Sustainable Consumption and the New Economics: Exploring an Alternative Approach

by

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Abstract

An alternative theoretical approach to environmental governance and sustainable consumption is proposed by a broad body of thought known collectively as the ‘new economics’. It is founded on four key elements which define it as alternative to the mainstream: new conceptions of *wealth*, broader definitions of *work*, new uses of *money*, and reintegrating *ethics* into economic life. This paper is concerned with exploring the practical implications of this normative theory through an examination of an emblematic ‘new economics’ project which sets out a new, sustainable system of provisioning: ‘time banks’, a community-building initiative which uses time as money to reward community engagement and build social capital. Although successful in a ‘niche’, the alterity of this initiative result in problematic interactions with mainstream social, economic, ideological and policy regimes – particularly around issues of defining ‘work’ and income entitlement within the modern welfare state’s social contract.

Keywords: Sustainable consumption

1. INTRODUCTION

The problem of overconsumption in developed countries first entered the international policy arena in Agenda 21, the action plan for sustainable development adopted at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. The proposed solutions included promoting eco-efficiency and using market instruments for shifting consumption patterns, but it was also recommended that governments should develop 'new concepts of wealth and prosperity which allow higher standards of living through changed lifestyles and are less dependent on the Earth's finite resources' (UNCED, 1992: section 4.11). These two proposals – the former suggesting reform and the latter a radical realignment of social and economic institutions – represent competing perspectives of the nature of the problem and its solution, and here we will refer to them as 'mainstream' and an alternative 'new economics' perspectives on sustainable consumption (see Jackson and Michaelis (2003) for a review of sustainable consumption discourses).

Since then it has become a core issue on the international environmental agenda (e.g. OECD, 2002), and in 2003 the UK Government announced its strategy for sustainable consumption and production – defined as "continuous economic and social progress that respects the limits of the Earth's ecosystems, and meets the needs and aspirations of everyone for a better quality of life, now and for future generations to come" (DEFRA, 2003:10). This strategy uses a range of market-based measures, and calls on informed and motivated citizens to use their spending power to influence producers and so transform markets by demanding improved environmental and social standards. This mainstream policy approach to sustainable consumption has been criticised – not least by the government's own Sustainable Development Commission - on the basis of a number of significant factors (Porritt, 2003). These include market failures, information failures, political economic issues concerning the relative power of different stakeholders in the market, an inability to respond to the preferences of those unable or unwilling to participate in the consumer market, and most significantly, that it fails to see the social infrastructure and institutions which constrain choice to that available within current systems of provision. The critics therefore conclude that the mainstream approach is limited in scope, flawed in design, and unjust in its objectives (Maniates, 2003; Seyfang, 2005; Southerton et al, 2004; Burgess et al, 2003).

Despite the direction the mainstream policy framework for sustainable consumption has taken, the challenge laid down at Rio has not fallen on deaf ears. An alternative theoretical approach to environmental governance and sustainable consumption is proposed by a broad body of thought known collectively as the ‘new economics’ (Ekins, 1986; Henderson, 1995; Daly and Cobb, 1990; Boyle, 1993). This broad church of ecological, institutional, behavioural and radical economists aims to develop alternative systems of provision, with associated social and economic institutions and infrastructure, requiring a foundation in alternative values, development goals, motivations and definitions of wealth (Leyshon et al, 2004; Jackson, 2004), through debating how an ‘alternative’ sustainable economy and society might operate. This alternative perspective on sustainable consumption currently exists largely outside the policy framework. Nevertheless they are strongly represented by networks of grassroots initiatives and community activists, many of them inspired by the Rio Summit itself, working to challenge existing practices, and create alternative social and economic institutions which allow people to enact these values in their daily lives (Church and Elster, 2002). This paper is concerned with exploring the practical implications of this normative theory through an examination of an emblematic ‘new economics’ initiative and its interactions with mainstream social, economic, ideological and policy regimes.

2. AN ALTERNATIVE 'NEW' ECONOMICS

The New Economics is a philosophical and political school of thought founded on a belief that economics cannot be divorced from its foundations in environmental and social contexts. Schumacher's landmark book 'Small Is Beautiful' proposed a human-centred alternative to mainstream neo-classical economics in which social and environmental wealth is valued and protected within the context of 'human-scale' participatory democracy, localised economies and modest consumption levels. Other notable writers in this field include Sale (1980) on 'Human Scale' economies and Meadows et al (1972) on the environmental 'Limits to Growth'. These 'deep green' thinkers rejected mainstream approaches to the environment, and shared a conception of a sustainable future involving radical re-organising of economies to be more localised, decentralised, smaller-scale, and oriented towards human well-being, justice and environmental protection (Dobson, 1995). Furthermore, the political prescriptions of these normative analyses – in direct contradiction to mainstream policies - lent themselves to supporting a growing grassroots movement of academics and activists seeking change (Ekins, 1992).

The term 'new economics' was first adopted following a gathering of these alternative thinkers in a parallel conference to the high-profile G7 summit of the seven richest industrial nations in 1984. Known as 'The Other Economic Summit' or TOES, this event focussed on 'real-life' economics and addressed international debt, local economic resilience, valuing the environment, building social cohesion and so on, through new theoretical frameworks and nascent demonstrations of these principles in practice (Ekins, 1986). Following the successful TOES, UK's New Economics Foundation (NEF) was founded in 1986 as a charitable organisation (and now a self-styled 'think-and-do-tank') with the aim of further developing ideas and practices of 'economics as if people and the planet mattered' and influencing policy (see www.neweconomics.org) through an approach which 'relies on a broader understanding of what we mean by *wealth*, a richer conception of *work*, new uses of *money*, and on integrating *ethics* back into economic life' (Boyle, 1993:5).

Taking each of these four core assumptions in turn and examining their substance and implications, we can discern precisely what is alternative about the new economics. First, we should consider the implications of a broader understanding of '*wealth'*. Building on the lessons of ecological economics (Costanza, 1991), the New Economics places the environment at the heart of its economic analysis, accepting that there are ecological services that cannot be substituted for other types of capital, and that ecosystems do not react in a predictable, linear way to external stresses. Following from this, the economy cannot be viewed as an abstracted mechanism for indefinitely producing 'value' but rather has to take its place within the environment – and society – as a starting point. This in turn demands alternative sets of indicators which redefine 'progress' and 'wealth' to achieve a greater appreciation of 'wellbeing' and 'quality of life' (Ekins et al, 1992), arguably a better measure of societal progress and the true objectives of economic activity, than increasing consumption per se as measured by conventional indicators such as GDP. Consequently new sets of indicators of economic and social progress such as the Measure of Domestic Progress (MDP) have been proposed to better capture this wealth creation at the national level (Jackson, 2004) and also at the local level where social capital, community spirit and engagement are also valued (Walker et al, 2000). The MDP index finds that over the last 30 years, while GDP has grown by 80%, MDP fell during the 1980s mainly due to environmental degradation, growing inequality and associated social costs, and has still not regained the peak achieved in 1976 (Jackson, 2004). One consequence of this principle is a recognition that continual economic growth, and increasing globalisation may not be the best way of achieving greater societal wellbeing. New Economics therefore favours the growth of decentralised social and economic organisation and local self-reliance, and most fundamentally, it proposes a 'steady state' economy, rejecting the imperative of continual economic growth (Daly and Cobb, 1990; Henderson, 1995; Douthwaite, 1992; Schumacher, 1993).

The second departure that New Economics makes from the mainstream is in its conception of '*work'*. It proposes that the economic 'lens' is extended to include the bedrock of unpaid socially reproductive labour which sustains communities and families and so supports the market economy. This approach to viewing the economy requires a redefinition of 'work' to value (currently marginalised) unpaid labour and the informal employment, alongside formal employment (Henderson, 1995). It also demands a recognition that the realm of economic activity is not as commodified nor as homogenous as is generally presumed in the standard economic myth of the universal market (Gibson-Graham, 1996; Leyshon et al, 2003). Robertson (1985) proposes that a sustainable economy would allow people to have a portfolio of employment options, and undertake a variety of different forms of work – domestic labour, unpaid work in the community, informal employment for cash and local currencies, and formal employment in the market economy – which are each valuable and valued in their own right.

The third alternative characteristic of New Economics is its understanding of money. Mainstream economics describes money as a politically and socially neutral technology, with four core functions: as a medium of exchange, a unit of account, a store of value, and a standard of deferred payment (Begg et al, 2002). New Economists claim that not only do these functions of money conflict with each other in modern use (e.g. withdrawing money from the economy to store value prevents money circulating to meet needs), but that since all money systems are socially constructed infrastructure, their design builds in particular purposes and behavioural incentives to each type of money. Lietaer states “Money matters. The way money is created and administered in a given society makes a deep impression on values and relationships within that society. More specifically, the *type* of currency used in a society encourages – or discourages – specific emotions or behaviour patterns” (Lietaer, 2001:4). Mainstream money is a system which prioritises a narrowly defined range of economic activities (by valuing what is scarce rather than what contributes to wellbeing), in isolation from social and environmental contexts, and so inhibits sustainable consumption. Therefore new systems of exchange are needed, designed to serve different ends by taking a ‘whole systems’ approach to the social-environmental context of economic activity. While these may be less efficient from a purely economic viewpoint, they are actually *more* rational when one incorporates environmental and social factors (Greco, 1994; Seyfang, 2000, 2006). One such new monetary initiative is ‘complementary currencies’, the generic term for a wealth of contemporary alternative exchange systems which exist alongside mainstream money, and which have been springing up in developed and developing countries since the 1990s as community responses to the economic, social and environmental pressures of globalisation and economic restructuring (Seyfang, 2006; North 2007). Different types of complementary currency aim to rebuild resilient local economies, build social capital, incentivise ‘green’ consumption, and so on, and the study of ‘time banks’ is a complementary currency where time is used as money as a community building tool.

Fourth, New Economics is concerned with *ethics*. Unlike the positive, apolitical abstractions of mainstream economics (which translate of course to very ideologically-based policy prescriptions) it is a normative analytical approach, which aims to describe and facilitate the transition to a more sustainable society. It therefore takes explicit moral stances about the role of government, commerce and the social economy in delivering such a world, and about what the aims of policy should be – namely increasing sustainable wellbeing while maintaining healthy ecosystems (see for example the New Economics Foundations ‘Wellbeing Manifesto for a Flourishing Society by Shah and Marks (2004). The New Economics therefore calls for a new ‘ecological citizenship’ of humanity as a whole, one which expands across borders (as does environmental change) and which recognises the political implications of private decisions and so defines everyday activities of consumption as potentially citizenly work (Seyfang, 2005).

3. TIME BANKING: A 'NEW ECONOMIC' INITIATIVE

Having discussed the elements of the New Economics which justify its stance as an alternative to the mainstream, attention now turns to the practical application of these theories. Time Banks are an initiative which has been pioneered and promoted by the New Economics Foundation, and which embody all the above-mentioned characteristics of an 'alternative' perspective on wealth, work, money and ethics. We can therefore view them as emblematic New Economics initiatives for sustainable consumption.

'Time banks' are a social economy innovation which reward participation in community activities, and so aim to nurture social capital and networks of reciprocity. A time bank is a community-based organisation which brings people and local organisations together to help each other, utilising previously untapped resources and skills, valuing work which is normally unrewarded, and valuing people who find themselves marginalised from the conventional economy. It is a framework for giving and receiving services in exchange for time credits: each person's time is worth exactly the same – one hour equals one time credit, whatever the service given[1]. In this way, volunteer's hours are 'banked' and can be 'withdrawn' later when they need help themselves. A time broker manages the project and keeps a database of participants' needs and abilities. The types of help given are things like gardening, small DIY, giving lifts to the shops or hospital appointments, befriending, dog-walking, etc. These are things that family or friends might normally do for each other, but in the absence of supportive reciprocal networks, the time bank recreates those connections. When a member phones with a request, the broker finds another participant to carry out the task and arranges the service, and records the exchange of 'hours'. In this way, time credits are exchanged among participants as a form of time-based money or community currency. Participants are facilitated to give as well as receive help, challenging assumptions about the capacities of vulnerable and deprived populations.

Time banks were invented in the mid-1980s by US civil rights lawyer Edgar Cahn as a response to the erosion of social networks and informal neighbourhood support which Cahn perceives as the 'core economy' or the bedrock of society (Cahn and Rowe, 1998). David Boyle of the New Economics Foundation invited Cahn to bring the idea to the UK in 1996 and the first UK time bank was established in 1998 in Gloucester. In 2002 a national survey of Time Bank coordinators across the UK found that there were 36 active time banks with an average of 61 participants each (Seyfang and Smith, 2002). Since then, the idea has grown and by late 2007 there were 84 active time banks across the UK with a further 43 being developed. This equates to an estimated 7100 participants, who have exchanged 580,000 hours (Time Banks UK, 2007). They have developed in a range of settings where involvement of residents and service users can have beneficial impacts – eg health care, regeneration, education and community development - and this user-based delivery of public services is termed ‘co-production’ (Cahn, 2000; Burns and Smith, 2004). Furthermore, time banks have been successful in attracting participation among the most deprived neighbourhoods, and the participants of time banks are among the most socially-excluded groups in society, and those least-likely to be involved in traditional volunteering. For instance, 58% of time bank participants have an annual household income of under £10,000 a year, compared to only 16% of traditional volunteers. The benefits of time banking include increased self-esteem and confidence, gaining skills, growing social networks and building friendships, getting more involved in the community, and meeting needs – overcoming social exclusion and enabling active citizenship (Seyfang and Smith, 2002; Seyfang, 2003).

The stated principles of time banking are: recognising people as assets and that everyone has skills to share; redefining work to include the unpaid ‘core economy’ of work in the neighbourhood and community; nurturing reciprocity and exchange rather than dependency; growing social capital; encouraging learning and skills-sharing; involving people in decision-making. Furthermore, as they meet people’s needs for belongingness, self-esteem, recognition and wellbeing, they are claimed to reduce people’s need to consume material goods to fill emotional voids (Cahn, 2000; Time Banks UK, 2001). Time banks are clearly ‘alternative economic spaces’ for sustainable consumption, but in common with many other social economy initiatives, this alternative space is almost entirely dependent upon public (state) support, being dependent upon grant funding. Indeed, Time Banks UK’s aim is to promote the principles of co-production among mainstream public agencies, in order to meet the needs left unsatisfied by public spending cuts, help government meet its policy objectives for public services provision, and to improve public engagement with civic life. Given this tension between the alternative and the mainstream within time banking, to what extent is this New Economic alternative enabled or undermined by public policy?

The UK government has enthusiastically embraced the ‘social economy’ of voluntary and community organisations, and social enterprise, as a means of delivering a range of public policy objectives. These include volunteering and community participation, training and education, neighbourhood renewal, delivering local services, local governance and achieving sustainable lifestyles through behaviour change (HM Treasury, 2002). Time banks have been recognised as valuable tools for meeting such goals in the Department of Health’s green paper on Adult Social Care (which was publicly launched at London's Waterloo Time Bank) (DH, 2005), and in the Active Citizenship Centre's review of community engagement which highlights the achievements and potential of time banking in improving health (Rogers and Robinson, 2004). However, despite this official support, the need for secure, long-term funding is the biggest issue for time bank coordinators. The 2002 survey found that all the UK's time banks were externally funded. Time banks do not rely on volunteers, but require financial support to pay the time broker's salary (essential for attracting hard-to-reach groups in deprived neighbourhoods), an accessible office, marketing costs and so on, costing an estimated £27,300 a year in 2002 (Seyfang and Smith, 2002). UK time banks have received grant funding from various charities and trusts, but over time it has become harder to secure ongoing funding for existing projects, or to increase the funding available for time banks overall, with the result that established projects close while new ones are begun elsewhere (ibid).

At the same time, in order to promote the uptake of time banking among the poor and unemployed, in 2000 the UK government took a significant step in announcing that time credits would not be counted as earnings, and so would not affect entitlement to income-related benefits. Neither are they counted as taxable income (Time Banks UK, 2006). This ensured the initiative had official support as a tool for tackling social exclusion, by framing participation as 'non-remunerative work', rather than 'economic activity'. However, the experience of time bank organisers and activists is that the benefits ruling does not go far enough, and there are three remaining regulatory obstacles which constrain time banking's potential. First, the Department of Work and Pensions has stated that goods used as an incentive to participation on time banks (for example recycled computers which are awarded to participants for earning a certain number of credits), count as earned income (cited in Time Banks UK, 2006). In the USA, local businesses donate surplus goods or services, which can be 'bought' for time credits; this attracts participants with economic needs and widens the range of useful services available on the time bank. Such a strategy in the UK would enormously increase the benefits of time banking to the socially excluded. Second, participants receiving incapacity benefits may find their payments cut because participation in time banks is presumed to demonstrate an ability to work (ibid). Time bank organisers claim this is a mistaken and short-sighted assumption – the involvement of people with disabilities in community activities through time banking is first of all an effective form of occupational therapy, building confidence and skills, and second, only possible in many cases because of the high levels of support offered. Thirdly, unemployed time bank participants – in common with anyone undertaking unpaid work in the community – find themselves pressured by current ‘welfare to work’ policy to enter the formal employment market, at the expense of their voluntary work (Seyfang and Smith, 2002; Burns et al, 2005).

It is apparent that despite broad official support for the social economy in general and for time banking in particular, in practice there is a lack of policy coherence particularly around state policy on benefits and work. In the next section we discuss the causes and implications of this deep-rooted contradiction, which go to the very heart of UK public policy, and highlight the complexities of building New Economics alternatives within mainstream policy settings.

4. DISCUSSION: WORKING ALTERNATIVES

Time banks meet all the New Economics criteria of offering alternatives to mainstream economic thought and practice, and offer a new approach to achieving sustainable consumption. As Table 1 summarises, they embody a richer, non-economic conception of '*wealth'*; they redefine '*work'* to include the unpaid work in society; they use time as a new form of *money*; and they enact egalitarian principles and an *ethic* of reciprocity. The primary mainstream social and policy context within which this alternative, New Economics initiative resides, is that of the welfare state's social contract. This holds that individuals who are able to work, have an obligation to do so and to thereby earn income to provide for themselves and their families; those unable to work are financially supported by the state. This contract forms the basis of the system of income distribution in all modern economies: income entitlement is tied to formal employment and the unemployed are, by definition, socially excluded (Bauman, 2005). This system has been strengthened over recent years as the 'welfare to work' New Deal programme has emphasised even more the obligations of citizens to undertake paid work, and recent social inclusion policies have emphasised employment as being the primary route to social inclusion (Byrne, 2005). Yet this mainstream system of income distribution and its accompanying goal of 'full employment' - or the more modern 'employment opportunity for all' - is arguably partial in its scope and detrimental to cohesive, sustainable communities. It recognises only paid formal employment as 'work', so values only that work which has exchange value in the labour market. Indeed, participation in community and voluntary activities has been falling, and women (the traditional providers of unpaid community work) are doing less, as they are encouraged to undertake paid employment instead (Davis-Smith, 1998). In effect, this policy is stripmining communities of the very people they need the most – active citizens who work hard, on a voluntary basis, to meet social and economic needs in local communities – because they are officially viewed as being 'economically inactive' and are required to be financially self-reliant – i.e. not in receipt of state benefits (Burns et al, 2005).

Table 1: Contrasting mainstream and 'New Economics' alternative economics

	Mainstream economics	**'New Economics' Alternative as practiced in time banking**
Wealth	Exchange value	Use-value
Work	Formal employment	Work in the 'core economy' of neighbourhood and community
Money	National currency, values what is scarce	Time currency, values skills and abilities which are abundant
Ethics	Free market competition; welfare state 'social contract'	Reciprocity, mutual aid and egalitarianism

As an alternative to the mainstream, time banking bucks the pricing and market system by giving a value – and incentive - to the work which is normally unvalued in society, yet which is an essential prerequisite for a functioning society and economy. Social reproduction "is the work that keeps local neighbourhoods safe, clean and inviting, keeps people healthy and happy, and enhances people's abilities as parents, friends, neighbours and potential employees – but never appears in government employment statistics" (Burns et al, 2005:3); it is quite literally unvalued in the conventional economy (Waring, 1988). Time banking aims to prevent this vital work from being squeezed out by the pressures of the market economy, by building an alternative regime of work and income distribution which values and rewards such efforts. One of time banking's primary attractions to participants is its recognition and acknowledgement of the skills and abilities of people who do not have a value in the labour market. To use Marx's terms, it priorities 'use-value' over 'exchange-value' (Amin et al, 2002), and proposes an alternative system of societal income distribution: one which is also based upon the work ethic, but which redefines what we mean by work: i.e. it decouples income from employment, and ties it instead to 'work' broadly defined to include unpaid as well as paid exchange (Seyfang, 2003). In this way it speaks to the growing New Economics movement seeking to recognise and legitimise alternative forms of work organisation within modern economies (Gibson-Graham, 1996; Williams, 2005; Robertson, 1985).

If unpaid work in the social economy is to be valued for its contribution to society – and the active citizenship policy agenda suggests that it should - then government must consider how it honours and incentivises that work. Policy measures are needed which recognise – and reward - the valuable work performed in the social economy – valuable both to the individual and to society – and which thereby encourages participation in such activities by *all* groups in society. Time banking is just one means of achieving this goal, and there is much that government and policymakers could do to enable time banking to flourish and grow into a powerful tool for change. In addition to removing the impediments to participation faced by the poor and unemployed, for instance, given higher levels of long-term funding, time banks could be incorporated into health, education and regeneration agencies, as well as charities and special interest organisation, as a tool to help them achieve their objectives; it could also be usefully adopted as a mechanism to boost public participation in local decision-making in areas with high levels of disenfranchisement. This could be both through official channels, e.g. Citizen's Panels or Social Inclusion Partnerships, or alternatively though community groups and lobbying organisations.

5. CONCLUSIONS: GROWING A 'NEW ECONOMICS' ALTERNATIVE

The New Economics offers alternative models, theories and practices, which aim to contribute towards more sustainable development in general and more sustainable consumption in particular. It is founded on four key elements which define it as alternative to the mainstream: new conceptions of *wealth*, broader definitions of *work*, new uses of *money*, and reintegrating *ethics* into economic life. Although currently existing on the margins of mainstream policy, these ideas are increasingly being put into practice in community-based initiatives for change, representing a bottom-up implementation of the alternative New Economics existing in tandem with a creeping acceptance into policy models (such as public support for the social economy), both alongside more mainstream ideologies and practices.

The implications of this alterity have been examined in this paper, through discussion of an emblematic project which sets out a new, sustainable system of provisioning: time banking. While benefiting from official policy endorsement as a tool to promote community engagement and participation, time banking's alternative conceptions of wealth, work, money and ethics result in it falling foul of the mainstream social contract which insists that income entitlement is tied to participation in formal employment. This fundamental conflict of values constrains the potential of time banking to achieve its goals and meet policy objectives. If social economy initiatives are to grow and achieve their potential, then this policy incoherence must be addressed, and efforts made to introduce genuinely joined-up thinking around work, income and society. Several policy responses – such as time banking - have been proposed which might be accommodated within the current policy regime, but which nevertheless shift the incentive system far enough so as to recognise and value the unpaid work in society.

The alternative economic space offered by time banking could therefore offer much to complement mainstream activities and provision, if it were possible to incorporate spaces of alterity into the wider social and policy contexts. This might be possible through the promotion of 'niche' spaces where the rules are different and alternative values hold sway. These alternative niches can be seen as seedbeds of societal transformation, spaces where new ideas are tested and developed, either for their own intrinsic value, or explicitly aiming to diffuse into wider society (Seyfang and Smith, 2007). A limiting factor of this approach however, is the extent of the alterity itself: Smith (2006) finds that the more alternative a niche is, the harder it becomes to translate those ideas and values to be able to influence wider mainstream processes. It has certainly been the case in the example studied here, that despite quite mainstream framing, time banking's core alternative values conflicted strongly with wider policy contexts; yet this problem is not insurmountable given more coherent policy structures and a willingness to embrace diversity of values. Given the potential of the New Economics to offer a real alternative to mainstream economic thought, the need for greater understanding of the role of alternative niches in the transition to a more sustainable society has never been greater.

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