

The Doughnut Model for a Fairer, Greener Amsterdam

An interview with Marieke van Doorninck, Socrates Schouten

October 15, 2020

As the Brussels region gears up to reform its economy on the basis of the doughnut model, Amsterdam is already taking the leap with its renewed sustainability strategy. In developing this strategy, the city council engaged the now world-renowned creator of this model, Kate Raworth to tailor the model to Amsterdam's social and environmental problems. What follows is a conversation with Marieke van Doorninck, the municipal councillor responsible for a circular economy, on what doughnut economics will mean in practice for Amsterdam.

On April 8, Amsterdam city council adopted a five-year circular economy strategy. This strategy includes many measures that businesses, the municipality, and also citizens will have to put in place in the coming years. For example, circular consumer goods – such as furniture, electronics, paint, and textiles – must become more available to locals. The city has committed to building a supportive infrastructure that includes sharing platforms, thrift shops, online marketplaces, and repair services. The goal is to halve the use of new raw materials by 2030 and to achieve a fully circular economy by 2050.

Amsterdam's circular economy strategy is a tailored elaboration of the “doughnut model” created by British economist [Kate Raworth](#). The doughnut is a way to think about how to solve environmental and socio-economic challenges in a coherent and balanced way. While the environment and the economy have long been approached in a piecemeal way, the model describes how societies and businesses can contribute to economic development that respects the boundaries of planet and society. Amsterdam's “city doughnut” provides a target for the future and will be supplied with a great deal of data. Above all, the doughnut is expected to offer a compass for measuring prosperity beyond the here and now.

Socrates Schouten: The doughnut is a striking new term, but how new is the idea? Politicians are already working nationwide on the concept of wellbeing, for example.

Marieke van Doorninck: There is indeed a broad movement that recognises that ecology and the social domain are interlinked, and that green sustainability cannot isolate itself from other challenges. The approach to the broad concept of wellbeing is reflected in the way we are constructing the monitor. The doughnut helps us to tell the story. Our strategy may be focused on Amsterdam, but in the end, it's about a bigger story that will bring global structures into focus.

Amsterdam has chosen to use Kate Raworth's doughnut model. What exactly does this entail?

The doughnut brings our society's two main categories of problems – social problems and environmental problems – together under one framework. We don't have the social foundation in order; too many people are dealing with poverty, loneliness or housing problems. At the same time, we are exceeding planetary boundaries because of the way we inhabit the earth. Climate change and loss of biodiversity threaten to make the planet unliveable. The doughnut provides a clear picture of this dual problem and helps to identify contradictions at the city level. For example, housing prices partly determine the economic performance of the city: when prices are high, we think that the city is doing well. However, for many, it means they can no longer afford a house here. We want to change that.

It strikes me that the doughnut model and the term “circular economy” are used interchangeably. Amsterdam is launching the doughnut model and the circular strategy at the same time. What is the difference? And can all of this fit within the portfolio of a single councillor?

The doughnut certainly does not correspond to a single councillor. The entire municipal board supports this concept and we are proposing it together. The design of Amsterdam's new circular economy strategy was the most important reason to embrace Kate Raworth's doughnut economics theory. The circular economy is the first dossier we are looking at through the doughnut lens. Other policy areas will have to follow, but that's up to the respective councillors.

How does the doughnut enrich the circular economy?

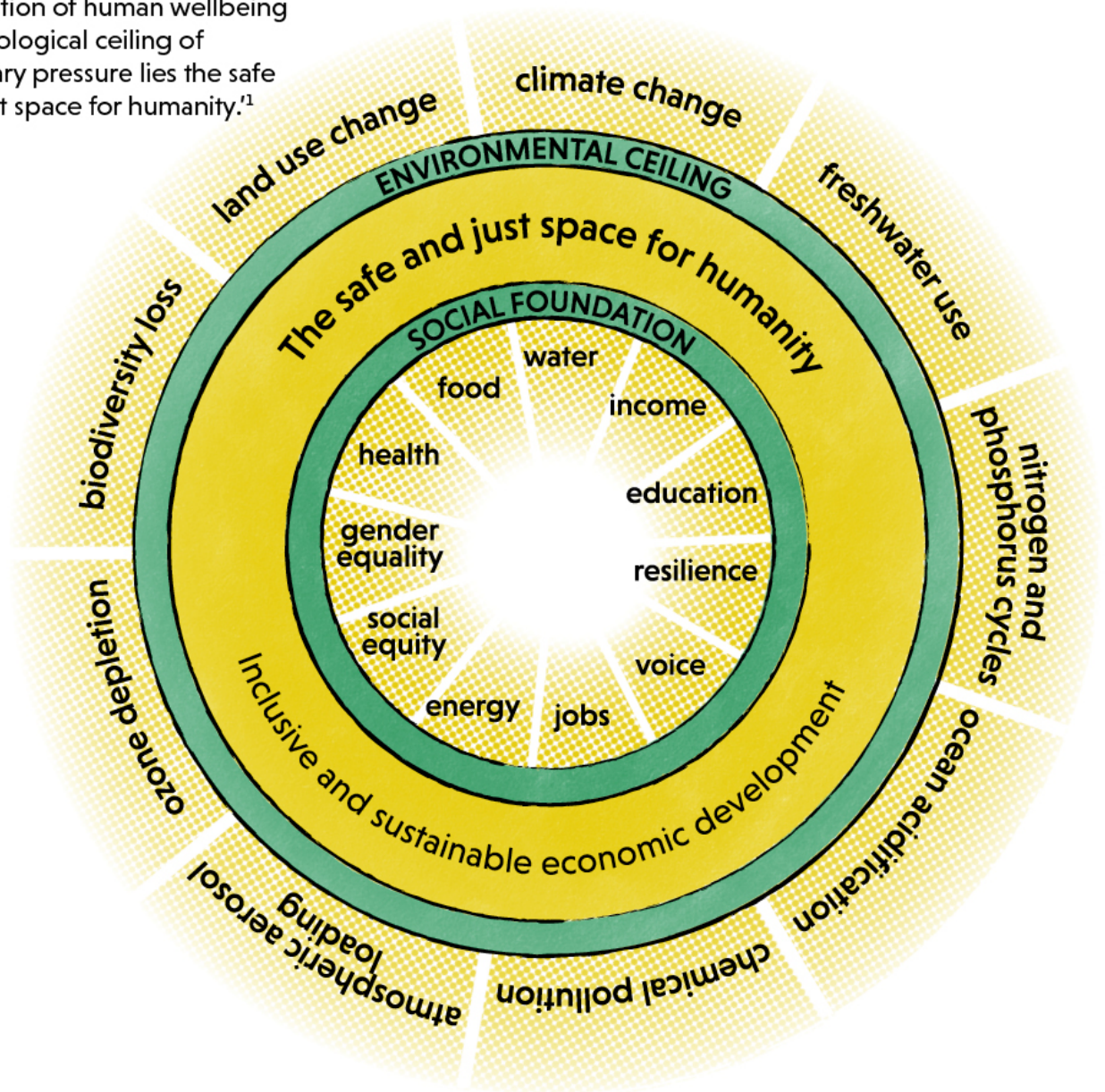
We already try to be as circular as possible when purchasing products and collecting and processing waste in the city. But as we were defining this new strategy through 2025, with a vision towards 2030, we were looking for a connecting story. The doughnut connects the measures needed to make the city more social and liveable in all respects.

[The doughnut model] also holds up a mirror to what the city is doing reasonably well, and where we are clearly falling short or crossing borders.

While the terms “sustainability” and “circularity” immediately give the impression that we are doing good things, we are missing the structural changes required to really do things differently. Our starting point for this strategy was: “You don’t have to do circular things, you have to do things circularly.” The doughnut is a fine model for that. Not only does it offer a theory about the connection between the social and the sustainable, but it also holds up a mirror to what the city is doing reasonably well, and where we are clearly falling short or crossing borders.

So we are using the doughnut model to make the strategy more coherent and more impactful. You can ofcourse have a circular economy strategy without a doughnut model. But then it doesn’t go further than simply doing nice circular things, without looking at the bigger picture.

'The Doughnut: a 21st-century compass. Between its social foundation of human wellbeing and ecological ceiling of planetary pressure lies the safe and just space for humanity.'¹



The doughnut has two limits: the outer ring (the ecological ceiling) and the inner ring (the social foundation). How does the municipality visualise the various upper and lower limits of urban prosperity?

We have made an “urban selfie”, a first sketch that shows where we cross both the inner and outer boundaries of the doughnut. On the social level, the city has taken stock of unaffordable housing as well as people living in social isolation and consequently at a higher risk of experiencing loneliness and depression. We’ve done the same for the environment in terms of mapping our greenhouse gas emissions and the overconsumption of non-sustainable materials.

On top of our existence as Amsterdammers, we have developed instruments to measure the impact of our consumption patterns on people and nature in other countries. The doughnut enables us to look into the social and ecological impacts that our local economy has on places around the world where our products and raw materials originate from.

The urban selfie is our baseline measurement for where we are now. We are still developing a system that will monitor whether it’s possible to do better in staying within the limits of the doughnut from this point onwards.

I can imagine that Amsterdammers are wondering: all right, that's a beautiful story, but what's actually going to change?

Concrete measures are the roughly 200 projects included in the implementation programme. They range from collecting leftover latex paint to introducing material passports that keep a detailed record of the composition of buildings so that its constitutive elements are easier to reuse. In the long term, we want to make this compulsory for the entire construction sector. We are constantly tightening the sustainability requirements for buildings and we recommend sustainable and circular materials, such as timber.

We also support social initiatives with the doughnut. The initiative for the first “doughnut deal” was taken by an inhabitant of Amsterdam-Zuidoost. She wants to help people living in poorly insulated houses reduce their energy bills by providing them with thick curtains, which have been made by people excluded from labour market. Some of these projects have been co-financed by the municipality.

To what extent can you fundamentally reform an economy at the local level when faced with global chains and consumption patterns?

We have deliberately chosen three areas where we have the necessary influence as a city: food, construction and consumer goods. In the area of food, we can take big steps to reduce waste. But Amsterdam can't do it on its own. We need the Dutch government and the European Union to truly move forward.

Take the requirements we are setting for consumer products for example. Everyone knows the frustration that results when appliances are difficult to repair. If one button breaks, you have to throw the whole thing away. On top of that, plastics are often hard to recycle because they contain different materials. Many people are fed up with this wasteful culture, and regulation is the only answer.

The discussion around small plastic bottles proved that the market will not solve the problem; the Dutch government expanded its deposit system to include small PET bottles after failing to move the drinks industry to reduce this waste. At the municipality, we had been waiting for this to happen for years.

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and the European Union to truly move forward.*

We are also lobbying for more space for local experimentation. For example, current legislation distinguishes between household and industrial waste, with the latter being collected by various private companies. We have been granted a pilot exemption from the Environmental Management Act for Amsterdam's “9 Streets” shopping area, which means that the municipality is responsible for the collection and processing of waste there. This will reduce the number of trips made by rubbish trucks.

Another long-cherished wish is for a lower tax on labour and higher taxes on the use of raw materials. A circular economy has the potential to create many jobs. However, if labour remains expensive, there is a strong incentive to use raw materials more lavishly, avoid precision work and repairs, and buy Chinese products in bulk. We want labour to be valued more and the use of primary raw materials to be reduced as much as possible. A simple tax measure will help companies that want to work circularly.

The *Guardian* even headlined that Amsterdam is embracing the doughnut model to shape the post-coronavirus recovery. Won't this be difficult at a time when council resources are in short supply?

We came out with our circular strategy in the middle of the coronavirus era. We wondered about the timing of the proposal and what in the plan could survive such an acute health crisis. But how do we ensure that we do not go back to business as usual when the worst of the crisis is behind us? How do we shape an urban economy that no longer relies on infinite growth but ensures that everyone has enough to live decently within the limits of the planet?

Considering these questions, *The Guardian* is right in pointing out that now is precisely the right time. One of the reasons why we think the doughnut is such a workable model is that it brings together a great many crises and connects the problems we encounter in Amsterdam – and actually throughout the entire world. The emphasis on producing, consuming and reprocessing regionally will create jobs – which is very important in dealing with the recession – and make the economy more resilient.

Is the doughnut also viable outside Amsterdam? Here we have a progressive majority and the doughnut seems to me to be very green-left. A green outer shell and a leftist bottom: that combination defines Groenlinks as a party.

You don't have to be a GroenLinks supporter to embrace the idea of a circular economy. In the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area, which is the most left-wing of the 32 municipalities, far-reaching agreements have been concluded about working circularly. Perhaps not all of them are according to the doughnut model but they all have very strong ambitions on sustainability.

Our strategy may be focused on Amsterdam, but in the end, it's about a bigger story that will bring global structures into focus.

Since that story in *The Guardian*, I have been asked a lot about the doughnut. The CEO of a prominent Amsterdam company said that he finds it interesting, and referred to the book *The Value of Everything* by the economist [Mariana Mazzucato](#). These ideas show that a different economy is possible without having to give up a lot. There are more values in the economy than we realise.

Even without a theoretical framework, you can certainly start sustainable projects that familiarise people with the idea that we need to use primary raw materials sparingly, and that there is more to life than our culture of consumption and waste. At the urban level, however, you need a model that combines ecological and social components. Both theory and practice are needed to make it possible for more people to experience wellbeing in a clean world.

This interview was first published in Dutch by [De Helling](#).



Marieke van Doorninck has been the Councillor for Spatial Planning and Sustainability for the city Amsterdam since 2018.



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