

Exploring the added value of quasi-ethnographic case studies on the emergence and up-scaling of grassroots innovations

Tom Bauler & Ariane Debourdeau
Université Libre de Bruxelles
tbauler@ulb.ac.be

Overarching objectives :

- Investigate the patterns of emergence, solidification and diffusion of existing consumption *niches* :
 - a° how can we qualify, define and circumscribe *niches* when the focus of analysis is put on consumption patterns?
 - b° what are the dynamics that co-organize the *evolution* of such consumption niches?



- Transition Approaches and socio-technical innovation
 - Focus on alternative, self-organizing consumption&production practices as niches
- “Configurations that work”
 - Focus on interconnectedness of factors (from micro to macro)
- Diffusion processes:
 - Focus on spread / replication and the implicit/explicit alterations of niches
- Collectives as the analytical unit



Research questions

- a° what internal and external factors form the 'configuration that works' and enabled the creation and emergence of this particular niche of alternative (sustainable) consumption and production practice?
- b° to what extent are these configurations highlighting possible pathways of diffusion of these niches?
- c° what forms of governance developed in the niches and collectives, how are these niches and collectives governed by public authorities⁴



Case study layout

<i>Niche</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Nature of the 'collective'</i>	<i>Consumption domain</i>	<i>Synthesis description</i>
GELA Gemeinsam Landwirtschaften	Austria	A community-supported agriculture project	Vegetable and fruit production, distribution and consumption	Gela is the first Community-Supported Agriculture project in Austria. Consumers sign up in advance for a one-year or a season provision of organic vegetables grown at a local biodynamic farm. The CSA is co-managed by a group of active consumers and the farmers.
Veggie-Thursday	Belgium	A Not-for-profit organisation	Promotion of vegetarian/vegan food consumption	In 2009, the "Thursday Veggie Day" (TVD) is launched in Ghent promoting vegetarianism, with the support of the municipality in order to promote the adoption of a veggie/vegan day a week as a commitment towards sustainability, health and animal suffering.
Wolhagen 100% RES	Germany	A Local Authority	Local renewable energy production	The city of Wolhagen aims to cover, by 2015, its entire communal energy need (households, commercial and industrial business) with locally generated renewable power plants.
Emission-Zero	Belgium	A consumer-producer cooperative	Local renewable energy production and consumption	Promotes socially-aware wind projects and short electricity supply chains. It also actively supports a model based on a locally generated renewable energy owned by the citizens/residents.



- “People” have a crucial importance:
 - All 4 case studies rely on charismatic and hyper-educated leadership
- Outer context frames the moments of emergence:
 - Opportunity: e.g. Wolfhagen&Veggie Thursday
 - Opposition: e.g. Gela&Zero emission
- Alternatives are on a wider economic deconstruction pathway
 - Build an economically viable and independent alternative way of live

- Evolution of the niches is not following a single pattern :
 - Diffusion = sprawl, e.g. Zero emission: extension of the model to more windmill parks and other renewables, and even to consumption reduction
 - Diffusion = replication, e.g. Gela: copy-pasting explicitly wanted and supported
 - Diffusion = translation, e.g. Veggie Thursday: not more as an idea is diffusing
- Consumption niches do evolve strongly over time

Niche governance

- Multi-faceted external governance schemes :
 - Framing, e.g. zero emission cooperative: strong legal framework, but no direct influence by public actors
 - Empowering, e.g. Veggie Thursday: public actors give means, resources and visibility to civil society
 - Ignoring, e.g. Gela: no public governance, but some opportunities are caught
 - Engineering, e.g. Wolfhagen: public actor is the driver



- Case sensitivity? Context matters?

Configurations matter?

Conclusions and outlook

- “Frontrunners” seem to be one key even internally in the niches
 - Internal contexts are important
- Fundamentally different “configurations that work”
 - comparative approaches seem impossible, and integration of findings a challenge
- ... but then the good news: contexts matter w/r to the emergence and diffusion

