



## **Cultural change to sustainable consumption:**

### **A dynamic system perspective\***

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Our civilization is unsustainable and it is getting worse fast. The human ecological footprint has already overshoot the carrying capacity of the Earth, while population and economic growth are rapidly expanding our impact. How can we meet the legitimate aspirations of billions to rise out of poverty while reducing our global footprint to sustainable levels? Research and policy are now primarily focused on technological solutions to problems of environmental degradation and resource scarcity. These are symptoms, not causes. Here I briefly consider the relationship between subjective well-being and sustainability. The literature tends to view aspects of these issues in isolation. I use a dynamic systems perspective to integrate these phenomena and raise questions about the processes of change required, at multiple scales. I argue first, that technological solutions promoting ecoefficiency and new, sustainable industries, while necessary, are not sufficient: as long as everyone wants more, there is no technical solution to the problem. Second, drawing on the rapidly expanding literature on subjective well-being, I argue that even if there were no ecological constraints, the relentless pursuit of *more* among the already-affluent, no matter where they live, is failing to deliver high life-satisfaction and well-being. Whereas it is widely believed that sustainability requires sacrifice, constraint, and hardship, many policies promoting sustainability are aligned with policies that promote greater well-being above and beyond their benefits to the environment and public health. I close by raising difficult and unresolved questions about how a more sustainable, low consumption society might be achieved.

\* Prerequisite Reading: Sterman, J. (forthcoming). *Stumbling towards Sustainability: Why organizational learning and radical innovation are necessary to build a more sustainable world—but not sufficient.*