



# Alternative Collective Consumption and Production Niches

Lessons from their emergence, development and  
governance

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# List of Abbreviations

CSA	Community-supported Agriculture
EVA	Ethical Vegetarian Alternative
Gela	Gemeinsam Landwirtschaften
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
REC	Renewable energy community
TVD	Thursday Veggie Day

# I Introduction

The currently institutionalized rethinking of western consumption and production patterns is quite strongly concentrating on either the promotion of eco- and material-efficient products and services, or to advocating patterns of sufficiency, localness, fairness. Much energy is spent to address each perspective exclusively with the help of their specific agents of change and socio-political addressees, which reduces the momentum for **integration** and creates a situation of mere tension between two theories of intervention. These tensions mirror in the relatively aseptic (for policy-making) dichotomies between absolute and relative decoupling, strong and weak sustainability, incrementalism and systemic innovation, pragmatism and fundamentalism.

In reality, there might well be a third set of strategies which can help to conceive an alternative lever of action in so far as they question some of the foundations of today's system of exchange of goods and services between producers, retailers and consumers. This particular set of strategies questions markets as being the only imaginable, feasible, efficient and equitable institutions of exchange. This set of strategies has been labelled as "**strategies of de-commodification**" (Crivits et al. 2010) which can be located at the intersection of the prevailing "strategies of efficiency" and the "strategies of sufficiency". As we will see in the present synthesis, de-commodification takes many forms in practice, but generically consists of substituting non- (or differently) commercialized exchanges for commercial (or market-based) ones. In other words, de-commodification is in most instances about fundamentally changing the nature of what constitutes a consumer and a producer, and in particular of what their respective relationships are to a product (or a service) and what the structures and norms that define the exchange situation are. De-commodification should not be mistaken for "out of the market"-alternatives; but really is a more or less fundamental switch in how actors define their exchange relationships (regardless of whether these relationships remain formally organized via market-based dynamics or not). De-commodification has been thought of elsewhere as contributing to the re-embedding of consumer and producer relationships into a more comprehensive understanding of their soci(et)al networks and cultures.

## Objective and audience

Seen from a birds' eyes perspective, we will report in the present synthesis on an exercise of not merely rethinking consumption and production patterns along the lines of re-embedding and de-commodifying, but of **observing** alternative practices. In other words, this synthesis intends to improve our understanding by digging into initiatives that grew 'organically' into sustainable livelihoods by questioning some of the fundamental 'commodifications' that rule our current consumption and production patterns. The present part of the InContext project reports on the patterns of emergence, solidification and diffusion of 'alternative' consumption and production niches. The subsequent is relying on an extensive observation of four particular **case studies** where such alternative niches exist.

Our **objective** fundamentally boils down to addressing two **questions**: What can be learned from qualifying, defining and describing alternative niches when our focus of analysis is put on the emergence and evolution of such alternative consumption and production patterns?

What are the wider societal dynamics and socio-political contexts that appeared to co-organize these consumption and production niches?

The present report is a **tentative synthesis** of our observations. Its pretention is to be overtly speculative. This does not mean that the content of the present is loose of any empirical basis, but that we take the liberty of interpretation here a bit further and start to rearrange our observations and hypothesis to sketch some proposals or directions for action. We reported elsewhere on the extensive empirical material collected during InContext (see notably the D3.1 and D3.2-reports which consist of the empirical data assembled), as well as on the methods that we used to do so (see in particular M6 - *Research Guidelines: Common Methodology for Analysing Case Studies*). This synthesis is the way for us to confront the individual observations on each case study. Confrontation seems important at this stage, because the case studies of InContext were explicitly not designed in a way as to allow for comparisons between them. The synthesis merely provides the reader with a series of assertions that result from the cross-examination of our four case studies. It is equally important to understand that the present synthesis is meant to be a document to trigger further thinking within the *InContext* project (and in similar projects), and a document for a **non-scientific audience**. It is written on the level of an editorial piece, i.e. a think piece, bringing together a series of impressions and ideas that emerge from our material and which we explicitly don't ground in literature. As such it can be taken as the starting point for the configuration of future research agendas, as it can be read as a basis for prospective policy exploration. The cross-examination will be rendered throughout the present synthesis as explicit as possible: each time where appropriate we refer to the particular case study that allows us to bring forward the assertion made. That again is not proof enough for generalization to be made. We will try to show where messages match and co-align, and where they collide against particular observations made in particular case studies. These references to the empirical observations, i.e. to the observed 'realities', are thus not to be taken as a vain attempt to construct an image of robustness on the basis of singular assertion. But the references to observations should help the reader to grasp the extent of our extrapolation and interpretation, i.e. to get an idea of the effective distance between observation and this tentative synthesis.

The synthesis report is **structured** along these lines. The next section is devoted to briefly describe the main concepts and terminologies we used. Thereafter we describe crudely the four case studies, and touch upon the methods employed to organize our observation of the case studies. These parts will be kept short, rather insufficient if the intention was to produce a scientific piece. Readers with interest in these issues should indeed consult the extensive material that we reported on elsewhere (see D3.1, D3.2 for the empirical material, and M6 for the methodological guidelines used). The subsequent parts of the report are devoted to the results of our cross-examination of the case studies. A first section develops on the issues of emergence and evolution of the case studies as seen from within the case studies and at the level of the participants, while a second section develops on the contextual configurations – policy frameworks, governance approaches - that appeared to accompany the case studies. We reserve the conclusion for the most speculative reflections which revolve around the way one should address the conditions for up-scaling, replication and translation of alternative collective consumption and production niches.

## Underlying concepts and terminology

The systematization of the observation of the four case studies of alternative consumption and production patterns is vastly enabled by the existence of a (relatively) common framework of analysis emerging from a set of relatively recent research initiatives. The building blocks of this framework are anchored in Transition Management/Approaches, Socio-technical Innovation Studies, Practice Approaches/Theory, Reflexive Modernization/Governance and Institutional Economics/Politics. We will briefly elaborate on the main building blocks of these approaches.

Epistemologically, and heuristically, 'Transition Approaches' - and their interventionist form 'Transition Management' (Loorbach 2010) - are the overarching references we used in the entire *InContext* project. Both are themselves grounded in (socio-technical) Innovation Studies (Geels 2004; Rip 2006; Kemp et al. 1998). Applying a Transition Approach to consumption and production patterns implies to consider 'alternative' consumption and production patterns as being societal (or socio-technical) consumption and production '**niches**' which emerge in partial contradiction to (or in the context of) the 'usual' way of consuming and producing (i.e. 'the regime'). This process of emergence is somewhat similarly conceptualized to that of technological innovations, which emerge as commercial or technological niches before spreading over their market (i.e. the regime). A fundamental objective of *InContext* is to come to a better understanding of how consumption/production niches emerge and how they interact with the regime. Consequently, one of the foci was to develop an analytical qualification of consumption and production niches (i.e. enhancing our understanding of their very nature), as well as the exploration of their evolution (i.e. exploring the pathways they take). Hence the necessity to engage into case study descriptions with the necessary depth and the attempt to account for richness and diversity.

## Overview of the four case studies

The exploration of pathways to alternative consumption and production patterns and living is operated through a series of four in-depth empirical case studies. Case studies have been selected in different socio-political contexts, in different EU Member States and operating on different consumption domains. The intention was not to develop a comparison, we targeted the selection of the case studies to allow for a maximum of variety: catching the richness of the alternatives was the objective.

**Table 1: Case studies of alternative consumption and production 'niches'**

Niche	Nature of the 'collective'	Consumption & production domain	Main object
GELA GEmeinsam LAndwirtschaften (Austria)	A community-supported agriculture project	Vegetable and fruit production, distribution and consumption	Gela is the first Community-Supported Agriculture project in Austria. Consumers sign up in advance for a one-year or a season provision of organic vegetables grown at a local biodynamic farm. The CSA is co-managed by a group of active consumers and the farmers.
Veggie-Thursday (Belgium)	A Not-for-profit Organization	Promotion of vegetarian/vegan food consumption	In 2009, the "Thursday Veggie Day" (TVD) was launched in Ghent promoting vegetarianism, with the support of the municipality in order to promote the adoption of a veggie or vegan day a week as a commitment towards sustainability, health and animal suffering.
Wolfhagen 100% REC (Germany)	A Community	Local renewable energy production	The city of Wolfhagen aims to cover, by 2015, its entire communal energy need (households, commercial and industrial business) from local renewable power plants to become a 100% renewable energy community (REC).
Emission-Zero (Belgium)	A consumer-producer cooperative	Local renewable energy production and consumption	Promotes socially-aware wind projects and short electricity supply chains. It also actively supports a model based on a locally generated renewable energy owned by the residents.

### Methodological setting and synthesizing

In *InContext*, we basically try to identify and account for contextual factors which allow to understand the diffusion of consumption and production niches by adopting two distinct perspectives: a) depicting the 'external' factors, which influence the niche formation and evolution; e.g. what governance mechanics do public authorities develop with regards to the niche?; b) identifying the 'internal' factors that drive actors to engage in the niche; e.g. what is the role of personal motivation or values?

This double perspective is reinforced by conceptually grounding our investigations in 'practice theory' (Shove & Walker 2010; Ropke 2009) as an entry point for explaining consumption patterns in their specific societal settings. Practice theory approaches, i.e. a meso-level analysis, allow investigating consumption beyond the influence of a specific (micro-level) 'artefact' (i.e. a technological object). It allows situating the practice of everyday lives in the 'societal' context of large-scale socio-technical innovations (i.e. the macro-level evolutions which define society). Hence, it allows situating 'external' and 'internal' factors on an identical level of reading and analysis.

**Conceptually**, the exploration and qualification of the adoption and diffusion of consumption and production niches builds on two distinct underlying building blocks. On the one hand, we focus on an analysis of contextual and internal factors which co-evolve into 'configurations that work' (Rip & Kemp 1998), i.e. factors which interlink the elements that form an alternative consumption and production niche in its very specific configuration. On the other

hand, a focus is given to the analysis of the 'collectives' that form, operate and steer the consumption niches.

The **empirical explorations** of the four case studies are **methodologically** grounded first on extensive document analyses, followed by a series of in-depth interviews with the central actors of the niches, a face-to-face 'Participatory Network Analysis' as well as on-site observations. We are building on a bottom-up - almost ethnographical - approach to perform the observations at case study level and to develop them into cross-analyses. After having developed the four detailed case study analyses, we identified some recurrent explicative 'traits' in the emergence and diffusion of consumption and production niches. As stated already, methodologically, we did not adopt a comparative setting, nor do we reach out to identify overarching causalities which might rule the 'successful' emergence and diffusion of niches. The objective is rather to concentrate on a cross-investigation of the richness and complexity of the individualized alternative consumption and production patterns as lived in the respective niches.

## 2 Jumping into action – on actors' engagement

In grey literature and media coverage, and more and more also in strategic policy documents, attention is directed towards citizens who "move into", "experiment with" and "live" alternative lifestyles. An impression seems to prevail, at least in western Europe, that the general directions to live more sustainably are known: more cycling, more organic, local, meat-less diets, different leisure occupations, renewable energy-supply, etc., and that it lies in people's hands to start living along these principles and adapt them into their own lifestyles. Underlying these ideas for change from people's level is the assumption that public actors are not able – and ultimately should not – design and engineer people's lives. Additionally, a sentiment reigns that the necessary system innovation, i.e. breaking with the incrementalism of simply choosing less-impacting artefacts of consumption, can simply not be devised by the public hand or by private firms, who themselves rather reinforce the prevailing inertia instead of initiating innovation. Understanding thus what made those citizens move who are already living such alternativeness – at least partly – against the odds of institutional and societal inertia, is exceedingly of interest. Not only for academic, scientific purposes of rendering our understanding of behaviour more in line with the practices that people are living, but equally for public and private actors who – from their prescriptive positions - are hoping for the identification of favourable framing conditions.

Questions arise such as: how do alternatives at people's levels emerge? What makes people start to engage? What does it need for people to interpret situations in a way that they feel in a position to act? Why do people continue to be engaged in alternativeness after the initial euphoric phases? Why do alternative lifestyles colonize across groups of people?

To find a beginning of an answer to such questions we drew our attention to the individual, personal levels of the people that were engaged in the four cases. Both investigating what made people move internally, and which external impulses people report as having been significant to them. The cross-examination of the four case studies shows a very broad

spectrum of individual factors of engagement and continuity with alternatives. These factors can be categorized broadly under: *motivation, inspiration and support*.

Our case studies, as diverse and incomparably set up as they are, quite directly show that it is not primarily the **individual motivation**, nor primarily the **external impulse** that makes people move and stay in action. But a third axis seems to play an equally important role and that is the recognition by people of the potential to **create a collective** as supporting unit of their own alternativeness. We will discuss in the conclusion whether the very existence of this third axis would not mean to fundamentally rethink the distinction made between individual motivation and external impulse. Meanwhile the reader should be careful not to understand the factors we are addressing hereafter as being “levers” or “drivers” for alternative behaviour or practice. What we propose here is rather a set of internal dimensions which in the four case studies occurs to us to have a major influence to form **configurations that worked** for the people to engage and sustain their engagement with the alternative niches.

In the following, we expose some of the details of these three axes of the configurations that worked and link them to the evidence collected in the individual case studies.

## 2.1 Engaging with alternativeness – individual motivation

To start with rising the level of ambiguity, the cross-examination of the reported ‘realities’ of the four case studies shows that individual motivation in the common sense revealed to be non-explicative as a cause for engaging into alternatives. What is commonly referred to – also by the interviewed actors - as ‘motivation’ revealed to be too multifaceted than to be summarized under a single terminology. Behavioural scientists to a certain extent - and practice theorists certainly - make this particular point for quite some time.

*<Wolfhagen 100% REC> The reported reasons for aiming to be become a 100% REC (renewable energy community) are varied: from global climate change responsibility and the need for climate protection, to local value creation through the creation of municipal energy production and -supply, to awaiting benefits on an individual level, like from the sustainable investment funds to be created for the planned citizen-owned wind park (which should deliver two-thirds of the local energy requirements in the future).*

What is reported in our case studies to be motivational as a cause for engaging can be better distinguished as being grounded on the **personal values** of the people who participate in alternative niches on the one hand, and their feeling to contribute to a wider, societal dynamic of **potential alternative value creation at community-level**.

### 2.1.1 Personal values

Distinctive at the level of **personal values** were people’s identification with the importance of environmental threats to modern society, and in particular the issues of human-induced climate change. Climate change awareness was an obvious driver to be found behind the people engaging with the energy-related case studies. What felt to be at least equally important to awareness however is the acknowledgment by the people of our collective responsibility in generating the environmental problems in the first place. In other words, it was not so much the perception of the risks to suffer from the consequences of climate

change (and other environmental disruptions), but more so the perception to be part of the system that created and sustains the problem. Responsibility was reported to be among the main personal values that drove people into engagement. Additionally to the environmental values, solidarity with their community was another strong personal value that people reported to have created engagement.

*<Gela> Strong sustainability values proved to be the most important driver for both producers and consumers to pick up an alternative practice. The farm owner aspires to maintain the farm's biodynamic farming practices with a focus on plant diversity, while at the same time aspiring to secure the financial viability for the farm. Consumers look for healthy, locally-grown food from a known source of provision, but more importantly, they aspire to find an alternative to anonymous supermarket shopping which they perceive as being equally detrimental to the environment and to society. Thus, the search for solidarity and trust were as important drivers to join Gela, as was the desire for tasty and healthy vegetables.*

*<Emission zero> The main reported motivation to engage in the EZ cooperative is to contribute to a more sustainable energy production, supply and consumption thanks to renewable energy sources like wind power, and consequently to take part in building a more environmental- and climate-friendly energy system for future generations (which also conveys a very positive social image and self-esteem).*

While the links between stated personal values and motivation might appear quite unequivocal, they have been much criticized - and rightly so – as not being sufficient to explain behavioural change: the linkage should not be taken as prescriptive. Yet, such personal values are mostly part of the ingredients that make the emergence of sustainable practices possible.

## 2.1.2 Value-creation

Our case studies hint to a complementary facet of motivation. People repeatedly stated that their engagement was equally motivated by their personal recognition of the opportunity to participate to **alternative value-creation for their communities**. In some of the case studies, such alternative value-creation for the community might be a form of operationalisation of the personal value of solidarity with their community. More concretely, the alternative values which the people thought that alternative niches would support and help emerge, were linked to objectives such as local jobs, fair wages and fair trade, and more widely to the emergence of a local solidarity-based economy which would assign some form of autonomy to the local community against the globalized, capital-driven economic system.

*<Emission zero> The other reported motivational aspect lies in the re-appropriation by citizens and inhabitants of the power supply chain because of the implementation of a cooperative economic model, which is build on principles of collectively-owned technological capital and implements more participative and democratic decision structures.*

*<Gela> The search for an alternative practice in the food system – but for some also alternative to profit-orientated, market-based exchanges in general – is a central motivation for starting or joining the scheme. This was frequently described by the term 'food sovereignty' that relates to the desire of the consumers to regaining autonomy over the production of foodstuff.*

Reported personal motivation to engage with alternative niches – and practices – appears thus from the four case studies to be connected on the one hand to personal values (in

particular towards environmental responsibility and solidarity with the community), and on the other hand to people's belief to participate in alternative value-creation dynamics.

### 2.1.3 Knowledge

There is a third factor which appears in the case studies to play out at the individual level, namely **knowledge and skills**.

*<Wolfhagen 100% REC> Knowledge and motivation – these two aspects can be seen as the main conditions for starting the whole process. Within the process' core team - and in particular the public utility manager - knowledge about the technical feasibility, economic viability and the local implementation capacity of the applicable steps towards a renewable energy system was given.*

The picture is however more complex in as much as knowledge, skills, and competences are both within people and within the group of individuals. In both energy-related case studies, the leading figures could capitalize (at least initially) on their pre-existing engineering knowledge bases. Capitalization on their knowledge happened to play out at the very level of technical and organizational problem solving. But the capacity of the alternative niche to capitalize on pre-existing knowledge, notably gained at personal level and from earlier experiences, was also suggested to have generated a certain level of crucial trust in the leading figure(s). At such a level of meta-competences, the more generic capacity and openness to learn and accumulate skills over time was reported to be important.

*<Gela> The CSA model posed challenges for both producers and consumers. The farmers have to learn how to share responsibility for farm decisions with the yield shareholders, and both groups constantly redefine the border between those decisions that the farmer should take and decisions which the Working Group should take. This process, but also communication with shareholders in general, proved to be more time-consuming than expected – yet another challenge for the farmer. Consumers, on the other hand, needed to adapt to their new role as active participants – the term 'harvest shareholder' points to it – rather than passive consumers. This requires time (for collecting the vegetables, helping out at the pick-up station, getting involved in the working group), open-mindedness (e.g. with respect to old and less common vegetable varieties) and a reflection process.*

Equally, on the way to formalisation of the alternative niche, the case studies point to an emerging capacity for **self-reflection** on the very distribution of their internal competences in terms of knowledge and skills of the people forming the alternative niche. This finding insinuates that concentration of knowledge and skills might at certain points become an issue of critical observation and assessment.

*<Veggie-Thursday> EVA's (i.e. the initiating organization) organogram conveys the idea of a rather hierarchical organization and a centralization of the skills, knowledge and "decision power" in the hands of EVA's director. This observation is confirmed in the recent document devoted to EVA's internal governance entitled "Beleidsplan 2011-2015", which shows EVA's internal organogram. The npo displays an assessment of its current state of organization and elaborates a program composed of 5 main strategic objectives for the coming years. In the SWOT analysis, it is indeed explicitly mentioned that "There is too much work / knowledge / decision-making centralized in one person (the director and co-founder)".*

## 2.2 Catalysts for a vision to materialize – external impulse

The reader might expect that after we described what could be mistaken as the ingredients that seem to us to have been of importance to the emergence of the four case studies, we should drop a few words on the cooking ware and other material artefacts that were needed for the alternatives to emulsify. Actually, before being able to speak at all of the hardware, we need to address the peculiar mechanisms that made the recipes emerge. The four case studies show that there is a moment in the process of the alternative niche concretization that is described by people to be crucial, but which is preceding – or accompanying – the emergence of or the search for blueprints, plans or schemes for the alternative niches. The configuration of the alternative niches – in some instances, even their very characteristic of being alternative – is not externally designed by following a recipe that allows assembling all the necessary ingredients, but it emerges if favourable conditions, inspirations and motivated individuals come together.

The four case studies show however that external factors do influence the engagement of the actors, i.e. the configuration of the niches. We propose to label these triggers for engagement under the umbrella terminology of **catalysts**. Under this term we address the impulses of the **legal and regulatory framework**, the **materiality of the technological systems** involved, and the **organizational arrangements**. The distinctiveness to label this triptych of external triggers as 'catalysts' and not as the outcome of governance by public authorities (onto which we will come back later) is related to the processes observed in the formation of actor engagement in the alternative niches. These triggers in effect did not engender action in the sense of what could be expected instrumentally to emerge from external factors such as governance mechanisms. Rather, the external triggers generate a certain vision for action - at the particular moments when the alternative niches started to form and asked for engagement by people. In other words, catalysts helped the people to materialize their vision of the respective alternative niche. Very much in line with what public administration scholars define as 'enlightenment' or 'conceptual influence' when they speak of the influence of expert-based information on the formation of policy solutions. Information – and under our terminology, catalysts – might simply change a bit (but sufficiently) the recognition of what the situation is, how the problem should be framed, where to look for alternatives, hence enabling participation of people and consequently the emergence of the alternative niches.

### 2.2.1 Organizational arrangements

What is commonly understood as 'catalysts' helps us to account for what happened at very singular moments in the niche formations we observed in the four case studies. People were reporting the importance of reference messages that inspired the moment of engagement. In two of the case studies that happened when visioning a movie, in one of the case studies via a public conference.

*<Gela> Inspiration came from individuals who had already done the deed – in case of Gela a representative from 'Buschberghof', Germany's first CSA and people the farmer's wife met while working on a CSA farm in the US. Inspiration also came from public screening of the film "The Real Dirt on Farmer John" (Siegel, 2005). The film tells the story of a US farmer who founds a CSA and managed to save his farm from economic ruin. The screening of the movie had a*

*decisive effect on the key actors. It created a sense of feasibility and breathed life into the abstract concept of CSA.*

*<Wolfhagen 100% REC> From 2006 onwards, the manager of the public utility company and the owner of the local cinema screened “An inconvenient truth” (Guggenheim, 2006), a documentary recalling Al Gore’s campaigning on climate change awareness, several times (occasionally accompanying the screenings with discussion rounds or presentations about climate change related issues). As an outcome, in January 2007 these events led to the foundation of the citywide campaign “Klimaoffensive Wolfhagen”.*

*<Veggie-Thursday> The 2009 conference held in Ghent by Rajendra Kumar Pachauri (the chair of the IPCC – Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), where the speaker explicitly mentioned the devastating link between meat consumption and climate change, played a key role in convincing a pool of key actors of the scientific legitimacy of the Veggie-Thursday initiative. Especially several deputy mayors of the city took up the message of Pachauri and turned their personal commitment to the initiative into municipal support to the Veggie-Thursday’s public awareness-raising campaign. As a consequence, the campaign itself stood the proof to be scientifically and ethically grounded.*

However, as stated above the issue of the catalysts is more multi-dimensional than the mere personal reaction to an environmental science or policy message. In effect, **organisational arrangements** played a major role in the generation of these messages, in each of our case studies. The excerpts above show that the proto-groups of the alternative niches created themselves, via organizing and arranging the visualization of the movies or when inviting a high-level speaker, the conditions for catalysis to occur. Partly thus the ‘externalness’ of the triggers themselves should be put into question. Even if it is certainly not accurate to speak of self-generated moments which were designed to result in the formation of the vision to act. The external trigger was to a certain extent organizationally arranged by the actors in place. And the vocational moment of these external, inspiring moments, can only read with a certain distance in time.

## 2.2.2 Legal and regulatory frameworks

A second set of triggers played an important role in the four case studies for a vision to materialize at the level of the niche participants, namely the **legal and regulatory framework**. Especially in the two energy-related case studies, which are obviously the ones where the infrastructural artefacts (i.e. the windmills) definitely needed to be in line with regulation, shifts occurring in the regulatory frameworks in both cases created the opportunities for some actors to see their vision for change materialize. As stated above in the introduction to the present section, the impact of the legal and regulatory frameworks is emphasized here not in a perspective of a trigger-action mechanism of public governance (we will come back to this issue below), but rather at the level of the individual participants whose capacity to identify, clarify, materialize... their particular vision for change and a vision for an alternative collective niche was impacted by a certain shift in the external framework.

*<Emission zero> The revision of the Reference framework for wind power in Wallonia may also have enhanced the emergence of the idea of an EZ cooperative; yet more importantly at the level of the founders and leaders of the (future) cooperative, then for anonymous co-operators.*

In the case study on Wolfhagen, the expiration of contractual arrangements at the local level combined with the shift in regulatory frameworks forced local stakeholder into action:

*<Wolfhagen 100% REC> The liberalization of the electricity market forced the municipality to decide how they wanted to operate their municipal utility system in the future. In 2002 the former municipal utility was transformed into a 100% municipally-owned public utility company in order to gain more flexibility in the company's management. (...) In 2006 the licensing agreement between the city of Wolfhagen and their electricity providing company on the operation of the energy grid expired. This offered the chance for the re-municipalisation of the energy grid which was mainly initiated by the manager of the public utility company and who managed to convince the local authority's decision-makers.*

The legal and regulatory framework does play out its influence on engagement also in a 'negative' sense, though. In effect, the alternative niches might simply concern a set of activities which actors think of being located in the residual space of the existing regulatory frameworks. Alternative niches might be alternative also in the sense that their domain of activity didn't yet trigger any legislative, framing activities by the public authorities. Hence, that the seemingly existing vacuum in terms of regulatory framework helps actors to identify opportunities of action, and make engagement feasible to them.

### 2.2.3 Materiality of the technological systems

A third set of triggers for engagement to materialize is linked to the promises that the **materiality of the technological systems** carries with itself. Our four case studies are located on two distinctive practices. Practices are – conceptually speaking – influenced and influencing the set of artefacts (i.e. objects) that are manipulated to serve the practice. To take a simple example, eating less or no meat and more locally-grown vegetables at a large-scale societal level does involve an adaptation of the agricultural technological system. Conversely, all technological systems carry their very particular significations and images for people. In that sense, it is obvious that alternative niches implementing alternative practices are influenced by these very significations that the specific (alternative) technological system on which they sit carry. In the two energy-related case studies, it could be reported that the deployment of renewable energy systems carried an image of de-centralization of the entire power generation with it. And that this very image as linked to the technology itself was a trigger for people's engagement to occur. Equally, the technologic system of organic vegetable consumption (in the framing of Gela and Veggie-Thursday) carried a promise of local production. Through the renewable energy case studies it becomes clear also that it is not so much the 'reality' and 'materiality' of the technological systems that are of importance here, but more so the image and promises that the technology does carry. Local renewable energy production does at no moment imply cutting the link to the national energy grid; de-centralization, autonomy, independence are carried in the technology more as an image, but are not necessarily part of the reality of the technology.

## 2.3 The collective as a process-guarantee

The above argues that internal motivations and external triggers for motivations are explanatory factors for the occurrence of people's engagement with alternative niches. But, we also saw that the dichotomy between internal and external triggers can only be partly held up when confronted with the details of the case study descriptions. In effect, when investigating people's engagement with niche creation, then even the external triggers materialize only via a process of internalisation, i.e. of personal-level reading. It is the

perception of the promise of de-centralization via renewable energy systems that contributes to explain people's engagement. Equally, we saw that some of the proto-niches arranged the external triggers for people who were not yet actively involved, for instance by organizing film screenings. Hence, such internalisation effects and indeed internalisation techniques render the dichotomy internal vs. external potentially fragile.

Especially, when we try to concentrate on the factors which not only explain emergence of engagement, but are given as reasons for staying with the alternative niches over time, there is more fundamentally a third perspective that needs to be added to the internal and external layer of explanatory factors. Looking for what it takes people to engage over longer time periods, keeping their engagement active, hints to the fact that the alternative practices reviewed in the case studies are located at the levels of a **collective practice**. The four cases indeed show that the creation of an alternative niche, and equally the continuation of engagement with the niche, is a matter of taking risks.

*<Gela> The first and perhaps most prominent element comprising this alternative consumption practice, is the form of payment, i.e. consumers' commitment to cover one year in advance the costs of vegetable production on the farm. In this way, consumers share the risk of low crop yields, and provide the farm with the financial security necessary for applying the targeted alternative agricultural practices.*

Sharing risks is thus obviously the case with community-supported agriculture, where the re-definition of (financial) risk sharing between consumers and producers is one of the explicit mechanisms sought after with the practice. But risk re-definition equally occurs when people engage with the windmill cooperative, or even when deciding to alter their relationship to everyday meat consumption.

*<Emission zero> Some of the co-operators, and especially the founders, want to deepen the social and environmental commitments of the cooperative through launching new projects, even if that means taking new risks. This position is strongly criticized by many co-operators who don't want to take more risks by investing in new projects whilst they expect to earn their first dividends only in 3 or 4 years, after their initial capital investment.*

The four case studies show that engaged people interpret the very fact that the alternative niches are collectives by nature, as a guarantee for the occurring risks to be shared. And the very fact that these collectives are discursively organized appears to work as a guarantee that the terms of the risk sharing are negotiated and rendered explicit. The collective nature of the alternative niches seems important to guide people over longer time periods in the potentially disruptive processes of adapting from one type of practice to the new practice configured through the alternative niches. The collective nature is thus a factor for keeping engaged over time with the alternative niches.

However, the collective itself - and to a certain extent the deliberative organization of the collective - can also be a matter of raising the level of risk, notably when disagreement occurs and threatens the cohesion and composition of the collectives.

*<Gela> Participants' perseverance appeared to be dependent on their willingness to overcome difficulties arising from changing entrenched consumer and producer practices, as well as on personal relationships within the group.*

*<Emission zero> During fall 2011, these positions resulted in tensions between the most activist members, i.e. mainly the founders of the cooperative, who consider the cooperative as an economic tool to foster development of renewables, and some of the grassroots' co-operators who favour a management strategy associated with little risk investments that guarantee the*

*distribution of earnings. Consequently, this discussion raised the issue of the 'leadership' of the cooperative, and more widely echoes the potential opposition between the founders' normative legitimation (better environmental and democratic solutions) and grassroots co-operators' pragmatic legitimation (advantages to the different stakeholder groups) of the practice.*

### 3 Nature reserves vs. Brown fields - on governance

In section 3 above, we concentrated on extracting the messages from our case studies' observations on what sparkles and favours participation to alternative niches by situating our discussion at the level of the participants themselves taken as individuals. In the subsequent section 4 we attempt to draw the main messages from our case studies at the level of the external framework conditions. We leave thus the level of the individuals, of the participants, and look at the mechanisms at a more societal level.

Although this distinction between the individual and the societal might feel attractive on paper, it is in reality quite difficult to operationalize distinctive categories. We saw already above that a shift in regulatory and legal frameworks can play a distinct role to trigger visions at the level of some individuals and collectives. Once these visions are translated into actions triggering the emergence of a collective niche, these external societal frameworks can exert their governance mechanisms in a different, more mechanistic way and trigger for instance opportunities for action (or inaction) for the alternative niches. The very fact that *individuals evolve in contexts*, i.e. the starting research question for the InContext project itself, does render our double - individual and collective - perspective necessary, even if difficult to classify neatly.

In the very context of the case studies, societal levels appear to play out at two distinct perspectives which we address hereafter. The first perspective concentrates on the 'societal' framework conditions at the level of the niches themselves. Our case studies being alternative collective niches, once leaving the individual level the 'next' level to investigate is the collective itself. Trying to address questions such as what are the arrangements convened within the alternative niches that render the niche practice to be a robust, enduring way of living one's alternativeness? In other words, the first set of explorations is devoted to understand the basic characteristics of the **governance within the niches** which are observable. Whereas pure organisational, managerial forms of arrangements are very diverse from one case study to the other and appear basically to be dependant on the nature of each niche, there appears to be nevertheless an important condition which needs to be discussed at the level of internal governance: the collective nature of the undertaking itself is crucial. It thus less the internal governance arrangements taken which are discussed here, but much more the collectiveness of how these arrangements are configured and decided upon. It is the **nature of such a collectiveness** that we will address hereafter.

The second perspective – as developed in section 4.2 – takes a step out of the configuration of the alternative niches and asks the complementary question of how the overall socio-political frameworks are influencing the development of the studied collective niches. This second set of questions links to the **governance of the niches** by external frameworks. Partly, we complement thus the explorations from section 3: whereas we assumed (see the introductory paragraphs to section 3) that collective alternative niches are also an expression

of alternativeness against or at least at the margin of public policies and against or at least complementary to mainstream practices, we turn our attention here to the question on how the niches are influenced by public policies on the one hand and by public actors on the other hand. Second, when addressing the governance of the niches, our case studies show that there is hardly a particular blueprint for a set of policies that will help alternative niches to emerge or spread. The divergence in nature of the niches might be too wide as to be able to develop a unique approach to their governance by public authorities. However, what we detect, and which is corroborated in much of the literature is **the need for some form of protective space** for the niches to emerge. The case studies show that in order to be effective the resulting protection can be either explicitly designed by policy frameworks hence rendering a space akin to *nature reserves*, or be the result of *laissez-faire* or of ignorance by public authorities and grow on a *brown field* of public (in)attention. This last point opens a new perspective on the governance of protective spaces, i.e. the explicitly acknowledged development of grey zones where existing public governance frameworks, e.g. regulatory, normalising, legal frameworks, are not enforced and hence allow for societal experimentations to develop into collective alternative niches.

### 3.1 Emergence of coalitions of the willing

Unsurprisingly, the internal governance mechanisms of the case studies vary widely: there is a difference in running a CSA-scheme at farm level to managing a municipal energy production and distribution cooperative. Equally, at the level of the necessary coordination competencies for the niches to be able to run and deliver, the spectrum across all case studies is very wide. Nevertheless, when switching our mode of observation, the case studies appear to reveal a common trait: the very diversity of internal and external (to the collective alternative niches) coordination competences shows a staggering uniformity. The observed alternative niches are precisely living on the very fact that they are able to cope actively with diversity. Whether such diversity in competences is a necessity for collective niches to emerge and develop cannot be concluded from the case studies. The studied collective alternative niches seem virtually to be emulations of deliberately configured coalitions which are apparent at two distinct levels: the niches are basing their functioning on **deliberation**, on debate, which in turn allow the development of forms of **cohesion** to emerge. The alternative niches really are... collectives, which per se is not surprising, but the case studies show in particular that these are collectives that encompass to a certain extent also external resources and which form **coalitions of internal and external competences of people** that are working and acting in favour of the niche.

#### 3.1.1 Coordination mechanisms and deliberative arrangements

The four case studies show that coordination mechanisms are in all instances quite carefully planned and that these are a matter of explicit configuration. Without going into details here, coordination is in all cases relatively cooperative in nature, forming different internal bodies with an overall flat hierarchy and which work on principles of self-governance and deliberation-participation with all members, attributing in principle equal rights to all for their participation to decision-making.

*<Gela> The Gela 'working group' remains the heart of the day-to-day decision-making process in the project even though it still does not have a legal formalization of any kind. The group meets monthly and participation is open to all shareholders and farmers. It prepares Gela events, including the Annual Assembly where the budget is discussed. In addition, all participants sign an agreement ("Vereinbarung") where they commit themselves to an annual membership. Although having the appearance of a contract the legal value of the document in case of conflict is limited. Internal governance is thus very informal. It builds on trust (supported by symbolic actions) rather than contracts or institutions and it builds on transparency (e.g. by sharing minutes with all shareholders or giving detailed account of expenditures at the Annual Assembly). Participants of the 'working group' have been changing over time, but there clearly is a core group consisting of consumers, interested activists and the farmer who are instrumental in running the project.*

*<Wolfhagen 100% REC> The citizens' energy cooperative ("Bürgerenergiegenossenschaft") is unique in its structures and its scope of influence. The members of the cooperative are shareholders of the public utility company and are represented in its supervisory board. Though financial participation approaches in the field of renewable energy projects are not new as there are already some examples for citizen's owned wind parks in Germany, up to now there has been no direct financial citizen's participation in a public utility company. Other energy cooperatives usually focus on certain projects, mainly wind power plants, but they are not becoming an active part of a public utility company.*

The case studies also show that - for instance when the context imposes decisions on the niches – e.g. via a shift of the regulatory framework - the collective niches have procedures (which might not be formalized, though) in place which allow them to tackle change in a deliberative way. Even in case studies where the internal governance structures are not totally explicit or are still in formation, a culture and reflex of open negotiation and deliberation forms the basis of what could be called their problem solving and decision making procedures. On a daily basis, deliberative organisation and coordination is in many instances the foundation of the case studies, which mirrors with the aspect of shared risk taking mentioned before.

*<Wolfhagen 100% REC> The initialisation of the energy transition process was mainly driven by the activities of the manager of the public utility company of Wolfhagen, which was supported by local political decision makers. Starting thus basically as a policy driven process, and building on a strong coherence between the different political actors, local citizens were consequentially empowered to take an active part in the process. These modes of participation led to a shift in power relations and decisional capacity by the fact that 25% of the shares of the public utility company are in the hands of the citizens' energy cooperative. The close cooperation between political and administrative actors and engaged co-operators are basically fostering their process of energy transition as a participative process.*

*<Gela> One of the interesting management challenges that Gela is facing is the gradual transfer of responsibility from farmers to the Gela Working Group (and thus to yield shareholders), which is related the general trend in Gela's evolution over time. Hence, the border between decisions which the farmer should take and decisions which the Working Group should take is constantly being redefined. On the one hand, the farmer has a unique expertise which demands that certain decisions stay under his responsibility. On the other hand, there is a need for increased involvement of yield shareholders if the project wishes to sustain itself.*

Such principles favouring the creation of interlinkages between internal actors rather than of hierarchies appear in some of the case studies to form a wider more general mode of operation. Experienced internal modes of operation and coordination – based on principles of

networking and deliberation - become by principle the blueprints for the participants' activities in organising external coordination beyond the scale of the specific alternative niche.

*<Emission Zero> Several networks which aim to interlink energy cooperatives are currently emerging, for instance with the creation of federations at both the national (REScoop in Belgium) and European level (REScoop Europe, launched in 2011 by the Belgian federation of renewable energy cooperatives).*

### 3.1.2 Coalitional cohesion

While deliberative modes of operation and coordination are widespread in the organisation of alternative niches, and are hardly surprising anyone anymore, these modes of operation become more stimulating to observe when they encompass not only the internal coordination between individual citizen-participants to the niche, but when these modes extend towards public authorities. As the case study in Wolfhagen shows, the lines can be blurred between the modus operandi of the internal coordination and the external governance mechanisms: the characteristic trait of the internal coordination seems to pre-configure the relationships of the niches with their context. In particular cases, e.g. Wolfhagen, this cross-influence might stem simply from the fact that participants have double assignments being both part of the public authority and part of the participants or instigators of the collective niche. In other cases, the principles of deliberative coordination – or more widely the experimental character of the niches' coordination - contribute to enhance the blurriness between internal and external modes of governance.

*<Veggie Thursday> The question of 'external' and 'internal' (or 'self') governance are the two sides of the same coin. According to the discourses held by the various concerned actors – thus both by the leading 'internal' participant (EVA) and by the 'external' public authority (the Ghent city council) - the niche governs itself through the co-operation between activists and public authorities on the basis of a larger partnership.*

While fully-fledged cooperation between the niches and public authorities is not a trait of all case studies – Gela being the most notable exemption –, the particular mode of operating with the diversity and heterogeneity of the actors of the context (be it public authorities or other types of actors) deserves some attention. What emerges from the case studies is the prevalence of coalitions of internal and external actors around the niches' objectives. These coalitions can span over individual political interests, as apparent in the Wolfhagen case where a cross-party support ensures the ground for the niche, irrespective of the typical legislative timespans and irrespective of discrepancies in opinions on the level of specific operational issues. Coalitions by definition do not require the individual actors to abandon their particular interests, or that an overarching, shared objective emerges: coalitions merely ask actors to rally around very particular causes. In some of our case studies, the coalitional causes were the very idea (e.g. of local food or local energy) which the alternative niches represent.

*<Wolfhagen 100% REC> A remarkable aspect regarding this process was the close cooperation and agreement between local political actors from different parties right from the beginning of the process. On the local scale, politicians even made and supported decisions which were in opposition to regional or national politics of their own party. The energy transformation process in Wolfhagen could be identified as one of the rare cases of local cross-party policies. The involved parties at that time were the social-democratic party (SPD), the conservative party (CDU), the liberal party in cooperation with an independent voters'*

*association (FDP / Wolfhager Liste). The green party in the city council supported the general energy transition aim, but they opposed the construction of the wind turbines on the designated area because of nature conservation considerations.*

Actors' coalitional cohesion, in particular between internal and external actors, did emerge in some case studies from the organisational nature of the niche itself. By essence, cooperative arrangements call for the establishment of formalized, quasi-contractual coalitions between a range of actors. But in other case studies, not pre-requiring formalized coalitions to be the basis of the niches, we nevertheless observe such coalitions of interests, which might not be overtly cross-party but cross-actor.

*<Veggie Thursday> The TVD niche has undoubtedly become possible thanks to the commitment of several key actors. The 'personal context' of these core people contributed to frame the niche and to give a specific meaning and orientation to collective action. Indeed, the main actors exerted a critical influence on the TVD campaign by forming a leading group comprising EVA (NGO) and especially its leader Tobias Leenaert; IPCC chairperson R.K. Pachauri; Ghent's socialist party's municipal Councillor for the environment, Tom Balthazar (who initiated municipality support); and the socialist party's Councillor in charge of Education and training, Rudy Coddens, (who decided to implement TVD in school canteens).*

Coalitions form indeed around causes – as represented in our case studies by the alternativeness of the niches and the issue of participating to the reconfiguration of consumption and production patterns – but can just as effectively form around people. It appears in effect in the studied niches that leadership and visionary people more generally are crucial ingredients for that particular coalitional mode of operation to emerge.

*<Emission Zero> (...) a person like Bernard Delville is involved in renewable energy since the 1970's at a time when he launched a first association in support of renewables in the Belgian Ardennes. Npo Vents d'Houyet - created in 2002 - is conceived by Delville as the inheritor of that pioneer association. The long-running activism of key actors like Delville – who is also well-known for his commitment in the 'mass-moving' cultural revolution in and after 1968 – played a major role in the emergence of the cooperative, because these people contributed to the emergence of proximity and trust, two important components of the cooperative's success.*

## 3.2 Framing, engineering, or empowering - on green and brown governance

We analysed alternative collective niches as they emerge and evolve over time in the public space. Necessarily, some attention needs to be devoted to provide an understanding on how the configuration of the contextual public space influences the studied niches. By definition, much of the public space in Europe is co-configured by public authorities, by regulation and more generally by the governance dynamics exerted by public authorities. Many of the above strands of analyses show that alternative collective niches are configured from 'within' and are basically in a mode of struggling with their context rather than being under direct influence of public governance. Engineering of alternative niches by public authorities – hence, governing in the first sense of the term – was not observable at the level of the studied niches. In parallel, or as a consequence, the way the niches coped with their governance context does not reveal a singular, particular mode of operation.

These observations are not to be understood, however, as pointing to the unimportance of the governance context. Quite the contrary, as the space that the public authorities'

governance provided to the niches was actively negotiated in all the case studies: the public authorities' influence on the niches was of predominant importance in the four case studies. A first reading of the Gela case study might conclude on the contrary: no intervention by public authorities and hardly any reaction by the niche to the context posed by the governance schemes. However, a secondary reading reveals a rather different message: the Gela niche is deliberately positioning itself at the fringes of the governance by public authorities. Gela is influenced, hence, by governance, but by the negative, by developing implicit and explicit avoidance strategies to keep Gela off the radar of public authorities.

The impossibility to engineer – i.e. to actively steer – alternative collective niches from the viewpoint of public authorities leads many authors of current academic and grey literature to call for the development of **spaces for experimentation**. If designing an unequivocal governance scheme for alternative niches is not feasible, then the public actors should rather develop the framing conditions which allow 'people' to experiment by themselves. If the 'solutions' are not pre-configurable, then the framework conditions should be configured in a way as to allow for collectives to self-configure their 'solutions'.

*<Veggie Thursday> The 'Environment Outlook 2030: Flanders in transition?' (2009) testifies the embeddedness of Veggie Thursday in the general framework of sustainable public policies. Indeed, this long-term strategic agenda for Flanders openly asks for the development of an institutionalised transition approach and sketches the corresponding forms of governance. In this context, Veggie Thursday inserts itself into a well-identified type of governance "that invests in broad, transparent networks by public and private partners, in which policy is developed by thinking, doing and learning together".*

While the development of a governance of experimentation is an overall appealing, logical idea of shifting from one level of governance (i.e. from the level of the policy object itself) to a secondary layer of governance (i.e. to the very framework conditions that surround the policy object), the actual configuration, implementation and enforcement of such a form of governance might well be beyond what most local authorities can deliver, and be it only for lack of competences and experience.

With the policy idea of framing experimentations come the calls to develop certain **forms of protection** for alternative niches. An example: protection might in some instances materialise as a simple exemption from certain burdensome administrative acts, but could be as performative as to provide the necessary (human and financial) resources for the niches to actually fulfil their administrative obligations. In many instances, the configuration of protection for collective alternative niches resembles strongly the sort of initiatives taken at the address of start-up companies. Metaphorically, such protective spaces resemble somewhat the **conservationist governance of nature reserves**; involving a relatively strong implication of public authorities, often to a level as to have some presence of the authorities in the decision-making bodies of the niches, which seek proximity in order to engage almost in a partnership-like relationship with the niches. In these cases, the attention of the public authorities appears to concentrate to ensure correct conditions of protection for the niches, ostensibly show support, and potentially with the aim to be able to monitor to a certain extent the outcome or result of the niches.

*<Wolfhagen 100% REC> The willingness for inter-party cooperation can be seen as another important influence faction. Though these kinds of cooperation are not unique in municipal politics, the stability of the inter-party cooperation in this case is remarkable. Since the re-municipalisation of the energy grid, the close cooperation of the SPD (socialist party), CDU (Christian democrats) and FDP/WHO (Liberal party) was continued in all decision processes*

*concerning the energy transition process. As a result, there has been a political stability and a clear political majority in the city council during the whole transition process.*

*<Veggie Thursday> One of the most important factors is obviously the official/ institutional support which plays a major role in the launch and institutionalization of the initiative. Indeed, the commitment of (local) public and political authorities is considered by both EVA members and Ghent's municipal representatives as the necessary catalyst that conditions the possible existence of an effective Veggie Thursday.*

However, the observed cases reveal a second mode of protection, which to the contrary is not the result of active engagement of public authorities, but rather the opposite: active engagement of the niche to position itself at the margins or the interstices of public authorities' governance. The niches are either de facto situated in regulation-free space as is the case for some activities of Gela: public authorities didn't – yet - target any direct regulation or framework action to the particular niches. Public governance basically ignores such niches. Some actors may do so on purpose, but mostly ignorance is just the result of missing sensibility of the public actors to detect small-scale, mostly private collective initiatives. If we were looking for an image to circumscribe these situations, such niches emerge and evolve like they would be located on a **governance brown field**. They are abandoned and ignored for the moment, for instance because public authorities see them as insignificant with respect to the bigger picture of societal problems and solutions.

*<Gela> One of the most striking features of the creation of Gela was their complete ignorance of any legally binding agreements of institutional arrangements. A shared notion and common vision seemed to be sufficient to launch the CSA. Public authorities did not play a role in the initiation or maintenance of Gela. To the contrary, public authorities were overall ignorant of the project or even created – although involuntary – additional stumbling blocks. The most important public actor for Gela is the community of Gänserndorf where the farm is located. (...) So far, Gänserndorf's mayor has not shown any interest in Gela or offered support. AMA, Austria's oversight organisation for agricultural subsidies, is another relevant actor with little regard to the farm's specific situation. (...) However, controllers from the bio-dynamic label took into account the specific conditions under which the CSA worked. Finally, Austria does not have a mode of collective ownership (which exists in other countries like e.g. France), a factor which hinders the ability of the community to collectively own the farm.*

Protection might however also play out at a different level than at the interface between the niches and the governance by public authorities. Protection of the niches might be conveyed internally, i.e. towards the level of the participants to the niches.

*<Emission Zero> As a matter of fact, the niche creation requires setting-up a cooperative structure and organization that will play a core role in the management of the niche at all its development stages; i.e. from conception to operation. Alternative energy practices are not directly resulting from the existence of the cooperative, but the cooperative creates the 'protective space' that allows citizens to collectively own a wind turbine and to produce (and consume) local renewable energy.*

Notwithstanding the stated objective by all involved actors to configure protective measures, the frameworks might not in every case save the alternative niches from opposition.

*<Veggie Thursday> The considerable economic weight of the regional meat production industry contributes to render it difficult for radical policy measures to emerge which would target the decrease of meat consumption. Indeed, when confronted with the niche, authorities have to cope with contradictory economic interests. The mobilization of the Farmers Union of Belgium against the diffusion of the Veggie Thursday initiative as a niche towards other Flemish cities like Hasselt or Mechelen illustrates this issue. According to T. Leenaert (EVA), the Farmers*

*Union "sees the campaign as a threat [...]. It distributed meat samples during city council meetings in Hasselt and Leuven, when the campaign was being discussed there<sup>1</sup>."*

## 4 Alternative collective niches - on the diffusion and translation of a policy idea

The objective of the present synthesis is to rearrange the observations made during the description of four case studies of collective niches of alternative consumption and production patterns. The focus here is to extract from the case study material our generic, shared learning in order to emphasize our understanding of the conditions for emergence and evolution of the observed niches. Considering the divergence of the described niches both in their nature and their contextual settings, it is beyond the scope of the present exercise to extrapolate comparatively robust messages. Rather is the idea to point to a diversity of factors which we observed with some recurrence in the case studies. The way these factors work out in combination in the specific case studies is highly individual. To use an image we convened before: we might have identified - and laid out in this synthesis - from a given set of dishes some of the more important niche-relevant ingredients, but surely no recipe which would allow similar niches to be reproduced elsewhere. More fundamentally, it seems to us from the material gathered and analysed that the very idea might be illusionary that such a blueprint for niche developments would exist.

The case study material does show one important overarching message. A message which might sound trivial, but which reconfirms the basic intuition (and the subsequent research questions) of the *InContext* project: we identified a number of moments in the life of the alternative collective niches where the interplay between individual, people-based factors with the governance and society-based factors sparkles the evolution of the niches. In other words, the double-sided individual-societal perspective enshrined in *InContext* does make sense as an analytical lens.

Beyond the satisfaction of reconfirming our initial project idea, the implications that this individual-societal perspective is to be pursued and refined could be important for future research and policy agendas. While alternative collective niches like the ones described in our case studies seem to be mushrooming in many places and in many domains of private and collective life, it is also the very idea that such initiatives could be a valid and rich part of the 'solution' to contemporary socio-environmental challenges that percolates fruitfully to the level of many policy actors. Bottom-up transitions, social innovation, social entrepreneurs... are rather starting to show some presence in policy documents and even to some extent in media coverage. There appears to be a form of meta-diffusion of the very idea of alternative niches that might even induce in the future to elevate alternative niches to the level of a *policy idea*; i.e. a non-formalized conceptual shared comprehension that potentially initialises at later stages a formalisation and institutionalisation process towards defining a policy domain populated with policies which articulate policy instruments and tools. If such an evolution would indeed be materializing, the perspectives taken in *InContext* – and in the present synthesis – might be worth to be pursued further.

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<sup>1</sup> Bhansali Mehta Karishma, "A tale of two veggie-friendly cities", *Flanders Today*, December 1, 2010, <http://www.flanderstoday.eu/content/tale-two-veggie-friendly-cities>.

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