

Promoting Sustainable Living: The Informal Way

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Abstract

Evolving attitudes on sustainable living broadly address the agenda, the difficulties, and strategies to building a sustainable future. Nevertheless, most of the research centres around formal actors and institutions. The role of informality in promoting sustainable living is often not part of the discussion. This paper brings in the perspective of the 'informal sector' through two caselets - one, that is underpinning "alternate" consumption and second that deals with most of the recycling and waste management. The informal policies are easier to change and fix as compared to formal rules. The so-called 'unorganised sector,' allows for trials and errors. A change in the formal setup is harder, and cannot be brought in overnight. By starting at the fringes, the informal spaces create room for debate and discussion that creates new norms as per the preference of the majority. This is discussed as a contemporary necessity for the political ecology issues of environmental preservation and social equity.

Keywords: Informality, Sustainability, Alternate Consumption, Waste Management

The Neo-Liberal Era of Unsustainable Living

The Industrial Revolution radically changed the way people lived. Numerous advancements in the technological revolution expedited the process of "economic growth" for the human race. However, the price of the advancement of the nations of the world has been paid by the vast expanses of natural resources. The ability to mass manufacture, combined with the laissez-faire markets aimed at increasing competition and accumulating profit has led to the absolute decline of natural resources as they exist today (Hills, 1985).

As the European liberal intellectuals ventured to find a middle ground for the contradictory philosophies of socialist planning and classical liberalism, the idea of neoliberalism as an economic philosophy was birthed (Mirowski, 2009). Neoliberal economics is a set of economic policies that became widespread in its present meaning around the 1970s and 1980s (Boas & Morse, 2009). It usually incorporates policies of liberalisation, free trade, austerity, privatisation and the elimination of public expenditures and public goods (Goldstein, 2011; Martinez & Garcia, 1998). Over the past few years, neo-liberalism has entrenched itself as the principal standard of progress. And due to the command of neoliberal designs in the control of natural resources today, commodification and privatisation have become so prevalent that an alternative arrangement seems almost implausible (Harris, 2009).

The question we need to ask is how the modernised arrangement of neoliberal policies around the world leading to globalisation, is affecting the realisation of the global agenda of sustainable development. The 20th-century neoliberal policies which developed from the revival in the notion of free-market business or laissez-faire worked when it first emerged in economies where national control of the capital was assumed. However, with the present nature of resource control, most of the privileges that economic philosophies suggest, end up serving a small margin of the population, leaving the poor to fend for themselves (Martinez & Garcia, 1998). This can be seen from various instances around the world: a report in 2017 stated that the earnings of CEO's were increasing exponentially- almost 271 times that of the average worker (Mishel & Schieder, 2017).

Contemporary neoliberal policies are leading to the consequent downfall of both the large majority of people and the environment as we know it. This ranges from 900 million tons of carbon dioxide being emitted each year from the cars on our roads (Leech, 2018) to \$1 trillion of food- enough to feed 2 billion people, getting wasted every year (World Food Program USA, 2019).

As per a recent study by Oxfam (2019), the wealthiest 1 per cent in India get access to about 73 per cent of the country's money. While there are tens of thousands of Indians who struggle to make ends meet and earn minimum wages to sustain themselves and their families, the top 1 per cent of the wealthy in India witnessed a growth in their earnings by almost 6 times between 2006-2015 (ibid). As per the same study, while the number of billionaires in India is increasing from just 9 in 2000 to 101 in 2017, the number of people pushed into poverty due to healthcare costs are two per second. This situation is even more dire for the informal sector. Research indicate that the pandemic will lead to the loss of 130 million jobs, out of which 40 per cent would be from blue-collar jobs (India Today, 2020).

The situation on the global front is no better; with studies showing the rising inequality between different countries and between the haves and the have nots in a particular country.

Figure 1 depicts the top 10 per cent income shares across different countries and how the inequality is increasing across the spectrum but at different speeds.

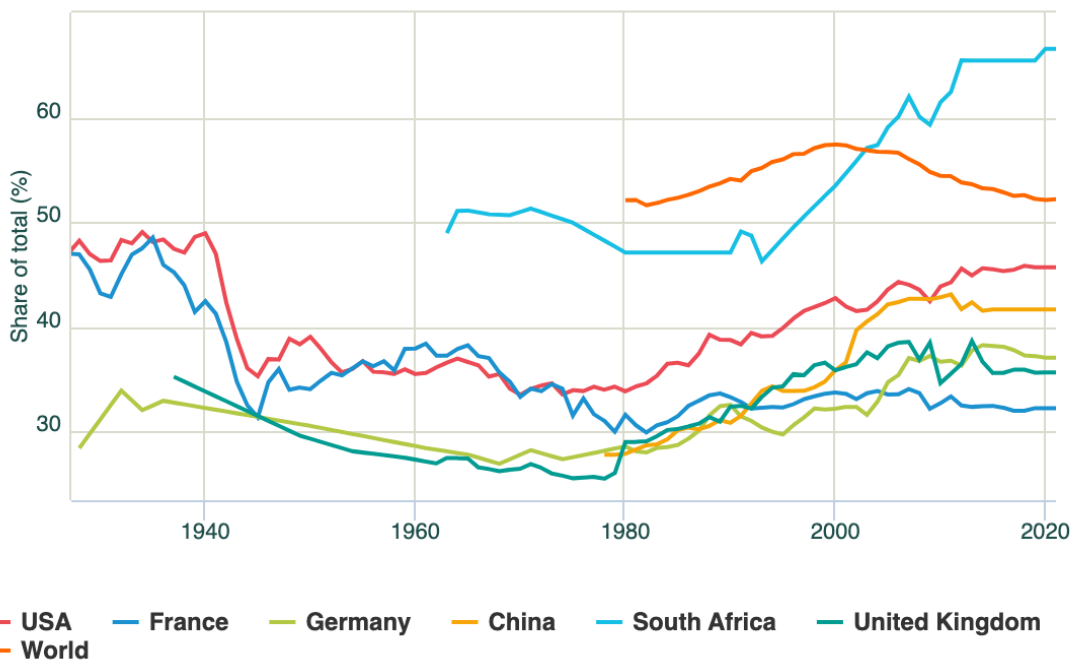


Fig 1. Top 10 per cent national income shares across the world, 1940–2021 from World Inequality Database

The COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences have been catastrophic for nations and their people across the world. Spilling beyond the healthcare sector, the pandemic disrupted the functioning of almost every global economy; percolating the levels of inequality that already existed. A 2022 Oxfam report suggests that the pandemic created one billionaire every 30 hours. In fact, in the first 24 months of COVID-19, billionaires' wealth increased more than it did in the previous 23 years combined (Oxfam International, 2022). The combined wealth of the billionaires in the world currently equates to 13.9 per cent of the global GDP- this indicates a three times increase from 4.4 per cent in the 2000 (ibid). Meanwhile, other sections of the society did not have such favourable outcomes from the pandemic. In fact, as per the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), 119 million workers lost their jobs in the first two weeks of lockdown. Studies also suggest that about 40 crore workers in the informal sector were pushed deeper into poverty due to the pandemic (ILO, 2020).

As per the International Monetary Fund, heightened inequality can disintegrate social cohesion, lead to political polarization, and conclusively weaken economic growth. The present economic, social and political institutions which are shaped to accommodate neoliberalism are leading to problems such as overconsumption on one hand and extreme poverty on the other (Kenner, 2015).

The methodical pressure of neoliberal capitalism is not just economic but also environmental, as can be seen in the explosive increase of economic and ecological imbalances (Faber, 2018).

Despite all these shortcomings, we need to give neoliberal policies its due. It has provided nations, especially developing ones, with increasing opportunities for availing foreign

investments (Metz, 2013). Also, by promoting open barriers of trade, these policies have provided jobs and new working conditions for the local populations of many developing countries (ibid). Products became cheaper, therefore within the reach of many poorer families. Also, markets expanded, which led to growth, however skewed it might be. It is still important to remember that even though globalising the world has increased Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) in the developing world, they are not put to use in building and improving the urban environmental infrastructure (Minh and Amin 2002)

This produces quite a predicament for society since the market forces of neo-liberal systems are not just conveniently distant from supporting the environment, but are a "significant patron to the overall destruction caused" (Haque, 1999). They operate on the notion of competition and minimum state intervention, and with the sole function of expanding profit that end up exploiting natural and human resources to the maximum limit possible.

In the words of Weaver (1973), "once growth is introduced as the primary goal, environmental pollution is inevitable. Each firm must pollute in order to compete with other firms. Each nation must pollute in order to compete with other nations." The proof of Weaver's statement is evident across all spheres of society; from the colossal burning of the Amazon rainforest to promote/encourage Brazilian industries (Calma, 2019) to the dumping of about 1.15 to 2.41 million metric tonnes of waste into the water bodies of the world and creating garbage patches across the oceans (The Ocean Cleanup, n.d).

The Rise of Use and Throw Economy

The use-and-throw economy is one dominated by the ideas of consumerism, overconsumption, and excessive generation of disposable commodities as compared to durable goods.

Such an economy supports the notion of planned obsolescence or the strategy of creating a product with a restricted lifespan so that it matures into a commodity that is no longer functional after a duration of time (Bulow, 1986). In an economy where profits are maximised by maximising production and efficiency, the gradual disuse of products warrants repeated purchases (Smart, 2010). However, besides increasing purchases, planned obsolescence adds on to the throwaway culture that we are already guilty of over-indulging in.

One of the first instances of businesses influencing consumers to periodically substitute a commodity was the 'lightbulb conspiracy', wherein it was believed that some companies organised the Phoebus Cartel to restrict firms from trading lightbulbs with a longer lifespan than 1,000-hour, even though bulbs lasting more than 100,000 hours were present (Vince, 2012). It is within this context that anti-consumerism disputes against planned obsolescence and the extensive damage caused to the environment and the distinct consumption it promotes among consumers (Wong, 2012).

Since the 1980s, studies have been cautioning us about how prevailing human actions are stimulating environmental destruction at an unmatched scale and speed (Wilson 1988; Reid and Miller 1989). Along with its modern neoliberal policies, globalisation has led to a distinct unsustainable lifestyle. This fostered form of living furthers the pursuit of profit over social and ecological costs. It drives towards the degradation of natural reserves, expansion of financial

vulnerabilities and represses the sustenance and development of sustainable market methods that are locally important (FOTE, 2003).

In August of 1955, Life magazine discussed the prevalence of disposable commodities and the ease with which they could be purchased and disposed of as 'Throwaway Living'. Ben Cosgrave later discussed this (culture) as "when tossing out everything was all the rage" (2014). Convenience has been preferred over sustainability and has caused an escalating volume of waste production and the development of toxic waste dumps, which are a vortex of toxic substances that are harmful to health, including but not limited to, cyanide, arsenic, and lead (Akpan & Olukanni, 2020). Every day approximately 1.50 lakh tonnes of solid waste is produced in India (Shrivastava, 2019). Only about 27,000 metric tonnes or 20 per cent of this is treated daily while the rest of the 1,08,000 metric tonnes or 80 per cent finds its way into landfill sites (ibid).

The neoliberal policies of the free market and free trade to facilitate globalisation have led to the formation of certain formal structures of production and consumption which are unsustainable in their very structure. There are many points of intervention in this value-chain of production and consumption where changes can be brought about to improve the system. There are organisations working on cleaner production systems, decent work environment and labour laws, better wages, and environmental protection - cleaner air, less pollutants, effluent treatment plans, pollution permits. This paper focuses on the role of informality in the promotion of sustainable living through informal markets. It argues its case using the concept of commodity fetishism, put forth by Marx in the first chapter of his radical book, *Das Kapital*. It discussed how the impression of people in society started to collectively perceive commodities to have an intrinsic value of their own, instead of recognising that it was manufactured by a real person and that actual labour went into the production of that good (1959). Marx's chapter was a word of caution against the overt commercialization, where products take on a life of their own, without any regards for the labour that went into producing this. A typical example can be when a customer is shopping for a bag or a table in one of the online portals. These products are compared with each other for their intrinsic value - their features, wherein how it was produced (by flaunting environment regulations or skimping on wages and healthcare benefits for workers) is not of any concern to the buyer. This rational ignorance of refusing to consider things that should matter to us, is at our own peril.

The present extent of fetishisation of commodities has far exceeded what was present in the century when *Das Kapital* was penned. The risks of slipping into the pitfall of commodity fetishism increase as the transaction becomes more detached and formal. The primary example of this can be witnessed in online transactions where the entire purchase happens over a screen without the need for any human interaction. These transactions rope in more consumers towards commodity fetishism.

Around 51 per cent of Indians use online banking channels for transactions (Economic Times, 2017). E-commerce sales are projected to hit approximately \$4.5 trillion in the year 2021 (Hatch, 2019). While online transactions are probably here to stay, it is critical to tackle commodity

fetishism before the complete *alienation of the worker*¹ takes place in our late-stage capitalist society.

Reconceptualising Development - The Sustainable Approach

Academic literature investigating such alternate consumption is expanding and contrasts the two features of sustainable consumption, i.e. ecocentrism (environmental sustainability) and anthropocentrism (fair labour and exchange practices) (Bryant & Goodman, 2004).

Defetishisation can help with both ecocentrism and anthropocentrism. The side effect of knowing where your food comes from points out a rather distinct association linking information and behavioural adjustment (Cairns and Johnston, 2018). When buyers know more about food production methods, they will make more refined, sustainable decisions. While Marx's concern was largely limited to labour and their protection, ecological disruption has become an equally challenging goal in today's world.

This misalignment between the present system and the use of natural resources was observed by various countries, academics, and policymakers all over the world. Consequently, the need for sustainable development arose; it commenced with the Brundtland commission report about 'our common future' (Keeble, 1998; Borowy, 2013). The Brundtland Commission Report has considerably supplemented the sustainability movement by highlighting the significance of sustainable development and in consequence pushing it as one of the chief agendas of the United Nations and the multilateral development banks (Daly, 1990).

This effort towards achieving sustainable development was translated into the Sustainable Development Goals or the SDG's, which are a set of seventeen goals for the countries of the world to follow. They were operationalised with 169 targets and 330 indicators to promote the holistic growth of the countries and its present and future generations (Hák, Janoušková, & Moldan, 2016).

To achieve sustainable development, models of ethical production and consumption patterns would have to be put in place that are able to reduce inequalities and at the same time, are not detrimental to the environment (World Economic and Social Survey, 2013).

This paper examines the role of informality and informal actors in promoting sustainable development. We discuss two aspects of sustainable living - sustainable consumption and waste disposal, and how informal actors are playing a key role in these two areas.

Informality is often confused with deviance or with illegal activities. This misconception is not only divorced from the truth but also contradicts it in some instances. The informal or the unorganized sector, in fact, is a set of multifaceted economic ventures, businesses and workers who find themselves unregulated and unprotected by the state (WIEGO). Despite the lack of social security and institutional backing, the workers and functioning of the informal sector often promote sustainability where their formal counterparts are unable to do so.

¹ Marx (1887): In the mechanised system of production, it is very easy for the workers to feel completely detached from the society and perceive their work as amounting to nothing.

Homemakers, who as informal workers at home, indulge in unpaid and unvalued domestic duties, including cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, taking care of older generations in the family, etc have been considered key actors in promoting sustainable development by the Ministry of Energy Ministry and the Office of the Vice-President for Women and Family Affair (Financial Tribune, 2015). However, the dominant picture of the informal sector is often associated with tax evasions and illegal activities in political discussions that sustain the proposals for its exclusions (Smith, 1994; Mirus, et al, 1994).

Case 1: Informal markets promoting sustainable consumption as the new activism

In a period where globalisation and neo-liberal strategies are promoting "free" global markets as the drivers of growth and have led to unchecked commercialisation, sustainable consumption is coming up as the 'new' activism. This type of adjustment is necessary and is emerging with political ecology narratives about how these alternative markets are observed (Bryant & Goodman, 2004).

After 2015, the preservation of the environment and social justice are held as 'morally beneficial objectives,' which help to direct the consumption patterns towards a more sustainable lifestyle by politicising the everyday acts of what people eat, how they dress, bathe, what products they use to clean their house, or how and where they shop (Bryant & Goodman, 2004; Ram, Kumar & Zafar, 2018).

Some of the steps for consuming sustainably are already in place- there exists comprehensive proof for the requirement of such consumption and certain government assurances in the same direction is already set in motion. The imperative action to be taken now includes empowering consumers to form more sustainable practices and make decisions that keep sustainability in mind (Sustainable Consumption Roundtable, 2006).

The idea is not to overwhelm the customer but to increase transparency. The information should be available if and when the customer chooses to know more. When the customer purchases groceries from a local street vendor, a system of trust settles in, where the seller can assure the customer of the origin of the produce and even the type of water that went into its production!

Similarly, when we witness the transformation of raw material into a finished item, we can comprehend the value of labour that was spent to create that commodity. That would mean buyers might be less opposed to paying higher amounts for their purchase if they knew that it can enable the producers to send their children to school or afford healthcare benefits. Also, if they are made aware of the production process and the producers, it might dissuade them from buying things that involve child labour, paying less than minimum wages, and perpetuating poverty.

Customer activism is an endeavour to secure customer awareness of the production process and the producers. Vendors at informal markets educate their customers about both the product and the production process. It is an attempt at defetishisation. While a sustainable market cannot function solely through informal norms, the informality renders undeniable functional fluidity. The attempt at sustainable or ethical consumption as the new activism is essential in the contemporary world.

Despite certain notions, many informal enterprises are not undeniably more dangerous to the ecology than formal businesses (Benson, 2014). In fact, since the informal sector can be more susceptible to the forces of climate change and ecological degeneration, it is more motivated to find solutions to tackle environment-related problems (ibid).

The defetishisation thesis declares that alternative markets that restore the consumer's relationship with the producers can lead to 'a more honest, less mystified relationship' with the generation of material goods and in turn, empower civil society (Gunderson, 2014). Sustainable societies necessitate more dynamic local associations and economies and stronger and more co-operative relationships at the international level. Also, there is a requirement to focus on the supply chain that links everyone from the production to the consumption process. This can be achieved by increasing awareness amongst consumers about sustainable consumption and lifestyles and also by equipping them with sufficient knowledge via safety, health standards and labels.

However, institutions must concentrate on all consumers in the market and not just a few handfuls of 'green consumers' who are expected to 'shop society's way out of unsustainability' (Sustainable Consumption Roundtable, 2006). There are several techniques to make sure more people are engaged in sustainable consumption such as community enterprises and local feedback to make the consumers feel like they are a part of a common movement. Human beings are creatures of habit and getting them to adjust their typical methods and manners is a complex task that observes some resistance at the least. There is also the perception that sustainable options are for the well-off sections of society. These issues need to be tackled to increase sustainable consumption.

Despite government attempts at increasing sustainability, it is the fluidity and openness of informal and local markets such as farmers markets, that really assist in advancing sustainability. Research also illustrates that such farmers markets can be more cost effective than local supermarkets (Ragland and Tropp, 2009), provide pesticide-free, properly labelled products (Claro, 2011), help reduce the waste and pollution (Farmersmarket.net) and are generally better for the environment, amongst others (Triple Pundit, 2016; Sustainable Jungle, 2019)

Ragi Kana, a local market in the city of Bengaluru in India functions as an alternative market for consumers. The weekly Sunday market is set in a twenty-acre plantation where small-scale agriculture and animal husbandry is practised. It also serves as a cultural hub with activities for children, theatre workshops, demonstrations and discussions on topics that are relevant to the theme of sustainability (Ram, et al., 2018). Informal markets such as Ragi Kana succeed in removing the veil of commodity fetishism where formal markets falter. By granting customers with the knowledge of where their food is coming from and who is producing it, the defetishisation of commodities is able to take place. There are many other such markets in India which include but are not limited to Organic Farmers Market in Versova, Delhi Organic Farmers Market (DOFM), Organic Shandy, Farmers Market Malcha and the CoCo Pune.

A question that often looms around the defetishisation thesis and its practical utility in helping consumers arbitrate and understand the production-consumption relationship is whether this knowledge actually changes customer behaviour. But fair trade is catching up. Literature

indicates that in 2017 itself, over \$218 million was paid to producers in fairtrade premium (Fairtrade Foundation, n.d.).

Gunderson suggests that conventional capitalist businesses that function with the sole aim of increasing profit are penetrating and that untraditional markets are unable to compete and deliver a widespread impact (2014). To attain a far-reaching impact, it is recommended that large-scale political strategies are put in place for defeteshization to work.

Case 2: Role of Informality in Waste Management

Two of the worst externalities of economic development have been inefficient solid waste management and littered roads. In urban India, the majority of waste is toxic and handled extensively by the informal sector (Suthar, Rayal & Ahada, 2016). The Minister of Environment, Forests and Climate Change, Prakash Javadekar, in fact affirmed this in a statement on the issue, by mentioning that the informal sector 'has saved the country' (The Hindu, 2015). Neglected and unpaid, these ragpickers that reclaim the reusable or recyclable products that are discarded daily, are crucial for waste management in India. They help clean up a notable fraction of the 62 million tonnes of waste generated annually (Aneez, 2017; Bose & Bhattacharya, 2017). Their numbers are predicted to be between 1.5 million and 4 million (ibid). Even though the practice of rag-picking falls under the realm of the informal sector and it is difficult to gauge the exact amount of waste that is collected through the practice, rough estimates indicate that municipal bodies collect only 75 to 80 per cent of the generated waste in India (Bose & Bhattacharya, 2017). Also, more than 90 per cent of India lacks a proper waste disposal system (ibid). Informal rag pickers, often take up this essential job of collecting waste and sustaining recycling. Through unsaid standards embedded in practices, the informal systems are able to manage informal pursuits (Bratton, 2007). Evidence supports their success in operating enterprises and developing networks (Ghani, 2019; Meagher, 2010; Perera, Ranjith & Amin, 1996). These informal city-wide networks help avoid bureaucratic red tapes of formality that stops the municipal bodies from being able to get the job done.

While society benefits from their informal network, they are at the losing end. From China to Nigeria, rag-pickers working in precarious situations and earning less than the minimum wage is a global trend (Silva, Fassa, Siqueira & Kriebel, 2005; Suthar, et al., 2016; Nzeadibe, 2009; Orlins & Guan, 2016).

Rag pickers have been mentioned as the abused workers and ecological agents of the informal sector in Brazil (Silva, et al., 2005). They source, divide, disseminate and trade different types of recyclable supplies and support cities in minimising the waste in landfills as they assist recycling companies and attempt to feed their families through the work that generates earnings less than twice the level defined by the Brazilian state as the minimum living wage (ibid). Without informal waste recycling, many developing countries would be unlivable. Literature suggests that waste picking can generate employment, stimulate local financing, decrease poverty and the expenses shouldered by municipalities, preserve natural resources if is suitably arranged and maintained (Medina, 2008; Rayal & Ahada, 2016). Hence, it is critical to promote informal waste recycling as a sustainable approach in sketching a community based solid waste management plan.

Discussion and Conclusion

More often than not, the implicit or explicit answer to the predicament of who will take the burden of leading society towards sustainable development falls upon the shoulders of the state. This is because of its policy-making, rule setting and implementation powers. In fact, Arthur Okun states that public policy is deemed to manage the forces of efficiency and equality (2015). However, the inflexibility of formal institutions restricts quick modifications for varying circumstances. In contrast, informal institutions flourish on executing swift alterations to adjust for the given condition or problem.

It is critical to conceive of and consider alternative modes of consumption when the formal system itself is cracked and leading to extensive structural inequalities. Changing the formal norms or the formal system is not an easy feat considering that the highest bargaining power for making the changes in the formal structure lies in the hands of the very people who are the gatekeepers of these formal institutions.

The contemporary requirement is for the political ecology themes of environmental conservation and social justice to lead to the formation of new informal markets that underpin "alternative" consumption. This kind of alteration is imperative, particularly in a period where globalisation and neo-liberal strategies supporting "free" global markets as the generators of growth have led to unchecked commercialisation (Ram, et al., 2018).

The informal networks, whether it be of rag-pickers or sustainable consumers are more malleable. The so-called 'unorganised sector' can allow trial and error and building standards as per the preferences of the majority of traders and customers in these informal spaces. Instances of such informal arrangements range from college students using their holiday money to start gig work and eventually turning that enterprise into a 15 crore venture (Shanbaug, 2013), a group of five cousins using a small space, one mixer, two grinders and a sealing machine to start their own ready to cook packaged food company (Our Bureau, 2014) and even multi billion dollar corporations such as Hewlett-Packard, Disney, Amazon, Google and Apple. Most of these companies started out of a garage or a storage space and paved their success through trial and error, changing and making up their policies as they went. By growing from the margins, there is a scope for discussions, mistakes and prompt solutions for the mistakes. This organic structure of change permits debates, negotiations and reflections that emerge into a sophisticated structure of satisfactory solutions.

There are several other examples of daily life situations where the informal economy steps up in places where the formal structures seem to be lacking- water provision, transport and food services, SMEs and countless other sectors (Marteau, 2008; Kumar, 2016; Skenderi, Islami & Mulolli, 2017). From artisanal mining to smallholder farmers using green technologies to enhance their crop yield, the potential for making the informal economy more sustainable is manifold and needs to be tapped into (Benson, 2014). This will help in expanding the scope of sustainable development for a more ecologically friendly future.

The complexity of the data that is needed to decide the sustainability of different products, can cause serious perplexity even amongst those who are wholly dedicated to the cause of sustainable consumption. In such situations, the transition to a sustainable lifestyle requires not the government mandating us to buy this or that, but our neighbour approving and advocating such products. Formal institutions might not be able to fully accommodate this change and require the assistance of informal institutions to lead the way.

It is critical to understand that supporting informality does not necessitate transformation to formality. For instance, the street vendor policy does not push for bringing these vendors under the umbrella of formal systems but rather aims at recognising them (Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, 2014). This helps counter harassment that these informal agents face at the hands of the local policemen who often charge them for setting up shop. It also goes a long way in providing them with cleaner and safer vending spaces. Policies such as these, help move the agenda of helping the informal sector in its entirety without pushing for formalisation. Formalisation, though often intended to help the informal sector, usually does more harm than good (Mukhija, 2004; Kumaraswamy, 2019; Söderbaum, 2006). The aim is not to inevitably formalise them but to acknowledge the functioning and perks of the informal sector that makes processes easier and helps minimise transaction costs.

The defetishization thesis comes with its fair share of debates and criticisms as does the process of sustainable consumption. The more extensive dilemmas of equality solicit an informal space for open discussion and conversations that allow intricate constructs to be opened up for negotiations, disputes, trials and to be reflected upon. Informality succeeds in accommodating an agreement about the novel approaches of sustainable living.

The overarching hope is that research about the informal sector, spaces and networks are able to unveil the concealed benefits that informality furnishes in policy architecture, and policymakers can acknowledge the indispensable part performed by informality in the route to sustainable living.

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