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### Slowing Down the Great Acceleration: Campaigns for Sustainable Consumption in the Netherlands, 1950s–1990s

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# Chapter 29

## Slowing Down the Great Acceleration: Campaigns for Sustainable Consumption in the Netherlands, 1950s–1990s



Peter van Dam 

### Background

People in Western Europe and North America experienced an unprecedented rise in material prosperity from the 1950s onwards. This prosperity came at a hefty price for people and the planet alike. Researchers have labeled the second half of the twentieth century the ‘Great Acceleration’ because of the enormous increase of human impact on the planet. The rise in material wealth up until recently primarily benefited people living in the Global North (McNeill & Engelke, 2016; Steffen et al., 2015). The United Nations’ International Resources Panel in 2019 reported that global resource use has continued to expand rapidly during the first decades of the twenty-first century, reinforcing the detrimental environmental impact as well as the unequal distribution of wealth and negative social and environmental effects (International Resources Panel, 2019, p. 17). In light of the Sustainable Development Goals, the current use of resources is unsustainable (Guterres, 2020, pp. 48–49). Reducing the human material ‘footprint’ has therefore been a key part of recent strategies to promote sustainability (Shukla et al., 2022, pp. 505–507).

To reduce the material footprint, two key strategies are apparent: reducing the resources needed to maintain current levels of consumption and curtailing current levels of consumption particularly in the wealthiest countries (Bizikova et al., 2015, p. 11). The former has been a primary focus of current policies to design processes of production, distribution, and consumption in a less wasteful and more circular manner. The latter has been more contentious, because it implies a more drastic change in lifestyles and undermines current economic models geared towards economic growth and consumer sovereignty. As the climate crisis has been mounting and material resource use has continued to expand, however, the call to consider measures to curb consumption levels has gained traction. In 2023, the Netherlands

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Environmental Assessment Agency, for instance, stated that more attention will have to be devoted to strategies urging consumers to refuse consumption if a circular economy is to be realized (Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving, 2023).

To understand the opportunities and barriers to reducing the impact of consumption, it is crucial to draw on the insights offered by past attempts to promote sustainable consumption. The notion that citizens can contribute to a more sustainable world through consuming responsibly has become a staple of present-day consumer culture. Where did the sustainable consumer come from? Talk of sustainability became ubiquitous during the 1980s around the publication of *Our common future*, also known as the Brundtland-report, which stated that economic development and environmental protection ought to be intertwined in order for each to be successful (Borowy, 2014; World Commission on Environment & Development, 1987). Tracing explicit mentions of sustainability and its counterparts in other languages, the genealogy of the German *Nachhaltigkeit* has drawn particular attention. In the history of forestry in particular, historians of knowledge have analyzed how economic interests and environmental concerns were connected in coming up with ways to harvest wood sustainably (Hölzl, 2010; Warde, 2018). Broadening the scope of the history of sustainability to include ideas and practices we would now qualify as sustainable, historians have analyzed how people accounted for the environmental and social impact of economic activities since the Early Modern era, if not longer (Caradonna, 2017; de Keyzer, 2018; Soens & Stabel, 2016).

This chapter combines both approaches, asking how the now-familiar notion of sustainable consumption came to be. Initiatives for sustainable consumption to that end are defined here as implicit or explicit attempts to redress the social and environmental impact of existing practices of consumption. They explicate the assumptions and impacts which inform existing practices and propose alternatives (Halkier, 2009; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013, pp. 204–243). People have long worried about the negative impacts of consumption. Emphases differed: working conditions and economic distribution, health, the environment, animal welfare, and wastefulness, to name the most important ones. Whereas most histories of sustainability have explored how social concerns were eventually wedded to environmental ones, the history of sustainable consumption starts with socio-economic considerations. The Dutch word for sustainable—*duurzaam*—was mainly used before the 1980s to refer to products which would last and could thus sensibly be bought. The emergence of practices related to what would become known as ‘sustainable development’ since the 1950s demonstrates which ideas and practices informed it and helps to explain how sustainable consumption could quickly become widely known at the turn of the 1990s.

Civic initiatives were at the forefront of attempts to address mass consumption’s negative consequences for people and planet. These initiatives activated existing networks and adopted existing practices of consuming responsibly, while reacting to new concerns about unsustainable ways of living and creating new alliances. Many campaigns directed towards changing consumer behavior in the post-war-era have been discussed as actions mounted by individual social movements. Approaching them as instances of promoting sustainable consumption enables an analysis which

presents these campaigns as part of a longer engagement in favor of sustainability, highlighting the continuities as well as important shifts in preconditions, motives, and practices.

As attempts to change the way in which people consume particularly in the global North gain a new urgency amidst the climate crisis, assessing the trajectories of earlier attempts to promote sustainable consumption is crucial. This chapter highlights how campaigns promoting sustainable consumption initially focused on social issues and gradually came to combine social and environmental concerns. This shift from ‘red’ to ‘green’ issues is highlighted through the analysis of a selection of prominent civic campaigns promoting sustainable consumption in the Netherlands from the 1950s until the 1990s. By analyzing the preconditions, motives, and barriers involved in promoting sustainable consumption, it establishes why some campaigns were more successful than others and identifies ways to move forward.

## Advocating Sustainable Consumption During the Great Acceleration: Case Study

Levels of consumption rose remarkably in the Netherlands since the 1950s. The average disposable income more than doubled between 1969 and 2020 (Mulligen, 2021). This surge in income translated into an enormous increase in spending on consumer goods. In 1950, 121,000 passenger cars were registered in the Netherlands. By 2005, there were 6,992,000. The consumption of wine rose from 0.5 liters per person a year in 1950 to 21.3 liters in 2005.<sup>1</sup> Average meat consumption rose from 35.4 kilos per person a year in 1950 to 73.5 kilos in 1980, while coffee consumption went up from 1.3 kilos a year in 1950 to 7.8 kilos in 1980. This ‘Great Acceleration’ came at a considerable cost: it resulted in 10.6 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions per citizen in 2010 and was predicated on importing 12.9 tons of raw materials per capita in the same year (Lintsen et al., 2018, pp. 316–317). These unsustainable levels of consumption were attained during the Great Acceleration both in the Netherlands and in Western Europe and North America at large. Right from the outset, this development was contested. Intellectuals criticized the threat to individuality and authenticity, the coarseness and artificial wants, and the potential alienation resulting from mass consumption (Horowitz, 2004; Wirsching, 2010). A host of civic initiatives engaged more directly with consumers, attempting to steer them towards consumer behavior regarded as more sustainable. Their initial focus was on the social impact of consumption on an individual and a collective level within the global North.

A first group of organizations which emerged during the 1950s focused on the socio-economic dimension of consumption. The *Consumentenbond* (Consumers Union) was founded in 1953 to provide a counterweight to business influence in politics and society. As part of the international network of organizations federated

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<sup>1</sup> CBS Statline, <https://opendata.cbs.nl/statline/>.

in the International Consumers Association, it aimed to defend the rights and interests of consumers through product testing, consumer education, and lobbying the government to protect consumers. As the *Consumentenbond* grew into an organization boasting half a million members by 1978 (on a total population of 13.9 million), it expounded the idea that sustainability was primarily a matter of economy on a macro- and a micro-level. On the macro-level, the equal representation of consumer interests next to the interests of businesses would ensure balanced economic development. The government was to provide consumer protection through legislation, setting a baseline for the quality of products and services and indicating the kind of information that should be provided by retailers. On the micro-level, an ethics of frugality continued to inform the view of the ‘good’ consumers. They were advised to inform themselves about their rights and about the products they were buying. Product testing offered a chance to single out products which offered the best quality for a reasonable price (Black, 2004; van Dam, 2021).

The *Consumentenbond*’s view of sustainable consumption was initially supported by a broad coalition of civic organizations, including women’s associations and trade unions. By the early 1970s, however, the *Consumentenbond* felt confident enough to distinguish itself from this coalition as the primary voice of the consumer, while trade union representatives were increasingly uncomfortable by what was perceived as the middle class orientation of the *Consumentenbond*. In 1972, the Dutch trade unions initiated the establishment of an alternative consumer organization called *Konsumenten Kontakt*, which foregrounded the interests of consumers with limited spending power. What good was it to advise on ‘best buys’ if only the well-to-do could afford them? It thus questioned the usefulness of a generalized notion of sustainable consumption, stating in one of its publications: ‘Of course, there’s something like the “best buy”. But that advice applies to the average consumer. And who is that? Nobody, because all of us together build the average. Everyone has distinct demands and distinct abilities’ (Konsumenten Kontakt, 1973, p. 5).

Socio-economic concerns predominated the consumer association’s considerations regarding sustainable consumption. Prompted by concerns about food safety, they also considered consumer health to be an essential issue. Emphasizing economic and health interests, consumer associations were driven by motives for promoting sustainable consumption which are often overlooked (van Dam & Verriet, 2023). Moreover, these concerns were primarily related to the lives of consumers in the Netherlands. By the end of the 1960s, however, a new flurry of campaigns pointed out the socio-economic impact of consumption on what was then called the ‘Third World’.

In 1968, a loose alliance of student and youth organizations, development organizations, and religious groups launched the ‘cane sugar campaign’ to raise awareness about international economic inequality. This campaign would kickstart a series of other activities all directed towards raising awareness about global inequality and the ways in which Dutch citizens were implicated in upholding it. Cane sugar symbolized this involvement very aptly around 1968. Nominally, it was cheaper than European beet sugar on the world market. But because of European import tariffs on cane sugar and agricultural subsidies for European-produced sugar beet, producers from

the global South did not get a chance to sell their cane sugar for a competitive price in the Netherlands. By asking consumers to demand cane sugar instead of beet sugar, the campaign's initiators wanted to draw attention to the ways in which trade was structured to the detriment of producers in the global South. As a result, they hoped that citizens in the global North would urge their political representatives to renegotiate these in forums like the United Nations Conferences on Trade and Development (van Dam, 2019b).

The attempts to leverage sugar consumption primarily to raise awareness and exert political pressure did not produce the desired changes in international politics. Activists opposing global inequality thus gradually shifted attention to incremental tactics, retaining the aim of raising awareness but also making an immediate impact. From the early 1970s onwards, hundreds of so-called 'world shops' sprung up across Western Europe, where rag-tag groups of activists met locally to discuss, plan activities, and buy and sell 'good' products ranging from cane sugar, coffee procured by co-operatives, wine from revolutionary states like Algeria, to recycled toilet paper. These world shops thus fostered an alternative ethics of consumption, focusing on the impact consumption had on people far away rather than on the economic position of consumers in Western Europe (Möckel, 2019; van Dam, 2016).

Whether focused on the socio-economic interests of people in the South or the North, the consumer associations and the Third World activists emphasized changing what people bought. Limiting the overall volume of consumption was not a primary goal. Making 'good' choices along the lines of consumer associations or Third World activism did foster an ethics of consumption which emphasized making considerate choices and moderating consumption accordingly. In the course of the 1970s, a new wave of campaigns aimed to curb consumption. They were informed by long-standing ethics of simple living and prompted by analyses like the Club of Rome's *Limits to growth* (1972), which stressed the fact that the planet's resources could not sustain the prevalent patterns of consumption (Meadows et al., 1972).

Food activism developed particularly strikingly in this regard. By the late 1960s, a group of small-scale farmers working along the 'biodynamic' principles set forth by Rudolf Steiner around the turn of the twentieth century were joined by newcomers, who wanted to distance themselves from mass production and consumption. These newcomers took up small-scale farming to live more plainly, communally, and in a closer relation to nature, eschewing the glare of mass society and the chemical means of industrial agricultural production (van Dam & Striekwold, 2022). As a result, a network of small-scale farms, distribution centers for organic foods, and corresponding shops developed in the course of the 1970s (Nieuwendijk, 1983). The subculture which evolved alongside stressed a lifestyle which wondrously avoided the perceived ills of consumer society, ranging from the use of fertilizers to increase agricultural production to the use of plastics to package mass-produced foodstuffs. These alternative practices were often accompanied by explicit references to ideas epitomized by Ernst Schumacher's *Small is beautiful* (Schumacher, 1973)—to live more sustainably in light of the ecological and social limitations, people in the global North would have to reign in their appetites.

Attempts to limit consumption were not confined to the circles of people moving to small-scale farms and shopping for organic food, however. Churches had been preoccupied with the lifestyles of Christians in a postcolonial world, where many people in Western Europe started to live unprecedentedly prosperous lives. The World Council of Churches had spoken about the need to adjust the way people lived in light of the unequal relation between the South and the North and the pressure economic activities exerted on the environment at its assembly in 1966. Engagement on behalf of peace, justice, and equal distribution blended with a more conservative strain of criticism focusing on the moral emptiness of life in a technologically advanced consumer society (World Council of Churches, 1967).

Gradually, the conversations about consuming responsibly found their way from international church meetings to local and national assemblies. Signaling a remarkably broad consensus about the need to change the way people lived, the Dutch Catholic and mainline Protestant churches launched a campaign to promote 'a new style of living' during the 1970s. In 1973, the Dutch Catholic bishops published a pastoral letter which called for a more austere way of living (Bisschoppen van Nederland, 1973). Two years onwards, a group of Protestant churches published a brochure which called for a change in the way Christians lived to plausibly express their concerns about global inequality, the limited availability of natural resources, and the environmental degradation which currently resulted from using them (Algemeen Bureau voor de Gereformeerde Kerken, 1977). Impressed by the warnings about the unsustainability of the prevalent mode of production and consumption in the global North, these churches in 1974 jointly encouraged their constituency to seek new ways of living more responsibly. In particular, church leaders thought that reducing consumption in the Netherlands could be a way to provide other parts of the world with to develop without exceeding the environmental and social 'limits to growth'. After all, consuming less would free up resources for others to use, reduce pollution, and decrease the gap between rich and poor.

A working group was tasked with mounting a campaign to this effect. The *Werkgroep Nieuwe Levensstijl* (Working group New Lifestyle) distributed information and suggestions for activities to church members, spurring the establishment of around 700 local groups across the Netherlands. In a notable shift away from grand narratives of change, members of these local groups were asked to implement concrete changes in their everyday lives: eat less meat, heat homes sparingly, reduce the use of cars and airplanes, etc. They started on these changes by meeting up to discuss the ways in which their everyday lives touched upon global problems. The working material encouraged group members to identify issues which tied their 'heads' to their 'hands', combining reflection and concrete changes in the way they lived. To make sure such changes had a lasting impact, the groups were encouraged to revisit their reflections and resolutions regularly (Landelijke Werkgroep Nieuwe Levensstijl, 1977; van der Sar, 1978).

Around 1980, however, the campaign's coordinators observed that interest was dwindling. The daunting insights into the interconnections of social and environmental, local, and global problems caused some to abandon the campaign altogether, whereas others decided to focus on specific issues without clinging to the banner of

a 'new lifestyle'. Having regular discussion group meetings itself was becoming a habit rather than a life-changing practice for many church members. The evaluation of the campaign published in 1981 also noted that interest in adopting a more sober lifestyle had been spurred by economic crises. As time went on, anxieties about scarcity and economic decline had waned, and so had the perceived need to change patterns of consumption. Most of the participants had not translated their immediate reaction to a perceived state of crisis into long-lasting changes (Werkgroep Nieuwe Levensstijl, 1981).

New efforts to promote sustainable consumption in the 1980s returned to changing rather than curbing consumption. Concerns about the social impact of consumption particularly on people in other parts of the world continued to shape these campaigns. Environmental issues also informed the new initiatives, although they stressed the local environmental dimension rather than the threat of global scarcity. A series of famines in African countries played an important role in this shift, as they dramatically foregrounded how people in some parts of the world lacked access to food almost completely (O'Sullivan, 2021). Bob Geldof's much-advertised Band Aid and Live Aid campaigns and other, less internationally visible actions connected global inequality and environmental degradation. In the Netherlands, a coalition of 'Third World' and environmental activists, church groups, and agricultural organizations responded by hosting a week of activities around the motto *honger hoeft niet* ('no need for hunger') in 1985, which were planned by local campaign committees backed by a national campaign which provided materials and publicity (Verweij, 2020).

The focus on food made the connection between social and environmental concerns a natural one: there were ready examples of the entanglement of socio-economic and environmental issues. The *Honger hoeft niet*-campaign in 1985 presented the example of coffee creamer, which was produced from soja beans, palm kernels, coconuts, or sunflowers imported from countries like Brazil, Malaysia, Turkey, and the Philippines. This implied that farmers in faraway countries were producing cheap foodstuff for the Western European market, rather than food which could be sold to the local population. On top of that, forests were cleared to increase production. On the other hand, farmers in Europe were outbid by these cheaper products. The brochure concluded with the question: 'What if every country would try to take care of itself? Would there still be hunger? Would nature still deteriorate so sharply?' (Taverne et al., 1985). In such instances, what would become known as 'sustainable development' offered a plausible alternative: finding ways to foster more feasible economic development would also be a way to prevent environmental degradation. As the campaign was reiterated on a yearly basis between 1985 and 1991, explicit references to sustainable development as popularized by the 1987 Brundtland report became an explicit part of the communications without changing the outlook of the campaign.

The basic premises of *Honger hoeft niet* remained similar in the course of its yearly iterations but its repertoire did not. The first years were marked by activities which aimed at raising awareness among citizens through events, exhibitions, lectures, and publications. After the evaluation of the third annual campaign in 1987, the organizing committee noted the widespread calls for activities which promoted practices of

‘critical consumption’. Such activities were deemed an effective way to relate the issues which were addressed to the daily lives of the public. They would also allow those who were sympathetic to the campaign to continuously pursue these concerns instead of only focusing on them during a yearly week of campaigning (Andriessen & Sturkenboom, 1988). The 1988 campaign therefore put seven products center stage: coffee, tropical timber, cola, milk, margarine, meat, and ‘frontline products’ imported from countries neighboring South Africa. Some of these—timber, milk, margarine, and meat—ostensibly combined social and environmental dimensions like coffee creamer had done before. Products like the ‘frontline’-items were predominantly focused on the social aspect, encouraging consumers to economically support South Africa’s neighbor countries by buying products from these regions.

The *Honger Hoeft Niet*-campaign thus attempted to limit certain kinds of consumption and promote alternative choices. People were encouraged to buy fair trade coffee and cashew nuts from countries which were struggling to escape the economic hold of South Africa. At the same time, they were called upon to reconsider buying products made out of tropical timber to stop deforestation, eat less meat to free up land and food now used to feed livestock. This shift in repertoire towards a more appreciative stance regarding consumption provided a crucial building block for the growing popularity of the figure of the ‘sustainable consumer’ in these years (van Dam, 2019a).

The effects of campaigns like these are notoriously difficult to measure. On the one hand, products people could buy to support specific countries remained niche products, imported by small agencies and sold through a few select channels. On the other, the 1990s saw notable developments in relation to other issues the campaign addressed in the Netherlands and throughout the global North. A coalition of environmental organizations founded the Forest Stewardship Council in 1993, which promoted sustainable forestry with measures like product certification. Dutch supermarkets increasingly provided substitutes for meat and provided for vegetarian diets.

The success of campaigns which promoted practices of sustainable consumption through substitution of one product for a ‘better’ one were epitomized in the Netherlands by the launch of fair trade certification in 1988. Searching for ways to sell more fair trade coffee in reaction to the Latin American debt crisis and the dire situation of small coffee farmers, a team from the Dutch development organization Solidaridad developed a plan to introduce fair trade coffee in supermarkets. Initially devising a distinct fair trade coffee brand, the group turned to the idea of product certification inspired by the environmental movement which had introduced its own label for organic products some years before. A certification scheme was better suited to accommodate supermarkets who wanted to trade directly with small farmers. It could also draw in large coffee companies instead of turning them into competitors of a new ‘fair’ brand. The new coffee label ‘Max Havelaar’—referring to a famous Dutch anti-colonial novel—was successfully introduced in Dutch supermarkets in 1988. Spurred by the foundation of the international organization Fairtrade Labelling International in 1997, fair trade certification developed into a regular presence in European retail,

sourcing products from around 1.66 million farmers across the world by the 2020s (Bennett, 2013).

The activities of organizations in the field of fair trade certification were not limited to marketing fair trade products to consumers and businesses. Abetted by sales numbers and practical experience in the field of global trade, they lobbied national and international governmental bodies, funded campaigns to raise awareness, and collaborated with producers to improve the environmental and socio-economic conditions in which they lived.

By the early 1990s, the combination of environmental and socio-economic concerns under the banner of sustainability was well-established. The success of campaigns which aimed to mitigate the negative impact of mass consumption by substituting consumer products had also proven effective. This approach was capable of drawing in a larger group of consumers than previous 'alternative' channels had been able to reach. It also broadened the field of retail partners and other businesses interested in engaging with sustainability. The establishment of this interpretation of sustainability and the corresponding approach to promoting it resulted from campaigns by fair trade and environmental activists but was also underpinned by less eye-catching campaigns. Consumer associations had pioneered interpretations of sustainability which stressed the durability and affordability of products but also regarded health as a crucial consumer interest. Promoting healthy products and living environments, their goals aligned with those of new campaigns advocating sustainable consumption.

## Regional Significance

The Dutch campaigns to change the way people consumed by as diverse groups as consumer associations and Third World activists established practices of sustainable consumption even before 'sustainable development' became a buzzword during the late 1980s. These campaigns thus facilitated the popularity of sustainability and in turn capitalized on it, presenting their practices of sustainable consumption as part of a broader push towards sustainability. As postwar development of consumer society in the Netherlands developed in step with other Western European countries, the history of the campaigns advocating sustainable consumption in the Netherlands can shed light on the ways in which people reacted to the Great Acceleration in the global North since the 1950s. It highlights the global conditions which enabled the rise of a distinct ideal of sustainable consumption, the motives underpinning it, and the distinct practices promoted by its advocates.

The campaigns discussed above delineate the historical conditions which enabled the interpretation of sustainable consumption as a practice promoting economic development and environmental responsibility. The expansion of mass production, distribution, and consumption was a crucial cause for the rise of sustainable consumption as an idea and a practice. The unprecedented extent of production, distribution, and consumption caused socio-economic and environmental problems, ranging from

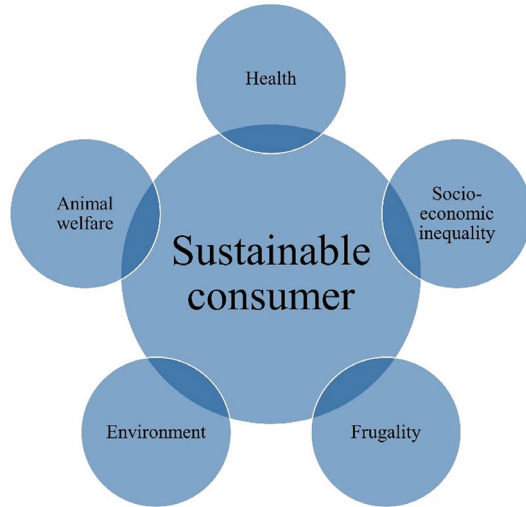
global inequality and pollution to feelings of alienation and fears of looming scarcity. The increased levels of spending, range of choices, and time devoted to consuming elevated the consumer to a more prominent figure in the social imaginary (Klingler, 2014; van Dam, 2021).

Just as importantly, the political decolonization of countries in the global South turned global inequality into an issue of international contention. The fact that countries from the global South leveraged a majority of the votes at the United Nations since the 1960s abetted initiatives to renegotiate issues like the structures of global trade (Kunkel, 2014). During the 1980s, international negotiations about socio-economic inequality and environmental concerns were combined by the work of the Brundtland-commission and its report *Our common future*, which stated that effective environmental policies were only viable if economic development addressed was at the same time (Borowy, 2014). The growing concerns over local pollution, a global shortage of raw materials, and the worldwide effects of the Great Acceleration were thus a third condition enabling the rise of a range of practices of sustainable consumption (Warde et al., 2018). Notably, the issue of climate change was hardly addressed by the campaigns analyzed in this chapter, despite the growing consensus among experts that climate change occurred as a consequence of the rising levels of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

The rise in levels of consumption thus met with a range of objections and the development of alternative practices ever since the 1950s. Some of the critical ideas and practices related to balancing quality and price as well as health quickly became part of a widely shared ethic of consumption. The case of the Netherlands sheds light on the diverse motives underpinning campaigns to promote sustainable consumption. References to sustainable consumption in the 1950s were related to the economic benefit and health of consumers. Third World and alternative food activists articulated motives like a responsibility for people far away, a responsibility to preserve scarce materials, and a desire to live in harmony with nature and other people since the late 1960s. Apart from the more widely shared appeal of ‘simple living’ and frugality, these motives remained more marginal than those expressed by consumer associations. Overall, these histories underline that efforts to promote sustainability were informed by a mix of motives rather than a single purpose. They also point out recurring blind spots in thinking and practicing sustainable consumption in the global North, particularly regarding the lives of people living further away (or out of sight), abstract issues like climate change or the interests of other species (Fig. 29.1).

Next to the importance of the different motives underpinning sustainability, campaigns promoting sustainable consumption in the Netherlands also highlight the significance of analyzing which specific practice is promoted. Consumer associations since the 1950s focused on urging consumers to inform themselves about the quality of products and services and to make deliberate buying decisions based on what was sensible from a perspective of individual economy and health. Subsequent campaigns by Third World activists attempted to integrate buying specific products in a broader repertoire of political campaigning. They regarded buying products like cane sugar as a lever to raise awareness about the structures of global inequality which would result in political pressure. Food activists turning to small-scale production

**Fig. 29.1** Motives for promoting sustainable consumption



and buying organic food in alternative stores attempted to rejoin the production and consumption of food. They also encouraged consumers to buy their food at an alternative venue. The *Nieuwe Levensstijl*-campaign attempted to change the way people consumed by urging local groups to reflect on their lifestyles and reduce their levels of consumption where possible.

The practice of substituting a regular product for a 'good' one urged by the *Honger hoeft niet*- and Max Havelaar-campaigns proved most successful in reaching a larger audience, as is evidenced from the broad coalitions of civic partners they mustered. This broader appeal in part can be attributed to the relatively small change consumers had to make in their everyday lives to buy into this campaign. By substituting one product for another during their regular shopping routine, they could support sustainable development. Moreover, this contribution entailed a form of direct support to marginalized small farmers and a sociopolitical statement at once, elevating the significance of the consumer's decision beyond everyday without decoupling it from daily routines. From the point of view of advocates of sustainable consumption, it turned out to be much easier to encourage consumers to substitute buying a 'good' instead of a 'regular' product than it was to promote a more moderate pattern of consumption or even shopping in an alternative location. Moreover, this significance extended beyond the engagement of consumers. Companies were also more likely to engage with recognizable practices, which did not require drastic changes (Table 29.1).

**Table 29.1** Practices of consumption promoted by campaigns for sustainable consumption

Campaign	Practice
Consumer associations (Consumentenbond, Konsumenten Kontakt)	Making individual buying decisions sensibly
Third World activists (Cane sugar campaign)	Buying as part of a repertoire of political action
Food activism (small-scale farming, organic food stores)	Integrate producing and consuming through small-scale farming, buying in alternative places
<i>Nieuwe levensstijl</i>	Reduce levels of consumption
Sustainable development ( <i>Honger hoeft niet</i> , Max Havelaar)	Buy 'good' products

## Promoting Sustainable Consumption: Barriers, Lessons Learned, Challenges

Despite the relative success of the campaigns promoting sustainable consumption since the late 1980s, sales of fair trade products and other ways of engaging in sustainable practices have not had the desired impact. Practices of sustainable consumption have neither met the expectations of campaigners, nor made a difference on the scale needed to advance more equitable global relations, a reduced global footprint, and the mitigation of climate change. The analysis of the campaigns promoting sustainable consumption in the Netherlands since the 1950s enables an assessment of some of the main barriers on the way to upscaling sustainable consumption.

Some of these barriers are well-known from a broad range of scholarly analyses. Consumption is largely based on habit. The gap between ideals and their alignment with everyday practices (knowledge-action-gap) among consumers is common knowledge in consumer research. It can be regarded a part of a broader problem regarding the viability of tactics aiming to accomplish change through targeting individual consumer behavior. Consumer behavior is shaped within a 'regime of consumption' (Kroen, 2004), a power structure in which individual citizens have little to say. Changing the way in which people consume has been notoriously difficult in the global North, where consumers' freedom to make choices individually has been strongly ingrained in the social imaginary particularly during the Cold War (Olsen, 2019). The imperative to create 'prosperity for all' as a crucial foundation of the politics of postwar Western societies severely limits the extent to which curtailing levels of consumption has been possible on a micro-level. Seen as such, it is likely more viable to regard practices of sustainable consumption as ways to raise awareness and as bridges to other kinds activism, rather than expect these practices to make a large-scale impact in the short term.

Two lesser-known barriers can also be discerned, which could be labeled the paradoxes of success and scale. The paradox of success contends that the sustainable practices which met with the greatest acclaim have been those with the smallest impact. The closer the proposed sustainable practice aligned with existing ways of living, the greater the chance it was taken up. Choosing the 'best buy' or 'fair' coffee

was a practice many consumers showed willingness to consider. However, the effect of substituting one item on the shopping list with another is less noteworthy than a more radical change of lifestyle. Such more radical interventions have been less popular. Even in instances where a broad coalition supported them, as was the case with the *Nieuwe levensstijl*-campaign launched by a coalition of mainline churches, the results were meager at best because of the extent of change propagated.

The paradox of scale denotes the fact that although upscaling sustainable practices is desired, many practices of sustainable consumption build on ideas about the small scale. This is particularly striking in the realm of food activism. The new wave of food activists since the 1960s aimed for a return to small-scale farming, re-establishing links between farmers and their local communities, consuming seasonal foods, etc. As some of the larger retail outlets displayed an interest in selling organic products, this ideal of the small scale appeared all but untenable. As a result, food activists had to decide whether they wanted to prioritize maintaining their ideal of combining social and environmental change through small-scale farming or emphasize the environmental dimension by upscaling organic production (van Dam & Striekwold, 2022).

The main lesson which can be drawn from these campaigns is that changes in patterns of consumption are possible despite these formidable barriers. In thinking about how to instigate such changes, the success of the history of the campaigns promoting sustainability in the Netherlands highlights important factors in thinking about how to maximize the impact of a proposed intervention: alignment, access, and substitution costs were crucial in turning the Consumentenbond and Max Havelaar into the most successful outlets in terms of broad appeal.

The alignment of the proposed ideals and practices with existing ones makes taking up a new practice more viable to consumers. The Max Havelaar-campaign was launched at a time when sustainable development had become a widely acknowledged goal, while it also aligned with the existing practice of buying coffee in supermarkets. This points towards the second factor, as the access to fair trade coffee by making it available in supermarkets made it a highly accessible product for consumers, which made a notable difference in fair trade coffee sales as compared to the earlier attempts to sell it through alternative channels. By aligning their intervention with existing practices and making it widely available, the transition costs for consumers were limited to accepting the slightly higher price and a diminished selection of coffee brands from which to select.

Another takeaway from the history of these campaigns ties into the observed plurality of motives underpinning sustainable consumption. Sustainable consumption has meant different things to different actors, ranging from sensible economic decisions, a healthy lifestyle, and reducing environmental degradation to promoting socio-economic equity and respecting animal rights. A challenge to a historical analysis of sustainability, acknowledging this plurality can serve as an asset to future campaigns, which can draw on the full range of connotations of sustainability to enhance its appeal.

One of the main challenges to promoting sustainable consumption is closely related to this multiplicity of motives. As the climate crisis escalates, sustainability

is increasingly presented in the light of environmental concerns. Emerging as a 'red' concept during the 1950s primarily directed towards social issues like household economics and health, sustainable consumption is thus increasingly regarded as a 'green' practice. Although this development is perfectly legitimate in the face of the climate crisis, it entails the risk of rescinding the broader appeal of sustainable consumption implied by its history. At the same time, recent debates about climate justice underline the importance of relating the environmental and social dimension of the current ecological crisis in order to come up with viable perspectives for the future. Campaigns for sustainable consumption have presented perspectives which combined these dimensions since at least the 1970s. As we look for ways to create a more sustainable way of living for everyone on the planet, new initiatives have much to gain from learning from, but also tying into these earlier campaigns which pioneered practices of consumption to address environmental and social concerns.

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