

## Consumption as Voting: A Path to Sustainability?

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## **Consumption as Voting: A Path to Sustainability?**

### **Abstract**

This paper examines 'consumption as voting' with the aim of critiquing it as a practice and evaluating whether if promoted, it could help satisfy the objectives of not for profit organisations engaged in the development and management of sustainability.

The review shows that it can motivate market place change and send messages regarding broad sustainability issues including consumers desire to see action upon them. It is limited however, in its ability to directly affect social change and lead development of a sustainable economy. Overall, it is a useful practice to promote, capable of advancing not for profit organisational objectives.

**Keywords:** sustainable development, fair trade, consumer sovereignty, boycotting

## ***Introduction***

A key group concerned with the development, promotion and management of sustainability are not for profits organisations such as charities, pressure groups and NGO's. In engaging with their various audiences, there are a number of strategies such as political engagement (Gawor, 2008), consumerism (such as directed consumption (Hirschman, 1970)), community participation (Fan, 2008) or encouraging withdrawal from a consumer society (Cherrier and Murray, 2002), by which they can attempt to advance their agendas.

Of these options, this article will focus on examining an under researched (Shaw et al., 2006) but growing consumerist approach: Consumption as Voting, with the aim of critiquing it as a practice and evaluating whether if promoted, it could help satisfy the objectives of not for profit organisations engaged in the development and management of sustainability. This paper looks to make a contribution by focussing on how these organisations can engage with consumers to meet their objectives. As such it compliments work focussed internally on the management of the organisation, to help develop a holistic understanding of the management of sustainability.

By explaining Figure 1, the next section provides an exploration of what consumer voting is, its history and foundations. This is followed by a description of what it can (and has) achieved and a critique of its limitations. Finally, a summary and discussion on the potentials roles for consumer voting will provided.

## ***Consumption as Voting***

Consumption as voting refers to consumption specifically enacted with the objective of producing value and beliefs led change from within the market place (Shaw et al., 2006). As an addition (or replacement) to traditional political participation, it has influenced the

growth of goods produced and marketed in a more sustainable manner such as financial services coffee, clothing, and organic food (Fairtrade Foundation, 2008, *Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs*, 2008, Bengtsson, 2008).

### ***Figure 1: Model of Consumption as Voting***

Insert Figure 1 about here

Consumption as voting describes actions taken by citizens, in their role as consumers, in response to perceived inequities or injustices in the market system, where choice of one product over another is motivated, in part, by specific personal beliefs, values or a moral position. It reflects a concern for some general good rather than just personal gain and is political in nature because recognition is sought for these beliefs and values, as it is with voting for a specific political party. This focus suggests a high degree of integrity with consumers using their economic votes in this way, often referred to as being empowered in their morally driven market choices (Harrison, 2005, Shaw et al., 2006).

The metaphor of 'consumption as voting' has a long history. Fetter in 1911, for example notes that 'The market is a democracy where every penny gives the right to vote' (1911, p. 394). A later view from the political right in the UK proposed that 'everyone who goes into a shop and chooses one article over another is casting a vote in the economic ballot box' (Powell, 1969, p. 33). The use of the metaphor has continued to the modern day, as seen by its use in the UK based 'Ethical Consumer' magazine: 'Money makes the world go round, and deciding how we spend our money might just save it...Buying cheap clothes which have been made in sweatshops is a vote for worker exploitation. Buying a gas

guzzling 4X4, (Sports Utility Vehicle) especially if you are a city dweller, is a vote for climate change' (Ethical Consumer Research Association, 2006).

Consumption as voting can be witnessed in the growing markets for products and services with clear political agendas. For example, UK consumer spending on foods reflective of political concerns, including fair trade and organic, which have clear links to concerns for the environment, human welfare and individual health, reached £5.8 billion in 2007 an increase of 14% on 2006 (*The Ethical Consumerism Report*, 2008). This market has grown steadily in the 2000's. Hence, whilst many in the anti-consumption movement view marketing and capitalism as part of the problem in over-consumption, numerous consumers are using that very market system to find a solution (Dobson, 2007).

## **Antecedents of Consumption as Voting**

### **Disenchantment with Political Process**

For the market based actions highlighted in Figure 1 to be identified as consumption as voting, several antecedents are necessary. In the Ethical Consumerism Report (2005) the authors comment that increases in the market for fairtrade products can be attributed to some citizens finding the responses of their governments inadequate when compared to the actions taken by some commercial and not for profit organisations. Specific environmental, ethical and social issues where government responses are deemed inadequate include climate change, deforestation, genetically modified foods, child labour and animal welfare. History supports the contention that where people become disassociated from politics or do not believe they have a political voice, they can use the marketplace as a site for political action (Micheletti et al., 2003). Its existence in the modern market place reflects earlier examples such as boycott of absentee landlords in the 1800's (Scott, 1985, Ayto and Crofton, 2006) and role played by boycotts of British goods in the ending of British colonialism in India (Rudmin and Kilbourne, 1996).

It has been widely reported that many Western democracies over recent decades have reported a decline in conventional political participation (Putnam, 2002). This is evidenced by decreasing voter turnout and declining political party membership. For example, the UK General Elections in 2001 and 2005 recorded the lowest voter turnouts in 80 years (The Electoral Commission, 2006). Conversely, there has been a reported increase in political activity through the marketplace in the form of consumer votes (Smith, 1990, Dickinson and Hollander, 1991, Friedman, 1996, Dickinson and Carsky, 2005, Shaw et al., 2006). Indeed, Hertz (2001, p. 190) stated ‘The most effective way to be political today is not to cast your vote at the ballot box but to do so at the supermarket.’ For example, in 2007, during the period when the UK government’s action on climate change was restricted and sceptical, it was reported that UK consumers spent £4.63 billion directed at addressing the impacts of this issue (*The Ethical Consumerism Report*, 2008). It remains unclear from this however, whether consumption as voting is a replacement for traditional political participation or whether it is an adjunct to it.

### **Consumer Sovereignty**

Consumption as voting has its foundations based firmly in the primacy given to consumers over hundreds for years in a market based economy (Smith, 1998), a primacy that, more recently, has been supported by political ideology. This context has led to consumers understanding the power of their individual choice, not only to create personal benefit but also for the good of society (Waldfogel, 2005, Marion, 2006, Dobson, 2007).

Consumer sovereignty has been used to describe this position of power or dominion over the supplier, which consumers exercise independently (Korczynski and Ott, 2004), as they are thought to be the finest judges of what is best for them. This self interest is then thought to motivate suppliers and ‘when consumer sovereignty exists, production in the

economy is directed by millions of consumers making buying decisions with their dollar votes' (Garman, 1997, p. 5). Therefore, as individuals spend in a free economy, they, through their rational choice and market competition, support the suppliers (and therefore workers) who offer the best product at the best price (or however utility and value are defined). In turn, the supplier's wealth is enhanced and employment within associated manufacturing and supply chains is supported. Overall the general good is thought to be supported by the growth of wealth in a society, and through the encouragement provided for the development of superior products, material progress within a market society is made (Marion, 2006).

More recently this consumerist logic has been adopted and developed by successive western governments starting with the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher and Republican Ronald Reagan. It has continued with the so called 'Third Way' politics adopted by Centre-Left political parties in the late 1990's. In the UK, for example, a central theme of New Labour's reform programme focused on consumer and choice (Barnet, 2002, Vidler and Clarke, 2005). This advocacy of the market and private sector managerialism, embracing the principles and management practices of private business sought to be more responsive to the needs and demands of citizen consumers. The privatization of key state industries such as electricity, water and telephone supply provide examples of this. However, this reform has gone much further as more recently the private sector has been involved in most arms of government, including the building and running of schools, provision of health care, the running of prisons and the supply of armed forces.

Beyond this, consumers have long understood that goods hold cultural significance (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979) and what they do and do not purchase reflect their values and beliefs (Dickinson and Hollander, 1991). It is not surprising, therefore, that as consumption has become the principle framework in many societies (Jackson, 2002) and

that governments have adopted this logic to underpin their political perspective, that in response to mounting concern about the impact of consumption levels on the natural environment, consumption is now seen as a mechanism for changing these undesired outcomes (Shaw et al., 2006).

### **Choice and Information**

For this type of market based action to be possible, the ability to *choose* amongst alternatives must be present, and to do this, information on the alternatives is required (Gouldson, 2004). Recent growth in this form of consumption has according to Nicholls (2002) been fuelled by increased exposure to and accessibility of information about global issues. Reports of questionable practices are no longer confined to marginal activist groups as the media attention given to political issues has heightened and are now disseminated very quickly via popular culture and the internet. The swift dissemination of the Nike culture jam concerning the use of sweatshop labour (Peretti and Micheletti, 2004) and popularity of authors and books such as Naomi Klein (No Logo), Eric Schlosser (Fast Food Nation) and George Ritzer (McDonaldisation of Society) provide examples of this. The broadening dissemination of information has, therefore, contributed to an increasingly informed and active consumer (Shaw and Duff, 2002, Harrison, 2005); however, this is of limited use without choice. The market for this informed political consumption is provided by organisations such as: The Fairtrade movement, whose products are available in 22 countries and has penetrated all of the main supermarket chains in the UK. Carbon offsetting schemes and ‘Adopt an animal’ schemes such as those offered by Care for the Wild International on travel and gift website [www.Lastminute.com](http://www.Lastminute.com).

## **Actions**

Consumption as voting may take the form of entry or exit from a market, or deliberate choice or avoidance of specific companies or product. It is deliberate and involves conscience thought and deliberate action. The two market actions available are either boycotting or buycotting (Friedman, 1985), which can in turn lead to consumer loyalty. These are deliberate choices for or against a target and as such, are equal to the task performed at the political ballot box. These choices may be supported by a range of other actions such as volunteering, demonstrating, correspondence or signing petitions.

Indeed, while the adoption of a consumption as voting strategy by the consumer emphasizes consumer citizenship and feelings of responsibility to enact change, many consumers do not believe they have the power individually to produce change (Burgess et al., 1995, Shaw and Duff, 2002). A feeling of collective action, however, can enhance feelings of sovereignty in the marketplace (Shaw and Clarke, 1999). The greatest impact of consumer votes is via organised group action (Lozano, 2007). However, a prerequisite to this, is that individuals need to be sensitive to the impact of their votes as this empowers them and motivates them to organise into the group frameworks required.

Consumer voting does require buying power and engagement in the market. This link to the market, places it in contrast to the reductive ideals of anti-consumption and anti-globalisation, where a solution of developing sustainability is envisaged via reducing consumption and exiting from the marketing place (Dobscha, 1998, Cherrier and Murray, 2002, Kozinets and Handelman, 2004, Gawor, 2008). Shaw and Clarke (1999) found that while ethical consumers were concerned about overall consumption levels, many believed that to reduce their consumption would lessen their power in the marketplace, due to an inability to then vote via their 'purse strings' (p. 116) Consequently, these authors summarise that there is a desire to enact change by consuming and changing the status quo

from within the existing market system. Such reformist (rather than revolutionary) themes have been noted in both ethical and political consumerism by Newholm (1999), Shaw et al. (2006) and Micheletti, Follesdal and Stolle (2003). Here, action is focused on changing the policies and practices of companies rather than the capitalist system itself. Indeed, as noted by Shaw et al. (2006, p. 1063) 'while the purchase of organic food may indeed create a new market...it also represents a gradual move away from pesticide use through intensive monocrop agriculture'. Hence consumption as voting can be viewed as a consumer response from within the dominant market hegemony, one that has potential to redirect markets in more sustainable, equitable directions.

Having described consumer voting and its foundations, what effect and benefits this approach may have will now be discussed. In doing so, the market signals and outcomes seen with this approach (Figure 1) will be explored in more detail.

### **Market Signals and Potential Outcomes**

As described earlier, whilst consumption has long been seen as a mechanism for economic social good (supporting jobs, the economy), this is achieved secondary to individual utility. Consumer voting goes further than this consequential social good, and shows that consumption can be a force for fairness, altruism and increased societal participation, therefore highlighting the connection between consumption and other aspects of existence (Belk, 1987). This is derived from its ability to direct, via boycotting or buycotting, overall product design, individual product features and extraction, manufacturer, assembly, supply chain and marketing practices. Buycotting is more effective in achieving this, if practiced via repeated purchases. This practice tells organisations what their loyal customers want by sending repeated signals, which are less likely to be missed or misinterpreted.

Importantly, these signals are not confined to the individual organisations whose goods are being bought or avoided, as they also provide information to their competitors in the wider market place. This market based activity also sends signals to governments (on all levels) as to some of the issues of concern to the population and, critically, in which areas they believe government action is insufficient.

Dickinson and Hollander (1991) and supported by Dobson (2007), proposed that individual members of society should be responsible for the consequences of their action if the societal implications of their purchases can be reasonably and readily determined. Their proposal offers insight into possible benefits derived from the market and political signals that consumer voting can send. These may be thought of in four complementary ways:

1. As a way to have consumers cooperate to obtain long term or higher order goals that might otherwise be excluded by everyone acting in his/her self-interest.
2. As a non-legislative alternative to redress imbalances in the perceived distribution of goods and services to various components of society.
3. As a means of promoting private and public discussion with respect to utilities and perhaps their transformations to a higher level of societal responsibility.
4. As a way to support worthwhile economic institutions, for example, retailers offering outstanding value through benefit to society as a whole.

Further, the ability of all consumers to make ethical purchases frequently may increase a sense of participation in society as consumers can understand that embodied in the product or service they chose are their values and beliefs.. This is in contrast to political voting, which often does not necessarily give participants in the election a feeling that they mattered. The sense of individual participation may be extended into a sense of participation in creating a better society, a potential partial antidote to a society often now

described as a place where individuals are more isolated and more self concerned (Giddens, 1990, Beck, 1992). Therefore, the potential benefits of consumption as voting go beyond its ability to motivate change in environmentally or socially undesirable practices. From this discussion on what can be achieved, examples of what consumption as voting has achieved will now be highlighted.

### **What has it Achieved?**

One of the main market actions of consumer voting, namely boycotting, has been used as an effective but limited tool for campaigning against social injustices for over 250 years. It has been used to highlight environmental and sustainability concerns in numerous examples including the 'Stop Esso Campaign' (Gueterbock, 2004) and the boycott of Kimberly Clark tissue brands in Canada (Kleercut, 2006). The 'Stop Esso' campaign was called because, according to Greenpeace, Exxon-Mobil's have played a role in undermining the Kyoto treaty, have not invested sufficiently in renewable energies and proportionate to its extraction and refinement activities, has very high organisational CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (Exxon, 2007). Success has been mixed however; increased funding of renewable energies research has been gained, though Exxon have failed in their commitment to stop the flaring (burning) of gas from Nigerian oil wells by 2006, a significant source of the companies direct CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (Daily Trust, 2009). Kimberly Clark's use of virgin pulp from felling ancient forests to supply its Kleenex and Cottonelle tissue brands, has also led Greenpeace to organise action against it, including promoting a boycott and letter writing campaigns (Kleercut, 2006). Greenpeace claim that 728 organisations have joined this boycott, though the disputed logging activity continues (Forest Friendly 500, 2009).

A key motivating variable in the success of boycotting, appears to be that consumers are willing to pay extra for goods and services produced according to their

ethical positions (Harrison, 2005). This has led to an increased willingness for producers to respond, as witnessed by the growing markets for ethical and politically orientated products and services. For example, in the UK sales for timber and paper produced in a sustainable manner, grew by 46% between 2006 and 2007 (*The Ethical Consumerism Report*, 2008) and there are now over 1000 fair trade marked products available (Fairtrade Labelling Organisations International, 2007).

Beyond examples of these actions targeted at an individual company, the effect that consumption as voting can have on promoting a social cause throughout a whole market, can be explored via an extended example on the UK coffee market. Whilst the motivation for consumer action has been unfair trading practices, wider concerns over the effect of globalization, links this action with damaging farming methods and supply chain practices. This example, therefore, is pertinent to the goal of article in critiquing consumption as voting's role in promoting a sustainable economy.

Historically, the coffee sold in the UK has been done so within a market structure that has led to abuses of developing world coffee farmers and traders. The global coffee market is characterised by fragmented growing on small family owned farms in mainly poor countries (Fair Trade Council, 2002) while roasting capability is concentrated by five multinational companies. These five (Nestle, Kraft, Proctor and Gamble, Tchibo and Massimo) purchase, roast and sell over ½ of global output (Oxfam International, 2002). Whilst this situation does not necessarily lead to inequalities in pricing and profit, the collapse in coffee prices in the early 2000's led to well publicised hardship for the farmers and local traders (Fair Trade Council, 2002). Hardships that were not shared by the roasters and retailers, who saw margins improve (see for example *Nestlé*, 2000)

*'We can't pay our daily labourers. My children can't go to school. We can't afford medical treatment.'* The family was surviving by eliminating luxuries such as butter, oil and sugar, and selling their animals - cows, goats and sheep - one by one.'  
(Mekonum, a 45-year-old coffee farmer from Ethiopia as quoted in *The Guardian*, 2005)

Associated with this market system are intensive mono-cropping and a move away from traditional shade grown cultivation. This has led to many damaging farming practices and their outcomes such as deforestation (Clay, 2004), loss of biodiversity (Estrada et al., 1994) high use of potentially dangerous agrochemicals (Segura and Reynold, 1993) ground water contamination (Nielson and Lee, 1987) and degradation of soil quality (Babbar and Zak, 1995).

Within this context, one focus of market based action has been the development and growth of products sold under the Fairtrade labelling initiative. Since 1997, this initiative, managed by the Fairtrade Labelling Organisation (FLO), has attempted to improve trade justice by helping consumers identify goods produced under fair employment and trade conditions. A Fairtrade label is awarded to products that meet explicit general and market specific terms of trade and production for both traders and growers. For example, coffee roasters must guaranteed a minimum price with a fair-trade premium but also offer stable supply contracts (see <http://www.fairtrade.net> for further details on these). In providing these guarantees, Fairtrade coffee has provided the stability required for these small farmers to run their farms profitably and has helped some move back toward less intensive farming methods including organically grown.

The deliberate purchasing of these coffee products by concerned consumers, mirrored by organised and personal boycotting of alternatives, has seen the market for

Fairtrade coffee in the UK expand to £65.8 million in 2005. In addition, not only has the collective action of this value driven consumption worked to create sales but critically, vendors have acknowledged this. All the main supermarket chains in the UK stock Fairtrade labels along with 46 other retailers and chain coffee shops. Indeed, the iconic UK retailer, Marks and Spencers, only now stocks Fairtrade products for its entire range of 43 teas and coffees (Fairtrade Foundation, 2008).

The UK coffee market also has examples of wider political action than purely the choice or non choice of particular brands of coffee. Starbucks is one stockist of the Fairtrade labels and has recently been subject to active demonstrations, petitioning and communication, in response to the position, perceived as unjust, that they took in trade negotiations with the Ethiopian government. In 2006, the Ethiopian government attempted to secure a stronger position in negotiations with Starbucks by asking the company to grant them ownership over the names of Ethiopia native coffees. According to Oxfam, however, Starbucks, despite the brands it stocks and annual corporate social responsibility report, blocked applications to the US patent authorities for these claims (Oxfam International, 2006). In response to this, Oxfam organised the 'Stir it up' campaign to inform the public and to put pressure on the company via consumer action. A key part to this was a day of action held on the 16<sup>th</sup> of December 2006, where customers were encouraged to protest at Starbucks stores worldwide or to engage with baristas at a store level. In this way, 89,000 consumers were organised in collective action against Starbucks perceived tokenism regarding fair trade in general, and their intransigence on this issue in particular (Oxfam International, 2006). Since this campaign, Starbucks has revisited their original decision and has engaged with the Ethiopian government on a trademark deal (Make Trade Fair, 2006) .

This review has highlighted that market based political action can send signals to the market place regarding the types of products and supply chain activities that the consumers want to support or discourage. These and other campaigns therefore provide support that this approach can be effective in directing belief led change within the market place. However, its limitations, such as market structure and consumer behaviour will now be explored and as a consequence, the power of consumer votes to direct meaningful, sustained and consistent action is questioned.

### ***Limitations of Consumption as Voting***

#### **Market based limitations**

As explored in the previous section, a key requirement for political participation under market conditions is consumerist logic encapsulated in consumer sovereignty over the market. If this situation does not exist, or is not consistently the case, then the consumer cannot expect to move the market to act in accordance with their wishes. Despite the long history of consumer sovereignty, several arguments can be made against it, first from the perspective that companies are not necessarily driven by it.

Waldfoegel (2005) points out whilst consumer sovereignty underlies economic theory and is almost universally embraced, empirical data supporting it is scarce. Indeed, several authors refer to the 'myth' of consumer sovereignty (Sirgy and Su, 2000, Korczynski and Ott, 2004, Saren et al., 2007). Consumer demand is explicitly recognised by many companies, as the basis upon which they decide what to/what not to produce so that their offerings will attract and maintain customers (see for example Proctor and Gamble, 2008). Shaw et al. (2006) note, however, that the perspective of the consumer is only one of the considerations and companies will ultimately produce what is in their best interests to produce, even where that may require persuading and manipulating consumers.

Korczynski and Ott (2004) take an illusory view regarding sovereignty. They consider a service setting where they view consumer sovereignty as the role of the service provider to make the consumer *think* they are sovereign, whereas the producer is the party actually dictating how the service is provided. Further Shaw et al. (2006) discuss the limitations set by the market through a lack of effective labelling, inhibiting the information available to consumers upon which to make their decisions.

To propose that consumers are in control of every detail of the consumption process at all times, over emphasises the power of consumer sovereignty. Instead, sovereignty suggests that longitudinally, consumers' wishes are the focus upon which the producer designs their offerings. Control over the details may evolve over time and according to market conditions, but also within a market economy there is a place for supplier led innovation and design, which fashion consumers' tastes and desires. Therefore, consumers using their consumption as a political voice cannot always expect it to work, nor can it be expected to work quickly, as it takes significant amounts of time for an organisation to listen, redesign and reengineer its supply chain (Kessler and Chakrabarti, 1996).

Neither can it be assumed that market conditions contain sufficient competition for consumers to be able to choose. For example, when one is buying a personal computer there is very little choice beyond one based on Microsoft Windows or the Apple Mac platform. In many markets, particularly high technology markets where a few suppliers dominate, this limited competition reduces the opportunity for consumers to exercise their power (Shaw et al., 2006).

The efficiency of consumer voting is also questioned by the heterogeneous signals sent by suppliers. These mixed signals can be the results of short term lack of stock, or because the alternatives available in the market place contain a combination of desired and undesired features. For example, the organic vegetables available in the Woolworths chain

of supermarkets in Australia are all shrink wrapped in plastic, whereas non organic vegetables are available in a loose form. Therefore, buying the organic versions is simultaneously a vote for organic methods of production AND increased packaging using non recyclable and harmful plastics (Piringer and Baner, 2008).

In summary, from the supply side, a rejection or manipulation of sovereignty, lack of competition or appropriate choice and the slow speed by which the market can react to signals, undermines consumption as voting, particularly as a rapid option, for developing a sustainable economy. In addition to these limitations, consumer decision making restricts its effectiveness.

### **Consumer limitations**

It has long been recognised that consumer use of information and decision making ability is flawed (Kahneman et al., 1982, Kahneman, 1994), thereby compromising market based political action. As highlighted previously, Shaw et al. (2006) discuss the lack of effective labelling available to consumers and without relevant information consumers are limited in the effectiveness of their decision making (Baron, 2000). Action under conditions of insufficient information may also lead to unforeseen and damaging consequences. For example, the recent growth in the use of biofuels as a greener alternative to fossil fuels has been subsequently questioned. The use of food crops such as corn, to produce ethanol are thought to have contributed to an increase in commodity and food prices, therefore simultaneously reducing the ability of poorer nations to feed themselves (OECD, 2006).

Even if a sufficient quantity of relevant information is available, consumers differ in their skills, time and levels of motivation required to make informed choices within an ethical decision making context (Sirgy and Su, 2000). More fundamentally, the seminal series of works by Kahneman and Tversky (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979, Tversky and Kahneman, 1981, Kahneman et al., 1982) shows over a range of contexts that even when

possessing sufficient information, consumers make suboptimal, and 'irrational' decisions. These issues are sufficiently severe and resistant that Kahneman (1994) discusses the case for paternalistic intervention in consumer decision making, a position supported by Thaler and Sunstein (2003).

Further, consumers have been found to experience uncertainty regarding the consequences of their actions when choosing *between* ethical markets such as reducing ones carbon footprint or buying ethically manufactured clothing and *within* markets, such as between hydroelectric or solar power (Tomolillo and Shaw, 2003, Ethical Consumer Research Association, 2006, Shaw et al., 2006). This uncertainty can then be expected to undermine their commitment to undertake repeat purchase and extend their ethical purchasing into other markets (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). For example, one mechanism to reduce carbon footprint is to only purchase locally made clothes; however this may also simultaneously entail choosing against consuming only ethically manufactured clothing (which is manufactured abroad), despite this issue also being of importance to the consumer (Tomolillo and Shaw, 2003). An example of within market confusion can be seen with the choice regarding which carbon offset scheme to purchase. Here the consumer is faced with further confusion as to the beneficial outcome of the chosen alternative because of conflicting scientific evidence regarding the claimed benefits of individual types of scheme (Murray and Dey, 2007).

In addition to market place uncertainty caused by heterogeneous signals sent *by* the suppliers as discussed previously, variation between consumers' in terms of their beliefs and values sends mixed signals *to* the suppliers and hence the market place. The effectiveness of consumption as voting is achieved most readily when practiced collectively, however disagreement over which problem to address, product to buy, approach to take or whether the approach should be taken at all, can divide the effort and

send weak or conflicting signals to the market. The signal may also be weakened by a lack of sustained effort as consumers become aware of new issues, become fatigued with the problem, disenchanted as to progress of their efforts or seek variety from their established shopping habits (McAlister and Pessemier, 1982).

The efficiency with which collective action is organised can also affect the outcomes of this approach for example, where signals become weakened because organising groups disband, or run out of resources. Of more concern to this critique of consumption as voting, is the probability that in some instances the most popular or best organised actions may not be the most beneficial. Further, it cannot be assumed that boycott or the threat of a boycott, for example, is necessarily a source for the common good, it may instead reflect the coercive self interests of powerful groups.

A final issue based on its nature as a market based solution is that its prosecution may lead to less consumption. Over the history of the modern nation state, societies have at various times, been negatively affected by levels of consumption that were insufficient to support the levels of employment, growth and prosperity required to avoid widespread poverty. Indeed, the G20's use of fiscal stimulus packages as a response to the recession in 2008/2009, is largely motivated by the economic lessons from the long duration of the great depression of the 1930s. It is widely believed now that under-consumption and fiscal tightening lengthen this economic and social crisis (Eichengreen, 1996). Taking an anti consumption, non market approach to reducing consumption may therefore reduce the ability of the wealthier nations to make the necessary changes to the global economic system.

## ***Discussion***

It is clear from the evidence of numerous campaigns that politically motivated consumption can be successful at affecting the market place and sending general messages to a wide range of audiences. Therefore, promoting consumption as voting as an approach to its consumer audiences has the potential to advance the objectives of not for profit organisations. However, the analysis provided in this paper finds that it is limited in its direct ability to affect social change and lead the development of a more sustainable economy. This is concluded based on consumers' inability to send clear, consistent, sufficiently strong signals and on the marketplace's desire and ability to listen and act, in a sufficiently timely manner, upon the signals that are sent. These main conclusions will now be discussed further.

In support of the use of consumption as voting, it is apparent from consumer's willingness to participate in, for example boycotts and buycotts, that there is a clear desire for action in a range of sustainability and social justice issues. Indeed, Shaw et al. (2006), supported by Shaw and Duff (2002), discuss that even when consumers were unsure of the outcome of their boycott, they were still compelled by feelings of personal responsibility and obligation, to continue to act. Further, whilst it may be limited in its direct ability to lead social change, it is able to send general messages about what issues are deemed important. The preceding analysis suggests that the specific campaigns that are supported within the area of sustainable development may be inconsistent, the messages sent may be unclear or weak and the reaction of the market can be slow and obstructive. However, overall, clear messages are sent to governments that people support and are willing to engage in the larger issue of sustainability. For example, the choice of which carbon emissions scheme is the best may be debatable and some consumers can be said to have chosen the wrong ones, the overall message however, that consumers are prepared to take action on climate change, is clear. Boycotting and buycotting also signal to governments

how much citizens are prepared to pay for change, what reductions in utility they are prepared to accept and what additional actions they are prepared to take.

Beyond this, whilst specific campaign goals may not be achieved, promoting a campaign via consumption as voting can be successful in furthering an organisations overall goals. This is highlighted with the 'Stop Esso' campaign, which, even with involvement of one of the largest and most respected environmental charities, Greenpeace, it has failed to stop Esso flaring gas in Nigeria. Tellingly, this is despite the company promising on several occasions to do so (Daily Trust, 2009). This shows that target organisations can, through their public relations activities, mollify the demands of the protestors without necessarily acquiescing to them. Even so, whilst not all the specific campaign goals were achieved, the awareness and levels of action created by it, have furthered the wider corporate Oxfam objectives of 'catalysing an energy revolution' and 'creating a toxic free future' (Greenpeace International, 2009).

Structural limitations within the market place and debate surrounding consumer sovereignty manifest themselves in a lack of power and sufficient options across a complete range of markets. Together these suggest that organisational responses to consumption as voting can be limited. Whilst one has many ethical choices in the coffee market, this is not the case in personal computers or cars and even where choice does exist, the perfect product, containing all the consumers required features may not. Debate exists regarding the degree to which companies acquiesce to consumer sovereignty or instead continue to market what they can make and then attempt to manipulate consumer tastes. The existence of evidence to fuel this debate further questions a market based approach to developing a sustainable economy. Indeed, even when reacting to consumer sovereignty, several authors suggest that such consumer activism quickly becomes co-opted by the market in the advancement of commercial interests rather than signifying organizational acceptance of

the values underlying the desired product features (Holt, 2002, Heath and Potter, 2004, Carducci, 2006). Greenwashing represents a particularly extreme and insincere form of this co-option.

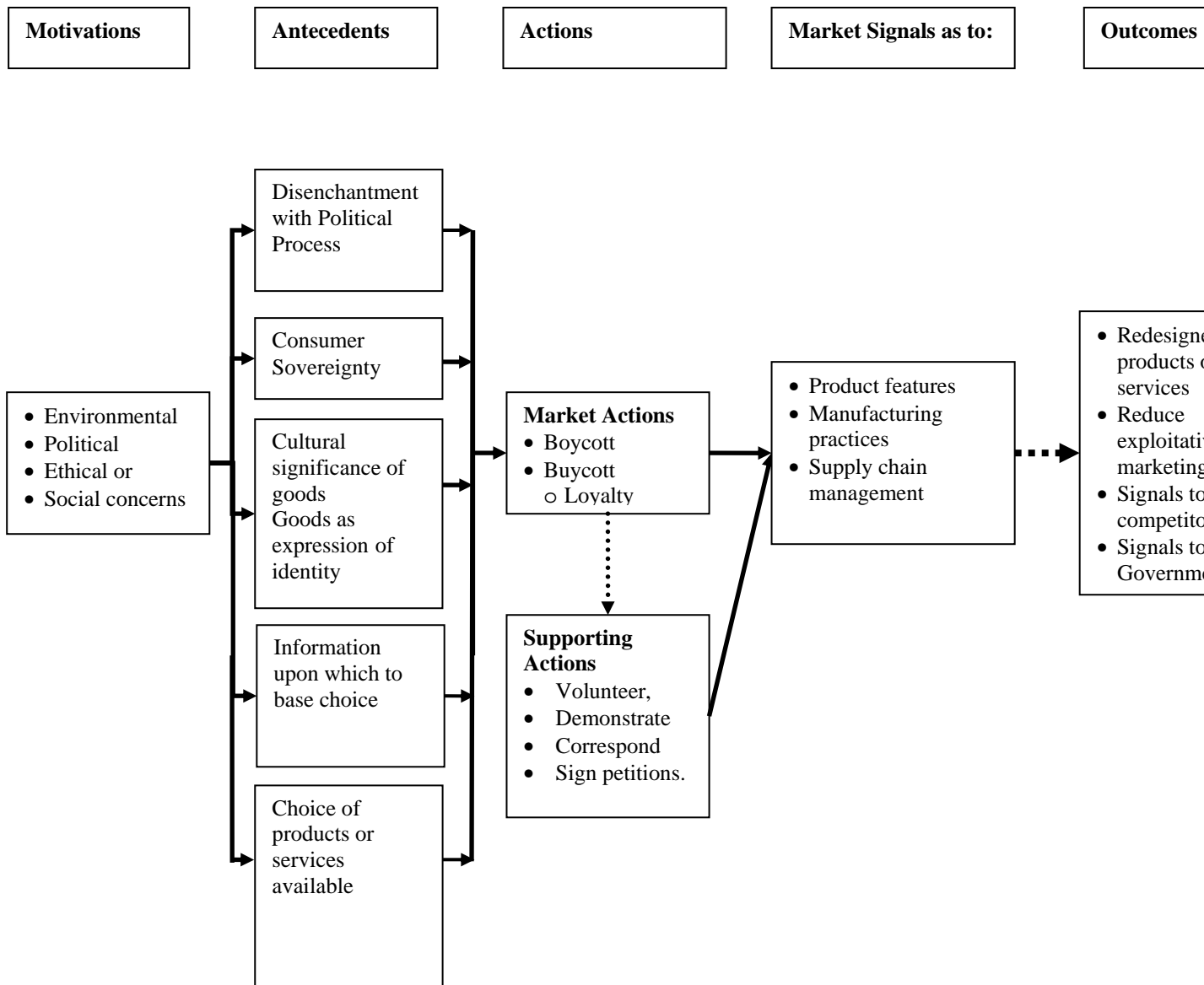
Therefore, whilst the development of a sustainable economy requires action across markets and market sectors, the ability of the market to remodel itself in this way, based on value led consumer demands, appears limited. More fundamentally, the structural nature of the current unbalanced utilisation of energy and resources questions whether a consumer interest led, reformist approach, can bring about the size and scope of the changes thought to be required (*United Nations General Assembly, 2002*). The market as a site for enacting reform is therefore further questioned by this critique. Instead this paper supports the conclusion that government intervention is the key action required to establish the development of a sustainable economy (*United Nations General Assembly, 2002, Newman, 2007, The Ethical Consumerism Report, 2008*).

A main summary from the preceding analysis is that overall, promoting consumption as voting strategy is likely to have limited direct effect on the development of a sustainable economy. The inadequacies highlighted in this review lead to the conclusion that its direct effect on key issues such as climate change, deforestation, land degradation, poverty and worker exploitation will be slow, fragmented and lack consistency. Instead as highlighted by the Stop Esso and Kleenex examples, direct governmental action is the key to wide ranging and lasting success (Kleercut, 2006, Exxpose Exxon, 2007). However, it appears to have a role in furthering organisational objectives and in the reform of the current unsustainable market based economy by sending overall belief and value based messages to organisations and governments. As such it can contribute to addressing both specific campaigns and the broader issue of sustainability.

When using this approach, this review would make several recommendations, based on established customer relationship management principles (see for example Dwyer et al., 1987, or Gummesson, 1997), on how to improve its effectiveness. First, boycotting and buycotting should be supported by direct communication to the organisation regarding the specific message the action is attempting to convey. Second, those organising and participating must ensure that the message is sent repeatedly, therefore, developing deeper relationships with the organisations via customer loyalty. Third, whilst loyalty is important, consumers should be prepared to quickly move to the next company whose products demonstrate greater fitness to their ideals. In this way the market can be told that continued innovation is required. Fourth, the most profitable customers of an organisation have the most power to direct change; organisation of a campaign around these individuals or companies is more likely to send a message that is received and enacted. Finally, consumption as voting should be encouraged as an additional form of political actions and participants should be urged to engage with traditional political mechanisms to help ensure that the most powerful strategy, government intervention, is mobilised.

There several areas for empirical research in relation to this topic. Amongst these are the exploration of the relationship between consumer voting in the marketplace and more traditional and activist forms of political participation. Second, work that explores the trade-off between reduced marketplace involvement (through more sustainable consumption practices and/or market exit) and perceived consumer power, will further clarify the role of the market place in supporting sustainable consumption practices.

**Figure 1: Model of Consumption as Voting**



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