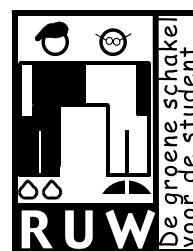


# A new cradle for society?

By: Irene Boers

After introducing 'cradle to cradle' on Monday the 11th, it was time to discuss the possibilities and constraints of the concept on Wednesday evening. Louise Vet joined us again, together with three other experts on sociology in nature and environmental policy, civil engineering and the built environment.



The evening was opened by showing the short film: "The story of stuff." This animated film introduced our modern society's sustainability problem, in a little moralistic –the film is American-, but funny and appealing way. Social and environmental effects aren't shown in our economic model, where our welfare is being measured in how much we consume. Instead of being cyclic, it's a linear system, which starts with the extraction of raw materials and basically ends on the landfill. The adverse effects of this process were explained and supported by at times somewhat shocking figures. For instance, 99% of what we buy is thrown away within 6 months! It is described as 'obsolescence': consumer goods are designed or marketed for a short lifetime. This also means that most products cannot be recycled, so we keep extracting more and end up with more waste. Clearly, that system is ineffective and needs to be changed.

RUW-coordinator Ruben Borge asked for reactions: "So how do you feel after seeing this? Good? Is it recognizable?" Kris van Koppen (environmental policy) felt it was good that the film criticized our consumption, as an addition to the cradle to cradle concept. With current norms and consumption patterns, it is hard to reach sustainability, according to him. "We don't only need new technology, we also need 'new minds'," says van Koppen. Ronald Rovers (built environment) explained how we are often forced to consume and spend more with a humorous example of the fixed coffee cup size at the train station. The 'normal' size became 'small' and was ruled out. 'Large' became 'normal' and 'large' larger. He drove the salesgirl crazy by asking for the smaller size each morning. "Our economic model prevents from forming closed cycles." van Koppen: "The model works, but we just interpret it in a very small way."

A student explains that the source of obsolescence could lie in the 1930's, during the Great Depression, where the theory was formed that if consumption doesn't grow, the economic system could fall apart.

Ljiljana Rodic-Wiersma (civil engineering): "Since there is always a big demand for basic needs, we shouldn't worry about consuming enough. The more I know about it, the more I think: 'Waste is stupid.' We are challenged to develop education so that we look upon things with different values. No-one possesses the earth, and we are all dependent on it."

Louise Vet: "If we apply the cradle to cradle concept, consumption and production are not a problem anymore, because we wouldn't be wasting resources anymore. But as long as we can't produce a surplus of solar energy, we should be careful."

After a short explanation of cradle to cradle, the crowd is divided in several groups, facilitated by the visiting experts. They had the assignment to discuss about closing loops in extraction, production/distribution and consumption (including waste).

In the extraction group, with Louise Vet, it was questioned where we should start to form closed loops. However, if you've closed loops, theoretically speaking, you wouldn't need extraction anymore. But how does that work in practice? Because if the population grows, so does consumption, and you'd need extraction again to gain more materials. Louise Vet argues that this isn't necessary, since you can use renewable sources as well. However, each usage knows its maximum. Also renewable sources need time to be renewed. It becomes clear that to get to a cradle to cradle society, you should start from product design. You could start thinking from an existing product, but you can also start with its function. We have to start improving by thinking about the function of a product (what do we want) and the possibilities in terms of sustainable producing. The example of a glass, better known as 'drinking device' is used to think this over. (By coincidence, Ruben Borge puts a plastic bottle and a glass on the table.) How to design a system that assembles used products with human ('technical') materials, was one of the questions that came up.

After some time of discussion, the groups are put back together to present their findings. Ruben Borge tells us that each group had a very different starting point and that he had a great time walking from one group to the other.

Ljiljana Rodic-Wiersma: "We want to start by making a statement. Cradle to cradle is more about changing surfaces and systems than it is about products. After concluding that, we got into philosophy very quickly." Their group thought C2C is a good idea, but has its difficulties as well. Since no-one really owns materials after they've been produced, how are you going to get them back? Which power should producers have? And how do you want to change consumption, with education? A discussion on the transition to C2C follows. It is argued that a company, or maybe even, new, specialized companies will be interested in taking materials back, since it is profitable.

Rodic-Wiersma said goodbye with a touching closing: "I'm once again intrigued by this night. Evenings like this never fail to impress, even after twenty years. There were unorganised discussions on all sides, agreements, disagreements were everywhere. From this chaos, the best ideas are born. It's always like this when you're thinking about a new concept. I'm not regretting that I came."

Another group reported that they had a quite unstructured and also philosophical discussion. There were discussions about changing people's mindsets with education. About consumer awareness and the freedom of choice. It is said that we need more research in new, non-toxic materials (as cradle to cradle advocates its use). Also here, companies could specialize in this interesting new market segment. Rovers stresses durability of building materials, when asked on which cradle to cradle part they could play. They should last for more than a generation, because these materials differ from standard products, which have a much smaller life cycle. He finds it very hard, however, to say whether these materials can be made 'cradle to cradle.' But designing a product for re-use was never an issue in technology, is argued, but some forces worked against developing this. There is a tipping point however, where a custom product gets too expensive. OPEC for example, has slowed innovation in alternative energy sources, by lowering prices of oil or even buying

companies specialized in this innovation. However, with the current energy demand, those practices aren't feasible anymore.

Some think that C2C doesn't provide a complete solution to society's problems. They see a more integral approach, that includes all involved parties, feasible. Therefore, we shouldn't rely on market steered solutions only, government intervention is needed too. Working around the government would even be counterproductive. Furthermore, it is concluded that C2C's basic thought is good, but faces practical constraints, such as limited knowledge about alternative, non-toxic or biodegradable materials.

Roan Lakerveld from WEP (Environmental Platform Wageningen) states very wisely that we shouldn't stop criticizing the concept, but that it shouldn't stop us from being creative in thinking about solutions to society's problems.

That thought is very good to close the evening with. Everyone can agree on the fact that we should change the current system that we're running in. If cradle to cradle is the way to get there, is more questionable. Can it really be a flawless system; aren't there losses or effects somewhere, can these be mitigated? And wouldn't it be necessary to change our way of living, is it ethical? In any case, cradle to cradle offers a good framework for a new way of thinking and towards a new, sustainable cradle for our society.

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