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The politics of sustainable consumption: the case of the Netherlands

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The environmental pressure associated with contemporary modes of material provisioning in advanced countries suggests the need to foster more sustainable consumption. Despite growing interest in sustainability, the Netherlands currently has few effective and legitimate measures in place that focus on the role of citizen-consumers. Existing policy styles and instruments have not reduced significantly the environmental impacts of consumption. An explanation for this inadequacy resides in the technocratic origins of environmental policymaking and the pronounced tendency to rely on the presumed rationality of producers situated on the supply side of production-consumption chains. A central issue, therefore, becomes the organization of an overt politics of sustainable consumption. We explore here possible alternatives to facilitate sustainable consumption in the Netherlands and review the policy initiatives that non-governmental organizations and the Dutch government have to date undertaken. The analysis evaluates these efforts through a theoretical framework designed to chart the development of a democratic vision of sustainable consumption.

KEYWORDS: sustainable consumption, politics, developed countries, environmental impacts, public awareness, economic policy, government policy, non-governmental organizations

Introduction

As early as 1972, the Dutch government introduced the concept of “ecologically adjusted behavior.” The country’s environment minister at the time declared, “In a society as we know it, economic growth has to be controlled; it is not just about production, but also about critical consumption and responsible living.” Since the first upsurge of ecological awareness in the early 1970s, environmental considerations have become a regular feature of everyday life and the consumption practices attached to it. Dutch consumers have become accustomed to paying ecological taxes on gasoline, to separating their organic wastes, and to subscribing to a wide array of “green electricity” schemes. From these observations, we might conclude that environmental considerations have gained a degree of independence from purely economic aspects of consumer decisionmaking inspired by comparisons, comfort, and convenience. Nonetheless, the domestic environmental pressures attributable to consumption remain high.

Consumption politics in the Netherlands during the 1970s and 1980s were organized around information campaigns to educate people about topical environmental problems and their personal responsibilities in helping to ameliorate them. Often, the government delegated these

tasks to environmental education centers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that issued—usually with public financial support—moral appeals for critical and “correct” consumption behavior. During this period, discussion focused on limiting overall consumption as the solution to environmental problems, with substantially less attention to alternatives that could lessen harmful household practices. Policymakers devoted considerable rhetorical energy to sustainable consumption during these years, but they often failed to produce tangible programs.

The first Netherlands Environmental Policy Plan (NEPP), published in 1989, marks the beginning of more comprehensive consumption policymaking. The NEPP identified households as one of its environmental policy target groups, particularly with respect to their vital position in production-consumption chains. The 1989 document treated consumers as independent and potentially critical actors, with power to influence production. Moreover, the NEPP acknowledged that consumers were “not [an] easily accessible target group.” While environmental policymakers in the Netherlands have come to accept that consumption requires special attention, and that they should tailor initiatives to consumer requirements, the issue remains highly problematic. By the time the Dutch government released its third version of the NEPP a decade later, consumers were no longer treated as one of the target groups; instead, more sustainable consumption is

to be achieved on the basis of ongoing product innovations (VROM et al., 1998). These circumstances suggest that politicians and policymakers cannot decide whether to approach sustainable consumption from a consumer- or a producer-led perspective (Vermeulen, 2000).

Contentions that the future success of Dutch environmental policy depends on how these initiatives ultimately address the everyday practices of citizen-consumers are (once more) gaining ground (Beckers et al., 2000). If consumption is indeed a social phenomenon, then we need to take a fresh look at how to accomplish social transformation and what the major consequences will be. In other words, how will the Dutch style of environmental policymaking be affected by an emphasis on sustainable consumption? How will an invigorated politics of sustainable consumption influence the routines of everyday life, the levels of personal comfort, and the features of contemporary life that citizen-consumers in the Netherlands regard as indispensable?

By analyzing past and present initiatives, we hope to arrive at a set of insights that might guide the country's future efforts in this area. In seeking to understand the current political status of sustainable consumption in the Dutch context, we draw on the theory of ecological modernization, which appears at present to be informing the activities of many of the relevant actors (see, for example, van Driel et al., 1993; Mol and Spaargaren, 1993; Duyvendak et al., 1999). The recommendations we present for the development of a politics of sustainable consumption are also embedded in this view.

We argue that policymakers should not confront the issue of consumption from a one-sided perspective informed exclusively by environmental scientists and commitments to limit aggregate consumption. In this sense, we do not endorse efforts to "tame the treadmill of consumption" as a narrow objective (see also Princen et al., 2002). Policy programs that aim to lessen the environmental consequences of consumption by reducing (or radically restructuring) consumption will likely lead to questionable social and economic outcomes. These so-called de-modernization strategies tend to underestimate the potential to improve the environmental consequences of contemporary consumption by promoting more ecologically rational practices. Without taking a strong position on the desirability of limiting consumption in the absolute sense, we maintain the need to embed consumption in policy objectives developed by democratic environmental reform processes over the last several decades.

In addition, the involvement of citizen-consumers is indispensable in formulating environmental criteria that will steer the transformation of consumption practices. This participation is essential with respect to policies that emphasize the role of *consumers* (for instance, when considering the use of eco-labels), as well as in terms of the politics and policies that highlight the role of *citizens* (for instance, when reconfiguring the local or national water system or when formulating Agenda 21 activities). Both situations require a strong emphasis on active citizen-consumer contributions, and imply a need for strategies that privilege actors and institutions within civil society. Such a perspective suggests that a shift in governance—motivated

by the development of new sustainable consumption policies—is the main driver behind several political changes presently underway in the Netherlands.

The next section discusses the factors that have prompted Dutch policymakers to take a special interest in sustainable consumption and the conventional approaches that they have applied. We then assess the current state of environmental politics in the country and explain how developments in this sphere have contributed to the conceptualization of new strategies to green consumer behavior. We then appraise several policy experiments carried out by NGOs and relevant government ministries to facilitate more sustainable consumption. The conclusion reflects on those initiatives that we deem to be most promising, describing how these pilot programs can serve as useful building blocks for a future policy program, as they combine a democratic environmental perspective with an equally strong focus on the everyday life of citizen-consumers.

Greening Consumption: The Dutch State of Affairs

Before describing some of the more striking features of Dutch consumption patterns and their related environmental effects, it is important to explain our conception of consumption practices. We refer to consumption not as isolated purchasing behaviors, but instead as a broad concept that encompasses the "buying, using and disposal of products and services within the contexts of social practices, or consumption domains." We use the terms "consumption domain" and "social practice" interchangeably when discussing the specific setting in which consumption occurs. There is, of course, a distinction between the two concepts. The notion of a social practice refers to clusters of everyday routines that are bound in space and time and are common among citizen-consumers—for example, dwelling or personal care. Social practices also include many types of activities that cannot be considered "consumption" in the conventional sense. The term "consumption domain," in its strictest usage, refers to a certain segment of consumer expenditure and excludes activities such as house cleaning. We consider it analytically preferable to refer to social practices when discussing the state of ecological modernization, since this includes a broader range of activities. However, consumption domain is currently the more widely used concept among Netherlands policymakers.

Per capita consumer expenditures in the Netherlands have approximately tripled during the second half of the twentieth century. While there have been, during this period, some significant changes in provisioning patterns, the dematerialization anticipated by scholars and policymakers has not occurred (RIVM, 2003). The adverse environmental impacts of consumption—the generation of toxic air emissions, the production of solid wastes, and the depletion of natural resources and energy—continue to increase. The third version of the NEPP estimated that consumption in the Netherlands was responsible for ten percent of the country's greenhouse gas emissions, four percent of its releases associated with acidification, 19

percent of its discharges contributing to eutrophication, and 14 percent of overall solid wastes (see Table 1).

Table 1 Various Consumption-Related Emissions in the Netherlands Relative to Total Emissions.

Emission Category	Percent
Greenhouse Gas Emissions	10
Acidification Emissions	4
Eutrophication Emissions	19
All Wastes	14

Source: VROM (1998)

Recent debates also have emphasized the spatial dimensions of consumption, an outcome that is not especially surprising given the Netherlands' high population density. Within this context, the Dutch ecological footprint—particularly the landmass necessary for carbon dioxide sequestration—has been a frequent point of discussion. Of course, actual estimates vary depending on the method of calculation, but some local NGOs contend that citizen-consumers in the Netherlands occupy two to three times their “fair share” of the Earth's surface. The National Strategy for Sustainable Development, released in 2002, assessed the country's ecological footprint in terms of average global productivity: the appropriated landmass was about eleven million hectares (approximately 0.2 percent of the global total), while the Dutch population comprises sixteen million people (0.26 percent of the world total), and the country's land area is 33,943 square kilometers (0.026 percent of the global total) (VROM, 2002a, 2002b; see also Postma, 2000 and Ros, 2001). Although commentators seem to agree that the Netherlands' ecological footprint needs to be reduced, few concrete policies have resulted.

Most technical studies that map the environmental effects of consumption focus on the so-called “direct” and “indirect” uses of energy. In this regard, the general trend among Dutch citizen-consumers is one of continued growth. The percentage increase in per capita energy use (from thirty-five GJ in 1946 to 120 GJ in 1995) exceeded even that of consumption in monetary terms. The largest expansion in energy use occurred between 1960 and 1980, largely due to the introduction of central heating and the expansion of personal automobile ownership. Efficiency improvements in the supply sectors somewhat offset this growth in energy consumption; in the absence of these advances, per capita energy use would have increased by a further forty GJ by 1995 (Vringer et al., 2001; SCP, 2001).

Direct and indirect energy use among Dutch citizen-consumers is primarily attributable to a limited number of consumption domains (see Table 2).¹ The largest share of energy consumption in 1995 was assigned to three domains: home, food, and housing (with leisure rapidly increasing).

¹ Refer to Vringer et al. (2001) for a complete description of these consumption domains.

The relative importance of these consumption domains is likely to change over time. For example, researchers suggest that by 2030 the amount of energy consumed for holidays will exceed that used for housing. Food and home energy consumption will also decrease, while that used for at-home and away-from-home leisure will rise sharply. On an aggregate level, the energy use is expected to grow. Notwithstanding the slow rate of dematerialization and efficiency improvements in the supply sectors, energy use among Dutch citizen-consumers is projected to increase between 56 and 74 percent by 2030 (1995 baseline), making it difficult to meet both national and international targets. In terms of sustainable development, it becomes clear that consumer behavior is an essential area for environmental politics and policymaking.

Table 2 Energy Consumption of the Major Consumption Domains in the Netherlands as Shares of National Total.

Consumption Domain	Energy Consumption (Percent)	Definition of Domain
Home	29	Maintenance, improvement, and heating
Food	23	Obtaining, storing, preparing, and eating
Dwelling	8	Cleaning, gardening, and decorating
Indoor Leisure	7	Reading, watching television, talking on the telephone, and so forth
Outdoor Leisure	6	Sports, cultural activities, and so forth

Source: Vringer et al (2001)

Sustainable Consumption Initiatives: From Alternative Consumer Culture to the Creation of Green-Niche Markets

As outlined earlier, environmental considerations have gained a certain degree of independence from the other factors that motivate Dutch citizen-consumers. On a more abstract level, the issue of sustainable consumption has become embedded in different initiatives involving individuals, social groups, and industries. Over the last several decades, public discussions regarding the environmental implications of provisioning have developed in various directions. These deliberations have been framed in terms of the need to forge new styles and qualities of consumption, to interrogate the characteristics of consumption practices, and to involve different actors in the development of alternative practices.²

An interesting—though decidedly peripheral—manifestation of interest around sustainable consumption in the Netherlands is the so-called “Platform True Prosperity.” This project is a joint initiative coordinated by more than two-dozen organizations (NGOs, consumer groups, charities, religious organizations, and trade unions). Proponents are seeking to foster a more balanced society and to link up with personal motivations to demonstrate

² By the 1970s and 1980s, certain segments of Dutch society had already begun to turn their attention to the need for “new lifestyles.” Initiatives consistent with this perspective were pursued primarily within the context of the ecumenical social movement that dedicated several newsletters and seminars to the topic.

that non-material values (such as silence and personal networks) can enhance quality of life. Organizations and individuals connect to the Platform by sharing ideas or by establishing small innovation projects—for example, regional non-monetary exchange economies and local community-garden projects. In some respects, the motivations that animate the True Prosperity discourse (an emphasis on the non-material qualities of life and a critical perspective on the culture of consumption) resemble those that informed the de-modernization strategies common in the Netherlands during the 1970s and 1980s.

Another campaign is the National Initiative for Sustainable Development (NIDO) that brings together industries, governments, civil-society groups, and scientists to develop and implement thematic programs promoting sustainable development. In contrast to True Prosperity, NIDO does not seek to bring about general changes in (consumption) culture, but the organization's adherents develop competencies in those social sectors that can promote sustainable-system innovations and transitions. One NIDO program specifically designed to create market opportunities for sustainable products is the “green products” initiative, which works to transform current sustainable consumer products and services niches into mainstream markets. To realize this goal, various associations of producers and consumers, research institutes, and governments are working collaboratively on marketing strategies for green consumption alternatives.

In addition to these relatively large-scale initiatives, numerous smaller, independent activities in the Netherlands aim to develop tangible options for greening specific consumption aspects. Sponsored primarily by private companies, these projects are introducing green products and services. Prominent examples of environmentally sound products are solvent-free paints, biodegradable detergents, green-electricity schemes, and a number of product groups categorized under other environmental labels. Less apparent examples of product innovations are the “green savings” and “green investment” programs that the financial services industry and the national government have introduced since the mid-1990s (de Wit, 2002).³

Uneven development

Current social debates regarding sustainable consumption in the Netherlands are less intense and morally focused than they were during the 1970s. Both governmental and non-governmental actors today are more pragmatic, emphasizing practicable ways to organize emerging green markets and to promote sustainable consumption. These efforts have enlarged the number of sustainable alternatives and improved the overall quality of green products and services. However, the amount of innovation—or the extent of ecological modernization—differs greatly across consumption domains. Winsemius' (1986) policy life-cycle model provides an instructive approach for highlighting some of this variability, as well

as the unequal rate of innovation in the different consumption domains (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 depicts the present position of several relevant consumption domains and illustrates their considerable differences in degree of ecological modernization to date. The availability of green products and services in tourism and leisure, for example, is still rather limited. The process of greening—as measured by the number of environmentally sound alternatives that are available, and the extent to which they have been incorporated into everyday routines—is substantially more advanced in housing and feeding.⁴

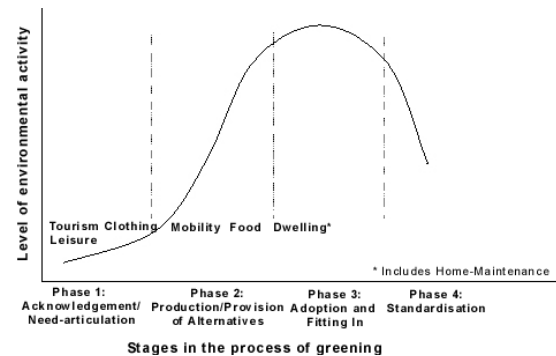


Figure 1. Stage of Ecological Modernization for Consumption Domains in the Netherlands

Regarding tourism, recent research has noted that efforts to facilitate more sustainable consumer choices are still in the initial stage. Initiatives to enable environmentally-sound travel alternatives are confined to eco-accommodations in the Netherlands and abroad, programs to facilitate sustainable tourism in the Alps, and an airline-ticketing scheme called Trees for Travel that allows consumers to purchase tree-planting certificates to compensate for airplane-generated carbon dioxide emissions. The slow pace at which tourism has been subjected to ecological modernization suggests that this consumption domain may be resistant to sustainability-enhancing changes (CEA, 1999). Holiday practices tend to be habitual, and are subject to change only as a result of new financial circumstances. Environmental considerations do not appear to play a significant role in consumers' holiday-planning decisions. The evidence suggests that, for at least the near- to medium-term, there is likely to be very little (articulated) consumer demand in the Netherlands for sustainable holiday alternatives.

If we now investigate a domain such as food that is purportedly more environmentally advanced, the initial impression is that, at least in the Netherlands, a rather modest level of ecological modernization has been achieved. This impression is premised on the relatively

³ There is an interesting distinction between “dark” and “light” green financial products in the Netherlands. The first generation of dark green investment funds was initiated in the 1970s and many of the rules governing these vehicles actively prohibit investments in heavily polluting industries. The financial products dating from the early 1990s are based on more flexible policies.

⁴ The relative positions of the consumption domains are predicated upon our own qualitative assessment, because well-defined sets of indicators and related quantitative analyses would require data that are not yet available. Most consumption figures in the Netherlands are expressed in terms of individual household expenditures on products and services in different domains. These data do not include, for example, the availability and accessibility of green alternatives or their overall quality in comparison to conventional substitutes.

small proportion—approximately one percent in 1998—of Dutch food consumption that consists of organic products (Van der Grijp and De Hond, 1999). However, in assessing the potential for change here, a number of other indicators are important. The variety of retail outlets selling organic food products has increased significantly in recent years.⁵ The number of supermarkets displaying over fifteen organic items has expanded from seventy in 1995 to over 4,000 in 1999.⁶ Likewise, specialized organic groceries have become more prevalent, and their numbers throughout the country grew during this period from 280 to over 400. Moreover, a survey of Dutch consumers demonstrated that environmental concerns are an important motivation in the purchase of organic food products—51 percent of organic food consumers identified “the environment” as their most important reason (*Platform Biologica*, 2001).

We can consider the choice of organic foods to be a “dark green” expression of sustainable food-consumption practices. There are also several “lighter green” possibilities, such as substituting meat with novel protein foods or purchasing seasonal products.⁷ Major producers and retailers on the supply side of the food chain have become quite cognizant of these consumption changes. Growing consumer interest in organic produce is one of the key catalysts for a successful sustainability transition, because it prompts stakeholders to liberate more environmentally benign forms of food production from a countercultural typecast.⁸

The policy life-cycle model focuses attention on the undeniable fact that, over the past decade, producers and civil-society actors in the Netherlands have developed a significant number of innovations to facilitate sustainable consumption. However, not all of the alternatives have been unqualified market successes. For instance, the premature launch of the compact fluorescent light bulb led consumers to view energy-efficient lighting as inferior. Some researchers also draw attention to so-called rebound effects, especially with regard to energy use (Rood et al., 2001; Hofkes et al., 1998). Nonetheless, citizen-consumers have adopted numerous green products, and these items have become common features of everyday life. On balance, then, the situation concerning the ecological modernization of consumption is one in which several frontrunner domains have reached a “take-off phase,” while others, because they are more resistant to environmental reform, are currently lagging behind.

⁵ This transformation includes alternative channels, such as farmers markets and memberships in organic vegetable distribution networks, that make regular deliveries to individual subscribers’ homes.

⁶ One of the largest supermarket chains in the Netherlands—with more than 700 stores—routinely displays 250 organic products depending on the season (www.albertheijn.nl).

⁷ By 2002, meat alternatives captured a growing share (1 percent) of Dutch consumers (Aurelia, 2002).

⁸ If we focus on the production (instead of the consumption) of food in the Netherlands, 1.7 percent of all farmland in the country was used for organic agriculture in 2002. Official Dutch policy seeks to shift ten percent of all farmland to organic production by 2010. Present indications are that it will be quite difficult for the government—in collaboration with farmers and consumers—to achieve this goal (*LNV*, 2000b).

Green Politics in the Netherlands: Negotiation and Consultation

We focus in this section on Dutch environmental politics in general, and consumption politics in particular, as part of sketching the political background for the greening of consumer behavior. During the most recent elections in the Netherlands (May 2002 and January 2003), environmental concerns received only very modest attention, with little substantive discussion about the environment. The absence of timely and controversial issues may simply mean that the environment is not—at least for the time being—critical to the electoral fortunes of political parties. However, according to some analysts, the environment’s relatively low salience is attributable to the non-adversarial positions that the main political parties take on these issues (Koopmans, 1995; Duyvendak, 1997). With the exception of the unequivocally green parties, it is in actual practice very difficult to distinguish Dutch political parties as either proponents or opponents of overtly green policies. If the entire political spectrum conveys a mildly green image and speaks to some extent a language of ecological modernization, the environment becomes less attractive as an arena for electoral contestation and more difficult to invoke for political benefit.

This political tendency to downplay environmental issues is further compounded by a strong systemic emphasis on communication and consensus. Many analysts attribute Dutch prosperity, social harmony, and political stability to the so-called “polder model,” where unions of employers and employees seek to reach common agreement. During the second half of the 1990s, some commentators began to invoke the notion of a “green polder model” to suggest that the country could only resolve conflicts over environmental policy if political parties, trade unions, environmental organizations, and other stakeholder groups cooperated (Duyvendak et al., 1999).

A commitment to communication and a consensual style of politics is not only emblematic of political debate in the Netherlands, but is particularly evident in the horizontal policy arrangements that characterize the environmental field. For example, “policy networks” are regularly used to address circumscribed problems at the regional or local level and, as discussed above, the target-group approach has been in ascendancy. The target-group approach is a strategy, normally used at the national level, to bring together civil society actors and government representatives to address specific environmental problems or policy areas. The relevant participants then enter into several rounds of negotiation on an ad hoc basis, with the aim of reaching voluntary accords for environmental performance standards and for instrument usage (Driessen and Glasbergen, 2000).

Although many Dutch politicians and government officials, as well as some members of the country’s environmental movement, point to the benefits and accomplishments of the green polder model, less enthusiastic voices are also discernible. Critics maintain that the consensus model has the potential to create situations in which the negotiation table becomes the

central stage, and political parties conveniently leave delicate environmental issues to other entities without much democratic legitimacy.⁹ For opponents of the green polder model, corporatism and the surgical removal of the environment from the political agenda is a notable shortcoming.

Nevertheless, most analysts view the open and facilitative disposition that characterizes Dutch political parties as beneficial to environmental reform. Public debate does not typically frame environmental issues in oppositional, zero-sum terms, but rather as common problems for which everyone is responsible. However, this idea of collective obligation, especially concerning sustainable consumption, must be understood in its proper political context. Consumption demands delicate treatment because it is so closely intertwined with popular notions of individual freedom (Basset et al., 1994). Even in the Netherlands it is extremely difficult for policymakers to modify household consumption behavior, even in circumstances when it is generally considered propitious to do so.

With time, it has become apparent that citizen-consumers are often beyond the reach of conventional environmental-policy interventions. There are several reasons for this inaccessibility. First, it is not feasible for the government to negotiate covenants with citizen-consumers, as it has with members of several prominent industrial sectors. Second, citizen-consumers comprise a heterogeneous target group that does not usually participate—collectively or through its individual members—in the neo-corporatist consultation circuits common in Dutch political life since the 1980s. Finally, consumers are not typically fluent in the highly specialized jargon that environmental professionals normally use to set objectives, to define approaches, and to formulate instruments for change. In other words, conventional environmental policy frameworks are not compatible with a consumption-oriented approach (Spaargaren, 2003).

Modernizing Consumption-Oriented Policies: The Need for Political Innovation

The policy problems regarding sustainable consumption generate several questions. If the initiatives of the early 1990s did little to improve the environmental dimensions of consumer behavior, how should the Dutch government approach consumers? What kinds of political innovations are prerequisites for a more effective consumption-oriented approach to environmental policy? What are the drawbacks associated with such an approach?

We begin with a discussion of the possible weaknesses inherent in more consumption-oriented environmental policies, and consider the “individualization” of politics and political responsibilities as developed by Bauman (1993) and Princen et al. (2002). Many environmental problems are ultimately rooted in the

conduct of institutional actors, such as companies and governments. Under these circumstances, there is little merit imposing obligations on citizen-consumers, who not only lack the power to influence the organization of production and consumption, but also cannot—and arguably should not—be held responsible for issues that arise out of the “treadmill of production and consumption” (Schnaiberg, 1980). It is likely to be unproductive, and above all illegitimate, to burden citizen-consumers with remedying such problems. If policy initiatives only advance individual solutions—and ignore institutional actors—socially regressive and environmentally ineffectual outcomes will be the result.

At the same time, it is equally important to avoid simply discharging citizen-consumers from responsibility for the impacts of their consumption practices. This is not intended as a moral statement; our point, rather, is that we cannot properly comprehend modern consumer societies by examining producers alone. As Rifkin (2002) terms it, we live in an “age of access,” and this implies—among many other things—that the secret to understanding the dynamics of production-consumption cycles resides in the practices of citizen-consumers, who participate as knowledgeable and capable agents in reproducing the basic institutions that facilitate their livelihoods. An appreciation of this feature of contemporary social life is essential for arriving at effective consumption-oriented policies that mediate between isolated individualism and one-sided structuralism (Giddens, 1991, 1998).

The Netherlands seems to need a “new politics of consumption.” However, the Dutch experience thus far suggests that there are no easy solutions for such a project. The government has customarily addressed the environmental dimensions of consumer decisionmaking using social-psychological models that focus on individual attitudes. This approach has tended to exacerbate the risk of individualizing (or privatizing) environmental problems; it must be supplanted with perspectives sensitive to the contextual, structural characteristics of provisioning practices in modern societies. Table 3 tentatively compares the “old” and the “new” policy paradigms with respect to consumption.

While consumption politics in the Netherlands have conventionally been situated outside the mainstream of environmental politics, we can anticipate that this situation will change. The increasing relevance of policy initiatives aimed at citizen-consumers is rooted in features of modern societies that include shifting attention within production-consumption cycles to the “modes of access.”

The following section moves beyond these general observations to describe several contemporary initiatives in sustainable consumption. Though some of these efforts are part of the pre-existing paradigm, others illustrate—at least on an experimental basis—the new mode of thinking about citizen-consumers.

Policy Initiatives to Facilitate Sustainable Consumption

This section provides an overview of the policy instruments that the Netherlands has developed to promote sustainable consumption. In addition to the Ministry of

⁹ Because of concerns about cooptation, over-institutionalization, and loss of public legitimacy, participation in horizontal policy arrangements has caused considerable internal debate within the Dutch environmental movement. Some NGOs have refused to engage in the proceedings—for example in the contested case concerning the expansion of Schiphol Airport.

Housing, Spatial Planning, and the Environment, several other arms of the Dutch government are highly involved in

Table 3 Principles of Consumption-Oriented Environmental Policymaking Old (or Classical) and New Policy Perspectives.

Principle	Old (or Classical) Policy Perspective	New Policy Perspective
Characterization of Citizen-Consumers	Citizen-consumers viewed as atomized actors performing isolated sequences of activities.	Citizen-consumers viewed as actors who participate in social practices that are shared with others and reproduced in time-space. Consumption involves the use of clusters of related goods and services.
Degree of Citizen-Consumer Differentiation	Citizen-consumers treated as a homogeneous group with subgroups differentiated only with respect to levels of environmental awareness.	Citizen-consumers treated in terms of environmentally relevant social practices with focus on actual behaviors.
Procedures to Promote Greening	Greening of consumption analyzed in terms of individual attitudes that guide conscious individual choices. Social structures are exogenous variables.	Greening of social practices analyzed in terms of the duality of structure in interaction. Rationalization of behavior investigated with respect to embedded social practices and connected to lifestyle choices in the context of life politics.
Relationship between Citizen-Consumer and Life-World	Strong separation between consumer and producer rationality.	Emphasis on the interplay between consumer and producer rationality in different stages of the production-consumption cycle.
Perceived Potential for Improving the Environmental Performance of Everyday Consumption Practices.	Generally pessimistic.	High technical and social potential.
Conception of Sustainable Consumption	Reduced consumption in both quantitative and qualitative terms.	Potential to achieve comparable or even greater comfort, convenience, and safety.

(Spaargaren and Mol, 1992; Hajer, 1995). In general, Dutch environmentalism has come to perceive the establishment

environmental policymaking and concern themselves, to varying degrees, with consumption's side-effects. Moreover, a focus on citizen-consumers necessarily blurs the boundaries separating the various ministries, because the environmental consequences of provisioning transcend the limits of conventional policy domains.¹⁰ Before describing the strategies of the different ministries, we highlight the role of Dutch NGOs in sustainable consumption.

Dutch NGOs: Taking on a Consumer Perspective?

Dutch environmentalism has developed and diversified over the past three decades. In particular, large segments of the country's environmental movement have adopted ecological modernization as a central ideological tenet. As a result, the environmental agenda has shifted away from moral appeals of soberness and counter-cultural experimentation toward ecological rationality, emphasizing the search for strategies that improve the environmental performance of modern production and consumption

of environmentally sound consumption practices as the joint-responsibility of multiple stakeholders—government, industry and citizen-consumers (Duyvendak, 1997; *Alliantie voor Duurzame Ontwikkeling*, 1992).

Dutch NGOs—often as part of collaborative efforts—have achieved some notable successes, fostering more sustainable production and consumption. For instance, by appealing to public opinion and negotiating with the government and the business sector, they secured a ban on chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) in spray cans. Other successes include stricter regulations governing the use of pesticides and chemical additives in food production, and the use of eco-labels. It is clear that many achievements of NGOs in the Netherlands regarding sustainable consumption are attributable to government lobbying and activities directed at industries. By approaching supply-side actors, these organizations have campaigned for the greening of policy and production processes (*Alliantie voor Duurzame Ontwikkeling*, 1992).

Initially, NGO activities were not aimed specifically towards greening *consumption* practices, or towards expanding the scope of sustainable consumption by actively involving citizen-consumers. However, for more sustainable consumption practices to become viable from a consumer standpoint, they will need to compete without sacrificing comfort, convenience, and overall product quality (Van Vliet, 2002; Shove, 2003). The environmental movement in the Netherlands is becoming increasingly cognizant of this fact as they search for novel ways to link

¹⁰ There have been appeals within Dutch political circles to create a new Ministry of Consumer Affairs. This debate is inspired, on one hand, by the success of such a ministry in Germany and, on the other hand, by uncertainty concerning the future of the current Ministry of Agriculture, Nature, and Fisheries. The importance of fisheries and agriculture as policy fields is declining, and nature conservation could be readily handled by the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning, and the Environment. At the same time, the issue of food safety has become more important. Combined with other issues of public concern, it seems practicable to transform the current scheme for managing agricultural activities into a Ministry of Consumer Affairs.

up with the everyday lives of citizen-consumers, and to facilitate more environmentally sound forms of consumption that correspond to extant expectations.

With these aims in mind, several Dutch NGOs have developed strategies to provide sustainable and high-quality consumption alternatives. For example, a “green” automobile manual offers information on how to save energy—for instance, by regularly checking tire pressure—without stigmatizing the actual ownership and use of an automobile. Another example is providing practical environmental advice for people moving to a new house through a CD-ROM that covers issues ranging from emptying the old premises and using a moving van to decorating a new home. NGOs in the Netherlands have also taken up the challenge of redefining and strengthening their relationship with citizen-consumers by forging new partnerships with public and private producers that facilitate more sustainable consumption.

The Ministry of Economic Affairs: Consumption Politics within Free-Market Conditions

The Ministry of Economic Affairs (*Ministerie van Economische Zaken*, or EZ) defines consumer policy as a separate policy domain, and is primarily concerned with developing initiatives that enable consumers to pursue their personal needs and norms without interference (subject to certain governmental prerogatives) (EZ, 2000). The EZ’s outlook is based on the notion that consumers are sovereign market participants and it is the role of government to support them in their demand-side position. Specific policies are geared toward improving market access, promoting transparency of product information, and strengthening the legal position of consumers in disputes with producers. More broadly defined social concerns regarding consumption—such as sustainability—appear only when reliable information about a product’s environmental dimensions is an issue. However, the degree to which the Ministry focuses on sustainability as a broader aspect of consumer policy is rather limited.

Nonetheless, the environmental aspects of consumption are central elements of other policy fields within the EZ’s ambit, especially in terms of energy. Since the early 1970s, the Ministry has focused on citizen-consumers as users of domestic energy for home heating and hot water production. The approaches utilized in this context have been rather commonplace: establishing levies, imposing energy taxes, formulating subsidies for energy efficient products, and organizing information campaigns (often in cooperation with energy and installation companies). In its most recent campaigns, the EZ encouraged citizen-consumers to monitor their actual energy consumption, to become knowledgeable about their personal use and its environmental impacts. Additionally, the Ministry actively promotes the purchase of “green energy” generated from renewable sources (*Energie Ned*, 2000).

The EZ, in collaboration with the Ministry of Spatial Planning, Housing, and the Environment, is also responsible for developing and implementing integrated product policies (IPP). The primary aim of these initiatives is to stimulate all market parties—producers, consumers, and retailers—to strive for reductions in the level of

environmental pollution per product unit. Although IPPs are clearly connected to consumer practices, a goal of these programs has been to avoid direct regulation of consumption. This is because, as SER (1994) explains, “implementing policies to decrease the environmental pressure per product might prevent a situation in which the government is forced to influence the volume of consumption and/or the lifestyles of citizen-consumers.”

The EZ’s overall policy style for handling issues at the interface between consumption and sustainability is best characterized as “environmental policy within strict market relations.” The Ministry is normally reluctant to abandon a market approach for addressing the environmental side effects of material consumption. A guiding philosophy that the market is the most efficient way to distribute goods has remained largely unchallenged, and the EZ confines its interventions to the occasional imposition of ecological taxes to limit pollution. As such, the Ministry seeks to coordinate its activities with European-level regulations.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management, and Fisheries: A Citizen-Consumer Orientation in the Making

The Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management, and Fisheries (*Ministerie van Landbouw, Natuurbeheer en Visserij*, or LNV) is a very broad and multifunctional arm of the Dutch government. The areas of its operations that impinge most closely upon material consumption and the environment are agriculture and nature management. The Ministry’s responsibilities for agriculture are particularly interesting for current purposes, given recent developments regarding food production and safety. Citizen-consumers in the Netherlands have become highly critical of the both conventional methods of producing food and of food quality. In recent years, considerable scrutiny has been devoted to the side effects of agro-industrial production—for example, the acidification of the landscape, the poor living conditions of livestock, and the use of chemical pesticides and hormones. LNV acknowledges these issues and refers to them as a turning point in the public discourse on agriculture. Ministerial officials have emphasized the need to increase organic production and to become more responsive to demand-driven approaches that consider the concerns of citizen-consumers in production decisions (LNV, 2000a). Such sentiments would seem to provide fertile ground for the development of agricultural policies that combine a strong commitment to both consumers and sustainability. However, recent statements have not actively articulated a demand-side approach to sustainable consumption.¹¹

Within the area of nature conservation, a new orientation on consumption seems to be emerging in the Netherlands. A focus on citizen-consumers as vital actors is evident, for instance, in two recent series of policy reports

¹¹ The only concrete outcome that has emerged in this regard is a communication plan to attract and retain a new group of organic food consumers. According to official documentation, “by informing the citizen about sustainable production, animal welfare, and biodiversity, this same citizen will, in his or her capacity as a consumer, understand the real value of the organic product and therefore show more willingness to pay a higher price” (LNV, 2000c).

entitled “People for Nature, Nature for People” and “Nature as a Living Environment.” The latter series aims to map the possibilities for linking nature policies with the needs and demands of Dutch society (Langers en Spinnenwijn, 1999). The Ministry, in particular, continues to search for new approaches that will increase its capacity for involving citizen-consumers (Kuindersma and Selnes, 1999). In official formulations, then, nature conservation is experiencing a shift from top-down, centralized steering toward self-regulation by decentralized actors, most notably the local and provincial governments. At the same time, it is still unclear how the new discourse will influence actual decision-making, since the policy reports to date have served only exploratory purposes.

Ministry of Transportation, Public Works, and Water Management: Limited Social and Political Margins for Policies Regarding Sustainable Mobility

From a sustainable consumption perspective, the most interesting initiatives of the Ministry of Transportation, Public Works, and Water Management (*Ministerie van Verkeer en Waterstaat*, or *V&W*) are in terms of mobility. Because of the density of the Dutch transport system, the movement of goods and people has a large impact on the environment and the general quality of life. Dutch policymakers have begun, in recent years, to devote increasing attention to personal mobility, partly because the largest growth has occurred with respect to so-called “recreational” movements.

The general stance of the Ministry is that mobility is a central feature of modern society and it is a government responsibility to accommodate it, while at the same time ameliorating its negative side effects. The Ministry’s National Traffic and Transportation Plan, 2001-2020, sketches its intended policy approach to achieve this combined goal: “[t]he needs of citizens are put centrally and will be respected, but as end-users they will have to pay for their choices” (*V&W*, 2000). Consistent with this approach, the Ministry imposes regulatory taxes on automotive fuel, as well as hefty parking fees. Moreover, *V&W* has experimented over the last few years with systems of differentiated, electronic road pricing, but for the time being has postponed more widespread implementation because of political resistance. Transforming private automobile use, from a system that has never been subject to scarcity pricing into one that requires users to pay for their claims on available capacity, has been difficult in the Netherlands. A recent campaign statement by Wouter Bos, the leader of the Social Democratic Party (PvdA), highlights the lack of political enthusiasm for taking on the sensitive issue of excessive automobile use. Bos stressed that the days in which the party’s policy in the field of mobility was premised on “car pestering” were definitely over.

In addition to developing economic instruments, the Ministry aims to educate people about energy-efficient automobile use. Furthermore, automatic vehicle guidance (a generic term that refers to various technological means to support—and in some cases assume over the long term—the driver’s tasks) is seen as an innovation that could improve automotive energy efficiency, and the Ministry has

supported some pilot studies in this area. However, these initiatives have become mired in political wrangling over the appropriate role of government intervention in the lives of citizen-consumers and whether cars are part of the private realm.

The Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning, and the Environment: Exploring New Sustainable Consumption Policies

The Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning, and the Environment (*Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting, Ruimtelijke Ordening en Milieubeheer*, or *VROM*) is the core authority with respect to sustainable consumption policies in the Netherlands. In comparison to the other arms of the Dutch government, *VROM* focuses a great deal of effort on sustainability and the environmental dimensions of consumption. Moreover, since the mid-1990s, the ministry has actively considered the roles and responsibilities of citizen-consumers in fostering sustainable practices and has sought to involve them in developing sustainable consumption policies. Accordingly, the Ministry has launched several initiatives to analyze, evaluate, and stimulate more sustainable consumption practices. *VROM* has designed a number of pilot studies to catalyze internal discussions and to advance a consumption-oriented policy perspective that could become the basis for official guidance in a future iteration of the national environmental policy planning process. This section discusses some of these policy experiments and describes how *VROM* has begun to identify some building blocks for crafting a new policy style with which to address consumption as a central tenet of environmental policymaking.¹²

The Future Perspective Project: A Little Greener Every Day

VROM launched the Future Perspective Project to explore the potential for facilitating more energy-efficient lifestyles in the Netherlands. The scheme sought to generate insights regarding the roles of citizen-consumers as meaningful participants in Dutch climate policy and in the ability of the Netherlands to meet its greenhouse gas emission targets. The project’s objective was to determine whether a small group of households could reduce their indirect energy consumption by thirty percent and sustain this new level on a long-term basis.¹³

During a two-year study period, the participating households were encouraged to alter their lifestyles in ways that enabled them to achieve appreciable improvements in energy consumption. Since household incomes in the Netherlands were expected to rise during this timeframe, participants received a twenty percent supplement to their household budgets to see if they could successfully delink their increasing income from their energy use. For the length of the project, a “sustainability coach” helped all of

¹² This section draws on Beckers, et al. (2000).

¹³ The focus was especially on households’ indirect use of energy. In the Netherlands, this amounts to about 60 percent of total domestic usage.

the households to monitor energy use and provided advice on energy-saving alternatives (CEA, 1999).

By the end of the study, most of the households had managed to reduce their energy consumption—on average by thirty-one percent. One of the most interesting conclusions of the project is that energy-efficiency gains were not equal in all consumption domains. An area that proved very resistant to improvement was long-distance transport, particularly in terms of summer-holiday travel. This sobering outcome is attributable to the limited number of energy-efficient travel modes, as well as to an unwillingness on the part of citizen-consumers to revise their vacation routines.

This policy experiment also offers valuable lessons about the longer-term implications of more energy-efficient lifestyle choices. Eighteen months after the formal conclusion of this project, researchers again measured the energy use of the study households. In most cases, direct energy consumption had increased, while indirect energy use was quite stable (especially with respect to food and leisure). The critical factors that limited the households' ability to sustain their improvements were the loss of the supplemental income and the lack of feedback that the sustainability coaches had previously provided. The high price and limited availability of energy-efficient products were related constraints. In contrast, some households managed over time to routinize their new energy-efficient practices by coming to view their new lifestyles as healthier, more relaxing, and more economical.

The Future Perspective project, because of its focus on citizen-consumers' actual daily behavior, provides a useful starting point for exploring the prospects of more sustainable consumption. The study's insights regarding the practicability of energy improvements in different consumption domains, and the constraints imposed by the dearth of energy-efficient alternatives, are valuable. At the same time, the project did not consider the specific ways in which producers offer sustainable products and services. It also restricted consumption behavior to "green shopping," without looking into the social relations that accompany the purchase and use of items deemed environmentally preferable (Spaargen, 2003).

The Domain Explorations Project: Pinpointing Environmental Hot Spots

In 1995, *VROM* launched the Domain Explorations Project, which aimed to identify opportunities for reducing the environmental side effects of consumer behavior within five specific areas of everyday life relevant for consumption-oriented policymaking: feeding, clothing, housing, recreation, and personal care (Schuttelaar and Partners, 2000; *CREM*, 2000; *TNO-STB*, 1999).

Within each of these domains, researchers assessed the environmental implications of various consumption practices, using life-cycle analysis (LCA) and other technical methods of evaluation. This quantitative mapping provided an overview of forms of consumption that required the most urgent attention, in other words, the areas of consumption that constitute environmental hotspots. The investigators then developed measures to address these major burdens, and to identify the best potential links in production-consumption chains. The project's next step

calls for organizing so-called "chain consultations" that will engage stakeholders from specific domains in discussions about strategies for achieving the proposed improvements.

This scheme reflects the pragmatic attitude prevalent in the Netherlands with respect to sustainable consumption, and serves as an important step toward creating the foundation for more consumption-oriented environmental policies. Rather than starting from a set of prefigured objectives, the conceptualization of carefully defined consumption domains serves as the point of departure for subsequent analysis and intervention. By mapping the areas that hold the greatest potential for improvement, it becomes possible to compare the resultant changes within (and among) the various consumption domains. These evaluations bolster the legitimacy of consumption-oriented environmental policies—at least in their technical form. However, this particular emphasis can also prove problematic. Citizen-consumers' experiences are tightly interwoven with their consumption choices, and these social aspects of provisioning do not lend themselves to the quantitative analysis inherent in LCA. Under such circumstances, it becomes difficult to assess the extent to which citizen-consumers have internalized the themes and terminology of specific policy interventions—for instance, reducing greenhouse gas emissions or protecting biodiversity.

The Citizen and the Environment Project: A Green "Consultation Model"

The *VROM* designed the Citizen and the Environment Project to foster meaningful relationships with citizen-consumers by abandoning the classical emphasis on technical system rationality. The scheme aimed to find potential linkages between government steering and the everyday life concerns of citizen-consumers. This initiative did not focus narrowly on provisioning practices, but also considered various relationships between citizen-consumers and the environment—for example, the ways in which environmental problems are defined and transportation choices are reconciled. The project was highly explorative and qualitative as it sought to provide input for a comprehensive reconsideration of environmental policymaking.

The researchers organized a series of small, independent projects to examine the impacts that a stronger consumption orientation would have on agenda setting, policymaking, and the division of roles and responsibilities in environmental decision-making. The project employed a diverse array of methods and techniques, including workshops, expert sessions, panel meetings, interviews, and focus groups, to study the environmental motives and concerns of citizen-consumers in different everyday life settings. For example, some respondents were interviewed while visiting an entertainment area or a day-care center to identify how they encountered and experienced environmental issues in these places. They were also queried about their thoughts regarding how environmental policymakers should address these issues (*B&A Groep*, 1997, 2000).

The researchers drew several conclusions regarding consumption-oriented environmental policymaking. This initiative suggested that *VROM*'s current approach does not enable citizen-consumers to make connections between environmental goals and everyday life and that the Ministry needed to "socialize" the environment (Spaargaren, 2003). In other words, to improve public uptake policymakers should develop—as part of a dialogue with citizen consumers—broader problem definitions that extend beyond the ecological context that is commonly used, and should formulate symbolic representations of environmental problems that accord more closely with lived experiences. This study also made clear that the division between citizen-consumers and the government requires clearer delineation. Some environmental problems are the responsibility of individual citizen-consumers, while others require explicit governmental leadership.

The Warm Gulf Stream Project: A Communication Approach

The Warm Gulf Stream Project is a relatively new approach initiated under the aegis of *VROM* that starts from the idea that communication should be customized for different social groupings according to lifestyle characteristics and environmental perceptions. This strategy is predicated upon a categorization of Dutch citizens into eight ideal types: rational ecologists, passionate ecologists, conscious progressives, conservatives, techno-actives, contented citizens, materialists, and indifferent citizens (Motivaction, 1999). For each of these classifications, *VROM* and other relevant government ministries sought to employ a specific style of environmental communication. For instance, the Dutch government has utilized the Warm Gulf Stream approach to convey information about climate policy. Dutch citizen-consumers were asked to choose those measures for reducing greenhouse gas emissions that conformed with their individual lifestyles—joining an ecoteam, purchasing green electricity, opting for public transportation, or buying "trees for travel."

This particular strategy is a specialized form of target-group segmentation. The search for targeted, tailor-made communications—instead of employing a universal approach—is a positive development that, to our minds, deserves encouragement. Nonetheless, we have concerns about the project's theoretical and methodological foundations. The particular clusters that this project employed are based on general patterns currently visible in Dutch society, and these values do not necessarily reflect actual consumption behavior. We also have reservations about how suitable these categories are for predictive purposes, as lifestyle segmentations should be grounded in actual consumption practices (Ester, 1999). The Social Practices Model we have formulated separately provides a more sociologically informed approach for developing this strategy (Beckers et al., 2000; Spaargaren et al., 2002).

Sustainable Dwelling: A Transitional Policy Field

The recently initiated Dutch policy field of "sustainable housing" is, in many respects, the consumption-oriented offspring of sustainable-building policies created three decades ago. Until the mid-1990s, sustainable building in the Netherlands was a technocratic

endeavor that sought to close production loops, to promote the use of eco-efficient materials, and to increase energy efficiency. From 1995 onward, *VROM* has acknowledged the decidedly singular focus on the supply side of the housing market and sought to devote more attention to supervisors of building projects and citizen-consumers. To achieve this objective, the policy focus was broadened from merely sustainable building to the more expansive concept of sustainable housing (*VROM* 1997). As a result, the Ministry developed several policy initiatives to encourage environmentally friendly occupation and maintenance of buildings (Martens and Spaargaren, 2002).

One example of this approach is the Sustainable Do-It-Yourself (DIY) Project, jointly executed by four project partners: *VROM*, the Association of DIY Stores, the Consumer and Safety Foundation, and the Dutch Company for Energy and the Environment. Beginning in 1998 and lasting for two years, the aim of this scheme was to stimulate "greener" DIY practices. This project was unique because it simultaneously paid attention to both the demand and supply sides of sustainable DIY. A training program to increase the knowledge of store personnel about the environmental dimensions of different products is one example of a supply-side improvement. The primary strategy for greening the demand side was a mass media campaign to inform and educate consumers about possibilities for sustainable DIY. By employing an aggressive marketing approach—one that emphasized consumer rationality instead of a specific policy objective—this effort differed from traditional government information programs.¹⁴

Policymaking in support of sustainable housing highlights the policy-style changes that *VROM* has made for addressing sustainable consumption. The Ministry has evolved away from its previously very limited emphasis on citizen-consumers toward a view that recognizes consumers as knowledgeable and capable actors. One of *VROM*'s current goals—though it still remains to be seen how it will work out in practice—is to make citizen-consumers full-fledged policymaking partners in sustainable housing (*VROM* 1999a, 1999b).

Conclusion

During the mid-1990s, Dutch NGOs and government ministries began to acknowledge the importance of citizen-consumers in fostering more sustainable consumption. During the past decade, the orientation of policymakers has broadened from a rather narrow focus on meeting challenging targets, based on

¹⁴ The design of the information campaign involved drafting a profile of the prototypical Dutch DIY enthusiast based on personal characteristics, preferences, and "DIY logic." A typical home renovator in the Netherlands is a male homeowner who is between 25 and 59 years of age. He is married (or is living with a domestic companion), is the salaried member of the household, and has more than average interest in interior design. When choosing products and services the archetypal Dutch DIY aficionado considers quality to be a foremost criterion; subsequent considerations are safety and health, followed by price, environmental characteristics, and convenience. Before undertaking a particular renovation task, he will solicit information from store personnel, as well as from brochures, product labels, and promotional materials.

technical definitions of environmental problems, to a stronger commitment on consumer rationality. This shift is, to some extent, evident among all NGOs and relevant ministries. However, a wide variability exists regarding the actual application of these new policy discourses. By focusing on the different consumption domains (instead of on specific policy fields), this study makes it apparent that the change process differs both qualitatively and quantitatively. Our analysis of the various participants involved in facilitating more sustainable consumption in the Netherlands prompts us to proffer a series of recommendations for improving the effectiveness of current interventions.

First, consumption-oriented environmental policymaking should be directed at “policy units” that are both environmentally significant and connected to the everyday-life rationality of citizen-consumers. The domain explorations project provides an effective foundation for defining the targets of specific policy initiatives. It is now necessary to elaborate upon and prioritize these domains. To prevent this process from devolving into a technocratic exercise that hides the social context of consumption, it is essential to create an active dialogue with citizen-consumers, as the Citizen and the Environment Project did.

Second, prospective environmental hot spots that pose major environmental burdens (and concomitantly hold the potential for large-scale improvements) need to be analyzed for selected domains. Government ministries should complete these investigations in cooperation with groups of citizen-consumers to develop appropriate environmental heuristics. Environmental heuristics are relatively simple and practicable principles that connect the predominantly technical rationale of environmentalism with the social rationale of the everyday life-world (Spaargaren et al., 2002). These rules of thumb should enable citizen-consumers to identify environmentally preferable alternatives, within a certain social context, that lead to improvements in the overall performance of the specific domains.

Third, an important issue related to developing environmental heuristics entails visualizing and framing environmental effects as objects of sustainable consumption policy. To date, policymakers in the Netherlands have not developed many schemes that allow citizen-consumers to assess the environmental impacts of their consumption practices, either at an individual level or as they are embedded within a specific social setting or consumption domain. Researchers are now working—especially with respect to energy—to construct monitoring formats that are geared to consumer rationality and that employ the terminology and images of everyday life.

Fourth, we argue that environmental innovation progresses unevenly across the different consumption domains. Policymakers need to consider the potential for reform in terms of creative public responses, as well as the available range of sustainable alternatives. In the past, policy objectives with respect to sustainable consumption were often overly ambitious, or did not mesh with improvements already achievable in everyday life. By first assessing capacity for additional ecological modernization in each consumption domain, policymakers can better tune

their interventions to the actual phase of the transition process.

Finally, consumption-oriented environmental policies suggest a need for the participation of citizen-consumers themselves. Active public involvement in shaping such initiatives demands novel approaches—focus groups, panel discussions, and discussion forums. In addition, the description and analysis of different lifestyle groups deserves attention. Motivaction’s (1999) differentiation of citizen-consumers into ideal types represents a good start, but this approach should be adapted in accordance with *actual* environmental dispositions and consumption practices. Lifestyle groups emerge from—and should be identified according to—the social practices that comprise everyday life.

Some of the building blocks described above are already available, while others still need to be developed. Reflecting upon the current state of knowledge and policy practice, we conclude that the success of efforts to encourage more sustainable consumption hinges on the extent to which they accord with consumer rationality. The social practices model we have described elsewhere strives to integrate several of these building blocks (Spaargaren, 2001; see also Giddens, 1984, 1991). This approach entails a primary focus on specific social practices within everyday life. Domains such as food, housing, leisure, and clothing can usefully serve as new units of analysis for environmental policymaking and thus supplant the earlier emphasis on environmental consciousness or individual environmental attitudes. The model combines an emphasis on the everyday life-world with a strong emphasis on the social context in which behavioral routines are situated.

In recent years, we have tested the social practices model in several research and policy settings. On one hand, the model has been employed as an analytical tool to study the potential for sustainable transitions in certain segments of everyday life and to map the factors that could stimulate or impede progress. On the other hand, we have used it as a framework for reflecting upon and for evaluating existing policy initiatives with respect to sustainable consumption. As such, the social practices model has proven valuable in the search for more effective consumption-oriented environmental policies.

Most analysts contend that, since the late 1980s, the development of new horizontal policy arrangements in the Netherlands, as well as the turn towards market-based strategies and civil society actors, represents a major political renewal. The question, though, remains whether we can expect another equally embracing modernization of the environmental policy field in the near future, one characterized and inspired by an even stronger focus on citizen-consumers. We believe that such an approach is essential to prevent a loss of influence and legitimacy. At present, *VROM* and other relevant policymaking institutions in the Netherlands are pursuing a number of initiatives that influence the everyday life-world of citizen-consumers, but the scale of these efforts remains too limited and their scope overly fragmented. A more vigorous political debate regarding sustainable consumption and the role of citizen-consumers in environmental policymaking is required. An important step in promoting this public discussion entails expanding the

pilot projects that various governmental ministries, private companies, NGOs, and lifestyle groups have begun to pursue.

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