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# **An Unsustainable State: Contrasting Food Practices and State Policies in the Czech Republic**

**Petr Jehlička and Joe Smith**

**Abstract** This paper brings together consideration of food policies and practices and of post-socialist transition to raise neglected questions about means of nurturing more sustainable food systems in the developed world. The last three decades have been marked by the growing salience of food as a political and scholarly concern. While market-based alternative food systems have been heralded for their potential to promote environmental sustainability, the benefits of non-market practices such as household food self-provisioning and barter have been assumed rather than being the focus of research. In the western context, both types of food consumption have positive connotations. Although food self-provisioning in European post-socialist societies is a more wide-spread practice than in western societies, it has been on the periphery of research. The existing literature has conceptualised them as ‘coping strategies’ or as a legacy of irregular supply of goods in the state socialist era. Drawing on empirical research in the Czech Republic, we are proposing a novel approach to the phenomenon of household food production in post-socialist societies as a practice compliant with principles of sustainability. First, we highlight the large extent and social inclusivity of food self-provisioning in Czech society to demonstrate how post-socialist societies are a repository of a rich set of sustainability-promoting consumption practices in relation to food systems. Second, we show that international and domestic policy actors in these societies have ignored these alternative, socially inclusive and environmentally effective practices in favour of far less effective

market-based sustainability oriented food policy initiatives. The paper promotes a more integrated view of non-market and market approaches in the pursuit of more sustainable food systems.

**Key words:**

sustainable consumption

food self-provisioning

barter

governance

post-socialism

Czech Republic

**1. Introduction**

Our research is motivated by the negative biophysical impacts of developed-world consumption patterns, and an interest in reassessing neglected but widespread social practices that may substantially ameliorate these impacts. Focusing on household food systems and specifically on the wide extent of self-provisioning, barter and gifting in the Czech Republic, we wish to contribute to the discussion on the relationship between consumption patterns and environmental impacts. We propose that for affluent societies such as the Czech Republic, sustainable consumption policies should incorporate thinking about people's framing of notions of quality of everyday life in such a way as to promote both less consumption *in toto*

and less resource intensive consumption in daily practices (for detailed justification see Klooster, 2010). While we acknowledge that sustainable development has long been a contested concept (see, e.g. Richardson, 1997), its sustained prominence at the intersection of environment and a range of other consumption related sectors in European Union (EU) policies, including transport, energy and food, explains our decision to frame the research within the context of sustainable consumption discourses. Reference to environmental sustainability, sustainable development and sustainable consumption within the article does not suggest that these concepts provide fixed destinations for policy, or indeed society. But they do clearly signal our desire to investigate interactions at the nexus of the biophysical, economic and socio-cultural spheres. That sustainability is a fluid concept is not simply acknowledged – it is precisely that characteristic that has guided us in choosing to look at the movement of concepts through EU and other vectors into national policy discourses. That investigation leads us beyond study of policy and into an investigation of cultures of non and quasi-market food production and consumption. We have found that the non and quasi-market food cultures and practices we explored make little or no conscious reference to sustainability considerations. Various literatures could be drawn upon to justify our interpretation of self-provisioning as more sustainable than supermarketization of food systems, but we would particularly reference the ecological economics literature (e.g. Lawn, 2010 or Røpke, 2010) and environmental social science/policy work around consumption (e.g. Jackson, 2004 or Jackson, 2009). The striking contrast between the comparatively ineffective promotion of official ‘sustainable consumption’ policies (in terms of ecological impact reduction outcomes) at EU and national level, and the evidence of ecologically and socially sustaining food

practices at grassroots level that make no direct reference to sustainability in their implementation, lies at the heart of the paper.

Food is our case study rather than our subject. Nevertheless we have found it a compelling and revealing arena within which to explore our concerns. The last three decades have been marked by growing salience of food as a political concern and as the focus of scholarship (Lang et al., 2009). As Guthman (2008a) pointed out, foodie-ism as a social phenomenon came of age in the 1980s. For western academia this period is marked by the rise of consumption as a focus of research with food consumption (Holloway et al., 2007; Maxey, 2006) and with neoliberalisation of the agro-food sector becoming one of its central concerns (Eaton, 2008; Guthman, 2008b and 2008c). While there is, in geography, a growing body of literature on both neoliberalisation of nature (for a comprehensive critical review see Castree, 2008a and 2008b) and also, more specifically, on neoliberalism and food politics (Guthman, 2007, 2008a, 2008b; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005), the empirical focus of these studies is on the 'core' of the developed world - North America and Western Europe. With a few exceptions (Smith, 2002a and 2002b), post-socialist societies, despite experiencing the most profound and far reaching experiments in neoliberalisation (both in terms of 'roll-back' and 'roll-out' forms of neoliberalisation; Klooster, 2010), have remained on the periphery of geographical research into neoliberalism, consumption and food politics.

Neoliberalism is often understood as a programme of policies and governance arrangements that favour privatization, the liberalisation of markets and more competition (Peck and Tickell, 2002). Neoliberalisation, then, is an evolving, variegated process of implementation of this programme (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004; Klooster, 2010). Among central elements of neoliberalism are the emphasis on

individual choice, self-regulation, commodification of different fields including nature and reliance on responsibilitization of consumer.

In this paper we draw on insights from the ongoing debate on neoliberalism and neoliberalization in geography. Neoliberalism has often been conceptualised as a coherent, hegemonic, top-down ‘macro’ project which is promoted primarily by national governments and international organisations and which has a global reach with similar effects everywhere (e.g. McCarthy and Prudham, 2004; Harvey, 2005). There is an alternative conceptualisation of neoliberalism wherein it is understood as ‘a migratory technology of governing that interacts with situated sets of elements and circumstances’ (Ong, 2007, p. 5; see also Ferguson, 2010) or as an ‘assemblage’ (Larner, 2009) with outcomes dependent on particular policies and particular contexts (Perreault, 2005). We have found this line of argument to offer a more suitable perspective from which to analyse the case presented in this paper. As we look at an effort to implement ‘on the ground’ a model of governance promoted by an international initiative, we also take our cue from Barnett’s et al. (2008) point about the need to explore how such top-down initiatives work out in practice.

Researchers have grappled with questions of the extent to which the models of neoliberal governance of sustainable consumption such as the promotion by environmental movements and other actors of organic and ethical certification of food represent an effective ‘push-back’ and to what extent they are a form of roll-out of neoliberalisation (Klooster, 2010). Following Gibson-Graham (2006) and drawing on McCarthy (2006) and Krueger and Agyeman (2005), Klooster (2010, p. 119) suggests that ‘at least potentially...some forms of neoliberal governance...might constitute experiments in “actually existing sustainability”, because they contain alternative economic forms and shelter practices with the capacity to fulfil sustainable

development objectives'. While we recognise the importance of these debates, in this paper we believe we have gathered evidence and arguments that serve to complement and extend them. We seek here to both look at the effects of the import of the neoliberal model of governance of sustainable consumption of food in parallel with considering the sustainability potential of well established everyday practices of food production and consumption.

Both popular food writing and politics as well as much of food scholarship have identified and promoted environmental and social benefits derived from eating closer to home and seasonal, organic and Fair Trade food (Nabhan, 2002; Selfa and Qazi, 2005; Steel, 2008; Little et al., 2009). In academia, these developments have been characterised as a shift from productivist to post-productivist food regimes (Ilbery and Bowler, 1998) and analysed using the concepts of short food supply chains (SFSCs) and alternative food networks (AFNs) (Renting et al., 2003; Maxey, 2006). SFSCs and AFNs 'are most heralded for their potential to capture more value for food producers seen as marginal to the "global" food economy as well as to create social capital and trust' (Guthman, 2008a), and also for their potential to link food production and consumption with bioprocesses; the claim being that food is produced using environmentally less damaging methods (Maxey, 2006; Dixon et al., 2009). Furthermore, these developments also appear to respond to widespread popular convictions that food produced with reduced or no chemical inputs is healthier (Renting et al., 2003; Maxey, 2006).

Historically, most of this scholarship has been concerned with analyses of *market-based alternative food systems* within west European and North American contexts (Renting et al., 2003; Seyfang, 2006; Selfa and Qazi, 2005; Goodman and Goodman, 2007; Eaton, 2008; Maxey, 2006). Typically, these include farm shops,

farmers markets, box schemes, certification labels, catering for institutions and the like. Comparatively little attention has been given to food *alternatives that are not market-based* such as food self-provisioning and barter. This literature has often arisen as a critique of much of the scholarship on market-based food alternatives, and specifically of its neglect of concerns about class, gender and equity. According to this critique, AFNs and SFSCs have in practice tended to cater to wealthy consumers (Self and Qazi, 2005; Guthman, 2008c; Koc et al., 1999). In consequence, the literature on food self-provisioning is often concerned with minorities and disadvantaged groups' vegetable gardening (Domene and Saurí, 2007; Guthman, 2008a) and gender and class changes in allotment holders (Buckingham, 2003 and 2005). The dominant themes of this research have included consideration of the implications of these practices for self-improvement, well-being and dietary and health improvements.

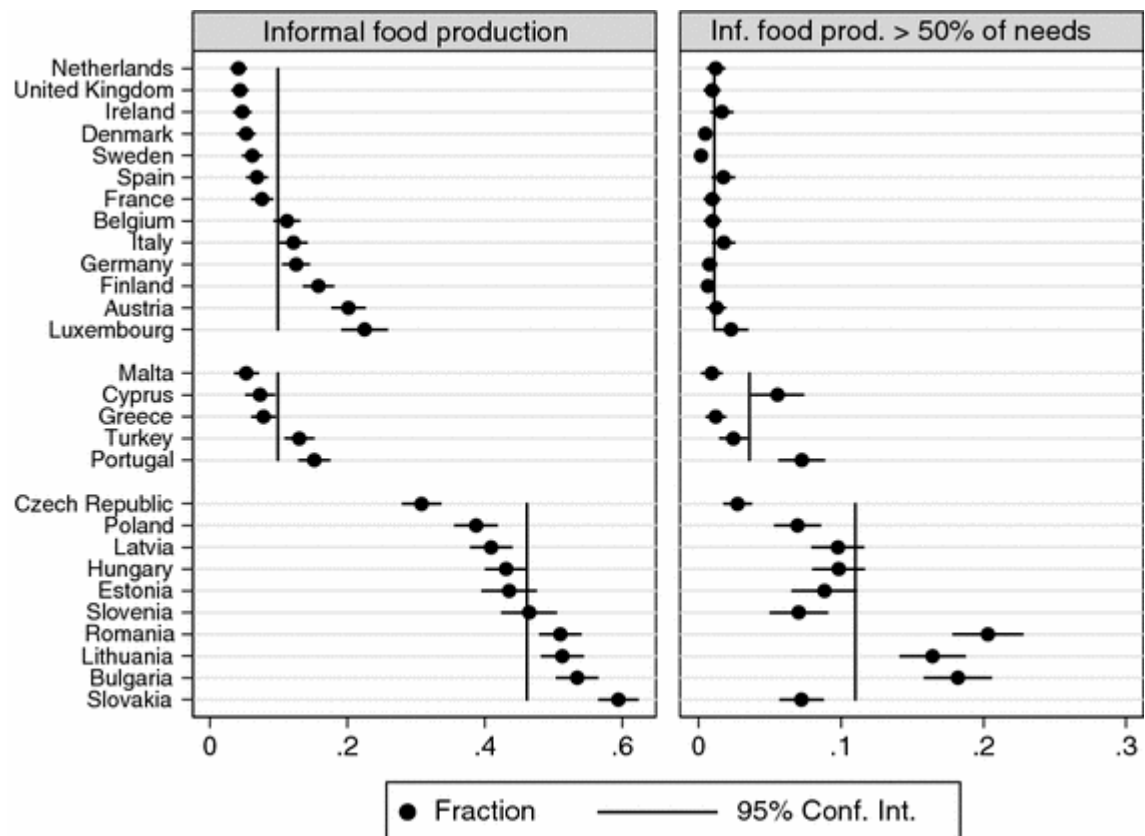
While biophysical/environmental sustainability concerns are often at the forefront of scholarship on western AFNs and SFSCs (Marsden et al., 1999; Maxey, 2006), in the literature on 'informal household food production', 'vegetable gardening' and 'household food self-provisioning and barter', the environmental dimension of these practices is assumed rather than being the focus of research. For example, while Buckingham's (2005, p. 177) concern is the changing class and gender balance of British allotment holders, she refers to these practices in passing as 'an impetus towards more environmentally sustainable methods of local food growing'. The limited interest in the environmental sustainability potential of food self-provisioning in this literature is striking, given that household food production and barter can conceptually be seen as an extension of AFNs and SFSCs and meet the same environmental sustainability criteria. We can speculate that one reason for the



lack of concern with the environmental sustainability of household food production and informal local economies of food exchange might be its limited extent in western societies. According to Alber and Kohler (2008), in ‘traditional west European market economies’ the proportion of citizens involved in growing some of their food ranges from five (the Netherlands) to about 20 per cent (Luxembourg); see Figure 1).

While it is not easy to provide a quantitative account of the environmental benefits of food self-provisioning, there are reasons to be confident that in comparison with conventional means of obtaining food, household cultivation practices significantly reduce environmental impacts of food provisioning. This is due to reduced or eliminated packaging needs and waste production, due to composting, the short distance from garden to table and little or no use of fossil fuels in cultivating the soil, growing and harvesting the crop. Although household food production is not necessarily chemical- and pest control-free, there is evidence that they are usually used only in extreme situations (Buckingham, 2005).

A number of researchers (e.g. Rose and Tikhomirov, 1993; Smith, 2002a and 2002b; Pallot and Nefedova, 2007; Alber and Kohler, 2008) identified the large extent of household food production in post-socialist societies (see Figure 1). Bearing in mind its potential environmental benefits, we set out to explore this practice using the case study of the Czech Republic.



**Figure 1:** Informal food production in European countries in 2003. The left chart depicts proportions of the population who grow some of their food. The right chart depicts proportions of the population who grow more than 50 per cent of their nutrition needs.

Source: Alber and Kohler (2008)

The first goal of this paper, therefore, is to summarise the ways in which Central and East European (CEE) societies are a repository of a rich set of sustainability-compliant consumption practices in relation to food systems. However, to conceptualise Czech food self-provisioning as a sustainability-compliant practice, we will need to counter the view that household food production in CEE countries is primarily a ‘survival’ or ‘coping’ strategy, in other words that it is born out of necessity rather than a result of free will, an argument commonly advanced in the existing literature (for example, Rose and Tikhomirov, 1993; Pallot and Nefedova,

2007; Alber and Kohler, 2008). This discussion will unfold in section 2 of the paper, followed by section 3 that introduces briefly the empirical sources underlying this paper's arguments and findings. The extent of food self-provisioning in the Czech Republic will be outlined in section 4.

As noted above, market-based AFNs and SFSCs have been questioned in terms of their capacity to pose an alternative to neoliberalism. More than that, these arenas of food-related activism even 'seem to produce and reproduce neoliberal forms of spaces of governance' (Guthman, 2008b, p. 1172; see also Pudup, 2008; Rigby and Bown, 2007). Nevertheless there is still a broad agreement as to their capacity for the promotion, in Western Europe and North America, of social and environmental sustainability when compared to the working of the conventional industrialised agro-food sector (Lang et al., 2009). However, this linkage may be less straightforward in the specific, 'hybrid', conditions of European post-socialist countries with long established, non-market, socially inclusive and widespread self-provisioning, barter and gifting practices. The quantification of the degree to which these practices are more 'sustainability-compliant' than agro-industrial market-provision has not been the focus of this research, nor indeed of other previous work. This is an area that invites further research, and we note the potential for balancing or counter-intuitive factors in quantification of environmental sustainability performance, such as the origins of sugar used in preservation, the use of potentially inefficient or additional freezers for food storage or the carbon emissions related to travel to and from a plot or in transporting goods for consumption, sharing or barter.

Nevertheless, these practices do generally align with definitions of sustainability rooted in reduced ecological impacts around transport, packaging, fertiliser and pesticide inputs, and in enhanced social resilience resulting from barter,

gifting and other forms of mutuality. One can go one step further and suggest that such practices also help to reinforce more ‘social’ aspects of sustainability, including the strengthening of local bonds of trust in ways that are supportive of the pursuit of a more sustainable formal economy (and the maintenance of credit, investment and employment opportunities within a locality).

Thus, the second goal of the paper is to show that the promotion of market-based AFNs in these societies may have a far more ambiguous effect than in western societies. However, we do not wish to conceptualise these two variants of sustainable food consumption (self-provisioning and the marketing of sustainability-oriented products such as organically certified food) as mutually exclusive. Nor do we want to discount the sustainability potential of current consumption trends such as organic food retailing. Indeed, we consider them in many ways to be complementary. Instead, the aim of section 5 of the paper is to highlight and analyse what strikes us as internal contradictions within sustainable development policy discourses in the EU and member-states. On the one hand these discourses neglect the sustainable consumption potential of the established and socially inclusive non- and quasi-market practices such as self-provisioning, local produce, barter and gifting. On the other hand they nurture what remain economically marginal and socially exclusive sustainable consumption programmes and projects. The conclusion considers the paper’s contribution to urgent discussions of sustainability governance in the context of fast changing developing world societies.

## **2. Food self-provisioning in post-socialist Europe: survival strategy or sustainability-compliant practice?**

Post-socialist everyday consumption practices are receiving growing attention from researchers. Much of this literature is concerned with the implications of changing consumption practices for the articulation of identity, modernity and tradition (Haukanes, 2004; Haukanes and Pine, 2004) and the extent to which these economic practices constitute an alternative to market-based relations of capitalism (Acheson, 2007), and with the hybrid nature of everyday life constituted of pre-socialist, socialist-era and post-socialist practices (Stenning, 2005).

One area of post-socialist consumption practices that is puzzling to researchers is food self-provisioning and barter. Whether conducting detailed qualitative analyses of household practices (Acheson, 2007; Smith, 2002b; Snajdr, 2008) or large scale quantitative national surveys (Rose and Tikhomirov, 1993; Alber and Kohler, 2008) in post-socialist societies, researchers have agreed that against all expectations large scale household food production continued in the 1990s and the 2000s. While adopting different research perspectives and agendas, these scholars have struggled to explain the continuing existence of food self-provisioning, barter and gifting, phenomena that Acheson (2007, p. 405) refers to as ‘anomalous’ and ‘falling into no easily definable category’.

It strikes us how profoundly differently the same phenomena have been conceptualised depending on the context in which the research was conducted (see Table 1). Both advocates and scholars of food self-provisioning in the North American and West European contexts frame such practices in positive ways. This is either in the sense of providing a set of modern alternative practices and a vehicle for minorities and (poorer) women’s self-empowerment and diet improvement or, in the case of better-off sections of society, as an activity associated with the notions of

choice and lifestyle (health and fitness), a practice compliant with the goals of sustainable development or simply as a worthwhile hobby. There are even examples of food self-provisioning as a mildly subversive activity such as ‘guerrilla gardening’ and as an art practice (for example EXYZT’s Dalston Mill installation for the London Barbican Gallery’s Radical Natures exhibition, 2009 [EXYZT, 2009]). Whatever the conceptualisation, the practice is not considered to be a result of economic necessity, but rather to be driven by non-monetary values related to quality of life, community and/or environment.

On the other hand, since the early 1990s when western researchers first registered the scale of household food production in CEE societies, with a few notable exceptions (Smith, 2002b; Clarke et al., 2000), their accounts of these practices have been cast in negative terms. Large scale household food production was initially seen as evidence of the traditional non-modern character of Russian and CEE societies, or even as marking the de-modernising and de-differentiating processes that have affected these societies (Rose and Tikhomirov, 1993).<sup>1</sup> They have also been seen as a legacy of socialist-era shortages and unreliable supply of goods, in other words as a coping strategy (Alber and Kohler, 2008) or a survival strategy (Seeth et al., 1998).

**Table 1:** Conceptualisation of food self-provisioning in the West and East.

<b>Western Europe and North America</b>	<b>Eastern Europe</b>
(poorer) women’s empowerment	evidence of de-modernisation
minorities’ empowerment	evidence of de-differentiation
dietary improvement of poorer sections of society	survival strategy of the poor
health and fitness	responses to irregularities of supply
environmental and social sustainability	path-dependency on the state socialist past

<sup>1</sup> According to Rose and Tikhomirov (1993), the labor force in modern society is differentiated, with a large number of people producing manufactured goods and services and a small proportion of farmers producing food. To these authors, the fact that a high proportion of East European households in both urban and rural areas grow their food is a sign of de-differentiation of these societies.

recreational activity	economic necessity
resistance and opposition to neoliberalism	legacy of socialist-times shortages
modern social alternative	exercise of tradition

While in the early 1990s Rose and Tikhomirov's (1993) argument about food self-provisioning being a legacy of the experience of food shortages during the state socialist period may have seemed partly plausible for some former socialist countries (for not all of them experienced food shortages during the socialist period), their theses of de-modernization and de-differentiation seem to have been more a reflection of the western triumphalism of the time rather than the result of rigorous analysis. However, to claim in 2008, as Alber and Kohler (2008, p. 121) did, that the widespread informal food production in post-socialist societies, detected by a Europe-wide survey conducted in 2003, is explained by 'the long-standing experience of a command economy which trained people to resort to informal resources outside official channels' is troubling. These analysts of CEE informal food production invoked the evolutionary and deterministic conceptualisation of post-socialist societies (Hörschelmann, 2002) as having been 'inferior in space and behind the time' (Macnaughton and Urry, 1998, p. 149).

While we would not go as far as claiming that these practices have no economic dimension, we would, nonetheless argue that to view these practices primarily in terms of economic necessity, survival strategies and as a legacy of socialism, is increasingly untenable. First of all, already during the state socialist period household food production was a multifaceted activity. While it certainly could partly be a strategy for countering irregular and unreliable supply, this was not a feature that would apply universally and equally to all socialist societies at all times. Once the consequences of the 1939-1945 war economy were overcome in the 1950s socialist Hungary, East Germany and Czechoslovakia did not experience shortages

and irregular supply of food in terms of those fruits and vegetables grown in that part of Europe.

Food self-provisioning in this period also worked at a political-cultural level to make space for a (safe) element of independence from state organisation and provision of both food and work: '[t]hings that lay outside of the control of the state were highly valued locally, and were often used as symbols of what was pure, real and "ours"' (Haukanes and Pine, 2004, p. 108). Many people's state-related work was unfulfilling and undemanding, permitting extensive leisure time/alternative work, making space for them to meet some food needs through their own labour. Thus self-provisioning provided both for a satisfaction of needs and represented a space of resistance (Pittaway, 2004). While there has been a decline in the proportion of the population involved in these practices, there is plenty of evidence that widespread self-provisioning has been sustained long after the dramatic economic and political transformations of 1989 (see Table 2).

**Table 2:** Percentages of population growing some of their food in selected Central and East European countries and in Russian cities.

Country	1991	2003	2005
<b>Bulgaria</b>	62	50	n/a
<b>Czech Republic (Czechoslovakia<sup>a</sup>)</b>	70 <sup>a</sup>	30	42
<b>Poland</b>	48	38	n/a
<b>Russian cities</b>	72	n/a	n/a

Sources: 1991: Rose and Tikhomirov (1993)

2003: Alber and Kohler (2008) (our reading of the chart in the article)

2005: National survey commissioned by the authors in the Czech Republic

Western researchers' bewilderment stems not only from the continuing large scale of these practices while these societies experience rapid supermarketisation of the food retail sector and the concomitant fall of food prices, but also from some of its



more specific and counter-intuitive aspects, such as the finding that food self-provisioning and barter are more likely to be practised by the better-off and urban sections of the society rather than by the poor (Clarke et al., 2000; Acheson, 2007). In fact, these practices are remarkably socially inclusive, with only the poorest sections of society being under-represented. This finding directly contradicts the notion of food self-provisioning being a survival strategy. In contrast to Alber and Kohler's conclusion that people growing their food in 'established market economies' do so as a hobby while for people in former socialist countries it is a coping strategy inherited from the pre-1989 past, the results of our 2005 Czech national survey showed that the most important motivation for this activity was 'our own healthy food' followed by 'being a hobby'.

Smith (2002a) argues that both during state socialism and in the years since the non-economic reasons for these practices have been at least as prominent as the economic. He concludes that 'household food production can only be understood in relation to the constellation of household, cultural/historical and economic (not only capitalist) forces' (Smith, 2002a, p. 244).<sup>2</sup> We wish to complement and extend these more rounded accounts of post-socialist food systems by considering relations between neoliberalism, post-socialism, food systems and sustainability in tandem.<sup>3</sup> The case study at the centre of this paper responds to Castree's (2008b) call for researchers to engage with questions of precisely how nature is neoliberalised and what are the effects of this process.

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<sup>2</sup> Smith's Slovak study had a narrower focus than our Czech national survey as it specifically analysed urban households with access to land in rural areas.

<sup>3</sup> Smith's (2002a and 2002b) work on Slovak household food production, Staddon's (2009) research into mushroom and herb collection in Bulgaria, Cellarius's (2000) work on food barter in the same country and Acheson's (2008) account of food barter in Slovakia are all driven by other questions.

### **3. Research context and methodology**

The findings presented at the core of this paper are based on several sets of data gathered in the Czech Republic mostly in 2005, although some details have been tested or confirmed in research conducted in 2010. First, we commissioned the polling agency CVVM to pose 13 questions formulated by us as a part of a national survey. The agency added our 13 questions to another 30 questions prepared by their other clients. However, all questions in this survey were related to the issue of food and the title of the survey was 'Food 2005'. The polling was conducted between 21 and 28 February 2005. The survey was a standard CVVM survey using the quota sampling method.

The agency worked with a panel of 241 interviewers who were geographically spread throughout the country, including both urban and rural locations. CVVM sent questionnaires to its 241 interviewers. Each of them conducted either four or five interviews with respondents who met the criteria set by the agency so that the resulting quota sample constituted a representative sample of the Czech population. CVVM estimates that the response rate in terms of the proportion of people who met the representativeness criteria and agreed to be interviewed out of the total number of people approached by interviewers was between 50 and 60 per cent. These cannot be expressed with greater precision on account of this sampling technique: it is not recorded how many people approached by interviewers declined to be interviewed and/or did not meet the criteria (Vinopal, 2009a). The quota sample of CVVM respondents must match characteristics of the Czech population over the age of 15 established by the 2001 national census in terms of gender, age, educational level,

employment, job, and geographical distribution of respondents, which are annually updated by the Czech Statistical Office.

To guarantee the representativeness of their polls, CVVM aims at receiving at least 1000 questionnaires filled in by respondents. Their long-term experience is that to receive back the minimum of 1000 questionnaires, the agency needs to send out 1150 questionnaires as there is normally some shortfall of returned questionnaires due to unforeseen circumstances (Vinopal, 2009b). In the case of our survey the number of returned questionnaires was 1056 out of 1150 sent out to the interviewers. The questions covered a broad range of topics related to food consumption including where respondents purchase food, whether they grow their own fruit and vegetables, the percentage of specific types of fruits and vegetables consumed in their households accounted for by their own production and motivations for growing their food.

To uncover motivations, causalities and explanations for behaviour identified by the quantitative survey the second stage of the research involved 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in households identified by our three research partners. This part of the research was conducted by ourselves and was entirely separate from the CVVM-administered survey. While these interviewees were not derived from a process of representative sampling, we aimed at the widest possible range of respondents in terms of age, income, educational level and employment. Most interviews were conducted with individual respondents, but on three occasions married couples took part in the interview. We interviewed people with a diversity of backgrounds including an unemployed couple, a high school teacher, a couple of pensioners and a successful local businessman. Gender balance was not a criterion as we needed to talk to those members of the selected households who identified themselves as being more concerned with food provisioning, buying and cooking.

Reflecting the general household gender roles in Czech society, these were mostly women (four men took part in our interviews). All interviewees were from the ethnic majority group – white Czechs.<sup>4</sup> As we knew from the quantitative survey that the food-related practices in which we were most interested were common in both rural and urban areas, we decided to select interviewees in three locations whose sizes would reflect this diversity. Therefore, five interviews were conducted in the capital city Prague (over 1 million inhabitants), five in Hradec Králové (a regional capital with 100,000 inhabitants) and five in Polička (a rural town with population 9000).

Finally, in order to obtain information on the development of Czech sustainable consumption governance, we interviewed five key personnel working in the field, including three members of the government Working Group on Sustainable Consumption and Production two of whom were officials from the Ministry of the Environment and one an NGO activist. The other two interview respondents were working for NGOs on projects on sustainable consumption with a focus on food consumption.

#### **4. Living sustainability alternatives: self-provisioning, barter and gifting**

Evidence from our survey conducted in February 2005 showed that food self-provisioning is still widely practised. More than two fifths of respondents (41.5 per cent; n=1056) use a garden or allotment to produce vegetables and fruits for their own consumption. Far from being directly related to austerity in the economy, the Czech evidence suggests that there are higher rates of self-provisioning in more financially

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<sup>4</sup> Given that the percentage of ethnic minorities is modest (the Roma - 3 per cent and Vietnamese less than 0.5 per cent), and not significant in terms of our research questions, we did not actively seek to include members of these ethnic groups within our qualitative interviews.

secure households than not. The proportion of people with high living standards that grow their own food is higher (43.6 per cent; n=248) than the proportion of people doing so with low living standards (35 per cent; n=277). The unemployed and pensioners are not more likely than economically active people to grow their own food.

The proportion of people with tertiary (34.7 per cent; n=118) and basic levels of education (35.3 per cent; n=235) who do productive gardening are lower than those with *maturita* (secondary school final exam taken at the age of 18) (45 per cent; n=287). Older generations tend to practise production gardening more widely than younger generations. More than a third of entrepreneurs and the self-employed (35 per cent; n=79) have a production garden. In Prague, 21 per cent of people practise productive gardening (n=119), in mid-size towns this proportion is 41 per cent (n=243) and in villages with less than 2000 inhabitants 65 per cent of people are involved in this kind of gardening (n=262).<sup>5</sup>

The survey revealed ‘being a hobby’ and ‘a method of saving money’ as the second and third most important motivations for production gardening. However, the main reason was stated as being about having access to their ‘own healthy food’.<sup>6</sup> This was confirmed by our interviews. The respondents placed great emphasis on ‘healthy food’ which to them primarily means food grown with no or limited use of pesticides and other industrially produced chemicals and which contain, as a result, the least possible residua of industrially produced chemicals:

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<sup>5</sup> There are three main types of land on which Czechs can grow food: approximately 45 per cent of the population live in family houses which usually have a garden; urban dwellers living in flats have access to allotments; in addition, a large proportion of urban dwellers (e.g. 30 per cent in Pilsen and 25 per cent in Prague) have second houses in the countryside, typically with a large garden.

<sup>6</sup> Questions addressing the issue of chemical and pest control in household food production were not part of the February 2005 national survey. However, the emphasis growers place on healthy food suggests that their use is limited. This was confirmed by the respondents of the 15 household interviews. While the majority of them who grow fruits and vegetables (11 out of 15 households) emphatically denied the use of chemical fertilisers, two respondents admitted that in exceptional circumstance they would resort to chemicals to contain potato blight.

It's more like organic farming. We use almost no chemicals. We fertilise the garden with rabbit manure. And we hoe up weeds, for that we don't use any chemicals (Kozáček, 2005).

The reason why we grow our own food is that we do not use any sprays. Yes, the fruit is spotty, it certainly does not look like the fruit in shops. We are now running out of our own apples, so I wanted to buy some on the shop but my husband said: "Don't buy those chemical balls" (Ryklová, 2005).

We can buy food with chemicals in shops. The point of growing food at home is to do it without chemicals (Idunková, 2005).

The notion of healthiness is related to food's provenance and freshness:

When I grow that tomato in my own garden, I consider it to be healthy (Ryklová, 2005).

My family grows food because it's fun and because it gives us fresh food (Putna, 2005).

Self-provisioning of many commodities is very high. The February 2005 survey showed that among productive gardeners about two thirds of the consumption of currants, strawberries and apples is accounted for by people's own production (see

Table 3). These productive gardeners also emphasise the natural state of their produce, and the absence of additives, for example:

The non-alcoholic cider we make from our apples is without added sugar. It is something different to the cider bought in shops. Ours is naturally sweet (Fenclová, 2005).

**Table 3:** Proportion of self-grown produce in the total gardeners' household consumption of the fruit or vegetable (%) as reported by respondents to the February 2005 national survey.

<b>Fruit or vegetable</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Fruit or vegetable</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
currants	73	carrot	52
strawberries	68	plums	49
apples	62	onion	44
cherries	55	potatoes	44
tomatoes	53	pears	41

We would argue that from an environmental sustainability perspective, barter or gifting with self-provisioned food can be seen as a mechanism of distribution and allocation of surplus production which might otherwise end up rotting. The Czech household interviews confirm that there is a lot of barter going on:

I have plenty of eggs and rabbits and it is quite unhealthy to eat too much of these. As I have a lot of friends, I give a couple of eggs or a rabbit and exchange them for, say, lettuce and other vegetables or for leftovers which I then feed to the rabbits (Ryklová, 2005).

Barter and gifting of fruit and vegetables among both family and friendship networks is going on in large cities as much as rural areas. In addition, a number of urban and rural dwellers alike pick wild berries (for example bilberries and alpine strawberries) and mushrooms that they consequently use in their kitchen. When people explained to us the role of foraging, self-provisioning, allotments or smallholdings, it became clear that these forms of provisioning help to sustain dense webs of connection between the rural and urban in ways that are now comparatively rare in Western Europe (confirming Stenning, 2005, p. 122-123):

We grow leek, lettuce, radish, peas and spinach... Some fruits do not grow well here, so we get it from relatives, from my mother-in-law, or we bring it from Moravia. Apricots and plums. We have relatives there, so we go there quite regularly. I make compotes. This year [I made] about 15 kg [of compotes], I freeze some of it and I also made marmalade this year. We also grow tomatoes - we have plenty - and also cucumbers... My mother-in-law lives 5 km away from us and there are slightly different climate conditions, so they have cherries, pears that we do not have because the conditions here are not favourable to them (Mešťanová, 2005).

Only one person interviewed during our 15 household interviews was not involved in these networks of food exchanges. Although these exchange networks typically involve members of extended families, as the above quotes document, they are not confined to relatives as neighbours, friends and co-workers commonly take part in them too. For example, a high school teacher interviewed by us regularly exchanges her home baked Sunday cakes as well as, during the harvest season, fruits



and vegetables from her garden with her colleagues (Konderlová, 2005). Another respondent stated:

Every autumn my family has a lot of apples, so we make non-alcoholic cider.

And I give it to friends when it's fresh. Everybody gets cider (Fenclová 2005).

Our findings thus confirm the results of Acheson's (2007) study conducted in eastern Slovakia between 1993 and 2006. While these networks were fully developed during the state socialist period (Torsello, 2005), they pre-date state socialism (Acheson 2007) and have shown remarkable resistance to change in the years of the post-1989 social and economic transformation. Hence we conclude that these practices serve social as well as environmental dimensions of sustainability, by reinforcing family and community networks in ways that are not reliant on the formal economy or on the consumption of material goods.

While food self-provisioning, barter and mutual help are still widely practised as evidenced by our national survey and qualitative research, although at a slightly diminishing scale, they are rarely picked as a subject by the Czech media or for academic debate or investigation. Czech society's diverse, long established and socially embedded indigenous set of practices and cultural traits constitute a solid basis for initiatives that result in - even if they are not actively pursued with the goal of - sustainable food consumption. The puzzle remains as to why the sustainability policy community at the local, national and international level has failed to take advantage or even acknowledge this in the development of policy initiatives. The next section seeks to explain this failure by recourse to qualitative interview data and analysis of policy documents.

## 5. Sustainability, consumption and governance

Although activities aimed at the promotion of what would be today referred to as sustainable consumption in a broad sense have been in existence in the Czech Republic for nearly two decades, we are able to put a date (29 and 30 May 2003) to the beginning of an initiative that introduced the term ‘sustainable consumption’ as a distinct category of environmental policy. As will be shown below, this initiative gave rise to what has since become the privileged discourse on sustainable consumption in the country and had profound implications for the Czech policy debate on sustainable food consumption. The activity was initiated by an external and international actor – the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) - with the explicit aim of promoting sustainable consumption governance in the Czech Republic. The activity was a typical example of a top-down policy initiative of an international organization aimed at the promotion of the neoliberal model of governance of sustainable consumption. It placed an exclusive emphasis on marketization and responsabilization of the individual consumer via information disseminated by various non-governmental actors. It offered a unique opportunity to explore how these initiatives work out in practice (Barnett et al., 2008) and how neoliberalism as a mobile technology interacts with situated sets of circumstances (Ong, 2007).

Following the emphasis placed by the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development on consumption<sup>7</sup> UNEP ran a series of seminars under the title ‘Sustainable Consumption Opportunities for Europe’ (SCOPE) in selected

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<sup>7</sup> Sustainable consumption was established on the global governance agenda in the course of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992. Chapter 4 of Agenda 21 called for the adoption of sustainable consumption patterns (Fuchs and Lorek, 2005).

European countries at which it introduced the report 'Consumption Opportunities' prepared by the UNEP's Regional Office for Europe and by its Division for Technology, Industry and Environment (DTIE). Although the SCOPE project was described by UNEP as a pan-European initiative in reality its primary foci were post-socialist countries in CEE and in the former Soviet Union (Fuchs and Lorek, 2005).

In May 2003 a consortium led by the Czech National Committee of UNEP and consisting of Partnership Foundation and STEP (Síť ekologických poraden),<sup>8</sup> supported by modest seed corn funding from the Ministry of the Environment, organized a conference and a seminar under the title 'Sustainable Consumption – the Challenge for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'. Roughly at the same time, the Czech government set out to fulfil its Johannesburg obligation to develop a 10-year action plan for sustainable consumption. To that end a working group on sustainable production and consumption was set up as one among several such groups within the Czech Government's Council for Sustainable Development (Kašpar, 2004). The group of participants at the May 2003 conference established an informal initiative with the stated goal of assisting the Czech government to develop the 10-year action plan, 'drawing on the experience of developed countries and recommendations of international governmental and non-governmental organizations (UNEP, OECD)' (UNEP-CR, 2003).

The UNEP document 'Sustainable Consumption Opportunities for Europe' introduced four types of sustainable consumption – effective consumption, different consumption, conscious consumption and appropriate consumption.<sup>9</sup> 'Effective' and 'appropriate' consumption were perceived by the initiative as rather theoretical,

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<sup>8</sup> Partnership Foundation is a major funder of Czech environmental groups. STEP is the umbrella body of the network of environmental advisory bureaux.

<sup>9</sup> Lower consumption was conspicuous by its absence in UNEP's four conceptualisations of sustainable consumption.

strategic, systemic, government-driven and future-oriented. Thus they were to be progressed via discussions within the Government Council's Working Group. The other two variants – 'different' (effectively meaning green procurement) and conscious (i.e. ethical) consumption - were perceived as requiring more decentralised solutions and inviting practical measures taken 'here and now'. Both variants could be seen as conforming to the established beliefs of Czech environmental policy actors, that is, that education-induced lifestyle change at the individual level can lead to system wide changes (Jehlička et al., 2005; Jehlička and Smith, 2007). The UNEP-sponsored conference was thus viewed as an event that enhanced the legitimacy of domestic activities that some actors had been advocating for a long time, providing them with the credibility conferred by its status as a UN programme (Kanichová, 2004).

How was the privileged narrative of sustainable consumption arising from the May 2003 conference translated into action on the ground? In terms of the categorization introduced at the conference, the pilot projects related to food consumption fell under the heading 'different' consumption and the target niche was public administration and the implemented projects were labelled 'green public administration' (Kanichová, 2004). Two pilot projects were implemented in parallel. Some functions of the Ministry of Environment were 'ecologised', including the switch to recycled copy paper and the replacement of conventional bulbs with energy saving ones. In the area of food, the internal directive stipulated that only drinks in returnable bottles and organic food catering would be used at official functions organised by the Ministry of the Environment (Vondrouš, 2004; Kašpar, 2004).

STEP approached the Brno-based Ombudsman's Office with a proposal to implement green procurement. Again, apart from the changes similar to those at the

Ministry of Environment, an organic meal choice was introduced as one out of five options served in the Ombudsman's Office canteen. The Brno branch of STEP Institute Veronica went out of its way to work out the complicated logistics of getting several organic meals a day to the Office's canteen. It had to develop a supply network of organic ingredients for the organic lunch option. This was not an easy task in a country with only 800 organic farms with a narrow spectrum of produce, and where most organic farmers specialize in the production of meat for export.

The green procurement in the Ombudsman's Office was heavily publicized by STEP with the aim of encouraging other public institutions to follow suit. With STEP's assistance, the organic meal option was also introduced in a Brno kindergarten. Nevertheless, despite the huge effort, after about six months the schemes both in the Ombudsman's Office and in the kindergarten were scrapped due to low demand for the organic meal option, mainly due to its substantially higher price. The price of the organic lunch in the kindergarten exceeded the price of the conventional lunch by three times (Kanichová, 2004).

Falling into line with UNEP DTIE's insistence that sustainable consumption does not equate to lower consumption (UNEP/CDG, 2000 in Fuchs and Lorek, 2005), the leading figures in the Czech sustainable consumption initiative, whether from government or the NGOs, were sceptical about lower consumption lifestyles and non-market consumption practices as an inspiration for policy. When voicing their ideas on and policy proposals for sustainable consumption, they invoked the vocabulary of neoliberal environmental governance. This is reflected in their talk of markets, choice, the citizen-consumer and the individual responsibility of citizens for the implications of their consumption:

And then, I think that a group of people is emerging [in the Czech Republic] to whom the status is not simply a new house, but a house built according to ecological principles. And these are the people who are well off enough to afford it, and it is something else than the category of people with the alternative lifestyle, who really leave [the city] for the countryside and seek to be self-sufficient and live independently from the external world (Kanichová, 2004).

They placed the range of policy solutions to consumption-related environmental problems firmly in the area of voluntary, and primarily information-provision instruments:

When somebody says ‘sustainable consumption’, to me that means responsible consumption and that is informed consumption. In short, when I make a decision as a consumer, I make that decision on the basis of information... The basic principle is that when I consume, I should seek information on the implications of my consumption and this principle applies to all types of consumers, whether it be an individual, a corporation or public administration (Kašpar, 2004).

For me too, different consumption is easier [to adopt] because I can obtain more information and consequently substitute some forms of consumption with other forms (Vondrouš, 2004).

They were dismissive of ideas of restraint and restriction:

I do not think that it is possible to achieve [that goal] by restrictive measures, [it is clear] that the way of going about it is in the sphere of information and [thus] in people's growing awareness (Kanichová, 2004).

Similarly, for Kašpar (2004) the main value of the two - in the Czech context well-known - books by the sociologist Hana Librova (Librová, 1994, 2003) did not rest in their findings on food self-provisioning, but in the abundance of useful information on market-based AFNs and SFSCs such as box schemes, farmers markets, Fair Trade and organically certified food in western societies. Although a food grower himself, he was dismissive of the possibility of food self-provisioning being considered by the government Working Group as a practice that can contribute to greater environmental and social sustainability. He explained this position in terms of its association with the era of state socialism (Kašpar, 2004).

The May 2003 UNEP seminar on organic and Fair Trade retailing established these kinds of certification as a prominent means of promoting sustainable consumption, both amongst government officials and a number of Czech environmental NGOs. The magazine *Sedmá generace*, produced by the most influential Czech environmental NGO and the Czech branch of Friends of the Earth *Hnutí Duha*, which for years had run a column on household food production, has since the mid-2000s given substantial coverage to organic and Fair Trade food retailing including a special issue dedicated to this topic. Many NGOs including *Hnutí Duha* started to sell organic and Fair Trade products in their webshops and from their offices. Yet, despite the recent increase, both Fair Trade and organic food remain negligible phenomena in Czech society when measured by the amount of money spent. For example, in 2006, Czech citizens spent 5 million Czech crowns on Fair

Trade products (Kovařík, 2007).<sup>10</sup> Similarly, only 0.06 per cent of food sold in the country in 2003 was organically certified (Pokorný, 2004).

In the western context, where food self-provisioning and barter are marginal social phenomena, there is a general acknowledgement both among food activists and scholars that market-based AFNs and SFSCs are broadly beneficial in terms of their sustainability potential. The effect of the import of the model of neoliberal governance of sustainable consumption to the Czech and other post-socialist societies is more ambiguous, though. On the one hand, they have been a source of policy innovation and extended the spectrum of opportunities for the promotion of sustainable agriculture and food consumption. On the other hand, however, the import of this model of governance has resulted in the establishment of a dominant discourse of sustainable consumption (in the Czech context promoting practices with marginal sustainability gains) and the concomitant marginalisation of the existing domestic sustainability-supportive practices.

We explain the enthusiastic prioritisation of the UNEP-promoted model of sustainable consumption by the policy community – in part - in terms of a vigorous adherence to EU consumerist model of economic development within post-socialist countries. Nonetheless, the stark contrast between the negligible market-share of these forms of purchasing compared with the very widespread sustainability-compliant social practices remains puzzling to us. One explanation for this failure of policy makers to acknowledge the value of these existing practices relates not just to the way policy makers think about the present and future, but also how they consider the state socialist past. Our interviews with policy makers indicate that domestic practices have been rendered undesirable and ‘backward’ simply due to their association with the

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<sup>10</sup> This amounts to 170,000 euros or less than 0.5 per cent of the total expenditure on Fair Trade products in Austria, a country with the population a third smaller than the Czech Republic (Kovařík, 2007).



socialist past. A counter point however, is that not all socialist-era phenomena carry these negative connotations.

Normally, ideologically conformist phenomena associated with the socialist-era have been viewed by the post-socialist elite as undesirable and worthless in terms of their potential as a source of policy innovation, while pre-socialist and socialist-era phenomena associated with resistance to state socialism have been instinctively perceived as valuable and potentially culturally and politically inspiring (Jehlička and Tickle, 2004). One of few areas to which this normative dichotomy does not apply is household food production, which as we argued in section 2, was a form of ‘safe’ resistance to the socialist system.

Furthermore, in countries such as the UK and the USA, from which cultural and policy innovations are often imported, food self-provisioning has currently acquired the media image of a fashionable and even glamorous phenomenon (e.g. Shaw, 2009). In these western societies food self-provisioning is often associated with the construction of the self, an aspirational lifestyle and higher social status (Etzioni, 1998; Librová, 1999) - qualities with which the Czech policy community identifies. Similarly, while in general Czech food self-provisioning is a remarkably socially inclusive activity, it is, nonetheless, the financially more secure households that are more involved in food production than those with lower income levels. As we showed, it is by no means a survival strategy of the poor. At the more conceptual level, household food production has a number of features in common that make it compatible with the tenets underlying neoliberal governance favoured by the Czech policy community. It is a result of individual choice, it is compatible with the idea of localism, it is an articulation of self-identity and ‘authenticity’ and it is often the result of an informal educational process.

The critical elements that appear to be missing are entrepreneurialism, commercialisation and marketisation of food. We propose that it is primarily the absence of market relations that renders these practices unacceptable to the Czech policy community. Non-market practices such as household food production, barter and gifting contrast with the model of sustainable consumption advocated by UNEP, the EU and the OECD. As these practices take place outside the capitalist market economy, they defy the central thesis of the dominant approach to sustainable consumption that individual consumers' choices drive market transformation (Seyfang, 2006). In the Czech post-socialist context, this constitutes a more fundamental obstacle for incorporation of these practices in the neoliberal model of environmental governance than in western societies because the market is symbolically more important. The emphasis on entrepreneurialism and marketisation in the model of sustainable consumption promoted in the post-socialist Czech society by international actors conferred critical legitimacy to the Czech conceptualisation of the market as it has developed during post-socialist 'transition'. As the social anthropologist Ladislav Holy (1996, p. 151) argued, in the post-socialist Czech Republic 'the market [is constructed] as a symbol of the civilisation to which Czech society now again aspire[s].

In this construction, the market is 'an integral part of the package of ideological notions, the other important elements of which were democracy and pluralism of ideas, all "civilising mechanisms" which were destroyed under socialism' (Holy, 1996, p. 151). In consequence, this elevated symbolic status – fetishization even - of the market ascribes greater value to entrepreneurial and market-based approaches such as the marketing of certified products and green consumerism

while simultaneously devaluing non-market practices such as food self-provisioning, barter and gifting.

## **7. Conclusion**

Since the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development consumption has emerged as a significant environmental policy issue. As Hobson (2002) observed, in the name of reaching a palatable form of consensus, the numerous discourses apparent at the start of negotiations were traded, distilled and rewritten to create more moderate discourses. Lower consumption has been dropped from the agenda (Fuchs and Lorek, 2005) because it runs counter to prevailing neoliberal ideals, and challenges the pervasive illusion of consumer sovereignty (Cohen, 2007). Despite the emerging criticism of the reliance for alleviating environmental problems on consumers' choice of marketed products, AFNs and SFSCs are commonly considered to bring about environmentally positive changes.

In this paper we have shown that the effect of promoting AFNs and SFSCs in the context of post-socialist societies can have a more ambiguous, albeit unintended, effect. Revisiting Gibson-Graham's (2006) point, we have shown that, in the specific context of post-socialist Europe, governments have failed to shelter practices with the capacity to fulfil sustainable development objectives. Instead, at the discursive level they have pursued exclusively neoliberal strategies of environmental governance that displace 'actually existing sustainability' with experiments that have, to date, delivered little in the way of practical results (see also Mincyte [2011]). We have demonstrated how in sustainable consumption strategies developed and promoted by

institutions such as the OECD, UN Commission for Sustainable Development or, as shown in this paper, UNEP, with their emphasis on technocratic and economic interventions, there is little experience of or commitment to more nuanced approaches. We suggest that policy making in this and other spheres would be enhanced by a more culturally informed approach, that is, one which takes a more historically and culturally grounded approach to policy formation in relation to food systems. Our argument contrasts with much of the existing literature for which large-scale household food production is a sign of de-modernising tendencies in some post-socialist contexts and social groups. Rather we have argued that from the sustainability point of view, CEE societies can be seen as a repository of contemporary food-related production and consumption practices that are closely compatible with ideas of sustainable consumption as reduced or less resource intensive consumption. We have also shown how historically contingent value systems can mean that the sustainable consumption policy community fail to recognise the importance of these social practices and systems.

The rapid transformation of lifestyles and expectations amongst burgeoning middle classes in the ‘emerging economies’ makes the subject of this paper of far more than academic significance. The fact that these ignored sustainable practices are at most only partly motivated by the desire to protect the environment needs to be closely considered. They are expressions of self-identity and ‘authenticity’ that, incidentally, reduce the self-provisioners’ environmental impact. Similarly it is of much more general interest that these practices can be ignored by the policy community in favour of approaches that promise only marginal environmental gains, but are compatible with a discourse of neoliberal environmentalism. This case also demonstrates the extent to which international sustainability policy discourses,

programmes and projects are driven by principles derived from neoliberal economics rather than the biophysical burdens delivered by western patterns of consumption. This fundamental weakness runs through international sustainability discourses, yet is little acknowledged, despite the fact that this failing promises to be ecologically devastating in the context of the rapid growth of middle classes in the developing world.

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