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# TRANSFORMATIVE ACTIONS. SOLUTIONS #47

## EMPOWERING CHANGE: UNLEASHING POLICY INNOVATION TOWARDS GLOBAL SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION



Food loss © AdobeStock

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**In a world of cascading threats to resource security, decoupling economic growth from consumption-resource depletion challenges through strategic policy innovation-led consumer empowerment could be a transformative solution to reduce waste, combat pollution and recalibrate global sustainable consumption efforts.**



**“IF WE DON’T EMPOWER CONSUMERS TO MAKE SUSTAINABLE PURCHASING CHOICES, THEY WON’T BE ABLE TO CONTRIBUTE. BUT WE NEED THEM TO. SO, WE NEED TO MAKE IT EASIER FOR THEM. WE ARE DOING THIS BY PROTECTING CONSUMERS FROM UNFAIR COMMERCIAL PRACTICES AND ENSURING THEY HAVE BETTER INFORMATION ABOUT WHAT THEY’RE BUYING.”**

- Didier Reynders, EU Commissioner for Justice, European Commission

In 30 years, the global population is projected to grow to around 9.8 billion,<sup>1</sup> requiring three Earths to sustain current lifestyles.<sup>2</sup> Perilously, countries face the challenge of decoupling economic growth from unsustainable resource use and persist in exceeding their biological limits<sup>3</sup> intensifying biodiversity degradation and loss, pollution and climate change.

The United Nations<sup>4</sup> confirms this threat as it reveals that Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12<sup>5</sup> on responsible consumption and production is woefully off-course. Material footprints have tripled since the 1970s, surging 66% between 2000 and 2019,<sup>6</sup> driven by high-income countries; 13.2% of global food was lost post-harvest and 17% was wasted in households, food services, and retail, totalling 931 million tonnes in 2019 – enough to circle the Earth four times.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, two thirds of global emissions are linked to household consumption and carbon-intensive lifestyles with the richest 1% solely responsible for more than twice the emissions of the poorest.<sup>8</sup>

A potentially depleted and scorched Earth for around 9.8 billion people, our children and future generations, presents a terribly grim prospect. Evidently, business as usual is no longer tenable.



Local market © Anton Luzhkovsky

# 1. CONSUMPTION PATTERNS AND THE THEORY OF CHANGE

Unsustainable consumption not only wastes finite natural resources but is also a causal nexus of wasted labour, effort, investment and a drain on critical resources like water, land, and energy. It threatens food security, affordability, contributes to social inequality and increases greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions exacerbating climate change. It also has a direct impact on waste production and biodiversity degradation and loss.

Against this backdrop, the **Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework's**<sup>9</sup> (KMGBF) vision and mission of living in harmony with nature by 2050 is not just an environmental imperative but a holistic strategy linked to economic and social considerations for the balanced benefit of Nature and People.

**Governments, through their public policies, are instrumental in promoting sustainable consumption and empowering consumers and businesses to engage and act meaningfully.** By 2030, KMGBF Target 16<sup>10</sup> on sustainable consumption underscores governments' crucial action in empowering consumers through supportive policy, legislative and/or regulatory frameworks and improving consumers' access to accurate information and education. This is complemented by businesses<sup>11</sup> role to act on KMGBF Target 15<sup>12</sup> on business and biodiversity aligned with SDGs 9.4<sup>13</sup> and 12.6<sup>14</sup> to disclose information to consumers, assess and mitigate their biodiversity impacts, and report on their compliance with access and benefit-sharing obligations.

Promoting the **theory of change**<sup>15</sup> through biodiversity governance that is powered by concerted action from the consumer to the government-level could ensure shared progress towards achieving sustainable global consumption. However, challenges remain to translate these targets into actions that not only achieve long-term and effective stakeholder engagement outcomes but also drive behavioural change that can spur a culture of commitment to sustainability beyond binding legal obligations by 2050.

# 2. EMPOWERED TO LIVE WELL IN HARMONY WITH NATURE

Over half of the world population belongs to the global consumer class,<sup>16</sup> which is expected to expand, partly due to the growth of digital markets, and despite economic, health and geopolitical shocks. In 2024, consumer spending is projected to rise by \$2.3 trillion (or \$2017 PPP)<sup>17</sup> comparable to the size of another G7 economy (e.g., Germany)<sup>18</sup> contributing to an uneven increase in the global footprint of consumption.<sup>19</sup>

In the face of actual and imminent threats of biological resource depletion due to the challenges of the climate crisis, unsustainable consumption and production patterns and the recent recognition of the human right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment<sup>20</sup> – the intrinsic role of consumers in alleviating these pressures and driving sustainable market transformation towards a fair consumption space for all through their responsible and sustainable choices has never been more compelling.

**Consumer protection – the engine of change** Established by the **United Nations General Assembly in 1985, the United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection**<sup>21</sup> (UNGCP) are the only internationally agreed and widely implemented framework that set global principles in consumer protection and empowerment. These principles are aligned with the unique economic, social, and environmental contexts as well as the legitimate needs of individual Member States and in harmony with relevant international agreements. Over time, the UNGCP have evolved with changing global demands,<sup>22</sup> and have been revised to include a broader focus on sustainability and environmental conservation.<sup>23</sup>

At the heart of the UNGCP's principles is the **synergy between sustainable consumption driven by consumer protection and environmental conservation**, positioning the Guidelines as a vital tool in the implementation of targets 15 and 16 of the KMGBF. As a **global consumer protection benchmark**, the UNGCP (i) frame sustainable consumption as "meeting the needs of present and future generations for goods and services in ways that are economically, socially and environmentally sustainable";<sup>24</sup> (ii) advocate that consumers are provided with clear information to make informed decisions and take impactful actions towards sustainable living; (iii) combat misleading practices e.g., **greenwashing**;<sup>25, 26</sup> and (iv) recommend safety standards and eradicate harmful practices for the benefit of consumers and the environment.<sup>27</sup>

**Driving action for KMGBF targets 15 and 16** Enhancing and reinforcing consumer rights from unfair practices, growing digital divide<sup>28</sup> and challenges of **intention-action gap** in green consumerism,<sup>29</sup> the alignment between targets 15 and 16 of the KMGBF and the UNGCP's directives underscore the transformative role of public and private sector policies as levers to reduce, change and improve global consumption in line with SDG 12 and the Paris Agreement. A snapshot of these interlinkages is summarised in Table 1.<sup>30</sup>

The UNGCP promote integrated stakeholder approaches that respect common and differentiated responsibilities. They mandate ethical business conduct and bar illegal and deceptive practices and products that could be harmful to consumers, whilst ensuring that such policies or measures create value, cut costs and do not become barriers to trade. **Recognising that consumer protection laws may have limited to no specific provisions on sustainable consumption**, the UNGCP provide a comprehensive toolkit for effective and bespoke implementation towards consumer empowerment for sustainable development.

**"[US] KIDS MAY ONLY BE 25% OF THE WORLD'S POPULATION, BUT WE ARE 100% OF THE FUTURE. WE STILL HAVE A LOT OF WORK TO DO BUT KNOW THAT WE WILL NOT STOP UNTIL THE FIRST QUESTION ASKED WHEN ARRIVING AT BALI AIRPORTS WILL BE – 'WELCOME TO BALI. DO YOU HAVE ANY PLASTIC BAGS TO DECLARE?'"**

- Melati and Isabel Wijsen, Bye Bye Plastic Bags

1 UN DESA, The 2022 Revision of World Population Prospects.  
 2 United Nations (n.d.).  
 3 Earth Overshoot Day, Global Footprint Network.  
 4 Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special Edition.  
 5 Goal 12 | Department of Economic and Social Affairs (un.org).  
 6 UNEP (2021). Food Waste Index Report 2021.  
 7 Limited but growing data on national food waste estimates are being assessed for suitability in tracking progress under SDG 12.3 and for global coverage evaluation. See <https://bit.ly/3uzcRI2>.  
 8. Oxfam and SEI (2020) mentioned in UNEP (2020) and 1.5 degree lifestyles: towards a fair consumption space for all.  
 9 Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (cbd.int).  
 10 Target 16 (cbd.int).  
 11 Especially, high net biodiversity impact large and transnational companies and financial institutions.  
 12 Target 15 (cbd.int).  
 13 Goal 9 | Department of Economic and Social Affairs (un.org).  
 14. Goal 12 | Department of Economic and Social Affairs (un.org).  
 15 The KMGBF's theory of change assumes that transformative actions i.e., sustainable use of biodiversity, are taken to deploy solutions to reduce threats to it.  
 16. Per the Brookings Institution, "Those spending at least \$12 per day (measured in 2017 purchasing power parity, or PPP prices)." (NOTE: The UNGCP defines 'consumer' under the guidelines as, "...generally refers to a natural person, regardless of nationality, acting primarily for personal, family or household purposes, while recognizing that Member States may adopt differing definitions to address specific domestic needs."  
 18. Per The World Bank: Purchasing power parity conversion factor is the number of units of a country's currency required to buy the same amounts of goods and services in the domestic market as U.S. dollar would buy in the US.



Sustainable fishing © Eelco Böhntlingk

Table 1. The KM-GBF and UNGCP interlinkages on sustainable consumption

Theme	KMGBF Target	Objective	UNGCP-linked approach	Reference
Sustainable consumption patterns (SCp*) and resource efficiency	Target 15	Provide clear information to consumers (Businesses)	Objective (h): Promote sustainable consumption	
		Enable businesses in providing information that promote SCp	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promote SCp</li> <li>Educate consumers about environmental, social and economic implications of their choices</li> </ul>	III, 5(i) III, 5(f)
	Target 16	Promote SCp choices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A responsibility shared by all of society</li> </ul>	IV, 11 (a-d)
		Reduce global consumption footprint	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promote ethical business conduct, transparency and consumer education (Businesses)</li> </ul>	H, 50
		Halve global food waste	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promote eco-efficient products with life-cycle consideration; encourage recycling and purchase of recycled goods</li> </ul>	H, 52,57
Legal and policy frameworks	Target 15	Develop and implement measures to minimise biodiversity impact of businesses	Objective (a): Assist countries in achieving or maintaining adequate protection for their population as consumers	
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Standardise consumer protection across all commerce and adopt global guidelines against fraud</li> </ul>	III, 5(j) VI, 90
Compliance, transparency and disclosure	Target 16	Establish supportive policy, legislative or regulatory frameworks to encourage SCp	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enhance SCp and consumer protection policies through balancing fiscal instruments, social needs and market access</li> </ul>	H, 58-9 H, 50-1
	Target 15	Require transparency in business and biodiversity impact reporting	Objective (c): Encourage ethical practices in production and distribution	H, 60
	Target 16	Implement supportive mechanisms responsive to national contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitate access to accurate information on the environmental impacts of products and services and take action on misleading green claims</li> <li>SCp policy development and implementation should be inclusive and consultative</li> <li>Businesses to comply with their transparency and disclosure obligations to enable informed SCp</li> </ul>	C, 27-30 H, 50 IV, C
Consumer protection and fair practices	Target 15	Require business compliance with disclosure of biodiversity impacts and access and benefit-sharing measures	Objective (a): Assist countries in achieving or maintaining adequate protection for their population as consumers	
		Reduce global consumption footprint equitably for all people to live in harmony with nature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop, strengthen and maintain strong consumer protection policy considering the UNGCP</li> <li>Promote fair treatment of consumers in the marketplace through accurate and sufficient information</li> <li>Foster accountability and compliance<sup>19</sup> and support sustainable agricultural policies/practices to conserve biodiversity with due regard to traditional knowledge</li> </ul>	III, 4 III, 5(d) K, 71
Consumer education and information	Target 15	Enable informed consumer choices based on business impacts on biodiversity	Objective (b): Facilitate production and distribution patterns responsive to the needs and desires of consumers	
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide adequate information (including health/environmental benefits) for informed consumers choice</li> <li>Educate consumers in environmental, social and economic consequences of their choices</li> </ul>	H, 56 III, 5(e) III, 5(f)
	Target 16	Improve consumer education and access to information to encourage SCp and reduce global consumption footprint equitably	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promote SCp based on inclusive consumer rights and responsibilities in school curricula</li> </ul>	G

19 Ibid.  
 20 Facts and Figures | United Nations.  
 21 See a/hrc/48/l.23/rev.1 (undocs.org).  
 22 United Nations guidelines for consumer protection | UNCTAD.  
 23 The UNGCP was revised by the General Assembly resolution 70/186 of 22 December 2015.  
 24 See the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) resolution 1999/7 of 26 July 1999.  
 25 Item H, Guideline 49 of the UNGCP.  
 26 Parance, Groulx, Montero | One Planet Network (2023). Policy Brief on regulations to combat greenwashing  
 27 UNCTAD (2023). "The perils of greenwashing" featuring Arnau Izaguerri Vila. The Weekly Tradecast (podcast), episode 28, MP3 audio, 03:56, 12 January 2023.  
 28 Consumers International (2023).  
 29 "Why we can't meet the SDGs without ending the digital divide" | World Economic Forum (2023).  
 30 White K., Hardisty D. and Habib R. (2019). "The Elusive Green Consumer" | Harvard Business Review.  
 31 The UNGCP's emphasis on transparency and product traceability indirectly supports the fair and equitable sharing of benefits, aligning with the objectives of the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit-sharing.  
 32 CBD, The Sharm El-Sheikh to Kunming and Montreal Action Agenda for Nature and People.  
 33 "Green products come of age" | Deloitte Insights (2023).  
 34 BioTrade Initiative, UNCTAD  
 35 See https://bit.ly/48bgQ52.  
 36 Blue BioTrade Project, UNCTAD.  
 37 See https://bit.ly/3fuDdZ3.  
 38 See https://fsc.org/en.  
 39 See https://bit.ly/49C107q.  
 40 See https://bit.ly/48r3ana.  
 41 Legal basis: Arts. 191 (1)-(3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). See https://bit.ly/4yr1YU.  
 42 See https://bit.ly/3usZbYM.  
 43 See https://bit.ly/42xmscU.  
 44 See https://bit.ly/4wGJ22.  
 45 See https://bit.ly/3wfs2xG.  
 46 See https://bit.ly/49jJRU.  
 47 See https://bit.ly/41xEqan.

### 3. THE DUALITY OF TRANSFORMATIVE PATHWAYS TO SCP

Echoing the **CBD's whole-society approach**,<sup>32</sup> the UNGCP emphasise the shared responsibility of all sectors of the society and highlights the **crucial dual role of consumers** in preserving the planet for future generations, their duty to consume sustainably and their right to safe and effective goods and services. Amidst rising global demand for sustainable products,<sup>33</sup> **scalable and replicable models** of UNGCP-KMGBF nexus could be elaborated and potentially harness this duality on the ground:

**Sustainable consumption and resource efficiency**  
 The **UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) BioTrade**<sup>34</sup> **Principles and Criteria (BT P&C)**,<sup>35</sup> implemented in over 100 countries, has supported conservation, sustainable use of biodiversity and fair and equitable sharing of benefits through trade. This is enhanced by the Initiative's **trade and biodiversity statistical tool, knowledge sharing and self-assessment tool**, and a robust **network of partners and practitioners** that ensure trade of biodiversity goods and services is legal, traceable and sustainable. Its spin-off, **Blue BioTrade**,<sup>36</sup> empowers coastal communities to sustainably use, produce and trade marine-based products under P&C. Voluntary certification schemes complement these efforts by ensuring that products are e.g., sourced with respect (the **Union for Ethical BioTrade UEBT**),<sup>37</sup> come from well-managed sources (**Forest Stewardship**

**Council (FSC @)**)<sup>38</sup> and meet quality and sustainability requirements (the **Pura Vida Seafood and Aquaculture collective mark of Costa Rica**).<sup>39</sup>

The **Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Committee on Consumer Protection (ACCP) toolkit on sustainable consumption**<sup>40</sup> raises awareness on the impact of socio-economic growth and promotes SCP for sustainable development in the region.

#### Legal and policy frameworks

Established in 2008, the EU SCP Action Plan<sup>41</sup> led to initiatives such as the **Eco-design Directive**, revision of the **Ecolabel Regulation**<sup>42</sup> and **Eco-management and Audit Regulation**,<sup>43</sup> legislation on **Green Public Procurement**,<sup>44</sup> the **Resource Efficiency Roadmap**,<sup>45</sup> and the **Eco-Innovation Action Plan**<sup>46</sup> envisaged to mainstream sustainable, circular, safe and non-toxic products and materials in the EU market.

Addressing the immense challenge of sustainable consumption's lack of visibility in sector-specific actions, the **EU Ecolabel**<sup>47</sup> has guided consumers towards environmentally friendly products and services whilst incentivising businesses to innovate and reduce their ecological impacts since 1992. Adapting to the growing digitalisation of the retail market, the EU Ecolabel logo can now be seen alongside certified products online, providing e-consumers with more sustainable options.<sup>48</sup>

The first government-backed eco-labelling scheme is also being established in Latin America and the Caribbean.<sup>49</sup>



E-consumption © AdobeStock

- 48 As a caveat, the proliferation of sustainability labels does not ensure product sustainability, which may disadvantage small-medium enterprises that do not have access to 3rd party verification.
- 49 See <https://bit.ly/3Ty4i3V>.
- 50 For example through incentives, reduced tariffs, partnership grants, recognition programmes etc.
- 51 See <https://bit.ly/49g8KcO>.
- 52 See <https://bit.ly/42DOT1d>.
- 53 See <https://bit.ly/49fHBVn>.
- 54. See <https://bit.ly/49lcKzC>.
- 55 See <https://bit.ly/49egegn>.
- 56. Regulatory Frameworks to Combat Greenwashing (One Planet Network).
- 57 See <https://bit.ly/3GNel1X>.
- 58 Consumers International.
- 59 URGENCI.
- 60 See <https://bit.ly/3GPsKQw>.
- 61 IOYFP (UNEP).
- 62 United Nations (2023).
- 63. See <https://bit.ly/3TxLVMM>, also <https://www.greenschool.org/>.
- 64 Lifestyle Impacts on nature and biodiversity.
- 65. One Planet Network's Anatomy of Action, Media Toolkit (2021).
- 66 Interventions targeting consumption could cut up to 70% GHG emissions (IPCC (n.d.) in Consumers International (2023).
- 67 White, Hardisty, Habib (n 30).
- 68. UNEP (2016).

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**Compliance, transparency and disclosure**

Governments have a crucial role to encourage businesses to invest in the environmental performance of their products<sup>50</sup> and set regulatory standards on how to responsibly and transparently communicate sustainability to consumers to gain market advantage. The proposed **Green Claims Directive** (EU),<sup>51</sup> the **Green Claims Code** (UK),<sup>52</sup> the **Green Guides** (USA),<sup>53</sup> **Green Labelling Scheme** (Singapore),<sup>54</sup> **Green Advertising Decree** (Colombia)<sup>55</sup> amongst others<sup>56</sup> are some of the regulatory frameworks that aim to address greenwashing and misinformation on product sustainability.

**Business for Nature's High-level Business Actions on Nature (Assess, Commit, Transform and Disclose [ACT-D])**<sup>57</sup> aims to drive credible business action and policy ambition for a nature positive economy by 2030. Its global campaign, **"It's Now for Nature"** provides clear direction to businesses' nature strategy – a roadmap of how businesses will contribute to a nature-positive world. Voluntary certification schemes like the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC ®) play a critical role in complementing these efforts by ensuring that products come from well-managed sources.

**Consumer protection and fair practices**

Launched in December 2023, the **Fair Food Price Monitor**<sup>58</sup> is a multi-stakeholder collaborative initiative that promotes transparency and fairness in the food supply chain, from the point of origin to consumer level, uncovering risks of unfair pricing practices in the region.

**Urban-Rural networks: Generating New forms of exchanges between Citizens (URGENCI)**<sup>59</sup> is an international grassroots solidarity-based network of food producers, consumers, activists, researchers, local officials, etc. that participate in **Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)** based on the **teikei movement**<sup>60</sup> that originated in Japan in the 1960s. Since 2006, URGENCI has played a crucial role in promoting agroecology and fair food systems that are resilient, environmentally friendly, and socially just.

**Consumer education and information**

Supported by UNEP under the **10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production (IOYFP)**<sup>61</sup> to promote SDG 12, the **One Planet Network** houses a comprehensive global collection of projects, policies, tools and resources serving as the central knowledge hub for information on SCP. One of its six programmes, **Consumer Information for SCP (CI-SCP)** mainstreams accurate information on sustainability and better-informed purchasing choices.

Globally, about 19 million students are enrolled in **eco schools**<sup>62</sup> that progressively embed dynamic sustainable development education and equip students with crucial know-how and motivation to address SCP/SDG challenges for a more resilient sustainable future. The **Green School Bali**<sup>63</sup> in Indonesia imparts sustainability as one of its eight 'iRespect' values and teaches solution-based learning and community engagement

exercises as "students are change makers in action" (e.g., the **Bye, Bye Plastic Bags** and **BioBus** enterprise).

**4. FROM HERE, WE LEAP - NOT SINK**

Shifting consumer behaviour through public policy space is complex as efforts predominantly target sustainable production over sustainable consumption. The lack of sector-wide actions' visibility often not identified as "consumption policies"<sup>64</sup> underscores the urgency of actionable measures for the public, and direct government and industry efforts to transform global value chains. Social media is emerging as a potent and direct platform for engaging with the growing digitally savvy consumer generation.<sup>65</sup>

In a world of cascading threats to resource security, and an emerging global population of young, digitally connected new consumers, integrating **consumer safety and protection as a core mechanism to advance SDG 12**, meet the Paris Agreement climate goal of 1.5C<sup>66</sup> and live in harmony with nature could offer transformative solutions.

The UNGCP-KMGBF synergy (i) fosters a paradigm shift to demand-side resource reallocation (through e.g., education and information access) and (ii) pivots stakeholder focus from merely offsetting carbon footprints to enhancing what Mother Nature has left to offer through **consumer empowerment**. In this rapidly expanding e-commerce era, bridging the **intention-action gap in green consumerism**<sup>67</sup> requires enduring coordinated, inclusive and balanced approaches that boost sustainable choices.<sup>68</sup> The UNGCP-KMGBF synergy ensures that such options are not only available but also affordable, making sustainable living a viable and intuitive choice for everyone.

**"WE DON'T NEED A HANDFUL OF PEOPLE DOING ZERO WASTE PERFECTLY. WE NEED MILLIONS OF PEOPLE DOING IT IMPERFECTLY."**

- Anne Marie Bonneau, The Zero Waste Chef

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**TRANSFORMATIVE ACTIONS.**

TOGETHER FOR NATURE & PEOPLE.

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