

Assessing the viability of downshifting initiatives in the Netherlands

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*Though the problems of the world are increasingly complex,
the solutions remain embarrassingly simple.*

Bill Mollison

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In front of you lies the result of almost a year of struggling with the concept of downshifting, intellectually as well as in practice. The reader should be aware of the fact that I personally support the idea that consumers in affluent countries, from a moral point of view, should reduce their consumption patterns to match the environments' carrying capacity. I have attempted to organize my life accordingly. Although this belief has fuelled my motivation for conducting this research, I have attempted to remain critical and objective in the assessment of the viability of each downshifting initiative.

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Abstract

In the last decades it has become increasingly evident that increased consumption has caused the ecological footprints of rich countries to surpass what they should be, in result threatening the survival of the human- and many other species (Rockstrom et al. 2009). In dealing with this situation the overall strategy of the Dutch government is, just as in other developed countries, typified by: the belief in win-win strategies, in which the environment and the economy prosper through the decoupling of growth and throughput; reliance on innovation and technology; the assumption that growth is needed for renewal; and finally that consumption reduction and the change of individual habits is not really needed (de Geus 2003). Increasingly scholars and citizens share the concern that decoupling will not be enough and that a reduction in consumption levels and the increase of sustainable lifestyles will be necessary in order to remain within the Earth's carrying capacity. Downshifting consumption has so far only been promoted at the grassroots level. In this thesis, the main focus will be on the viability of these initiatives to contribute to or influence current societal consumption practices in a direction of less consumption. An overview is provided of around forty initiatives that promote downshifting; nine cases among these have been selected and studied in depth. A framework is developed in which viability is determined by internal factors (a framing process, the mobilization of resources, and networking skills) and external factors (social, structural, and political barriers and opportunities). I conclude that there is a rich diversity of initiatives promoting downshifting in creative ways, providing inspiration and tools for those people interested in lowering their consumption levels. The positive message provided by these initiatives reflects a departure in environmental organizations from 'doom scenario's and guilt triggering strategies. Downshifting is interpreted as a form of identity politics, following the lines of 'think globally, act locally', which makes the initiatives central weakness their fragmented character and lack of collective protest. The major external development contributing to the viability of these initiatives is the diminishing trust in neo-liberal strategies and the adoption of the notion that personal consumption choices matter and that people want to 'vote' with their money according to their beliefs

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Problem definition

In the last decades it has become increasingly evident that the human species is over-consuming the world's resources and over-polluting its sinks, in result threatening its own survival and that of many other species (Rockstrom et al. 2009). In response to this threat the UN established the Brundtland Commission which produced *Our common future* in 1987, and gathered in Rio in 1992 in order to develop a strategy together. Now, twenty years later, the complexity of environmental problems appears ominous and the aspired fusion of environmental preservation with economic growth seems out of reach. Thus despite some improvements the threat has only worsened. One complexity is the decoupling of environmental problems in time and space, meaning that the consequences of consumption and production processes are dominantly felt in other places and in the future. Typically, the developed world is causing the problems, while the developing world is the most vulnerable to environmental hazards, diseases, food scarcity, etc. Furthermore, there is no clear victim-perpetrator relationship since all citizens in developed countries contribute to environmental problems through everyday consumption (Gardiner 2010: 89). This is linked to another complexity: whereas in the past the state was regarded as the central figure in taking care of collective problems, now power is more diffused to regional government agencies and international overarching organizations.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and corporations are now established forces in negotiation processes on all levels of governing and financial institutions such as the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund and economic and military conglomerations such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development and NATO have come to dominate international relations. In results, the role of government, some believe, has become one of steering rather than controlling. In this model of governing:

more attention is given to interaction between actors pertaining to the state, the market and civil society...The concept of environmental governance has been refined to reflect the increasing complexity of social structures in which it is embedded...It also alludes to the need for coordination and to the various levels of aggregation at which non-governmental bodies involved in governance operate.

(Driessen et al. 2012: 144p)

Stakeholder participation is central in governance and based on the idea that the interests of the state, market players and civil society can be streamlined through negotiation processes, creating win-win situations (Dubbink 2003). The conflict of interest between environmental protection and economic growth has however not been sufficiently addressed through the dynamics of environmental governance (Trainer 2007; Jackson 2010; Adelman 2010). The rate in which economic growth is decoupled from 'throughput' by no means approaches what is necessary to remain within the Earths carrying capacity. And although production processes have become cleaner and more efficient, consumption increases immediately 'compensate' for these improvements. For instance, studies into the effects of insulation promotion policies have demonstrated that the money saved by households through increased energy efficiency is spent on larger houses, new bathrooms, more expensive holidays, etc., thus nullifying any positive environmental effects (Christensen et al. 2007). Scholars are increasingly criticizing the focus on win-win situations and the belief that we can continue with 'business as usual' with cleaner production processes. Already in the Brundtland report there was a call

for addressing the lifestyles and values of ordinary people in modern societies in order to support sustainable development. Both on the Rio Summit in 1992 and the Earth Summit in Johannesburg 2002 addressing consumption was identified as one of the main challenges for sustainable development (Marrakech Process Secretariat, 2010). The 2010 State of the World Report was called Transforming Cultures from Consumerism to Sustainability. Increasingly there is a call for a paradigm shift that includes a political role for consumers. Some go as far as to say that “reduction of consumption will be the only viable and sustainable solution to our modern environmental problems” (de Geus 2003: 14). On a political scale however, there is very little strive for decreasing consumption. The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) stated: “sustainable consumption is not about consuming less, it is about consuming differently, consuming efficiently, and having an improved quality of life” (UNEP quoted in Fuchs & Lorek, 2005, p. 268).

In spite of political promotion of economic growth and ever increasing consumption, some consumers have decided to privately reduce their environmental impact through reducing consumption and striving for quality of life with less means (Cherrier 2008; Schreurs 2010; Alexander & Ussher 2011). This has resulted in a voluntary simplicity movement and some believe this movement is bringing about ‘radical social change’.

The Trends Research Institute (1995) first reported this significant and growing trend and qualified it as the most fundamental change in our way of life since the Depression... The wide spread prevalence of downshifting has thus led researchers to conclude that downshifting is no longer an act of personal deviancy but rather an indication of a radical change in consumer society.

(Schreurs 2010: 87)

Though the number of simplifiers¹ is growing (Datamonitor 2003), only future can tell whether the movement will contribute to a general shift in consumption behavior. In my opinion, the question whether the movement *can* have this influence is often too easily answered. According to van den Bergh strategies proposing degrowth offer:

such a grand, imprecise idea which lacks a good, thorough analysis that it will be impossible to obtain political support for it in a democratic system. More importantly, it is void of a good view on systemic solutions and instrumentations, making it unclear how to upscale radical changes in lifestyles and grassroots initiatives by small subsets of the population (“niches”) to society as a whole.

(Van den Bergh 2011: 884)

Although I agree with Van den Bergh that there is little critical analysis of how initiatives can be upscaled, I do not ex ante support his assertion that alternative lifestyles have always existed without ever being adopted by the majority of society (*ibid.*). Indeed, many important public reforms originated as small scale social initiatives that proposed ‘alternative’ choices, think of the Arab Spring, feminism, labor movements, etc. Recognizing the power of social initiatives, I believe downshifting deserves a theoretically based assessment of its potential. Can it have a multiplier effect and encourage more people to reduce consumption, or is it more likely to remain at the periphery of society?

As the personal behavior, motivations and experiences of downshifters have been explored extensively

¹ Also known as downshifters

(Aarts 1999; Schreurs 2010; Cherrier & Murray 2002; Alexander & Ussher 2011) this thesis will focus on how downshifters organize themselves in groups and the various ways through which they promote simplicity in the Netherlands. The goal of this research will be to explore the various ways in which organizations are promoting downshifting in the Netherlands and to assess the potential of these initiatives to contribute to a change in consumption behavior. This leads to the following research question:

Main research question:

What is the viability² of Dutch downshifting initiatives?

Sub-questions:

1. What downshifting initiatives are being developed in the Netherlands?
2. What are the factors that contribute to or hinder the viability of downshifting initiatives?

1.2 Method

This research follows a case-study approach. Concerning the first sub-question, an overview will be made of all initiatives in the Netherlands promoting downshifting; e.g. magazines, eco-villages, simplicity houses. Nine of these initiatives have been examined in depth; through semi-structured interviews (see Appendix- interview questions) with organization leaders and the study of primary documents, web-sites, news-articles etc. Two initiatives have been added later in the research process because they were only discovered in the completion phase, and time for interviews was unavailable. Consequently their analyses are shallower, yet I believed them to be too important to neglect. A concept version of the assessment of each individual initiative has been submitted to the organizations and checked for flaws and incompleteness, to which most organizations have responded. In addition: I have visited a national gathering of downshifting promoters; joined a tour around a new self-sufficient eco-village; attended a reading by the GEEF Economie initiator Robbert Vesseur; and interviewed experts in the field such as Jan Juffermans and Jeanine Schreurs. The nine initiatives, selected on size and relevance, will be assessed using a number of criteria. These criteria were developed through reviewing theory explaining how consumption behavior can be influenced and how social and environmental grass roots initiatives become successful. Combining these I developed a conceptual framework with the relevant factors that provide whether downshifting initiatives can become successful. I divided these into *internal factors*, which are the properties of the initiatives themselves, and *external factors* which represent the conditions affecting downshifting initiatives from outside.

² Viability is interpreted as the capacity of the initiative to achieve its goals as well to contribute to the ‘growth’ of downshifting in the Netherlands. As I will discuss later, these are not always the same.

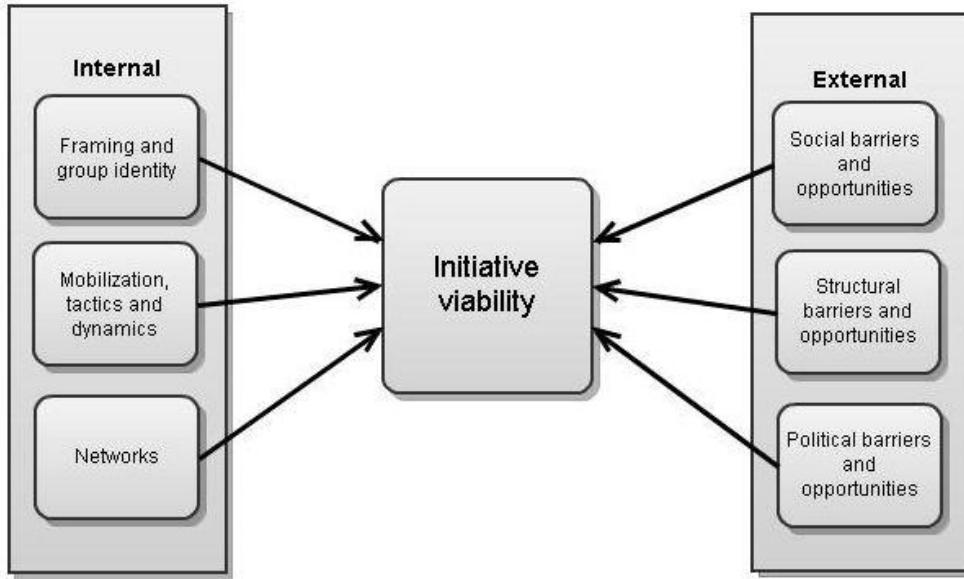


Figure 1. Initiative viability determined by internal and external factors.

This model demonstrates that the focus of this thesis is limited and the relations assessed are but a part of a wider collection of events. It does not cover for instance the relations between the external and internal factors, or how the initiatives influence external factors.

1.3 Structure

Chapter 2 will explore more deeply the relationship between excessive consumption and the environmental crisis. It will discuss the limitations of a technological innovation strategy in combating environmental problems and look at the embeddedness of consumption behavior in what is called consumer society. Chapter 3 will explore the phenomenon downshifting and the experiences, motivations and actions of downshifters. Chapter 4 addresses the factors that contribute to or hinder the viability of downshifting initiatives, looking at what stimulated behavior change, how social initiatives should organize themselves and how external factors influence initiative viability. In chapter 5, the results of data gathering will be presented and discussed, to be followed by a conclusion in chapter 6.

Chapter 2: Consumption and sustainable development

Perhaps one day we too will grow tired of it all and seek an escape from consumer culture. But with an ever-expanding treasure house of things to want, it seems we are not likely to call it quits any time soon.

(Wilk 2004: 81)

2.1 Introduction

This chapter starts out examining the relationship between the main environmental problems of today and production and consumption processes. This is followed by an analysis of consumerism to gain understanding of why consumption has taken on such a dominant role in rich countries.

2.2 Production and consumption

The current global economic system uses natural resources as input and natural sinks as deposits of waste. Together this is called the material throughput of the economic system. Economies rely on growth of GDP, and this growth is accomplished through the expansion of the consumption of goods and services. The encouragement of corporations by the state to invest and innovate in combination with the opening of the global market has led to unprecedented economic development since the Second World War. The average household income and standard of living has increased dramatically in developed countries. 'Per capita consumer expenditures in the Netherlands have approximately tripled during the second half of the twentieth century' (Martens & Spaargaren 2005: 31). This increased income has ultimately led to overconsumption³ in developed countries, it is clear that developed countries are contributing excessively to environmental degradation in comparison with the rest. In the OECD countries alone, which are populated by some twenty percent of the world's inhabitants, eighty percent of all the world's resources are consumed (Jackson 2005). In terms of carbon emissions:

The average person in a very high HDI⁴ country accounts for more than four times the carbon dioxide emissions and about twice the methane and nitrous oxide emissions of a person in a low, medium or high HDI country—and about 30 times the carbon dioxide emissions of a person in a low HDI country. The average UK citizen accounts for as much greenhouse gas emissions in two months as a person in a low HDI country generates in a year.

(Human Development Report Summary 2011: 9)

Let us approach the sustainability problem through focusing on total environmental impact. The IPAT equation is often used for this purpose; in its basic form it goes as follows:

$$\text{Impact} = \text{Population} \times \text{Affluence} \times \text{Technology}$$

³ I call it *overconsumption* for two reasons: First, because the ecological footprints of rich countries surpass what they should be, as discussed above. Second, because this increased consumption is no longer contributing to an enhanced quality of life (Jackson 2010).

⁴ Human Development Index: measures life-expectancy, education and income

Population simply indicates the number of people, affluence points to the level of consumption and technology determines the impact of consumption. When this equation was introduced all elements were regarded to be contributing increasingly to environmental impact. Technology was regarded to increase impact because production processes were getting more polluting than in the past, with machines replacing manual labor for instance. Today it is just the opposite because more advanced technology is supposed to diminish environmental impact. This trust in technology is the preferred choice, because purposefully reducing population is considered an impossibility, and our economic growth and societal aspirations are dependent on expanding affluence. Currently most developed countries have high-throughput economies, meaning that economic activity is sustained by high levels of energy and resource use. Sustainable development has been interpreted as decoupling economic growth from throughput through increasing efficiency, using renewable resources and developing cleaner production mechanisms. This approach has multiple advantages. First, it fits well within the neo-liberal approach that is still dominant in economic-political thinking. It uses competition in the market space to stimulate resourcefulness, efficiency and innovation in virtually all domains of life, up to public transport and healthcare. Second, it entails a promise to people of an ever improving standard of living, with more cumbersome labor left to machines and more freedom for individuals. Third, the approach potentially meets the economic needs of developing countries. It is proposed that developing countries are helped to make the ‘leap’ from where they are now to clean economies, without going through the same industrialization phases the global North went through.

There are however two crucial complications with this strategy. There is no guarantee that enough clean and efficient technology will be developed and implemented in order for the rich to sustain its level of affluence and for the poor countries to develop economically (Trainer 2007; Jackson 2010; Adelman 2010). Second, experience has demonstrated that increased efficiency does not lead to more sustainability because of the rebound effect (Christensen et al. 2007; Trainer 2007). Concerning the first complication, climate change demonstrates the immensity of the challenge. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports have consistently shown that the maximum allowable CO₂ concentration, above which catastrophic effects are risked, approximates 400 ppm (parts per million), also known as the two degree threshold. Global annual carbon emission is still rising and above 9 Gt/y (billion metric tons per year (Global carbon budget 2012 data, CO2now.org). Furthermore, the sooner CO₂ emissions peak, the more time becomes available to phase out emissions while shifting to alternative energy. Current trends indicate however a substantial overshoot and in order to remain under critical thresholds throughput will have to decrease *drastically*.

Many people do not understand the implications of perpetual economic growth. Economic growth is exponential growth, meaning that if it grows at three percent per annum it doubles every 23 years. China’s growth rate has centered around ten percent the last years, indicating that its entire economy doubles every seven years. Projecting that if outputs grow 3% per annum till 2070 and all countries enjoy the same luxuries as the developed world now, the world economic output would be 60 times greater than today (Trainer 2007: 128) while current outputs are already leading to ecological overshoot. According to a similar estimation by Jackson, the average carbon intensity would have to be 55 times lower by 2050 in order to remain within the earth’s carrying capacity (2010: 81). The overall picture of available resources in the following century is problematic:

If the present world population were to consumer energy at the rich-world per capita rate, world supply would have to be five times its present volume. World population is likely to reach 9.4 billion by 2070. If all these people were to consume fossil fuels at present, rich-world per capita consumption rates, all probably recoverable conventional, oil gas, shale oil, uranium

(through burner reactors), and coal (2000 billion tones assumed as potentially recoverable), would be totally exhausted in about 20 years.

(Trainer 2007: 1)

The second complication, the *rebound effect* is also troubling. Despite the fact that advanced technology and increased efficiency is simply not developing fast enough it can also be observed that it does not lead to less environmental impact, at all, because the saved time and resources are simply spent on something else (Christensen et al. 2007). It has been demonstrated that through the development of cleaner production technology economic activity becomes relatively more sustainable, and the environmental impact per euro diminishes, but overall impact keeps increasing because the money saved through increased efficiency is spent on something else. Denmark provides a good example of the problem; it is known to be a progressive country when it comes to sustainable consumption policies. Campaigning, regulating, implementing compulsory labeling and funding have remarkably influenced people to invest in clean technology. However, money saved on increased insulation was subsequently spent on larger households, expensive holidays, etc. Hence “it is worth noting that such a big effort is made to optimize energy efficiency and increase people’s awareness of energy use, while the increase in standards of living is not addressed at all” (Christensen et al. 2007: 110).

The problem we are facing in sustainable development policies is the focus on cleaner technology without addressing the required scale at which environmental impact has to be reduced, and without considering the rebound effect, which can only be solved if overall consumption levels are reduced in affluent countries. The focus on the market as the solution is misleading and even ‘fetishizes the belief that we just have to wait for the cleaner technologies that will be delivered by the profit incentive’ (Adelman 2010: 164). Moreover, if we would invest all possible resources into renewable energy, could this substitute current use of fossil fuels? Although there is plenty research on the possibilities of new energy technologies, there are few critical assessments of how renewables can substitute or complement *a substantial portion* of current energy provision. According to Trainer even the most promising renewable energies – wind, thermal, solar, biomass and hydrogen – do not have the required potential, individually or aggregate, to sustain current or projected consumption levels. For instance, wind and solar energy require major investment and always need fossil fuel complementation in case there is no wind and or sunlight (Trainer 2007: 111pp). In other words, it seems to be the case that meeting the needs of present and future generations is impossible with current, let alone increased, affluent consumption levels. ‘Trying to reduce environmental pollution without reducing consumerism is like combatting drug trafficking without reducing the drug addiction’ (Majfud 2009: 85). Reducing consumption however is not only economically undesirable; it also conflicts with cultural and social trends. The next section will explore the role of the ‘consumer’ and the driving forces of consumerism.

2.3 Consumerism

Consumers are constantly confronted with a number of choices: do they purchase a product or service; if they don’t do they spend their resources elsewhere; do they buy a polluting or a less polluting product; and do they use the product extensively or intensively? All these choices are relevant for the environmental impact of one’s consumption (Tellegen & Wolsink 1998). Generalizing we can speak of three basic choices available to consumers regarding this lifestyle of work-spend. Each choice has different notions of how sustainability should be achieved and who is responsible. The first and most dominant choice in developed countries is to live according to the ‘work and spend’ life-style uncritically, to enjoy its fruits and trust that other parties will take of care of externalities. A more

environmentally conscious choice is to live within the work-spend lifestyle while trying to minimize its ecological footprint, which is possible relative to the extent products have been made sustainable (Spaargaren en Mol 2008). Sustainable development is accomplished through the greening of supply chains in this strategy, which is the most practiced approach in current innovating projects. These consumers, named 'environmentally conscious consumers' or 'green consumers' are individuals willing to use some of their time and money to express their concern and care for the environment (Black & Cherrier 2010: 439). The third choice available to consumers is to diverge from the standard altogether through voluntary reducing income and consumption. The overall environmental impact is decreased not because of efficiency but through sufficiency, adopting a life-style in accordance to 'needs' rather than 'wants'. Of course the three choices are ideal-typologies, and most people probably move along this spectrum of choices unconsciously. We will turn to the third option, the central topic of this thesis, in the next chapter. For now the question is what drives people to follow the first approach in which consumption has such a dominant role. Developed (and developing) countries are increasingly exhibiting what is called consumerism or consumer-society. If voluntary simplicity is something people are moving towards, consumerism is what they are departing from. Through globalization it has spread across the world, even to remote and underdeveloped places. 'Even if they are not themselves participants, almost everyone in the world today is living within an increasingly global consumer culture' (Belk 2004: 67). People with low incomes are known to sacrifice basic necessities for luxuries, nutritious milk for candy, in order to participate in consumption practices and avoid social humiliation (*ibid.*). But what is consumerism? Most definitions include the importance of commodities over people. Schudson for example defines a consumerist society as:

1. A society in which human values have been grotesquely distorted so that commodities become more important than people, or, in an alternative formulation, commodities become not ends in themselves but overvalued means for acquiring acceptable ends like love and friendship.

(Schudson 1984 quoted in Belk 2004: 70)

In other words, what people buy is determined through the expectations of how they will be judged and valued by other people with this specific consumption good. Furthermore:

2. A substantial portion of a population consume at a level substantially above subsistence.
3. Exchange dominates self-production of objects of consumption.
4. Consuming is accepted as an appropriate and desirable activity.

(Rasuli and Hollander 1986 quoted in Belk 2004: 68).

Paradoxically, what is regarded as dividing line between what we need and what we want is socially and culturally constructed rather than driven by the force of nature, 'when desires become compelling enough we may naturalize them as needs' (Wilk 2004: 23). Exchange dominates self-production of objects because of increased specialization and the globalization of trade. People become increasingly dependent on others while each acquires their own specialized skill. Finally consuming as a desirable activity shows that it is not only about acquiring a good, but the activity itself has an important meaning. When an individual is consuming, he/she doesn't experience it as consuming, 'people first of all think of themselves as being involved in meaningful practices rather than being involved in consumption' (Røpke 2009: 2495). These 'practices' are strongly intertwined with people's daily lives: "their reputations, decency, self-respect etc. depend on being recognized as competent practitioners" (*ibid.*). Thus the 'doing' aspect of consumption can be just as important as the 'having'. Since consuming is held to be desirable, voluntary abstaining from consumption is regarded to be a form of

self-deprivation (Wilk 2004: 21). From a neo-Marxist perspective Livingstone presents some further features belonging to consumerism:

5. Value is no longer determined by the resources required in the production process, but by the subjective value attributed to the good.
6. The commodity form penetrates and reshapes dimensions of social life hitherto exempt from its logic to the point where subjectivity itself becomes a commodity to be bought and sold in the market as beauty, cleanliness, sincerity, even autonomy.

(Livingstone 1998 quoted in Belk 2004: 71)

In the last decades there has been a shift from utility or labor value of a product (i.e. its value is determined by its usefulness or the resources it required to make), to exchange value. Multinationals attribute large proportions of their expenditures to image or logo building, rather than to the production process and required resources. In result, '*almost every aspect of consumption laden with moral value and meaning, attitudes and values towards consumption have little to do with act itself*' (Wilk 2004: 20). Finally we turn to two features that provide more explanation of why consumption has taken on this central role:

7. A central role of emotion and desire.
8. Unrestrained and unrestricted individualism.

(Campbell 2004: 28)

According to Campbell, modern consumerism distinguishes itself from more traditional forms of consumerism through two defining features. First is the central role of emotion and desire when consuming, the second is unrestrained and unrestricted individualism (Campbell 2004: 28). Consumer demand, the ability to 'desire' and 'to long for' continuously and repeatedly for goods and services catalyzes the economic growth in developed societies. Second there is an unfolding ideology of individualism that emphasizes 'the right of consumers to decide for themselves which goods and services to consume' (ibid.). These two features are connected through the fact that modern consumerism is about the gratification of wants rather than meeting needs. Where needs can be objectively established by science, wants are defined subjectively. The 'wanter' is the central authority concerning what it wants, and in this personal expertise he or she can experience his or her individuality. Thus the real me comes from 'our special mix or combination of tastes' (Campbell 2004: 31). In this sense consuming becomes the path of self-discovery. According to Campbell western cultures have adopted an emotional ontology, meaning that whether something is judged to be real depends on the level of emotion aroused by it:

we live in a culture in which reality is equated with intensity of experience, and is hence accorded both to the source of intense stimuli and to that aspect of our being that responds to them. If then we apply this doctrine to the question of identity and the 'self' we can conclude that it is through the intensity of feeling that individuals gain the reassurance they need to overcome their existential angst and hence gain the reassuring conviction that they are indeed 'alive'.

(Campbell 2004: 36)

Consumption is unique in the sense that it provides a pure form of self-expression, because of the endless volume and variety of stimuli on the hand, and on the other the absence of the need to consider

the feelings or demands of other people (*ibid.*). The need for consumption of new products is explained by the fact that the reassurance of one's existence is a psychological need requiring repeated satisfaction. To achieve the same amount of satisfaction requires new stimuli each time, because the emotional effect wears off and becomes boredom.

So why is there an absence of need to consider the feelings and demands of other people in consumption? Giddens explains this with a phenomenon he calls *sequestration of experience*. As a person's identity is not fixed but arises from daily decisions 'modernity [becomes] a post-traditional order, in which the question, 'How shall I live?' has to be answered in day-to-day decisions about how to behave, what to wear and what to eat' (Giddens 1991: 14). In order to foster ontological security however people and institutions create predictability, routine and coherence. In order to create what Giddens calls the 'protective cocoon' *sequestration of experience* is needed, which basically means that certain aspects of life are structurally kept away from personal experience. Specifically events that could intrude the protective cocoon and disrupt the coherence of everyday life are being bracketed out:

they have the effect of removing basic aspects of life experience, including especially moral crises, from the regularities of day-to-day life established by the abstract systems of modernity.

(Giddens 1991: 156)

Giddens identifies five domains of life that are being sequestered: madness; criminality; sickness and death; sexuality; and nature. For each of these domains there is a special place, a specific setting within which they are allowed to be. Only within these safe confines - the hospital; the penitentiary; the bed; the park – can we encounter them without being disrupted. What's interesting is that these 'existential' domains represent the aspects of life that are run by natural, biological, hard to control processes. They are connected to vulnerability, dependency, aggression and lust. Yet according to Giddens what is most important about them is that they confront people with moral dilemmas, even moral crises. Within the confrontation our lives and daily routines become suddenly not so obvious, and often morally ambiguous. The experience of nature as something external has seized to exist because of two processes. First, most people live in a constructed and thus artificial area, we have no direct physical relation with nature. Second, nature is increasingly subject to human intervention and, thus being socialized, it loses its character as extrinsic point of reference (*ibid.*: 166). A more recent study on responses to climate change in Norway produces the same findings:

Community members had sufficient information about the issue but avoided thinking about global warming at least in part because doing so raised fears of ontological insecurity, emotions of helplessness and guilt, and was a threat to individual and collective senses of identity.

(Norgaard 2006: 391)

2.4 Conclusion

Production and consumption processes seem to be locked in societal structures: economically because growth is necessary to sustain current economic systems; and socially because consumption is directly related to how people interact with and value each other. Moreover, environmental concerns are structurally kept at a distance in order to preserve established routines that support existing expressions of identity. The following chapter will explore how voluntary simplifiers are 'liberating' themselves from societal forces and experimenting with new behavior, defined by spending less, focused more on autonomy and striving for wellbeing with less means.

Chapter 3: Voluntary simplicity

We need to field a variant of Gramsci's engaged intellectual...committed to translating scholarship into activism. Whether this activism results in the sublation of the global economy...or the selective disengagement of groups from the system altogether...it is a vital component of our professing mission, and one that has been left too long to atrophy...Second [we need a] relentless, holistic, comprehensive and nuanced empirical investigation of the material conditions of critical counterculturalism itself. We require a thorough understanding of the dynamics of resistance, appropriation or whatever other name by which the strategy of consumer revitalization movement comes to be characterized. The dynamics of populist presumption or grassroots conduct need to be examined as they unfold, on the ground, in households around the world. Whether ephemeral or long lasting, these instances of wresting autonomy from the system must be understood, harnessed and directed in the service of enhanced quality of life.

John F Sherry, *Elusive Consumption* (2004: 60)

3.1 Introduction

While governments and corporations continue in the direction of stimulating (over)consumption and trusting in technological innovation, some consumers believing overconsumption is problematic started to reduce their consumption levels voluntarily. The phenomenon is not new. Roots of voluntary simplicity are found in spiritual teachings by Lao Tze, Buddha, Jezus, Ghandi, st. Francis etc. In the previous century books such as Small is Beautiful by Schumacher (1974), Voluntary Simplicity by Elgin (1981) and The Simple Life by Shi (1985) were the first public signs of a movement countering the development of consumer culture. Voluntary simplicity - also called downshifting, the quiet revolution, anti-consumption, or consumer resistance – is about trying to achieve well-being and sustainability through living a more simple life. This implies focusing on the necessary basic conditions of living, rather than living by the high standards that are socially desired in consumer societies. This includes accepting a lower income, minimizing expenditures, acquiring possessions in a direct and simple fashion, and spending more time relaxing, contemplating or being with family, friends, community organizations. This chapter will cover some definitions of downshifting, discuss various themes associated with it, and look into the developmental phases in becoming a downshifter.

3.2 Definition

The core of voluntary simplicity/downshifting is introducing lifestyle and consumption changes to allow one to live with less than before. Schreurs defines downshifters as 'people who are living with less money than they did before' (2010: 25). But according to downshifters, it is not just about minimizing, it is a shift of focus from quantity to quality, living outwardly simple, inwardly rich.

Voluntary simplicity involves directing progressively more time and energy toward pursuing non-material aspirations while providing for material needs as simply, directly, and efficiently as possible. It measures personal and social progress by increases in the qualitative richness of daily living, the cultivation of relationships, and the development of personal and spiritual potentials. Simple living does not denigrate the material aspects of life but rather, by attending to quality, it values material things more highly than a society that merely consumes them... Simplicity is about knowing how much consumption is enough.

(Burch quoted in Alexander 20..: 356)

These principles do not translate into a fixed set of rules or codes of conduct. There is no central authority figure among downshifters and the definition of what one should do as a downshifter is decided through personal reflection and dependent on ones capabilities, values and context (Alexander 2011). They strive for quality of life with minimal consumption, i.e. to have a ‘high joy-to-stuff ratio’.

To be frugal means to have a high joy-to-stuff ration. If you can get one unit of joy for each material possession, that's frugal. But if you need ten possessions to even begin registering on the joy meter, you're missing the point of being alive.

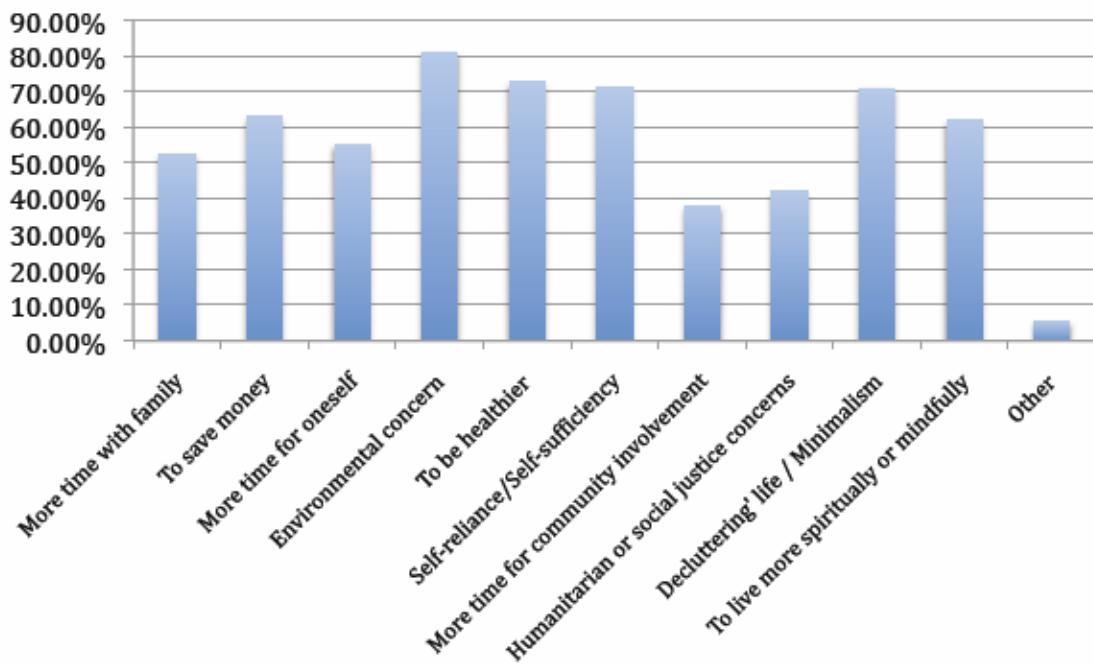
(Dominguez and Robin quoted in de Geus 2003: 177)

In an international survey among 2200 simplifiers, 87% of the respondents indicated to live a happier life since they started living simply (Alexander 2011: 10) and even downshifters that were forced to do so because of financial problems seem to experience a certain improvement (Schreurs 2010).

Demographic data on simplifiers shows representation across all age and income groups. In the Netherlands, downshifters have relatively high levels of education, and most are between the age of twenty and forty (Schreurs 2010: 54). Downshifters have ties and overlaps with various social groups such as local food eaters (Starr 2010; Alexander 2011), anarchists and vegans (Portwoord-Stacer 2012), the European post modernists and the American cultural creatives (Schreurs 2010), New Age/spiritually oriented people (Vonk 2011), altermondialists, permacultors⁵, and Transition Town members (De Bouvier 2010).

3.3 Motivation and actions

What motivates people to become a simplifier? The same survey among 2200 downshifters produces an overview of the various possible motivations for voluntary downshifters.



⁵ People who practice Permaculture, a form of organic agriculture and system design that places humans within the ecosystem and steers towards local resilience and self-sufficiency (Mollison 1988).

Figure 2. Percentage of survey participants listing specific motivations for living simply. Adopted directly from Alexander & Ussher 2011: 9.

Environmental and social responsibility

Foremost (more than 80%) simplifiers are concerned about the environment. They perceive the risks associated with consumer culture and choose to live a life with a small ecological footprint (Cherrier 2008), acting according to the Ghandian principle: be the change that you want to see in the world (de Bouvier 2010; Schreurs 2010). Being thoughtful and frugal about spending money is a core element of simplifying. The underlying idea is that one should only consume what is really needed, and produce no waste, so that minimal resources are needed to provide for one's necessary possessions (Aarts et al. 1995). Downshifters cut down in expenditures on basically all domains. They change to jobs that fit their values and/or allow them to work less hours, move to a different house allowing for more energy efficiency or with more suitable conditions for gardening for instance, and they change or sell their car. In the same survey, eighty-three percent grows its own food, of which seventeen percent of participants get more than half of what they eat from their own garden. Furthermore, downshifters strive for autonomy, one does not have to live in poverty, but rather to discover the 'freedom' and 'contentment' arising from knowing how much is 'truly enough' (Alexander 2011: 7). Endeavoring frugality and self-reliance appear arduous, but downshifters generally report to experience it as a sport, a challenge that allows them to experiment, be creative and discover new talents (Schreurs 2010). If clean technology can help in reducing ones consumption it is often used.

Re-enchanting consumption and the creation of a commonwealth of goods

To know what is 'truly enough' and to get out of the rat race of work and spend is held to be 'good for the soul'. Downshifters connect overconsumption to emotional solitude and 'living in an empty world', which they regard to be addictive and detrimental to personal autonomy and life-fulfillment. 'Voluntary simplifiers modify their consumption lifestyle to bring significance to an inauthentic, disenchanted consumer society' (Cherrier & Murray 2002: 246). Consumption itself becomes meaningful when it is directed towards justice, equality and participation (Cherrier 2008: 186). People become 'creative consumers', in the sense that through their consumption they contribute to the realization of their values. The time liberated through downshifting is spent in family life or community and the responsibilities of neighborly and civic duties are more often picked up (Alexander 2011: 11). In the shifting of the personal relation to material possessions, disposal and sharing can contribute to a sense of connection to others. The focus from needing to accumulate stuff to needing things for actual, or more personally defined purposes, allows for a cyclic 'flow' of materials. In Cherrier's study, thirty six percent of participants were involved in barter or 'informal' exchange systems, e.g. Food swaps and LETS, and sixty-seven percent were involved in a community organization (Cherrier 2009: 336).

3.4 The process of 'becoming a downshifter'

Two studies on downshifting indicate that the process of becoming a downshifter follows recognizable patterns for some people. Studying twelve downshifters Cherrier and Murray (2007) identify four phases: sensitization, separation, socialization and striving. Schreurs (2010) identifies seven similar phases in a group of sixteen downshifters: prelude, facing reality, coming out, restyling, repositioning, redefining and postlude. Both studies identify an initial phase in which respondents were still living according to the 'normal' lifestyle. In Cherrier and Murray's study, people reflect on the period before sensitization as pre-reflective and non-critical, in which 'the pre-established framework on how to live

life provides a regime of truth and serves as a form of "protective cocoon" that provides security' (Cherrier Murray 2007: 14). Then sensitization is triggered by some kind of event, by which the regularity of everyday routines is interrupted and people are made to reflect on their situations and choices. The shocking event causes their vision of the world to fall outside the category of familiarity, and 'the story of the self' is no longer congruent with the dominant discourse. In Schreurs study, the event is often triggered by a personal financial crisis, and the realization that one cannot go on living the same lifestyle. The following phase, separation/restyling, is characterized by emotional and physical distancing from that which reminds of the usual social imperatives. In this form of isolation connections with family and/or friends can be put on hold and all taken for granted truths reconsidered. This breach with normality is reflected in other studies. In choosing the 'moral person that they want to be' downshifters generally experience to be an outsider, to be swimming against the current (Sandlin & Walther 2009: 305) and downshifting becomes a form of emancipation, following new formulated values rather than those imposed by others/consumer-culture (Cherrier 2009: 331). This emancipation is experienced as a painful process, incomprehension and criticism from the social environment is rated as the most significant negative experience in becoming a downshifter (Schreurs 2010: 110). After separation comes a socialization/repositioning phase, during which respondents describe to acquire new social relations that provided 'approval and support for (re)-defining an identity and a consumption lifestyle' (ibid.: 20) more congruent with the personal life story. These new relations are often with locals who are 'visionary, energetic, unconventional, or exemplary' (ibid.) and provide examples of alternative, low-consumption lifestyles. Cherrier and Murray's last phase, striving, is an ever continuing process of dispossession and identity negotiation. What to have and how much to buy is always undetermined and dependent on personal commitment and capacity, and downshifters generally remain reflecting on their performance as a downshifter. Most feel they could be doing better. What 'hinders' downshifters from downshifting mostly is other important aspects of their identities. In the striving phase, the downshifting desire has to be balanced against being a friend, a parent, an employee.

The management of the boundaries between myriads of identity roles (mother, wife, lawyer, sister homemaker) and the range and flexibility of practices available, can help explain consumer's inclination for anti-consumption practices over green consumption. We saw that whereas a range of identity conflicts occurred (mother versus wife, friend versus environmentalist), limitations were typically placed on green products when they either challenged core mothering values or modified the home or body. Hence, we identify that one of the main contributing factors to consumers not purchasing green products is that core elements of the self may clash with the purchase or use of green products.

(Black & Cherrier 2010: 450)

The struggle between anti-consumption and green products in this quote refers to the fact that downshifters often strive to buy only things that are environmentally friendly. When they are hindered in doing this because it clashes with other important aspects of their identity, and the labeled version of a product is simply too expensive, the emphasis shifts to buy as less as possible, rather than everything organic. To try to buy as little as possible is easier in this sense because 'as little as possible' can be personally defined and is dependent on external circumstances. Buying everything organic as a principle thus appears to be more demanding in certain situations. The main point I want to emphasize however is the imminent tension between a person's different desires and aspirations.

The need for social acceptance by close relatives and friends makes lowering carbon emission particularly challenging. At times, the pressure is bearable and our informants...persevere with

lowering their carbon emission even if it means struggles and ‘insults’. At other times, the social pressure is so intense that lowering carbon emission becomes impossible.

(Cherrier et al. 2012: 407)

As example, an often cited challenge for downshifters is how to deal with the principle of not flying. The need to visit family or to attend conferences overseas often conflicts with downshifting aspirations. This puts the story of the double dividend in downshifting in perspective. Not buying particular things can be very hard, emotionally or financially (Cherrier and Murray 2007).

3.6 Conclusion

People become downshifters for both altruistic and egoistic reasons, but it is generally related to ‘the kind of person’ they want to be. It has become apparent that people who identify themselves as downshifters experience their behavior as truly deviant from normality. They don’t just consume a little more consciously compared to the average consumer, but alter their way of living altogether. The following chapter will explore how the viability of downshifting initiatives should be assessed.

Chapter 4: Opportunities and barriers for downshifting initiatives

4.1 Introduction

Over the last centuries we have seen the rise and fall of numerous events which were initiated as social movements, i.e. ‘collective attempts to further a common interest or secure a common goal, through collective action outside the sphere of established institutions’ (Giddens as quoted in Hourigan 2004: 6). Among these were civil wars in the US leading to independence, revolutions in Russia in the early twentieth century, the ending of the iron curtain in 1989, the rise of feminism, civil-rights movements, labor unions, environmental movements, and very recently the Arab spring. As this research looks at initiatives promoting voluntary simplicity in the Netherlands as social movement organizations (SMOs), this chapter will look at the conditions under which social movements organizations can become successful. In particular it will focus on the conditions beneficial for organizations that promote consumption reduction. For this purpose this chapter will start by addressing theory on persuasiveness of messages and environmental consumption behavior. This will be followed by an analysis of social movement development in which I look for the necessary conditions for and barriers to downshifting initiatives success.

4.2 Persuasion for behavior change

Numerous studies have focused on what makes people incorporate different values in their considerations and change their consumption behavior accordingly. I will start from general theory on persuasiveness of sustainable consumption promotion, and afterwards move to consumption *reduction* specifically.

Information alone is insufficient

In consumer studies the rational choice model – the idea that consumption choices are based on the rational process in which personal preferences are balanced against and principles - has been dominating research (Jackson 2005). Increasingly it has become apparent that, as displayed in Chapter 2 and 3, consumption choices are to a large extent embedded in identity and social relations, related to emotions, and generated by routines. ‘People with strong habits possess motivational and informational biases that reduce the likelihood that they will receive and evaluate favorably new, counterhabitual information’ (Verplanken & Wood 2006: 92). Thus information is only likely to be successful when habits are not strongly fixed, for instance when people are young (Verplanken & Wood: 2006: 96). Strong habits are most likely to be changed when information is provided at critical moments when the ‘performance environment’ is changed, the social or physical context in which habitual behavior takes place (*Ibid.*).

Appealing information

Another thing that downshifting promoters can do is to use the fact that consumption is related to identity and emotions, and make their messages ‘appealing’. A significant shortcoming of the early environmental movement and specifically the ‘dark greens’ has been the moralizing tone in their messages. The shock therapy sometimes applied by Greenpeace does reach people that are attracted by a ‘hero identity’ (Cherrier 2008: 189). For many however, moralizing messages tend to trigger feelings of guilt and aversion, impeding the development of new positive behavior (Ropke 2009: 2496).

Messages can be made appealing in two ways: either the suggested behavior connects directly to something the recipient already cares about, in which case he or she is likely to give attention to the message, or it *associates* the required behavior with something desired. This last strategy is used in advertisement, e.g. where acquiring a good is associated with model figures. It helps when the information is based on a credible source and provides a single, emotionally appealing, urgent, relevant and very positive message (Jackson 2005: 109). As we have seen in Chapter 3, practices of downshifting are balanced between individual needs and environmental concerns. Hence, the challenge would be to create a ‘win-win’ situation in which these are equated through relating downshifting to ‘self-interested notions such as independence, beauty, quality or value for money’ (Black & Cherrier 2010: 437). The adoption of a sustainable lifestyle is a way of telling others who you are, hence promotion efforts should ‘concentrate on highlighting how sustainable practices and values can allow expression of existing identities’ (Black & Cherrier 2010: 450). In addition, it would be advisable to focus on the economic, convenience and functional benefits of certain consumption choices rather than charity arguments, and enhance desirability through highlighting taste, quality, durability, value and expected positive emotions to be experienced in the process (Black & Cherrier 2010: 450).

Empowering information

Another important aspect to consider is the desire of people to be in control of their lives. People ‘hate being disoriented or confused...hate feeling incompetent or helpless...[and] prefer acquiring information at their own pace and answering their own questions’ (Jackson 2005: 112) People are more likely to consume sustainably if they have the sense that their choices matter. People wish to know how personal consumption choices influence the environment and what exactly leads to more sustainability (Tanner & Kast 2003; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). Again, threatening stories of the decay of the global environment are much less empowering than specific ‘empowering’ information. Imposing information on already crowded lives reinforces incompetence, disorientation and confusion (Jackson 2005: 113). Instead, what is needed for behavior change is a supportive space for people to acquire knowledge at their own rate, to be allowed to experiment with possible solutions, and to provide them with practical knowledge on how to downshift and why it matters. This so called ‘participatory problem solving’ approach, ‘rather than telling people what they must do or do without, provides people with an opportunity to figure out for themselves how various broadly defined goals can be met.’ Helping people understand the issues and inviting them to explore possible solutions (*ibid*). Before habits can be changed, they need to be questioned: ‘pro-environmental behavioural change needs to occur by raising specific behaviours from the level of ‘practical consciousness’ to ‘discursive consciousness’ (Jackson 2005: 116). Counter-intuitively, habits are more likely to be questioned in a supportive, explorative space because threatened people are more likely to cling to their habits (Jackson 2005). It also helps if the environment is somehow articulated in a manner to which people can personally relate (Kong et al. 2002: 121).

Social learning

However, more substantial and direct ways of practicing new behavior are mediated through individual experiences with trial and error, observing what others do, and observing how others respond to one’s own behavior (Jackson 2005: 109). People learn from observing those around them, their parents, peers and role-models. As discussed, behavior is modeled on the behavior of significant others (Jackson 2005: 110) and it is in practice that we actually experience positive or negative reinforcements for our behavior. These rewards and penalties are crucial for the development of expectations, which in turn shape habits. This indicates that people are most effectively motivated to downshift when they have

frequent contact with other downshifters, and when new behavior is positively reinforced (Jackson 2005: 108). According to Gladwell (2001), social trends can reach ‘tipping points’ when only fifteen to twenty percent of a certain population exhibits a certain behavior.

4.3 Social movement dynamics

Internal factors

This section presents what theorists have proposed as the main properties that social initiatives require in order to grow and be successful. The factors are divided into: framing, leadership and resource management, tactics and dynamics, and networking.

Framing and group identity

Especially New Social Movement theories concentrate on the meaning of ideology and identity for social movements. Framing is ‘the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action’ (McAdam et al. 1996: 6). It is closely tied with the development of a group identity, the existence of which has proven a crucial element for movement expansion. Collective identity is ‘an individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution’ (Sandlin & Walther 2009: 301). Without a group, individuals are more likely to explain their strains as the result of personal deficiencies. Group connectivity rather than social isolation fosters the critical system perspective that can lead to collective mobilization (McAdam et al. 1996: 9). ‘The degree to which tactics coalesce into coordinated activist strategy depends largely on the effectiveness of cultural discourses in articulating individualized acts of resistance to larger political goals’ (Portwoord-Stacer 2012: 88). The framing process has to enable the initiative through a critical reflection process to construct a story of reality that allows the formation of a group identity and a persuasive message about what this group stands for.

Mobilization, tactics and dynamics

We now turn to the leadership and resource management requirements of initiatives that are required for successful development. The group needs not only a convincing story, it has to be articulated and applied by able individuals. Resource mobilization (RM) theorists argue that social movements grow with the availability and efficient use of resources (Kriesi 1996). Money and membership are the most important resources, but personal traits such as leadership and knowledge, and also group traits like organizational capacity and social coherence are important. Foremost, they have to be able to exert influence on existing structures and authorities. When the individual or a group changes its own social position through altering individual behavior this is called *social mobility*. According to Gregory one can only speak of *social change* if something is changed in how society in turns shapes individual behavior. In other words, social change occurs if the structures and/conventions that shape socializing processes are changed (Gregory 2000: 490). If individual effort does not lead to change nor to mobility efforts can only lead to defeat and resignation.

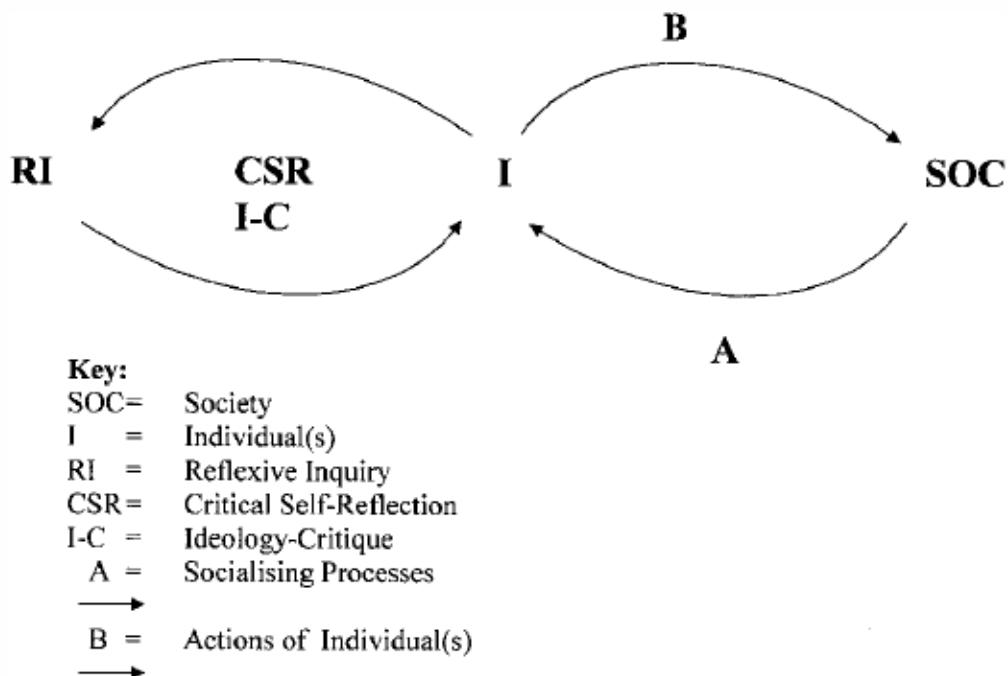


Figure 3. Self-society dynamics, adapted from Gregory (2002: 492)

While social movements often develop within social networks or established institution, at some point they have to create a formal social movement organization (SMO) in order to mobilize required resources (McAdam et al. 1996: 13). The movement structure means ‘the organizational bases and mechanisms serving to collect and use the movement’s resources’ and mobilization is ‘the process of creating movement structures and preparing and carrying out protest actions which are visible movement “products” addressed to actors and publics outside the movement’ (Rucht, in McAdam et al. ed. 1996: 186). Among a social movement, different types of organizations can be distinguishing from the main SMO’s: supportive organizations (media, church etc.) movement associations (groups catering to the needs of movements members, simplicity circles), and parties and interest groups (more elite groups that do not rely on the mobilization of their constituents). Supportive organizations, can accidentally contribute to the movement, and sympathize with it, but they are not part of it and help is indirect. Movement associations contribute to mobilization of the constituency, creating consensus and commitment, but they don’t contribute to action mobilization or activation of commitment. Parties and interest groups can pursue the same political goals, but they don’t need the mobilization of a constituency, they have their own resources and are specialized in pursuing specific interests.

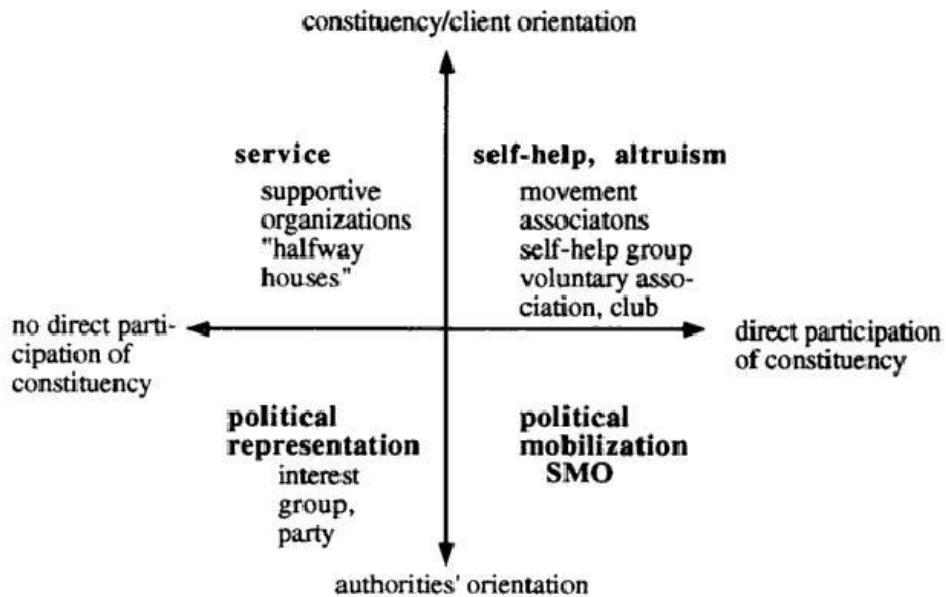


Figure 4. Typology of movement-related organizations (Kriesi in McAdam et al. ed.1996: 153)

The organizational structure and action repertoire in turn often depends on the type of movement. Instrumental movements (promoting a collective good: sustainability, peace, solidarity) are more inclusive and have thus greater potential to find resources and tend to institutionalize. Subcultural organizations (presenting minorities), are more likely to have intense commitment, which leads to more stability, but they tend to commercialize or involute. Finally Counterculturals (like urban autonomous or anarchists) tend to radicalize.

Effective mobilization requires the articulation of expectations and visions, which are needed to provide direction to the different processes, to attract attention, and to legitimate ongoing development. These expectations have to be specific, robust, shared by other actors, and the content of the expectations must be supported by ongoing activities (*Schot & Geels 2008: 540p*). Diversity in protest is important, as ‘each new form of collective action finds authorities unprepared’ (Tarrow in McAdam et al. 1996: 58). Protest is ‘the collective use of unconventional methods of political participation to try to persuade or coerce authorities to support a challenging groups aim’ (Taylor & van Dyke 2007: 263).

Networking

Another condition for social initiatives to grow is the capacity to network. Initiatives are usually strengthened by connecting to other groups and to develop an inter-organizational network. Networks can provide knowledge and skills exchange, enhance visibility, and give aggregate power (Hourigan 2004). Schot and Geels argue that networking allows the creation of a constituency behind the initiative and facilitates interactions among relevant stakeholders. Family life and social networks are the main structures upon which dissent is built. Informal structures of everyday life such as ‘communities of memory’ (people who have shared the same events), subcultures of dissent, and protest infrastructures can foster mobilization (McCarthy 1996: 142). These networks can exist within all kinds of organizations, e.g. sports clubs, neighborhood centers, bars etc., and can help in building movements (*ibid.* 143). A Social Movement Community (SMC), consisting of people in a social movement with certain cohesion is parallel to an SMO. It has the same goals but is a more informal network with fluid

boundaries, it contributes to movement cohesion and commitment, but not to mobilization. Social networks are more likely to become influential when networks are broad and allow the voicing of different types of stakeholders, thus broadening perspectives.

Before we turn to the external factors that influence initiative viability, the reader should know that in assessing the initiatives using the internal factors, what has been learned in the section Persuasion for behavior change' will be incorporated in the factors resulting from the section Social movement dynamics. In other words, I think that the framing process would be more likely to legitimize collective action if it incorporates positive and urgent messages about downshifting. Concerning the mobilization strategy of initiatives, it would help if they create supportive spaces in which people can practice with new behavior, etc.

External factors

We now turn to external factors that influence the development of social initiatives.

Social barriers and opportunities

For the development of a social movement, the importance of the 'attitudes, behavior and values of people who could potentially join' cannot be overestimated (Rucht 1996: 190). As we have seen, consumption has become so very intertwined with people's social status, daily lives, relations, values and quests for identity, that this will pose a significant challenge for downshifting promoters.

According Classical Social Movement theorists social movements are mainly the result of a process where societal dissatisfaction increases to critical levels. Structural strain produces a public psychological state of dissatisfaction, and 'when this psychological state reaches an aggregate threshold, it produces a social movement' (Hourigan 2004: 6). In the Eastern European revolutions against the Soviet Union, the ailing economy was a main driver of grievances, and daily irritations and worries about basic necessities of life increased dissent with the state (Rucht 1996: 105). Although social movement studies focused first on the rise of communism and fascism as 'irrational forms of mass hysteria', feminism, civil rights and labor movement have led to the perspective that social movements are important and legitimate forms of collective action. Thus the social barriers and opportunities for downshifting organizations are formed by the social desirability or undesirability of downshifting and the level of satisfaction that arises from normal consumption practices.

Structural barriers and opportunities

According to Alexander most developed countries are set up structurally to oppose voluntary simplicity, and changing these structural factors is necessary condition for consumers to decrease the volume and impact of their consumption (Alexander 2012: 1). Structural barriers are those social structures that hinder people's attempts to downshift and foster high consumption (Schreurs 2010; Alexander & Ussher 2011; Alexander 2012). For instance, the high distances combined with a lack of public transportation in American suburbs, forces people to own more cars. A survey among downshifters demonstrates that: unsuitable transport; unsuitable employment (the ability to work part-time); insufficient product information; exposure to consumer temptations (advertisement); suitable social activities (which I have treated separately above); and suitable housing are the main opposing structural barriers to downshifting (Alexander & Ussher 2011).

Political barriers and opportunities

Political opportunities are important for the development of social initiatives. In general whether the

political context allows for the development of a social initiative depends on how much it favors the initiative, and its capability to stimulate or repress the initiative. Favor of the initiative depends on the respective political agenda of the current government, and the capability to repress it on these four factors:

1. The relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system, i.e. the ability for new parties to participate in politics.
2. The stability of that broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity.
3. The presence of elite allies.
4. The state's capacity and propensity for repression.

(Adopted from McAdam et al. 1996: 27)

On an institutional level developments that contribute to system vulnerability are (long term) ineffectiveness and illegitimacy, and the combination of both is fatal (Oberschall 1996: 98).

Short-term volatile aspects of governance can be: a divided elite, a failed reform, the erosion of authority of the regime over its state bureaucracy. The dominant political system in turn is vulnerable to international developments such as climate change, globalization, or an ageing population (Rotmans 2011: 93). SMOs can also *create* political opportunities. For instance, when claims are made on elites by bold citizens paralleling the grievances of the less daring mass, the ‘opponent’s weaknesses’ can be uncovered, thus creating mass mobilization (Tarrow in McAdam et al. 1996: 58). The effects of political opportunities can be diverse. Governments can provide supportive financial conditions, regulations, publicity, political willingness, stimulate public support, etc. Because downshifting proponents are calculating on political opportunities this research will look at the current Dutch political support for downshifting, and discuss what changes might occur in the future considering looming environmental problems, keeping in mind however that any prediction is arbitrary.

4.4 Conclusion

We have considered the various dynamics that social initiatives usually follow when they become successful and contribute to some form of social change. Obviously, the causes and consequences of social change are almost impossible to deduct in real life, but generalizing we can see that social initiatives follow certain patterns. This chapter discussed possible strategies in persuading people to engage in new consumption behavior; what internal dynamics an initiative has to follow in order to grow and be influential; and finally how external opportunities and barriers contribute to the progress of social initiatives. In summary, initiatives can promote downshifting through creating positive messages that coalesce somehow with individual aspirations and enable people to live with less means. If initiatives wish to address the dominant system that supports overconsumption they have to create a message that demonstrates the illegitimacy of the current system and the desirability of downshifting, mobilize a constituency and find a form of political action that utilizes the weaknesses of the current system and generates willingness for something new. This includes ‘de-normalizing needs for consumption beyond necessities and to normalize practices of conservation, sharing, reusing, recycling, slowing down, treasuring, and downshifting consumption’ (Cherrier et al. 2012: 414).

Chapter 5: Data gathering: Downshifting initiatives in the Netherlands

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will present which initiatives in the Netherlands are promoting downshifting. The first section provides a chronological overview of all the initiatives that have been found promoting downshifting, directly or indirectly. This will be followed by in-depth case-studies of nine of these initiatives. For each case I will be looking at the various factors that according to the literature review in Chapter 4 contribute to the viability of these initiatives. The final section will look at the social, structural and political barriers and opportunities in the Netherlands that influence the viability of downshifting.

5.2 Mapping the initiatives

Name	Kind	Purpose	Type ⁶	Start
Case-studies				
Omslag	Platform/magazine	Provides information, workshops, discussions, etc on sustainable lifestyles	Service organization	1994
Genoeg	Magazine	Promotes downshifting	Service organization	1996
Echte Welvaart	Platform	Promoted alternative interpretation of prosperity	SMO/Interest group	2000
Vereniging Aardehuis	Eco-village	Building 23 Earthships ⁷	Self-help group	2006
Consuminderhuis Ons Genoeg	Centre	Supports vulnerable citizens to downshift	Service organization	2006
Transition Towns	Platform	Promotes local networks to build local resilience and self-sufficiency	Service organization	2008
Slow Food	Platform	Promotes conscious, sustainable, fair, and local food production/consumption	Self-help group/Service organization	2008
Repair Cafe	Cafe	Organizes regular days where materials can be repaired for free	Service organization	2009
No Impact Week	Event	Encourages and coaches people to have no environmental impact for a week.	Service organization	2010
Giving is all we have	Promotion organization	Promotes a ‘giving economy’	Service organization	2011
Buy Nothing New month	Event	Encourages and coaches people to not buy anything new for a month	Service organization	2012

⁶ Typology according to Kriesi (1996), see figure 4.

⁷ See section 5.3 Transition Towns for further explanation of the concept Earthship.

Non case-studies				
Eco-villages (30 established, 15 developing)	Communities	Facilitate self-sufficiency	Self-help group	Unknown
Permaculture	Schools and gardens	Promotes the creation of self-sufficient (eco) systems	Service organization	Unknown
Social Trade Organization (STRO)	NGO	Promoting alternative money systems and small scale economy	Interest group	1970
De Wonne	Church community	supporting vulnerable citizens, promoting downshifting.	Service organization	1979
Fransiscan Environmental Project Stoutenburg	Church community	Focused on a spiritual and sustainable lifestyle	Self-help group	1991
Local Exchange Trading System (about 90)	System	Facilitates local currencies	Service organization/Self-help group	1995
Werkgroep Voetafdruk Nederland (Workgroup footprint the Netherlands)	Promotion organization	Promotes the Ecological Footprint as a tool	Interest group	1998
Marktplaats.nl; Gratisophalen.nl; Ruilen.nl; Spullendelen.nl	websites	Allowing a cycle of possessions through selling, sharing, trading or giving	Service organization	1999
Weggeefwinkels (Give away shops) (around 30)	Shop	Collects and gives free second hand articles	Service organization	1999
Dress for success	Shops	Collects and provides second hand clothing for job interviews to unemployed	Service organization	2001
Bookcrossing.nl	Website	Facilitates exchange of books	Service organization	2002
Tijd voor elkaar (Time for each other); Zorg voor elkaar (Care for each other); Caire	Timebanks	Facilitating exchange of volunteer work, some for free, others in exchange for credits.	Service organization	2006
Swoeng	Cultural organization	Organizes 'living unplugged together'	Service organization	2006
Platform Duurzame en Solidaire Economie (Platform Sustainable and Solidary Economy)	Promotion organization	Promotes alternative economic system	Interest group	2007
Economy Transformers	Network organization	Promotes alternative economic system	Interest group	2009
Occupy	Occupation of financial cities	Protest against corrupt financial sector and social inequality	SMO	2011
Overdatum Eetclub (Expired food dinnerclub)	Cultural organization	Organizes regular dinner events cooked with expired food	Self-help group	2011
Via Pauline	Website	Collects and advertises non-material gifts	Service organization	2011
Snappcar, Toogether,	Platforms	Facilitate sharing with and	Service organization	2011

MyWeels, Autodelen.nl		lending cars to strangers		
GEEF Economie (Give economy)	Promotion organization	Promotes a ‘giving economy’	Service organization	2011
Zero Plastic Week	Event	Promotes annual week of no-plastic consumption	Service organization	2012
De Budgetkring (the budgetcircle)	Coaching agency	A yearlong training in which participants are taught to downshift.	Service organization	2012
Peerby	Online software	Providing an alternative to ‘disposal culture’ through bringing people in contact with each other and helping them share.	Service organization	2012
Sloworganizing	Coaching agency	Provides different trajectories in which participants are coached to declutter their lives.	Service organization	2012
GEEF Café (Giving Café)	Café	A café/restaurant with no prices, only donations are asked.	Service organization	2012

Table 1. Downshifting initiatives in the Netherlands

21 service organizations, 2 social movement organizations, 5 interest group, and 6 self-help groups

As the table demonstrates, downshifting is promoted through various ways by many initiatives. Most of the organizations are connected to each other. The Transition Town movement for instance has been started by permaculturists in England, and brought to the Netherlands by Omslag. These transition initiatives are in turn promoting downshifting, local farming, local networks, and local currencies. One very practical outcome is the arising of Repair Café’s where people meet to socialize and fix each other’s broken materials. The interconnection between the organizations is also reflected in the people, as there are some key figures that are connected to multiple of them. Paul Hendriksen for instance has been an important member of the national TT organization, TT Deventer and TT Olst. Jan Juffermans is connected to various initiatives such as TT Boxtel, the Ecological Footprint and Platform Sustainable and Solidary Economy. Rachelle Eerhart organizes No Impact Week and is member of permaculture center Eetbaar Park in The Hague. Apart from these initiatives, numerous blogs can also be found on the Internet of individual people starting to downshift and sharing their experiences publicly, self-help books in living with less are increasingly for sale also in the Netherlands, and people are meeting in simplicity circles to support each-other making a transition to a life with less means.

5.3 Case-studies

Each initiative’s assessment will include a table in which an overview is provided of how well it harnesses the internal factors that lead to increased viability, as resulting from my theoretical framework. In the main research question of this thesis ‘viability’ is interpreted as both the capacity of the initiative to achieve its own goals, as well as its capacity to contribute to reduced consumption. I have made this distinction because the purposes of the initiatives are not always directly to have a

societal impact. Omslag for instance wants only to spread information to and foster exchange among people who are already interested in downshifting. No Impact Week on the other hand explicitly tries to reach people who are unfamiliar with it.

Concerning the assessments of the initiatives, the reader should be aware that I have in no way empirically measured the effects of the initiatives activities. Rather, exploring what it is the initiatives are doing and analyzing this using the theoretical framework, in combination with what the initiative's leaders think is the effect of what they are doing, I assess their potential impact.

In the tables I use these symbols to indicate to what extent the factors contribute to initiative viability.

++	= highly	+/-	= neutral
+	= substantially	-	= hardly

Omslag: Workplace for sustainable development

Introduction

As Omslag (turning point) started in 1994, it is the oldest initiative studied in depth. The main purpose of Omslag is to support grass-roots initiatives that make the Netherlands “nicer, prettier and sustainable” (D. Verheul, personal communication, May 25th 2012). It is a workplace for themes such as the environment, peace, work, culture, economy and solidarity (Omslag 2012) and as such it hosts various social movements such as the peace movement, campaigns against job-applications obligations, and the environmental movement.

Framing and group identity

Omslag functions as a typical service organization. There are only a few members and the main goal is to provide services to a broad constituency in the Netherlands. Its focus is on facilitating people who are already idealists with the necessary practical knowledge and connections in order to successfully carry out their projects. According to Verheul there were two main occasions in the early nineties that brought together the people of Omslag: the Rio Conference in 1992; and a sense of increased individualization. Together these factors made the people want to organize themselves to see what they could contribute to sustainability and to more connection, by enhancing the visibility of people that share these desires. Sustainability is interpreted as having to do with people’s daily choices, and the current ‘western mindset’ is regarded as the problem and in need of a radical transformation (Omslag 2012). But since the main purpose is not to convince people of the urgency of their cause, but to support those who are already taking action, the initiative does not have a substantial persuasive story.

Resources, tactics and dynamics

The main strategy is to target ideals and connect the various initiatives that are arising. Omslag works with what arises in the actuality. After 9/11 for instance they were one of the organizations initiating and coordinating a peace movement. And when the Transition movement was getting bigger in the UK, they were among those who first brought the idea to the Netherlands and to host the first Dutch Transition initiative group. There is also a range of regular activities however. Foremost, the initiative publishes the *ZOZ tijdschrift voor doen-denkers* (magazine for do-thinkers), a bi-monthly magazine with: reviews of all kinds of books within their broad field of interest, practical tips, news and an action agenda. Omslag hosts its own library and bookshop with these categories: Philosophy, economy, alter-globalism, alternative economies, solidarity, feminism, world food distribution, peace, energy, environment, voluntary simplicity, communal living, low-impact housing, work and income, vegetarian cooking, collective action. It also functions as the national information service for people who are looking for alternative ways of living Landelijk Servicepunt Anders Leven Anders Wonen. There are also several newsletters, discussions, workshops, etc.

The effects of these initiatives are sometimes not directly tangible. Generally Omslag gives enhanced visibility to small projects in the Netherlands, which gives a sense of shared identity and motivates and encourages constituents to continue or get started themselves. The rise of Transition Towns was a major outcome, and the concept of Wereldmaaltijd⁸ (Worldmeal) was also kickstarted by Omslag to becoming a widely used tool to show people how to eat responsibly. The organization has a steady number of five official members, and around ten volunteers. The number of subscribers to the magazine has been

⁸ A three course meal, with quantities matching what people could eat if food would be equally distributed across the world, and within measures of environmental carrying capacity (Omslag website).

rising steadily to around 1550, and stabilized a few years ago. The initiative manages to get enough sponsors to do its work, but only enough to pay two members. Their accommodation is part of a monastery that houses different social organizations, for which they pay rent. Sometimes donations are asked for bigger projects, for instance a number of solar panels were financed as a gift from the constituents to the organization. The information provided by Omslag does not seem moralizing or pushing, because it targets people who are already committed to engage in direct action.

Interorganizational networks

The organization identifies itself as a network organization for grass-roots initiatives and a large percentage of their time is committed on simply spreading information between various different organizations. It has exchange-subscription with many other magazines like Genoeg, Onkruid, etc. Omslag is not connected to any government or political party. It applied for and received some funding in the past, but decided not to engage in this anymore because it limited the organizations freedom to work with and adapt to actuality.

Conclusion

As visible in the following table, I think the organization is very efficient in achieving its own goals. I encountered the ZOZ magazine in many other places with similar interests. It has the ability to contact and mobilize a constituency and has supported and sometimes kick-started other initiatives, such as Transition Towns. Omslag has less potential to have a societal impact; it is designed to remain at the grassroots level and has a small budget and select public accordingly.

Type of initiative	Service organization		Own goals	Societal impact
Framing and group identity	Purpose	To support grassroots initiatives	.	+/-
	Identity	Platform	+	+/-
	Coherent critical reflection	Yes. Many discussion evening on collective action	+	+
	Group identity	To some extent, the organization itself is very small, but it contributes to visibility of grassroots projects in the Netherlands	+	+/-
	Story persuasive	Does not try to persuade, its public is the people who are already motivated.	+	-
Mobilization , tactics and dynamics	Strategy	Information provision, connecting people.	+	+/-
	Activities	Hosting discussions, publishing a magazine and several newsletters.	+	+/-
	Effects	Enhanced visibility, better informed and organized initiatives	.	+
	Growth	Started in 1994, has grown steadily and stabilized at 1500-1600 subscribers.	+	+/-
	Who participates	Five board members and about twenty volunteers, mostly dark-greens, female, above forty.	+	-
	Resources	Funded and supported by its constituency	+	+/-
	Supportive practice space	Yes	+	+
	Empowering knowledge	Yes	+	+
Networking	Network relations	Linked to many other grassroots organizations	+	+/-

Table 2. assessing Omslag.

Genoeg

Introduction

Genoeg (enough) is a magazine promoting a frugal lifestyle through providing information to its subscribers. The subheadings of the magazine depict messages such as: ‘less is more’, ‘simple enjoyment’ and ‘non-glossy lifestyle magazine’. The main purpose of Genoeg is to inform and inspire people who want to downshift, ‘to be of support to those who are looking for new ways’ (H. vd Sanden, personal communication, June 4th 2012).

Framing and group identity

In the words of van der Sanden, Genoeg is trying to make a small breach in the usual societal ‘mode of work and spend’, while mainly supporting those individuals who are trying to live frugal lifestyles. With regards to coherent critical reflection on both societal structures and individual roles the magazine provides a broad range of articles. Foremost, there are numerous ideas on the possibilities for individuals who choose to live an alternative and more environmentally responsible life. Yet it also discusses and criticizes the broader structures of society. It hosts interviews with scientists, economists, bankers, entrepreneurs, philosophers and well-known Dutch people to discuss the role of frugality on a larger societal scale. The main message is persuasive in the sense that it is based on credible sources. Expert and individual stories contribute to a broad and diverse support for the general message that a frugal life style is needed and can improve one’s quality of life. The message is also made tangible and appealing through personal anecdotes and esthetic pictures. The personal stories also contribute to a group identity to some extent, especially for those whose pride is injured because of the need to downshift. Reading the experience of other downshifters lets them know they are not alone. Readers indicate to be inspired and ‘uplifted’ by the experience of reading others people endeavors.

Tactics and dynamics

Genoeg is a professional journalist organization striving to provide independent information. It has a distinct environmentally and socially driven ideology, but it wants to avoid the former miser or ‘scrooge’ image and the old environmentalist fallacy of fingerpointing. Genoeg produces the magazine since 1997, and since more recent also hosts a website. The predecessor of Genoeg was the Vrekkenkrant (Scroogepaper) which had started in 1992. Currently, of each edition 10.000 copies are printed, of which 5100 go to subscribers and the rest is distributed differently. The organization estimates to reach 40.000 people in this way, because the magazine is often shared and passed on. The number of subscribers has declined in the last two years, but is growing again slowly. Most people who terminate their subscription indicate to do so for financial reasons.⁹ Genoeg has 1900 Twitter followers and 550 ‘likes’ on Facebook. Subscribers used to be dominantly above forty, but the group is becoming younger, with many in their thirties and some in their twenties. The website is more focused on actuality, with an agenda, book-reviews and news. The magazine hosts: numerous tips from readers on cooking, diapers, cleaning, holidays, freeware, repairing bikes, repairing light switches; a column on gardening from van Deurzen (Consuminderhuis Ons Genoeg); a rubric on household with one family each time displaying their monthly income and expenditures, and how they manage or do not manage to save money or to live frugally. Many articles discuss actuality like the introduction of plastic waste

⁹ When a letter was published in the magazine by a woman who stopped because of financial reasons, twenty subscribers reacted that they wanted to pay for her subscription. Ever since a fund has been created by subscribers for people who can no longer afford the magazine. In this way 150 people can get a free subscription for a year.

separation, or sustainable investment and the green new deal, microcredit, environmental problems, technological developments concerning solar power, the emergence of transition towns etc. Personal reflection is found in many interviews. For instance, a man who decided to start living in a Yurt¹⁰ describes his thoughts on personal belongings: "stuff that is not used is still forms a distraction. It's a shame if they cannot serve the purpose for which they are made" (Koopmans interview in Genoeg 2009 editie 74: 14). Or in an interview with a couple that moved to Spain: "In the end money does not determine our quality of life. We find it here in the outdoors, the sun and in slowing down" (de Grijter in Genoeg 2009 editie 74: 28).

The effects of the magazine are of course varying and hard to measure, but Genoeg receives substantial positive feedback. Some people report to have changed their lifestyles drastically thanks to the magazine. One popular section that raises frequent discussion is the budget book, where people share with each other how they budget their household spending. Another important effect is the 'uplifted' feeling people get from reading other peoples projects and experiences. In the face of the hegemonic 'never enough mentality' they consider themselves less as having a defect. "They seem to feel that they do not need to 'defend' their lifestyle so much anymore" (H. vd Sanden, personal communication, June 4th 2012).

The magazine is generating enough income, but it had to work hard and invest in amongst others professionalization. It has engaged in free publicity and guerilla marketing wherever it could, but the desire to be independent increases the difficulty to find sponsors; Genoeg does not want any earmarked donations. It has received an EU fund for journalism however. Advertisement for products is not in line with the magazine's ideology, although it does have some ads for sustainable products. This is experienced as a fundamental challenge in generating income.

Networks

Genoeg is mainly connected to other magazines, through exchanging advertisements and by collectively producing an alternative magazine portfolio. It is principally not affiliated with any political party in order to remain independent. It does have a connection with the municipality where the publisher is located, and is called if any events occur with which Genoeg could have affinity. Genoeg co-created the national Enough Day in May 2012.

Conclusion

The main strength of the magazine is its usefulness as an updated guide to downshifting. It also enhances the visibility of downshifters and creates a sense of connection. Its only challenge in achieving its own goals is the sometimes difficulty to find enough resources in terms of advertisements or subsidies. In reaching a larger public and mobilizing more people to downshift it sets a great example in providing positive messages *and* stimulating critical reflection on both individual responsibility and societal structures. On the other hand the urgency of the message is mostly apparent to those with financial problems or those who already wish to simplify their lives.

Type of initiative	Service organization		Own Goals	Societal Impact
Framing and group identity	Purpose	Provide inspiration and information to downshifters	.	+/-
	Identity	Independent magazine	+	+/-

¹⁰ Yurt: round shaped tent used by Mongolian nomads

	Coherent critical reflection	Yes	+	+
	Group identity	Yes	++	+
	Story persuasive	Yes	+	+
Mobilization, tactics and dynamics	Strategy	Appealing information provision	+	+/-
	Activities	Magazine and website	+	-
	Effects	Content readers, lifestyle change ranges from small to big	+	+/-
	Growth	Currently stable at 10.000 per edition, of which about half are subscribers.	+	+
	Participation	Mostly people between 30 – 40. Gender unknown	+	+/-
	Resources	Hard to find required resources but managing.	+/-	-
	Supportive practice space	Yes	+	+
	Empowering knowledge	Yes	++	+
Networking	Network relations	Mainly with other magazines	+	-

Table 3. Assessing Genoeg

Echte Welvaart (True Prosperity)

Introduction

Echte Welvaart was launched in 2001 as a combined effort of 20+ NGOs to instigate a new kind of mentality in the Netherlands. The platform first operated under the banner of Stichting Natuur en Milieu (Foundation Nature and environment) and had high ambitions and expectations. Around 2002-2003 the organization took on a lower profile, created its own foundation, but continued with the same purpose in mind, yet with more 'on the ground' strategies (personal communication, A. de Vries, August 22nd 2012).

Framing and strategy

Overall the main purpose of the initiative has been to make people (government agents, entrepreneurs and individuals reflect on their daily actions, to question what prosperity means for them, and to stimulate 'personal involvement in sustainability, corporate social responsibility, and quality of work and life' (Echte Welvaart 2012). When the organization started, these themes were still new and far more subversive than today. Echte Welvaart was a spinoff of Stichting Natuur en Milieu program Environment and Economy, and in the beginning more than twenty NGOs with different purposes 'hooked on' to form a combined effort to change structures on a higher level. There was a sense that finally the discussion and efforts represented what the different organizations 'were actually about'. The different issues addressed by the NGOs were perceived to originate from the same problem: the *lack of value orientation* in striving for prosperity. Among these NGOs were: Consumentenbond, the Alternatieve Konsumentenbond, Dierenbescherming, In Natura, IVN, Landschapsbeheer Nederland, Nationale Toekomstprijs, Natuurmonumenten, Nederlandse Bond van Plattelandsvrouwen, Stichting Natuur en Milieu, Milieodefensie and Novib. The small group that formed Echte Welvaart was 'mandated' to spread the idea of a different kind of prosperity. The story constructed about Dutch society was that values needed for a sustainable society got neglected in the search for quantitative and material wealth. Concerns like attentive healthcare, healthy neighborhoods and balanced work were undervalued in decision making processes. Echte Welvaart wanted to reconnect wealth with wellbeing, to strike a balance between people, planet, prophet through promoting ten values: rest and silence; continuous learning; respect for nature; attention and care; balanced work; space; one world; alive neighborhoods; versatile perspective; and wise consumption. At the beginning the organization wanted to start a television campaign with a short proclamation to stimulate 'the public' to rethink what prosperity meant to them. The initiative never managed to find enough funding for this plan however and in the end took a new approach, targeting individuals and spreading the idea like a 'virus' through providing stirring messages.

Communication is central to the campaign. The campaign brings stirring, organizes encounters, enhances visibility and inspires.

(Echte welvaart 2000: 3, my translation)

Resources, tactics and dynamics.

The new strategy was to target *change agents*, those people in organizations that could spread the idea and contribute to a bigger change. To reach these people Echte Welvaart started organizing different projects, meetings, platforms, diners, events, theater shows, etc. For instance in the event 'What's Next' five researchers from developing countries were invited to study the state of sustainable development in

the Netherlands and to present their findings to politicians, entrepreneurs and scientists. The event hosted different creative forms of interaction, - written instead of verbal discussion, associating while lying on the ground, pass-through discussions on a piece of cardboard – and received the Event-price 2003 for creativity with limited means. Most events hosted by Echte Welvaart contain some 'special' element meant to make people think outside their daily routines. One event started off with a blindfolded tour through the halls of a fort, and after the blindfolds were removed the participants were personally looked in the eye and told "it comes down to you!". With these unconventional methods Echte Welvaart incorporated their values and purposes within the events themselves, creating new experiences and 'real connections' in a stimulating but safe space. The workshops Doen! Leren! Tonen! (Do! Learn! Show!) was another strand of the initiatives activities, developing learning processes on incorporating values in organizations.

In the ten years that Echte Welvaart existed it went through various profound changes. Because of the 'failure' to produce enough funding for a wide television campaign, the initiative had to focus on pathways to spread its message. The reason why Echte Welvaart became an independent organization was that it was too radical and alternative for Natuur en Milieu, their approach too indirect without measurable results or direct change. The organization decided to continue because its events were so well received, they had enough 'fans' (mainly entrepreneurs) to feel that what they were doing was meaningful, even though their public was not as big as desired, nor could they always reach the powerful players within organizations they approached. Echte Welvaart lost the connection with the larger group of initiatives from which it originated, but on a project basis worked together with a range of the same and different NGOs throughout the years. According to A. de Vries, the disintegration of the initial group was partly due to the difficulty for or unwillingness of NGOs to reach farther than their own particular issues and interest. Activity was thus always on a project basis, with more fixed purposes that NGOs could attach to, ranging from singular events to four year programs. It chose to reach out to *change agents* from government parties, businesses and individuals. Experience taught however that those in power are often not the ones who are interested to come to the organized events. Echte Welvaart experimented with shifting strategies. For instance it invited the directors of the Dutch banks to a conference in which CSR and banking would be discussed. The conference had a professional set up and the directors would be charged a 1000 euros entrance fee. With the exception of ASN and Triodos, they were uninterested. Another element pointing out the self reflexive character of the initiative is the 'doing what they preach'. Echte Welvaart acquired a reputation for being able to connect, inspire and touch people during events. There would be no 'one way traffic talk' in which the organization would try to convince the audience, but people were stimulated to rethink their values and enter into dialogue in an equitable set up. This anti hierarchical strategy reflects perhaps the presence of a majority of women within the organization.

The organization also published several columns in the Financieel Dagblad (Dutch equivalent of the Financial Times) which they could do because of the editor's interest in CSR. Concerning persuasiveness, the organization chose depth over breadth. Meaning that through their personal approach they could persuade individuals through attaching the message to the personal values and experiences of their public. The message was abstract however in the sense that it could incorporate just about anything. 'What does prosperity mean to you?' is not a singular message. The initiative had tangible and less tangible effects. Direct effects from the trainings and workshops for instance were the professional development of government agents who were trained to engage and cooperate with citizens in policy making; or workers from a business who wanted to introduce values into their work. Sometimes this would succeed and often the 'business as usual model' would prevail. In case of the latter people would sometimes quit and become social entrepreneurs. Less tangible is the different

mindset that Echte Welvaart helped create. The organization was a pioneer concerning CSR in the Netherlands, and de Vries still hears sometimes from people in her network that they were motivated to start to work in a more value oriented way since one of the events. Some spin offs of Echte Welvaart that still exist are organization *Pure Winst* (Pure Profit) and agency *The Art of Meaningful Conversations*.

Between five and ten people would be working full time for Echte Welvaart, and the organization had a turnover of about 900.000 a year. In the last years activity slowly declined however and in 2011 activities stopped. Members are still engaged in similar work but under different organizations, such as the government agency Leren voor Duurzame Ontwikkeling (Learning for Sustainable Development), or have become entrepreneurs. According to de Vries the movement in which they were pioneers has now caught up with them, and speeded on with younger people and more crossovers and faster forms of communication. The high turnover of 900.000 a year indicates that the organization could successfully find resources to organize its events. A steady sponsor was VROM, the previous ministry for housing, planning and the environment. Other sponsors and partners have been: WUR, BZK, provinces, municipalities, ING, Vitae, Unilever, Pentascope, Humanitas, NIDO, NSDO, NOVIB and the list goes on, reflecting at least a broad support for the kind of events organized. The organization was among the first to host interactive sessions between government officials and citizens. Yet political parties have not ‘hooked on’ to the organizations message. Professional development was welcomed, but structural change or a widespread campaign was not supported.

Conclusion

Echte Welvaart was a pioneer in the social entrepreneurship field and managed to organize a diverse range of events targeted at the inclusion of values. Its main strength was its creativity and resourcefulness in trying to inspire government and business representatives. It failed however to reach a wide public, as was its original purpose, and it also lost the cooperation of the group of NGOs who initially wanted to be engaged in the project. In the following table ‘Own goals’ and ‘Societal impact’ are merged because in this organization these are the same thing.

Type of initiative	Started as SMO, developed into interest group/service organization		+/-
Framing and group identity	Purpose	Promote an alternative view on prosperity. The first slogan was: ‘En dan nu: échte welvaart!	+
	Identity	First as the representing a large group of NGOs with an important message for all to hear. Later as initiating something small that would spread like a ‘virus’.	+
	Coherent critical reflection	Yes. Focused both on the here and now, doing what they preach, and also addressing government parties, businesses and individuals.	+
	Group identity	Initially a large group under one banner, but this dispersed and a small independent group of professionals remained.	-
	Story persuasive	Yes, but to a small public and abstract.	+/-
Mobilization, tactics and dynamics	Strategy	Disruptive, questioning, supporting introspection and dialogue,	+
	Activities	Organization of events, workshops, diners, columns,	+/-
	Effects	profession development in CSR and deliberative processes. Personal mind shifts	+
	Development	From 2001 – 2011. Starting ambitious, than finding ‘own character’, then fading out.	-
	Who participates	In organization mostly women around forty. Participants and partners mostly entrepreneurs	+/-

	Resources	Funding and help from professionals	+
	Supportive practice space	Yes	+
	Empowering knowledge	Yes	+
Networking	Network relations	High density network	

Table 4. Assessing Echte Welvaart

Consuminderhuis Ons Genoeg

Introduction

Consuminderhuis Ons Genoeg (less-consumption-home our enough) is a shelter and workplace which teaches people who are struggling financially to downshift (A. van Deursen, personal communication June 14th, 2012). When in crisis, people can get clothes and some food for free, but after a short while they have to either become a volunteer at the place, or join a simplicity circle in order to obtain the right to get furniture, clothes, food, and other materials. The basement, ground floor and first floor of the house are stacked with all kinds of household materials, and when I visit, the place is buzzing with volunteers who are arranging and folding the new clothes, cleaning the kitchen, sowing clothes, repairing radio's etc. These are all people who were struggling heavily and are now supported by the house through materials and/or a simplicity circle. A large range of the more vulnerable individuals of society are there, e.g. some are (ex) drug addicts, some are victims of abuse, (ex) prostitutes, immigrants who do not speak Dutch and people with a mental handicap. But in spite of their histories, the people who are present during my visit are all highly engaged in performing their tasks and seem very content to be part of the place. Annemiek van Deursen¹¹ initiated Ons Genoeg. She manages the place, leads the simplicity circles, and seems a patroness to the people who come to the house. She knows the individual problems of all of them, and observes whether they are having bad or good days and gives them some form of support when needed. In each simplicity circles van Deursen coaches a group of around ten individuals in how to live with a small budget. All individuals share their private situation and draw out their monthly income and household expenditures. They make a plan on how to save money in order to repay their dept or simply make ends meet. Because the stories of these people are often extreme, van Deursen always starts off with telling her own life story and how she has dealt with misery, but how she is now managing her life, and lives on 40,- euros a week. She uses her frankness and good humor to break the ice and to give some hope. The circles start meeting biweekly, and after a while become a monthly gathering, some of which last years.

Framing and group identity

The main purpose of Ons Genoeg is to teach people with a small budget to consume less and to live a meaningful, healthy and sustainable life with the little money they have. Van Deursen perceives the house as a safe haven for desperate people. The story she tells about the rise of a consumer society:

The dual earning babyboomer generation does not have time for budgeting, or to give attention to their children, and compensates for this lack through expensive gifts...During the crisis more and more people came in dept and it became apparent that they did not know how to live frugally. The mindset had become "I have the right to own", instead of "what can I afford in order not to get into trouble.

(Consuminderhuis Ons Genoeg, 2012, my translation)

The focus of the house is on empowering individuals to live their own lives, thus it focuses on social mobility rather than social change. It is very practice oriented. The weekly 'mijmeringen' (reflections) written by van Deursen provide mostly practical tips, but also include (poetic) reflections on quality of

¹¹ Van Deursen has a background in welfare work and dept support, is currently 'unemployed', and volunteers fulltime in the Consuminderhuis.

life, for instance:

Goodmorning people,

*We are always looking for happiness in the extraordinary
Daily life has become the so called 'plain' and 'ordinary'
We have lost sense of the miracle of simply living
But extraordinary is exactly the everyday
Seen through the eyes of wonderment.....*

Annemiek

(van Deursen, consumindermijmering 78, 14 mei 2012, my translation)

The circles create some group identity. A circle forms a delineated group for an extended period, in which sharing experiences is one of the major purposes. This group is focused onto itself and on the development of the lives of the individuals in the group. There is no intention of 'we' as a group making an effort for a certain external cause. The house in its entirety does also provide a limited group identity. The people seem to experience a sense of belonging and responsibility for the place, but van Deursen is the main 'social glue'. The message 'you can live on forty euros a week and live a happy life' is emotionally appealing and urgent to people that she works with.

Mobilization, tactics and dynamics

The first simplicity circle started in van Deursen's apartment in 2006 and in 2009 she was lent a house by Hestia Groep, a regional housing corporation. There have been numerous financial donations by local enterprises and two local supermarkets (Plus and C1000) donate food that would otherwise have been thrown away. Until recently the municipality Landgraaf has ignored Ons Genoeg, despite the fact that municipal social welfare workers have forwarded people to the house. Van Deursen managed to get media publicity and to shame the municipality in front of a gathering of local entrepreneurs, and it seems that a subsidy is coming. Ons Genoeg is growing steadily, with currently 42 volunteers and members are increasing, throughput in terms of second hand furniture coming in and going out is increasing and getting more efficient. People can acquire a 'crisis' pass, which they only get in dire circumstances, and after a while they have to start either volunteering or joining a simplicity circle, in order to get a normal pass with which they can get materials. There have been 17 circles of which 6 are still running. Besides empowerment, van Deursen also tries to bring to life a concern for the environment, but she does not emphasize it because these people clearly have other concerns. Rather, green awareness trickles through during cooking lessons with organic food, showing the importance of reusing materials, living simply and growing their own food.

Conclusion

Ons Genoeg demonstrates that living frugal is a skill that many people do not possess any more, but can be taught when it is necessary. It is highly successful in achieving its own goals. It manages to acquire increasingly more resources and people with financial crises keep on showing up. In terms of societal impact its main strength is its function as an example. Yet its scope in influencing people to downshift is primarily the vulnerable people surrounding Landgraaf.

Type of	Service organization	Own	Societal
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initiative			goals	impact
Framing and group identity	Purpose	Teaching vulnerable people in Landgraaf to live with a small budget	.	-
	Identity	'Safehouse'	+	-
	Coherent critical reflection	No	+/-	-
	Group identity	No	+/-	-
	Story persuasive	To its specific public.	++	+/-
Mobilization , tactics and dynamics	Strategy	Providing support, but making people have to participate.	++	+
	Activities	Collectively managing a thrift store, hosting downshifting circles.	+	+
	Effects	People learn new skills and get a grip on their lives.	+	+
	Growth	In the last six years the initiative has been growing substantially. 17 circles have been initiated and 42 volunteers currently active.	+	+
	Who participates	Typically lower class, vulnerable people. Age and gender mixed.	+	-
	Resources	Manages to get donations, and is hoping for a subsidy.	+	+
	Supportive practice space	Yes	++	+
	Empowering knowledge	Yes	+	+
Networking	Network relations	Has good relations with local supermarkets and housing cooperation.	+	+/-

Table 5. Assessing Consuminderhuis Ons Genoeg

Transition Towns

Introduction

Transition Towns (or Transition Movement, Transition Network) is an organization fostering the creation of citizen initiatives targeted at making towns, villages or neighborhoods more self-sufficient. TT was founded in 2006 by permaculturist Rob Hopkins, and in 2008 he wrote *the Transition Handbook: Making Your Community More Resilient in Uncertain Times*. The main dangers foreseen by TT are climate change and scarcity of resources, in particular oil. As the current production and transportation system is based on fossil fuels which will not be available in the future (oil) or should not be used (coal), they believe that provision systems will have to be localized. For TT members, survival is literally at stake, and they try to promote local food production, currencies, energy provision and water production in order to be self-sufficient to a large extent.

Framing and group identity

According to Hendriksen, the TT movement is similar to the Occupy movement, because all parts are entities in themselves doing something locally, not steered by a single force (personal communication, Sept. 3rd 2012). Although there are some national gatherings, TT members do not form a single group with a single purpose, but work parallel to achieve the same targets in their own living areas. The movement is much more orchestrated than the Occupy movement however. The handbook provides elaborate inspiration in understanding the problem, connecting emotionally to a new kind of living, and providing the tools to start acting¹². One technique used to frame the problem and legitimize action is looking at the industrial age and economic development as just a phase in history, motored by cheap fossil fuels.

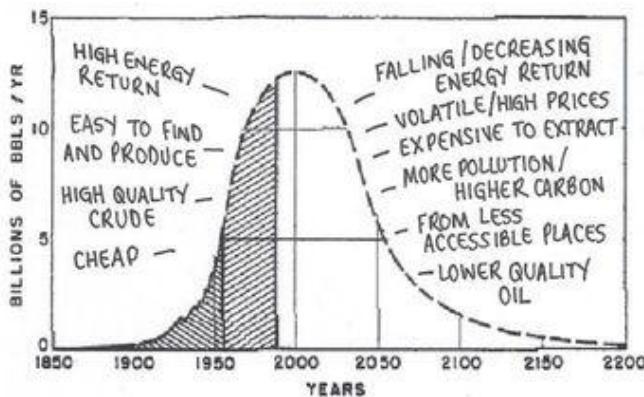


Figure 5. The rise and fall of cheap oil (Transition Network 2012)

On the one hand, TT trainings and discussion events focus on the limitations of the current provision systems to motivate members. On the other hand, it shows the promises of a better future after peak oil. It encourages visualization of what the world would like in the future: local production systems, a lot of green in the city, high social participation and cohesion, children playing on the street, and so on. Hence they call themselves the *transition* movement, trying to prepare local areas to make the transition to something new. But in spite of the fact that TT aims to foster a worldwide transition, the organization does not have a political lobby. It believes that it is up to citizens to initiate the shift, since

¹² As the Hopkins puts it: addressing the head, the heart and the hands (Hopkins 2008).

governments are not making the effort.

Mobilization, tactics and dynamics

As said the main strategy of TT is encouraging people bottom up. When a Transition initiative is started and achieves to get enough members it usually divides itself into several workgroups, each with a specific theme like local food production, transport or energy. These workgroups then see how they can develop their theme within the area. In order to attract new members some TTs have made promotion videos. They also organize discussion evenings, display documentaries and host workshops. There are trainings on how to start up and manage a transition town, and by now there have also been trainings for advanced initiatives that require different training (e.g. Deventer, Zutphen, Wageningen, Rotterdam, Castricum and Houten). The national board in turn receives training during the international gatherings of the Transition Movement, in which the national overarching organizations meet and learn from their peers. The most prominent outcomes of TT initiatives until now have been the setting up Community Supported Agriculture farms and local energy collectives. Grunnege Power for instance has become a very successful energy cooperative, which obtains solar panels collectively. The new TT Olst has also started a collective with 85 households, and TT Boxtel has one with 300. Other outcomes of TT initiatives have been a school education program to learn how to grow food, starting neighborhood gardens, promote LET systems, planting fruit trees in public spaces, etc.

The first foundational meeting in the Netherlands was held in 2008. Ever since it has grown rapidly. There are currently around eighty-three TTs throughout the Netherlands, of which thirty are actually labeled as ‘active’, meaning that they have a website and organize regular activities. The rest is still in a startup phase. Growth however is reaching its peak and the creation of new TTs is decreasing. There are about twenty to thirty members in the national organization and there is a board of six people. All members are volunteers. It has succeeded in attaining subsidies sporadically. They mostly manage to connect their projects to the municipalities’ goals such as stimulating healthier food, local food production, and social participation. Most initiatives cope relatively well with minimal funds, TT Deventer for instance has received more than needed, and spread the money over several projects. However, the sporadic and unstructured funding is hampering effectiveness, and according to Hendriksen TT does need more subsidies at a national level. A major impeding factor has been the lack to be able to reach out to the starting initiatives and provide coaching and activation. Currently the success of initiatives depends almost entirely on the self-generated skills and commitment of local initiators. There is a new system in development however. TT NL is creating a strategy for local initiatives to attract sponsors and setting up a structure in which local TTs pay a percentage to the national organization, and in return get training and support.

Interorganizational networks

As noted by Hendriksen, another important feature contributing to success is to what extent TT initiatives address a large and diverse network. Deventer, one the more successful towns, addressed different kinds of people: entrepreneurs, municipality officials and dark greens alike, and hosted its meetings in different locations. As in the towns where the initiatives were carried more by anarchists and meetings were held in squat buildings, it was hard to reach out to a more diverse public and activities retained a one-sided character. As mentioned, the TT movement functions in many respects as a network organization. It ties many smaller initiatives together. Permaculture gardens, local energy systems, Repair Cafés and LETS’s are now to some extent connected under the header of Transition Towns. To foster cooperation with municipalities, AgentschapNL funded an information campaign in which Hendriksen visited municipalities for a year, informing them about TT initiatives. According to

Hendriksen, TTs are often appreciated by municipalities and regarded to be constructive and proactive. They share similar goals, and can reach audiences the municipality does not have access to. On the other hand municipalities are also a bit weary of TTs because of their independent, ‘anarchist’ character that does not fit the usual technocratic form.

Vereniging Aardehuis Oost-Nederland as example.

Vereniging Aardehuis Oost-Nederland (Association Earthship East-Netherlands) is an interesting example of a combination of TT and eco-village initiative. The initiative has existed as a foundation since 2006 and been looking for a place and developing a plan since. In 2011 they got a patch of land from the municipality of Olst, and started building twenty-three earthship homes in spring 2012. Earthships are houses made chiefly from waste and loam, and are meant to be self-sufficient in energy generation and reuse and filter their own waste water. The initiatives mission statement is:

As Vereniging Aardehuis Oost Nederland it is our intention to build, work, live in our homes and in our lives in harmony with nature, in constructive relationship with one another and as a source of inspiration to the world around us. This goal is to be realized through the construction of an ecological housing project of self-sufficient Earth-houses whereby all aspects of sustainability are taken into consideration and balanced with each forming a harmonious whole.

(Aardehuis 2012)

The initiative is strikingly well organized and owns a website, board, a process facilitator, a contractor and a self-initiated energy cooperative. The organization strives to be non-hierarchical and ensures that all members participate in the highly intensive decision making processes. The stakes are high because most of the building project is funded by the people who will live there, although there are many sponsors and people who offer their services for free in exchange for publicity. The decision making process is sociocratic, which means that all participants have an equal vote and that decisions are only approved when there is general consensus. According to Hendriksen, the meetings can take long but have the benefit that all ‘hidden interests’ are brought to the table, which ensures a more efficient process afterwards. In order to foster healthy relations the association consciously invests in group cohesion and communication skills. All members are obliged to participate in the building process and have to be at the site at least one day a week, but since building earthships is highly labor intensive volunteers are also invited. Many volunteers come and in exchange learn something about how to build with loam and recycled materials.

Conclusion

The initiative’s main strong point is that it has been able to mobilize a large group of citizens to become active in their own neighborhoods. It manages to do this partly because of the positive and practical alternative that the TT concept provides. TT is highly dependent however on the input of local initiators, which explains why the largest part of the initiatives is still (stuck) in a startup phase. Some of the initiative’s spin-offs, like Repair Café and Grunneger Power have gained wide publicity and now serve as inspiration for others. A general weakness is the current lack of steering capacity in the national organization, and another weakness is that structural or political factors are not addressed.

Type of initiative	Service organization		Own goals	Societal impact
Framing and group	Purpose	Foster a transition to local self-sufficiency	+	+/-

identity	Identity	Grassroots network	+	+
	Coherent critical reflection	Focused on bottom up action	+/-	+/-
	Group identity	No. There are sporadic national meetings, but the network does not function as a group.	+/-	-
	Story persuasive	Complicated but positive	+	+/-
Mobilization, tactics and dynamics	Strategy	Stimulating local initiatives, functioning as example	+	+
	Activities	Organizing local collective action	+	++
	Effects	Many small alternative system created by engaged citizens		+
	Growth	Started 2006 in the UK, 2008 in the Netherlands. Now at 83 initiatives but growth has declined, experiences difficulty in activating each members potential	+	+
	Who participates	The group is diverse in gender and age; most are 'dark greens'.	+	+/-
	Resources	Has managed with sporadic funds, but needs more to be better organized.	+/-	+/-
	Supportive practice space	Yes, the initiative is not judgmental and stimulates creativity	+	+
	Empowering knowledge	Yes, the handbook and trainings provide increased opportunities for professionalization	+	+
Networking	Network relations	Highly connected, but mostly to other grassroots initiatives. In some instances good cooperation with municipalities.	+	+/-

Table 6. Assessing Transition Towns

Slow Food Nederland

Introduction

Slowfood NL is part of the international Slow Food movement, which was initiated in 1989 by Italian activist Carlo Patrini. He became concerned with the expansion of fast food, the monopolization of certain food industries, and the tendency of agriculture becoming more about profit and less about feeding everyone with healthy food. One of the biggest concerns is that naturally grown, local, seasonal, and nutritious food is currently only available to wealthy people because it is so expensive. The lower classes are bound to mass production food, usually high in calories and low in nutrients. One of the goals of Slow Food International is to make nutritious food available to all by on the ground promoting local food production, establishing direct ties between food producers and buyers, and reinforcing a preference for pure and rich tasting food. In some countries there are also strong political lobbies, especially in Italy where it originates and also in India, where the famous Vandana Shiva is a central figure in the campaign. The movement also has a delegation in Brussels, engaging with the EU agricultural policy.

Framing and group identity

The main goal of Slow Food Nederland is to promote the production and consumption of rich tasting, pure and fair food (J. Van der Meer, personal communication, July 20th 2012). Underlying this goal is the belief that in the entire process there should be respect for 'mother earth', animals, and the people that produced the food. Respecting these principles is important in itself, but Slow Fooders believe that they also generate the highest quality in a product: Allowing vegetables to grow naturally, when the nutrients are available in the soil because of slow organic processes; Allowing animals to have a stress-free life with healthy food and no hormones; Allowing producers the time and resources to create the best circumstances for growth. This high emphasis on quality and fostering the processes that create quality is where I believe to be the connection with downshifting. The relation is not directly obvious because Slow Food *promotes* consumption, but it promotes consumption of a kind that focuses on what is needed, what is good for the environment and what enhances quality of life, rather than on what brings profit and what can be consumed indefinitely.

Slow Food perceives itself as an independent grassroots organization, representing the interests of mother earth, animals and producers and consumers of 'pure food'. The purpose seems to bind the group together because they believe strongly in it and find mutuality in each other, and also because for many it is connected to their subsistence. Half of the members are producers of a certain kind of 'slow food', and their personal interests are directly promoted by the efforts of the organization. Thus the shared story is highly persuasive for them, and also for fans of high quality food. Considering what makes messages persuasive, the message of Slow Food 'slowfood is better for you, better for producers and for the environment' is probably less directly appealing to the general public. It is a claim among many others claims on what is supposed to be 'healthy' and 'good for the environment'. Some people misunderstand the 'slow' in Slow Food, thinking that it applies only to the cooking, while they generally do not have time to take long to cook. When people get in physical touch however with Slow Food somehow, the local element allows seeing the direct consequence of buying slow food. People can pay the producer directly while knowing how this producer treats its animals for instance. This increases the sense of positive personal influence.

Mobilization, tactics and dynamics

Slow Food Nederland chooses to be an independent organization of people, not seeking any subsidies. It tries to have a positive approach in promoting slow food, directly demonstrating the advantages in creative and enjoyable ways. For instance, the Utrecht convivium organizes visits to local food markets, where they host a mobile kitchen where special varieties are cooked. The market sellers donate vegetables to be cooked and visitors can taste the food and see how it is to be prepared. This mobile kitchen is a very popular feature, food markets are so excited that Slow Food is unable to keep up with demand. One of the main activities of Slow Food NL is the Ark van de Smaak (Arke of taste), which is a collection of rare and special products, such as specific kinds of cheeses or vegetables, produced by a specialist. The Ark gives visibility and status to these specific products, thereby assisting the particular farmer that makes it. An effect of this is that the producers sometimes become overburdened with demand from high quality restaurants across Europe. Another main activity of the organization is networking. As half of the members are producers, the meetings also focus on professionalization; sharing knowledge on how to produce, how to connect to clients, etc. Most activities have a strong social component. Slow Food Utrecht has a monthly event where they visit a special restaurant fitting their criteria. They also regularly visit producers of special products, tasting different types of cider for instance while getting a tour. Some convivia also organize educational events for children, visiting schools and giving cooking /tasting demonstrations. This and the mobile kitchen are the more public oriented events. The others activities usually include only members, strengthening the group cohesion but limiting its public impact. In the Netherlands the political lobby is negligible in comparison to other countries, but recently a work-group has been established to design a strategy for a political lobby.

In the Netherlands there are 3000 members, and while Slow Food started in 1989, it only came to the Netherlands in 2008, thus indicating a substantial growth in four years time. However, according to van der Meer the saturation point has been reached and growth has ceased. The members are mainly upper-class people in their forties or older. Slow Food is financially carried by the annual fees (€ 60) of its members and donations from producers; it does not look for subsidies because it wants to be independent from government interests. Ten percent of the fees go to Slow Food International. All members are volunteers and thus the activities are entirely dependent on the available time and resources of those organizing. The organization of events usually requires some networking, there are always limited financial possibilities, but the organizers manage and improvise using their vast network within Slow Food. The initiative provides its members with empowering knowledge in a supportive space, the group is however quite homogenous which could limit the accessibility, and attracting a more diverse public is perhaps difficult. In Utrecht about twenty percent of the 500 members come regularly to the meetings.

Networks

Slow Food Nederland is a network organization, mainly tying small producers together with interested consumers. It does not have strong ties with other NGO's or governmental organizations.

In general the government has little interest in Slow Food. If there are opportunities to link Slow Food with political aspirations the health aspect gives an important entrance. Recently the health department of the Utrecht municipality contacted Slow Food Utrecht, exploring whether they would be interested to help design a food strategy. Obesity for instance is becoming a wider problem and politicians seem interested to address it through healthier food. These developments are very recent however.

Conclusion

Slow Food is both a self-help and a service organization. Its members organize activities in their own interests, e.g. promoting their specific products or enhancing professionalization through peer meetings. The increased visibility does also have a societal impact of course. Consumers have easier access to their local farmers and the position of special quality products in general is stronger. The Dutch organization has until now not succeeded in turning the effort into a wider social movement, as is happening more in Italy and India.

Type of initiative	Self-help group/service organization		Own goals	Societal impact
Framing and group identity.	Purpose	Promote production and consumption of 'slow' food	.	+
	Identity	Platform	+	-
	Coherent critical reflection	Mostly on role of producers, very moderately on collective action.	-	-
	Group identity	Yes	+	+
	Story persuasive	To a specific public	+/-	+/-
Mobilization, tactics and dynamics	Strategy	Professionalization and enhancing visibility	+	+/-
	Activities	Promotion visits, meetings, magazine.	+	+/-
	Effects	Stronger position of producers, more visibility.	+	+/-
	Growth	Started in 2008, grew substantially, now growth has stopped.	+	+
	Who participates	Upper class producers mostly, fans of high quality products and 'dark greens'. Most above forty.	+/-	+/-
	Resources	Independent, would like to do much more, but manages.	+/-	+/-
	Supportive practice space	No	-	-
	Empowering knowledge	Yes	+	+
Networking	Network relations	Internal connectedness is very high, but external little.	+/-	-

Table 7. Assessing Slow Food

Repair Cafe

Introduction

A Repair Cafe is a place where people are invited to bring their broken electronics, clothes, furniture or any other possession that can be fixed. There is a team of volunteers present that tries to fix the articles. The visitor leaves with a repaired unit, and has learned something from the experience. The idea behind RC is that it is waste to throw things away, 'repairing is better for your wallet and better for the environment' (H. van Someren, personal communication july 12th 2012).

Framing and group identity

Repair Cafe was initiated in 2009 by Martine Postma, and it has grown rapidly since. Thus the main purpose of Repair Cafe is to host a space where people can repair or get their possessions repaired, to create a different relation with consumption goods, and to empower people to be able to repair things themselves. Postma considers RC and the promotion of keeping rather than throw away a form of political activism. The repair cafes are very practically oriented however, people come to repair and to have repaired, the activism does not target other parties and the emphasis is on individual possibilities to deal differently with possessions. There is a feeling of togetherness in the repairers team, and the RCs also create social cohesion among visitors. The purpose of RC however is not connected to the groups identity. There is a group belonging and a national overarching organization, but it is not the identity of the members that matters, it is the repairing. The basic message of RC to potential visitors is 'you can come and you're stuff will be fixed for free' and that is a personally and emotionally relevant message to people with little income or people who are attached to a certain personal possession. The societal message that RC sends out that 'we should care more for our articles' while demonstrating that it can be rewarding to do so is less directly urgent, but it is a positive message, and complemented with direct action.

Mobilization, tactics and dynamics

The RCs come from the overarching foundation initiated by Postma. All locally arising RC's are required to comply with the conditions provided by the foundation and have to use the national logo in all press and other communications. This is to give RCs more recognizability and to strengthen the national movement. In turn the foundation provides start-up assistance, knowledge, a forum to share questions and experiences and a national meeting. The organization does not wish to compete with still existing repairer professionals because they represent exactly what RC is promoting. At a discussion on the national RC gathering it was decided that helping a person with a bike for instance is legitimized only when the person learns to do it himself. If the task requires professional skills then the person is declined. Furthermore, RC members believe that professionals can benefit because the ethos of repairing is brought back to the attention of people.

The RC days in Utrecht are well routinized and organized. Each visitor receives a survey with questions and a number. The survey is used to collect statistics on how many people come each time, what kind of articles are brought, whether the visitor was satisfied with the result, whether they learned something, whether they would like to participate, etc. Generally there is a cue and people are helped in order, first come first served. There are multiple sections such as mechanics, or sowing, and each has a team of repairers. The visitor has to attend the repairing in order to learn from the experience, and also to converse in case the repairer has to undertake action that involves a risk of breaking the good. The visitor is made aware that he or she can lose disclaimer rights, and has to comply with the steps the

repairer takes.

In general the atmosphere is good during a RC. In feedback forms most people indicate to have learned and to be satisfied. According to Joke and Harry van Someren the place also builds social cohesion among visitors. The repairers are highly motivated and enjoy the work, they enjoy learning from each-other and passing on their knowledge to visitors. These positive experiences are reflected in the growth of RC. The first Cafe was hosted late 2009 in Amsterdam, in 2010 there were ten, currently there are forty RCs in the Netherlands, and the rate of growth is fast. In some cities as many as fifty visitors come in one day, thus some start hosting in several neighborhoods, or start hosting bi-weekly or even weekly as in Rotterdam-Alexander. Part of the success is also attributed to the financial crisis, which induces people to repair rather than throw away.

The level of professionalization varies among the initiatives. The foundation has three paid members. Some initiatives have a board with divided responsibilities; some are carried by one person. In Utrecht there are four board members, Harry is chairman and treasurer, Joke is the 'human resource manager', there is a secretary (who is also connected to Transition Town Utrecht) and someone who manages the website. In total there are forty repairers in Utrecht, mostly these are retired people, some of them old colleagues of the board members. All of them have a passion for working with their hands, helping people and fixing articles. But to preserve continuity and to pass on the knowledge to later generations they are hoping for younger people to participate in the RCs. The visitors are generally not environmentalists or downshifters, but simply people with broken articles and a small budget. According to Joke the main reason for people to come is to get their materials repaired, not because of an underlying ideology.

Although there is a national structure and strategy, the local cafes are independent in how they organize themselves and how tasks are divided. The Utrecht RC has an open structure and responsibilities are appointed to those who volunteer and have the necessary skills. Financially RC does not require much resource. The national foundation received subsidy from Dutch Ministry for infrastructure and Environment and VSB and Stichting Doen. These are used to pay three jobs, advertisement and set-up of cafes. These mainly use community centers as venue, and the extra expenses of the RCs are covered by donations from visitors, municipalities, and other sponsors. Postma emphasizes that RC is hardly a business model, but it has had plenty support and is able to do what it wants. The foundation has liability insurance for its members and it is trying to get a collective insurance in which all local organizations can participate. Health accident insurance is provided by most municipalities for volunteers.

Interorganizational networks

How is the initiative connected to other initiatives, NGO's, government department and companies? Many RCs are initiated by Transition Town initiatives that are already in place, thus it could be interpreted as a result of the Transition Town movement, but not all are connected. RCs are sometimes connected to welfare organizations, and are mostly held in community centers.

Conclusion

The main strength of this initiative is its simplicity and attractiveness to the general public and its combination of practical usefulness and social interaction. Although the underlying idea as initiated by Postma has an environmentalist agenda, for most repairers and visitors the place is simply either pleasurable or practical. This is a major strength and it explains the growth of the initiative. It is not necessarily appealing however to affluent people with little time or concern for the environment.

Type of initiative	Individual RC are service organizations, overarching RC is a SMO		Own Goals	Societal Impact
Framing and group identity	Purpose	Create a more appreciative, aware and sustainable relation to material possessions. Provide knowledge and facilities to repair.	.	+
	Identity	The repairing activities are meant by Postma as a form of political activism, setting an example and providing an alternative.	+	+
	Coherent critical reflection	No	+	-
	Group identity	No	+/-	-
	Story persuasive	To a specific public	+	-
Mobilization , tactics and dynamics	Strategy	Provide spaces; create visibility, national guidance	+	+
	Activities	Repair Cafe's, media attention, national meetings.	+	+
	Effects	Vibrant RC days. Sharing knowledge. Empowering people.	+	+
	Growth	Started in 2009 and has grown substantially to forty Cafes now	+	++
	Who participates	Repairers: hobbyists, pensioners. Visitors: mostly working class, 30+	+/- +	- -
	Resources	Success in acquiring what is needed	+	+
	Supportive practice space	Yes	+	+
	Empowering knowledge	Yes	+	+
Networking	Network relations	Strong ties with Transition towns and municipalities	+	+

Table 8. Assessing Repair Cafe

No Impact Week

Introduction

No Impact Week organizes a program of a week in which people are encouraged to experiment with minimizing ones personal, social and environmental impact. NIW's goal is to challenge as many individuals as possible to experiment and to experience the effects that living a no impact week has on personal quality of life. Eerhart, who participated with the No Impact Week organized by the 'No impact man'¹³ and brought the week to the Netherlands in 2010, hopes that the experience will make people reflect on their personal relation with environmental problems, and that living a no impact lifestyle is not only beneficial for nature, but can also significantly improve their quality of life. Ultimately Eerhart aspires to encourage young people to become environmental 'change agents' (R. Eerhart, personal communication, June 3rd 2012). In the program every day of the week has its own theme, and participants are instructed to reduce personal impact in a new way each day. The week starts with reducing consumption: not buying anything but necessary food. Participants are encouraged to invest in their relationships and experiencing that non-shopping leaves more time to see friends. It also provides tips to visit Repair Cafés and second-hand stores. The second day's theme is not producing any waste. Instructions are to separate and save waste, thus creating awareness on what is accumulated. Reduce, reuse and recycle are guiding principles of preventing waste and participants are encouraged to answer a number of awareness raising questions at the end of the day, and to start making a gratitude list in which they express their appreciation for anything that occurred that day.¹⁴ The third day focuses on mobility and transport and encourages to 'burn calories instead of oil' and to be creative with carpooling and public transport. At the end of this day participants are also encouraged to take a stand on some environmental issue and make a public statement, on Facebook for example. The fourth day's theme is food. It instructs to measure the environmental footprint of the previous day regarding food, and to try eating vegetarian, local and organic food. The next day focuses on energy and mapping and shutting off all energy consuming devices in the house. Again the participants are encouraged to experience more time with others instead of watching television for instance. Water is the theme of the sixth day, and it creates awareness of how much water is used and wasted, and how water consumption can be reduced. In the following day participants are invited to engage in collective action, preferably through contributing to some public good or charity organization. It discusses the reasons for and possibilities of volunteering. The last day, the 'eco-Sunday' consists of having the final and ultimate no impact day, incorporating all principles while evaluating the week.

Framing and group identity

In most of these steps people are instructed to reflect on their daily consumption patterns and the environmental effects of their choices. They are also encouraged to share their experience with each other on Facebook and Twitter on what the greatest challenges were, or what they gained from their experiments. Thus NIW mainly stimulates reflection on the personal role within broader societal structures. The question 'what is my personal contribution' is most present within the different instructions. From a classical social movement perspective, it lacks a broader discussion on collective

¹³ No Impact Man, Colin Beavan (2009)

¹⁴ A positive-psychology technique used to encourage people to be appreciative of what they already have/experience rather than looking for something else <https://twitter.com/#/search/GratitudeList>

action and on how to engage societal structures as a group. The initiative mainly contributes to a group identity by facilitating exchange on Facebook and Twitter. But overall the online conversations and exchange of advice seem to focus more on the practical aspects of a no impact life-style rather than on emotions, belonging or connection. Eerhart is the main initiator and executer of NIW in the Netherlands and there is no overall *shared story* as such, between her and other members. The source of NIWs story is the book *No Impact Man*, and the documentary with same title, which are the result of Colin Beavan's experiment of living a no impact year with his wife and child in New York. The bigger story of NIW does not provide a singular positive message, but rather brings the attention to the complex connections between personal life and the environment. Of course, the main point is that living a frugal life can be personally rewarding, but the urgency and personal relevance of this is not immediately apparent to most. Rather, it seems to require a week of reflection and personal experimentation. NIW does make a considerable effort to translate the larger picture into persuasive messages. For instance the first lines of the week manual read:

*Want to save money?
Lose weight? Have more time?
Live healthier & happier?*

Perhaps this guide will show you how..

(NIW manual, 2011: 1)

Mobilization, tactics and dynamics

NIW does not want reach only what Eerhart calls the 'dark greens', i.e. those individuals who have already committed themselves to a low impact life style and don't need convincing. These people are helped by the new tips that NIW offers and possibly the communal experience of doing it with others. Eerhart believes that ultimately most change has to come from 'normal' people or 'light greens', thus she wishes to keep the threshold low, and to invite these people to step just a little bit outside their routines, while encouraging to reflect on their experiences. NIW refrains from judging in this sense, and even fears that the sometimes enthusiastic and fanatic reactions from the dark greens on social media pages will daunt the less 'radical' person. In this line, Eerhart is considering to change the name to *Your Impact Week*, to reduce the negativity in the message *No Impact Week*. Thus we see an emphasis on personal experimentation and reflection, trying to raise awareness through small challenges, and looking to connect the experiences to each other through sharing.

The first United States NIW was initiated in 2009 and Eerhart brought it to the Netherlands in 2010. Both in 2010 and 2011 about 1.000 people participated, around 80% of participants are women between twenty and forty. The (long-term) effects that take place are obviously hard to measure, but change certainly occurs in (some) participants lifestyles. A questionnaire was filled in by 192 participants after the week (of course those who participated in this questionnaire might represent the more ambitious). 18 % Said to have become more aware of consumption choices, 32 % indicated to have learned how to consume more sustainable, while 19 % learned little because they were already living a low impact lifestyle (results end-questionnaire NIW, 2011). A directly perceivable effect is the NIW bloggers and Facebook discussions where people's experiences are shared.

NIW is dependent on donations and funds for carrying out its projects. Main costs are the work-hours and website, and Eerhart had to pay the No Impact Project in the US a substantial amount in the first year for a license and for guidance. The first year the project was executed in Eerharts 'free time' in

which she found some sponsors and engaged in crowd-funding in her own network. The second year she was working in her free time and for the IVN¹⁵, however also in this year she had to find the required sponsors. For upcoming year Eerhart is planning to focus on local businesses as sponsors. She anticipates that partners are easily made because the project has such a broad scope. A media problem is that it becomes only interesting when it is already happening.

Interorganizational networks

NIW is currently part of the IVN and is looking for partnerships with Urgenda, organic food shops, NLdoet¹⁶, sustainable banks, etc. The main idea is that these organizations support a part of the NIW costs through connecting somehow to the content of one the days of the week. For instance, the next week's volunteering day will probably coalesce with the national volunteering day organized by NLdoet. These connections are meant to wield new opportunities which might enhance the organizations visibility. This remains to be seen in the future however. Some politicians and local political party departments have reacted to NIW, but it received no official support from political parties, except from the Partij voor de Dieren¹⁷.

Conclusion

The main strength of NIW is its provocative yet nonjudgmental attitude. Through social media it has managed to inspire especially young people, and not only the 'dark greens'. As a tool to promote downshifting NIW is still young but has high potential. The project in New York is highly successful; Beavan has had wide media attention and is facilitating no impact weeks with schools and in other forms. Whether NIW here will have the same effects remains to be seen.

Type of initiative	Service organization		Own Goals	Societal impact
Framing and group identity	Purpose	Convince people to downshift	.	+
	Identity	Small scale organization trying to raise awareness	+	-
	Coherent critical reflection	Focus individual in relation to whole	+	-
	Group identity	No	-	-
	Story persuasiveness	Not obvious but considerable effort.	+	+ -
Mobilization, tactics and dynamics	Strategy	Awareness raising, social media and many other. Looking for middle way.	++	++
	Activities	Annual week with manual, plus promotion	+	+/-
	Effects	Hard to measure, but change certainly occurs in (some) participants lifestyles. Also an independent Facebook discussion.	+	+
	Membership and growth	Started in 2010, 1000 participants, growth to soon to decide		
	Members	Dominantly women between 20-40	+	+
	Resources	Manages to get funds and sponsorships for each individual projects	+	+/-
	Supportive practice space	Yes	+	+
	Empowering	Yes	+	+

¹⁵ IVN: Institute for Nature Education and Sustainability, a Dutch non-profit organization consisting of a number of professional and around 20.000 volunteering members.

¹⁶ NLdoet: organizes an annual national volunteering weekend

¹⁷ Partij voor de Dieren (Animal Party): small party representing the interests of animals, with a general concern for the environment.

	knowledge			
Networking	Network relations	Mainly IVN, others sporadic or in development.	+	+ -

Table 9. Assessing No Impact Week

Giving is all we have

Jeroen Timmers initiated Giving is all we have. He decided that he wanted ‘to change the world to evolve around giving’ and started a foundation to promote this change (Giving is all we have 2012). His plan is to mobilize a ‘generation of generosity’ through:

Enlighten: Raising consciousness & awareness on the philosophy that giving is all we have.

Engage: Coaching individuals on conscious leadership, designing consciousness programs for businesses. To provide people & businesses with on- & offline platforms that facilitate peer-to-peer giving.

Expand: Furthering knowledge on a new economic system that takes giving at its core.

(Giving is all we have 2012)

The initiative started recently in 2011, and in the last year Timmers has held a number of talks, provided workshops to businesses and is writing a book on how he images a new economic system based on giving. Most striking is the event he organized together with the Lowlands organization in the Lowlands festival¹⁸. Together with a team of eighteen people he hosted a Giftshop: a shop in which people could come to give something instead of buying. In the first day 400 gifts were collected this way: things like a book, a yoga lesson, a photo-shoot, a weekend in Vienna, etc. The second day the Giveshop team went out to distribute the gift cards on which the gifts were recorded. The 3FM radiohost of Lowlands also gave one minute of airtime, giving high publicity to the cause. According to Timmers the event was very successful and managed to inspire a huge (young) public with his message.

Buy Nothing New maand

The Buy Nothing New maand (month) is running its first time in the Netherlands Oktober 2012. Its purpose is to ‘create awareness about everything we already possess, to call on everyone to not buy anything new for a month, and to enjoy what we already have (BNN 2012 my translation). Irene Rompa, who initiated the event, was inspired by Paul Gilding’s TedTalk *The Earth is Full*¹⁹ and the Blog *Buy nothing new for a year*, a blog from a mother of four children who shared her experience of not buying anything new. The concept of Buy Nothing New Month however started in Australia in 2011, and its second edition is now running parallel to the Dutch month. The idea is to spread the month globally. Rompa attracted four other young women volunteers, and with a team of five they currently run the event. Similar to the No Impact Week, the organization provides the rules of the experiment and sends daily emails with tips and encouragement. The rules are: buy nothing new except food and drinks, medicine and cosmetics for a month. Participants are promised to learn how to shop more ‘consciously’, i.e. to be aware of the consequences consumption behavior, how to be more creative with what they already have, to share, etc.

The website is the most elaborate source I have found of an overview with the newest ways to reduce

¹⁸ One of the most popular festivals in the Netherlands with 55.000 visitors.

¹⁹ http://www.ted.com/talks/paul_gilding_the_earth_is_full.html. Also author of *The great disruption: Why the climate crisis will bring on the end of shopping and the birth of a new world* (2011).

consumption. It provides links to all new initiatives like Peerby, Repair Café, Toogethr, etc. All links provided are meant to inspire people to share their possessions with other people, fix articles rather than throw away, to wrap your own possessions in gift paper and give it away as a present, etc. The at time of writing 700 participants, of which 95 percent are female, are encouraged to spend the money they save on doing things (like going to the cinema, a restaurant, a massage) rather than buying things.

5.4 Discussion

Framing and group identity

So what has been learned from the above presentation of initiatives on how they use framing to motivate people, to become engaged and form a group identity? Transition Towns, No Impact Week, Slow Food, Giving is all we have and Genoeg have shown the most elaborate framing as they have spent a substantial amount of energy on understanding the problem and in constructing a convincing story of why change is needed, calling on people to be engaged. What these initiatives have learned from the older generations of environmental organization is the importance of positive and empowering messages. Messages are framed in such a way that they highlight the benefits of new behavior, and connect the urgency of downshifting to the personal aspirations of individual people. The alternative provided by the Transition Town handbook for instance is an elaborate sketch of what a sustainable future would look like, and why it would be desirable for people to change their consumption behavior.

Repair Café, Consuminderhuis Ons Genoeg, Peerby and other newer trading and sharing organizations on the other hand hardly legitimize collective action through a framing process. They are successful anyway because their purposes and practical relevancy appear obvious enough to attract new people.

There is little formation of group identity around the topic of downshifting. As reflected in other studies, there is an emphasis on changing individual behavior rather than on, for instance, collective protest or a political lobby. The Occupy Movement is an exception to this. While not directly promoting downshifting, the ideology of occupiers is quite similar. In short, according to the Occupy Manifesto (2012), they perceive the profit incentive to be perverse and want a more value oriented democracy and economy. They also perceive themselves as the ‘99%’, or in other words the ‘silent mass’, that has had enough of how a small percent of rich people are controlling the rest. Although occupiers have contributed greatly to the international visibility of people who want a different system, they have not succeeded in bringing together a large group of activists for a sustained period in the Netherlands. Although the most initiatives succeed in providing a positive message and empowering information, the real urgency to a wide public goes unnoticed. This has of course always been a challenge for the environmental movement. The detrimental effects of overconsumption are not felt by the Dutch, but by developing countries and more generally by (not so distant) future generations (Gardiner 2010). Because there is no collective suffering as a group, as happened for instance with the liberation movement in South Africa, a group identity has not emerged.

Mobilization, tactics and dynamics

Most initiatives studied are service organizations (21/37), meaning that they are a rather small specialized group providing a certain service to a larger constituency. Omslag, No Impact Week, Buy Nothing New Month and Genoeg provide information, inspiration and space for discussion concerning downshifting; the overarching TT organization provides a framework and guidance to people that want to change their neighborhoods, etc. The continuous flows of new input function as important cues in

the lives of downshifters in the Netherlands, firmly establishing the importance of alternative behavior in their daily lives. In Slow Food for instance, the promotion of a direct connection with farmers demonstrates to people the positive impact of their consumption because they see how the land and cattle are treated. Also in the Transition Towns initiatives people learn how to have a positive personal influence; the establishment of local energy cooperatives is spreading at an unprecedented rate. Service organizations like Peerby, Repair Café, LETS and Snappcar are more focused on providing the practical facilities that people need to reduce consumption through enabling them to share, rent, borrow, etc. Peerby for instance makes sharing highly accessible through linking strangers to each other and it facilitates trust through peer-review mechanisms. Whether these initiatives will extensively be used remains to be seen however. LETS systems have been around longest but are shrinking in size according to a report from Leren voor Duurzame Ontwikkeling (LvDO)²⁰. The other three are relatively young but growing fast.

Self-help groups (6/37) like eco-villages and transition neighborhoods have a similar effect. Through creating a physical environment together that facilitates self-generation of energy, water and food, recycling of materials, processing of waste water etc. these self-help groups are literally changing their performance environments (Verplanken & Wood 2006). They surround themselves with an environment that enables sustainable lifestyles because its inhabitants share those aspirations, keep each other informed and socially monitor each other. Thus, instead of battling the structures that engender overconsumption, they create their own in secluded areas like Olst.

The most obvious weakness of service organizations and self-help groups is the focus on changing individual behavior bottom up. It depends highly on the attitudes and aspirations of individual people whether they embrace downshifting, while dominant structural forces keep on stimulating overconsumption. Interest groups form the third group among the initiatives studied (5/35). Interest groups are specialized groups that target authorities to promote a certain cause. Among the in-depth case studies, only Echte Welvaart targeted its activities at the Dutch government, banks and firms. The others are: Stro, Workgroup Ecological Footprint, Platform sustainable and solidary economy and Economy transformers. These groups have had some successes Echte Welvaart has, as already discussed, facilitated interactive processes between citizens and government officials; some municipalities have adopted the Ecological Footprint as a tool; and Platform Sustainable and Solidary Economy has presented its report *Plan for a sustainable and solidary economy* to a delegation of politicians in November 2011. Apart from promoting their plans these groups function as epistemic communities: collecting, processing and creating the intellectual foundation for downshifting on a societal level. Although they are given attention by governments and firms more frequently, which is an important shift, their lobby has not succeeded in substantially changing policies.

The only organizations that function as social movement organizations are Echte Welvaart and Occupy Wallstreet. I classified Occupy as a SMO because it is made up of a large constituency and addresses the authorities. Its status as an organization is somewhat ambiguous however, since there is no central organization or a unified voice. Even the Manifesto (2012) does not claim to represent all occupiers, rather it voices the ideas of some of them. Echte Welvaart was only a SMO in its initial phase, when it represented the concerns of a large group of NGOs, but did not succeed in launching its public campaign as desired.

Overall a growth of initiatives can be perceived in the last years. Among the case-studies, eight out of eleven initiatives were initiated within the last six years, as are most of the initiatives in table 1,

²⁰ Learning for Sustainable Development, a government agency studying developments concerning sustainability

indicating that concern about overconsumption is growing. Members of the movement are largely female. According to some studies this could be beneficial because (also) in developed countries women are still responsible for most of household purchases (Tanner & Kast 2003). The age of participants varies among initiatives, among Echte Welvaart, Genoeg, Transition Towns, Omslag, and Repair Café most are between thirty and fifty. The newer organizations: No Impact Week, Buy Nothing New month, Giving is all we have and Peerby, manage to address younger people. This newer trend of attracting of a younger public could contribute to making downshifting more popular and trendy, as young people are often more connected than others (Gladwell 2010).

Among the case studies finding financial resources was generally difficult, precisely because downshifting itself is not profitable on a short term, and since most initiatives wish to remain independent and advertising is often against their principles. They do demonstrate high resourcefulness and can usually cope with limited financial means, also because their networks can provide facilities. Some of the newer organizations are winners of contests like *Green Challenge* and are often funded by Agentschap NL and Stichting Doen.

Networking

As already mentioned, the ability to address networks and share resources has made up for financial shortcomings of many initiatives. Creating (local) networks is precisely what initiatives like Omslag, LETS, Transition Towns, but also Peerby and SnappCar are trying to do. They facilitate interaction, cooperation and the exchange of goods among interested people, which allows for the expansion and increased connection of a constituency behind downshifting. The movement has not yet worked together with ‘elite’ parties that can influence authorities (McAddam et al. 1996).

The previous section has provided a discussion of the *internal* strengths and weaknesses of downshifting initiatives on three levels: framing and group identity; mobilization, tactics and dynamics; and networking. The following section will look at the *external* barriers and opportunities that affect the viability of downshifting initiatives.

5.5 External barriers and opportunities

As explained in section 4.3, I have identified three main external factors that can either stimulate or hamper the growth of downshifting in the Netherlands. The first section will discuss the social ‘readiness’ of Dutch citizens to embrace downshifting. Without repeating what has already been covered about consumer society, I will deliberate on some recent demographic studies on societal attitudes. Second, I will shortly discuss some structural barriers and opportunities specific to the Netherlands, like its infrastructure and labor conditions. Finally I will consider some recent political developments that will possibly affect the development of downshifting.

Social

First looking across the border, in the nineties the Institute of Rhinebeck New York identified simplifying life as ‘one of the top trends of the nineties’ (Cherrier & Murray 2007: 3). Datamonitor also published a report which states that downshifters have become an important segment of consumers, with twelve million simplifiers in Europe in 2002 (of which half a million in the Netherlands) and a

projection of seventeen million in 2007²¹. Two more recent reports produced by another marketing research organization, Havas Worldwide, also demonstrate some interesting findings.

70 % of the global sample claim to "respect/admire people who live simply"

67% believe most people would be better off if they live more simply

46% wish their homes were less cluttered

50% have thrown out or thought about throwing out lots of stuff to declutter their lives and homes in recent years.

41% have adopted or thought about adopting a "slower" lifestyle

(Havas Worldwide 2010: 15²²)

In a 2012 survey with 7.000 respondents in 19 countries 52% of the age category 18-34 thinks it has spent too much on things they don't really need. The same counts for 52% of those aged 34-55 and 45% of people older than 55. More than half of all age categories indicate to be tired from overconsumption and 40% thinks he or she would be happier with less possessions²³. So it seems that in some of the major economies of this planet the idea of living with less consumption is becoming more acceptable and even desirable. According to Datamonitor this also holds true for the Dutch. I also conducted a count of newspaper citations of the term 'consuminderen' (consuming less) in the Netherlands, in which a growing trend can clearly be perceived.

Year	Times mentioned	Year	Times mentioned	Year	Times mentioned
-1991	0	2001	10	2011	63
1992	1	2002	17	2012	37
1993	3	2003	38		
1994	2	2004	47		
1995	1	2005	33		
1996	11	2006	21		
1997	8	2007	36		
1998	9	2008	84 (peak)		
1999	28	2009	66		
'2000	28	2010	50		

Table 10. Number of times term 'consuminderen' (less consuming) mentioned in Dutch newspapers 1980 – 2012 (LexisNexis 2012)

What could be driving this the trend? As discussed in section 4.3, collective grievances can lead to the

²¹ The report is for sale for 2700 dollar and explains somewhat contra-intuitively how corporations should marketize their products for these consumers. Interestingly, I have encountered numerous business journals with articles on how to counter anti-consumption, partly through developing products that suit the ideals of downshifters such as durability, partly by clearing the negative name of the particular brand.

²² Survey conducted in Brazil (n=700), China (n=700), France (n=700), Japan (n=700), the UK (n=700), and the US (n=1500).

²³ This information was retrieved from a Spend Nothing New maand newsletter; I have been unable to track this specific Havas report myself.

desirability of something new. Yet, regarding the general happiness of Dutch citizens, the World Values Survey indicates that 90 percent of the population is either ‘quite happy’ or ‘very happy’ (WVS 2012). This implies that the mobilization of a larger downshifting movement cannot arise from general discontent with the current situation. It could however support the theory that once a certain level of affluence is acquired people start orienting more on immaterial values, as Aarts previously tried to establish (1999). As Inglehart has demonstrated, over the last decades people are increasingly oriented on post material-values, which ‘emerge as people come to place increasing emphasis on autonomy, self-expression and the quality of life’ (Inglehart 2008: 131). The organization Echte Welvaart experienced that many people are rich but yet still ‘miss something’ (personal communication, de Vries, August 22nd 2012). According to the WVS, most people in the Netherlands are somewhere in the middle between materialism and post-materialism (see figure 7), whereas after World War Two people were much more materialist.

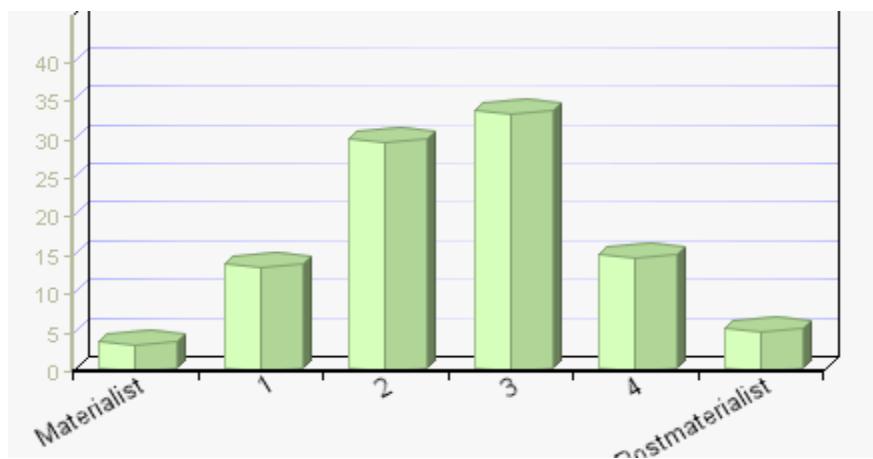


Figure 7. Postmaterialist index (World Values Survey 2012)

Perceived illegitimacy of the authorities is another contributing factor to mobilization. In spite of their wellbeing Dutch citizens have little confidence in their government (26 percent quite some, 53 percent not very much and 20 percent no confidence at all) compared to for instance the environmental protection movement (5 percent has a great deal of confidence, 51 percent quite a lot, 35 percent not very much and 9 not at all) (WVS 2012). Confidence in international institutions and multinational corporations is also quite low. Thus the elite organizations in power do not have the trust of the general public in the Netherlands, especially since the financial and European crisis. Banks like Triodos and ASN have become much more popular due to the financial crisis and the collapse of banks with irresponsible methods. Concerning political action, quite a high number is member of an environmental or charity organization (4 out of 16 million are member of an environmental organization²⁴), and a small majority has joined or would be willing to join in boycotts. In general people share a high concern for the environment and are willing to take on some responsibility to look after the environment (see figure 6).

²⁴ Milieuloket (2007) ‘Natuur en milieu organisaties hebben 4 miljoen leden’, retrieved on Oktober 5th 2012, <http://www.milieuloket.nl/9353000/1/j9vvhurbs7rzkq9/vhr1ksj7uavr?ctx=vhurdyxqumzx>

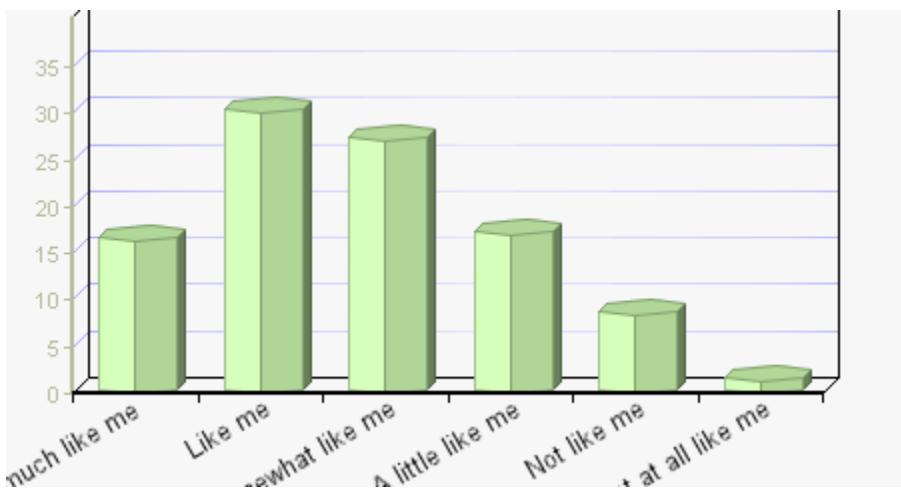


Figure 6. Important for individuals to look after the environment (World Values Survey 2012)

The initiatives covered in the case studies also provide a mixed picture of the Dutch social receptiveness of downshifting. Some people experience social disapproval and some don't; according to Verheul in general over the years a more frugal lifestyle seems to be more socially accepted (personal communication, May 25th 2012). Dissatisfaction with the usual routine of 'work and spend' is one of the most important drivers of downshifting according to van der Sanden. Many people experience a burnout before they start downshifting. For Repair Cafes, most of the advertisement runs through neighbors telling each other. This could indicate that the setting of the repair cafe does not carry a negative social image.

Structural

What structural limitations and opportunities influence the growth of downshifting in the Netherlands? The Netherlands has some quite beneficial factors. The country is small, we have among the best bicycle traffic accommodations in the world, and public transport is well developed. We also have the world's best conditions for part-time jobs, allowing people to take more time off from work²⁵. According to van Someren, a major limiting factor is high wages. When labor is expensive and resources cheap in comparison it becomes more convenient to buy new things than to reuse or to repair. What adds to this problem is the fact that most household devices are increasingly hard to repair. Devices are fabricated in such a way that they are hard or impossible to open without breaking some component (H. van Someren, personal communication, July 12th 2012). In the experience of de Vries, an obvious but major perceived structural barrier was the fact that most companies set-ups are to make profit, and to shift the attention in the business world to a different kind of prosperity focus was simply impossible. However, in the past ten year the idea has become much more mainstream, and social entrepreneurship is more readily embraced. Connections between businesses, government parties and NGOs are much more easily made, whereas around the year 2000 the opposition would be too great. Overall, just as in most rich countries, pervasive structures are promoting overconsumption. These include: a high advertisement density; high wages compared to cost of resources; and expensive and non-sustainable houses. The Dutch have an advantage however in comparison to most affluent countries in terms of size, infrastructure and public transport.

²⁵ This is compensated however by the large number of dual-earning households.

Political

This section discusses the political willingness of the current Dutch government to embrace downshifting and the capacity and propensity it has to ‘suppress’ downshifting initiatives following McAdam et al.’s four factors presented in section 4.3.

Concerning the openness or closure of the institutionalized political system, the Netherlands is quite open and new democratic parties are admitted through democratic procedures. In fact, a very broad range of parties was up for election September 2012, of which two parties promoted downshifting. The overall strategy of the Dutch government is, just as in other developed countries, typified by: the belief in win-win strategies, in which the environment and the economy prosper through the decoupling of growth and throughput; reliance on innovation and technology; the assumption that growth is needed for renewal; and finally that consumption reduction and the change of individual habits is not really needed (de Geus 2003: 188). The first politician to counter the dominant discourse was Jan Pronk, then minister for the environment, who gave an interview in the newspaper Trouw in 1999 and shared concern about the limitations of economic growth and the dominance of material welfare. His concerns were disregarded however.

He had completely misjudged the reactions of the more right wing and less green thinking members of the Dutch ‘Purple Cabinet’...who either took no notice at all of Pronks arguments or pragmatically distanced themselves in the media from his radical point of view...When arguing for an ‘economics of enough’ they would also run the great risk of being punished in the next elections by all those voters whose picture of the good life still corresponds with the realization of acquisitive values and unlimited consumption.

(de Geus 2003: 191)

Up to now Groenlinks, the largest green political party in the Netherlands, also resents the concept of sufficiency and pleads for ‘green’ technological innovation. In the last two elections however, some small political parties have started to take a stand for an economics of sufficiency. Among these is the spiritually oriented political party which with 18.000 votes in the 2012 elections did not get seats: Partij voor Mens en Spirit (Party for Man and Spirit), but also the better known Partij voor de Dieren (Party for the animals), with 180.000 votes and two seats in the House of Representatives. Its call for downshifting has been largely ignored, but the party might pose an interesting ally for downshifting initiatives in the future.

If general confidence in the Dutch government and in intergovernmental agencies keeps decreasing, this might render the stability of elite alignments more vulnerable to the advancement of a different system. The government is adapting however to some extent. A positive development is the increased concern with health (in particular obesity related) and social participation. The detrimental effects of overconsumption and the dictations of work and spend are increasingly acknowledged by government agencies. Consequently initiatives like Transition Towns, permaculture gardens and Slow Food events often receive funding because they stimulate healthier lifestyles and social participation. Another interesting development is the government’s interest in taking on the ecological footprint as a tool to decrease its environmental impact. The need for economic growth is still dominant however. For instance, although it has for some time been officially acknowledged that GDP is an unsatisfactory instrument to measure national welfare, the government is currently under huge pressure to stimulate economic growth and to deal with its budget deficit.

5.4 Conclusion

The first section of this chapter has first presented a list of initiatives in the Netherlands that promote downshifting. It has become apparent that many initiatives promote downshifting, albeit in different ways, and that especially within the last six years they are increasing in number. The case studies have demonstrated how these initiatives motivate people to downshift, what their general strategies are and how well they succeed in achieving their goals and having societal impact. The most important findings are that downshifting initiatives provide positive messages that in increasing cases manage to connect with the personal aspirations of potential participants. However, a collective identity has not been formed around the topic of downshifting, it is interpreted more as a personal endeavor than as a struggle that has to be collectively engaged. This is also reflected in the mobilization, tactics and dynamics of the initiatives. They are rather small compared to other environmental social movements (will be discussed in next chapter) and most (21/37) focus on providing services to their constituencies. They provide an increasing wealth of information and tools that assist people to start downshifting. In general there is not much money going around in these initiatives, which restricts their scope, and also sometimes their capacity to have more effective leadership and provide more services. This ‘weakness’ is compensated through utilizing their broad networks, in which services are often exchanged.

Finally I have presented some discussion on social, structural and political barriers and opportunities that affect the growth of downshifting initiatives and the uptake of downshifting behavior in general. Most importantly, they signify a shift away from the belief in a neo-liberal system towards a more direct responsibility to consumers and corporations model. Moreover, in the political domain downshifting is promoted by one political party, which is a first. In the following and final chapter I will bring these findings together and draw some conclusion on the major strengths and weaknesses of current downshifting initiatives.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

There is no panacea but an opening on to a world of 'free acts' and intense encounters that have begun to shift the ontological horizons of social change.

(Chesters & Welsh 2005: 204)

6.1 Introduction

Some proponents suggest that downshifters will stimulate a change in political willingness of governments to make more radical environmental policy. But on the other hand they stress that societal structures inhibit the growth of downshifting and that these should be changed by governments in order to foster downshifting. Thus downshifting is assigned an ambivalent position, it should serve as a catalyst for structural change while at the same time being dependent on structural change (Alexander 2012). This thesis is an attempt to find some theoretically based arguments that can help assess the viability of downshifting initiatives. In this final chapter I will discuss some conclusions that can be drawn. The next section will first consider the limitations of this study.

6.2 Limitations of this study

The most important limitation of this study is its speculative character. The reader will hopefully agree that its findings are based on empirical data, however I have focused on what downshifting organizations tell about themselves, rather than talking to their constituency, or to other organization they collaborate with. A second limitation is the choice of case-studies. In the beginning of the process I decided to select on size and relevancy, i.e. I wanted those organizations that seemed either the largest or were most directly focused on downshifting. This has resulted in the analysis of dominantly service organizations. Looking back I think that more diversity would have provided a more complete assessment of the various initiatives. For instance, I would have included more interest groups that promote alternative economic systems, because they are more targeted at promoting downshifting to government and corporate organizations. Finally, the findings of this thesis are limited to the Netherlands. I am aware of similar movements in Belgium and the US for instance, and I think these findings can be extrapolated to some extent to other affluent societies. However, the relation between standard of living and quality of life in developing countries needs to be approached from a completely different angle. With these limitations in mind, the conclusions of this thesis can now be considered.

6.3 The viability of downshifting initiatives

The main question of this thesis is: what is the viability of Dutch downshifting initiatives? Viability has been defined as both the capacity to achieve self-set goals and the capacity to contribute to the 'growth' of downshifting in the Netherlands. As we have seen the number of downshifting initiatives is growing, and according to trend studies the idea of living a simpler lifestyle is increasingly embraced by consumers. However, there is not a central social movement organization that promotes downshifting. Compared to the three largest environmental organizations in the Netherlands, the World Wild Fund for Nature, (935.000 members), Natuurmonumenten (Nature monuments) (881.000 members) and Greenpeace (570.000 members) downshifting initiatives seem insignificant in size. They do not have access to a constituency with a similar amount of sponsors or volunteers willing to participate in education or protest campaigns.

However, I believe there are a number of social developments that enhance the viability of downshifting initiatives. First the Dutch population is becoming more oriented on post-material values. Second, faith is declining in economic growth and market mechanisms as legitimate tools to address social and environmental problems, which is reflected in the reduced trust in the government in comparison to environmental organizations and increasing protest against capitalism as such. Chesters and Welsh identify this same shift studying the alter-globalization movement (AGM) in events such the World Social Forum:

Anomie is transcended through the exchange of views and the realization that reflexive criticality is not an individual quirk but is in fact a widely experienced and appropriate mode of response to the neo-liberal axiomatic.

(Chesters & Welsh 2005: 199)

The third development (tied closely with the second) is the acceptance of the idea that ‘the personal is also the political’ (Giddens 1991; Micheletti 2003), which is reflected in the personal approach of downshifting initiatives. Due to the failure of the capitalist system to bring about its promises, the past decade has seen a shift to the taking on personal responsibility for the public domain, both by corporations and citizens (Dubbink 2003). People increasingly expect corporations to behave ethically and downshifting initiatives seem to adapt to the notion that personal consumption choices matter and that people want to ‘vote’ with their money according to their beliefs. The neo-liberal system is surpassed because responsible consumers demonstrate that ‘consciousness and moral restraints on consumption choices undermine the traditional model of self-interested consumers and individualization of responsibility’ (Black & Cherrier 2010: 439).

According to some this personal approach results in a fragmented and diffuse character of the movement (Cherrier & Murray 2002: 245). Pleyers for instance believes that more active protest is needed.

The limitations and diversions of the way of subjectivity...are, however, even more present in these more individualized modes of involvement. In some cases it leads to the disintegration of the alter-globalization movement or its dissolution into depoliticized ‘self-help’ groups, more personal considerations of health or the quality of produce replacing the sense of opposition to neoliberalism and consumer society.

(Pleyers 2010: 242)

According to Chesters and Welsh conversely the fragmented character is essential to the movements’ identity. Members of downshifting initiatives call themselves ‘disorganizations’ because they ‘regard the existing political system as part of the problem not part of the solution’ (2005: 198). They lack institutions and preconceived structures because direct action is prioritized over a long-term strategy. The process of collective action itself is regarded just as valuable as the conceived results, thus integrating the purpose of the action into the doing/becoming itself.

[There is a] fit between daily personal acts – repertoires of self – and desired social, political and cultural ends. Within the AGM, personal frames thus intersect with elements of the ideological and discursive expressions of both contemporary society and the movement milieu.

(Ibid.)

Meanwhile, I think that downshifting initiatives are both the result of these social dynamics as well as a force that helps it grow. The main strengths in their strategy, as discussed in the previous chapter are

their ability to attach a positive message to downshifting; allow people to surround themselves with a different performance environment; and give empowering information and tools that help reduce consumption, for instance through social media. Knowing how to use new advancements in technology through social media and sharing/exchange software is contributing greatly to the visibility and applicability of downshifting ideas. According to Botsman and Rogers, the key to why what they call ‘collaborative consumption’ is taking on so fast now ‘is because every new advancement of technology increases the efficiency and social glue of trust to make sharing easier’²⁶. This might ‘compensate’ the movements’ lack of group identity. Weak ties and social bridges (see also Gladwell 2001) become more important in spreading the trend than in classic social movements in which collective identity fosters movement cohesion and movement actors are oriented on national systems and political opportunities (Chesters & Welsh 2005: 190). Moreover, according to initiatives like magazine Genoeg and Consuminderhuis Ons Genoeg the increased visibility of downshifters helps many people to gain a sense of dignity.

The personal approach, besides being a potential weakness in the sense that structural changes are not stimulated, also limits the initiatives in their daily activities. Transition Towns for instance could be bigger and more efficient if it had more resources to develop a stronger national organization. As the discussed, the mobilization of resources is more likely to be successful with ambitious visions and the articulation of concrete expectations. From this perspective, most downshifting initiatives (at least the nine that have been assessed in depth) have rather ‘modest’ ambitions.

At this moment it is impossible to predict whether the personal approach of downshifting initiatives will support the growth of downshifting enough to decrease (some of) the detrimental effects over overconsumption. The financial and environmental crises might lead to increased dissatisfaction with current governments and international institutions and contribute to a disruption of the taken for granted ‘protective cocoon’ and the promise of increased material affluence. As argued in Chapter 4, people are more likely to question the values that underlie their daily routines and lifestyles in times of crises. However, global resource depletion and emission of toxics is still increasing, fastest in countries like China and India, whose products are mainly exported to affluent countries, but where consumption levels are also vastly increasing.

6.5 Recommendations

In my opinion, research concerning sustainable development should focus on the emergence of necessary solutions. Although it will never be certain what those are, we should have a clear focus (decrease environmental burden), study all means available (including technological and life-style changes) and hope the right decisions will be made when they are needed. Moreover, when governments react too slowly to life-threatening situations, I agree with Sherry (2004: 60) that the scientific community should be committed to translate scholarship into activism.

For future research, it would be highly complementary to map and explore the motivations of actual downshifters in the Netherlands, instead of organizations that promote it. The opposition (or perhaps mutually beneficial relationship) between a personally oriented, fragmented downshifting strategy and a more publicly/state oriented approach can be deeper explored. Either way I agree that it ‘must consist in a quasi-methodical construction of a new balance of powers capable of producing a change in the social imaginary’ (Cherrier et al. 2010: 416).

²⁶ http://www.ted.com/talks/rachel_botsman_the_case_for_collaborative_consumption.html

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Appendix A – Interview respondents

Initiative leaders

Consuminderhuis Ons Genoeg:
van Deursen, A. personal communication June 14th 2012

No Impact Week:
Eerhart, R. personal communication, June 3rd 2012

Transition Towns Nederland/Olst
Hendriksen, P. personal communication, Sept. 3rd 2012

Slow Food Nederland
Van der Meer, J. personal communication, July 20th 2012

Genoeg Magazine
van der Sanden, H. personal communication, June 4th 2012

Repair Café Utrecht:
van Someren, H. personal communication July 12th 2012

Omslag
Verheul, D. personal communication, May 25th 2012

Echte Welvaart
de Vries, A. personal communication, August 22nd 2012

Buy Nothing New maand
Rompa, I. personal communication, October 2nd 2012 and email exchange

Experts

Ecological footprint, Local Agenda 21, Platform Duurzame en Solidaire Economie
Juffermans, J. personal communication, September 10th 2012

Downshifting researcher
Schreurs, J. personal communication, January 4th 2012

Appendix B – Interview question

Internal

1. What is the purpose of your initiative?
2. How are you trying to achieve this?
3. How do you perceive yourself in relation to society?
4. What are the main activities of your initiative?
5. What are the effects of these activities?
6. When did you start?
7. Are you growing?
8. Who participates?
9. How are you trying to attract participants?
10. How do you come by financial resources, and is it enough to do what you want?
11. Is there a sense of group-identity in your initiative or does your initiative contribute to one?
12. How is your initiative connected to other initiatives, NGOs, corporate organization and the government?

External

13. Do you get any political support/ are you looking for political support?
14. What structural factors help/make it difficult to live the life that your initiative promotes?
15. What happens socially to the people that participate in your initiative?
16. Why do people join your initiative?

General

17. What other downshifting initiatives do you know?