

Inspiring sustainable attitudes: the unseen transition role of the life view sector in The Netherlands

Peter A.J. Bootsma^{1,2}, Jako Jellema^{2,3}

¹Noorden Duurzaam association, Groningen, The Netherlands. ²Solidair Groningen & Drenthe foundation, Assen, The Netherlands. ³Platform Kerk en Aardbeving, Loppersum, The Netherlands.

Abstract

This case is about the life view sector in the Netherlands, comprising Christian churches, Islamic mosques, Buddhist centres, Humanist branches and many more spiritual or philosophical communities. Research in the Netherlands shows that, despite secularisation, still around half of the population find their most fundamental beliefs in this sector.

The urgent need for sustainability transitions puts the life view sector in an unprecedented and crucial position. The sector is able to provide large numbers of people with the narratives and value systems that they need to counter overconsumption and raise the next generation with sustainability in mind.

In the city of Assen, the Solidair Groningen & Drenthe foundation and the Noorden Duurzaam association started a project to explore this new position. All 35 life view communities in the municipality were invited to a series of meetings. An action fields model was developed to structure sustainability efforts into sector generic topics, and to provide life view communities with an action perspective. In January 2024, the participating communities organised a one-day sustainability festival, hosting many local sustainability initiatives. The festival received positive evaluations, which led to higher ambitions for next events.

1. Introduction

In this paper we explore the collective role of organised and active religious and philosophical communities in the societal response to the sustainability crisis. The collective is referred to as the 'life view sector'. We present a framework for developing sector wide sustainability action. Furthermore, we present a case project of local life view communities in the city of Assen, The Netherlands.

Humanity is facing the worst sustainability crisis ever. Half a century after the first public warnings, many limits to growth are being reached and exceeded. It has resulted in multiple environmental and social crises. While these crises develop slowly, they may amplify each other, may be irreversible when trigger points are passed, and may become existential to civilisation (Homer-Dixon et al., 2021). If humanity is to develop sustainably, as the UN expressed in the Sustainable Development Goals, drastic measures are needed (IPCC, 2023). The unprecedented urgency has led to a large-scale world-wide response. This response, however, is far from sufficient, as the Earth Overshoot Day shows. In 2023 in the Netherlands this was on April 1, globally on August 2 (Global Footprint Network, 2024).

In exploring options to accelerate, the regional Dutch thinktank *Noorden Duurzaam* (ND) argues that the medieval governance system of the Dutch water authorities can provide inspiration. This system builds on task division between mutually dependent societal sectors and has been successful in mitigating slow-but-existential water management crises, from the 13th century onwards. ND has presented a modernised version of this system for use in 21st century transition management (Faber et al., 2022).

One sector with a potential to help accelerate sustainability transitions is the life view sector, as its religious and philosophical communities may promote pro-environmental behaviour (e.g. Zemo & Nigus, 2021; Orellano et al., 2020). Then, how large is this sector and what is its reach? In 2022, around 43% of citizens in The Netherlands were counting themselves as belonging to a religious or philosophical movement. Some 18% are Catholic, 13% Protestant, 6% Islamic and 6% other, including Humanist (CBS, 2023; CBS, 2020). Around 12% visits services on a regular basis while another 12% regularly follows a service through TV, radio or internet. It adds up to some 10% of the total population.

Assen, our case municipality, is home to around 70.000 inhabitants. Based on the above statistics, we count 7.000 as members, and 23.000 more as involved audience, sensitive in some degree to what happens in their life view community. A brief survey by Solidair Groningen & Drenthe (SGD) in 2021 showed Assen counts 35 active life view communities.

What are current role perceptions in the life view sector regarding sustainable development? We take a brief look at two influential lines of thought.

Firstly, according to Pope Francis in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'* and the 2023 update *Laudate Deum*, the climate crisis is caused by mankind and needs to be solved by us as well (Pope Francis, 2023). Apart from a forceful message to upcoming climate conferences, the documents stress the importance of 'changing personal, family and community habits', as a contribution to sustainability in itself and to bringing about 'large processes of transformation rising from deep within society'. *Laudato Si'* has received strong support in Catholic communities.

Secondly, Trees van Montfoort states that current theology is unable to answer to the ecological crisis, since it is stuck in the modern, anthropocentric and mechanistic world view that caused the crisis in the first place. A theology that wants to be understandable for modern people, risks to adapt so much to the *zeitgeist*, that it has nothing left to say. If theology can deconstruct the worldview of the modernity, it can contribute to the wellbeing of the earth and its inhabitants by, 'asking fundamental questions, by sharpening existing questions and by offering insights from its rich tradition' (Montfoort, 2019). This line of thought received a warm welcome as well.

In sum, life view communities are not unaware of their potential contribution to sustainability transitions. This can also be seen in many initiatives across the sector, for sustainable facilities, activities and life style. However, this awareness is manifest mostly within communities and denominations. Sectoral collaboration for sustainability is still in its infancy.

The main question of this paper therefore is what role the life view sector as a whole may develop in sustainability transitions. We also want to know how the sector can experiment with these roles on a local level, how members respond, how society responds, and what impact can be expected.

In section 2 we present a theoretical framework used in the case project. Section 3 describes the case project itself. Section 4 is a discussion, leading to conclusions in section 5.

2. Framework

The life view sector has no shortage of inspiration sources and values, but has little tradition in sustainability transition management. The required knowledge, methods and institutes are to be developed yet. If the sector is to take steps, a functional model is needed, explaining what roles the sector can fulfil. We look at two models.

Firstly, Koehrsen discerns between three potential sustainability functions of religion: “(1) campaigning and intermediation in the public sphere; (2) ‘materialization’ of transitions in the form of participation in projects related to sustainable transitions; (3) dissemination of values and worldviews that empower environmental attitudes and action” (Koehrsen, 2015).

Secondly, Groene Kerken is a joint project initiated by protestant churches in The Netherlands. The project issues a toolkit for religious communities, containing tools for six themes: energy and climate; community finance; faith and inspiration; nature around the church building; sustainable purchasing; policy formulation. The project is popular and growing.

In 2017, in collaboration with a national advisory group, SGD and ND developed an action fields model for life view communities (Table 1), based on the Laudato Si’ encyclical and functional models as above. Its purpose is to structure sustainability tasks into functional areas, providing all life view communities with an action perspective. The model is intended to be sector generic and builds up from internal functions to inspiring society. Each action field may require a sector wide knowledge hub of some kind, on local or larger levels, making it easier for communities to get started and to share experiences.

Action field	Transition task at a local community level
Inspiration	(Re-)interpreting and sharing inspiration sources and traditions that call for sustainability. Reflecting on sustainability issues from these (re-)interpretations.
Policy	In annual plans, writing sustainability ambitions that stretch beyond the community.
Finance	Sustainable financial policy, including sustainable banking and investments, and reviewing agricultural land lease contracts.
Building	Transform the community facilities into a showcase of sustainable building.
Facilities	Sustainable purchasing and sustainable internal organisation.
Lifestyle	Calling on community members to choose and grow in a more sustainable life style.
Society	Contributing to transition acceleration in the surrounding society, e.g. by involvement in projects and by promoting intrinsic motivation.

Table 1: Sustainability action fields model for life view communities

Knowledge hubs may take the shape of small volunteer committees with members from multiple communities. The hubs may gather knowledge, for instance by inviting outside experts. The hub may also build a collection of successful examples or best practices that their communities may adopt. Another task could be organising sector wide meetings for their topic, stand alone or as part of larger events. Yet another role would be to represent the sector in (local) politics and plead for more sustainability action.

The local life view sector will thus gain new knowledge centres and representatives for sustainable development that may impact transition progress within and outside the sector, because the sector has a credible and institutional engagement. A side effect is that this approach provides professional specialists among community members with opportunities for engagement, with more reach than

just one community. Another benefit is that the action field model may be scaled up to national and even international levels, creating influential knowledge networks.

3. Case

In 2016, the SGD and ND decided to explore options for collaboration. Focus was on the role of catholic life view communities in sustainability transitions. This case description highlights main steps since then.

Later in 2016 SGD and others wrote a national scale pilot project plan focusing on Roman Catholic communities. As no funding could be found, SGD and ND decided to scale down, eventually to a local project. A new project plan was written in 2019, now explicitly sector wide. Again, multiple attempts to find funding had no result and caused long delays. In review, SGD and ND assume the repeated funding problem may have had multiple causes, including the proposal being non trivial and abstract, as no evidence from existing examples could be presented. Finally, SGD and ND decided to continue on a no budget basis with limited time investments.

In 2021, a survey resulted in a list of 35 life view communities in Assen. All were invited for a first meeting, which had to be online due to pandemic restrictions. The objective was to get acquainted and explore options for improving sustainability of community buildings. The meeting took place but attracted only few building representatives and was not followed up.

Gradually, an organising team was formed. The team currently has six members, representing seven life view communities (one Baptist, one Apostolic, three PKN - the largest Protestant denomination in The Netherlands, one Roman Catholic, one Humanist), and is facilitated by SGD and ND.

In 2022, two researchers from the Hanze University for Applied Science conducted a shared value survey among Assen life view communities. The team concluded that the communities “are often on the same page when it comes to awareness and activities for sustainability, and use the same words. In addition to being an urgent topic, sustainability can also be a bridge to discuss a (sustainable) future and what this means for us.”

Based on these findings, a plan for a local sustainability festival came up, along with the option of a student team to help organise this. This led to a sustainability festival in January 2024 (Figure 1), for the purpose of awareness, education, inspiration, action and collaboration for sustainability. The festival was titled ‘Geloof in groen leven’ (Believe in Green Living), and was targeted at residents, communities, schools and organisations in the municipality of Assen. The festival offered a rich program of exhibits (information tables), workshops, a children’s program, music, a volunteer taxi project and more.



Figure 1: Announcement

More than 250 individuals participated. 10% of all visitors participated in a survey by researchers from the Hanze University of Applied Science, in interviews or by filling in a questionnaire. According to many the event was pleasantly busy. The survey further showed that less than half of the visitors lived in the Assen municipality. The visitors were diverse in age and mainly came in duos or families. Most were attracted by the topic. Some were interested because the event was in their own church. Some seemed to have come just to meet others. The visitor feedback was mainly positive. People valued the many different activities (including for children). The atmosphere was friendly, and the festival was described as accessible, varied, useful, educational. Some visitors indicated they found inspiration to take a next step towards sustainability. More in general they assessed events like this as helpful for building awareness. From short interviews it appeared that many visitors were not used to expressing thoughts and feelings about the topic. Two visitors denounced the presence of multiple life view groups. A wish tree, built by an artist during the festival, collected 34 green hopes for the future. In conclusion, the event was considered a positive experience in itself, which contributed to positive impact in terms of awareness and intrinsic motivation.

The 20 exhibitors, mostly specialised in energy or nature, were satisfied as well. They evaluated the event as pleasant, positive and valuable, with ample interest from people 'with a passion for nature and/or sustainability'. The exhibitors were also positive about meeting other exhibitors and about talking with the politician who is responsible for local sustainability in Assen and who officially opened the event. Critical notes were about absence of circular economy exhibits. Also, they mentioned lack of interest for workshops, which seemed to be largely due to practical problems. Many exhibitors want to participate in a follow up event.

In an evaluation meeting, the organising team concluded that on the one hand, the festival had been a positive experience for all involved, and as such is worth repeating. On the other hand, the organising effort had been over the top for several team members, so in a follow up event more human and financial resources are needed. The team decided to prepare for a new and more ambitious event, in a phased project with multiple go/no-go decision points, to reduce overload risks and to generate more executive buy-in. In a first phase, a summary is to be written and to be negotiated with the executive boards of the municipality and all interested life view communities in Assen.

Reaching out to executive levels rather than sustainability representatives is considered a necessary step in order to mobilise leadership (“Sustainability is *Chefsache*”). The team expect that once chairpersons support and prioritise the plan, more life view communities and more volunteers in these communities will participate. In the plan they want to state this purpose: *a strong contribution of the life view sector to the intrinsic motivation of all Assen residents for sustainability transitions*. The team consider this sector level purpose an essential linkage between local government sustainability ambitions and the missions of life view communities.

In a subsequent phase, the team want to write a more detailed plan, drawing on the experiences of 2024. In collaboration with the Hanze University of Applied Science, a new group of students from the minor Event Management will be given the assignment to help organising the next event according to this plan, while at the same time adding what they learn-by-doing to the plan itself, in preparation for a event the year after. This approach seeks to align with the student culture in nearby universities, where complex annual events like freshman weeks are organised by relatively unexperienced student committees, working from standardised scripts and therefore needing only little support or mentoring.

The content of the next event will be chosen in a next phase as well, and may include an information market, a local conference with keynotes and parallel workshops, action field hub presentations, neighbourhood actions, involvement of schools, etc.

4. Discussion

Reviewing the case history, it appears that many steps, like funding and inviting building experts, were unsuccessful. Multiple factors may be in play here. First, the sector is very diverse and has little tradition in sector wide inter-denominational projects. Second, while many life view communities integrate sustainability in their mission and activities, little or no thought is given to the societal role of their sector as a whole. Thirdly, participants in various meetings in this case often experienced a negative energy balance: meetings take time and bring no new resources on short term. Fourthly, the group may have been too small to create ‘fear of missing out’. Fifth, there was no strong support or prioritisation from senior leadership in the local communities.

The festival, however, was a relative success. Here too, a number of factors can be seen. Firstly, in Assen there is both supply and demand of practical information about sustainability. Secondly, organising events is routine for life view organisations. Thirdly, a suitable church building was available for free. Fourth, a volunteer and a student team were available to prepare and manage the event. Fifth, SGD received some funding for student mentoring and coordination. Finally, the event generated sufficient mass and diversity to be an attractor by numbers alone, as could be seen in the visitor profiles and interviews.

The organising team, well aware of the above failure and success factors, formulated the role of the life view sector as a *strong contribution to intrinsic citizen motivation for sustainability transitions*. This is a potentially impactful viewpoint, as it proposes a common mission to a pluriform sector, which may provide new ground for dialogue and cooperation, and for board level buy-in. Furthermore, even a lightweight inter-denominational sustainability committee or hub creates a sector level actor, able to contribute to municipal sustainability policy. While municipalities cannot support the mission of individual life view communities, they do facilitate sectors in their common sustainability mission.

While in previous years board level executives in local life view communities and government showed little interest in helping the sector to self-organise for sustainability, this may change as urgency awareness accumulates. The action perspective for the team is to seize the current opportunity, present a development pathway that enables the sector to fulfil its role and to find resources to facilitate this process.

Practically, there may be two tracks. First is to build a tradition of annual or bi-annual festivals, either central in Assen or distributed in city districts. Second is setting up knowledge hubs for each field of the action fields model. The intended result is that each community has access to sufficient expertise in each field to be trustworthy in motivating their members for sustainability and to influence their neighbourhood.

The two tracks may join in the festivals, where not only local sustainability organisations inform visitors, but where life view knowledge hubs present their best practices, actions and public appeal as well.

One could argue that life view communities have different views on sustainability. Not all will see a need for life style change, depending for instance on their views on eschatology, or how 'blessings' are defined. While this may be true, many life view communities display a strong sense of urgency and responsibility. Furthermore, life view communities as well as their members continuously reinterpret their original inspiration sources to understand current circumstances (Montfoort, 2019). Facing existential threats, they may be expected to gradually converge on what is needed for next generations to survive and thrive. Disqualifying slow adopters may be less effective than stimulating them to join a growing movement.

5. Conclusion

While there may be compelling reasons for the life view sector to put collective effort in guiding society to life style changes, it appears difficult to even get the sector at the table to discuss the topic. As such, this is no surprise since this sector is very divided and has no strong tradition in inter-denominational projects. This case study shows no exception to this pattern, although some progress has been made in exploring pathways.

This case study started from the question what role the life view sector (defined as organised and active religious and philosophical communities) can take in sustainability transitions. A focus on societal sectors in general follows from the observation that global transition progress is insufficient, and from evidence about successful sectoral task division in countering slow but existential crises. The life view sector in particular is considered of crucial importance because on the one hand transitions ask for large scale unpopular changes in life style, while on the other hand the sector has an influence on intrinsic motivation of around half of the population. In this case study, the organising team therefore formulated the role of the life view sector as a *strong contribution to intrinsic citizen motivation for sustainability transitions*.

SGD and ND experienced hardship in finding budget for a sector wide experiment, on both national and local level. This seemed partly due to the plan being novel and abstract, as no evidence from existing projects could be presented. In a no-budget attempt with a small organising team representing seven life view communities, however, it appeared feasible to organise a joint event, a one-day small-scale sustainability festival where 20 local sustainability organisations staffed information stands and presented workshops.

Around 250 individuals participated in the festival. They appreciated the event as a positive experience in itself, which seems to have contributed to positive impact in terms of awareness and intrinsic motivation.

The life view communities organising the event experienced the event itself and their collaboration for sustainability as positive and useful, and worth repeating. Next steps may include board level involvement of communities and local government, and a two-track approach, consisting of expertise building and annual events. The team are hopeful that a follow-up event will generate more impact in terms of awareness and intrinsic motivation. A third track is a wider exchange of experiences on the research question at hand, to which this paper may contribute.

References

- CBS. (2020, December 17). *4 Diversiteit religieuze stromingen* [Webpage]. Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek. <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/longread/statistische-trends/2020/religie-in-nederland/4-diversiteit-religieuze-stromingen>
- CBS. (2023, April 6). *Deel bevolking dat bij religieuze groep hoort in 2022 niet afgenomen* [Webpage]. Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek. <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2023/14/deel-bevolking-dat-bij-religieuze-groep-hoort-in-2022-niet-afgenomen>
- Faber, N., Bootsma, P. A. J., & Pennink, B. J. W. (2022). *Proliferating circularity efforts, Coordinating multi-value creation in multi-actor contexts*. New Business Models Conference 2022, Rome. <https://www.newbusinessmodels.org/publications-media>
- Global Footprint Network. (2024). *Earth Overshoot Day*. Earth Overshoot Day. <https://overshoot.footprintnetwork.org/>
- Homer-Dixon, T., Renn, O., Rockström, J., Donges, J. F., & Janzwood, S. (2021). *A Call for An International Research Program on the Risk of a Global Polycrisis* (SSRN Scholarly Paper 4058592). <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4058592>
- IPCC. (2023). *AR6 Synthesis Report: Climate Change 2023 — IPCC*. IPCC. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-cycle/>
- Koehrsen, J. (2015). Does religion promote environmental sustainability? – Exploring the role of religion in local energy transitions. *Social Compass*, 62(3), 296–310. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768615587808>

Montfoort, T. van. (2019). *Groene theologie*.

https://halewijn.info/catalogus/groene_theologie?q=montfoort

Orellano, A., Valor, C., & Chuvieco, E. (2020). The Influence of Religion on Sustainable Consumption:

A Systematic Review and Future Research Agenda. *Sustainability*, 12(19), Article 19.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/su12197901>

Pope Francis. (2023). *Laudate Deum*.

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html

Zemo, K. H., & Nigus, H. Y. (2021). Does religion promote pro-environmental behaviour? A cross-

country investigation. *Journal of Environmental Economics and Policy*, 10(1), 90–113.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/21606544.2020.1796820>

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Het Lichtpunt in Assen for hosting the event, Sarah Elbert and Claudia Brouwer for their research, the student team: Wendy Korsaan, Mette Mosterman, Stan Verhoeven and Hugo Zalmé, and the other members of the organising team: Gerard Agterkamp, Jos Engelman, Alfred Guchelaar, Otto Lussenburg, Bert Middelkamp and Henk van der Zijden. Furthermore: thanks to Jacqueline Hofstede and Elly Rijnierse for their initiative and efforts to bring ECGIC 2024 to Leeuwarden.

FUNDING STATEMENT

This research was funded by Noorden Duurzaam and Solidair Groningen & Drenthe (both non-profit).

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data is available on request to peter.bootsma@noordenduurzaam.nl

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no potential conflicts of interest relevant to this article.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The authors declare human ethics approval was not needed for this study.