

**Business:** Is it possible to reconcile the cost-of-living crisis consumers are experiencing with the need for sustainable consumption?

### **Sustainability is Inversely Proportional to Affordability**

*“Yeh sustainability-wustainability toh bas ameroon ke chonchley hai”*

“These conversations around sustainability are just a fad created by the privileged.”

In India, many believe that sustainability and affordability cannot mutually coexist, and assume that sustainability always carries a hefty price tag. Is this necessarily true? For centuries, tribes around the country have been practising ‘Crop Rotation,’ a technique that involves planting different kinds of crops on an area of land. It has been adopted by approximately 15 million farmers, covering roughly 30 million hectares of land (“Sustainable Agriculture in India 2021” 2021). Besides meeting diverse nutritional needs, it entails many benefits, such as protecting land from degradation and preventing soil erosion. Other renowned practices include regenerative agriculture and subsistence farming. The actions of economically disadvantaged tribes in India demonstrate the intersection of sustainability and affordability. The government is also initiating the ‘The sustainable agriculture programme’ to address the issue of water scarcity and dwindling groundwater reserves caused by the utilization of water in agriculture (“Sustainable Agriculture,” n.d.). Traditional, sustainable agriculture systems illustrate a scenario in which environmental management and economic considerations can complement each other. Learning from them, the presumption that sustainability is a Western, neoliberal, and privileged concern shows itself to be not just wrong, but *lazy*. These ways of living inspire me, and I want to adopt them into the consumerist fold of urbanity. That ‘Sustainability is inversely proportional to affordability’, I believe, does not hold. Tribes, indigenous populations, and histories of eco-conscious communities living close to nature prove so.

Recently, due to the Russia-Ukraine war, the cost of natural gas has increased by 166.8%. According to the World Economic Forum, 'zero-covid' measures in China accompanied by the war have resulted in global prices rising by 8% and also led to a 3.5% year-on-year inflation rate, which is observed to be the highest in the past five years. The United Nations Development Programme has also indicated that Russia's actions caused a 40% rise in the prices of wheat and nearly 70% increases in corn and sunflower oil prices (Whiting 2022). Prices for gas and electricity have risen by 29% on average in local currency terms in Western European cities as the region tries to wean itself off Russian energy. This compares with a global average increase of 11% ("Worldwide Cost of Living 2022," n.d.). All of this, especially the hike in food and energy prices, has pushed 71 million people into poverty worldwide. The Reserve Bank of India released a 'Consumer Confidence Survey' in September 2022 that revealed shocking facts about the respondents' pessimism about their current income compared to the previous year, showing trends that reflect the challenges the average consumer faces due to the rising costs globally ("Consumers Hopeful about Income, Employment but Inflation a Worry: RBI Survey" 2023). Thus, this current situation is termed a 'Cost of living crisis' as the cost of the most necessities of life, such as food, healthcare, and education, is outpacing average incomes. The leading causes are the neck-deep inflation rates and the knee-high wage growth.

**Affordability is the primary concern, as opposed to sustainable consumption:**

For many households, the primary focus is meeting the immediate financial needs rather than prioritizing long-term sustainability. People struggling to put three square meals a day on their table naturally do not, and cannot, worry about more long-term and abstract problems. This, however, is a defeatism that can be combated. Another problem is people's lack of awareness about the benefits of sustainability. They believe that sustainable products can only

be bought by paying skyrocketing prices, which drives the middle class to develop consumption practices that are removed from the ethics of sustainable living, ultimately leading to environmental degradation and long-term losses.

In my context, I am economically secure enough to buy an INR 300 jute bag, my gender allows me to travel in public transport after dark, and my privilege of visiting farmers' markets to buy ethically sourced food every week. However, I acknowledge the fact that not everyone faces equivalent financial circumstances. For example, my family's household help, who plays a vital role in the smooth functionality of the house, would find it impossible to replicate more sustainable ways of living in the face of mass inflation that makes the prospect of procuring three healthy meals a day dubious. In this situation, is it fair for me to ask her to shoulder the additional costs accompanying sustainability? It is crucial to recognize the socioeconomic disparities that exist, and that they determine one's access to sustainable living to a large extent.

For a robust approach to reconcile the cost-of-living crisis with sustainable consumption, it is of paramount importance to hone a contextualised and holistic perspective that does not ignore how class differences are manifested, and how these make sustainability easier for some and more difficult for others. An ahistorical approach that overlooks the influence of class differences over adopting sustainable practices is ultimately hollow. Social classes classified by economic disparities affect resources and opportunity. For the wealthy class, sustainability is effortlessly achievable, helping them live in ecologically sensitive areas and investing in green technology.

On the contrary, members of lower socio-economic classes face financial barriers to attaining such a lifestyle. Soaring prices of essential goods lead individuals and households to sacrifice their basic needs and compromise daily nutritional needs, healthcare, and housing conditions.

It also results in financial stress and anxiety and can exacerbate poverty. All this contributes to the decline in the quality of life. Amidst this, how does one introduce the idea and importance of adopting sustainable life practices? In fact, can we even?

**I have ideated a three-pronged strategy to achieve this:**

Firstly, incentivizing the adoption of solar panels with tax exemptions includes a multifaceted approach. According to the World Coal Association, over 41 percent of coal is being used to produce electricity, which has become the main cause of global warming and greenhouse gas effects (Forme Solar 2019). Offering tax incentives would encourage people to shift to renewable energy sources and towards a cleaner and more sustainable option. Ultimately, the people would benefit from reduced electricity bills as well. Apart from assisting the economic upswing, it would open up new job opportunities in the renewable energy industry, making it an ideal scenario for both society and individuals. Secondly, the ethos of ‘Geeli Mitti’ (‘Wet Clay’) is emblematic of redefining architecture along the lines of sustainable living (“Geeli Mitti Farms- Natural Building Experts,” n.d.). Thus tackling the cost-of-living crises by making housing more economical and affordable. Drawing inspiration from this, urban homes can integrate these concepts to make housing more sustainable, affordable, and liveable. An example is ‘Passive Homes’ - a home designed for energy efficiency, containing innovative ventilation systems accompanied by various design principles such as extreme airtightness, continuous insulation, and high-performance windows and doors. While reducing environmental impact, residents of a Passive House will enjoy excellent indoor air quality and temperature (Sorensen 2016). It can further be tackled by educating people on different, small-scale practices to become more mindful, from basic water conservation strategies and second-hand purchasing to mitigate the impact of the supply chain to more advanced practices of composting, recycling, and reusing. Thirdly, the idea of a circular

economy that relies on resource regeneration tackles sustainability and affordability problems by emphasizing the environment's regenerative nature and the never-ending availability of resources. In a circular economy, materials and products are circulated by recycling, composting, renovating, reusing, and maintaining. Hence, it minimises waste and may result in lower manufacturing costs. As a result, it offers a whole solution to deal with issues related to cost and sustainability. "Driven by design," "eliminate waste and pollution," and "circulate products and materials (at their highest value)" are the three guiding concepts of the circular economy (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2023). The main feature of this model is second-hand purchasing, thereby extending the life-cycle of a product. By tackling the excesses of the fast fashion sector, circular economies can especially transform apparel businesses. Fast fashion, known for producing goods quickly and following market trends, has led to environmental issues like 10% of the world's carbon dioxide emissions, waste at every stage of the garment manufacturing process, harm to wildlife, land degradation, and soil and water pollution (Feldstein 2023). For this reason, investing in classic and long-lasting apparel is ideal, and the circular economy is the ideal option. By thus combining affordability and sustainability, the circular economy can help dismantle fast fashion's excesses. At large, the central economy's fundamentals reduce wasteful behaviour and lessen the negative effects of excessive production and disposal on the environment.

Thus, I sincerely believe that affordability and sustainability are not diametrically opposed to one another but can become mutual beneficiaries through adopting mindful and strategic manners of living. While the cost-of-living crisis seems more immediate, and sustainability is always secondary, we are all inhabitants of the same planet and have equal stakes in its preservation. Driven by this realization, it is possible to reconcile the cost-of-living crisis consumers are experiencing with the need for sustainable consumption. By aligning sustainability and affordability, we address the current problem of the cost-of-living crisis and

promote a harmonious future, for it paves the way for a society consisting of environmental stewardship and financial well-being, contributing to a more equitable and eco-friendly future.

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