Changing consumption and production patterns is at the heart of sustainable development. Since 1992 UNEP has worked on promoting cleaner production and sustainable consumption with significant results achieved. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that environmental gains at the production side are being offset by increases in consumption levels, arising from a combination of population growth and economic development. Of particular relevance are the increasing aspirations of consumers – particularly those in developed countries – to increase their quality of life by consuming goods and services. As a result, space for development for the vast majority of the world’s population, many of which are poor, is diminishing at an unacceptable rate. To tackle these challenges, there is a need for taking on a more integrated approach, in other words - life-cycle thinking is needed.

World-wide, work has been done to identify the problems, develop tools to promote change and increase awareness to facilitate changing consumption and production patterns. In Johannesburg and later in Nairobi at UNEP’s Governing Council it was agreed among governments that much work still needs to be done to facilitate change.

UNEP’s efforts in developing the life-cycle approach are built upon its activities on changing production and consumption patterns, which include cleaner production, ecodesign, product service systems, sustainable agri-food production and consumption activities, and the UNEP / SETAC Life-Cycle Initiative. These efforts have contributed to a conceptual base for a global framework of programmes on sustainable consumption and production as requested by governments at the WSSD. The recent effort to examine the current application of life-cycle related tools in policymaking for both public and private sector, is guided by this global initiative and is aimed at learning from existing practices.

As the WSSD Plan of Implementation states, consumption and production policies should use “science-based approaches, such as life-cycle analysis”. Life-cycle thinking is key for achieving success in the proposed function-based approach, because it enables decision-makers to choose the best intervention point during the appropriate phase of the life-cycle. For instance, improving waste management through better product design.

At UNEP’s Governing Council held in Nairobi last month, UNEP was requested to strengthen its sustainable consumption and production activities including the UNEP / SETAC life-cycle initiative which promotes the application of life-cycle approaches in decision making for stakeholders within government, industry, and organisations.

Moreover, UNEP is involved in facilitating the transfer of environmentally sound technologies, especially to developing countries and countries with economies in transition, and activities to stimulate the design of sustainable products and services. UNEP has taken an active role in strengthening the role of business and industry in promoting sustainable consumption and
production patterns including by playing an active role in implementing the Global Compact. Awareness raising and education for consumers is also essential in UNEP’s sustainable consumption and production activities.

UNEP also works to assist Governments to implement sustainable consumption approaches, such as those contained in the United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection. Some possible ways of addressing this is for UNEP to develop regional training, awareness raising and capacity building programmes in support of Governments, local authorities and business and industry in co-operation with other relevant UN agencies and international governmental organisations. UNEP is paying particular attention to gender issues and differing circumstances in regions and countries world-wide, particularly small-island developing States and countries with economies in transition. This way all countries can benefit from the process, by setting up or contributing to, regional programmes, building upon existing networks and activities.

AIST and UNEP have together embarked on a series of workshops to address life-cycle approaches to sustainable consumption. UNEP’s interest in joining AIST’s initiative is two-fold. Firstly, to identify research priorities in light of the development of a ten-year framework programme on sustainable consumption and production. Secondly, to build a bridge between the needs of policymakers and the state-of-the-art of ongoing and future research in the area of life-cycle based policy tools to promote more sustainable consumption and production patterns.

The workshop in Paris, 3-4 March 2003, aimed at identifying ongoing activities within the scientific community with regards to life-cycle approaches to policymaking. It is clear that there is a need for a holistic approach promoting ecosystem friendly economic and social development models, as there is evidence of increased consumption despite improved resource efficiency (rebound effect). From UNEP’s point of view it was deemed important to bring forward research priorities linked to the 10-year framework programme on changing consumption and production patterns by generating momentum for research, training & awareness raising activities on life-cycle based policy tools for sustainable consumption.

Participants agreed that research must be available and relevant to users. A significant body of research exists. Hence, it is not only a question of generating knowledge but of putting knowledge into the hands of consumers and decision-makers. Moreover, there is a need for gaining a better understanding of how life-cycle based information can be utilised to inform consumers. It was also recognised that researchers need to have a better understanding of decision-making processes and of how function-based/life-cycle approaches can be integrated into these processes. Finally, it was agreed that a separation of production and consumption should be avoided. A multi-disciplinary approach is needed, bringing researchers working on different aspects of production and consumption systems together to move toward a function-based approach.

Participants brought forward that:

- There is a need for more practical examples on applications of life-cycle and function based approaches within government, industry and organisations in order to see what effect these approaches can have on the sustainability of production and consumption systems.
- The use phase and consumer perspectives are poorly reflected in function-based approaches.
- Sustainable consumption and production is an issue for both developed and developing countries. Most activities, that we are aware of, on life cycle thinking are taking place in developed countries, hence, there is a need for more feedback from and possibly training and awareness raising for a range of stakeholders in developing countries.
• We need to know more about consumption change in various cultures around the world in relation to and by various stakeholders. I.e. people often seek to attain an identity throughout their purchasing choices reflecting trends (local/global).
• There is a need for a paradigm shift by reconnection of perspectives on consumption and production. How do consumers make choices and how are the set of choices available structured by producers, governments and other commercial actors (marketing).
• There is a need for implementing more efficient feedback mechanisms from consumers (individuals & NGO’s) to the suppliers (industry & government).
• Scenario analysis can be an efficient way to identify and implement sustainable solutions for companies, governments and organisations.

Programmes will be developed and implemented in partnership with stakeholders at local, national, regional and international levels, particularly in developing countries, building upon their existing efforts. Synergies will be stimulated among governments, business, non-governmental organisations (such as consumer organisations, workers and trade unions, environmental NGO’s), international governmental organisations and the research community. Additional stakeholders who are not yet engaged will be identified and involved.

The recent effort to examine the current application of life-cycle related tools in policymaking for both public and private sector, is guided by this global mandate and is aimed at learning from existing practices. Through its work with the scientific community in the ‘Life-Cycle Based Policy Tools for Sustainable Consumption’ workshop series, as well as other activities such as the UNEP/SETAC Life Cycle Initiative, UNEP is actively working to make these objectives a reality.