



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT ASPIRATIONS IN NORWAY: A PERSPECTIVE ON CIRCULAR ECONOMY AND FOOD WASTE

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Introduction

Homo sapiens are the smartest creature living on the 45 billion years old earth albeit their origin is assumed to be from apes (primates). Whilst all human activities contribute to changing the natural balance of surrounding environment or even the whole planet, in the name of development and our wellbeing we have endeavoured to consume natural resources far beyond their reproduction rate. Due to such human endeavours and the depletion of natural resources at an alarming rate, scientists have argued that our ancestors would not be able to recognise the earth



as the planet that they used to live. Based on this critical situation, the United Nation (UN) formed a commission in the early 1980s, the World Commission on Environment chaired by a former Norwegian Prime Minister - Gro Harlem Brundtland, to articulate a global agenda for change. This UN's initiative resulted in producing a report, namely "Our Common Future" in 1987.

The Commission defined the term "sustainable development" in its landmark report and its recommendations provided the momentum for the United Nations Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 followed by several UN Summits on this issue in the subsequent years and will provide the momentum in years to come. The report titled Our Common Future has proposed to formulate long-term environment strategies for accomplishing sustainable development by the year 2000 and beyond amongst other suggestions. This report has also provided the foundation for the recent breakthrough conference on Climate Change negotiated the Paris Agreement – a global agreement on the reduction of climate change in Paris, December 2015. Some of the European countries have focused their attention on the

issue of sustainable development carefully and have made initiatives to minimise negative consequences of human activities on the earth. This complex climate challenge is expressed by Capra & Luisi¹ in this way:

"The great challenge of our time is to build and nurture sustainable communities and societies, designed in such a way that our active t i e s do not interfere with nature's ability to sustain life."

Our essay casts light on Norwegian waste management practices and policies concerning the mentioned above global challenge.

Norwegian Waste Management Aspirations

Waste Management Procedure

Norway is considered to be one of the frontrunners in terms of achieving a sustainable society and as an active contributor to global sustainability. The Norwegian waste management system consists of more than 200 private and public companies handling and organizing the various kinds of waste and garbage in Norway. This industry is mainly organized and represented by its industry associ-

¹Capra & Luisi (2014: 362): "The systems view of life – A unifying vision", Cambridge University Press



ation, namely “Norsk Avfall” (Norwegian Waste), which accounts for 95 % of the waste management in Norway. This association is responsible for managing both industrial and household waste. In accordance with the long standing tradition of collaboration between business actors and the public authorities generally in the Nordic countries, the waste industry in Norway is founded on the same sustainable principles of collaboration. For example, municipalities in the Vest fold County and a private company cooperate in the collection and disposal of waste, and the production of Biogas.

The Norwegian municipalities generally categorise household waste into seven categories, namely Food waste, Plastic packing and containers, Paper and cardboard, Glass and metal packing, Electric and electronic waste, Hazardous waste, and Residual waste. Except the electric and electronic waste, and hazardous waste, the garbage collectors collect the remaining five types of waste weekly on a specified day. It is the responsibility of inhabitants to store their waste into the waste bins in their garden for the specific waste category. If they fail to do so, their garbage will not be collected and a reminding notice will be issued asking to sort out the garbage into the appropri-

ate bin. The electric and electronic waste, i.e. electric and electronic appliances and equipment can either be delivered to a shop that sells similar product or to a waste collection centre, whereas hazardous waste can only be handed over to a waste collection centre. Whilst disposing such products, albeit no fee is charged, each household has to pay a fixed quarterly service charge to the local authority for the disposal of garbage. In addition, in order to avoid littering soft drink bottles, including beer bottles and cans, retail shops should repurchase such bottles and cans. Therefore, most of the retail shops have installed a machine to which consumers return bottles and cans and to receive a receipt enabling to collect money from the cashier. In this way, the Norwegian municipalities maintain a strictly controlled environment friendly garbage disposing process.

Transforming the value of waste

The Norwegian waste industry and the Norwegian authorities have quite ambitious goals regarding the future development of the waste policy in Norway. The last few decades the waste industry is characterized by a rather radical change concerning how waste is viewed. Traditionally, the waste was considered not to generate any future economic gain, whilst the management of waste was largely



about storing the waste in huge garbage dumps, in an acceptable, secure and proper way. However, the changing view on waste suggests a different way of treating waste meaning that waste is appreciated as source of input (resources). Accordingly, the initiatives of reusing and recycling waste play a particular role in pursuing our sustainable future and our march towards a “Green Economy”, which is termed as “the Green Shift” by the Norwegian government. Under the rubric of “The Green Shift”, both Norwegian Government and waste industry actors endeavour to develop a Circular Economic Perspective – humans use and reuse resources until the end of their useful life and thereafter reuse in the process of production again to produce something useful.

The Norwegian waste industry pro-actively support the idea of “going green” by taking a leading and future-oriented role in order to make “The Green Shift” successful. The goals, strategies and activities actually conducted reveal a unique will to contribute in developing a sustainable and prosperous future in Norway and in other collaborating countries, including the European Union (EU). The Norwegian waste industry claims that we globally use far too much accessible resources for being sustainable. This over-consumption of accessi-

ble natural resources is quite short-termed and does not meet the climate change challenges facing us all. The emissions of climate change gasses has increased over the past decades in correlation with a corresponding increase in material prosperity in some privileged parts of the world. This asymmetric economic growth and prosperity is founded within a unilateral and short-termed logic and worldview, which pays no or little attention on the nature itself in the long-run. Hence, within this worldview the nature is exploited for the benefit of short-term economic growth. In spite of launching a broad range of “green” goals, strategies and activities, the Norwegian Authorities and the industry may fail in the long term if future waste management system founded in the aforementioned mechanistic worldview still prevails. Accordingly, we suggest a radical change in worldview, a shift toward circular economic perspectives characterizing society as a whole - public authority, business entities, civil society and the consumers. If not, the probability of achieving the ambitious goals seems rather uncertain and the goals thus might for the mostly be symbolic with little or no substance at all.

Nevertheless, the waste industry in Norway and the Norwegian Authorities seem authentic in their approach by taking a global per-



spective on their mission in creating a sustainable future. The waste association is concerned by the fact that in the pace of rapidly increasing global population, the over-consumption of natural resources and the amount of waste increase correspondingly. In order to avoid crises due to the depletion of limited natural resources, the industry suggests lesser use of natural resources in accordance with what is sustainable for our nature and the earth itself. At the same time, it is crucial to reuse and recycle the waste into new raw materials for our future use. This is interesting and a quite new way in viewing waste in line with circular economic perspectives. For example, a major Norwegian waste company reuses and recycles 95 % of a whole car, which they transform to new raw material for the purpose of producing future products in various kinds of industries in Norway, Europe and Asia. This is in line with both the principles of circular economy and the objectives of Corporate Social Responsibility. However, 85 % of the industrial waste in Norway is generally recycled. In this way, both private and public companies integrate its obligation for a sustainable society and nature into its core business activities. Accordingly, over time this radical shift in worldviews and willingness

permeate the way we organize societies and run business organizations. We assume this becomes the natural way of running business in the future. Otherwise, becoming responsible and sustainable might appear more like a symbolic action without any substantial contribution beyond appearing responsible.

This radical shift of how waste is considered, is also moving into many other industries. Our own research concerning major Nordic companies like retail chains, hotels and financial institutions, show a growing shift in their attention, recognition and ability of rethinking and changing the way that they run their business. Environmental and climate issues seem to become more integrated into the core business and the organizational identity. A move in the direction of a circular economic perspective seems clear. Claims such as “we are part of the problem and thus have to be a part of the solution” is envisaging a new view on how a business should be run. There seems to be a growing understanding of how firms in various fields and industries might contribute positively to achieving the goals necessary to avoid the most negative climate changes, threatening the existence of our



earth in general and the humans' survival in particular. The concept of circular economy is, even if it is in an early stage, obviously infusing production processes of commercial business entities. The following statement by a manager in a global Nordic Company, namely IKEA envisages how this company strives to organise its core business activities in accordance with circular economic perspectives:

Natural resources such as wood and cotton are crucial for our production. Thus, we promote and make efforts to manage the forest in a long-term sustainable way in close collaboration with our suppliers, academics and students. A key issue in this work is sustaining biodiversity through sustainable deforestation and the development of forest models, which enable us to enhance our responsible way of managing forests. We collaborate with leading authoritative NGOs like the World Wildlife Fund amongst others in this crucial work and we are making progress.

Minimizing food waste

The waste management also includes reducing of waste

through smarter and more sustainable ways of producing, distributing, consuming products and simultaneously managing the waste from various kinds of products in accordance with a circular economic perspective. The Norwegian Government and the food industry have recently signed an agreement to reduce food waste in Norway by 50 percent by 2030². Several efforts and initiatives are made to reduce the food waste. The government has removed VAT on food products that are donated to charities and there is a growing expectation that the food industry becomes even more innovative and creative in years to come. For example, the Nordic Choice, a leading hotel chain in the Nordic countries, has also adopted a circular economic way of managing its daily business operation over the last few years. Its food waste is actively reduced through a broad range of efforts including donating the surplus food to charities and reducing the amount of food on the plate served in the hotel. As a result, this company has reduced its food waste by 45% in the span of the year 2008 to the year 2012. At present, this company's hotels in Norway sell their remaining foods from the breakfast buffet at a price

²Read the 13th of October, 2017: <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/avtale-om-a-redusere-matsvinn/id2558931/>



around 50% of its ordinary market price. A quite new and innovative example of the latter is the introduction of an App named "To Good To Go" founded in Denmark late 2015. The idea is reducing food waste by offering access to delicious food and beverages that would otherwise be thrown away. The mission is to save food, save money and save the planet by placing the lost value back onto food as humankind's most valuable energy resource, and not something that should just be carelessly throw in the bin³. An increasing amount of hotels, bakeries, restaurants across several countries in Europe including Norway is engaged within the rapidly growing concept "To Good to Go".

According to the Government, the food industry's actions will be the deciding factor in reducing the waste by 50 % within 2030. A crucial trigger for this ambitious food waste reducing goal is The United Nations (UN) sustainable 17 targets accepted in 2015. There is no doubt that food waste is both an environmental issue and a key to meet the global climate challenges facing us all. The emissions of climate change gasses from food waste are huge and the

impact of reducing the food waste will be substantial according to the Norwegian Government. Based on this view, the municipalities of the Vestfold County has started producing biogas by processing food waste. At present, the county-owned Bus Company is utilizing biogas instead of using fossil fuel to operate its buses. In addition, this county's municipalities also use cars driven by biogas. The Minister of Climate and Environment claims that the agreement of reducing waste is a new way of working by setting ambitious and binding goals, which leads to a broad range of activities and efforts meeting the sustainable development goals concerned with Society, Economy and Environment. In June 2017, the Norwegian Government presented a report to the Norwegian Parliament on further renewing of the Norwegian waste policy and the role of waste within a circular economy⁴. The report strongly emphasize waste prevention, increased reuse and recycling of physical materials. In addition, it pinpoints a comprehensive strategy to address the increasing challenge of global marine waste and the spread of micro plastic nationally and globally.

³Read the 13th of October, 2017: <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/avtale-om-a-redusere-matsvinn/id2558931/>

⁴Read the 13th of October 2017: <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/meld.-st.-45-20162017/id2558274/sec1>



Concluding Remarks

The recognition of the importance of our common nature is increasingly fundamental for developing a sustainable society in the long-term and thus given an increasingly responsible role for running business in general. The Norwegian government aspires to attend the UN's sustainable development goals. Accordingly, the country strives to cultivate a Circular Economic Perspective under the rubric of "The Green Shift". The government's initiatives are widely accepted by most of the production and service industry actors and they are actively cooperating with all the levels of official authorities ranging from the central government to municipalities

representing the grassroots officials. Accordingly, attention is particularly focused on the avoidance of food waste, including the reuse of such waste amongst various kinds of waste with a view to impeding negative consequences of our food consumption on the earth. The production of Biogas by using food waste is notable and depicting a very promising trend that can curtail the consumption of conventional fuel. Both county and municipality authorities are increasingly using vehicles powered by Biogas in addition to the use of electric vehicles. The trend in Norway underscores that the world should strive to tap the maximum benefits of food waste and it is of the utmost importance for the survival of human beings.

