

EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



Understanding (Un)Sustainable Lifestyles in Europe: Past and Present Perspectives

Finalised project

SUMMARY

Objectives of the research

For the past three years, the “EU-InnovatE” project has investigated the prospects and obstacles for Europe to achieve sustainable lifestyles and a green economy by 2050. This Policy Brief focuses on one of its major empirical research themes, namely: to understand past and present (un)sustainable lifestyles, consumer values and behaviours in the context of socio-economic and cultural influences across Europe.

Scientific approach / methodology

EU-InnovatE has been delivered through an innovative mixed-methodology research design. The research findings presented here draw from a systematic literature review, conceptual paper, qualitative and desk research, pan-European survey, interviews, and stakeholder workshops held in the UK, Poland, Italy, Denmark and Germany.

New knowledge and/or European added value

Sustainability transitions and related user innovation go hand in hand with the development of an entrepreneurial society – yet there are few common definitions and understandings of how this can be achieved across Europe, and scant data. Cultural and political dimensions are centrally important, and also correlate with consumer lifestyle choices and behaviours in certain domains and geographic clusters.

Key messages for policy-makers, businesses, trade unions and civil society actors

Support structures for sustainable entrepreneurship and user innovation culture are essential for this emerging phenomenon to grow. “Top-down” governance structures are insufficient, implying more incentives to involve businesses, citizens and grassroots organizations in sustainability-driven innovation processes and platforms. Academia has a vital role to play as educators and neutral convenors of stakeholders with diverse interests.

Objectives of the research

In the first of our six empirical work packages (WP1), the principal goal was to understand (un)sustainable lifestyles, consumers' values and behavior across Europe. Our inquiry examined the underlying complex relationships between natural resources, human needs, technology, economics, ecology, and the physical system through an historical lens. It also placed particular emphasis on user innovation in the context of heterogeneous socio-economic and cultural influences in Europe.

Against this backdrop, the WP1 research team set out to achieve a number of defined objectives within the overall research design:

- ✓ Develop a conceptual foundation of the roles of citizens in sustainable lifestyles and related user innovation, based on historical evidence from 1850 to the present day;
- ✓ Explore the significance of cultural factors in shaping user innovation behaviours, both generally and specific to sustainability concerns and issues;
- ✓ Assess the relationship between lifestyles and sustainable consumption in the food, transport and housing domains;
- ✓ Investigate the political and governance factors which help or hinder the development of sustainable entrepreneurship cultures;
- ✓ Take stock of sustainable lifestyles in different EU regions.

Scientific approach / methodology

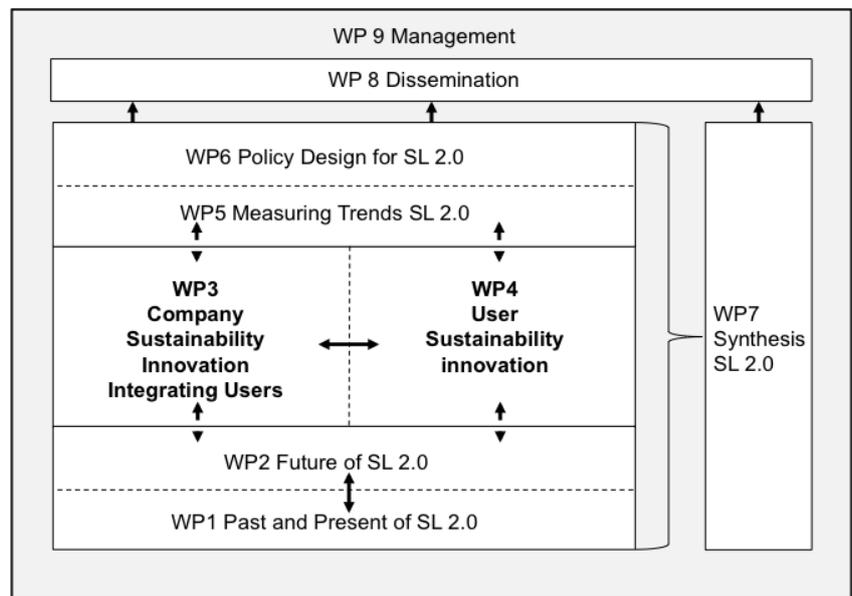
As a reflection of the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary complexity of our central theme and key objectives, the EU-InnovatE project featured an innovative mixed-methodology design applied across all work packages (WPs). The full project framework is shown below.

The WP1 research team designed a broader theoretical concept of user sustainability innovation in Europe by applying the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) and explaining the social dimensions. Based on an historical overview on the rise of mass production/consumption since 1850, plus a two-step desk research process, it generated fresh empirical evidence about the genesis and *status quo* of sustainability indicators in Europe.

Further large-scale data were gathered, and SPSS databases constructed, through a survey study about cultural attitudes towards an institutional framework for user sustainability innovation. This was combined with qualitative research, such as web-based studies and in-depth interviews, to better understand the logic of sustainability and user innovation

approaches in various European companies. The subsequent results and analyses were presented and discussed in multi-stakeholder workshops in five different European regions.

EU-InnovatE Research Design



New knowledge and European added value

The genesis of (un-) sustainable lifestyles in Europe

Our historical analysis highlights four key periods that define the rise of industry, mass production, and the democratisation of consumption and lifestyle choices in Europe from \approx 1850 to the present:

Inventing Consumerism (1850-1913): during which new user practices and movements developed in relation to the introduction of a host of new products into markets. The state was relatively absent in this period.

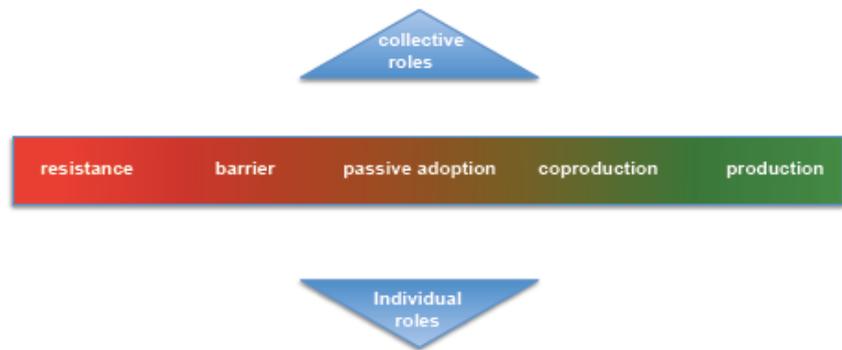
Contested Consumerism (1914-1950): during which debates and new consumer practices emerged in competition. Users, companies and the state promoted and experimented with different consumer practices, advancing collective, individual, large-scale and small-scale solutions. This happened against the background of a large ideological conflict between communism, fascism and democratic political systems.

Technocratic Consumerism (1951-1988): during which users were transformed into individual consumers who had to 'learn how to consume' through marketing (with a big influence from the USA) or how to reduce their consumer needs complying with state control.

Participative Consumerism (1989-present): during which the globalization of technology and markets inspired new experiments to better integrate users and consumers into product and service design, thus accelerating user innovation into the mainstream.

Conceptual foundation: Understanding sustainable lifestyles and user sustainability innovation

One of the main findings of our research has been to identify five specific and different roles – collective, individual or both – relating to user innovation: **resistance, barrier, passive adoption, co-production and production** (see below). In a wider scientific context, this is an important step forward in understanding the complex dimensions of consumer and user lifestyle choices and behaviours. It also has direct relevance for companies and policy-makers seeking to inspire positive change in these areas:



On the **individual level**, roles can range from ‘Not In My Back Yard’ (NIMBY) sentiments to the ‘classic’ role of users as consumers (or not) of sustainable products. Individual characteristics, such as early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards, influence innovation adoption decisions. Moving towards the right, we find individual users as “lead users”, “co-producers” and “user entrepreneurs” who convert sustainable solutions to a problem they experience into a business.

On the **collective level**, roles can range from large-scale social movements actively resisting innovations through organized protests to more passive collective barriers such as consumer practices and values. Towards the right, we locate such practices as “collaborative consumption” (e.g. co-housing, car sharing) and “collective buying power”-based business models. More active collective roles also include “crowdfunding”, “cooperatives”, “community innovation” (collective users that act as initiators, designers and maintainers of technological projects in their own locality), and finally “grassroots innovation” (social movement organizations who produce sustainable innovations but expand beyond their locality and inspire mainstream solutions).

The relative importance of lifestyles vs. geography

Our research adds significantly to the body of knowledge about how private citizens (across 10 EU countries) engage in user innovation – whether for their own benefit, that of their employers, or society at large – through our unique focus on sustainable products and solutions. Our headline survey revealed a substantial amount of user-innovator activities reported by private consumers in at least one of eight specific domains, varying from 8.4% in the UK to 31.2% in Hungary. However,

in the case of sustainable user innovations, the amount was significantly lower: **only 0.1-0.2% per country** reported something that could be classified as *environmentally-friendly* user-innovator activities.

As such, our research suggests that the focus of consumers' private user-innovation activities is overwhelmingly directed at solving private problems and obtaining private functionality, rather than on solving societal problems related to the environment. The differences between countries in terms of consumer innovation activities also suggest that individuals' inclination to privately search for new innovations depends on the socio-economic context – perhaps a reflection of the old saying that “necessity is the mother of invention.”

A second focus of the survey was on the relationship between domain-specific lifestyles and sustainable consumption in the food, transport and housing domains. In all three areas, we found that **lifestyle is a stronger predictor of sustainability-oriented choices than country (or region) of residence**. Our data show that lifestyles mediate most, if not all, of the impacts of geography on everyday sustainable consumption and on consumers' openness to new, pro-environmental innovations.

Putting innovations into regional context

Our desk research shows that innovation processes are clearly related to localized economic, social and ecological contexts. A basic infrastructure for knowledge building and innovative business initiatives is a pre-requisite for an innovation culture to grow. Similarly, sustainability goes hand in hand with the development of an entrepreneurial society, which sees business as key to societal and ecological development. Southern and Eastern Europe appear to lack many of these essential entrepreneurial support structures; the dominance of state governance structures enables a minimum of “top down” approaches, but struggles to foster “bottom up” initiatives.

A more effective exchange between different cultural players might help to foster shared learning between Member States and reinforce new perspectives on sustainable entrepreneurship and user innovation within different cultural contexts. In the long run, the ideal scenario is the **development of a common European innovation culture** which perceives cultural differences as an opportunity to develop new products and services for global markets.

**Key messages for
policy-makers,
businesses,
trade unions and
civil society actors**

Taking stock of sustainable lifestyles in different regions

Our stakeholder workshops highlighted the broad diversity of cultural approaches towards sustainability across Europe. The Central European event stressed the importance of industry and SME leadership; its UK equivalent underlined the strategic importance of NGOs in shaping future trajectories. In Denmark, discussions focused more on the systemic impact of academic and political debates, while the workshops in Italy and Poland both pointed to the importance of academic institutions acting as hubs for social innovation and developments.

The workshops clearly demonstrated that there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution that will miraculously foster citizen- or user-driven solutions that advance sustainable lifestyles and green economy across Europe. However, our studies have shown that a **deep understanding of regional context is essential** for defining and empowering the potential leaders who can ultimately foster sustainability-oriented innovation networks and processes involving users and citizens.

Our studies also indicate that more emphasis should be placed by companies, policy-makers and others on the **development of domain-specific lifestyle instruments and approaches** which seek to influence consumer behavior around the three consumption areas (food, transport and housing) which are responsible for most related environmental impacts. Consumer behaviours and lifestyle choices are shaped by an extremely heterogeneous mix of factors, and as such should be viewed as a set of constituent parts which can be reshaped with carefully tailored interventions, not blanket policies.

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Further reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Innovating in Search of Sustainability: Citizens, Companies and Entrepreneurs • Business Cookbook for Innovation with Stakeholders • Company-driven Open Sustainability Innovation (18 case studies) • Sustainable Enterprises (14 case studies) • International Webinar Series (6 presentations and audio recordings) <p>Available on the project website, plus links to all project deliverables.</p>
Related websites	<p>http://www.globescanforum.com/sustainability_innovation_exchange/ http://52.202.219.239:8080/user_guide (registration required) http://www.sustainable-lifestyles.eu</p>
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