

# Exploring “Aspirational Consumption” to Drive Systemic LiFE Changes

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**Abstract:** In this article, we explore the potential of “aspirational consumption” to drive systemic changes, supporting G20 efforts to decarbonize, detoxify and decouple production on the supply side for countries at different income and development levels. We also explore how the concept of a “fair consumption space” could shape G20 decisions around infrastructure options and provisioning systems used to meet and fulfil basic human needs – and how these options and decisions can fundamentally reshape our development pathways and relationship to the environment. We argue that the rise of aspirational consumption, coupled with a stronger value orientation aligned with moral objectives and responsibility, can be a driver of systemic change.

**Keywords:** aspirational consumption, sustainable lifestyles, fair consumption space, choice sets, systemic change

## Introduction

The scale of the multiple crises that the world faces now – human and planetary – is unprecedented in history and will require the efforts of all. Most policy efforts have focused on supply side conditions and sustainable production and, while these are essential, less attention has been given to the important role that consumers along the value chain could play in supporting systemic

change. Some change in this regard has been observed in recent years. The recently adopted UN resolution (28 July 2022) establishing a human right to a clean, sustainable, and healthy environment<sup>1</sup> calls into question not only the license to operate of highly polluting firms but also the role that individuals and consumers can play in enabling and demanding a cleaner and healthier future.

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At the Climate Conference in Glasgow in 2021, Prime Minister of India announced a new campaign which could deliver solutions to address the climate crisis i.e. Lifestyles for Environment (LiFE). As India assumed the G20 Presidency in 2023, LiFE is coming front and centre as a key issue – putting lifestyles at the top of the agenda for key economic and development ministries. Perhaps this is the first time any G20 Presidency gives importance to this dimension. While previous presidencies have flagged the critical importance of circularity and sustainability in their flagships and communiqués, this is the first presidency to bring full attention onto the significant role of individuals and consumers. And it is highly significant that this proposal comes from the most populous and fast-growing economies of the world.

This paper explores the potential of “aspirational consumption” to drive systemic changes, supporting G20 efforts to decarbonize, detoxify and decouple production on the supply side for countries at different income and development levels. It also explores how the concept of a “fair consumption space” could shape G20 decisions around infrastructure options and provisioning systems used to meet and fulfil basic human needs – and how these options and decisions can fundamentally reshape our development pathways and relationship to the environment.

## **LiFE: Builds on Past G20 Efforts on Sustainability**

Before embarking on literature and reasons why aspirational consumption may offer a strong foundation for supporting sustainable lifestyles, stock review of how this approach builds on and complements earlier G20 efforts is in order.

While sustainable development is a recurring theme for most G20 presidencies since the inception of the G20 in 2008, more recent efforts that connect to sustainable living and demand side choices include:

- *G20 Resource Efficiency Dialogue* (2017): The G20 Resource Efficiency Dialogue was launched in 2017 as part of the German presidency’s focus on sustainable development and climate change. The initiative aims to promote resource efficiency and *sustainable consumption and production* patterns, by bringing together policymakers, experts, and stakeholders to share best practices and collaborate on solutions.
- *Osaka Blue Ocean Vision* (2019): The Osaka Blue Ocean Vision was announced at the G20 Osaka Summit in 2019, as part of the Japanese presidency’s focus on the *circular economy*. The initiative aims to reduce plastic marine litter by 2025, through a range of actions such as reducing the use of single-use plastics and promoting recycling and waste management.
- *Circular Carbon Economy Platform* (2020): The Circular Carbon Economy Platform was launched by the Saudi Arabian presidency in 2020, as part of its focus on *circular economies and sustainable production and consumption systems*. The initiative aims to promote the use of renewable energy and circular economy principles to reduce carbon emissions and achieve climate goals.
- *G20 Global Smart Cities Alliance* (2021): The G20 Global Smart Cities Alliance was launched in 2021 as part of the Italian presidency’s focus on sustainable development and climate change. The initiative aims to promote the development of smart

cities that use innovative technologies to improve sustainability, including through sustainable transportation, energy-efficient buildings, and green infrastructure. Sustainable finance was also a notable push for the Italian G20 presidency.

The 2022 communique from Bali, Indonesia during the last G20 presidency is also instructive, as it pulls many of these threads together. Paragraph 15 of the communique states:

*We will further promote sustainable development and lifestyles, resource efficiency and circular economy to increase sustainability and work together on scientific knowledge-sharing, raising awareness, and capacity building, particularly to advance on the ocean-based climate action.*

Thus, in many ways, the current G20 Indian presidency focus on sustainable lifestyles is a logical evolution of previous efforts to introduce and expand individual choice set and demand side elements into the policy agenda of the world's largest and most populous economies. The fact that the G20 has now adopted high level principles to guide Lifestyles for Sustainable Development<sup>2</sup> speaks to the importance and timeliness of the issue: the environment is central to LiFE, and hence to all efforts to develop sustainably.

## **Consumption and Sustainability: Understanding the Connections**

Lifestyles are inherently connected with patterns of consumption. By exploring these connections, pathways can be identified to increase the pace of the system-wide changes required in global

and national economic systems to address climate change realities. These changes and transformations are essential not only for environmental sustainability and social equity, but for human well-being and the right of all countries to develop and build capacities.<sup>3</sup>

The importance of responsible and sustainable consumption is no longer in question. Instead, the issue is how and what kinds of pathways exist to steer consumption patterns and behaviours to reshape demand and supply, and accelerate the pace of market transformations. Many companies, bankers, insurers, and investors are increasingly adopting sustainability as a strategic objective for reasons of resource security, reputational purposes but also concerns for the planet. In the recent Climate conference - COP 27 (Egypt, 2022), 19 developed country governments signed up to meet net zero emissions by 2050. This recognizes that governments are consumers and have the purchasing power<sup>4</sup> and technologies to transform markets and influence the available products and services. Now all consumers need to be part of this change, and become active players to accelerate the transformation at the pace and scale required to meet climate, biodiversity, and pollution-free planetary goals.

## **Unpacking Consumption**

Over the years, falling prices of manufactured goods have led to affordable prices for the middle class in developed and developing countries; for the poor in general. This was possible in part because prices do not internalise the "bads" - the social (child labour, sweat labour), the environmental (emissions, effluents, destruction of forests) and health impacts (dangerous chemicals in products). It has raised many questions

about what sustainable consumption is, such as:

- How much consumption do we need? How much is enough?
- How much and what kind of consumption is possible given the 1.5 degrees climate goal, the need to live in harmony with nature and in a pollution free world?<sup>5</sup>
- What kind of per capita norms do we need to ensure equity, fairness, and value to the consumer?<sup>6</sup>

Consumption has a spatial, temporal and agency aspect to it. These together influence sustainability both local and global, both today and in the future, and can be examined better through three types of consumption: **1) Underconsumption** **2) Overconsumption** and **3) Aspirational consumption**. Each of these types of consumptions have implications for all countries, and particularly for large emerging economies. In this paper, the focus is on aspirational consumption as it is a road less travelled and has interesting aspects that can help re-shape demand to support responsible consumption and production choices.

**1. Underconsumption:** The issue of underconsumption, one that does not meet basic human needs, is not addressed in SDG 12, the core goal that focuses on consumption and production. Underconsumption - of basic services, food and nutrition, education, housing and shelter, energy, leisure, justice - has implications for sustainability in terms of social equity and economic opportunity and issues of basic human dignity, health, and resilience, in the short term and in the longer term. Underconsumption reduces the capability and functioning of individuals, quality of life and opportunity, and the achievement of the

SDGs, namely SDGs 1 to 8, SDGs 10 to 13 and SDG 16. In that context, policies should strive to ensure a minimum level of well-being for all.

**2. Overconsumption:** Both overconsumption and wasteful consumption have impact on the planet which is increasingly becoming evident. It creates huge externalities in terms of emissions, waste, and effluents that are detrimental to well-being. Waste and overuse impact the achievement of the SDGs adversely in terms of public health, safety and security with implications that are spatial and temporal in their externalities. Overconsumption patterns also have a deep inequality embedded in it as some consume too much while others do not have enough for sustenance and development whether in terms of ecological space or resource availability. To illustrate, the carbon profile of the top 10 per cent of income earners globally accounts for almost 50 per cent of total emissions; while per capita emissions of the top one per cent accounts for 15 per cent of the total and exceed 70 MT/yr.<sup>7</sup>

The International Resource Panel's Global Resources Outlook 2019 explains the disparities amongst country (income) groups when it comes to natural resource consumption and environmental impacts. An average person living in a high-income country consumes 60 per cent more materials than the average person in an upper-middle income country and over 13 times the level of an average person in a low-income country. Furthermore, the per capita environmental impacts of high-income countries are up to six times those of low-income countries.<sup>8</sup> Reducing this overconsumption is critical to live within the planetary boundaries.

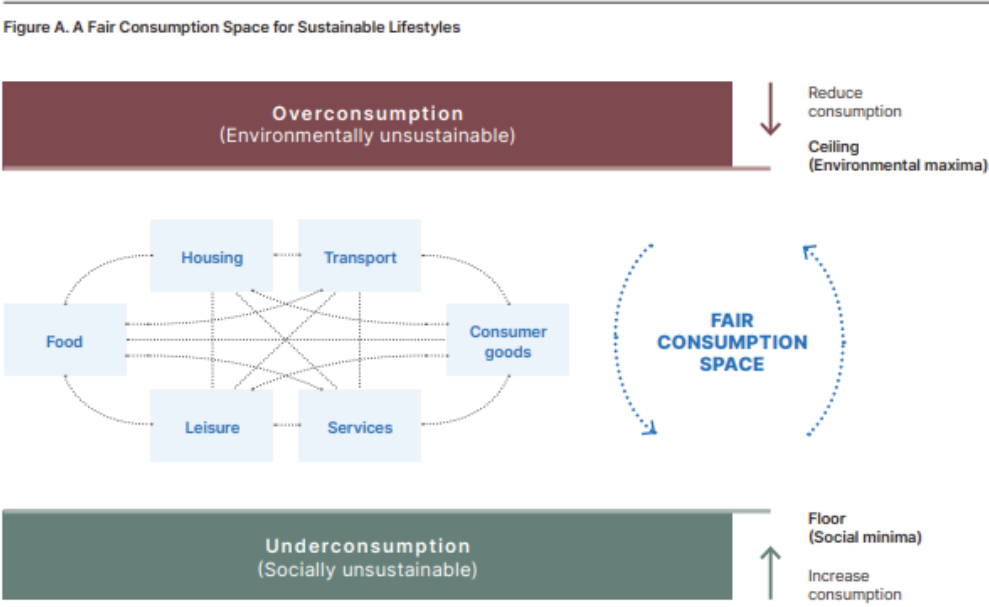
Essentially, the skewed distribution of over - and underconsumption leads us to the inescapable conclusion that

there is a dire need for a “fair and responsible” consumption space. Within the fair consumption space, there are many choice sets that are structurally determined. This has been explored in a report on 1.5-degree lifestyles<sup>9</sup> as well as in the Emissions Gap Report of 2020, which examined the carbon footprints of different income groups across the globe.<sup>10</sup>

**3. Aspirational consumption.** As its name suggests, aspirational consumption is linked with aspirations and differs in orientation across socio-economic contexts. The literature, both business and social science research, suggests that the understanding, the motivation and the sustainability outcomes of this type of consumption differ depending on where this consumption is located: bottom of the pyramid, young middle classes or the upper classes in emerging or developed economies. To understand how this kind of consumption can be leveraged to align lifestyles with environmental and

social imperatives, there is need of some unpacking.

**Aspirational consumption at the bottom of the pyramid (BOP):** The evidence suggests that contrary to popular belief, price alone does not drive consumer choice, particularly at the bottom of the pyramid. Granados and Prabhu (2022) suggest that because those at the BOP have lower social status, “consumers at the BOP seek to consume aspirational items as a way to increase their self-esteem or achieve a higher social standing within their communities.”<sup>11</sup> Srivastava et al. (2020)<sup>12</sup> provide many definitions of this consumption but in sum refer to a consumption undertaken to match with those better off in the economic hierarchy, aspiring to a lifestyle of the more affluent, even if not commensurate with affordability. As with the classic work of Thorstein Veblen<sup>13</sup> from over 100 years ago, aspirational goods for those in BOP can include private schools, TVs, beauty care, jewelry, footwear, cell



Source: Akenji et al. 2021.

phones, motorcycles, etc. It can also include “cyber-leisure” goods – anything that pulls the imagined “good life” closer into reach.

***Aspirational consumption of the millennials and the young middle classes, especially in emerging markets:*** Aspirational consumers are materialistically-oriented while, at the same time, aspiring to be sustainable in their purchases and beliefs,<sup>14</sup> adopting lifestyles that privilege “becoming” over “owning.”<sup>15</sup> Aspirational consumers, according to market research firm GWI, are the largest consumer segment (39 per cent on average), with clear dominance in the developing markets of Latin America (56 per cent) and Middle East and Africa (47 per cent).<sup>16</sup> According to BWI research, 86 per cent consumers surveyed value contributing to their communities, 48 per cent want their favourite brands to be socially responsible, and 51 per cent want their brands to be eco-friendly; and 80 per cent would pay a premium for a sustainable or eco-friendly product.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the UNESCO “World in 2030” Survey Report canvassed more than 15,000 people worldwide in 2020 and observed that climate change and biodiversity loss are topmost concerns for the youth.<sup>18</sup>

***Aspirational consumption in high income groups:*** Currid-Halkett (2017) refers to the “dominant elite” and their consumer habits, which consist of conspicuous production, conspicuous leisure and inconspicuous consumption. “Ultimately those who are members of this new cultural and social formation aspire to be their version of better humans in all aspects of lives, with economic position taking a back seat.”<sup>19</sup> A 2021 Pew Research Center Survey done in 17 advanced economies also suggest that citizens are willing to change how they

live and work as the impacts of climate change are becoming more evident with younger adults tending to be more concerned.<sup>20</sup> The aspirational consumer of the high income world today may actually be seeking a more socially acceptable and conspicuous “enlightened consumption.” The trend towards more discrete consumption patterns could be further reinforced with the backlash against private yachts, jets and other high emission sources of conspicuous and unequal over-consumption.<sup>21</sup>

Aspirational consumption in the higher income classes signals perhaps a philosophy of life and a value system in their consumption choices as in the case of the young and emerging middle classes above. Those less well-off who choose to be part of the aspirational class do so even when they must use their insubstantial means to be part of the club, as is the case for those in the Bottom of the Pyramid. Each have their different reasons.

The argument here for the purposes of the G20 discussions this year is that aspirational consumption - linked to aspirations for a good life that is “meaningful, productive and fulfilling” - has the potential to be an instrument of positive change for reinforcing and advancing sustainability transitions. This insight lies in the following five aspects:

- Aspiration to a “good life” exists in most individuals and especially those who are at the bottom of the pyramid and young, in both developed and developing countries, who form well over half of the world’s population.
- Youth are increasingly becoming concerned with environmental issues and are weaving that factor into their understanding of what a good life or lifestyle is or should be. Youth are also concerned with their

future. This may revolve around scarcity of resources and greater climate instability. This means that the notion of what is a “good life” is open to influence and narratives around responsible consumption and how this translates around what to wear, what goods to buy and what to avoid.

- The globalised world of today is also an increasingly digital world. The consumption question gets more complex in such a world with regard to work and leisure, as argued by Arora (2012).<sup>22</sup> The main difference, Arora (2012) argues, between the industrial and the digital age is in its form from the perspective of leisure. In the former, leisure was seen to supplement labor; while the digital age recognizes that leisure can also be labor. This suggests the need to re-examine how labor and leisure are viewed across opposing ends of the development spectrum.
- The energy sector shows us that given advances in digital technology, the consumer is transforming from a passive to an active agent. With increased decentralization and digitalization of the sector, choices of how to consume and when to consume energy to enable savings is becoming a key aspect not only to save money for the consumer but also to “save the planet.” More needs to be made of this clear example of informed consumers and choice making, extending to other goods and services, particularly with increasing traceability and concerns around provenance.
- “Aspirational consumption” lends itself to social media, non-material and non-consumptive goods and services. When social influencers

create norms that put a premium on the experiential and quality of life aspects of consumption, this opens doors for wider entry to the aspirational consumer class, to the benefit of all.

*Steering aspirational consumption in G20 countries towards a global shift to more sustainable consumption is critical.*

How to re-orient aspirational consumption to be more responsive to environmental and social concerns? How can we catalyse shifts to more sustainable consumption, that have the “potential to transform lives, ensuring better and more permanent access to basic goods and services; a consumption that can generate new opportunities for economic development and well-being, create decent and green jobs, and help mitigate socio-economic risks in emerging economies, serving as a connecting thread between the industrial, agricultural, mining, digital and energy transitions being promoted in G20 emerging economies and yet factor in climate realities?”<sup>23</sup>

The following are three possible pathways that could enable a collective movement, building on the work of researchers in business, consumption, and public policy. These could also support the G20 efforts under consideration as part of LiFE.

### **Converting “Affordable” and “Sustainable” Aspirational**

Frugal innovations are about doing more with less.<sup>24</sup> It is a well-developed field of study in business schools, and along with sharing and the circular economy, it has begun to create a place for itself in economies which seek to address dwindling natural resources, new technologies and knowledgeable consumers. Granados and Prabhu (2022)

refer to aspirational consumption as a good route to enhancing the adoption of frugal innovations as the use of ubiquitous technologies to innovate faster, better, and cheaper “by creating a positive aspirational narrative” around such innovations.

To achieve this potential, four factors merit the attention of the G20:

**First**, the frugal good needs to make the consumer feel she/he has achieved and is not being serviced because she is poor. If these ‘frugal’ innovations are also imbued with environmentally friendly and circular design, then it could nudge consumers in the Base of the Pyramid to use and acquire more “affordable aspirational goods”.<sup>25</sup> Frugal innovations offer companies and entrepreneurs opportunities to meet needs of those at the Base of the Pyramid that are affordable and are mainstream alternatives in typical market segments through radical business models and innovations. Creating positive aspiration narratives around frugal innovations while making them circular in design and environmentally friendly can help steer this group to access goods and services they aspire to while being sustainable. This could be, for example, around cooling, food, electronics, housing, mobility, and fashion to name some of the high-impact sectors. Fashion in particular has shown the ability to disrupt and shape social norms. *G20 can reinforce this trend by acknowledging and underlining the importance of reaching the bottom of the pyramid with frugal innovations that improve human welfare, human capacities and the environment.*

**Second**, a “responsible aspirational marketing approach” one that delivers value to the consumer to improve well-being, creates aspirational connections but in a socially conscious way is required. This requires marketing and advertising

narratives around aspirational consumption targeted to different socio-economic contexts. Influencers, along with responsible marketing approaches can be instrumental in supporting behavioral change. They can be key to ensure that negative outcomes are avoided. If the non-material values that characterise and drive aspirational consumption of the millennials and the well-off are used to launch a social movement on responsible consumption, it could take away from the social stratification that Currid-Halkeit warns us of results from the aspirational consumption of the rich. *The G20 can highlight and underline the role of the private sector – and marketing in particular to ensure that promoting responsible consumption is part of the license to operate.*

**Third**, “cyber leisure”<sup>26</sup> needs to be explored as an opportunity to build social capital with its potential social effect of binding people and sustaining relationships. Arora (2012) suggests the need for greater attention to the “... ingenious strategies that the poor employ to cope and escape from their current plight.”<sup>27</sup> Entertainment is a key tool here with class taking a backseat. The literature indicates that cyber-leisure has the potential of creating social bonds and contributing to personal health, well-being, and fulfilment through sustenance of relationships and overall life satisfaction.<sup>28</sup> Can these positive social effects be harnessed to trigger deliberative processes and organized movements towards a more sustainable consumption?

**Fourth**, Engage influencers and institutions (e.g. Bollywood in India) to promote sustainable consumption, not just the “official ambassadors” of different causes, but the larger community of influencers needs to become more environmentally conscious and responsible. Social media can be a great



amplifier in this regard. *G20 can promote social movements towards aspirational and sustainable consumption by working with influencers, educational and media leaders and outlets to bring an aspirational lens to content and programming.*

### **Enable “Responsible” Consumer Choices through Investment in Consumer Capabilities**

Responsible consumption requires investment in time and effort and learning about available choices.<sup>29</sup> Consumption capabilities are a matter of learning about, choosing among, and creating routines.<sup>30</sup> What can help expand and make the sustainable choice set more accessible?

Three factors deserve consideration by the G20:

**First**, remove products and choices that are harmful. This can be accomplished by, *inter alia*, maintaining and introducing regulations that keep those harmful products and services out of the market. For example, the single use plastic ban in India and Kenya was very effective. In Kenya, they immediately gave rise to alternative products and innovations, e.g., recycling old jeans for shopping bags. Lead in paint is another known toxic products that impairs human health and childhood development. *G20 can promote the right to a clean and health environment that improves human well-being by carefully examining and removing products from the market that are known to damage human health and the environment.*

**Second**, increase the ease and transparency of product information for consumers. More transparent and standardized information about the product can be implemented, just as is done for tobacco and other health related products. More fundamentally, governments and companies build trust through increased accountability and

reporting on supply chain processes, tracking provenance of goods through supply chains. They can harness the power of digital information and social networks to increase transparency and accountability in products and services for more informed choices. *The G20 can empower informed consumers and more sustainable lifestyles by implementing enhanced frameworks for consumer information.*

**Third**, pay attention to infrastructure decisions that reinforce and determine choice boundaries. In the case of cities, sustainable urban planning, infrastructure and policies are fundamental in shaping choice that will determine circularity of use, reuse, repair, refurbish, and safety. For example, in the New Delhi metro, investments in a separate compartment for women and the support of security guards to raise awareness helped women feel safe and adopt a new routine. The more sustainable mobility choice was enabled because of this capability to learn and accept a new routine for travel. *G20 can exchange information on successful efforts at the local/national/regional level to promote sustainable infrastructure, policies and planning that create and enable a “sustainable” default for improved choice architecture. This is an area where further research is needed.*

### **Enhance “Public Value” by Expanding Choice Sets**

Enhancing public value in strategies to support more responsible value chains will need better alignment of the world views of consumers and producers on sustainability. Some possible pathways that the G20 could include:

- Introduce governance mechanisms that enforce circular and resource efficient mechanisms across jurisdictions for business to be accountable and responsible. The

plastics treaty under negotiation is a notable example and opportunity; and would reinforce and bring together the climate/circular economy and development working group tracks.

- Correct pricing of natural resources and environmental costs is needed. Full cost pricing is an important aspect of embedding public value and interest especially in the long run. The long-term social impact of many subsidies attests to this fact. Current pricing does not make sustainability the default option ; in fact it is the contrary. Full cost pricing also promotes innovation. The G20 Pittsburg agreement to remove fossil fuel subsidies is an important step in this direction.
- Focus should be on investment in extended producer responsibility; regulate planned obsolescence; extend product lifetimes. The advances in many countries, including Europe in this regard, are notable and can be extended to further align pricing signals with life cycle costing.
- Link resource efficiency and sustainability factors to incentives for credit customers. For example, credit card reward schemes can offer sustainable lifestyle choices. Green mortgages can drive energy efficient choices through preferred interest rates. For instance, the Norwegian bank Romerike Sparebank, a signatory of UN Principles of Responsible Banking, developed green mortgages coupled with a tool helping customers to identify possible energy efficiency improvement measures.
- Build innovative and sustainable

solutions around social and green jobs in value chains; the UNEP, ILO, UNICEF “Green Jobs and Youth Pact” to address inter-generational equity is a case in point.

- Embed the voice of the aspirational consumer better in product planning and have stronger interfaces in the value chains. Explore how joined up and more transparent value chains can benefit not only consumers but also producers, particularly in lower income producer countries.

These are just a few of the policy instruments that can be brought to complement and expand the sustainable choice sets that are at the disposal of G20 countries.

## Way Forward

Market and academic research suggests that there is a class of consumer – the ‘aspirational consumer’ – in various socio-economic brackets. They have increasingly become the force of numbers and hence the power to cause markets to transform through changes in preferences and demand away from the goods and services that are harmful to the environment. This can trigger a ripple effect across the value chain.

While governments change laws and rules, pricing and influence markets in the choices they make as consumers of goods and services; while investors pressure firms for more responsible production practices, while the producers themselves begin to invest in more environmentally friendly technologies and practices in value chains as they see the value of nature for business, aspirational consumers can become a force for transformative change and contribute to “tipping points” through a

desire for a “good life” that aligns with environmental and social imperatives.

This paper has attempted to make the case for utilizing “aspirational consumption” as a pathway to accelerate the pace of change. It recognises that a focus on the producer, the company or even the individual consumer alone will not result in the economic transformations in the scale and pace desired. The rise of aspirational consumption with a stronger value orientation aligned with moral objectives and responsibility can be an opportunity to build a narrative that scales change across countries and income brackets.

This paper argued that finding ways by which the aspirational consumers can come together to share common, collaborative spaces into an environmental movement can help reshape demand, influence markets and supply chains towards more responsible choices and lifestyles. They represent a unique opportunity to mobilize lifestyles around a greater responsibility in consumption keeping equity and the longer term in view, with youth playing an important role in shaping this collective action. The pace of sustainability transitions can be accelerated if all actors in the market are aligned with strategic and moral objectives. Aspirational consumption, aligned with moral objectives, can support a wider political vision for a new society that recognizes and aligns the socio-economic realities of the emerging and developing world with climate and environmental realities.

Finally, with leadership coming from the Indian G20 presidency, and with a hand-off to Brazil who will host the presidency in 2024 and South Africa in 2025, the G20 could mobilize movements around the world to understand how aspirational consumption could support increased equality and sense of fairness

between countries. A renewed focus on sustainable living is timely, and can help address the urgent need for improving human well-being and capacities within an increasingly constrained planet, while reducing consumption inequalities. And that can bring more meaning to LiFE.

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