

## **Youth consume in a sustainable way**

There is growing awareness and concern over Australia's current consumption patterns. Social researchers like Clive Hamilton and Hugh Mackay are demonstrating over-consumption contributes to the problems that not only affect our everyday lives, but impact on the global world. A recent report commissioned by the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme (NYARS) recognises that it is young people who are demonstrating consumer leadership. They are finding more sustainable ways of living and are part of a solution to this problem.

With Griffith University and the International Young Professionals Foundation, the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme (NYARS) undertook research that has resulted in the *Sustainable Consumption: Young Australians as Agents of Change* report. It explores the influences on young Australian's consumption and asks how they can be supported to lead their communities towards more sustainable consumption patterns.

Young Australians represent a large slice of consumption expenditure, as they do in most affluent societies. Young people hold sway over the discretionary spending. In 2003 combined youth spending power in eleven major economies including Australia exceeded 750 billion dollars (\$US).

When young Australians spend it is on distractions. Not bound yet to mortgages or major assets it is clothes, food, entertainment and communications equipment that are popular. Today, teenagers in Australia lead the world in mobile telephone use, with 45 per cent of 13 to 15 year olds owning a mobile phone.

According to *Sustainable Consumption: Young Australians as Agents of Change*, the consumption patterns of young Australians are consistent with the qualities of contemporary consumer society. Young people establish their own identities through what they buy. They seek social inclusion by purchasing the newest and "coolest" products on the market. While young Australians are critical of the consuming desire, they continue regardless.

Young people also consume considerable amounts of product advertising on an annual basis, and often do not comprehend the extent to which the media develops conceptions of desirable lifestyles and personal identities. The report is critical of the role advertising and media play in promoting these lifestyles.

However, an increasing number of young people are becoming conscious of the influence of the media in these matters. Many young people have grown up aware of the strategies media employs to influence them and the report identifies ways in which young people can and do use the media to promote sustainable lifestyles.

The importance of consumption as an issue is becoming more high profile. Since 1950 the global economy has grown five-fold. Consumption of water, grain, beef and mutton has tripled, and paper consumption has risen six-fold. Many governments and international organisations are increasingly recognising the value of policies that promote sustainable consumption. The economic outlook is expanding beyond the simple idea of 3 per cent annual growth. Institutions are starting to see over the horizon to the economic and social impact of today's profiteering.

Despite increasing policy attention, research and program initiatives on sustainable consumption in many countries, including Australia, there has yet to be a strategic targeting of this issue.

The report argues that sustainable consumption in an Australian context requires a rethinking about social and environmental costs of production, distribution, use and disposal of consumable products and services. It also means addressing this through informed responsible consumer choices.

Many of the young Australians surveyed believe that their peers buy too many consumer products. Young people are critical of aspects of consumer culture, but they are not always critical of consumption as a way of life, and interestingly, the study also found the paradox that many young people are clearly unhappy, and unfulfilled by consumer society.

Interestingly, the study also identified a growing trend of young Australians trying to minimise their environmental impact through a variety of sustainable lifestyle practices: water and energy conservation, vegetarianism, downsizing and refusing to succumb to the stress of a hypercompetitive job market. Encouragingly, young people are highly concerned about the environment and the wellbeing of others, and accept their individual responsibility for sustainable consumption. On the flipside, *Sustainable Consumption: Young Australians as Agents of Change* warns that a high level of social concern does not necessarily translate into personal action.

One innovative component of the report was a youth and sustainable consumption training initiative that provided young people with the skills to analyse their own consumption. This project provides a model for the delivery of others with the final outcome of developing young Australians as effective leaders and participants in a more just and sustainable Australia and world.

Mr Cameron Neil, co-founder and CEO of IYPF explains that currently there are plans to extend the capacity building program into a wider national training and grants scheme available to all Australian youth. This national program will bring together local, state and commonwealth agencies, youth and industry in a strategic partnership focused on real change initiatives and policy development.

*Sustainable Consumption: Young Australians as Agents of Change* acknowledges there is no magic solution to unsustainable consumption in Australia. Conventional policies such as encouraging environmentally and socially sound products and services, promoting recycling and reuse need to be integrated with more innovative policies that recognise institutional, social, cultural and ethical factors. This way individual consumer behaviour can be shaped and the focus placed on wellbeing rather than economic growth as a measure of progress.

*Interested organisations and individuals can obtain more information from the following link <http://www.iypf.org/IYPF-projects.htm#YouthSC> or by e-mailing [youth.sc@iypf.org](mailto:youth.sc@iypf.org). Phone enquiries can be directed to Cameron Neil on 0402 072 452.*