

Perspectives on consumption corridors

The relationship between consumption corridors and recent sustainability-focused economic models

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Introduction

This is the first of hopefully several texts from various scholars reflecting on the consumption corridor concept (Di Giulio & Fuchs, 2014; Fuchs et al., 2021), putting forth new propositions or queries, or deliberating earlier work.¹ In this current text, I briefly discuss how the concept of consumption corridors relates to some of the economic models and concepts put forth in recent years with the purpose of bringing about sustainable societies. I believe that such discussion is useful and necessary, so that we can define how consumption corridors are positioned, and in what ways they may, or may not be compatible with these models and concepts.

Consumption corridor as a standalone concept

As the rich resources on [this website page](#) demonstrate, consumption corridors are a good life-oriented governance tool aiming to transform human societies towards sustainability by radically decreasing biophysical resource intensive consumption while meeting our true needs, rather than insatiable wants. They implement sufficiency in two ways. First, they focus on ensuring the provision of “enough” for a good life for one (minimum consumption limits) and second, they translate that into “enough” for a good life for all (maximum consumption limits). Thereby, consumption corridors foster the reduction of negative impacts from consumption via absolute reductions in material consumption, as well as improvements in the eco-efficiency of the remaining material consumption (e.g. modal shifts, product longevity, and sharing practices, see Sandberg, 2021). Ultimately, with the help of consumption corridors, high biophysical resource intensive consumption could be decoupled from human well-being and quality of life. The corridors also aim to preserve the idea of freedom, even if freedom is redefined from freedom to consume within our personal limits of money, time, etc., to freedom to consume so that we don't deprive others their similar freedom to consume in order to meet their needs. In practice, this means staying within the limits of our planet's life-supporting systems. Further, the corridors focus on justice for both current and future generations, and this tool can, therefore, also tackle current high and increasing societal inequalities. Finally, they are suggested to be created through participative democracy, a form of shared governance for creating the future we want.

The concept is powerful, but how could it work in practice in the context of currently still dominant growth- and profit-focused paradigms in industrial societies? The alarming news on the state of our planet and the awareness of rising social inequalities is likely to increase and widen discourses on what to do in the short and medium term, also around the idea of reducing consumption for the sake of human and planetary well-being. In other words, such discourses may lay the groundwork for consumption corridors. All tools, however, require a context in which they fit. Luckily many alternative models to the current economic system do exist, and the transformation may be more a question of overcoming the obstacles — for example, incumbents fiercely resisting change — on the path towards sustainable societal systems.

¹ All texts will be published on the Consumption Corridors website at: <https://www.uni-muenster.de/Fuchs/en/forschung/projekte/konsumkorridore.html>.

Models for sustainable economies

There are many models for organizing *well-being economies* (see e.g. Sharpe, 2022). Some of these have a long history and may originate in global South contexts. But in this short text, I will focus on three models and concepts that are fairly recent and/or well-known globally: the circular economy, the doughnut economy, and the not-for-profit economy. Additionally, I will have a look at the so-called 1.5-degree scenarios.

The principle of circularity for organizing human societies is old. A typology of over 70 *circular economy* related concepts is given by Calisto Friant et al. (2020), and although there is no particular economic model underpinning the basic concept of a circular economy, present-day discourses around the popular concept share the principles that waste should be turned back to productive use, and that as much of “reduce, reuse, and recycle” as possible should take place in the system, while minimizing pollution and not exploiting nature beyond its limits. In the most recent forms of the circular economy concept, with up to 10 different Rs being included, the *reduce* and *reuse* actions are, however, losing ground (Calzolari et al., 2021). Further, in much of the current discussion on the circular economy, the principle of sufficiency is not addressed, and even the growth imperative is often not challenged. At the same time, a fully circular economy would be incompatible with the current growth model, Calisto Friant et al. (2020) argue. In their typology, a *circular society* is a more comprehensive approach, taking also the social aspects of circularity into account. A circular society is, in fact, a concept similar to the doughnut economy laid out by Raworth (2017). Finally, Calisto Friant et al. (2020) define a *transformational circular society* — with a small minority of circular economy discourses qualifying — as a system that, among other things, does incorporate sufficiency as well. In some sense, circularity at its best can be a tool facilitating a good life within consumption corridors, and in a sustainable economic system, both tools are complementary and in fact necessary.

With her 2017 book, Raworth popularized her *doughnut economics* model aiming at organizing societies based on the idea of circularity, and simultaneously avoiding crossing the planetary boundaries and giving all humans their chance to thrive. The book, however, does not discuss unsustainable consumption or reduction of consumption as central themes, neither is there really discussion on the principle of sufficiency, nor criticism of profit-driven systems. The most recent [update](#) to the change model in doughnut economics is likely to remain *growth agnostic*, rather than directly challenge profits as the driver of economic growth and the spiraling destruction of social and natural systems that follows. However, the basic aims of doughnut economics can, in principle, incorporate sufficiency, and therefore, also be compatible with the consumption corridor approach. The foci on limits and social well-being are shared by both approaches. The doughnut economic model can be adapted to fit different contexts, and it is, in fact, meant to be adapted, according to Raworth. It seems that the many users of the ideas within doughnut economics may already include stronger takes on profits and growth, at least based on the variety of content on the [doughnut economics website](#).

The *not-for-profit economy* is not as well known yet as a societal economic model, but the concept of not-for-profit (or non-profit) as an organizational or even business model has existed for quite some time. The not-for-profit model for entire economies (Hinton, 2017; 2020; 2021) is inherently fit for curbing unsustainable consumption, as it avoids profit motive driving the system towards excess, with all businesses having legal responsibilities to deliver social benefit. Indeed, a not-for-profit economy can even be seen as necessary for the successful implementation of a system of consumption corridors, Hinton argues. However, that an economy’s market place and its businesses are organized as not-for-profits may be a necessary but not sufficient requirement (Hinton, 2022). Similar to the doughnut economy, a sustainable and regenerative not-for-profit economy incorporates circularity and the principle of sufficiency, in addition to other *sustainability-facilitating values* (term from Kanerva, 2021). In such a system, money is but one means for well-being, rather than an end,

and we move away from measuring growth in monetary terms to measuring growth “in ecological protection, equality, and human need satisfaction” (Eckersley, 2021:261). According to Hinton (2022), other conditions for a successfully sustainable not-for-profit economy include strong legislation to protect workers as well as nature, a shorter work week, shorter supply chains, land ownership reform, and educational reform. Policies in the transitional phase must overwhelmingly favour not-for-profit businesses.

Finally, the various *1.5-degree scenarios*, produced recently as a response to the growing urgency indicated by the IPCC (2018) 1.5-report, may not all contain comprehensive economic models, but they do all focus squarely on the reduction of consumption, either in the EU or globally (see e.g. Lorek et al., 2021; Kuhnhen et al., 2020; Akenji et al., 2021). They incorporate limits, justice, and well-being, and two of them explicitly call for establishing consumption corridors. Additionally, most explicitly or implicitly include a [post- or degrowth approach](#), circularity, and the principle of sufficiency. However, only one of the three reports (Kuhnhen et al., 2020) reviewed really addresses the for-profit vs. not-for-profit issue. Even in this case, the not-for-profit model is not considered for the whole economy, although it is seen as a powerful and in some ways preferable part of a sustainable economy. Concluding from the discussion here, it seems that, while society’s *relationship-to-profit* (see Hinton, 2021, for relationship-to-profit theory) can be seen to lie at the basis of unsustainable growth-based economic systems, it is rarely acknowledged as a key driver, even in the post-growth/degrowth literature (Hinton, 2021). In any case, these 1.5-degree scenarios are well set up to incorporate explicit corridors for limiting unsustainable consumption. The case for the importance of degrowth for 1.5-degree paths is made by Keyßer and Lenzen (2021) who argue that 1.5 °C scenarios integrating degrowth minimize many key risks in terms of feasibility and sustainability of the mitigation scenarios.

As mentioned earlier, many other models exist, for example, other degrowth-based models, indigenous movements, such as *buen vivir*, and other concepts from the global South (see e.g. Calisto Friant et al., 2020), or even Anitra Nelson’s (2022) model of a non-monetary economy. Above I have looked at only some of the models present in discussions.

Consumption corridor as a tool in the right context?

So, what is the overall relationship of consumption corridors to the above models? In principle, these models and consumption corridors may be compatible, but it depends on how the models are applied. Sufficiency is one of the key principles that they must incorporate, as only sufficiency-based systems will allow for limiting consumption in ways that consumption corridors are intended to function. Ultimately, only sufficiency will work as the basis for true sustainability that respects ecological limits in our 21st century context. It is by no means obvious that all the models discussed above would incorporate sufficiency, but in principle, they all could. As mentioned above, the circular economy isn’t really an economic model, but more a tool to be used within different economic models, some of which are far from sufficiency-based systems (e.g. Calisto Friant et al., 2020).

Although ultimately, it is a question of which system will actually be sustainable within the planetary boundaries, in a transitional phase, i.e. when starting from the current system and moving towards a sustainable one, we may be mainly interested in what are the most realizable or politically possible transition steps to take, the *next-best* (Eckersley, 2021) policy steps. Changing societal contexts, e.g. increasing impact of various crises, will also change mindsets and what is considered to be the next-best. However, we must start in the current context.

Adapting sustainable consumption corridors broadly within the current economic model would directly challenge that very same model, and it might, therefore, seem that they would be unlikely to work in practice. The “solution” would be to first radically reform the larger system in which the corridors would then be employed. Yet, this still seems an unlikely option for the very short run. However, in a similar way that existing and hopefully increasing numbers of not-for-profit businesses directly challenge the dominant capitalist paradigms,

consumption corridors can also assist in ushering in change. The discourses around consumption corridors applied in practice, even if on a trial or local basis, can make societies more aware of the insurmountable challenges within the current economic system, and therefore, eventually more willing to accept fundamental changes. To further prepare the ground, corridors could perhaps be more easily applied in the current economic context in areas where alternative, less resource intensive consumption could relatively easily start replacing the more damaging consumption. This could be the case, for example, in meat consumption where the *new meats* (Kanerva, 2021), e.g. new generation plant-based meat, are increasingly seen as real alternatives to traditional meat, at least within a transitional phase towards more plant-based diets. Similarly, switching short-haul flights to long-distance trains could be done by applying limits for air travel. This could imply losses for airlines and wins for train services, but it would be an imaginable scenario in the current economic context, in [the age of crises](#).

Consumption corridors can function as a next-best — *radical incremental* (Göpel, 2016) — policy step in the present moment. At the same time, they are an important tool for the fundamental transition towards a sustainable economic system we must urgently pursue.

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