

“We are all humming birds”:

Individual and collective transformations towards sustainable lifestyles and consumption in urban India (Bangalore and Chennai)

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Abstract

India is currently undergoing a process of rapid urban transformation with an expected increase in the urban population from 30 to 50 percent by the middle of this century (Census of India 2011, McKinsey 2010). A concomitant, and hitherto largely neglected aspect of these processes are changes in the socio-economic structure, values, behaviours and attitudes that have significant impact on urban lifestyles and consumption patterns. In India, intellectuals of the ‘new’ middle class are also gradually becoming more aware of the sustainability discourse. Based on empirical, qualitative research conducted in Bangalore and Chennai in 2015, this study concentrates on the niche of socially innovative actions of individuals and citizens’ initiatives as change agents and social pioneers. This paper first outlines the the changing landscape of consumption patterns and the expansion of the (urban) middle class in India, then methodology and selected cities. It then explores the key findings in terms of the processes and progress, scales of change and interrelationships at individual and collective levels.

Introduction

21st century humankind is faced with multiple crises and opportunities. Ecologically, economically, socially and even culturally, the world faces challenges that cannot be resolved at the material, physical, scientific or technological plane (Scharmer 2009, Wilber 2000). Increasing realization of these issues has led to a search for initiating transitions and transformations towards more sustainable societies (WBGU 2011).

Climate Change is one such complex, multifaceted area that requires a different set of actions. Socio-technical solutions are not sufficient to address this issue. Transition research emphasizes the necessity of understanding socio-cultural changes in individual and collective transformation of values and worldviews.

Globally, these changes will have to take place primarily in urban areas, where majority of people live and where lifestyles, production and consumption patterns are comparatively more unsustainable in terms of resource requirements and carbon footprints than in rural areas (in emerging/developing countries). Particularly, cities of lower/middle-income

countries, middle and upper income groups depict similar consumption patterns and impact on GHG emissions as in highly industrialised regions of the world. This convergence of behavioural patterns is visible in rapidly urbanizing societies like China and India as well (McKinsey India Report 2011).

Consequently, research is required to understand the processes of social and cultural change of people, groups and communities in cities. Especially in the western world, over the past decades many people and groups have begun not only to question the way the economy works (global inequalities/exploitation in the markets) or the ecological degradation and climate change, but also started to take action. These have been termed social pioneers or change agents. They act from a postmodern, postmaterialist worldview, often critically reflecting on the existing systems and consciously transforming their own lives. The transition town initiatives, which have become a transnational movement within a few years, and other intentional communities, are such examples (www.transitionnetwork.org).

In India, intellectuals of the growing, affluent middle class are also gradually becoming more aware of the environment and the sustainability discourse. Availability of organic food products, health food stores, cycling groups promoting alternative transport, and IT employees who turn into organic farmers are some of the more visible incidents. Many scholars and practitioners report that such deeper transformations take place from an internal (re)source of people (Parodi and Tamm 2018, Wamsler et al. 2017). This is where their strength, energy and motivation stem from. But not much is known about relating and integrating such transformative development processes with urban planning processes for climate change response in India.

This study would look for transformative moments at the level of the individual, the group and at the level of community. At this stage, it is about scoping the terrain for such initiatives. Hence the focus will be on intentional (urban) communities, eco-spiritual communities/settlements in India, especially in the metropolises like Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Bangalore, Chennai, etc.

The 'new' urban middle class and changing landscape of consumption

Recently, there has been a lot of talk about the so-called 'new' urban middle class in emerging economies (Brandt and Büge 2014, Bartelt and Harneit-Sievers 2017). Staggering are the sheer numbers related to India's urban transition. Continued yet decelerating urban growth¹ (UN-Habitat 2011) combined with demographic transitions in the cities of India, coincides with tremendous social change and contradictions. A net increase is expected in working-age population of 270 mill. people by 2030 as well as a rise from 22 million urban middle class households² to 91 million. This growing middle class, located not merely in large million plus cities but also in emerging medium-size towns, will be characterized by rising consumption and consumerism (Ghosh 2011, McKinsey 2012).

¹ 2010: total urban population 360 mill.; 2030: 590 mill. housing approximately 40 percent of the total population (UN-Habitat 2011).

² McKinsey (2010) defines them as earning between 200,000 (appr. £2,300) and 1 million rupees (appr. £11,600) a year.

In India, the arrival of this new urban middle class may be located within the liberation policies of the Indian Government launched at the beginning of the 1990s: “This ‘liberalization’ package, tailored to make India a player in the ‘globalized’ economy suddenly put the spotlight on the middle class for an entirely new reason: its ability to consume” (Varma 1999: 171). At least for that time, Gupta (2000) identifies the ‘shallow middle class’ as ‘Westoxicated’, which “is about superficial consumerist display of commodities and fads produced in the West” (Gupta 2000: 11). According to Gupta, this middle class is relatively small in total numbers and consists more of elitist, better-off, high income urban Indians who consume western items but remain traditional in their social attitude and behavior as they use family connections, caste status, and are disrespectful to legal rules and norms (Choudhary 2014).

Definitions and concepts of the middle class vary greatly; this has been one of the conundrums of social scientists for long. Most common is a classification according to income, which often measures consumption as income data are less reliable. Kapur et al. (2017) list more than ten different studies that attempt to classify Indian middle classes at various points of time (including the above cited McKinsey report). These attempts are a demonstration of the heterogeneity of the middle classes in India. For instance, the Asian Development Bank in a 2010 study identifies 224 million as lower middle class, 45 million as middle-middle class, and 5 million as upper middle class. Sociologists like Deshpande (2003) also discuss the middle class in relation to other social categories like caste; he concludes that in comparison to other countries the middle class comprises a relatively small proportion of Indian society, which is congruent with other estimates. An alternative (subjective) classification of middle class by means of self-identification (belonging) is proposed by Kapur (et al. 2017).

Categories particularly interesting for this research as they imply a link to consumption and lifestyles from ‘aspirers’ to ‘seekers’ to strivers’, ‘the near rich’, ‘clear rich’, ‘sheer rich’ and ‘super rich’ while a global consultancy firm differentiated the new middle classes in 2005 into 32 million ‘technologies babies’ (8-19 years), 16 million ‘impatient aspirers’ (20-25 years), 41 million ‘balance seekers’ (25-50 years) and 9 million ‘arrived veterans’ (51-60 years) (cited in Brosius 2010: 3). One-quarter of humanity – 1.7 billion people worldwide – now belongs to the ‘global consumer class’, having adopted the diets, transportation systems and lifestyles that were once mostly limited to the ‘global North’ (Lorek & Vergragt 2015). The convergence of behavioural patterns is visible in rapidly urbanizing societies like China and India (McKinsey India Report 2010), write Bartelt and Harneit-Sievers (2017: 22) “from an analytical perspective that prioritises income, purchasing power, and ‘global lifestyle’, the middle classes exhibit the same or very similar characteristics throughout the world”. In the Asia-Pacific region, along with rising incomes, the lifestyles of the large middle class are moving quickly towards a buy-and-discard consumer model that involves carbon-intensive products and services (Mohanty et al. 2012).

Research on this ‘new urban middle class’ is relatively scarce but growing. Most of the research focus is on consumption (Mathur 2010, Mawdsley 2004) whereas social innovation towards sustainable lifestyles and consumption remains largely under researched. We

(Hackenbroch and Woiwode 2016) distinguished between two main strands of environmental activism in urban India. An elite and middle class “bourgeois environmentalism” of mostly RWAs (Residential Welfare Associations) with a focus of keeping their housing society and neighbourhood clean and conserve resources like parks and water bodies, and ‘classical’ environmental non-government organization. The other being of a different kind and currently emerging, conceives an “avant-garde or activist” environmentalism emerging from the grassroots yet with a profoundly different intention of incubating actions towards transforming their own and others people’s lifestyles and consumption patterns. It is this latter phenomenon which is in focus of this study.

Research rationale and design

Given the fact that seed funding was made available and the phenomenon of investigation is relatively new, this research was designed as a scoping study. This also requires to establish an overview of the theoretical-conceptual grounding with regard to the Indian context involving a review and scan of available literature on consumption, urban lifestyles, new urban social movements, environmentalism and sustainability discourses, including conceptualising and placing the study in current theoretical debates of sustainability, urbanization, urban development as well as social transformation.

Three research questions shaped the broad scope of the project:

1. What kind of individuals/groups or communities are consciously moving towards low carbon and low emission lifestyles in urban India, in particular the cities of Bangalore and Chennai?
2. What are the determining factors that help in the emergence of such communities?
3. What do such communities think in terms of what would it take to scale up such lifestyle across urban settlements in India?

The overall methodology emphasizes an empirical, qualitative research design, combined with collecting secondary data about the objective, factual conditions in India. Furthermore, to honour all types of knowledge including ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’, the literature review and the conceptual framework applies an ‘emic’ perspective that tries to understand cultural phenomena meaningful to members of a culture (intrinsic insider), and an ‘etic’ perspective that applies an interpretation meaningful to an external observer of cultural phenomena (extrinsic outsider).

The empirical grounding concentrated on identifying people and initiatives to a) scan the field across India to get an overview, b) identify some for interviews, c) zooming in on Bangalore and Chennai by piloting studies on “urban lifestyle pioneers”, those people, families, or communities which have made an intentional decision to live a more “sustainable”, “eco-friendly”, “conscious” life, thus demonstrating and promoting options for change to others.

Besides generating the background and conceptual framework through the literature review and by collecting secondary media items about specific initiatives and people in Bangalore and Chennai, semi-structured interviews formed the core empirical method of the study.

These interviews were conducted in person by the research team with selected individuals in Bangalore and Chennai. Technically, interviews had either a focus on the individual and the personal trajectory of initiating or becoming part of a transformative group and one's personal journey (the narrative-biographical interview) or the focus was on the experience of the initiative itself. In the latter case it was a sort of 'expert' or key informant interview where the person responding was a representative of the initiative. However, frequently it was neither possible nor desired to separate these two techniques as personal involvement is the key of such initiatives. Consequently, both these techniques were blended in the interview situation rather than strictly kept apart. At times interviews also assumed more of a focus group discussion, for instance when the research team met with one or several (co-)founders of an initiative, while at the same time also to some of the members of the group.

A comprehensive topic guide was prepared initially and constantly amended in the process to inform the conversations that lasted between 30 to 90 minutes. Its design reflects the twofold nature of the study to explore the individual trajectory and involvement of a person or persons and the collective level of the initiative (appendix). All interviews were recorded on a voice recorder with prior consent of the respondent and agreement of anonymity to keep the data confidential. They were subsequently transcribed and analysed by way of content analysis. Depending on what is considered, eleven interviews were conducted covering approximately sixteen different initiatives in the two selected cities. These comprised kitchen/organic terrace gardens, composting, organic farming, organic food stores, ethical clothing, sustainable lifestyles, upcycling, and a sustainability museum. Site visits and observations on-site were carried out in almost all of the cases

Bangalore and Chennai in brief (city profiles)

Chennai, the former Madras, is known as the 'Queen of the Coromandel Coast' (Muthiah and Gupta 2012). The foundation year dates back to 1639, a comparatively new city with less than 400 years old, going back to an English trading post of the East India Company around Fort St. George. During its first 150 years it was the gateway to India for the Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, French, and English, and hence it is rightly considered that the foundations of modern India were laid in Madras. The first municipal corporation and a Mayor's court was established here in British territory in 1687 (Pinto 2000). Interestingly, and in spite of its cosmopolitan roots of the past, Chennai is often viewed as 'the oddest' in comparison to other Indian metro cities (Bail 2011) for being more 'traditional' presented as an "idyllic, genteel city, an example of 'simple living and high thinking' "(Sethi 2011: 10).

Dramatic transformation characterises the past twenty years though, which saw a profound change of the city – including a name change - that reaches deep into its cultural heritage and self-image. After Bangalore and Hyderabad, it became a hub for the IT industries, the health sector, and global multinationals like Samsung and Hyundai, which are located in the peri-urban region (Homm 2014). As a result of this continuous growth and agglomeration of settlements the city's boundaries were regularly expanded. Due to this rapid and dynamic increase in area and population, however, it is difficult to gauge the population. According to the Census 2011, Chennai Municipal Corporation hosts a population of 4.68 million, but was expanded in the same year from 174 sq. km to 430 sq.km with now an estimated over 6

million residents (Hill and Woiwode 2015). Similarly, the metropolitan area expanded continuously, most recently in January 2018 from previously 1,189sq.kms to 8,878 sq.kms making it the largest metropolitan area in India after Delhi and just before Bangalore with an estimated population of well over 9 million inhabitants (The Hindu 2018).

Formerly known as the ‘garden city’, Bangalore or Bengaluru (like Chennai it was also renamed) is currently best reputed as the ‘Silicon Valley’ of India. These two very distant metaphors reflect the significant and profound transformation the city has undergone in just thirty years. From a tranquil cantonment and indigenous city with tree lined roads it grew, spurred by the Indian Government’s decision to locate the Indian Aerospace Centre there, into a formidable metropolis of global relevance.

The roots of the city date back at least five hundred years into the 16th century, and a British Cantonment no more than two hundred years old. These two settlements were brought under one single Municipal Corporation in 1949 (Nair 2005).

Between 1941 and 2001, the population of the urban agglomeration grew from 410,967 persons to 5,686,844, the city itself expanding far beyond the 66 sq.km to an urban agglomeration of 531 sq.km. “In the five decades since Independence, a small and unremarkable town was transformed into an internationally known metropolis. The increase of the built-up area of the city between 1945 and 1973 was three times that of the previous 33 years (1912-45), doubling in the seven years between 1973 and 1980. The transformation of Bangalore has thus been crowded into a short span that affords none of the advantages of gradual growth [...]” (Nair 2005: 79).

Arguably, the roots for its internationally acclaimed IT industry were laid, however, by large public sector electronics industries founded by the Indian government in the 1960s and 70s. Clustered around these public sector giants were national laboratories such as the National Aeronautics Laboratory (NAL), Electronic Research and Development Establishment (LRDE), and the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO), among others. With the arrival of Texas Instruments in the city in the early 1980s, the city’s attraction as a centre for computer software and hardware development dramatically increased. Nair (2005) comments “Bangalore largely bypassed the smoke stack stage of industrialization, leapfrogging straight into ‘cleaner’ forms of industrial production” (Nair 2005: 87), thus becoming an internationally recognized gateway to styles of globalized consumption (Nair 2005: 81). This also shaped saliently the social make-up as an overwhelmingly middle-class city as the public sector workers define themselves as belonging to the middle class by adopting such lifestyles and aspirations, a phenomenon that dates back to the 1970s: “The work culture of the new economy has strengthened the middle-class link, to foster self image that is far removed from any concept of a labouring self, emphasizing work as a lifestyle whose goal is enhanced consumption” (Nair 2005: 87).

Key findings

Who are the social pioneers and innovators?

Individuals interviewed have various backgrounds, they come from all walks of life, some were homemakers (typically female), others professionals such as IT graduates and engineers or in the banking sector. Most of these are adolescent and in their middle ages (between 20-40 years). They may be childhood friends but come from different professional backgrounds.

“We all have worked almost 20 years in the IT companies as managers. So money is not the motive for us, we have some savings and we can run the family. [...] So we contributed from abroad at an earlier stage. So this is what we did at an early stage because we had to manage our shift from the US and some of us were in Bombay. (co-founder of Nallakeerai)

“In the year 2007...there was a bunch of us who met by sheer coincidence. We were a few people who wanted to help farmers and that’s why we wanted to start retail.[...] most of us were from big corporates who *came back from abroad*. [...]. My wife and I were working in Switzerland. We had decided by 2006 that we would come back to India. We would not work for monetary employment, we would work on social issues. We had decided this in 2006 itself that in 6 years we would go back. So we decided when we would come back we would work on food and agriculture. So that's how we started, *travelling and exploring what is happening, understanding*. There were a bunch of us who used to work in IT[...] These were people who had the same idea and were trying to do something with the farmers. (co-founder, reStore)

It also seems that people are getting even younger to exit a corporate job and make this shift towards alternative living. As this conversation about organic shopkeepers in Chennai highlights:

R: Yes, these are youngsters who were working in corporates. See I jumped out of the corporate world at 35. I have seen people come out in their forties. But these are guys who have jumped out in their twenties. Even though they get a very small salary they tell us that they don't mind getting involved. The salary they get here is probably half of what they got in their previous jobs, but they derive a lot of job satisfaction from their work here. I would definitely call them volunteers.

I: But they are still working in these corporates?

R: No they are not working, they all picked to work in OFM [Organic Farmers Market].

I: So this has become the main purpose of life!

R: Yes, some of them are still working and waiting to quit. They tell us that they have small loans here and there, which are settled slowly. That's it. So they want to just work with farmers. They all want to lease a farm somewhere and jointly work in a farm. So this is what is enticing for them. To be able to work in a farm.” (co-founder, reStore)

This is corroborated in several interviews by shop owners: “There are also a few of us from IITs and IIM’s [Elite Universities in India]. They were doing very well in their careers and

they quit to run a farm in the outskirts of town. There are a lot of us whom you can pick up stories from” (interviews with members of OFM).

Salient features for the launch of any activities were:

- a) All initiators are well educated, were well paid employees and managers in IT industry, etc., and most of them had returned from abroad.
- b) Highly motivated: initiators returned from as far as US and Mumbai;
- c) Youngsters in their 20s quit well paid jobs to join in
- d) Goal is to establish a social enterprise
- e) Learning journey and exposure (this is also very similar to the Nallakeerai people)

There is a strong pattern that people who initiated activities and formed initiatives returned from abroad, US, Switzerland, Singapore, a phenomenon that we termed ‘transnational knowledge mobilities’ (see Hackenbroch and Woiwode 2016).

Expansion of the Self: Motivation, Life’s purpose and Personal Change

The motivation for many individuals who became change agents is a search for deeper meaning in life that ended with shifting ‘from software to organic food’. Apparently, there is a trend of corporate employees, especially in the IT sector, to question their lifestyle.

Frequently they had an encounter or situation that served as an eye-opener as in this case:

“Sustainability is a big word today. See, if you breakdown where the salary of an IT graduate is spent...at the best case scenario, they own an apartment or a decent size house. For you to own that you need to slog and you are stuck in a huge cycle for years. Some of them started questioning that lifestyle, which is amazing. When they started questioning that it all boiled down to a person's need” (interviews with members of OFM).

“ I used to work in the software industry, selling banking software for HCL for some time. I used to study Mass Communication before that. Somewhere in between I realized that it was a very robotic life. You go, you slog and you make a lot of money. However, none of us were content. So I wanted to do something to make a meaning out of life. That's when I met Nammazhvar³, and he pointed me towards multiple directions and told me to choose a path which suited me. Somewhere during the search, I met a lot of conventional farmers and organic farmers. There was a clear divide. The conventional farmers were not happy and called me a fool for wanting to leave IT and looking at agriculture as a profession. In contrast, all the organic farmers welcomed me with open arms. They were all happy and content. All of them were leading sustainable lives and conventioanl farmers were leading input driven lives. If they needed anything they had to run to the market and pick up some sprays and organic farmers didn't need a lot of things, they had their own seeds and they were content. It was sustainable” (interviews with members of OFM).

Typically, a shifting of values through reflection on one’s life and living conditions led to a return to values previously held high in Indian society like simplicity (a Gandhian ideal) and even frugality (an ideal traditionally rooted in the lifestyle of merchant castes in India). This comes with a desire to lead a simple, least exploitative lifestyle because the current lifestyle,

³ A pioneer of organic farming in India.

especially in cities is seen as highly exploitative. Interestingly many, but by far not all, of the individuals move out of the city to start a farm, they want to leave behind the urban which is viewed as an environment where sustainable living is difficult to implement.

“We are a couple who have moved from the city and we are now farming organically. The motivation for us was towards leading a simpler lifestyle. Which is least exploitative. When you stay in the city it forces you to lead a certain lifestyle which we feel is damaging and largely very insensitive to nature and fellow human beings. The shift was to move out of this exploitative environment and when you move out of it, it takes you to a rural, agricultural scenario. And also the other question here is food, the current food itself is much degraded now because you put in a lot of poison. It is mechanized and not grown with the care that it is supposed to be nurtured with. But it is something fundamental to life form and we do not treat it well.

I: So, what initiated you to move towards this?

S: It's not a spark. It's like how a tree grows, it grows uniformly because of variety of nutrients it gets over a period of time. So I think the process of change is not always abrupt and not at a point. Pivots don't happen at a single point. And I think if you keep an open mind it would be an elaborate and long process. So there is no "one event, one idea or inspiration" that made us look in this direction. It is a series of actions” (interviews with members of OFM).

Initiating change may be brought about through “Leading by example” like in the classical ‘gurukul system’ which the following conversation points to.

I: To paraphrase what you have told me is that instead of focusing on spreading large scale production, you would rather spread awareness and knowledge. Do you want to initiate people?

K: No, we want to lead a simple and least exploitative life which is in harmony with nature. So we want to look at ways which best achieve this goal and all the necessities of human life with low energy intensive techniques. So it is not a question of scaling up or spreading. We think this is how people should live.

S: We are not spreading it ourselves, we don't have an outreach. We don't have a newsletter or a mailing list. If anyone comes about to ask us questions, like you do, we are willing to answer. But we are not looking to seek out wannabes and make them convert them and preach. I think the best preaching is if you are stationary and you do well for others.

I: And if it comes from within.

S: Yes, if somebody comes with an interest then we are there to help. This is the classical gurukul system. People go in search of the guru and that is how wisdom is transferred. We believe that we want to do our job and we want to do it well. If we do it well, whatever happens will happen. Our job is to be the stone and not the ripple” (interviews with members of OFM).

Significantly, leading a sustainable life and the search for it, is primarily done for its own sake and not with a telos, a purpose or objective, in mind. The reference to ancient Indian traditions of the gurukul – a schooling system where pupils live with the teacher (guru) similar to an ashram (primarily a place for learning and experiencing spiritual wisdom) - and wisdom (not

knowledge!) is remarkable insofar as 'Western' learning primarily focuses on the mind accumulating factual and structured knowledge rather than 'wisdom' (which is more concerned with life's experience, intuition and non-formal ways of knowing). This attitude that everyone can do their own bit in contributing to the world is not only reflected in the widely known saying "be the change you want to see in the world" attributed to Gandhi, but also the African story about the humming bird that was narrated to us (see box).

The Story of the Humming Bird

N: But this event [Seed and Food Festival in Chennai] focuses mostly on seeds.

M: It is basically, you know the significance of May 23rd? It is a march against Monsanto, which is a global event. We didn't get a permission for a protest. Instead, we got a seed diversity mela.

I : *So in a way this is a transnational connect. A call for change. It is your contribution to this global movement. People around the world are trying to contribute to it and you are doing your part.*

M: Exactly. It is like the story of the humming bird. It is from a documentary movie called "Dirt!"

When the whole forest was on fire, all the animals were running and they went to a safe place. But one humming bird which flies faster goes to the lake and takes little water and drops it in the fire. All the animals were asking it whether this would really do anything. It replied that all it is doing is its part. This is an African story. That is what the story of the humming bird is - we are all humming birds.

I: *So you are hoping other people also join you. You are just leading the initiative.*

M: Exactly.

I: *It is a good initiative. Thank you so much for your time, both of you.*

(I=interviewer A. Debbarmar; M,N=members of Organic Farmers Market, Chennai)

Characteristically, many of our interviewees agree on making small, gradual changes to change their lifestyle. But they acknowledge that making small changes in your own life contributes to the big picture because of an accumulation of small changes over time. There is an inevitable personal involvement as family and personal life is intimately interlinked with activism. In many cases, initial changes in food – living practices – medicine in personal life spread to other spheres as well, as the following account demonstrates:

"I think my interest in sustainability came also on personally, because I wanted to.. uh.. have a healthier way of living for us as a family. You know the entire processed food. I mean it started with the child in the family. Like processed food or all of these things sort of concerned me. So when I started to look for alternatives to weigh these things. You know.. better living practices.. one thing you have to understand.. start with food.. or you start with better.. you know.. living practices with respect to food itself and then that translates now to

medicine. [...] There are a lot of small changes but overall I feel they've amounted to something that we have been able to successfully do. [...] So, then we said okay and have started growing some food. Still minimal. Like I grow some chillies and some beans and so on. It's a starting point, I mean, if we give more time and effort I think we can do a lot more. And I think Bangalore people have managed to take kitchen gardening itself as a huge thing. So, for me it's always been in how many areas I can make small changes. Whether it's car-pooling to office or taking the bus and public transport as often as possible - optimizing trips"

"We are not Walmart": Social-ethical-ecological entrepreneurialism

Profoundly, social, ethical and ecological values form the core of all initiatives studied. "With these qualifying terms 'social-ethical-ecological' we intend to grasp the comprehensive, or more holistic, approach and intention of these socially innovative agents who combine their activities with an entrepreneurial business idea. They cannot be simply placed in any single discourse of poverty alleviation, social justice, or environmentalism" (Hackenbroch and Woiwode, 2016: 15).

"We wanted to show that reStore is more than retail. It's part of a movement. Nothing would be commercial. Even our commerce would have ethics behind it. We very strictly adhere to it. [...]. We wanted to just link the farmer and the market. That was it, nothing more. We didn't want to become a big shop and have hundreds of stores, we aren't Walmart. We wanted more independent, small shops to come" (co-founder, reStore). The name reStore relates to "The process of restoration—of our health, ecological balance and the livelihoods of the marginalized—can take place only when we as consumers are empowered to make better choices" (www.restore.in). "It [reStore] was not just a retail chain. It was not just for commerce. Yes, we wanted commerce! But it had to be ethical and organic also. But we also ensured a lot of other activities. We wanted consumers to be aware, it was also a lifestyle we were promoting and not just a product sale" (co-founder, reStore).

The Organic Farmers Market (OFM) is a collective initiative by a group of organic farming enthusiasts with the aim to:

- Guarantee consistent, continuous availability of safe food
Ensure fair pricing of organic products for both, the farmers and the consumers
- Protect the livelihoods of organic farmers
- Spread awareness on safe food and current agricultural practices/malpractices
- Transparency and traceability

The group has opened multiple organic outlets across Chennai, which is being used to bridge the urban-rural, demand-supply gap (<http://www.ofmtn.in>).

Importantly, the organisations operating under this umbrella intend to initiate and promote a cultural project of transformation towards healthier lifestyles, social responsibility, and ecological sustainability combined with fair and ethical practices. Food is at the core of their activities, revamping local and natural food items, including (re)discovering traditional recipes. "We would also organize food festivals. There was something else we took up five years back, millets" (co-founder, reStore).

Create the 'aware consumer: Redefining Producer and Consumer Relationships

Many 'change agents' were involved in helping setting up more than one initiative or organization. What we found was more of an 'ecosystem' of organisations that evolved over

time and operate in connection with and to the benefit of each other, and where specific individuals or a core group play varying roles as incubators, catalysts and facilitators.

Distribution of farm products through multiple channels of marketing. One is the customer who directly orders online from the website. There are organic shops in Chennai and they buy in bulk, and then a tie up with some corporate company. Nallakeerai is building a secured customer base for its farmers to ensure market lead production: “This is the model we have for 1000 families. It is kind of an assured consumer base. It is not only the planning. We connect the farmer with the customer. It is like a big connection is broken between the consumer and the farmer. Many consumers even don't know from where their produce comes from. [...]. They have to be connected to the farmer. So when you have this kind of model, I can call them my customers because I know who they are and where they are.”

Currently, the consumers are urban residents (in the studied cases in Bangalore and Chennai). The customer base is mostly middle and upper class as this is mostly based on affordability. The ultimate goal is that the price should reduce. The key to their model is the ‘aware customer’: “See, the most important thing is to have aware consumers. People always assume that organic food is so costly and they prefer the cheaper alternative. If people have that consumer awareness they could always go for good products. We are trying to educate people on this.” reStore raises similar issues: “In the year 2007, there were hardly any organic shops in Chennai. Many shops would open and close. They could not sustain themselves. There was no awareness, there were not enough producers as well and we could not procure enough because it was expensive. There was very less demand for these products and the transportation cost was very high. Everything was very hard then (...) On one side we were able to go into ecological farming, sustainable organic farming, and chemical free farming. [...] But then we realized that it was more important to create a market for it. We realized that we need to create a market before we could get back to sustainable farming. Creating a demand was not just for the retail business sale. [...] we also wanted people to get an awareness to understand what is coming on their plate. In fact they should become an aware consumer rather than becoming a consumer who buys everything” (co-founder, reStore).

Creating a consumer base and awareness for organic food products within the urban population goes hand in hand. However, it is also a process of mutually enhancing each other's transformation during which everyone involved is gradually developing further, for instance when the consumer/customer and volunteer boundary is transgressed as ‘consumers turn volunteers’: “There are consumers who come early morning to help us, pack, organize the vegetables, and help clean things. They always care. There are a few people who evolved from regular consumers to volunteers. They have started to participate with us. It is also one step further into their involvement. It is not just about consumption but working towards the next stages” (co-founder, reStore).

Various aspects of importance in this area:

- Creating a demand for organic, ethical products, it is not enough to produce nice products, they need a market.
- Generate the ‘aware consumer/customer’
- Most consumers are in urban areas
- “we re-connect farmer with customer” to generate long term relationships between farmers/producers and customers
- Transparency of product chain and production
- Securing livelihoods of farmers through fair prices and long term secure income

Of Ambassadors and Celebrities: Awareness, outreach, education, learning

As has already become apparent from the discussion in the previous section (producer-consumer relationships), creating awareness, reaching out for education and learning is a central mission for all initiatives studied.

- Outreach and exposure visits: farmers and other people visit organic farms
- Pass on knowledge of organic farming to ‘newcomers’ who live in nearby villages. Another effect is that land, which has fallen barren is being re-used as agricultural land: “People approach us saying that they have five acres of land nearby but their kids are working in Chennai. They want to start organic farming but they don't have the time and knowledge about it. So, we collect their numbers and select a few people who we would contact personally to come to our farm and learn more about organic farming. We would give them advice and guidance, tell them about what their region is good for (paddy, vegetables or millets). [...] Based on this we guide them what to produce and market them.”
- Initiators mostly subjected themselves to learning-by-doing: “We were interested in Organic Farming but my father and grandfather had no connection with agriculture. So all this is very new to me. I had to learn everything. I went on a personal journey from 2001 up to 2010 when I met so many farmers of organic farms. I spent from two days to one month with them and I learnt a lot of things” (co-founder, Nallakeerai).

Initiatives stress their intention to create and promote a certain lifestyle, the ethical, social and ecological implications that underpin it as well as health awareness connected to organic food consumption. For example, exposure visits have the aim to understand the product, organic farming and farmers’ situation but equally to connect the urban consumer with the source, i.e. the farmer: “We want consumers to be aware, it is also a lifestyle we are promoting and not just a product sale. We would tell them why it is important to understand Organic Farming by organizing farm visits, people would go there to the farm and stay for a day or two to understand. [...] We ensure that people understood everything, the farmer’s plight and problems they faced, especially farmer suicide in India. [...] We would also talk about the health effect of organic produce. We wanted people to not just come to our shop but to purchase organic produce if they can and what they can do through growing an organic garden“(Anantoo, reStore)

Over the past ten years, going organic has become something fashionable and chic: “See, all great movements start off small. I can wholeheartedly tell you that reStore has been

responsible in influencing organic market across Tamil Nadu and outside. We have influenced so many people including policy makers to think organic and to see why it is important. [...] There were politicians, public figures, actors and cricket players who would come and stand in a queue and buy our products. In fact, there were a lot of people who went away because they would feel very odd to come and stand in a queue. We have reinforced a statement. [...] So we made that a statement and we also made that chic.

We make everybody who uses the products a celebrity. In social media days it is easy for us. If you bought something at Tula you could post it on the Tula Page. You become a Tula ambassador, everybody who buys Tula becomes a celebrity. The terrace garden group in Bangalore had all come in Tula dresses for a meeting. We made celebrities out of them. We are all the ambassadors. Whoever endorsed became our celebrities” (co-founder, reStore).

The Green Bazaar – organized by TheAlternative.in in cities across India like Bangalore, Chennai, Delhi, Hyderabad - is a nodal point of initiating change in local neighbourhoods through workshops, talks, stalls presenting and exhibiting sustainable and organic products. These events bring together ‘change makers’ – existing activists and groups - of the city and the particular locality, and link civic as well as social and environmental issues. “...it is more likely that you will participate in some local initiative than you will go to far away places. So, can we create these communities that are self motivated? They all have a space to come together, meet people, get inspired and take back home. We can’t do this thing alone. Like Whitefield Rising⁴ was a huge collaborator. There are already people looking at Whitefield’s infrastructural issues, Whitefield’s social initiatives and they reach out widely to apartments, they bring in people to do workshops at a broad level concerning civic issue as well as social, environmental, and so on. (TheAlternative.in, Bangalore)

In this way, The Alternative’s Green Bazaars help people and activists to reach out to the wider public. These events are there for people to discover things and green options. In order to increase the appeal they have special activities for kids, like play areas and storytelling: “So it’s a refreshing day out, also other than the malls, where else do you go with kids? So using that as a peg to get regular people in. These are not activists. They may...i mean there’s a mix. They are the people who are discovering in the first instance. [...] I myself didn’t know there’s something called sustainable coffee. So there’s a discovery process. And then you bring in the champions who are already there in the area, those are the people we partner with, the experts and participants in this.” (TheAlternative.in, Bangalore).

The challenge is eventually to translate this awareness and education into real life action, how to move on from awareness to tangible results. One argument towards achieving this is that while internet and social media provide a platform for inspiration and sharing experience, one would still need the real world experience with live interaction and face-to-face encounters to generate the actualisation of change: “Very often we hear of people that have been able to adapt to millets, do something with solar, look at Greenhome, get in touch with them, grow something in their garden with help from The Alternative. And we also conduct the Green

⁴ A local action group. Whitefield is a posh neighbourhood in the east of Bangalore where many employees in the IT sector live.

Bazaar, because we argue that people have to touch in order to feel. It's not about reading it online. That is the second part. First experience should be something that is very sensible and appeals to people in terms of action... and that is reality, it is not *chumma*⁵ some activists are doing" (TheAlternative.in, Bangalore).

In their work, The Alternative.in follows a strategic approach of action towards how to impact on people's lifestyles and consumption patterns. It concentrates on initiating small changes and everyday life action across various levels of intervention, attempting to generate a sort of pathway of change from the individual to the household to the community.

Conclusion

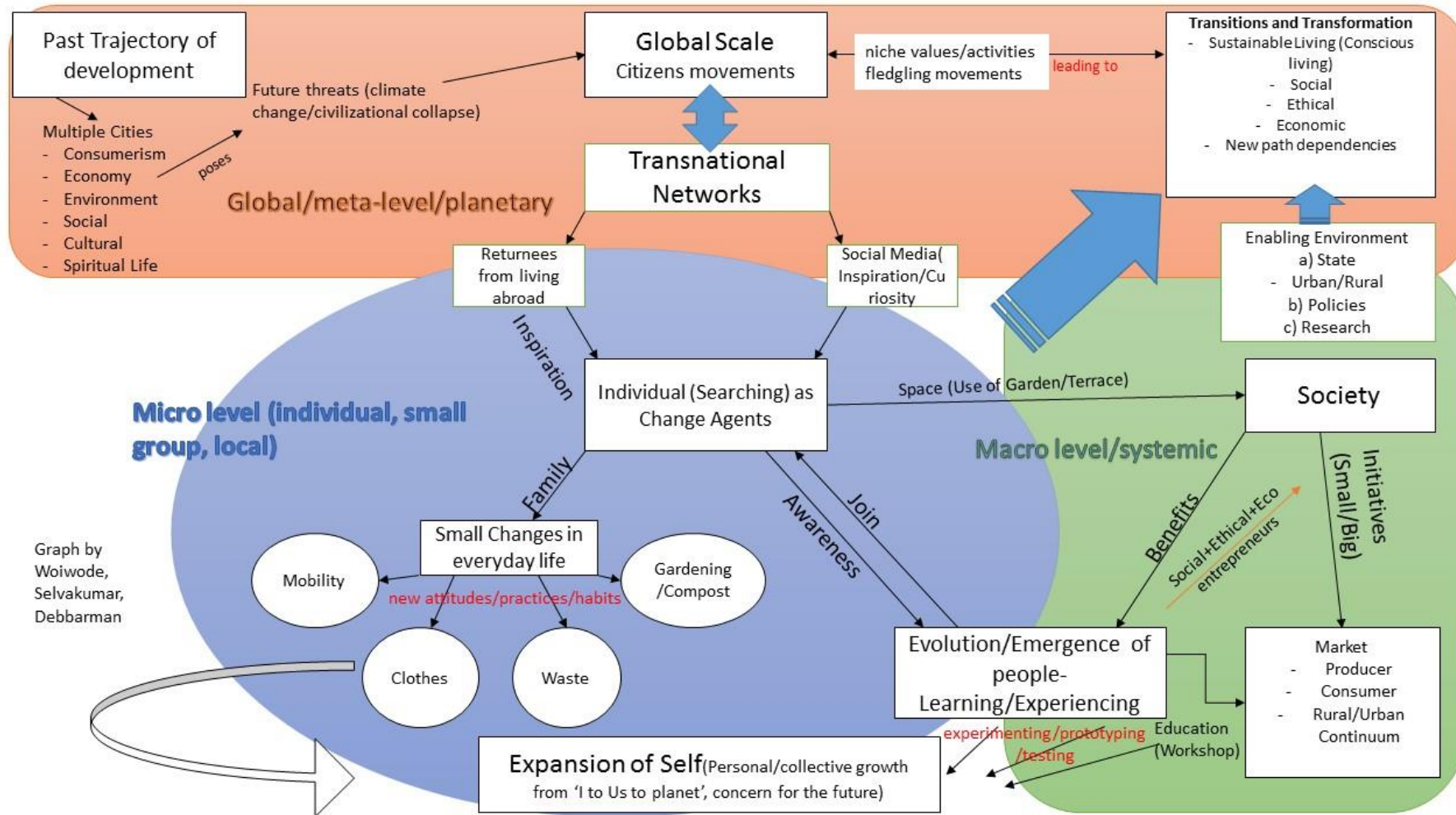
This paper pulls together a preliminary analysis of the rich material that was collected. An initial discussion of the overall preliminary research findings was presented by Hackenbroch and Woiwode (2016), which has been refined in the meantime and is now available displayed in the diagram (Fig. 1). This figure draws together three levels of complexity to understand transformative citizen-driven, grassroots social innovation towards sustainability in selected cities of India:

1. a micro-level of local change: the individual/small group begins a process of very personal, local change by way of lifestyle and/or consumption choices in sectors like mobility, waste, clothing, or gardening. For individuals, this commitment is often explicitly driven by a search for more meaning in life. Interestingly, many youngsters with professional background in highly paid jobs consciously discontinue their jobs.
2. a macro or more systemic level of societal change can be distinguished where initiatives attempt to induce societal and systemic change; for instance, by creating awareness and concrete action towards sustainable living (e.g. internet platform and Green Bazaar) or building cooperative organic food producer-consumer networks through what we identified as "social-ethical-ecological entrepreneurialism", and lastly
3. a global meta-level about the grand challenges: on the one hand discourses about the grand challenges are shaped by the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change, the Sustainable Development Goals and an increasing debate about necessary socio-economic transitions towards sustainable societies. In concrete terms of this study we may conclude that such global interconnectivity plays out in two aspects (i) many individuals we interviewed had returned from living abroad—e.g. Singapore, USA, Europe—where they were exposed to such ideas, witnessed and participated in similar projects; and (ii) access to and use of social media provides inspiration and examples of what is possible. We found global knowledge mobilities a crucial dimension in the emergence of local initiatives. Even though they are local, they are also embedded in transnational linkages or networks that connect them to global-scale citizens' movements promoting transitions to sustainability, fairness and justice.

⁵ A Hindi expression literally meaning 'kiss', here metaphorically 'nonsense'.

In conclusion, while these activities have reached some scale in urban India, they remain niche activities available, accessible and affordable to a minority of the urban populace, which is primarily upper middle and upper class, and more likely better educated than the average citizen. However, as has been demonstrated, while these characterize the initiators, there are clear efforts and links to the rural farmers to enhance their livelihood security. Nonetheless, it is fair to argue that the studied local initiatives to change people's everyday life practices are currently in between "transformative moments" at the local level and "scaled movements" at the national level (which is true for the organic farming/food sector), striving towards sustainable lifestyles and conscious production-consumption.

Figure 1: Innovations towards Urban Sustainable Lifestyles and Consumption at work on three Planes – Bangalore and Chennai



Graph by Woiwode, Selvakumar, Debbarmar

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Appendix

Topic guide used for semi-structured interviews:

Personal Trajectory

1. Describe the source of influence and/or inspiration that led to your involvement or founding this initiative. What was it that made you change your own way of living?
2. The reasons why – the Personal Conviction behind starting the group/of becoming part of it
3. Explain and describe the goals and objectives of the initiative
4. Describe the personal Motivation, is there any kind of inner work that is important, a technique that is practiced or being used? – History of your own personal life that contributed to this?
5. The personal journey, major ‘milestones’ of one’s life, is there such a thing? Have there been challenges, and if yes of what kind? How was it possible to overcome them?
6. Evidence (Self / Others) of previous point 5, what is the progress and how is it evaluated?
7. Partners / Collaborators: are there partners and/or collaborators needed? How are they linked to you/the initiative?
8. Financial Model
9. What / How to Scale – Support required: can it be up-scaled, what would be needed, the requirements?
10. Transnational Connect – Experiences: is there an exchange or inspiration by other initiatives worldwide?
11. Global Knowledge Base: similar to previous point, is there an understanding of belonging to a larger, maybe even global movement, co-creation and exchange of knowledge?
12. Connection of the View of Life with one’s work in the initiative: stance towards, climate change, their lifestyles, notion of quality of life, spirituality, connections of people’s perceptions and approaches to climate change with urban development polices of Bangalore/Chennai
13. How would you describe your own world view, if possible?
14. What does sustainability mean from your point of view? What does sustainable lifestyles/consumption mean to you?

Initiatives / Communities

1. Goals & Objectives
2. Initial idea
3. Story of creation (group size)
4. Activities: how experimental, what is new/different?
5. Communication
6. Networks / Association
7. Financial Model
8. Relationship with Local Government – Expectations
9. Approach / Methodology - Experiments

10. Learning Curve – Survival / Growth (idea / process)
11. Resilience: how does it matter in connection to sustainability? What is their sustainability vision?
12. Plans to scale up – support required
13. Written material
14. Media coverage
15. Evidence (progress)
16. Challenge at Group Level (Mindset / attitude / behaviour)
17. Team / Group Process (Conflict / Consensus / Negotiation)
18. Learning by doing
19. Organisation within Group
20. Do you know any other initiatives similar to yours?