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The Age of Interdependence

Varieties of Sustainability in the Low Countries during the Twentieth Century

PETER VAN DAM

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Where has sustainability come from and how could it become such a popular idea? This special issue analyses the intersection between twentieth-century attempts to attune environmental, social and economic concerns in the Low Countries and the rise of 'sustainable development' from the 1980s onwards. The introduction to this issue first relates the articles to the international historiography on sustainability and elaborates their shared approach. Second, the varieties of sustainability practiced in Belgium, the Netherlands and Congo – as analysed in the contributions on forestry, breweries, pisciculture, water management, agriculture, and the alternative food movement – are presented. Based on their results, the period from the 1940s until the 1990s can be characterised as an 'age of interdependence' during which a distinct notion of sustainability emerged. Sustainability was interpreted in the light of global interconnections. Transnational governing coalitions, aided by experts and the ideal of planning, were established to achieve a balance between environmental, social and economic interests. The environment became an important object of post-war public debate and policy because of its connections to society and the economy. Building on these histories of sustainability, the introduction finally explores how historians enhance our understanding of the Anthropocene.

Waar komt duurzaamheid vandaan en hoe kon het idee zo populair worden? Dit themanummer analyseert het snijvlak van twintigste-eeuwse pogingen om ecologische, sociale en economische belangen in de Lage Landen met elkaar in evenwicht te brengen en de opkomst van 'duurzame ontwikkeling' vanaf de jaren 1980. De inleiding positioneert de bijdragen in de internationale geschiedschrijving van duurzaamheid en licht hun gemeenschappelijke werkwijze toe. Vervolgens peilt de inleiding de invullingen van duurzaamheid in België, Nederland en Congo, zoals die in de bijdragen over bosbouw, bierbrouwerijen, viskweek, waterbeheer,

landbouw en de alternatieve voedselbeweging worden geanalyseerd. Op basis van de artikelen kan de periode van de jaren 1940 tot de jaren 1990 als een 'era van interdependentie' bestempeld worden, waarin een specifieke invulling van duurzaamheid opkwam. Duurzaamheid werd geïnterpreteerd tegen de achtergrond van een groeiend bewustzijn van mondiale verbondenheid. Transnationale samenwerkingsverbanden probeerden met behulp van experts en ambitieuze planning een balans te vinden tussen ecologische, sociale en economische belangen. Juist door de verbanden die werden gelegd met de sociale en economische perspectieven werd het milieu in deze periode steeds belangrijker geacht. Naar aanleiding van deze duurzaamheidsgeschiedenissen verkent de inleiding ten slotte hoe historici ons begrip van het Antropoceen vergroten.

Writing the history of sustainability

Since the 1980s 'sustainability' has become a buzzword to confront the mounting ecological crises humanity has brought upon itself. Officials, civic organisations and activists in the realm of international relations presented 'sustainable development' as a way to reconcile the economic development of the global South with environmental concerns predominant in the global North. It soon became a panacea for an ever-expanding range of attempts to address local and global environmental concerns. Beyond the goal of reconciling environmental, social and economic concerns, sustainability has proven to be a remarkably malleable concept. This flexibility was key to its quick rise to fame. Policymakers, business representatives, and activists all recognised the potential to apply it to their respective and often diverging goals. Current definitions of the concept assume that 'human society, the economy, and the natural environment are interconnected', and that concern for the future obliges societies to acknowledge the social and ecological limits to economic activities (see Figure 1).¹

Pioneering studies of the history of sustainability have noted the striking combination of the quick proliferation and the limited impact of sustainability. Iris Borowy has questioned whether the very assumption that economic development and environmental protection can be balanced has contributed to this ambivalent result.² She concluded that despite the acclaim for 'sustainable development' many stakeholders did not abandon their traditional views about economic development. Others have been less sympathetic. John Dryzek has identified sustainability as a comfortably

1 Jeremy L. Caradonna, *Sustainability: A History* (Oxford University Press 2014) 16-17.

2 Iris Borowy, 'Sustainable Development and the United Nations', in: Jeremy L. Caradonna (ed.),

Routledge Handbook of the History of Sustainability (Routledge 2017) 151-163.

reassuring approach to the ‘politics of nature’. Instead of identifying limits to economic growth, Dryzek argued, proponents of sustainability considered it possible to combine economic growth, social justice, and the preservation of the environment.³ Elke Seefried has suggested that sustainability had been related to such limits before the 1990s, but was subsequently ‘economised’. Politicians and scientific experts presented preserving the environment as a profitable enterprise, to be driven by the market competition instead of state interventions. Technological innovations would ensure an efficient use of raw materials and fuels, bringing about a more environmentally-friendly economy.⁴ In this regard, the history of sustainability aligns with broader debates about the history of environmental policies. Some scholars have evaluated these as stopgap measures to address the worst excesses, while technocratic interventions left the roots of environmental degradation untouched. Others regard the history of environmental policies as a collective learning process in which administrations, activists, and businesses have gradually managed to address common problems.⁵

This special issue *The Age of Interdependence: Varieties of Sustainability in the Low Countries in the Twentieth Century* assesses how sustainability could become an acclaimed concept from the 1980s onwards, and which interpretations have dominated in the process. It postulates that during the ‘age of interdependence’, from the 1940s until the 1990s, a distinct interpretation of sustainability was popularised. This interpretation entailed a widespread belief in the possibility of integrating and balancing environmental, social and economic claims by means of transnational governance, planning, and scientific expertise.

To this end, the articles first inquire into the history of attempts to reconcile the environment, society and the economy in Belgium and the Netherlands before the 1980s. By then, many practices considered sustainable were already established, which catalysed the widespread recognition of the concept. Second, the articles analyse different interpretations of sustainability. In this respect, they follow up on scholarship by social scientists highlighting varieties of sustainability. Reinhard Steurer has proposed to distinguish between ‘weak’, ‘balanced’, and ‘strong’ sustainability, based on the way sustainability is related to economic growth. The weak version is applicable where economic growth remains at the core of decision making with marginal corrections to account for environmental and social challenges. Balanced sustainability allows economic growth only in selected economic domains,

- 3 John S. Dryzek, *The Politics of the Earth: Environmental Discourses*, Third edition (Oxford University Press 2013) 15-16, 159-183. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/hepl/9780199696000.001.0001>. (2015) 394-396. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17104/1611-8944-2015-3-377>.
- 4 Elke Seefried, ‘Rethinking Progress. On the Origin of the Modern Sustainability Discourse, 1970-2000’, *Journal Of Modern European History* 13:3 (2014) 218-222; Michael Bess, *The Light-Green Society: Ecology and Technological Modernity in France, 1960-2000* (University of Chicago Press 2003).
- 5 Hein-Anton van der Heijden, *Tussen aanpassing en verzet: Milieubeweging en milieudiscours* (Ambo 2000) 218-222; Michael Bess, *The Light-Green Society: Ecology and Technological Modernity in France, 1960-2000* (University of Chicago Press 2003).

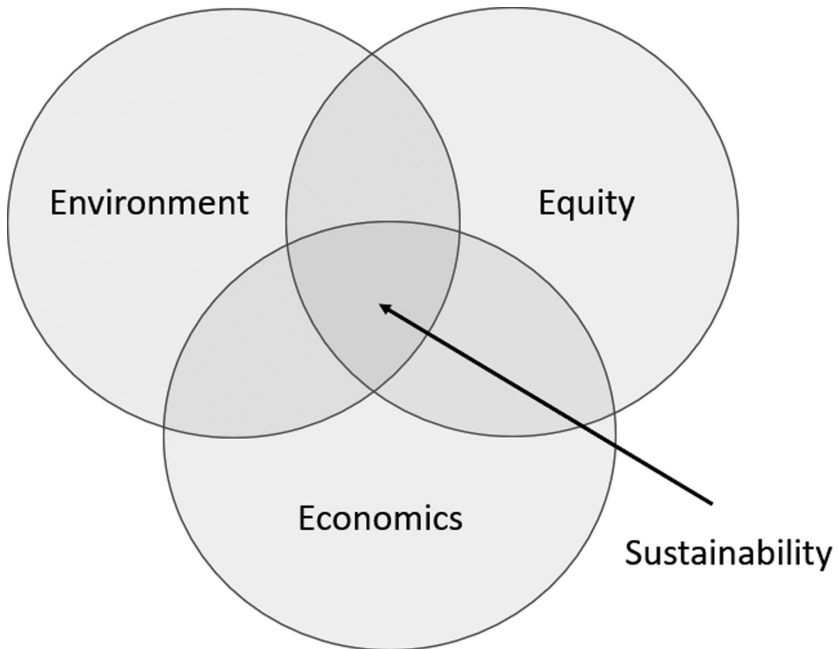


Figure 1 Model of sustainability as endorsed by the 2005 United Nations World Summit, cf. United Nations General Assembly, Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 16 September 2005. 60/1. 2005 World Summit Outcome, A/RES/60/1. Figure based on: Jeremy L. Caradonna, *Sustainability: A History* (Oxford University Press 2014) 8. © Peter van Dam. Adapted from Caradonna, *Sustainability*, 8.

whilst its strong interpretation considers economic growth to be essentially limited.⁶ More recently, Frank Adloff and Sighard Neckel have classified varieties of sustainability based on how actors aim to achieve it: through modernisation within the current societal structures, through a transformation of society, or by controlling the impact of ecological emergencies to sustain the livelihood of particular groups.⁷ This special issue historicises sustainability in this vein by investigating not just the different visions of sustainability, but also which actors were involved and what means they employed to achieve it.

As historians have set out to analyse the genealogy of sustainability, ‘short’ and ‘long’ histories have emerged. Short histories focus on the trajectory of the concept from the introduction of ‘sustainable development’ in the realm of international politics during the 1980s, to the many interpretations of sustainability which followed in its wake.⁸ The call for ‘sustainable development’ resulted from negotiations over the dual priorities of economic development of the Global South and preserving the environment across the globe. The influential United Nations report *Our common future* (1987), which became known as the Brundtland report, epitomised a reconciliation of these challenges. It stated that socioeconomic inequality constrained the affected people’s ability to live sustainably, thus causing environmental degradation. Protecting the environment was not at odds with, but rather inseparably connected to reducing global inequality.⁹

Long histories of sustainability have considerably widened the temporal and thematic scope. Some scholars have explicitly traced back the concept to its conceptual precursors. They have particularly taken their cue from the German concept of *Nachhaltigkeit*, which was pioneered in ‘scientific forestry’ during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These long histories highlight how people grappled with ways to preserve environmental

6 Reinhard Steurer, ‘Paradigmen der Nachhaltigkeit’, *Zeitschrift für Umweltpolitik & Umweltrecht* 24:4 (2001) 537-566.

7 Frank Adloff and Sighard Neckel, ‘Futures of Sustainability as Modernization, Transformation, and Control: A Conceptual Framework’, *Sustainability Science* 14 (2019) 1015-1025. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-019-00671-2>.

8 Olav Stokke, *The UN and Development: From Aid to Cooperation* (Indiana University Press 2009) 354-360; Reinhard Steurer and Gerald Berger, ‘The EU’s Double-Track Pursuit of Sustainable Development in the 2000s: How Lisbon and Sustainable Development Strategies Ran Past Each Other’, *International Journal of Sustainable Development & World Ecology* 18:2 (2011) 99-108.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504509.2011.559958>; Stephen J. Macekura, *Of Limits and Growth: The Rise of Global Sustainable Development in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge University Press 2015); Seefried, ‘Rethinking Progress’; Iris Borowy, *Defining Sustainable Development for Our Common Future: A History of the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission)* (Routledge 2014); Hans Schouwenburg, ‘De geboorte van het concept duurzaamheid: Een pleidooi voor duurzaamheidsgeschiedenis’, *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 132:3 (2019) 467-483. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5117/TVGESCH2019.3.007.SCHO>.

9 World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford 1987).

resources since medieval times.¹⁰ Other scholars used sustainability as a conceptual framework to study how people in the past attempted to reconcile environmental, social, and economic concerns.¹¹ By way of a reverse image, historians have examined natural disasters and societal resilience in the face of disruption to highlight historical unsustainable practices.¹²

The Low Countries are a particularly salient region to investigate varieties of sustainability. Land was scarce in this densely populated area since early modern times. Competing interests – the production of food for the urban population, subsistence farming, and attempts to develop land for economic gain – made land use particularly contentious. The geography of the Low Countries also produced a constant need to negotiate relations with rivers and the sea. Such negotiations became even more demanding during the last two centuries, because humans could exert more control over water and land and economic activities increasingly caused pollution.

Negotiations over water management have taken center stage in the region's historiography.¹³ The resulting picture of competing interests by often well-organised interest groups in the Low Countries extends beyond water-related issues. Similar dynamics can be observed in the realm of agriculture. For centuries cattle and arable farming were important staples of the region's economy, with well-established representations of farmers, traders, local and translocal communities vying for influence. Nonetheless, this bulwark of relationships went through remarkable changes. Mechanical and chemical agricultural innovations caused considerable social and environmental tensions. New interest groups, representing ecological and

10 Richard Hölzl, 'Historicizing Sustainability: German Scientific Forestry in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', *Science as Culture* 19:4 (2010) 431-460. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09505431.2010.519866>; Caradonna, *Sustainability: A History*; Paul Warde, *The Invention of Sustainability: Nature and Destiny, c.1500-1870* (Cambridge University Press 2018). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316584767>; Abigail Dowling and Richard Keyser (eds.), *Conservation's Roots: Managing for Sustainability in Preindustrial Europe, 1100-1800* (Berghahn 2020).

11 Ruth Oldenziel and Helmuth Trischler (eds.), *Cycling and Recycling: Histories of Sustainable Practices* (Berghahn 2015); Tim Soens and Peter Stabel, 'Small and Strong: Looking for the Roots of Sustainable Economic Success in Medieval Flanders', in: Véronique Lambert and Peter

Stabel (eds.), *Golden Times: Wealth and Status in the Middle Ages* (Lannoo 2016) 17-139; Maïka De Keyzer, *Inclusive Commons and the Sustainability of Peasant Communities in the Medieval Low Countries* (Routledge 2018).

12 Jeremy L. Caradonna, 'Sustainability: A New Historiography', in: Caradonna, *Routledge Handbook of the History of Sustainability*, 9-26; Tim Soens, 'Resilient Societies, Vulnerable People: Coping with North Sea Floods Before 1800', *Past & Present* 241:1 (2018) 143-177. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gty018>.

13 Most recently Milja van Tielhof, *Consensus en conflict: waterbeheer in de Nederlanden 1200-1800* (Verloren 2021); Tim Soens, *De spade in de dijk? Waterbeheer en rurale samenleving in de Vlaamse kustvlakte (1280-1580)* (Academia Press 2009).

social concerns, gained foothold in these negotiations during the twentieth century.¹⁴

The status of the Low Countries as a transnational node in networks of trade, politics, and civic organisation makes the region an even more relevant vantage point for a history of sustainability. Its location in a delta region necessitated navigating transnational interconnections to govern rivers, canals, and the sea. Public and private actors also played a key role in the extraction of coal, oil, and gas – literally fueling the carbon economy.¹⁵ As the environment became an issue of transnational concern, civic, scientific, and business actors presented their approaches as innovative contributions towards a more sustainable future.¹⁶

Practices of sustainability in the twentieth century

The articles in this special issue analyse the intersection of the long and short histories of sustainability. In accordance with long histories, the authors discern sustainability where people weigh environmental, social, and economic concerns. They focus on attempts in the Low Countries to achieve a balance between these concerns particularly during the twentieth century, in the course of which the concept became widely acknowledged. The issue sheds new light on the underlying assumptions and the historical conditions which enabled the ascent of the concept. It also places current notions of sustainability in a broader perspective, exploring which ideas and practices have continued to inform our current understanding, and which ones were abandoned. To this end, each article discusses distinct actors, who advocated specific versions of a balance between society, the environment and

- 14 Kristian Mennen, 'De "polder"-strategie van de natuurbeschermingsbeweging in Nederland, 1930-1960', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 134:3 (2021) 425-447. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5117/TVG2021.3.005.MENN>; Henny van der Windt, *En dan: Wat is natuur nog in dit land? Natuurbescherming in Nederland 1880-1990* (Boom 1995).
- 15 Johan Schot and Adri Albert de la Bruhèze, *Techniek in Nederland in de twintigste eeuw: Deel 2: Delfstoffen, energie, chemie* (Zutphen 2000); Joost Jonker and Jan Luiten van Zanden, *Van nieuwkomer tot marktleider, 1890-1939. Geschiedenis van Koninklijke Shell, deel 1* (Boom 2007); Stephen Howarth and Joost Jonker, *Stuwmotor van de koolwaterstofrevolutie, 1939-1973. Geschiedenis van Koninklijke Shell, deel 2* (Boom 2007); Keetie Sluyterman, *Concurreren in turbulente markten, 1973-2007. Geschiedenis van Koninklijke Shell, deel 3* (Boom 2007); Aad Correljé, *Hollands welvaren: de geschiedenis van een Nederlandse bodemschat* (Teleac/Not 1998).
- 16 Oldenziel and Trischler, *Cycling and Recycling*; Ruth Oldenziel and Milena Veenis, 'The Glass Recycling Container in the Netherlands: Symbol in Times of Scarcity and Abundance, 1939-1978', *Contemporary European History* 22:3 (2013) 453-476. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777313000234>; Cf. Harry Lintsen et al., *Well-Being, Sustainability and Social Development: The Netherlands 1850-2050* (Springer Nature 2018).



Pollution became a manifest problem during the 1960s and 1970s, increasingly publicised by the press. This picture shows the polluted beach near the Dutch town of Castricum, 6 September 1978. The child's identity is unknown.

© Photo taken by Rob C. Kroes. National Archives, The Hague, cco, Anefo, 2.24.01.05, 929-8879, <http://hdl.handle.net/10648/acbb52d8-dob4-102d-bcf8-003048976d84>.

the economy. Each article devotes particular attention to the practices which experts, policymakers, businesspeople, and activists employed to implement their interpretations of sustainability.

In their analysis of forestry in the Netherlands during the long twentieth century, Kristian Mennen and Wim van Meurs provide a model for understanding varieties of sustainability as they analyse the different, overlapping functions assigned to forests by state officials and civic organisations.¹⁷ They show that sustaining forests was a constant and shared concern, but different motives dominated the ways in which specific forests were governed. Initially, policies were focused on forests' economic utility and their quality as 'natural monuments' to be studied and enjoyed. During the 1970s, an understanding of forests as precious ecosystems supplemented these anthropocentric motives. The distinction between specific forest areas with different purposes was replaced by one which stressed the option of 'multiple use' for any forest. The authors also discern an important shift in thinking about 'nature'. At the start of the twentieth century, the focus was primarily on organic nature. By the 1980s, the attention to the problems of acid rain and human-induced climate change caused a more explicit acknowledgement of the importance of elements in ecosystems which were not living.

Exploring the nexus between colonial governance and scientific expertise, Patricia Van Schuylenbergh presents the history of fish farming in the Belgian Congo between 1945 and 1960.¹⁸ In historiography, the colonial roots of the concept of 'sustainable development' have been documented particularly in relation to conservation initiatives.¹⁹ Van Schuylenbergh's assessment of colonial practices to secure sustainable food provision presents a different component of the colonial history of sustainability. Faced with food shortages, Belgian colonial officials introduced fish farming in closed ponds in Congo, based on comparable initiatives in Indonesia. Their goal of achieving communal self-sufficiency appeared to be an important driver for advocating sustainability. At the same time, limitations to achieve this come to the fore. Scientific knowledge could not simply be applied to any area. The cultivation of the fishponds depended on local Congolese communities, which had not been involved in its planning and did not regard these ponds as a means to procure a sustainable food supply.

The governance of the river Rhine is characterised by Daan Sanders and Liesbeth van de Grift as a more successful attempt to achieve sustainability.²⁰

17 Kristian Mennen and Wim van Meurs, 'Forests in the Netherlands and Their Many Functions since the 1900s'. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.11697>.

18 Patricia Van Schuylenbergh, 'Pisciculture in the Belgian Congo: Sustainable Development *Avant la Lettre?*'. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.11689>.

19 Macekura, *Of Limits and Growth*.

20 Daan Sanders and Liesbeth van de Grift, "'The Rhine as One River". Rhine Pollution and Multilevel Governance, 1950s to 1970s'. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.11694>.

They disentangle the interplay between the agencies and activists who have addressed river pollution since the 1950s, principally in the Netherlands. The actors involved sought to balance economic, social, and environmental aspects, well before the policies on Rhine government explicitly aimed for ‘sustainable development’. At first, economic and social considerations dominated these discussions because of the impact of pollution on public health and agriculture. By the 1970s, environmental activists also exposed the ecological costs of pollution. Crucially, the history of the Rhine demonstrates how an effective regulatory regime could only be established after a coalition of different interest groups had learned to navigate local, national and European levels of governance. Another underrated transformation in achieving sustainability during the twentieth century transpires here as well. Civil servants and scientific experts expressed a preference for prognostic governance based on modelling the future instead of reactively preventing acute instances of pollution.²¹

With respect to actors involved in advocating sustainability, the role of businesses has been particularly contested. Many companies have claimed to contribute to sustainability, but there is often reason to doubt their intentions and the extent of their commitment. Allegations of ‘greenwashing’ abound, whilst even well-founded doubts are hard to verify for contemporaries as well as historians.²² Keetie Sluyterman analyses how the multinational brewing company Heineken dealt with environmental issues since its founding in 1864.²³ Sluyterman concludes that throughout the company’s history, Heineken management viewed these issues mainly as economic and technological challenges. Her article explores how the ways of taking environmental impact into account became part of the multinational’s policies, when sustainability became a buzzword in the international business community during the 1990s. Technological expertise within the company played an essential role in finding ways to limit environmental degradation and to economise by reducing energy costs. At the same time, if businesses subsumed environmental policies under the broad banner of sustainability, their attention for environmental issues could decline. Sluyterman’s analysis provides a different angle on questions of greenwashing and ‘real’ intentions. By focusing on outcomes rather than intentions only, she shows how Heineken has at times contributed to a cleaner environment and a broader

21 Elke Seefried, ‘Steering the Future. The Emergence of “Western” Futures Research and Its Production of Expertise, 1950s to Early 1970s’, *European Journal of Futures Research* 2 (2014) 29. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40309-013-0029-y>.

22 Matthew Klingle, ‘The nature of desire: consumption in environmental history’, in: Andrew C. Isenberg (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook*

of Environmental History (Oxford University Press 2014) 467-512. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195324907.013.0017>.

23 Keetie Sluyterman, ‘Green is More than the Colour of the Bottle: Environmental Issues at Heineken Breweries over the Long Term’. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgm-lchr.11685>.

acceptance of sustainable technologies and policies, even though the company was not primarily driven by environmental concerns.²⁴

Economic considerations thus often dominated policies even as these became part of explicit attempts to achieve sustainability. Yves Segers points out a similar development in the agricultural practices in Belgium between 1970 and 1990.²⁵ The scientific agricultural experts, who are central to his article, did not balance the economy, society, and the environment on equal terms, but focused on the most productive form of agriculture. Despite reports about the negative environmental impact of the use of fertiliser and the wider debate over 'limits to growth' during the 1970s, the primary objective of Belgian agricultural experts remained increasing productivity. Consequently, they eventually acknowledged only those concerns surrounding the use of fertiliser which were related to the economic viability of manure and fertilisers. Although economic considerations continued to dominate this debate, measures aimed at preserving productivity were one step among others, which contributed to a stronger inclusion of environmental perspectives in agricultural policies.

Looking at the role of scientific agricultural experts, another important twentieth-century transformation in the history of sustainability comes into view. In the realm of governance, scientific expertise became an essential part of decision making, whilst transnational governing coalitions proliferated.²⁶ Improved communications and new scientific insights about the interconnectedness of environmental issues stimulated the formation of transnational networks of experts and policymakers. This transformation of environmental governance is addressed in several articles in this volume. Scientific experts employed by state institutions and civic organisations became important interlocutors of environmental policy. As governing coalitions of state and non-state actors flourished, these experts became essential mediators. Besides the constant quarrelling over who should be involved, the broad acceptance of the notion that environmental problems do not respect national borders was remarkable. As a result, transnational environmental governance came to be expected by most stakeholders.

Scientific expertise and transnational governance did not evolve linearly or predictably, as the contribution by Peter van Dam and Amber

24 Bess, *The light-green society*; Frank Uekötter, *The Age of Smoke: Environmental Policy in Germany and the United States, 1880-1970* (University of Pittsburgh Press 2009). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt9qh8dk>.

25 Yves Segers, 'Brown Gold? Agronomists, Fertiliser Advice and Emerging Environmental Awareness in Belgium, 1970-1991'. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.11695>.

26 Lutz Raphael, 'Die Verwissenschaftlichung des Sozialen als methodische und konzeptionelle Herausforderung für eine Sozialgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 22:2 (1996) 165-193; Matthew Hilton et al., *The Politics of Expertise: How NGOs Shaped Modern Britain* (Oxford University Press 2013).

Striekwold demonstrates. They analyse how the Belgian and Dutch alternative food movement promoted the ideal of small-scale agriculture in the 1970s and 1980s.²⁷ The eventual establishment of eco-labels provided consumers guarantees about the qualities of their purchases and enabled a wider distribution of ecological products. Eco-labels have since become important markers of sustainable consumption. The opportunity to distribute their products more widely, however, led food activists to abandon practices of small-scale production. Dutch activists continued to emphasise environmental criteria, whereas social considerations retained a more central position in Belgium. The article also highlights the rivalry between experts and actors who rejected scientific expertise in envisioning how they wanted to produce and consume.

When comparing the histories of sustainability of Belgium and the Netherlands in this special issue, the lively exchanges between these countries and the similarities in framing and fostering sustainability stand out. The environment gradually became a more important subject in public debates and in the development of policies and technologies. It was not only considered as a resource, but also of intrinsic value. As knowledge about environmental degradation became available, policymakers, businesses and ordinary citizens paid more attention to mitigating pollution. Scientific expertise and technological innovation played a key role in both countries, usually directed towards fostering economic growth whilst alleviating the most egregious forms of environmental impact.

At the same time, a comparison between these countries shows that practices of sustainability did not evolve self-evidently. Local circumstances made specific practices of sustainability more or less viable. This is clear in Van Schuylenbergh's history of the fishponds in Congo, where experiences from Indonesia and general scientific insights could not simply be transposed from one local setting to another. The importance of local particularities is also apparent in the histories of activism, as analysed by Peter van Dam and Amber Striekwold. The availability of small plots of land for new farms in the Netherlands and the continuation of traditional small-scale farming in Belgium presented the alternative food movement with different vantage points. Segers' analysis of the regulation of the use of fertiliser reveals similar differences in timing, but also points towards an important factor fostering stronger harmonisation, when the European Union emerged as an important player in environmental governance.

This special issue will be accompanied in time by a series of blog posts, in which these histories of sustainability are delimited.²⁸ The contributors

27 Peter van Dam and Amber Striekwold, 'Small is Unsustainable? Alternative Food Movement in the Low Countries, 1969-1990'. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.11688>.

28 The blog posts result from the roundtable 'Fickle Waters, Resilient Societies? A Roundtable on Resilience, Sustainability and Water History around the North Sea' hosted by Mathijs Boom

take the storied history of water in the Low Countries as their point of departure, exploring how this historiography challenges us to think about resilience alongside sustainability. Whereas sustainability points towards human attempts to control their environment, resilience foregrounds the extent to which societies are able to cope with disasters and disruptions. In this vein, the contributions discuss the limits of human agency and unequal distribution of risks and benefits in how relations between humans and nature have evolved. They thus importantly question whether a sustainable balance between competing interests can in fact be achieved. Sustainability, it turns out, is a time- and place-bound concept. During the ‘age of interdependence’ in particular, it represented a distinctly optimistic way of thinking about connections between different domains.

The age of interdependence

This special issue presents an opportunity to specify how sustainability was interpreted and practiced in the Low Countries during the twentieth century. Politicians and officials, civic actors and business representatives all considered concerns over survival and the distribution of power of vital importance. The articles demonstrate the importance of their long-standing care for the availability of resources like timber and the preservation of areas which were deemed economically or esthetically valuable. Nature had to be protected because natural resources were limited. Anxieties over the risks that various forms of environmental degradation posed for public health were equally enduring and widespread. Technological interventions were seen as the primary means to mitigate the detrimental environmental effects of human behaviour and to safeguard individual and collective human health.

Whereas these elements remained pertinent throughout the twentieth century, the articles also point towards remarkable changes in the Low Countries in this period. These pertain to the awareness of interconnectedness, the aspired balance within this web of connections, and the ways in which people could achieve this balance. Since the 1940s scientists conveyed a more intricate understanding of the functioning and interrelation of ecosystems. The wider public started to understand its place in the world in the light of global interconnectedness as a result of worldwide economic crises and warfare. Links between different parts of the planet and the inseparability of environment,

and Davide Martino as part of the symposium

‘Beyond missed opportunities: The history of sustainability’, 4 February 2022.

EKOLOGISCH TUINIEREN ... EN GEZOND LEVEN



VELT

Vereniging voor Ekologische Leef- en Teeltwijze vzw



Campaign poster in which the Flemish association for organic consumption and production (VELT) promoted ecological gardening and a healthy lifestyle. (c) VELT vzw. Designer and date unknown.

society and economy were increasingly recognised. The idea that the world was one, inextricably relating all human societies and ecosystems, became the vantage point for scientific analysis, governance, and popular debates.²⁹

At the same time, government officials and scientific experts concurred that a balance between environmental, social, and economic considerations could be established. Among policymakers in particular, this recognition was accompanied by the conviction that such interconnections could be modelled systematically and subsequently managed. Environmental policy should be planned proactively, rather than simply in reaction to circumstances as they arose.³⁰ The unprecedented detrimental impact of humans on the planet, which became apparent during the 1960s and 1970s, thus paradoxically reinforced a sense of responsibility among scientists and officials to create a more sustainable world. In this context, many environmental issues became the object of transnational governance.

The histories discussed in this special issue reflect a widely shared belief in the possibility of integrating and balancing environmental, social, and economic claims by means of transnational governance since the 1940s. Several articles point out how this particular ideal of balance was gradually relinquished after the 1990s. Interpreting sustainability, companies, activist groups, and policymakers prioritised environmental aspects since then. As a result, sustainability became a ‘green’ concept. The period between the 1940s and the 1990s was thus characterised by a distinct interpretation of sustainability, which can aptly be summarised by naming it the ‘age of interdependence’. The specific characteristics of this period prefigured the acclaim for the concept of ‘sustainable development’ in the 1980s.

Most visibly, the ways in which the environment was imagined, weighed and governed shifted in the Low Countries in this era. This development has received ample attention, prompting historians to assert the emergence of a new type of society, especially in the Global North, which

29 David Kuchenbuch, ‘“Eine Welt”: Globales Interdependenzbewusstsein und die Moralisierung des Alltags in den 1970er und 1980er Jahren’, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 38:1 (2012) 158-184. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13109/gege.2012.38.1.158>; Olaf Bach, *Die Erfindung der Globalisierung: Entstehung und Wandel eines zeitgeschichtlichen Grundbegriffs* (Campus Verlag 2013).

30 Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge University Press 1985) 291-315; Paul Warde, Libby Robin and Sverker Sörlin, *The Environment: A History of the*

Idea (John Hopkins University Press 2018) 25-27; Elke Seefried, *Zukünfte: Aufstieg und Krise der Zukunftsforschung 1945-1980* (De Gruyter 2015) 49-73. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110349122>. The notion of ‘interdependence’ was popularised since the 1930s to indicate the interconnections of social, economic and environmental issues and of spatial entities, cf. Rex Weyler, ‘Greenpeace history: Declaration of Interdependence’, <https://web.archive.org/web/20121008064009/http://rexweyler.com/greenpeace/greenpeace-history/declaration-of-interdependence/>. (Accessed 12 February 2022).



On 25 May 1989, Dutch activists of Milieudefensie protesting at the presentation of the Dutch National Plan for Environmental Policy ('Nationaal Milieubeleidsplan') stated: 'Politics are letting the earth drown' ('Politiek laat aarde verzuipen'), while throwing a globe into the Hofvijver, close to the heart of Dutch politics in The Hague. Political institutions developed an increasingly comprehensive approach to environmental policy in the course of the twentieth century, but could scarcely stave off mounting ecological problems. © Photo taken by Rob C. Croes, National Archives, The Hague, Anefo, cco, <http://hdl.handle.net/10648/ad7306do-dob4-102d-bcf8-003048976d84>.

accords notable importance to environmental issues.³¹ The transition from the long to the short history of sustainability clarifies this ‘greening’ of societies during the twentieth century. This collection of articles shows how the environment did not emerge as an isolated subject. Rather, environmental perspectives were acknowledged in relation to social and economic ones. Activists vocally demanded more attention for ecological problems. They accomplished this by explicitly connecting these problems to social and economic concerns over ‘limits to growth’ and ‘sustainable development’. The analyses of sustainability in Belgium and the Netherlands in this special issue lay bare how less eye-catching, but no less impactful, many politicians and civil servants, businesses and farmers became involved in attempts to establish a sustainable society as well. The contributions demonstrate this widespread acknowledgement but also its limits. The commitment of multiple actors to the ideal of a sustainable balance was confined to begin with, and views on how to implement this ideal diverged widely.

Regarding this age of interdependence as a specific era in a longer history of sustainability also challenges the notion of gradual progress towards an ever-greener society. Rather than a history of growing environmental reflexivity, along the lines of seminal works from Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962 and *The Limits to Growth to Our Common Future*, or from movements for conservation to environmentalism, the varieties of sustainability represent a succession of interpretations of the desired relations between the environment, the society, and the economy. If we posit a separate period, from the 1940s until the 1990s, in which a distinct interpretation of sustainability was popularised, this allows us to hypothesise a recent rearrangement of its core assumptions. Since the 1990s, the attention to social issues has been marginalised by the pressing environmental problems and tensions between environmental and economic objectives have become more pronounced. The timespan to mitigate human impact on the environment has shortened and doubts about the efficacy of technological innovations have become more common.

Concerning history

The topicality of sustainability finally urges us to reflect on the historical moment in which we are discussing these histories. What can historians contribute at a time when the human impact on the planet is so immense that it will be visible in the earth’s geological history? How does the realisation

31 Bess, *The Light-Green Society*; Frank Zelko, ‘The Politics of Nature’, in: Isenberg (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History*, 716-742; Frank Uekötter, *The Greenest Nation? A*

New History of German Environmentalism (The MIT Press 2014). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262027328.001.0001>.

that humanity has become a geological actor alter our view of its past? What histories do we write in the Anthropocene?³² This special issue highlights the manifold contributions historians can provide. As any discipline addressing climate change has to turn to history to make sense of it, core elements of the historical craft are in fact more valuable than ever. They extend from the contextualisation of sources which provide data about climate change to reflections on how to make sense of time in the Anthropocene, which invokes temporalities ranging from planetary history to that of day-to-day political decision making.³³

The contributions to this special issue highlight four distinct ways in which historians enhance the understanding of our current predicament. First, by analysing the intersection of the long and short history of sustainability in the twentieth century, the authors show how historians integrate different relevant ‘layers of time’.³⁴ More specifically, Sanders and Van de Grift analyse how tentative forms of transnational environmental policymaking were abetted by the course of a river, then unexpectedly took off when the agendas of different actors, such as water supply companies and environmental activists, suddenly aligned. Segers then illustrates the flip side of this pattern: measures like limiting fertiliser use could stall because agricultural experts as a crucial group of actors did not change in accordance with others, despite mounting problems caused by their application.

Second, historians provide insights into the layered motives for promoting sustainability. Beyond an analysis of economic, social, and environmental concerns, the contribution by Mennen and Van Meurs elucidates how different reasons – economic use, natural beauty, recreation, or

32 Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History, and Us* (Verso Books 2016); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago University Press 2021); Andreas Malm, ‘Who lit this fire? Approaching the History of the Fossil Economy’, *Critical Historical Studies* 3:2 (2016) 215-248. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/688347>; Special Issue ‘Writing History in the Anthropocene’, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 46:4 (2020); Cf. Historians for future, ‘Statement’, <https://historiansforfuture.org/statement/> (Accessed 17 August 2022).

33 Richard Staley, ‘Understanding Climate Change Historically’, in: Alexander Elliot, James Cullis and Vinita Damodaran (eds.), *Climate Change and the Humanities: Historical, Philosophical and Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Contemporary*

Environmental Crisis (Palgrave Macmillan 2017) 43-68; Andrea Westermann and Sabine Höhler, ‘Writing History in the Anthropocene: Scaling, Accountability, and Accumulation’, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 46:4 (2020) 579-605; Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘The Climate of History: Four Theses’, *Critical Inquiry* 35:2 (2009) 197-222. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/596640>; Reinhart Koselleck, *Zeitschichten: Studien zur Historik* (Suhrkamp 2003) 9-15; Erik Isberg, ‘Multiple Temporalities in a New Geological Age: Revisiting Reinhart Koselleck’s *Zeitschichten*’, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 46:4 (2020) 729-735; David Kuchenbuch, ‘Histories in and of the Anthropocene’, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 46:4 (2020) 736-749.

34 Koselleck, *Zeitschichten*.

mitigating climate change – for maintaining and expanding forests coincided during the twentieth century. Just as competing motives could result in joint policies, shared interests sometimes failed to bring such policies about. Van Schuylenbergh's analysis of fishponds in Congo provides an example of the latter dynamic. Even though the interests of the local population and colonial experts appeared to align, the colonial authorities' lack of understanding for the living conditions and views of the Congolese population caused the initiative to fail.

Third, historical analysis brings out the complexities of assigning responsibility for sustainable and unsustainable practices. Humans have long understood their environmental impact, but apparently largely neglected it.³⁵ Many opportunities to counteract the current ecological crises were certainly missed.³⁶ The complexity of assessing whether we should speak of small steps forward, failure, or even willful neglect comes through particularly strongly in Sluyterman's contribution. Claiming to promote sustainability, companies like Heineken have often appeared less than committed to its actual realisation. The company developed sustainable technologies, but its primary goal was to save energy costs and obtain clean water for breweries. At other times, the company simply ignored the environmental problems its products caused. How do we weigh intended and unintended consequences in such cases? How invested should we be in establishing good or bad intentions?

Lastly, historical analysis brings out the contingencies in relations between humans and the environment. Such an unexpected outcome can be found in the article by Van Dam and Striekwold: activists who set out to promote small-scale production motivated by social and environmental considerations ended up pioneering large-scale ecological production and distribution. Such accounts circumscribe the limitations of human actions and the lack of insight into their consequences. Yet these histories may also kindle a hope for avenues into the future that we might not see today.³⁷

35 Fabien Locher and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, 'Modernity's Frail Climate: A Climate History of Environmental Reflexivity', *Critical Inquiry* 38:3 (2012) 579-598. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/664552>.

36 Mark Carey, 'Beyond Weather: the Culture and Politics of Climate History', in: Isenberg, *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History*, 23-51; Joshua P. Howe, *Behind the Curve: Science and the Politics of Global Warming* (University of Washington Press 2014); Joachim Radkau, *Nature and Power: a Global History of the Environment* (Cambridge University Press 2008) 195-249; Staley, 'Understanding

Climate Change Historically'; Spencer Weart, *The Discovery of Global Warming: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Harvard University Press 2008); Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (Bloomsbury Publishing 2010); Nathaniel Rich, *Losing Earth: The Decade We Could Have Stopped Climate Change* (Picador 2019).

37 Margrit Pernau, 'Aus der Geschichte lernen?', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 46:3 (2020) 573-574.

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