

The Amsterdam Doughnut: moving towards “strong sustainable consumption” policy?

Irene Maldini^(a)

a) Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Keywords: Policy; sustainable consumption; sufficiency; degrowth.

Abstract: Scholars in sustainable consumption increasingly highlight the limitations of “weak sustainable consumption” approaches to overcome the challenges of the current environmental crisis. While efforts to enable cleaner production and circular flows of materials are necessary and important, progress in environmental efficiency tends to deviate attention away from a more critical challenge: advancing sufficiency. In order to deliver “absolute” improvements, reducing production and consumption levels (an explicit focus on “strong sustainable consumption”) is needed. However, international and national environmental policies tend to avoid such measures. The literature points out that resistance from businesses and citizens and fear of losing geopolitical power or income from consumption taxes are major obstacles for such policies to emerge. In this context, this paper examines the case of the “Amsterdam Doughnut”, the measures aimed at reducing consumption of electronics, textiles and furniture included in the “Amsterdam Circular 2020-2025 Strategy”, and the relation to product lifetimes. Interviews with key actors involved in the integration of Kate Raworth’s Doughnut Economy model into the city strategy were conducted, and official documents were reviewed. The paper discusses to what extent these efforts can be characterized as a “strong sustainable consumption” policy, and aspects that may have helped to overcome the resistance mentioned above, contributing to ongoing debate about the implementation of sufficiency principles.

Introduction: Strong sustainable consumption policy

Promoting the use of goods and services for better quality of life, while minimizing the extraction of natural resources and production of pollutants, is at the core of sustainable consumption. In a 2015 review of progress in this field, O’Rourke and Lollo point out that efforts have been mostly focused on improving the material and energy efficiency of products and production processes, with the overall goal of decoupling economic growth from environmental impacts. However, studies looking for evidence of decoupling across nations and over time have not found it (Knight & Schor, 2014; Pothen & Schymura, 2015). The impossibility of reducing environmental impacts fast enough to outrun the pace of growth in consumption levels has led scholars to label such approach as “weak sustainable consumption” (wSC) and to call for “strong sustainable consumption” (sSC) approaches in order to enable “absolute” reductions. A central argument is that, while the efficiency gains of cleaner production and circular flows of

materials are needed, the problem of wSC is that it tends to deviate attention away from a more critical challenge: that of questioning consumption levels and advancing sufficiency (O’Rourke & Lollo, 2015).

SSC scholars identify society’s present focus on growth of consumption as a major barrier for strong sustainable consumption approaches to develop. By questioning economic growth as an indicator of prosperity and wellbeing and arguing for consumption reduction, sSC links to the degrowth movement. Lorek and Fuchs (2013, pp. 36–37) have argued that “sSC and degrowth depend on each other. Strong sustainable consumption governance as a comprehensive approach to the pursuit of sustainable development is a precondition for degrowth. At the same time, sSC governance will not be achievable without a societal acceptance of degrowth”.

In a thorough review of international public policy and governance documents, Fuchs and Lorek (2005, p. 263) found that wSC had received some attention, while sSC was absent from political debates and had been avoided by

international governmental organizations. The authors assigned difficulty in strengthening environmental policy not only to the lack of political will, but also to the interest of businesses and citizens. In 2015, O’Rourke and Lollo note that this difficulty persists. Among other barriers, they highlight the self-perpetuating cycle of positional consumption of individuals, and the pressure experienced by companies to continuously grow revenue. Governments consider geopolitical power, economic and social stability, and social progress largely dependent on economic growth, hindering the adoption of sSC in governance.

Policy measures promoting product durability and reusability are particularly relevant in the context of this conference. These can be considered a grey area in terms of a weak vs. strong classification. Longer lifespans do not necessarily contribute to reductions in new product demand (Zink & Geyer, 2017), they may also lead to accumulation with no concrete environmental advantages (Maldini, 2019). An analysis of the broader policy framework where they are embedded and the targets set, is needed to further unpack their role in this discussion.

In the case study below, the relation of the Amsterdam strategy to the Doughnut framework positions product longevity measures such as “ensuring a good infrastructure for sharing platforms, second-hand shops, online marketplaces and repair services” (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2020), as a means for consumption reduction, rather than a goal in itself, therefore providing a case to study sSC policy.

Given that sSC is highly absent from consumer goods environmental policy, knowledge is needed about how the barriers mentioned above can be overcome, but also about how governance for sSC could look like (see e.g. Cosme, Santos, & O’Neill, 2017). Scholars in the field have called for a mapping of the events, institutional settings and decision-making process that advance sSC policy. This analysis of the Amsterdam Doughnut is a contribution to such end.

Case study: The Amsterdam Doughnut

In April 2020, the Municipality of Amsterdam (MA) announced their intention to embrace Oxford economist Kate Raworth’s “Doughnut Economy” model for the management and strategic vision of the city. This model is a ringed shape visual framework -hence the name- that identifies a “safe and just space” for humanity’s economic activities; the space between the social foundation that would allow covering the basic needs of all humans, and the ecological ceiling of our planet (Raworth, 2017). The urgency of reducing consumption levels in the global North so that resources can be efficiently used in providing a better quality of life in the global South (while acknowledging the limits of what the earth can take and provide) is central in Raworth’s diagram and writings. Her work aligns with that of degrowth in many aspects, including the criticism of GDP as an indicator of human wellbeing. In the analysis below, I build on official documents of the MA with interviews conducted with Eveline Jonkhoff and Stef Le Fevre (MA) and Ilektra Kouloumpi (NGO Circle Economy), to reflect on the extent to which this initiative can be characterized as sSC governance and the process that made it possible.

The NGO Circle Economy (CE) is a collaborator of MA since 2014. “We have supported the development of their strategies for a long time and they were interested in going deeper and bigger”, explains senior cities strategist at CE Ilektra Kouloumpi, “by the end of 2018 we agreed on working with the Doughnut”. Eveline Jonkhoff (program manager Circular and Doughnut Economy at the MA) saw this as “a great opportunity to include the social foundation into the Circular Economy” and that was the starting point of a new collaboration to develop the Amsterdam Circular 2020-2025 strategy.

The process of building the city strategy on Raworth’s principles is summarized by Jonkhoff as follows:

What we did in spring 2019, was organizing four workshops where we invited colleagues from different departments of the Municipality to translate the Doughnut model to the level of the City (...) We delivered the building blocks in June 2019, which were discussed in the city board and sent to the city council. Moreover, we organized Doughnut workshops in

every city district, asking citizens to build the agenda for that evening. In autumn 2019 we used the Amsterdam Doughnut to actually develop the Circular Strategy and to translate it into this innovation and execution program with over 200 projects (...). In January 2020, in order to finalize the strategy and program, we openly shared draft versions with hundreds of companies, knowledge institutions and NGOs, and we had a large gathering to finalize the 5-year strategy and the 2-year innovation and execution program together (E. Jonkhoff, personal communication, October 7, 2020).

While Jonkhoff refers to the Doughnut as a useful methodology (a means to reach and explain their circular goals), Kouloumpi acknowledges the complementary value of this model to Circular Economy principles, and its conceptual additions to the former city strategies: “you can build a perfect circular model that is not inclusive or ethical, for instance. When you bring the Doughnut in, because of its holistic approach, you can’t avoid that”. Indeed, the issues of global responsibility and consumption levels are core to the Doughnut, and not to the Circular Economy framework.

The early joint initiatives of CE and the MA during the mid 2010s focused on transforming the built environment and food value chains. But during the evaluation phase, consumer goods came up as a value chain making the largest ecological footprint of the city, so it was added at the end of 2017. Within this area, the most recent 2020-2025 strategy focuses on furniture, electronics and textiles. These goods, according to Jonkhoff, present opportunities for impactful improvement and can be used as an example for the total value chain. In line with the principles of the Doughnut and the Circular Economy, the targets include reducing the consumption of the MA by 20% and implementing 100% circular procurement by 2030. These are meant to “set the example” for citizens. In addition, the strategy includes actions to raise awareness of the need to consume less and share more through advertising campaigns. However, the strategy does not include any straight forward measure to reduce the volume of goods circulating in the

city, or specific targets for citizens’ consumption reduction (*Gemeente Amsterdam*, 2020).

Kouloumpi highlights the value of MA’s ambition in reducing consumption, acknowledging at the same the limitations of the concrete measures:

Setting the example is already a very progressive idea. The journey with the Doughnut is only starting for them, so there would be a lot of steps to take and obviously one of them is how to address overproduction and overconsumption. But in this current strategy it is not explicitly mentioned. Banning the big brands with global value chains and presence, for example, would be out of their policy influence. But they were keen to think of new ways to create this in the future. (I. Kouloumpi, personal communication, September 9, 2020)

The idea that consuming less is a “good example” could have indeed faced resistance from different actors in the development of the strategy, but according to the interviewees, this was not the case. Parties from all the political spectrum approved the initiative:

We heard from them that the Doughnut had the power of uniting these political opinions, because it just brings one truth: that we want to thrive, but we cannot thrive beyond our own boundaries. The acknowledgement of the limits of growth, which is inherent to the Doughnut through the outer boundary, this is on the conversation all the time, and it was not controversial. The question now is what it means in practice, and there may be more controversy there, but they are opening the door for that. (I. Kouloumpi, personal communication, September 9, 2020)

From another perspective, Stef Le Fevre, program manager and strategic advisor of the waste and resource department of the MA and a participant in the development of the city strategy, foresees possible resistance from companies as the goal of consumption reduction is applied or strengthened:

I see in other projects that with brands and businesses this discussion goes very slow and it is very difficult. It may

be that along the way you develop a whole new concept about how the *Kalverstraat* [Amsterdam’s high street] should be in our city. If you think about it: What is this shopping street about? If you take our circular strategy seriously, including the plan of a communication campaign to reduce clothing consumption: What does it mean for the way we plan and operate these commercial zones? I don’t think we are there yet. It might be difficult for companies to welcome a call for reduction in consumption by the Municipality, but lets’ try it and see (S. Le Fevre, personal communication, September 16, 2020).

Kouloumpi and Le Fevre’s awareness of the limitations of this strategy and, at the same time, their acknowledgement of its value as a first step to address growing volumes of consumer goods in the city is to some extent addressed by MA’s monitoring plans. Progress in the longer term will be measured by Doughnut-related indicators. Kouloumpi expects that in the process of monitoring they will be faced with “the biggest challenges and commitments”. Just as consumer goods was added as a value chain in the environmental strategy of the city as a result of monitoring environmental savings, stronger measures to address overall consumption volumes may emerge from the evaluation of current ones.

Discussion: Overcoming barriers for (incipient) sSC policy

The introduction of this article reviewed obstacles identified by scholars for sSC policy to emerge. The measures targeting consumption reduction introduced in the Amsterdam Circular 2020-2025 Strategy are incipient and limited. While they do not address the level of change typically discussed in sSC literature, this case shows how some of the above-mentioned obstacles were overcome, leading to a few learnings in sSC policy.

A first characteristic is that this is a city-level strategy, rather than national or regional policy. Given that cities are not direct beneficiaries of consumption taxation, and that the geopolitical power of cities is not as strongly linked to GDP as in nations and regions, some of the growth-related barriers highlighted in the

aforementioned literature may not play such an important role. Although the impact of a city level strategy can be questioned, cities’ initiatives in environmental policy can influence policy at a national and regional level.

Secondly, the “self-perpetuating cycle of positional consumption of individuals” pinpointed by O’Rourke and Lollo (2015) as an important barrier for sSC policy may have lost popularity among Amsterdam citizens. With this, I do not imply that positional consumption is not practiced every day in the city, but that environmental awareness among citizens is undermining its perceived value. That is acknowledged and highlighted in the strategy documents by backing up the ambition of reducing consumption with the statement: “more than three-quarters of Amsterdam residents are positive about the idea of buying fewer new products for the benefit of the environment” (*Gemeente Amsterdam*, 2020). If the intended awareness-raising communication campaign presented in the strategy is successfully implemented, we may see public opinion and policy reinforcing each other, enabling reductions in overall consumption levels.

A third factor that played an important role in this case is that of narratives. Scholars in sSC make a distinction with wSC approaches, referring to the popularity of the Circular Economy framework as detrimental for sSC approaches to emerge. However, the NGO Circle Economy presented the Doughnut as an opportunity to broaden the Circular Strategy of the Municipality. Jonkhoff refers to it as a methodology to achieve their circular goals. Altogether these narratives, although not conceptually rigorous, have enabled first steps to address consumption levels in Amsterdam’s strategy. Scholars have already stressed the power of alternative narratives to overcome the challenges of sSC governance (e.g. O’Rourke & Lollo, 2015). This case study questions the effectiveness of a dualistic categorization of weak and strong sustainable consumption approaches for sSC to be actually applied. In this case, the holistic nature of the Doughnut model (including both wSC and sSC principles) and the fact that these efforts are seen as a continuation of previous ones, has helped to prevent potential resistance from political parties or local businesses that otherwise may

not have endorsed targets for consumption reduction.

Lastly, the value of metrics in enabling this kind of policy has already been highlighted in the literature (e.g. O’Rourke & Lollo, 2015). In the case of the Amsterdam Doughnut, measuring impact has been central in introducing the ambition of consumption reduction in consumer goods. Jonkhoff explains that metrics were also useful in promoting acceptance from citizens and local businesses while fine-tuning their 2020-2025 strategy (E. Jonkhoff, personal communication, October 7, 2020). If the aforementioned strategy is monitored through Doughnut-related indicators, as it is the current intention, the results may emphasize the limitations of initial efforts, paving the way for a deeper sSC policy in the years to come.

References

- Cosme, I., Santos, R., & O’Neill, D. W. (2017). Assessing the degrowth discourse: A review and analysis of academic degrowth policy proposals. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *149*, 321–334. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2017.02.016>
- Fuchs, D. A., & Lorek, S. (2005). Sustainable consumption governance: A history of promises and failures. *Journal of Consumer Policy*, *28*(3), 261–288. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10603-005-8490-z>
- Gemeente Amsterdam. (2020). *Amsterdam Circular 2020-2025 Strategy*. Retrieved from https://assets.amsterdam.nl/publish/pages/867635/amsterdam-circular-2020-2025_strategy.pdf
- Knight, K. W., & Schor, J. B. (2014). Economic growth and climate change: A cross-national analysis of territorial and consumption-based carbon emissions in high-income countries. *Sustainability*, *(6)*, 3722–3731. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su6063722>
- Lorek, S., & Fuchs, D. (2013). Strong sustainable consumption governance - Precondition for a degrowth path? *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *38*, 36–43. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2011.08.008>
- Maldini, I. (2019). From speed to volume: reframing clothing production and consumption for an environmentally sound apparel sector. In N. F. Nissen & M. Jaeger-Erben (Eds.), *3rd Product Lifetimes and the Environment conference* (pp. 519–524). <https://doi.org/10.14279/depositonce-9253>
- O’Rourke, D., & Lollo, N. (2015). Transforming Consumption: From Decoupling, to Behavior Change, to System Changes for Sustainable Consumption. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, *40*, 233–259. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-102014-021224>
- Pothen, F., & Schymura, M. (2015). Bigger cakes with fewer ingredients? A comparison of material use of the world economy. *Ecological Economics*, *109*, 109–121. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2014.10.009>
- Raworth, K. (2017). *Doughnut Economics: seven ways to think like a 21st century economist*. London: Penguin Random House.
- Zink, T., & Geyer, R. (2017). Circular Economy Rebound. *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, *21*(3), 593–602. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jiec.12545>