



## RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS 01/2024

# Consumption and sustainability in Norwegian households

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In this brief, we have gathered research results from several of Include's projects. What they have in common is that they have studied consumption patterns in Norwegian households, with a particular focus on understanding barriers and potentials for sustainable transitions. Thematically, the projects vary from how environmentally conscious households understand and "do" sustainability in everyday life, via the municipality's role as facilitator of sustainable consumption and reuse, to food, with a particular focus on meat consumption.

### Background

Household consumption is a crucial factor in any transition to a more sustainable society. At the global level, private household consumption, understood as the procurement and use of goods and services, contributes to over 70% of total global greenhouse gas emissions<sup>1</sup> and up to 80% of the material footprint.<sup>2</sup> Norwegian households are well above the European average for private consumption.<sup>3</sup> In January 2024, the Norwegian Environment Agency published estimates of consumption-based greenhouse gas emissions for the first time. They show that the consumption of goods and services in Norway amounts to 13 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalents per capita per year, of which more than 60% is emitted in other countries. Households alone are responsible for around half of these emissions, with transport and food accounting for the largest emission categories.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Norway's material footprint per capita is estimated to be among the world's highest, and almost twice as high as the average in OECD countries. In addition, very few of these materials and products are being circulated back into the economy.<sup>5</sup> These figures illustrate the challenges related to consumption in Norway.

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<sup>1</sup> [It starts at home? Climate policies targeting household consumption and behavioral decisions are key to low-carbon futures - ScienceDirect](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Environmental Impact Assessment of Household Consumption - Ivanova - 2016 - Journal of Industrial Ecology - Wiley Online Library](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Nordmenns forbruk nest høyest i Europa – SSB](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Utslipp av klimagasser fra norsk forbruk er beregnet - Miljødirektoratet \(miljodirektoratet.no\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> [OECD Environmental Performance reviews: Norway 2022](#)



While Norwegian households are among the world's least sustainable, a recent survey conducted by Opinion shows that a clear majority of Norwegians to some degree wish to live more sustainably and that around half of all Norwegians have clear, stated ambitions to do so.<sup>6</sup>

## The research behind this brief

With this in mind, and to better understand the barriers and potentials for sustainable transitions, we have conducted qualitative analyses of Norwegian households' consumption patterns through several Include projects. In the project [Sustainability and household consumption in Norway](#) we interviewed 20 households that described themselves as environmentally conscious about their everyday lives and consumption patterns. In the project [Re-making consumption? Exploring the transformative potential of local initiatives for more sustainable consumption](#) we interviewed 19 households in Asker municipality to understand their attitudes and practices related to sustainable and circular consumption, and the role of the municipality. In addition, we build on insights from 52 household interviews in Oslo, Trondheim, Ottadalen and Sunnmøre and a nationwide survey (with 1 520 respondents) conducted in [the project MEATigation](#), in which Include is a partner. MEATigation focuses on the role of meat in Norwegian eating habits and routines, and how to promote more sustainable meat consumption in Norway.

Participating researchers in the projects above are Ulrikke Wethal, Arve Hansen, Thea Sandnes, Sindre Cottis Hoff, Johannes Volden, Øyvind Sundet and Marius Korsnes.

## What we have found out

The overall results from the projects listed above show that even though many Norwegians want to live more sustainably, they find it difficult to make major changes in everyday life. People also experience that there are limited incentives to help them succeed with such a transformation. Even those who are highly motivated and actively try to change their consumption patterns in a more sustainable direction experience this to be demanding, both in the face of dominant social norms and expectations, and in relation to surrounding material structures that facilitate high consumption.

Due to the lack of facilitation for more sustainable alternatives in society at large, the project participants experience that changing consumption requires them to be highly conscious in every situation and every choice they face. Since everyday activities tend to be shaped by repetition, habit and previous experience, this is challenging. A striking example is how many people say they eat meat in a number of situations where they would prefer not to. The reasons are, for example, that they feel a social expectation to eat meat, or that there are no good or appropriate alternatives.

Because many people find that a normal everyday life to a large extent requires high consumption, consuming more sustainably feels like stepping outside societal norms. Households feel that they have to explain and defend alternative practices to such an extent that they experience it as socially exhausting. For many, change towards more sustainable consumption thus becomes a rather lonely project, kept to oneself, or which is limited to a particular social group. As a result, the likelihood of sustainable practices rubbing off on others is lessened.

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<sup>6</sup> [Opinion – Forbruker og bærekraft innsiktsrapport](#)



Because our surrounding systems largely facilitate high consumption with short intervals between use and disposal, choosing alternative approaches such as sharing or reuse feels like a constant uphill battle. Dominant systems for procuring goods have gradually made it more convenient to be a consumer, with new services making it easier and faster to shop, anytime, anywhere. Reuse, repair and sharing services are therefore in contrast perceived as fragmented, inaccessible, time-consuming, complicated and too expensive. Although many would like to take advantage of such services, they become something which most are not able to make time for in a hectic everyday life, and instead an alternative only for the especially dedicated. Alternatively, sustainable consumption primarily becomes a hobby-based activity that comes in addition to, not instead of, everyday consumption. A lack of predictability in these types of services also makes it difficult to make use of them within regular working hours.

## Implications

Our research shows that there is great potential for sustainable transformation in Norwegian households. Many people have a desire to live more sustainably, and they could participate in a transformation of consumption patterns if this were facilitated.

A clear implication of our findings is therefore that stronger facilitation is required to succeed in a sustainable transformation of consumption. This transition requires social learning and both social and systemic incentives. Consumers must be drawn to alternatives and then choose to repeat these, so that over time new habits can be established and new knowledge developed, which in turn can normalise new norms. Holistic thinking is needed, so that sustainable and circular consumption become the most attractive alternatives, in that they are cheaper; logical and meaningful in use; and work within the rhythms and routines of everyday life. To achieve this, services must become more predictable, and it will be necessary to minimise existing regulations that create barriers to social experimentation, such as the Second-Hand Trade Act and VAT on repair. Such a transition also requires that it is no longer profitable to sell large quantities of cheap, poor-quality products.

Our research also shows that it is high time to think more broadly than individuals' choices when aiming to change consumption patterns. We find that policy in this area is largely based on outdated assumptions that consumers will change their behaviour if they are given enough information. Our research clearly shows that even those with a lot of information and environmentally friendly values find it difficult to live sustainably in today's Norwegian society. Consumption must be understood in a larger social and material context, and measures must take into account both the context in which consumption occurs and what can work to replace existing consumption practices. Furthermore, we see that although consumption policy tends to focus on the individual consumer's choices, it can be challenging to be first movers with regard to consumption change. It may therefore be fruitful to look at how groups of consumers can test alternatives together, for example by allowing workplaces and public institutions to function as learning platforms and thus contribute to creating new solutions and changing social norms together.



The results of these projects have been presented in a number of publications and podcasts. Some examples:

### Opinion pieces:

- Wethal, Ulrikke Bryn & Hansen, Arve (2023). [Why overconsumption must be understood as a societal challenge](#). *sciencenorway.no*.
- Wethal, Ulrikke Bryn & Hansen, Arve (2022). [Å uffe seg over høyt forbruk fører ikke til endring](#). *Forskersonen.no*.
- Hansen, Arve; Sundet, Øyvind; Volden, Johannes & Wethal, Ulrikke Bryn (2023). [Hvorfor er det så vanskelig å spise mindre kjøtt?](#) *Forskersonen.no*
- Hansen, Arve & Haanæs, Øystein Rygg (2023). [Ekspertintervju: Kjøttvaner er vonde å vende](#). [Tidsskrift]. *Energi og klima*.

### Podcast episodes:

- Hansen, Arve; Wethal, Ulrikke Bryn; Efstathiou, Sophia & Volden, Johannes (2023). [Transforming Society Podcast: Towards plantification by normalising less meat-intensive diets](#). *Transforming Society*. Bristol University Press
- Wethal, Ulrikke Bryn (2023). [Trashtalk: Nordmenn er best i verden på forbruk, men er det egentlig noe å skryte av?](#) *Switch – Human perspectives on global issues*.
- Wethal, Ulrikke Bryn (2023). [Sofies grønne skifte. Episode 10. Forbruk: La oss snakke om overforbruk](#)

### Academic journal articles:

- Wethal, U., Hansen, A., Sandnes, T (2024): Swamped in dinosaurs with LED-lights: Negotiating sustainability in a high-consumption society, *Consumption and Society*. Doi: [10.1332/27528499Y2024D000000008](#).
- Volden, Johannes (2023). Doing (food) without meat? Accomplishing substitution and qualifying substitutes in household food practices. *Consumption and Society*. doi: [10.1332/APSQ9102](#).
- Hansen, Arve & Wethal, Ulrikke Bryn (2023). 'It's just pølse': Convenient meat consumption and reduction in Norway. *Appetite*. ISSN 0195-6663. 188. doi: [10.1016/j.appet.2023.106611](#).
- Sundet, Øyvind; Hansen, Arve & Wethal, Ulrikke Bryn (2023). Performing meat reduction across scripted social sites: exploring the experiences and challenges of meat reducers in Norway. *Consumption and Society*. doi: [10.1332/ZGV3476](#).

### Reports:

- Wethal, Ulrikke & Hoff, Sindre Cottis (2022). Lokale initiative for bærekraftig forbruk: Asker kommune. Include rapport 1/2022: [include-rapport-1-2022-lokale-initiativer-for-barekraftig-forbruk-asker-kommune.pdf \(uio.no\)](#)