic models. • Income, changing work-life balance and environmental impact. • The role of business in the shift toward sustainable lifestyles. • Shift from ownership to access of goods.
2. Policy frameworks	• Challenging consumerist to shape consumption in a more sustainable direction. • Transboundary policies that help reduce environmental and social impacts. • Analysis of rebound effects and cultural differences.
3. Infrastructure and spatial planning	• A holistic approach of spatial planning and flexible planning concepts. • Everyday transport patterns of individuals and households. • Energy efficiency in the housing stock.
4. Information technology and social media	• Bridging the gap between technology-driven innovation and human behaviour. • The impact of social media and ICT on relationships and behavioural routines, consumer choices and preferences. • The potential of gamification.
5. Social institutions	• Investigation of the contribution of social institutions to sustainable lifestyles. • Effective empowerment incentives for grassroots civil society initiatives. • Packages of interventions for professionals in social institutions.
6. Collective actions	• Segmentation research to customise policy tools and packages. • Interventions to stimulate change in the collective mind-set. • Exploration of bridging social capital within communities.
7. Individual behaviour	• Deeper understanding of people's motives and values. • Knowledge about the framing of sustainable actions. • Rebound effects and unintended consequences of behaviour change.
8. Governance processes	• Learning from stakeholder involvement initiatives. • The potential of open (social) innovation processes. • Analysis why policies on sustainable lifestyles have been missing.

The need for new research approaches

The Research Agenda addresses research strategies to inquire the complex and multi-faceted domain of lifestyle change, reflecting on the synergies of this Research Agenda with Horizon 2020 – The Framework Programme for Research and Innovation of the European Union (European Commission 2011). Advancing sustainable lifestyles is a complex process embracing all facets of society, starting with behavioural changes, social and cultural norms and values and involving changes in infrastructure, technology, economic systems and institutional settings. Interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and practice-oriented research are crucial for attaining a better understanding of the challenges associated with enabling, shaping and scaling up sustainable lifestyles.

Lifestyles define, connect and differentiate us. They are embedded into, exert influence and are influenced by institutions, infrastructures and the environmental conditions. Therefore,

promoting sustainable lifestyles requires research and innovation leading to in-depth knowledge about solutions that connect individual and collective behavioural change to understanding how change can be facilitated by innovative technologies, infrastructures, institutional settings, policies and education. This requires both empirical studies and theoretical work. Sociotechnical, practice-theoretical, transition and innovation studies provide frameworks that can be developed on the basis of empirical inquiries. An integrated and interdisciplinary approach implies that technology and society are addressed in one forward-looking process, rather than being split up into disciplinary silos. Horizon 2020 supports this perspective by advocating the so-called challenge-based approach that will bring together resources and knowledge across different fields, disciplines and technologies, including humanities and social science.

To get sustainable lifestyles widely adopted, we need solutions that combine knowledge on individual behavioural change with knowledge about how to facilitate such change by new/changed technologies, infrastructures, rules, policies, social norms etc. A transdisciplinary approach – integrating different types of knowledge, e.g. scientific, experimental, tacit and practical – is likely to help arrive at solutions that are both grounded in a robust conceptual understanding and that are useable in practice. The SPREAD Sustainable Lifestyles 2050 European Social Platform explored the strengths and benefits associated with involving practice and societal stakeholders in knowledge creation. Several challenges have been identified. For example, the policy cycle is sometimes not well-aligned to the research cycle, i.e. policy making often demands solutions at short notice, while the design, execution and analysis of high quality social research takes time.

Experimentation with different economic tools, business models and community initiatives is more necessary than ever before. Applied research, pilot projects and socio-technical demonstrations can be a very useful way of trying out, testing, validating and evaluating new sustainable concepts and translating research outcomes into policy guidelines. Existing research on socio-technical transitions and systemic changes may offer important observations on the dynamics of systemic change, the role of experimentation and learning in technical niches and the role of higher order learning among stakeholders. Horizon 2020 supports the bridge between theory and practice by planning to provide funding “from idea to market”.

Knowledge brokerage is a novel way of creating knowledge by linking scientists, policy makers, civil society organisations and other stakeholders in dialogues, aiming to fully exploit results of existing research, to identify potential conflicting areas and together develop recommendations or even solutions for consensus-building. Developing new integrative modalities that link research results to policy-making can improve mutual understanding among divergent views on sustainability-related issues. An additional and critical dimension of knowledge brokerage relates to the general public. Sustainable lifestyle changes cannot occur without making the general public aware of the challenges and solutions to unsustainable ways of living. Therefore, research and innovation activities should include steps to translate complex and advanced evidence-based scientific knowledge into easy to understand messages highlighting the practical relevance of scientific findings.