



## RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS 04/2021

# Consumption and everyday life in lockdown: Covid-19, social practice and sustainable transitions

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### Purpose of the research

The purpose of this project was to understand to what extent and in which ways the Covid-19 pandemic has strengthened or changed habits around travel, food and leisure. The starting point was that consumption patterns are to a large extent controlled by habits, and lockdown gave a unique opportunity to study how often deeply entrenched habits change. Since unsustainable patterns of consumption are at the core of the high-emission society, this knowledge is crucial to achieving the necessary transformation to a low-emission society.

### Research question

We ask:

1. How have food, travel and leisure habits changed during lockdown?
2. Which changes in habits remain changed over time, and how can policy and systems of provision support changes in the direction of more sustainable consumption habits?

### Who participated in the research group?

Arve Hansen, Ulrikke Wethal and Johannes Volden (all Centre for Development and the Environment, University of Oslo) have led the Norwegian part of the study. The study is part of the work of the Include research centre, and has been conducted as part of the international research project 'Covid-19 and Consumption: Disruptions in everyday life, changing social practices and transitioning to sustainable lifestyles', led by the Environmental Policy Group at the University of Wageningen, where 27 researchers studied lockdown and everyday life in 11 countries. The Norwegian part consisted of 28 in-depth interviews with households in different parts of Oslo.

### What have we found out?

We find that consumption patterns are closely interwoven with other routines of everyday life, such as commuting, work and leisure activities.

We find that the lockdown caused by the pandemic created an opportunity for many to reflect on habits and consumption patterns that are not normally up for discussion. For some participants, this became an opportunity to try to make changes toward more sustainable consumption.

We saw clearly that reduced mobility could have positive (but also negative) implications for participants. Many experienced a less stressful everyday life and said that they would like to continue to travel less after the pandemic, however primarily with regard to work travel. Many were looking forward to resuming leisure travel, though not necessarily internationally.



We also saw that when other anchor points disappeared, practices connected to food became an even more central part of everyday life. Many households spent the time that was now not used for commuting and leisure activities exploring cooking as a hobby and diverging from established routines. For some, this meant making more food from scratch, growing food themselves, testing out new ingredients, meal boxes or vegetarian food. Food and drink also became an important way to enjoy oneself during lockdown, as well as to create a separation between work and leisure, and many households described increased consumption of both snacks and alcohol. In addition, the households were more concerned with making use of leftovers and planning meals based on what they had available. The latter is related to shopping becoming more complicated, something to be avoided and which involved risk.

Home office entailed a disruption of practices in the home, where the divisions between work and leisure became erased and households had to work to re-establish these. Especially in households with many inhabitants or restricted space, this became a significant challenge, and home office could in many cases be established at the cost of other home-based activities. The establishment of home office could also entail resource use connected to new furniture and electronics.

We saw significant differences in how participants were affected based on life situation, living situation and work situation. In the international comparison, we saw that this was often more important than cultural differences.

Further, we saw that lockdown not only led to breaking but also strengthening certain processes and patterns, such as for example digitalisation and refurbishment. As an example, many of our participants experienced a clear change in that barriers to online shopping were broken down, and the transition to home office could entail high resource use.

## Implications

### **Sustainable consumption has to be understood as a societal problem, not an individual problem**

Several studies show that the individual consumer is a poor starting point for understanding and changing consumption patterns. This study supports this and shows the large extent to which consumption is part of social practices and is interwoven with social relations and everyday life. It also shows that many consumers are open to making changes. But if one is to achieve transformation of deeply embedded consumption patterns, one must facilitate sustainable consumption rather than merely appealing to individuals to swim against the current to live more sustainable lives. More time in everyday life, more flexibility, and more regulation of consumption can contribute to sustainable transformations.

### **The pandemic can create an opportunity space for sustainable change**

There is no indication that the pandemic necessarily leads to sustainable transformation. However, our study shows that it represents a certain opportunity space in the sense that consumers to a greater degree than normally have reflected over what is important to them, and what can be changed. It also shows that deeply entrenched habits can change, and that it is possible to achieve large changes by regulating consumption. Air travel and domestic vacationing are the most obvious examples. Even if such measures would not be accepted in the long term, they show the potential to change consumption in a sustainability perspective.



A follow-up study can give us better insight into how habits are (re)formed and changed and will show whether the changes observed toward more sustainable consumption were lasting.

### Transformation has unequal impacts

The study has clearly confirmed that large changes have different impacts on different groups, which means that inequality has to be taken into account in transformation efforts to avoid strengthening already-existing societal inequalities (or creating new ones).