



FOSTERING AND COMMUNICATING SUSTAINABLE LIFESTYLES

PRINCIPLES
AND EMERGING
PRACTICES
- FULL REPORT -

UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENTAL PROGRAMME



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WHY THIS REPORT?

The goal of this report is to further the understanding of sustainable lifestyles and accelerate their widespread adoption. The report does so by identifying elements to consider when developing sustainable lifestyle and related initiatives, and by providing guidance for effective communication, framing and engagement strategies.

DEFINING SUSTAINABLE LIFESTYLES AND FACING THE CHALLENGE

This project builds on past UN Environment and others' efforts to advance sustainable lifestyles by outlining its determinants and lifestyle drivers ^{1,2}. The following is the definition of sustainable lifestyles contained in the 2016 UNEP report (Akenji et al.).

A “sustainable lifestyle” is a cluster of habits and patterns of behaviour embedded in a society and facilitated by institutions, norms and infrastructures that frame individual choice, in order to minimize the use of natural resources and generation of wastes, while supporting fairness and prosperity for all. ³

This report uses an operational definition that brings the ecological impact forward and places additional emphasis on the holistic aspects of lifestyles beyond changing habits and behaviours:

A sustainable lifestyle minimizes ecological impacts while enabling a flourishing life for individuals, households, communities, and beyond. It is the product of individual and collective decisions about aspirations and about satisfying needs and adopting practices, which are in turn conditioned, facilitated, and constrained by societal norms, political institutions, public policies, infrastructures, markets, and culture.

Additional definitions and expansions on the concept of sustainable lifestyles are included in Part 5 of this report.

At its core, a sustainable lifestyle means meeting basic needs and living well while embracing the idea of sufficiency. This is a challenging vision at a time when consumerism is a way of life and aspiration for many. Mass consumption is part of a complex system of technology, culture, institutions and markets advancing continued economic growth. People in wealthy countries are often locked into unsustainable lifestyles. Millions of people consume at high levels and millions more are aspiring to join in, including many urban youth in developing countries. This trend continues while many others are unable to meet even their basic needs. In addition, those who benefit from mass consumption strive to limit people's ability to imagine alternative aspirations and wants. These trends are unsustainable both ecologically and socially.

¹. Visions for Change. Recommendations for Effective Policies on Sustainable Lifestyles. Based on the Global Survey on Sustainable Lifestyles. UNEP (2011)

². Akenji, L, H. Chen et al. (2016). A framework for shaping sustainable lifestyles: Determinants and Strategies. United Nations Environment Programme.

³. Paraphrased from: Akenji, L, H. Chen et al. (2016). A framework for shaping sustainable lifestyles: Determinants and Strategies. United Nations Environment Programme.

Despite formidable structural barriers, the idea of thriving more sustainably and equitably within the capacity of the Earth's life support systems is gaining traction among grassroots movements, national and international organizations (including the United Nations), thought leaders and some businesses, politicians, and policy makers. Around the world, people are practicing and experimenting with more sustainable ways of satisfying their needs across key lifestyle domains, from food to mobility, housing, consumer goods, and leisure. They are communicating in different ways about sustainable lifestyles choices that harness real aspirations for a better life and creativity while inspiring action.

How can these small-scale initiatives and campaigns facilitate a wider adoption of holistic sustainable lifestyles? This report addresses this question by seeking to understand what makes such initiatives effective as models of ways of living and how best to communicate them. It analyses case studies from around the world of initiatives and campaigns intended to bring the participants closer to a sustainable lifestyle through practice, communication and, in most cases, both. The report begins by presenting principles by which the case studies assembled can be interpreted and evaluated and offers insights on how to apply key learnings.

ABOUT THE REPORT

Fostering and Communicating Sustainable Lifestyles intentionally links the discussion of sustainable lifestyles to best practices in communication, framing and engagement approaches. Both draw on an understanding of human behaviour and how it interacts with culture, infrastructure, and institutions. Thriving sustainable lifestyle initiatives rely on effective communication to increase understanding, reframe aspirations and priorities, support behaviour change, and shape new social norms and values toward the ultimate goal of creating tangible changes in the way people live their daily lives.

This report provides an analysis of sustainable lifestyle initiatives (and/or related domains) and the framing and engagement strategies they employ. It is based on a synthesis of relevant bodies of literature on sustainable lifestyles and communications, on an analysis of examples, and on consultations with experts globally including via virtual workshops described in more detail in Part 3. The case studies in Part 2 are distilled from a larger pool of examples recommended by project advisors and selected to reflect geographic diversity. They explore how sustainable lifestyle campaigns intersect with key aspects of meeting core domain needs around food, shelter, mobility, leisure time, and human connections.

Advancing sustainable lifestyles is identified as a target in the Sustainable Development Goals and in the 10 Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production, including as part of its Sustainable Lifestyles and Education Programme. This report is a contribution to these global efforts.

PRINCIPLES FOR SUCCESS: SUMMARY

The following four step strategy roadmap for success, with eight operating principles, aims to guide the design, adaptation, and evaluation of sustainable lifestyles campaigns and initiatives.

STEP ONE: Understand Audiences



Stakeholder-Focused: *Engage in participatory, relevant, and grounded ways*
Orient around people's needs and wants, build trust, and promote actions linked to a sense of place and local context.

STEP TWO: Set Goals



Better Living: *Focus on aspirations*
Create a compelling vision based on stakeholder values. Be clear about the problem but place greater emphasis on how lifestyle choices lead to a better life.



Impact: *Set clear goals and demonstrate sustainability results*
Set achievable ecological, social, and economic goals and outline clear milestones for measuring progress along the way. Clarify how people can contribute in meaningful ways.

STEP THREE: Determine Strategies



Systemic: *Consider the systemic nature of lifestyles*
Highlight the underlying drivers and systemic structures that enable sustainable lifestyles. Develop campaigns that promote activities across domains.



Dynamic Life Changes: *Take advantage of life stages and transitions*
Leverage moments of life stages and transitions such as marriages, birth, moving, retirement, and career changes to shift thinking and guide new patterns of behaviour.



Diversity: *Accommodate the diversity in lifestyles*
Illustrate the range of sustainable lifestyles. Tailor to different stakeholder groups

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