

How “inner sustainability” can benefit the climate: Linking environmental to personal well-being

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Environmental sustainability as defined by the Cambridge dictionary is the "idea that goods and services should be produced in ways that do not use resources that cannot be replaced and that do not damage the environment". In short, this could be interpreted as a state of “equilibrium”, which is “a state in which opposing forces or influences are balanced”.

Could we apply the same metaphor on “inner sustainability”? We could define it as a balanced way of life that does not deplete our mental (i.e. avoiding burn-outs, depression...) as well as physical "resources" (e.g. preventing overweight, cardio-vascular and other conditions linked to stress and nutrient-poor Western diets).

In our presentation "Why aren't we really mitigating? – Understanding the Hows, Whys and Why-Not-Yets!"

- 1) Detlef van Vuuren (PBL and Utrecht University) identifies the most important areas of lifestyle changes with mitigation potential on Global Warming, including (more) plant-based diets, different mobility and transport concepts, and changing consumption patterns. research perspective, how unfounded fears and prejudices (such as equalling sustainable decisions with a decrease in living quality) prevent us from changing our habits; how we can overcome these barriers; and
- 2) I then explain what prevents us from changing our habits from a neuroplasticity perspective. 3) what micro- and macro- level benefits sustainable lifestyle decisions can have on health, well-being, and stress-levels.

Since 2014, political scientist Anna Meyer and myself as an environmental lawyer have regularly undergone so-called self-challenges, all around sustainable behaviour changes, alongside a growing online and offline community of followers. Each challenge lasts for a month, and could consist in being completely vegan, consuming only local goods, designing zero waste lifestyles, avoiding all plastics, buying no products except from food and personal care products, and so on. Our challenges had initially been designed to foster environmental sustainability and awareness. However, both of us and our community reported increased levels of well-being, and health (healthy weight, better immune system, better skin, and various benefits from higher quality of nutrients and time spent, and less exposure to toxic elements present in products and packaging). Interestingly we also positively reported an increased simplification in our lives (less "agony of choice"), a heightened sense of satisfaction from bridging our knowledge-action gaps, and a clearer conscience. We also found ourselves enjoying and being motivated by the community spirit and open exchange.

Against common prejudices, we found that sustainable behaviour change in consumption frees up financial resources and time resources. This emerges from what is commonly known as the 3Rs hierarchy of sustainability: REUSE, REDUCE, RECYCLE, with their practical implications in the form of repairing, sharing, swapping, upcycling, and other creative ways to avoid consumption and waste.

By following the rules of the 3RS, we found ourselves spending less money on products—and most interestingly also observed that we had more time and energy levels at our disposal which we would otherwise have lost through buying and agonizing over products. Furthermore the increase in financial resources opens spending potential on self-realisation projects or investment for higher quality of life, such as for a babysitter, a cleaner or other activities identified as beneficial. A

sustainable change of consumption and spending patterns also gives room for reducing working hours or enables working in professions that give a bigger sense of purpose ("ikigai").

We reported similar effects by shifting to sustainable means of transport and mobility, both in our daily lives and in travels.

The recent study "Buying Time promotes Happiness" by Whillans *et alia* in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 2017, confirms that investing money in the quality of our time promotes more happiness than investing the same amount of money in the consumption of products.

There is an immense potential of a positive chain effect. Simple measures, say in the area of sustainable nutrition and transport, can trigger increases in well-being and health, which in turn alleviates national health systems. Rethinking transport reduces pollution, stress, and time spent in traffic jams, with positive impacts on well-being and health. The financial savings in the health sector could for instance be re-invested into creating greener spaces and community projects, which in turn has positive effects on physical and mental health.

We believe that many unsustainable behavioural patterns derive from habits in "auto-pilot" mode: patterns which we fail to question or transform in our daily lives. We see great potential in fostering creativity and flexibility through self-challenges, be it on an individual or community level. By giving different inputs to our brain, we keep ourselves agile, and meanwhile acquire new and better habits for operating sustainably in our environment.

We believe in sustainable lifestyle change on a "mix & match basis", i.e. by identifying personal priorities and needs, and tailor-make our own sustainable lifestyle choices on the basis of clear, practical and accessible information. This has a great potential to foster higher levels of inner and environmental sustainability.

We claim that main-stream economic thinking and product-marketing rest on a counter-intuitive, misguided notion of well-being, which essentially reduces well-being to purchasing power and consumption of products and services. Fortunately, some recent developments in economics have broadened the picture, by introducing more inclusive measurements of growth and well-being beyond GDP. Though minoritarian approaches such as "Inclusive Growth" by the OECD or Bhutan's "Gross National Happiness" index are promising approaches towards the right direction. Overall, we recommend an approach that interconnects economic interests, well-being, and sustainability, and strives for products and services according to these priorities.

It would be desirable that governments integrate

- 1) sustainable behaviour and pathways to well-being into educational curricula, including practical classes on how to prepare sustainable meals, teaching crafts, how to repair and upcycle – complemented with mindfulness techniques for conscious living and consumption.
- 2) And, as economic theory has long understood, the free-market systems need to be complemented through governmental interventions or regulations that aim to internalise negative environmental and social effects into the pricing of products and packaging; and reward or subsidise economic activity with positive external effects. Once such interventions are in place, companies will automatically react by engaging in more sustainable behaviour, for instance by reducing packaging and emissions – out of pure self-interest, thanks to the internalisation of negative external effects.