



**Sustainable Consumption and Responsibility:  
Putting Individual Sustainability in Context**

Lucie Middlemiss

February, 2008

No. 07

**SRI PAPERS**

SRI Papers (Online) ISSN 1753-1330

First published in 2008 by the Sustainability Research Institute (SRI)

Sustainability Research Institute (SRI), School of Earth and Environment,  
The University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT, United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)113 3436461

Fax: +44 (0)113 3436716

Email: SRI-papers@see.leeds.ac.uk

Web-site: <http://www.see.leeds.ac.uk/sri>

### **About the Sustainability Research Institute**

The SRI is a dedicated team of over 20 researchers working on different aspects of sustainability. Adapting to environmental change and governance for sustainability are the Institute's overarching themes. SRI research explores these in interdisciplinary ways, drawing on geography, ecology, sociology, politics, planning, economics and management. Our specialist areas are: sustainable development and environmental change; environmental policy, planning and governance; ecological and environmental economics; business, environment and corporate responsibility; sustainable production and consumption.

### **Disclaimer**

The opinions presented are those of the author(s) and should not be regarded as the views of SRI or The University of Leeds.

# **Sustainable Consumption and Responsibility:**

## **Putting Individual Sustainability in Context**

© Lucie Middlemiss 2008

Email: l.middlemiss@see.leeds.ac.uk

### **Contents**

Contents.....	3
Abstract .....	4
About the Author .....	4
Introduction .....	5
Empirical perspectives on responsibility.....	5
Theoretical perspectives on responsibility in Sustainable Consumption, Ecological Citizenship and Environmental Justice.....	8
A framework for responsibility in sustainable consumption .....	16
Conclusion .....	20
Acknowledgements .....	21
References .....	21

## **Abstract**

This paper reframes the understanding of responsibility within sustainable consumption in the light of empirical and theoretical work on individuals engaged in community action. The paper compares the sustainable consumption, ecological citizenship and environmental justice literatures theoretically to further develop thinking on responsibility and individual consumption. Mainstream sustainable consumption policy and research have tended to focus on means of persuading individuals to take on responsibility for the environmental damage caused by unsustainable lifestyles. Environmental justice has by contrast tended to emphasise structural factors that lock individuals into unjust situations, where their rights are violated. Historically, citizenship studies have emphasised either the rights or responsibility of the individual in society. By exploring differing perspectives on rights and responsibility within these contrasting fields, a broader interpretation of responsibility in sustainable consumption is developed. This recognises both the responsibility of the individual for sustainable behaviour and the limitations for individual action inherent in the context in which the individual operates. In addition it differentiates between individual responsibilities given people's ability to engage with change and the nature of the context in which they operate. A conceptual framework based on this thinking and on empirical research in the area is presented to summarise these ideas.

Key words: sustainable consumption; individual responsibility; environmental justice; environmental/ecological citizenship.

Submission date 07-02-2008; Publication date 28-02-2008

## **About the Author**

Lucie Middlemiss joined the School of Earth and Environment in 2004 as a Teaching Fellow and PhD Candidate. Her research interests include the contribution of community to individual sustainability, bottom-up initiatives for sustainability and sustainable consumption. Prior to her position at the University of Leeds, she took an MSc in Environmental Management at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. She has also worked for several years in corporate communications and in environmental consultancy.

## **1 Introduction**

The original motivation for this paper stems from observations made in a case study of a community action for sustainability project in the north of England. Members of the congregation of Holy Trinity church were involved with an action group campaigning on what are understood in academic circles to be sustainable consumption issues. The Christian Ecology Group participants were interviewed to establish among other things the impact of the context in which they operated on their take-up of pro-environmental and ethical behaviour options. Respondents showed a rather individualistic understanding of responsibility for sustainable consumption making very few references to collective responsibility. Instead many showed signs of attributing the responsibility for sustainable consumption mainly to themselves as individuals. Such an individualist perspective is not unfamiliar in the sustainable consumption literature, where mainstream views in particular tend to emphasise individual responsibility in proposed solutions to environmental problems (see the following for critiques of individualism: Spaargaren, 2000; Maniates, 2002; Seyfang, 2004; Southerton et al., 2004b). More subtle views of sustainable consumption, which incorporate collective responsibility, are emerging.

The empirical work in question, and the relatively limited engagement with the concept of responsibility in the sustainable consumption literature, prompted an exploration of theoretical perspectives on responsibility in other areas of research. The most obvious fields to explore in complement to work on sustainable consumption seemed to be those dealing with justice and citizenship in combination with environmental or sustainability issues, given their historical interest in matters of rights and responsibilities. In the process of researching these topics some interesting contrasts began to emerge. A theoretical comparison of these fields with sustainable consumption, together with the empirical work with sustainable consumers, has lead to a framework for understanding responsibility in sustainable consumption which incorporates both individual and collective responsibility and differentiates between the responsibilities of individuals.

The paper begins by presenting an analysis of interviewee perspectives on personal responsibility for sustainable consumption from the case study at Holy Trinity. It continues by comparing perspectives on responsibility in the sustainable consumption, environmental justice and ecological citizenship fields in order to better understand the concept of responsibility in sustainable consumption. Finally it proposes a new framework for the understanding of responsibility in the sustainable consumption field, built on this empirical and theoretical work.

## **2 Empirical perspectives on responsibility**

The case study concerned was undertaken as part of a research project on community-based organisations and their role in influencing individuals to behave more sustainably (Middlemiss, 2008b). The Christian Ecology Group (CEG) at Holy Trinity church, in a market town in the north of England, has been active in promoting sustainable consumption issues to its members and to the church congregation over the past 12 years. The CEG have had an important impact on those involved, with most of the participants interviewed reporting changes in behaviour, attitudes or

awareness as a result of the group's work (Middlemiss, 2008a). More detail on this case is available elsewhere (*ibid*).

## 2.1 Data and analysis method

The data presented here is taken from interviews with participants in the CEG (n=10), ranging from those that help organise events, to those that merely attend, or use the services provided by the group. The interviewees were distinctive in that most of them (8/10) had existing pro-environmental knowledge, awareness or behaviour, with half having a substantial history of engagement with ethical or environmental issues and actions before involvement with the CEG. As such they could be broadly termed 'sustainable consumers', with the one exception (who is not interested in or active on sustainability) excluded from this analysis. Interviewees represent a wide range of intensities of sustainable consumption attitudes and behaviour, however (ranging from a long history of interest and action to a more recent discovery of the issues).

The focus of this article is responsibility, and the parts of the interviews which were chosen for analysis were those that concerned the gaps between pro-environmental attitudes and behaviour. Attitude-behaviour gaps are a concept familiar in the literature (Jensen, 2002; Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002; Maiteny, 2002). When an interviewee provides an account of the disparity between their attitudes and behaviour, they tend to touch on issues of responsibility, since explaining such a disjunction convincingly to the interviewer requires the individual to give a reason for their actions. Such a reason is likely to place fault for the attitude-behaviour gap, or responsibility for the failure to take on a specific behaviour. This may be implicit or explicit, as is shown in the data below.

## 2.2 Respondents' perceptions of responsibility in Sustainable Consumption

Most of the participants interviewed gave examples of the difficulties of taking on environmental or ethical behaviours, despite positive attitudes to change. These accounts were mainly concerned with the limits to their own capacities and to the opportunities around them. Respondents were not asked to explain every instance of an attitude-behaviour gap or to make judgements about where responsibility lay in the failure to take on behaviour. Many of the stories came about spontaneously: for instance in answer to questions about what pro-environmental behaviour people had taken on, they responded by also detailing behaviours they had not been able to fulfil. The fact that individuals need to explain such gaps at all shows a need to account for their own potentially blameworthy behaviour (see the literature on accounts in sociology including Lyman and Scott, 1970; Orbuch, 1997).

One of the striking features of the case at Holy Trinity was the need for participants and practitioners to 'do the right thing' in terms of the environmental and ethical questions that are raised at the church. As such, people seem to feel strongly about attitude-behaviour resolution, and bad about their failure to meet what they see as responsibilities (which tend to be attitude-behaviour gaps). Signs of a need to justify actions were seen both in the way individuals responded to questions about their behaviour and in explicit justification of behaviour. Respondents gave three types of account for their pro- and anti-environmental behaviour: listing pro-environmental behaviour in detail; extensive or unprompted explanation of anti-environmental

behaviour; and explicit expression of guilt for anti-environmental behaviour. These are explained in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Listing pro-environmental behaviour (the first account for behaviour) varies by character type, but as soon as interviewees detect the subject area of the interview they tend to try to prove that they are doing their bit, or taking responsibility. While such responses do not directly address attitude-behaviour gaps, they do seem to be a means of ensuring that the interviewer knows that the interviewee is making an effort. This often results in detailed explanations of household arrangements. For instance, consider one respondent's response to a question about her environmental interests:

I'm obsessive about recycling. Obsessive. In each room in our house you have two rubbish bins. One for paper, one for other things like dirty tissues that can't be recycled. In the garage we have a crate for bottles. I know I should really get them from the milkman but he arrives after we've gone to work and since the front of the house is south facing it's always off before you get home. So we do buy milk in cartons, which I know isn't ideal, but that's what happens. So all the plastic bottles are put in a crate, that's shampoo bottles, washing up liquid bottles, all in a crate and they are... because my husband says I would use more fuel taking them to the recycling bin... I walk down every Saturday. (Holy Trinity Respondent, 2006, 2)

The individual concerned clearly wanted the interviewer to leave with an impression that she was doing her best and offers a detailed description of her recycling practice. Such an effort to impress is familiar to the interviewer.

The subsidiary stories in the quotation above consist of unprompted explanations of the details of her specific decisions. The story about the milkman is an example of the second type of account for behaviour. Respondents feel the need to give detailed justifications for behaviour that is non-environmental. Here she suggests that she has tried to buy milk from the milkman, as she realises that it is the 'right' thing to do, but failed since the house is south facing – implying that her use of milk cartons is only through necessity. The respondent feels her responsibility to act, and responds by detailed explanation of why she could not. Quite a few respondents felt the need to justify anti-environmental behaviour and gave similar accounts of why that behaviour was not achievable for them (Holy Trinity Respondents, 2006, 2, 4, 5, 9). This is sometimes taken to an extreme extent with excuses being made for physically impossible actions (Holy Trinity Respondents, 2006, 5 and 9). Only two participants explicitly express guilt about their behaviour (the third type of account). These are two members that have been engaged in ethical and environmental issues in the long term, and that are more open about their feelings than some of the other interviewees (Holy Trinity Respondents, 2006, 6 and 8).

In general then, while participants understand the limits of their own capacities, these are not clearly associated with corresponding limits to their responsibilities in pro-environmental behaviour. Participants' discomfort with attitude-behaviour gaps could conceivably lead to their attributing responsibility in sustainable consumption both to themselves and to other parties. In practice this is not the case. Some participants mention other parties in the context of sustainable consumption but rarely in terms of

blame or responsibility (Holy Trinity Respondents, 2006, 2, 4, 5, 7, 9). For instance respondents mention the lack of provision of specific products or low-packaged goods in shops (Holy Trinity Respondents, 2006, 2, 7, 9), others discuss the poor provision of public transport in the area (Holy Trinity Respondents, 2006, 2, 4, 5). However it is mostly only noted rather than explored in terms of responsibility and most statements referring to external forces are rather generalist. On provision of goods in shops a respondent comments: "Sometimes the things you'd like to buy just aren't available.", on public transport: "the trains don't run at the right times" (Holy Trinity Respondents, 2006, 7 and 2 respectively). There is little detailed consideration of the responsibilities of others, and very limited attempts to shift responsibility to others (business, government). In this sense individuals at Holy Trinity seem to have taken the responsibility for sustainable consumption on themselves.

### 2.3 Some thoughts on results

Participants therefore show an understanding of sustainable consumption which follows that prevalent in mainstream policy in this area (Seyfang, 2005). It seems that individuals at Holy Trinity feel the need to behave well regarding environment; they do not have a clear view on the boundaries of their own responsibility; and rarely explicitly link the responsibility for sustainable consumption to structural players (e.g. business and government). There are some interesting parallels here with previous research where active members of environmental groups have been found to assign responsibility for pro-environmental behaviour to themselves, while non-active members and non-members assign it to government or business (Eden, 1993). On the other hand, results contrast to Hobson's findings in research on GAP Action at Home participants where discussions of responsibility "focussed for the most part on the inadequacies of absent 'others', perceived as having greater liability and capacity responsibility than themselves" (Hobson, 2006, p. 291). For whatever reason the latter findings contradict this research, a type of consumer that attributes responsibility to him or herself rather than others is not an unfamiliar one. Such 'individualisation' will be discussed in more detail in the next section on theoretical perspectives.

## 3 Theoretical perspectives on responsibility in Sustainable Consumption, Ecological Citizenship and Environmental Justice

The emergence of the attribution of responsibility as a theme in empirical work prompted a theoretical interest in issues of individual responsibility. The most logical fields to explore as a complement to those directly concerning sustainable consumption seemed to be those dealing with justice and citizenship in combination with environmental or sustainability issues, given their historical interest in matters of rights and responsibilities. Indeed, on closer inspection there were found to be some interesting overlaps between these research areas.

The links between ecological citizenship and sustainable consumption are considerable. While Dobson, in his book on ecological citizens, did not necessarily intend to create a normative model for a sustainable consumer, other authors, in particular Seyfang, have pointed out the parallels between his model and what they see in practice (Dobson, 2003; Seyfang, 2005; Seyfang, 2006). Seyfang has projected a reciprocal relationship between the two concepts interpreting the practice

of sustainable consumption as a potential tool for the eco-citizen, and the ideals of eco-citizenship as a driver for sustainable consumption (Seyfang, 2005; Seyfang, 2006).

There is also a 'justice' connection between sustainable consumption and environmental justice as it is generally understood that over-consumption leads to low quality environments and both perpetrators and victims are created by such damage (Jackson, 2006). Environmental justice typically takes the 'victims' as its locus of interest, victims being those who have their rights (to clean environment and safe places to live) violated (Shrader-Frechette, 2002; Agyeman, 2005). Sustainable consumption on the other hand takes the 'perpetrators' as its topic, people who are neglecting their responsibilities (to consume within the limits of resources available) (Jackson, 2006).

The following section takes the topics of sustainable consumption, ecological/environmental citizenship and environmental justice in turn and explores their perspectives on individual responsibility. These topic-specific sections also broaden the discussion to include the relative importance of agency and structure within each topic area, as well as describing key conceptual models used by each topic to frame issues of individual responsibility for the environment. Following this a theoretical comparison between the three fields' attempts to unravel the areas in which concepts in justice and citizenship can help to inform our understanding of sustainable consumption.

### 3.1 Sustainable Consumption

Sustainable consumption as a field incorporates some distinct perspectives on individual responsibility which hinge on different conceptions of the roles of agency and structure (Spaargaren, 2000; Seyfang, 2005; Hobson, 2006; Seyfang and Paavola, forthcoming). Spaargaren identifies a distinction between the agency-oriented perspectives familiar in economics and social-psychology where sustainable consumption is explained theoretically in terms of the internal motivations of the individual, and more sociological analyses which take a structuration perspective (*ibid*, 2000; see also Jackson's review of the literature which summarises many of the agency-oriented perspectives Jackson, 2005). Seyfang and Paavola categorise research into three areas, two of which ('cognitive' and 'social-marketing') focus on a strategy of providing information to change individual behaviour (agency-oriented), while a third ('systems of provision') appreciates the possibility of lock-in for individuals who may not have the ability to act within the structures they inhabit (Seyfang and Paavola, forthcoming). In separate work both Seyfang and Hobson note a tendency in mainstream UK policy to paint the individual as the agent of change in sustainable consumption (Seyfang, 2005; Hobson, 2006). Both authors contrast this perspective with situated visions of societal change which see individual buying power alone as an impotent strategy for sustainable consumption. The terms 'individualist' and 'situated' will be used in the rest of this article to distinguish these two perspectives on sustainable consumption.

The individualist agency-orientation seen in sustainable consumption research and policy, tends therefore to focus on "the consumer as the principle lever of change." (Sanne, 2002) In a detailed critique of this position, Maniates sees such

'individualization' as part of a political movement in the 1980s to downsize government and shift the locus of responsibility to the individual consumer (Maniates, 2002). Maniates believes that such a strategy frames individual laziness and ignorance as the cause of environmental problems and marginalises more substantive solutions. Hobson helpfully cites the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR, 1998) in the UK to this effect:

Ultimately the burden on the UK's environment is attributable to the choices and the actions of the consumers. To a great extent producers are, quite naturally, responding to meet the preferences of the consumers. (DETR cited in Hobson, 2006, p. 285 )

DETR clearly attributes responsibility for environmental problems to the individual (consumer) here, and detracts blame from the producer. Witness the use of language: the 'burden' on the environment is due to failures by the consumer and the logical producer responds 'quite naturally' to their preferences. The implication is that the producer is fulfilling his responsibility (in following preferences) while the consumer fails hers (in taking the wrong choices).

Such an emphasis on individual responsibility in sustainable consumption is not inevitable, and exploring both the limits of individual responsibilities, and the interactions between individual and societal responsibilities, can offer useful insights. More recent literature on sustainable consumption takes structural influences on individuals into consideration (Burgess et al., 2003; Shove, 2003; Spaargaren, 2003; Southerton et al., 2004a). Authors stress the importance of social context in giving meaning to sustainable consumption lifestyles, and in allowing genuine choice for individuals who want to live more sustainably (Burgess et al., 2003; Spaargaren, 2003). In theoretical work in this area Spaargaren takes a structuration perspective on sustainable consumption, where individual agency (or capacity to act) is determined by the structure of the opportunities offered to them which in turn is influenced by individual agency. Spaargaren analyses acts of consumption in particular 'domains' of social life in terms of:

the deliberate achievements of knowledgeable and capable agents who make use of the possibilities *offered to them in the context of specific systems of provision* (2003, p. 688, emphasis in original)

In other words the individual acts because they are capable of acting, because they know how to act and because they are taking an opportunity to act that is offered to them by their context.

The recognition of the importance of structure in individual choice leads to a different view on individual responsibility: if choice or empowering structures are not available, perhaps the responsibility of the individual is diminished and that of the producer (business or government) increased. Spaargaren and Martens link individual responsibility for sustainable consumption with reference to capacity for change.

Capacities for change can so far be said to result from the concerted actions of (governmental and market-based) providers and innovative groups of citizen-consumers. (2005, p.230-31)

As such individuals can be held more accountable in places or contexts in which the capacity for environmental living is well provided for and accessible. This author would argue that this should be further extended to encompass the capacity of the individual for change, including the resources available to them, their understanding of environmental issues and so on. If an individual is poorly resourced to make changes, their responsibility to do so is diminished. A structuration perspective on responsibility in sustainable consumption therefore sees the individual and the context in which she lives as strongly interdependent. To give a brief example: an individual choosing to own a car helps to propagate a social system which relies on car transport. On the other hand an individual may feel the responsibility of operating without a car in a system designed for car use too onerous.

There is rather limited discussion of individual rights within the context of sustainable consumption. This is not necessarily inevitable, and some more attention could be paid in this area. Responsibilities of the individual can be reframed as those of society, as they sometimes are by those sustainable consumption researchers incorporating structural explanations in their work. For instance the individual's responsibility to live a sustainable lifestyle can be framed as the responsibility of society to provide infrastructures for an individual's sustainable lifestyle. To take this a step further a responsibility of society can be framed as the right of an individual. So the individual can be seen to have a right to live a sustainable lifestyle, and a right to be provided with sustainable opportunities by society. Considering individual and structural responsibilities and individual rights in a sustainable consumption context allows the reasons for individual activity or inactivity to be explored in more depth.

This discussion of sustainable consumption will conclude with an outline of two conceptual models used in the exploration of issues of individual sustainability. The first is the ecological footprint, which is seen as a useful way of characterising the impacts of an individual on the earth (Wackernagel and Rees, 1996). The focus here tends to be on the amount of resources used per person (be it per Briton, per city resident or per individual). The usefulness of this is as an "aggregated indicator of natural resource consumption" (Barrett et al., 2005 p. 305) or a measure of how much each individual uses in all their daily activities. On the many websites provided for eco-footprinting an individual's ecological footprint can be compared to the average in their own country, or to 'sustainable' levels of resource consumption (defined by the proportion of the earth's natural resources and waste sinks available to each individual) (see for instance World Wildlife Fund, 2008). The eco-footprint reflects an attempt to visualise the difference between how we live and how we ought to live. As such the eco-footprint implicitly identifies where people are failing in their responsibilities.

Spaargaren introduces the alternative concept of 'environmental utilisation space' originating from the economist Horst Siebert (see Dresner, 2002 for a history of this concept) and used somewhat interchangeably with 'environmental space' as discussed under environmental justice below. The environmental utilisation space of the planet is a more positive concept than the ecological footprint because while it implies ecological limits (there is a total amount of space) it also "evokes the image of available space that can literally and legitimately be made use of" (Spaargaren, 2000, p. 57). Spaargaren argues that the concept incorporates the notion of a fixed amount

of resources (the physical limits of the earth) while leaving the use of these resources open to debate (for instance the precise distribution of resources). While Spaargaren does not discuss rights and responsibility in this context, environmental justice interpretations of this concept do (see 'environmental justice' below).

### 3.2 Ecological/Environmental Citizenship

The concept of citizenship is concerned with issues of both rights and responsibilities as applied to the individual. Dobson chronicles the rise and fall in favour of rights and responsibility in recent years in his book on Citizenship and the Environment, noting a tendency to focus on the prevalence of either rights or responsibility rather than incorporating the two (2003). Dobson does not concentrate on distinguishing rights and responsibility although his perspective is rather responsibility-oriented (as detailed below). Other schools of thought on citizenship differ, in his critique of Dobson, for instance, Barry takes a rights-oriented (republican) perspective (2006) while Bell's liberal point of view favours procedural rights and responsibilities (for instance the right for the individual to choose to take environmental impacts of their actions into account) as opposed to substantive ones (2005).

This body of work is also not easily categorised as agency or structure-oriented, as different authors have different approaches to the topic. Some authors have a tendency towards individualistic proposals for change which mirror those agency-oriented approaches offered in individualist sustainable consumption outlined above (see for instance Connelly, 2006; Dobson, 2007). Dobson's proffered solutions in citizenship studies are educational, attitude-changing programmes offered through mainstream education, in an attempt to create environmental citizens who will then engage in environmental living (Dobson, 2003; Dobson, 2007). This is quite an agency-oriented perspective on environmental change, reliant on an individual's internal processes creating change as opposed to structures of society. Bell's model for change is a more mixed approach where citizens responsibility is to follow laws set by the government which are created in deliberative processes through the involvement of citizens (2005). To some extent this mirrors work on structuration in the sustainable consumption field: although Bell sees the responsibility to act as mainly structural. In his view an individual should follow laws and recommendations of the government on environment (structure), and has no obligation to attempt to live a sustainable lifestyle independently (agency).

In his book on the topic, Andrew Dobson presents a model of responsibility-oriented citizenship while also touching on the nature of citizenly rights (2003). Using the ecological footprint as a conceptual model he argues for a responsibility orientation: since ecological footprints are different for each individual, citizens have an individual responsibility to remain within the limits of a sustainable ecological footprint. Dobson only touches briefly on the rights dimension here, although importantly he does see the 'virtue' or overarching purpose of ecological citizenship as justice, which emphasises the right of each individual to an equal share of ecological space. This contrasts to other perspectives on citizenship which avoid talking about rights in substantive terms, preferring to concentrate on procedural rights (Bell, 2005). Dobson's vision of the ecological footprint as both a right and a responsibility, a right to a certain amount of ecological resources (for meeting basic needs) with a

responsibility not to use more than one's fair share, is a useful expansion of the perception of the footprint in sustainable consumption work.

Another issue raised in the environmental citizenship field which will be discussed in more detail in relation to environmental justice is that of differentiation between individuals in attribution of responsibility. In reference to relations between the developed and developing worlds, Dobson emphasises the morality of obligations to the environment falling on those with capacity to act (2003). Connelly also notes that duties (responsibilities) and rights are not necessarily symmetrical for an individual: the attribution of a right does not necessarily result in a corresponding responsibility and vice versa (2006).

### 3.3 Environmental Justice

Environmental justice tends to take a structure-oriented perspective on individual sustainability, with a focus on how structural decisions affect individuals and their ability to live within healthy environments. Although many of the cases chronicled in this research area are about bottom-up protest at environmental wrongs (agency as a solution) the problem is explained in terms of structural factors that impinge on individuals. Witness Agyeman's definition of environmental justice:

local, grassroots, or 'bottom-up' community reaction to external threats to the health of the community which have been shown to disproportionately affect people of color and low-income neighbourhoods. (Agyeman, 2005, p.1-2)

Note the problem is 'external' threats to the community. Equally individuals are affected because of their characteristics: ethnic minorities and low-income individuals are more likely to be affected irrespective of individual agency. As a result there is a considerably greater emphasis on rights than responsibility in much work in environmental justice (see for instance Agyeman's citation of the Principles of Environmental Justice in which only one of seventeen principles is concerned with individual responsibility) (*ibid*, p. 187).

Shrader-Frechette's work on environmental justice is exceptional in that she (briefly) considers individual responsibility alongside individual rights. In reference to a particular aspect of individual responsibility (the responsibility of citizens of the developed world to ensure that hazardous technologies are not exported to the developing world) she differentiates between individuals by 'responsibility through ability' (Shrader-Frechette, 2002):

To the degree that people have the ability to make a positive difference in such situations, therefore they are obliged to do so. (*ibid* p. 178)

There are two ideas that benefit our understanding of sustainable consumption here: first that fulfilling responsibility depends on ability, and second that individuals have differing abilities to fulfil their obligations. Having the 'ability' to make a difference according to Shrader-Frechette amounts to responsibility requiring acts that: "normal, non heroic people are capable of being convinced to do." (*ibid* p. 178) This may involve individuals rejecting their allotted responsibilities where these are too onerous. It may also require supportive measures to ensure that acts of heroism on

behalf of the individual attempting to live a sustainable lifestyle are not essential. Differentiation between individuals is familiar in the area of environmental justice, where equality is relative to the capacities and the structural experience of the individual (Agyeman, 2005). Such differentiation between individuals can usefully be expanded into the sustainable consumption area – where some individuals are more likely than others to have the capacity to fulfil their responsibilities, whether that is due to their own personal capacity to act or to the presence of supporting facilities which can enhance their capacity to act.

A conceptual model used in environmental justice that is useful here is environmental space (Agyeman, 2005). Environmental space represents the minimum resource requirements and maximum resource entitlements of the individual, thus recognising both rights to a decent life and responsibilities to live within ecological means. Environmental space mirrors the perspective on the ecological footprint taken by Dobson above: it represents both a limit to individual consumption (and a responsibility to keep to that limit) and an entitlement (or right) to a certain standard of living.

### 3.4 Theoretical comparison

Table 1 shows a summarised theoretical comparison between the approach to individual responsibility in the three areas of research considered above (sustainable consumption, ecological/environmental citizenship and environmental justice). It compares the research areas' perspectives on agency and structure, rights and responsibility, and the use of the conceptual models outlined above. There are two columns for sustainable consumption, which deal with the individualist and situated approaches to the topic separately.

**Table 1: Comparison of Sustainable Consumption (Individualist and Situated), Ecological/ Environmental Citizenship and Environmental Justice approaches to individual responsibility**

Dimension	Sustainable Consumption (Individualist)	Sustainable Consumption (Situated)	Ecological/ Environmental Citizenship	Environmental Justice
Agency/ Structure	Agency-oriented: individuals have an effect on the natural and social world.	Structuration: individuals affect society which in turn affects individuals.	Diverse perspectives.	Structure-oriented: the structures of society have an effect on individuals.
Rights/ Responsibility	Individual is responsible as perpetrator of environmental damage.	Individual is responsible according to capacity accorded by context.	Diverse perspectives (tendency to prioritise rights or responsibility).	Individual's rights are violated as the victim of environmental damage.
Conceptual models	Ecological Footprint: shows (relative) effects of individual on the earth.	Environmental Utilisation Space: shows resources available for sustainable use.	Ecological Footprint: shows rights to resources and responsibility to observe limits.	Environmental Space: shows rights to resources curbed by limits to over-consumption.

While this is something of an oversimplification, as no area of research is confined entirely to agency or structure perspectives, the prominence of one or the other makes for an interesting contrast. The historic focus on agency or structure-oriented explanations for (individualist) sustainable consumption and environmental justice respectively, has perhaps masked the connections between the topics. The distinction between perpetrator and victim, for instance, may be difficult to draw, with individuals acting as one or the other depending on the topic perspective. Consider, for instance, the rural dweller who fails to use a local public transport system: is she a victim of insufficient services, or a perpetrator of climate change?

There is a link between some research areas' focuses on concepts of agency and/or structure and equivalent focuses on responsibility and/or rights. This is particularly apparent in individualist sustainable consumption and environmental justice fields. Individualist sustainable consumption research that emphasises the agency of the individual as a trigger for change also emphasises the responsibility of the individual for environmental problems. Environmental justice research has a focus on the individual's rights to a decent environment, and tends to offer structural explanations of why individuals live the way they do. In other areas this connection is less straightforward.

Situated sustainable consumption attempts to combine both agency and structure in its explanations of societal problems and of the potential for change but is rather fixed on responsibilities rather than rights. This may be an issue of framing, as discussed above responsibilities of society can be reframed as rights of the individual. Environmental/ecological citizenship, on the other hand, has had varied emphases on agency and structure and rights and responsibilities over time which do not link up so neatly. If anything this shows that both rights and responsibilities can be used to theorise about individual sustainability.

The different treatment of two basic conceptual models (ecological footprint and environmental space) by the different disciplines is also revealing. Both environmental justice (using environmental space) and ecological/ environmental citizenship (using ecological footprint) attempt to incorporate rights and responsibilities into conceptual models. In contrasts the same models used in the sustainable consumption field have a rather more responsibility-oriented vision of individuals. In individualist sustainable consumption (ecological footprint) the emphasis is on the effects of the individual on the earth (failure to meet responsibility) and in situated sustainable consumption on available resources for individuals to consume (within limits of responsibility).

The consideration of sustainable consumption in the context of justice and citizenship is useful, adding new dimensions to understanding of individual responsibility. Two points in particular emerge from the discussion above:

1. Considering sustainable consumption in the context of justice and citizenship leads to a more subtle understanding of responsibility for sustainable living, which does not automatically accrue to the individual, but is rather a shared obligation between individual and society.

2. Justice and citizenship perspectives suggest that responsibilities are likely to differ between individuals given people's ability to engage with change and the nature of the context in which they operate.

These are the main starting points for the following section which proposes a framework for the concept of responsibility in sustainable consumption.

#### **4 A framework for responsibility in Sustainable Consumption**

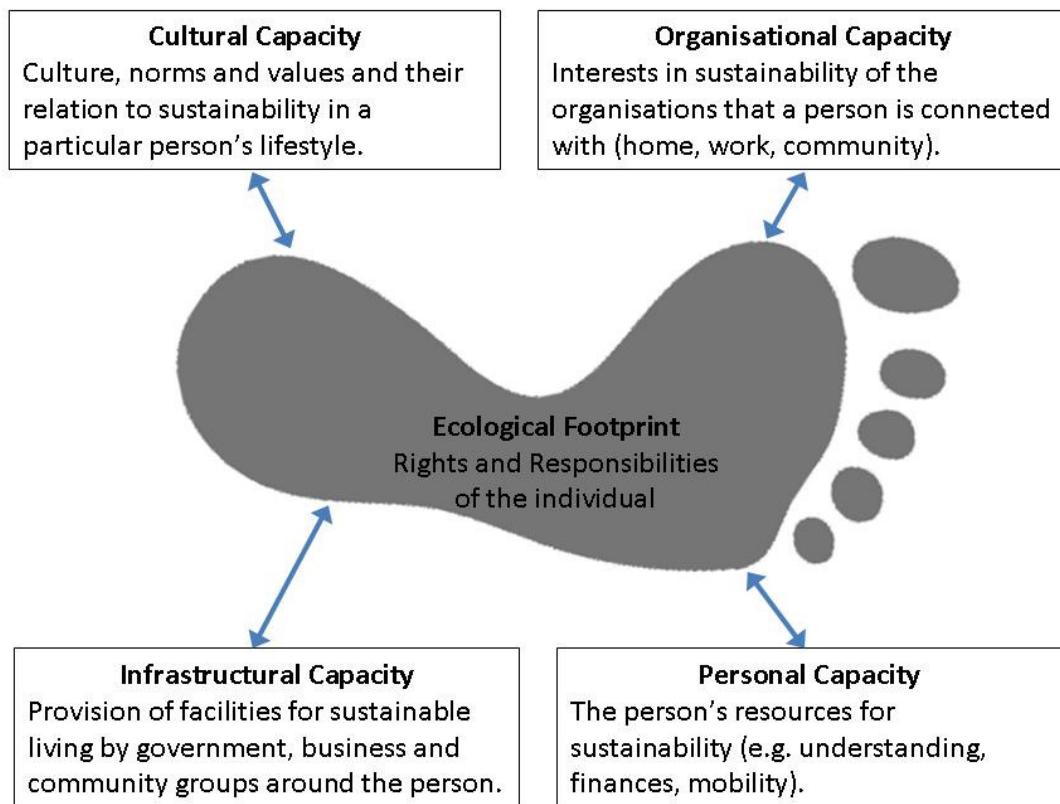
If the responsibility for sustainable consumption is framed as a shared obligation between individual and society, this implies a move away from a causal explanation of sustainable consumption activity as driven only by the individual, adding the context of the individual as a further explanation for change. It also suggests a more relative conception of responsibility in sustainable consumption, where the boundaries of responsibility for behaviour are formed according to the specific individual's capacity to engage with change, and the nature of the society in which she lives. The following section attempts to redefine the ecological footprint as a conceptual model to address these issues.

##### **4.1 Conceptual model**

Figure 1 is a conceptual model which attempts to represent individual responsibility in context. At the centre of this diagram is the individual's ecological footprint made up of both their rights to a liveable amount of ecological space and their responsibilities to use only a sustainable amount of space. This relates to Dobson's conception of environmental footprints in his work on environmental citizenship, and to the concept of environmental space in the environmental justice field (Dobson, 2003; Agyeman, 2005). The four 'capacities' that sit around the footprint are made up of external structures (here given as Organisational, Cultural and Infrastructural Capacity) and individual context (here given as Personal Capacity). The word 'capacity' here is used to mean the ability to enable individual responsibility. As such individual responsibility is subject to that individual being in a context in which his or her own (personal) capacity is high enough, and the capacity afforded by his or her context (organisations, culture and infrastructure) is also high enough.

The arrows linking the footprint and the various 'capacities' here are two-directional. This is important because it means that the boundaries of the individual's footprint can be stretched or shrunk by all four surrounding capacities. If, for instance, a person has very low personal and infrastructural capacity, with limited personal resources and limited local service provision, their footprint will be larger. On the other hand if a person has high capacity due to his or her context their footprint will be smaller. There are likely to be upper and lower limits to footprint size, defined by carrying capacity on the upper side, and decent standard of living on the lower side, as seen in work on environmental space in sustainable consumption and environmental justice (Spaargaren, 2000; Agyeman, 2005). The boundaries of the individual's footprint are specific to individuals within contexts, however, and there are likely to be instances in which an individual footprint is above the 'sustainable' size due to specific local and personal capacity reasons. This links to Spaargaren and Martens's idea that 'how much is enough' needs to be addressed socially and

politically and not only from an ecological and technical perspective (Spaargaren and Martens, 2005).



**Figure 1: Proposed model of the rights and responsibilities of a sustainable consumer and the contextual factors affecting these**

The different capacities are defined in brief in figure 1. The origin of these is not self-evident given the data and theory presented in parts 2 and 3 of this article and as such they merit more detailed treatment here. All of the 'capacities' in the diagram relate to the specific context of the individual concerned and as such will be different for each person. The 'capacities' could differ, for instance, between two neighbours who have slightly different lifestyles. The concept of 'lifestyle' is used after Spaargaren (and as such Giddens), as the set of social practices in which an individual engages in daily life (Spaargaren, 2003).

Cultural Capacity refers to the accepted norms and values within a person's lifestyle. If sustainability is a part of, or connected to the world view that pervades a person's lifestyle they are likely to be more enabled to act than someone that has a world view which does not relate to sustainability. In the particular case reported on in part 2 the respondents were members of a church, and had made connections between their religion and issues of sustainable living. This gave them a strong cultural capacity, in that their attempts to live sustainably were not (in the Christian Ecology Group at least) considered culturally unacceptable. The pro-environmental culture meant that in practice environmental issues were considered an acceptable topic of discussion in church (Holy Trinity Respondent, 2006, 7). There was also an opposing culture

among fellow church members, however, who saw no connection between the church and sustainability issues. This had diminished the cultural capacity of the participants, especially organisers involved whose efforts were considerably frustrated by the opposing culture (Christian Ecology Group Practitioners, 2006). Cultural barriers to, or enablers of change are a common theme in sustainable consumption research (see for instance Sanne, 2002; Burgess et al., 2003; Jackson, 2004).

Organisational Capacity refers to the connections that the organisations with which individuals have contact in their day to day lives have to sustainability. This refers to two features from the case study: the importance of the value that organisation leaders place on sustainability, and the links between the organisations' purpose and sustainability. In the case concerned the leadership issue manifest itself in the recognition by the rector and other local and national Church of England figures of the importance of sustainability issues to the church. This seemed to help to encourage the acceptance of the principles of sustainability within Holy Trinity. The presence of leadership on these issues was supplemented by a growing recognition in the church in general and in this specific congregation of the connections that can be made between the church's purpose and the goals of sustainability. The importance of organisational leadership is not often commented on in the literature, although there are some connections with the idea of community champions (DEFRA, 2008). The importance of being connected with organisations that recognise the goals of sustainability is also relatively unfamiliar, and it remains to be seen if either of these factors can be generalised outside of the context of community action on sustainability.

Both Infrastructural Capacity and Personal Capacity are more familiar concepts, although as discussed under 'sustainable consumption' above the former is a relatively new area of focus in this field. In the case study in part 2 these are referred to in more detail. Infrastructural capacity is interpreted here in a very broad sense, referring to the provision of products and services by surrounding organisations, be they government, business or community driven. In the case study the Christian Ecology Group provided some extra facilities to members that allowed them to fulfil their environmental responsibilities. On the other hand respondents struggled to find certain products or services in the facilities provided by the local council (transport) and businesses (especially supermarkets). There is no exhaustive list of the elements of personal capacity that might have an effect on ability to fulfil environmental responsibilities. In this case the sorts of inhibiting factors that emerged were physical (inability to walk, or carry recycling), financial (inability to afford environmental or ethical products), administrative (inability to switch to more ethical banking). Participants also referred to lack of awareness of environment and ethical issues as a factor influencing their behaviours before their involvement in the group.

Other authors have attempted to categorise influences on individual sustainability (note not explicitly on responsibility) including both personal and structural influences and there are some resonances with this work (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002; Barr, 2003; Southerton et al., 2004b). Southerton et al in particular give a typology of structural constraints to individual action on sustainable consumption which resembles to a great extent that evolving here. The constraints include the resources available to the individual (economic, cultural, social), normative pressures on the

individual (for instance requirements of 'fitting in') and the material and infrastructural arrangements to which the individual is subject (e.g. spatial proximity of services which enable choices) (2004b).

#### 4.2 Discussion

The revised conceptualisation of the ecological footprint presented above situates individual responsibility for sustainable consumption in the context of the individual's capacity and of the structures of society which affect the individual. As such the model also differentiates between individuals' responsibilities for sustainable consumption according to their capacities and the capacity of the structures that they inhabit. This new perspective has some implications for the way that we see the sustainable consumer.

Firstly we must accept that some actions are impossible for some people as a result of their own capacities and those of the structural context which they inhabit. Being aware of this should result in more feasible demands from consumers and could reduce the feelings of guilt associated with unfulfilled responsibility. An example from one respondent in this study follows:

My daughter, she even banks at banks that [invest ethically]... you know... I am impressed by that. But I'm 70 and my life is so complicated, my money is where it is and I just haven't any more energy or skill in finance to move it. I feel a bit guilty about that. I ought to do it. I ought to make a stand like my daughter ... (Holy Trinity Respondents, 2006, 6)

The respondent is 70, has relatively recently taken on the management of her own finances after the death of her husband, and is reluctant to change arrangements as a result (her 'skill in finance' is limited). She requires a local high street bank to manage her money and there is no local ethical banking provision. As such the above respondent lacks both the personal capacity to change her bank accounts to ethical providers, and the infrastructural capacity that would have been present had a local ethical banking service been available. It is notable here that despite her strong links to the church which has a considerable interest in sustainability (organisational capacity) and her being influenced by the alternative culture of the Christian Ecology Group (cultural capacity) she is still unable to act. The guilt she expresses is discussed in more detail in part 2 above.

Secondly it is the case that an individual's responsibility for their actions on environment is not always easy to ascribe. It is indeed likely that the boundaries of individual responsibility are subject to some contention, with different cases being judged differently by different people. An example in this case comes from a respondent discussing her commuting habits:

at one point when I worked near the railway station, I'd quite often get the train to work. But now ... to get to [place] I'd have to leave at [time]. The effort involved... I have to say it just wouldn't fit in. (Holy Trinity Respondent, 2006, 2)

The above respondent is a part time worker with two school-age children. Her decision to use her car over public transport to commute to work is based on limited time resources, particularly as she starts work early in the morning as a teacher, as well as the absence of an easy connection by public transport to her workplace. Whether these particular individual is neglecting her responsibility or not is up for debate, and would depend on perception of what is and is not acceptable in terms of sustainable consumption behaviour.

Both examples given above recall Shrader-Frechette's call for acts of environmental responsibility that do not require 'heroism' (Shrader-Frechette, 2002). Exactly what kind of pro-environmental behaviour is acceptable and what is beyond the power of ordinary mortals needs closer and contextual examination. In any case the ascription of responsibility individuals, and ensuing guilt seen here in an empirical context when one fails to perform, is not a long-term strategy for encouraging people to live more sustainably. As Maniates puts it:

you cannot plant a tree to save the world – and as citizens and consumers slowly come to discover this fact their cynicism about social change will only grow (Maniates, 2002 p. 59)

True personal empowerment for change in sustainable consumption must involve understanding of the responsibilities one can take on, but also understanding of the limits to one's own responsibility due to contextual or personal capacity limits. It also must involve an understanding of the rights that pertain to individuals in terms of minimum levels of consumption.

## 5 Conclusion

Ideas on responsibility in sustainable consumption that emerged from empirical research in the area of community action for sustainability led the author to explore related literature in the fields of environmental/ecological citizenship and environmental justice. A conceptual model based on this empirical and theoretical research was presented here. This changes sustainable consumption work in two ways: it situates the individual's responsibility within the structures that they inhabit and it differentiates between individuals by their capacity to act. This understanding of responsibility in sustainable consumption requires us to accept that individuals may be unable to meet 'responsibilities' as conceived by government or academics. Equally the exact nature of an individual's responsibility for sustainable consumption is not always clear, and should be a matter for discussion rather than prescription.

The empirical work on which this research is based is rather limited, and the author recognises the dangers inherent in generalising from a specific project on community-based sustainable consumption to sustainable consumers as a whole. The conceptual model above will be subject to iterative work in the future in the area of community-based sustainability, and the author would encourage its appropriation in other contexts.

## Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Joseph Murphy, Jouni Paavola and William Young who commented on an earlier draft of this article.

## References

- Agyeman, J. 2005. *Sustainable Communities and the Challenge of Environmental Justice*. New York: NYU Press.
- Barr, S. 2003. Strategies for Sustainability: citizens and responsible environmental behaviour. *Area*, **35** (3), pp.227-240.
- Barrett, J., et al. 2005. Exploring the application of the Ecological Footprint to sustainable consumption policy. *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning*, **7** (4), pp.303-316.
- Barry, J. 2006. Resistance is fertile: from environmental to sustainable citizenship. in Dobson, A. & D. Bell (Eds.) *Environmental Citizenship*. Cambridge, MASS; London, UK: The MIT Press.
- Bell, D. 2005. Liberal Environmental Citizenship. *Environmental Politics*, **14** (2), pp.179-194.
- Burgess, J., et al. 2003. (Un)sustainable consumption. in Berkhout, F., M. Leach & I. Scoones (Eds.) *Negotiating Environmental Change: New Perspectives from Social Science*. Edward Elgar.
- Christian Ecology Group Practitioners. 2006. Interviewed by Author at Holy Trinity Church.
- Connelly, J. 2006. The virtues of Environmental Citizenship. in Dobson, A. & D. Bell (Eds.) *Environmental Citizenship*. Cambridge, MASS; London, UK: The MIT Press.
- DEFRA. 2008. *Every Action Counts Programme*. [online]. [Accessed 2 February, Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.everyactioncounts.org.uk/>.
- Dobson, A. 2003. *Citizenship and the Environment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dobson, A. 2007. Environmental Citizenship: Towards Sustainable Development. *Sustainable Development*, **15**, pp.276-285.
- Dresner, S. 2002. *The principles of sustainability*. London: Earthscan Publications Ltd.
- Eden, S.E. 1993. Individual environmental responsibility and its role in public environmentalism. *Environment and Planning A*, **25**, pp.1743-1758.
- Hobson, K. 2006. Environmental responsibility and the possibilities of pragmatist-orientated research. *Social & Cultural Geography*, **7** (2), pp.283-298.

Holy Trinity Respondents. 2006. Interviewed by Author at Holy Trinity Church.

Jackson, T. 2004. *Models of Mammon - a cross disciplinary survey in pursuit of the 'sustainable consumer'*. ESRC Sustainable Technologies Programme Working Paper 2004/1.

Jackson, T. 2005. *Motivating Sustainable Consumption: a review of evidence on consumer behaviour and behavioural change*. Sustainable Development Research Network, SDRN Briefing one.

Jackson, T. 2006. Readings in Sustainable Consumption. in Jackson, T. (Ed.) *The Earthscan Reader in Sustainable Consumption*. London: Earthscan.

Jensen, B.B. 2002. Knowledge, Action and Pro-environmental Behaviour. *Environmental Education Research*, **8** (3).

Kollmuss, A. & J. Agyeman. 2002. Mind the Gap: why do people act environmentally and what are the barriers to pro-environmental behaviour? *Environmental Education Research*, **8** (3), pp.239-260.

Lyman, S.M. & M.B. Scott. 1970. *A sociology of the absurd*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

Maiteny, P. 2002. Mind in the Gap: summary of research exploring 'inner' influences on pro-sustainability learning and behaviour. *Environmental Education Research*, **8** (3), pp.299-306.

Maniates, M. 2002. Individualization: plant a tree, buy a bike, save the world? in Princen, T., M. Maniates & K. Konca (Eds.) *Confronting Consumption*. London: MIT Press.

Middlemiss, L. 2008a (forthcoming). Community action for individual sustainability: linking sustainable consumption, citizenship and justice. in Pavlich, D. (Ed.) *Environmental Justice and Global Citizenship*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Middlemiss, L.K. 2008b. Influencing Individual Sustainability: A Review of the Evidence on the Role of Community-Based Organisations. *International Journal of Environment and Sustainable Development*, **7** (2).

Orbuch, T.L. 1997. People's Accounts Count: The Sociology of Accounts. *Annual Review of Sociology*, **23**, pp.455-78.

Sanne, C. 2002. Willing consumers - or locked-in? Policies for a sustainable consumption. *Ecological Economics*, **42**, pp.273-287.

Seyfang, G. 2004. Consuming Values and Contested Cultures: A Critical Analysis of the UK Strategy for Sustainable Consumption and Production. *Review of Social Economy*, **62** (3), pp.323-338.

Seyfang, G. 2005. Shopping for sustainability: can sustainable consumption promote ecological citizenship? *Environmental Politics*, **14** (2), pp.290-306.

- Seyfang, G. 2006. Ecological citizenship and sustainable consumption: examining local food networks. *Journal of Rural Studies*, **22** (4), pp.385-95.
- Seyfang, G. & J. Paavola. forthcoming. Inequality and Sustainable Consumption: Bridging the Gaps. *Local Environment*.
- Shove, E. 2003. *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience: The Social Organization of Normality*. Oxford: Berg Publisher.
- Shrader-Frechette, K.S. 2002. *Environmental Justice: creating equality, reclaiming democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Southerton, D., H. Chappells & B. Van Vliet (Eds.) 2004a. *Sustainable Consumption: the Implications of Changing Infrastructures of Provision*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Southerton, D., A. Warde & M. Hand. 2004b. The limited autonomy of the consumer: implications for sustainable consumption. in Southerton, D., H. Chappells & B. Van Vliet (Eds.) *Sustainable Consumption: the Implications of Changing Infrastructures of Provision*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Spaargaren, G. 2000. Lifestyles, Consumption and the Environment: The Ecological Modernisation of Domestic Consumption. in Mol, A.P.J. & D.A. Sonnenfeld (Eds.) *Ecological modernisation around the world : perspectives and critical debates*. London: Frank Cass.
- Spaargaren, G. 2003. Sustainable Consumption: A Theoretical and Environmental Policy Perspective. *Society & Natural Resources*, **16** (8), pp.687 - 701.
- Spaargaren, G. & S. Martens. 2005. Globalisation and the role of citizen-consumers in environmental politics. in Wijen, F., K. Zoeteman & J. Pieters (Eds.) *A handbook of globalisation and environmental policy: national government interventions in a global arena*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Wackernagel, M. & W.E. Rees. 1996. *Our ecological footprint : reducing human impact on the earth* Gabriola Island, B.C: New Society Publishers.
- World Wildlife Fund. 2008. *Footprint Calculator*. [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://footprint.wwf.org.uk/>.