Balancing living standards and environmental pressures

CSIRO’s Dr Heinz Schandl and the Department of Climate Change’s Dr Steve Hatfield Dodds explore the notion of ‘decoupling’ economic growth and environmental degradation.

Since the 1950s, all OECD countries have experienced rapid growth in economic activity and standard of living. This has come at a cost, however, with the increased use of resources, resulting in greater environmental pressures, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and consumer waste.

While growth in global resource use and emissions was, until recently, driven by wealthy industrial countries, today’s main drivers are the rapidly developing economies of China, India and Brazil.1

This has ratcheted up the scale and speed of global resource use, with today’s patterns of production and consumption hitting the limits of what the planet can offer and sustain. Climate change, water and food availability, and peaking global oil supply are converging rapidly in an unprecedented manner. The global community seems to be at a turning point. The need to make decisions is urgent, yet the information required for decision-making is incomplete.

Accounting for resource use and emissions

Good resource management relies on the availability of comprehensive information systems that track resource stocks and use, and the generation of emissions and other waste – such as agricultural crops, timber, ores, construction minerals and fossil fuels. The standard framework developed to account for resource use and emissions – along with data and indicators from OECD and some developing countries – tell us that, globally, we are using 50 thousand million tons of resources per year, or an average of 8.5 tonnes per capita.

The philosophy of eco-efficiency and dematerialisation, for example, outlines a path to achieving economic growth and wellbeing, while using fewer resources and generating fewer emissions in meeting our demands for food production, transport, construction and housing and energy.

Integrated economic and environmental policies can reconcile continuing increases in living standards with considerable reductions in resource use and emissions. But major changes in policies will require better understanding of environmental processes, development of appropriate technologies, and a consensus in favour of action to change our management practices and lifestyles.

International effort to decouple growth and the environment

In November 2007, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) launched the International Panel for Sustainable Resource Management whose objective is to find ways of breaking the link between economic growth and environmental degradation.

UNEP’s view is that while climate change tops today’s environmental agenda, the world faces myriad other problems caused by wasteful production and consumption patterns and related environmental, efficiency and equity issues. Australia can play a part in this international effort. By developing new policies that will improve our resource efficiency, we can learn to ‘do more with less’ and be part of a new economic paradigm that will account for the living standards of future generations, as well as our own.

More information:
UNEP Sustainable Consumption & Production Branch, www.unep.fr/scp/

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