

WAKE UP!

UPCYCLE YOUR REGION

UPCYCLE YOUR REGION WITH RAW MATERIAL CYCLES

Alfride Groenewold
Leonie Spronk

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CHANGE ALMOST
ALWAYS LIES
WITHIN A REGIONAL
COMMUNITY'S OWN
REACH AND SPHERE
OF INFLUENCE.

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Jacqueline Cramer, Professor of Sustainable Innovation and director of the Utrecht Sustainability Institute

‘MUNICIPALITIES NEED TO TAKE ON THEIR ROLE IN SUSTAINABILITY NOW’

At a time when the government is further withdrawing and concentrating on legislation, Professor Jacqueline Cramer questions this trend in terms of the transition to a circular economy. In May 2014 'her' Utrecht Sustainability Institute presented a municipal approach for creating a circular city. This concept, says Cramer, assigns an initiating and directing role to municipalities. "Circular thinking requires us to look at the totality of a chain. This means letting go of the idea that you only have a task at the end, i.e. in the waste phase. Municipalities can provide new impulses for their region."



IT'S NOT THAT MARKET PARTIES AREN'T INTERESTED

It's not that market parties aren't interested in a circular economy, says Jacqueline Cramer, Professor of Sustainable Innovation at Utrecht University and director of the Utrecht Sustainability Institute.

"I see ever more market players investing in sustainable policy that's aimed at long-term profit. But government is also playing a role in this transition. It needs to mark out a path, show vision and develop a strategy for encouraging and supporting innovations and new forms of business. I don't mean only through traditional legislative methods but also through innovative spatial planning policy and with new instruments, such as contracting and facilitating new arrangements for collaboration in clusters and chains. This can significantly strengthen the Dutch economy."

ECONOMIC POTENTIALS

This certainly applies to municipalities.

"I STILL SEE THE ECONOMIC POTENTIAL OF THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY AS THE MOST ATTRACTIVE FEATURE. IF YOU CONVERT PRACTICALLY ALL YOUR WASTE INTO RAW MATERIALS THEN THIS WILL CREATE NEW BUSINESSES AND NEW JOBS. RECYCLING IS THE INDUSTRY OF THE FUTURE."

Moreover, according to Cramer, it is becoming ever more expensive in relative terms to extract, acquire and produce raw materials and then to process them as waste. "So the more raw materials we keep in the cycle, the better it is for our wallets." Another point, says Cramer, is that municipalities with a sustainability policy set a good example to their businesses and citizens. "Then you show that we as a society have the obligation to ensure sufficient raw materials for future generations. Besides this, the prospect of a waste-free society is politically interesting, too." So the moment has arrived for municipalities to begin the transition to the circular economy in their own regions.

A GUIDE FOR MUNICIPALITIES

In order to support municipalities in this shift, USI has developed the municipal roadmap 'The Circular City', produced by the USI research network which includes Utrecht University, TNO, Deltares, KNMI, Ecofys and HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht. The notable thing about this guide is that it shifts the focus from waste collection and processing to the start of the chain. So in a circular city the municipality also has the task of stimulating and facilitating the redesign of product and material chains. Cramer: "The PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency says that we are international leaders in separated collection and reuse of specific waste streams such as paper, cardboard and glass. Moreover, there is a steady growth in the number of businesses manufacturing in line with the cradle-to-cradle principles. But we are lagging behind in the separated collection of many other streams of household waste, including plastic, textiles and bulky household waste. We remain stuck in the logistical management of collection and processing, at the lowest possible price."

CITIZENS WISH TO PARTICIPATE

Cramer says that the paucity of system innovations is due in part to a lack of ambitious goals. "And something else, too: there has always been a fear – and still is – that citizens aren't willing to participate in an extensive separation of waste. But this is incorrect. During my time as a minister, when the separate collection of plastic packaging was introduced, people often told me: it's good that we can do something. People really are willing to participate, certainly if you get them involved from the start. That needs to be achieved at the local level, and then my personal experience is that the involved people can even become enthusiastic. It's a nice goal to work together to achieve circular streams in your own neighbourhood or district. If you approach citizens personally, then they're willing to help you. And businesses are often very happy to show their customers that they are working even more sustainably. Then suddenly a lot is possible."

RECIPROCAL PROCESS

According to Cramer, bottom-up involvement of citizens in innovative municipal policy is far from standard practice in the Netherlands. Personally she doesn't believe that informing citizens about changes should be a one-way process.

"I'M ALL IN FAVOUR OF COLLABORATION WITH CITIZENS"

"PEOPLE WANT TO INFLUENCE THE COLLECTION SYSTEM THAT WILL BE INTRODUCED IN THEIR OWN NEIGHBOURHOOD. AFTER ALL, THESE CHANGES DIRECTLY INFLUENCE THEIR OWN HOUSEHOLDS. HOW ARE YOU GOING TO MANAGE THIS IN YOUR OWN KITCHEN, FOR INSTANCE?"

USI is setting up experiments to investigate how the positive attitude among citizens and businesses can be translated into a broadly supported policy. Cramer believes that feedback on collection results should certainly form part of this. "Citizens want to know what effect all those home-separated waste streams is having. The stories about organic waste being collected then burned are still in people's minds. Administrators and professionals should be aware that collecting waste is a reciprocal process. That sometimes gets forgotten."



'PROCESSES LIKE THESE REQUIRE YOU TO TRANSCEND INDIVIDUAL GOALS AND TO SEE WHAT YOU CAN ACHIEVE TOGETHER'

INITIATIVES

Initiatives by citizens and (small) businesses form a valuable element on the path to a circular city, says Cramer.

“IN BIG CITIES YOU ALREADY SEE INITIATIVES IN THE AREA OF REPAIRS AND BORROWING. I THINK THAT'S A GREAT DEVELOPMENT. WHY SHOULD I KEEP A WELL-STOCKED TOOLBOX AT HOME, FOR INSTANCE, IF I ONLY DRILL A FEW HOLES IN THE WALL EACH YEAR? THAT MAKES NO SENSE AT ALL.

I understand that it's not easy to develop new policy. To implement changes. But municipalities that develop this sustainability vision and are open to initiatives by citizens, and really integrate these in the new policy, are the ones that are going to make the difference.” According to Cramer, change begins with leaving your own comfort zone, and it requires collective leadership. “In a circular economy it's no longer about what the individual thinks is important, but about the joint search for and realization of new solutions. And be clear: this doesn't need to happen overnight. That's impossible in view of the earlier choices and investments. Just consider the large number of waste incineration plants still present in our country. In my vision we are gradually moving towards a circular economy in the Netherlands.”



DIALOGUE AND CO-CREATION



Cramer says it is just as important that municipalities learn from each other here. "It would be bizarre, wouldn't it, if one municipality came up with a solution for improving paper recycling while 50 kilometres away two other municipalities have already done this, and moreover have a cluster of paper companies in the area? It's not such a big distance to bridge. I advocate dialogue and co-creation. In the field of innovation studies, the first articles on the circular economy state that collaboration, open innovation and co-creation are the strategies of the future. I'm aware that this requires quite a lot from organizations. I understand the resistance, the fear of losing one's own identity with one's own strategic goals. But in a circular economy these are the most important keys to progress."

FIFTEEN YEARS FROM NOW

Nonetheless, Cramer is optimistic about the willingness to change in the Netherlands. "Raw materials management, alongside energy, is going to be a major issue. For years now, lots of attention has been given to climate change and programmes relating to energy-neutral work. And rightly so. But I predict that in fifteen years from now we'll have made significant progress towards the circular city. There will be broad support in the population for changes to our systems. And we'll find it quite normal to separate various waste streams." In short, Cramer sees the coming changes as an opportunity for municipalities.

“WE ARE HEADING FOR MANY NEW NICHES THAT SPECIALIZE IN RECYCLING OF SPECIFIC WASTE STREAMS. THAT WILL CREATE NEW JOBS, ALSO FOR PEOPLE WITH A DISADVANTAGE ON THE LABOUR MARKET. SO I SEE A HUGE SOCIAL POTENTIAL, TOO. AS A MUNICIPALITY YOU CAN PROVIDE A MAJOR IMPULSE HERE.”

‘I UNDERSTAND THE FEAR OF LETTING GO OF ONE’S OWN INTERESTS. BUT THAT’S WHAT A CIRCULAR ECONOMY REQUIRES’

‘WE ARE HEADING FOR MANY NEW NICHES THAT SPECIALIZE IN RECYCLING’

ABOUT JACQUELINE CRAMER

Professor Jacqueline Cramer (1951) has been Professor of Sustainable Innovation at Utrecht University since 2010 and director of the Utrecht Sustainability Institute (USI) since 2011. Cramer became well-known in the Netherlands thanks to her political career. In 2007, as a member of the PvdA political party, she was appointed Minister of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment in the Balkenende IV government. As a minister she initiated the government-wide Schoon en Zuinig (Clean and Economical) climate programme and the sustainable purchasing policy. She also saw through a number of laws, including the Air Quality Act (2007) and the Spatial Planning Act (2008). Cramer has previously held professorships at the University of Amsterdam, Tilburg University and Erasmus University Rotterdam. She has published several books and academic articles and runs a consultancy firm for sustainable entrepreneurship. Jacqueline Cramer studied at the University of Arkansas (USA) and at the University of Amsterdam, where she gained a cum laude doctorate in biology in 1976.