

# Proste życie i zrównoważona konsumpcja

## Simple Living and Sustainable Consumption

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### Streszczenie

Artykuł rozpoczyna omówienie filozoficznych uwarunkowań idei ‘prostego życia’, które następnie umieszczono w kontekście zrównoważonej konsumpcji. Zwrócono uwagę na ogólne powiązania pomiędzy prostym życiem, zrównoważoną konsumpcją, a rozwojem zrównoważonym. Wskazano, jak proste życie może wspomóc wprowadzanie rozwoju zrównoważonego (jakie jego elementy należy promować, jakich instrumentów politycznych użyć i na jakie bariery można napotkać). Artykuł zamyka sugestią, że refleksja filozoficzna jest najważniejszym elementem prostego życia, który może wzbogacić prowadzoną obecnie debatę prowadzoną wokół zrównoważonej konsumpcji, a sama idea prostego życia warta jest popularyzacji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** proste życie, zrównoważona konsumpcja, dobrowolna prostota, efekt odbicia, szczęśliwość

### Abstract

After a brief reference to the philosophical background of simple living and its basic ideas, we explore how simple living can aid sustainable consumption. We look at general linkages between the two concepts and suggest how simple living can be used to support sustainable development (what elements to promote, what policy instruments to use, what barriers may be encountered). We conclude that philosophical reflection is the most important element of simple living that might enrich the current debate on sustainable consumption and suggest how to further strengthen the popularity of simple living movement.

**Key words:** simple living, sustainable consumption, voluntary simplicity, rebound effect, happiness

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### 1. Introduction

Simple and yet thoughtful solutions can solve complex problems. Referring to life-style choices, simple living involves more thoughtful consumption, complemented with spiritual development. We understand the latter as a focus on one's feelings and emotions, and on the intimate relations within the surrounding world, resulting in greater awareness and control of one's impacts on other people and on the rest of one's surroundings. Although simple living translates into reduced consumption levels and thus reduced environmental pressures, it has rarely been referred to in the literature on sustainable consumption. As those who pursue this life strategy declare themselves happy, research in simple living contributes to a discussion on the relationship between well-being and material consumption.

### 2. Simple living

We start with a brief reference to the philosophical background of simple living and its basic ideas, and then review the various categories of simple living activities in developed countries.

The idea of simple living is often associated with Henry David Thoreau's life at Walden Pond described in his 1854 book. It is there that many people have found inspiration in quotes such as: *Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor* (Thoreau, 1961).

The term ‘voluntary simplicity’ (often used as an alternative to simple living, along with downshifting) is attributed to Richard Gregg (1974) who

wrote that it *involves both inner and outer condition. It means singleness of purpose, sincerity and honesty within, as well as avoidance of exterior clutter, of many possessions irrelevant to the chief purpose of life.* Such ideas are not new to most philosophical and religious traditions. In ancient Europe, the best known examples include the Cynics, the Stoics and Epicurus<sup>1</sup>. In ancient China, the philosopher Lao Tzu said *To know when you have enough is to be rich.* Similarly in Japan, the idea of 'shoyoku chisoku' (less greed leads to contentment) or 'taru wo shiru' (to know what is enough), both derived from Buddhist concepts, have traditionally been ingrained among people. Schumacher (1973) attempted to merge some of these simple living ideas with Western lifestyles.

Simple living tends to be presented as a critique of mainstream consumption patterns, but to some extent simple living has already entered the mainstream. There is a wide array of motivations and functions behind simple living (Huneke, 2005), such as social or environmental concerns, questioning a growth-centred economy<sup>2</sup> and a materialistic society, and seeking a better quality of life. These may be individually or socially motivated (personal interests and values vs. broader resistance to consumptionism). Also, there is a large diversity of activities falling into this category, ranging from anti-consumptionist pressure groups<sup>3</sup>, through everyday choices of environmentally or socially conscious consumers<sup>4</sup>, to increasingly fashionable acts of the rich. Simple living is addressed by major environmental organisations, such as The Sierra Club and Worldwatch Institute, and by more focused groups, such as Simple Living Network and New American Dream. Although diverse, all of these refer to the ideas of 'enough' and 'spiritual affluence'.

<sup>1</sup> For a disambiguation of his philosophy from the perspective of simple living, see Mills (2002).

<sup>2</sup> The research community has responded with a 'de-growth' concept that suggests downscaling of production and consumption complemented with increased human well-being and improved environmental conditions (Martínez-Alier et al., 2010; Schneider et al., 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Such as Adbusters, the initiators of the Buy Nothing Day (a yearly event urging ordinary consumers to rethink their consumption and, for one day, refrain from shopping), or Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, a group of health care professionals, educators and parents acting against the marketing pressure exerted on children.

<sup>4</sup> These might include cycling or walking instead of driving, vegetarianism, eating organic food, buying locally or regionally, refraining from long-distance journeys, cohabitation, refraining from the use of television, reducing waste and recycling, volunteer work etc. There are people who choose to work less, so that they have more time for their families or hobbies, and those who seek jobs that would match their values or other needs, rather than just to make money.

To some extent, in their everyday lives, consumers in developed countries increasingly search for quality of life, linked to self-esteem and self-actualisation. It has been observed in the marketing community that the traditional, material status symbols are being replaced by inner values, such as 'being satisfied with one's own life' or 'being able to afford what is really important in life' (Longhurst, 2003). This is reflected in the growing interest in simple living in mainstream, fashionable magazines and television programmes. On some occasions, the media supported simple living campaigns, as it was the case with two Japan-based voluntary movements, gradually spreading to the world: Candle Night (encouraging people to rethink their life through turning off lights and enjoying candlelight on the summer and winter solstice) and the *Mottainai* (waste-not, want-not in Japanese). The latter was promoted by one of the major newspapers in the country and both got support of the Japanese Ministry of the Environment.

In developed countries, interest keeps increasing in activities such as yoga or meditation courses, organic and vegetarian food and slow food movement. Although these used to be an alternative, in opposition to mainstream consumption habits, they are becoming popular themselves, with articles and books on them published by fashionable and fashion-creating publishers. Similarly, artisan or food products offered by monasteries which might once be classified as embodiments of simple living, symbolising rigid conditions, without comfort, but highly spiritual, might be simply driven by monasteries' exploiting their potential value added market opportunity. Presumably, this is how simple living may enter mainstream and become another product of a mass culture. This is one way in which simple living might aid sustainable consumption. However, as we shall see later, to have a meaningful effect on consumption patterns, it would have to lead to a change in people's attitudes and not just constitute one more attractive consumption option.

### 3. Simple living and sustainable consumption

Consumption patterns are influenced by larger socio-economic changes. Currently it is sophistication rather than simplification that occurs in world consumption habits, with economic liberalisation, technological progress and the development of marketing channels, all increasing access to complex goods from far away. Even when new products are individually more environmentally friendly, overall environmental pressures related to their consumption are likely to increase because of increased consumption levels (rebound effect; cf. EEA, 2005). More generally, increased consumption levels are induced by economic growth.

Meanwhile, to be able to live in a sustainable way (Redclift, 2009; Laszlo, 2009), humankind needs

alternatives that would go beyond choosing more environmentally friendly (or simpler) goods only. To change current unsustainable consumption patterns, there is a need to change mentality – towards thinking about the Earth as a whole, and about one's surroundings and one's influence on those surroundings (Kras, 2011; Tuziak, 2010; Sanchéz, 2008). These could be aided with more spiritual practices and more self-development of the people. Here, simple living could aid sustainable consumption on a more profound level. Promoting simple living would increase consumers' awareness and, thus, change their behaviour, leading to increased well-being.

There is a large variety of approaches towards consumption, most of which refer to diversified ideas of 'what it means to pursue the good life' (Jackson, 2005a). If one follows a definition of sustainable consumption as *the search for consumption patterns that reduce human pressure on the environment and nature* (Bergh, Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 1999) then simple living falls into this category. Indeed, simple living leads to reduced resource use, and a focus on spiritual values (contributing to a more thoughtful and environmentally aware life). This has been emphasised by those dealing with simple living (e.g. Etzioni, 1998) and those who promoted it as an approach that could help attain sustainable consumption (Milbrath, 1993; Hunt Badiner, 2002; Myers, Kent, 2004; McDonald et al., 2006).

One of the most important common issues raised in the debates on both simple living and sustainable consumption refers to the problem of scale. If the scale of the economy is bounded by the Earth's carrying capacity, then consumption cannot grow into infinity and either current material consumption has to be curbed (at least for the world's rich) or, in some instances, dematerialised (material consumption substituted with services, e.g. through product-service systems). Both of these solutions have been addressed by the advocates of simple living and sustainable consumption, and they have become central to the degrowth movement. However, based on the experience so far, dematerialisation has not been able to solve the problems of increased scale of environmental impacts because of rebound effects and more literal forms of down-scaling have to be sought.

For a moment, leaving aside the exact philosophy of simple living, let us focus on simplicity more generally. Simplicity contrasts with one of the characteristics of modern society – ever greater investment in problem solving, increasing complexity and increasing energy use. All of the latter often constitute side effects of consumption-based attempts to improve the well-being of people. Indeed, these side effects constitute a trap, a never-ending vicious circle of technological pursuit of solutions to curb problems emerging with the development of those solutions. As Tainter (1996) argued, cumulative

incremental improvements often increase the complexity of a system and the costs of its operation, eventually reducing the initial gains for which these improvements were conceived. This reminds us of the rebound effect mentioned in the first paragraph of the current section. An additional problem links to our inability to predict the consequences of our activity on the environment (Faber et al., 1992). The more complex the system humanity creates, the less we know about its widespread impacts. Consequently, changing this system requires complex interventions which can further complicate the initial difficulties (lock-in problem).

If side effects of complex solutions can exacerbate the problems they were supposed to solve, then what can simple solutions offer?

- Firstly, the simpler the measure we adopt, the less complex should be its outcomes. For example, consumers are likely to understand the functioning and impacts of simple products and services better than those of their complex substitutes. Thus, they can understand and mitigate the impacts of simple products and services more effectively.
- Secondly, the simplest measures should be sought as early in the decision process as possible. This means that problems (and environmental impacts in particular) can be prevented rather than managed at the metaphorical end-of-pipe. For example, if instead of thinking about how to reduce the emissions related to their journeys by switching fuels or vehicles, consumers think how to optimise or avoid those journeys, they can reduce their environmental impacts to a larger extent.
- Thirdly, in principle, simple solutions should appeal to most consumers as they would be easy to understand and follow (and to enforce).

Counter-intuitively, simple living does not necessarily fulfil the third of the above conditions. Even though it invokes the idea of simplicity, it requires reflection and as a saying goes, 'reflection is the illness of intelligentsia'. Thus, in a way simple living requires complex decisions regarding the trade offs between consumption and happiness, an issue to which we shall return later. Meanwhile, as noted by Jackson (2006), most consumers do not see themselves as consumers, and in particular, they do not see themselves as consumers of natural resources. A question remains, what could be done to make consumers reflect on their consumption patterns. We shall attempt to answer this question in the following section, after now turning to some potential benefits that both the environment and consumers could gain from the consumers' choice of simple living.

It could be argued that simple living, through its focus on simplicity, simultaneously focuses on awareness and rationality. Those who pursue it follow a more thoughtful life and reflect on the

consequences of their decisions. In this way, simple living links to the notion of 'reasonable' consumption (Kronenberg, 2007). 'Reasonable' consumption remains on a par with real needs, which is motivated by an interest in the long-term survival of the ecosystem and which acknowledges the fact that the existence of the human species ultimately depends on it. If consumers understand the environmental impacts of their consumption choices, they are more likely to take environmental considerations into account while making their decisions. As simple living requires shifting focus from material consumption to non-material values, such as personal inner development, it might also increase the well-being of those who pursue this strategy through improved interpersonal relationships and increased self-esteem (Kasser, Grow Kasser, 2001 and references quoted therein; Brown, Kasser, 2005). Indeed, these are the principal objectives of simple living. Besides, more environmentally aware consumers would behave more responsibly and thus they might improve their living conditions. Simple living appeals to psychological needs and traits rather than to the quest for sustainability or environmental protection. It emphasises moral and ethical considerations more than traditional sustainable consumption. Finally, it is to a much larger extent spiritual, but at the same time more general – not based on a threat that if we do not change our behaviour, the world may suffer. In this sense, simple living is more objective, or positive – focused on positive emotions and visions, rather than associated with what for many consumers might be an intangible threat of environmental degradation. Consequently, it is more personal and would appeal only to some consumers.

#### 4. Discussion

Having briefly presented simple living and its connection with sustainable consumption, we now move to a discussion of what aspects of simple living could be promoted in support of sustainable development, what policy instruments to use for this purpose, and what barriers might hinder it (Kras, 2011; Redclift, 2009; Russel, 2010; Tuziak, 2010).

##### 4.1. Elements to promote

Changing people's values and convictions (mental models) has profound consequences for the whole economy–environment system (Meadows, 1999). Education for the purpose of bringing about a radical shift in consumption and production patterns can change the most important drivers of the current problems. In this context, simple living might offer a vision on how to satisfy needs in a more environmentally benign way. Information is necessary for consumers to make more informed purchasing decisions, but also, to some extent, to

change their perception of values, needs and the means of their satisfaction. The sustainability of consumption requires not only shifting from less to more environmentally friendly products, but principally shifting into more environmentally friendly consumption patterns in general. This involves decisions on whether to consume and how to consume, rather than what to consume.

The new mental model here – the need for thinking and reflection, acquiring more information about products and services, and their impacts – might lead to the realisation that excessive consumption may undermine consumers' well-being. Although information on products and services is derived from complex assessments, it helps consumers to choose consumption patterns with lighter environmental impacts. Eventually, this leads to broad thinking about the consequences of consumer decisions and involves more thoughtful use of resources in everyday life, with examples as simple as printing on both sides of paper or refraining from printing documents at all. Indeed, in the case of simple living, such thoughtful decisions extend to all spheres of human life, including everyday life and work. Research and information on the quality of life and quality of life campaigns might contribute to such change in mental models.

If happiness is defined as what has ultimate value for a person (Brülde, 2007), then a person that would live happily and sustainably has to see the value in sustainability or in harmonious economy–environment interactions. Indeed, well-being and happiness are influenced by the state of one's social and natural environment. Money and possessions are not sources of happiness but means – they are instrumental in letting human beings acquire happiness in the form of status, relationships, happiness and healthy environment (Daly, 1973; Meadows, 1998). More interest in what leads to happiness and what are its economic implications would be useful but this already is growing at an exponential rate (Clark et al., 2006).

Consumption culture is reinforced by the market and policies favouring further economic liberalisation, and by the liberalisation of the media. Although to some extent consumers and their demand drive supply, and thus production and the related environmental impacts, consumers are also exposed to the influence of producers via their marketing activities. This leaves little space for simple living which by many might be believed to be against the idea of development measured by the traditional indicators, such as GDP. Had demand been lower or more reasonable, supply would also have to be reduced in quantitative terms. One more issue that should be taken into consideration here is the time spent at work. Had we worked less, we would also produce fewer unnecessary goods.

Now we refer to what policy instruments might be used to promote the above ideas.

#### 4.2. Policy instruments

Sustainable consumption policy is a rapidly evolving area of research and practice, with one of the primary interests into how to change the behaviour of consumers (Jackson, 2005a, b). For this purpose, two kinds of policy instruments have been used primarily: information, and economic incentives and disincentives. To promote simple living as a form of sustainable consumption, policy makers would need to attempt to change the mental models or values of consumers, so as to curb certain aspects of consumptionist society at their source. In addition to informative and economic instruments, for the above types of interventions, policy makers would need to resort to regulatory instruments as well as political marketing demonstrating consistency with claims made in other places.

In his review of possibilities to promote sustainable consumption, Jackson (2005b) identified the following as the most important and influential policy mechanisms available for this purpose:

- external situational factors (or facilitating conditions) making sustainable practice easily available to consumers, such as the provision of recycling facilities;
- institutional context, including regulations on what is available to consumers, such as product standards;
- social and cultural context, including social norms, ethical codes and cultural expectations; and
- good examples set and promoted by business, community and public sector.

Indeed, the most powerful instruments that could be used to promote simple living as a form of sustainable consumption fall into the above categories.

*External situational factors*, useful for the promotion of simple living, might include ecological tax reform – changes in the tax system attributing financial responsibility for environmental pressures directly to consumers, and shifting consumption patterns through the use of economic disincentives. Of great relevance might be promoting spiritual and personal self-development, along with health and healthy life-style. This might be combined with facilitating the activity of groups that advocate simple living. Later, we shall also refer to promoting and facilitating good examples.

*The institutional context* for simple living might include food and health standards, already in use in many countries (e.g. restrictions and bans on sales of ‘unhealthy food’ at schools), and regulations on advertising and more general marketing standards, including bans on certain types of advertisements. Just as it has been possible to ban the use of subliminal communications, other excessively intrusive types of advertising can also be limited.

*The social and cultural context* seems to be the most challenging area for policy makers, and here they might be aided by other influential institutions,

such as churches. At the international level, UNEP and other UN agencies might join, for example through the promotion of value-based approach towards consumption within the UNEP-led Marrakech Process. These interventions would need to demonstrate that consumers’ habits and routine behaviour counteract sustainability (Jackson, 2005b). Thus, the aim would be to counteract the spread of mass-consumption culture and, potentially, also to counteract the influence of the media. Consumers should be made aware of the psychologists’, sociologists’ and economists’ findings that, in developed countries, happiness is primarily related to non-material factors (Myers, Diener, 1995; Clark et al., 2006; Pugno, 2007). Apparently, consumers do not know how to best use their income for their happiness. On the one hand, the above again calls on consumers for more reflection. On the other hand, potentially, the means of communicating such messages to consumers might change, too. For example, Jensen (1999) found that consumers enjoy the story behind free-range hens and oppose the story of conventional, industrially produced eggs, and they are willing to engage in buying a more expensive product, thus following sustainable consumption. Similarly, simple living might offer other positive stories for consumers to tell about themselves.

With reference to social and cultural context, the idea of working less that comes from the degrowth movement is also highly relevant here. Those who pursue simple living tend to work less and spend more time on leisure and reflection. Indeed, the idea of working less should be appealing to most people who would prefer to spend more time relaxing with their family and friends or just by themselves. According to some estimates, removing the institutional constraints to working less (promoting shorter weekly working hours, longer holidays, and earlier retirement) could reduce our environmental impact by about a third by 2050. Thus, apart from having direct impacts on human happiness, working less would also improve happiness indirectly, through improved environmental quality (Huppel, Ishikawa, 2010).

The social and cultural context might be influenced by developing and using indicators appropriate to measure well-being. Much consensus has been reached that such indicators are necessary in the relevant policy circles (including the OECD, with its fora on measuring and fostering the progress of societies). To choose one indicator that would incorporate the environment, society and economy, seems overly ambitious and such initiatives are criticised as methodically incorrect. Apart from bringing together distinct qualities, the aggregation process requires subjective decisions to be made regarding attributing indicators to categories and weighting their importance, which weakens the final result. Again, following the logic of simplic-

ity, the best sustainability indicators are not the aggregated ones, but sets of disaggregated indicators depicting various environmental, social and economic phenomena<sup>5</sup>. However, to avoid the problem of improving one dimension at the cost of other dimensions, the number of independent indicators has to be psychologically manageable. By promoting the use of well-being indicators alternative to GDP, governments may indicate to the society what counts in well-being and what are their priorities. With increasing popularity of simple living in developed countries, there are numerous *good examples* that could be promoted further. Similar to external situational factors, good examples make consumers more comfortable with the new alternatives they might want to adopt. This brings us to the issue of role-models – people regarded by the media and by the society as those whose behaviour should be imitated. Policy makers who support the ideas of simple living might personally partake in them, by either joining events such as the Candle Night or going even further and reducing their official or private material consumption. Also, soap operas have turned out to be an efficient means of involving significant numbers of consumers into sustainable behaviours. However, just as it might be difficult to get TV stations to promote the idea of simple living, there are various other problems that need to be raised here.

#### 4.3. Barriers

Problems related to the promotion of simple living can be divided into three broad groups: social, economic and environmental. On one hand, the problems stem from the fact that simple living prescriptions may be accused of being utopian or puritan, and such a risk is higher in their case than in the case of ‘traditional’ sustainable consumption. On the other hand, simple living as practiced in the developed countries may still not be sustainable enough in the sense of bringing the ecological footprint of consumers to the sustainable level.

On the social side, the most important barriers might be classified as problems with imposing lifestyles and the general passiveness of consumers. Changing consumption patterns is difficult because it is often questioned why a given life-style would be preferable or who would be in the position to make such decisions. In the case of simple living, some social groups might be more inclined to follow it (e.g. depending on life stage or family status) and, had they been properly identified, policy

measures directed at them might be effective. However, even if individuals decide to follow such ideas in personal life, often this may be more than offset by their professional activities (imagine a marketing specialist in a company manufacturing consumables adopting the ideas of simple living personally).

Consumers’ reluctance to question mainstream ideas is related to their fundamental social needs, such as that of being accepted by one’s peers. Most consumers do not want to stand out, except for being able to impress others with what everyone else desires. Environmentally friendly consumption patterns or spiritual values are not that high on the agenda of average consumers, and neither is a ‘reasonable’ approach to consumption side effects. Moreover, as noted by Claxton (1994), to have an effect on consumer choices, values need to be ingrained in consumers and not just known to them. In the latter case, they could be perversely used by the consumer’s subconsciousness to resist certain activities. This is further complicated by the fact that simple living may be too simple (too radical) for most consumers to accept.

Economists might fear that wide adoption of simple living might lead to economic stagnation, as it happened in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century China, when the economy closed for both spiritual and political reasons. China provides a good case study these days, too, as some critics argue that increased focus on material consumption is used by the authorities as a means for discouraging the middle class from potentially ‘dangerous’ social or spiritual considerations (Epoch Group, 2005). Indeed, similar attitudes may appeal to the business and political elites in other countries, including in the developed world. Furthermore, economists might argue that even happiness is easier to express in monetary terms, based on consumption of selected goods, which actually is the main reason for using consumption indicators as a proxy of happiness indicators. These barriers are particularly important from the perspective of the degrowth concept.

The environmental problem related to simple living is that even though those who follow this idea in the United States do pose lower environmental pressure than average consumers in developed countries, their ecological footprint still exceeds the presumed sustainable level (Brown, Kasser, 2005). This demonstrates that ‘mainstream’ simple living, reflected in fashionable acts of the rich, does not necessarily involve a genuine transformation of consumption habits. Rather, with increased consumption of surrounding goods and services, it may evoke a rebound effect. As Shaw and Newholm (2002) found, simple living tends to be contrasted with dominant consumption patterns and thus remains relative only. Clearly, this does not suffice for sustainability. Yet another problem is that there has not been much research on the linkages between simple living and sustainable consumption thus far. Indeed,

<sup>5</sup> Disaggregated indicators are simpler and more tangible, because they are more obvious. Meanwhile, constructing an aggregate indicator is in most cases criticised on methodological or theoretical grounds, because its proponents attempt to reflect too much complexity with one number only. Discussion on ecological footprint as a measure of sustainability provides a useful example (Fiala, 2008).

most often there is not enough communication between the proponents of the two ideas, as for example, the advocates of simple living do not usually attend scientific conferences in the West. The degrowth movement that is rapidly gaining ground provides a platform where these concepts meet.

## 5. Conclusions

We cannot impose simple living on anybody as it would contradict the basic idea, that it is a voluntary and deliberate act of renunciation of some material needs and opting for spiritual experience rather than material wealth. What we can do is to promote some universal elements of simple living, applicable to anybody whether pursuing a conventional or an alternative life-style. The most important of these is reflection – or ‘thinking more and buying less’, as it could be rephrased in the language of activists, or just ‘thinking more’ which would result in consuming less anyway. Reflection is necessary to appreciate the difference between means and ends (*Wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking, for it is merely useful for the sake of something else*, as Aristotle put it). Meanwhile, life without reflection contradicts the idea of simple living and it often involves unsustainable patterns of consumption. Increased popularity of simple living in developed countries does not necessarily lead to reflection – simple living is often adopted as yet another attractive consumption option. Meanwhile, devoid of reflection, simple living will not lead to sustainability.

Although we cannot expect consumers to shift to simple living en masse, we can curb the excessive pressure on consumers exerted by the media, which could leave consumers with more opportunities for independent reflection on their lives. Creating conditions that would facilitate the uptake of simple living, along with improving the society’s health and education, is also important. The number and diversity of the followers of simple living suggests that, being more general and objective, many of its features are appealing to various members of the society and they could potentially get greater appeal than sustainable consumption. Voluntary reflection may lead consumers to discovering on their own the need for sustainable consumption. Using sets of indicators describing well-being and making explicit the interdependence between society, economy and the environment might further broaden the perspective of the general audience. If the idea of simplicity was followed in all of the above areas, our interactions with the environment might eventually become less complex and easier to study and shape in a sustainable direction. At the same time, in light of research conducted on the income–happiness relationship, this would at least not reduce happiness in developed countries.

Finally, there is a need for further research in this area, in particular with reference to simple living in developing countries. Without any doubt, in general, people in developing countries live simply. Whether they pursue simple living though, is doubtful. The idea of simple living assumes that downshifting is voluntary while what occurs in most of the developing world is involuntary poverty. Furthermore, poverty in which people live in poor countries would not be acceptable to most of the proponents of simple living. Thus, simplicity is not equivalent to poverty, just as it should not be associated with ‘denying progress’. Surprisingly however, often low consumption levels in developing countries correlate with relatively high happiness measured by happiness perception indices (NEF, 2006). Indeed, fascination with happiness of simple lives of primitive societies has long been present in ethnographical literature (Turnbull, 1961) and there is much evidence that people in developing countries created simple and yet sustainable systems of resource use (either based on the traditional solutions followed in those areas for ages, or in the light of necessity). Potentially, studying less materially affluent and yet happy societies might also help to understand how simple living and sustainable consumption interrelate.

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