

Justifying the lesser evil – experience of self-sufficient living
in consumerist society

Ieva Tuca, 10294224

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Supervisor: Dr. Annette Jorgensen

Head of Department: Dr. Bernadette Quinn

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Department of Social Science

DBS School of Arts

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Abstract

Humans are causing unprecedented change to global environment contributing to the ongoing mass extinction, climate change and worldwide destruction of natural habitats. Implications of these changes for the future of humankind are increasingly coming into public discourse as new social movements such as Extinction Rebellion are being established. This qualitative study was conducted to investigate experiences of people who choose to include elements of self-sufficiency and environmentally friendly approach in their lives and to find out their approach to sustainable living practices in modern Ireland. By conducting and analysing four semi-structured in-depth interviews it was found that even though each individual journey into sustainability is separate, they all form coherent pattern of a social movement underpinned by real and virtual connections in the community and on social media. For people to succeed in their changing lifestyle they have to compromise between their ideals and being part of the community. By taking change one step at a time in slow continued move towards they are able to justify non-sustainable choices as part of their progression to being responsible guardians of their land and examples for others who may follow the same route.

Introduction

Modern global society is based on intricate interconnected network of exponentially increasing production and consumption of goods driven by capitalist ideology of economic growth via creating and satisfying ever increasing material needs (Ritzer, 2011, p.45). This model of development has led to the ongoing sixth mass extinction and is threatening survival of our species among all others (Ceballos, Ehrlich and Dirzo, 2017). Increasing awareness of non-sustainability of this way of life have led many to question viability of the current social order and exploring alternative ways of living while preferably preserving comforts and abundance people are now accustomed to.

Partial or complete self-reliance and small-holding sustainability combined with non-monetary communal collaboration is one example of an alternative development pathway which can deliver greater life satisfaction without compromising future survival of humankind (Jacob, Jovic and Brinkerhoff, 2009). Also increased well-being and affluence seen in modern Western societies has been shown to positively correlate with increasing preference for environmentally friendly life choices (Wang and Kang, 2019).

The project objectives were to find and contact people in Ireland who consider current socioeconomic model unacceptable and have taken practical steps to rectify the situation on a personal level, to conduct and analyse in-depth interviews and to understand their perspective on interaction with wider society.

The study should provide insight into interaction between smallholders and general public, understanding of motives for choosing to move away from the majority and how do people who reject mainstream capitalist model find compromise between their ideas and the fact that they still participate in processes which they consider wrong.

Modern alienation

Incidence of mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, substance abuse and eating disorders is highest in the Global West, e.g. Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand with the USA having the highest rate of mental health issues in the world according to the World Health Organization (Ritchie and Roser, 2016). It has been argued that increased globalisation, industrialisation and resulting consumerism as model of modern development all lead to dissatisfaction with life and personal alienation due to compartmentalisation of daily activities such as separation between home and workplace, dividing activities into work and leisure as well as introducing spatial and temporal separation between consumption and production (Allen, 2011, pp. 37-43). Increased atomization of society has clear negative consequences for individual well-being while continued growth leads to environmental problems, climate change and prospects of major social cataclysm occurring once such growth will be no longer possible. Sustainable development is proposed as a way to future proof current model by applying practices which would preserve resources necessary for growth in future generations (Considine and Dukelow, 2009, p. 464). For the global society to survive fundamental change of approach is needed as outlined in Toffler's concept of the Third wave society which is based on closely linked prosumers in contrast to existing separation between production and consumption.

Prosumers as alternative to separation

Term prosumption was developed by Alvin Toffler in 1980s and initially appeared in the IT sphere to label behaviour of computer users who contribute to creation of content. This phenomenon however, is inherent to many spheres of life – politics, energy production, mental health, internet, art, sport etc. Prosumption in general refers to either creating of a product for own consumption or contributing products to a shared pool of goods for subsequent consumption. In the prosumption context labour is free and product has no cost (Kotler, 1986).

By its nature prosumption implies close relationship between production and consumption excluding intermediaries such as corporate trade networks which resonates with principles of sustainable living and self-sufficiency. Prosumption is perceived among environmentalists as alternative to commercial commodities and centralized food production (Perera, Auger and Klein, 2018).

Toffler's paradigm. The third wave

Alvin Toffler postulates that after the Neolithic Revolution society is evolving through changing consumer – producer relationships in three waves. The First Wave is the settled agricultural society dominating the world after demise of hunter-gatherers. In this society most members produce goods for their own consumption or for consumption in their immediate surroundings. Work and home are not separated and society is kept together by tribal/kinship links. The second wave or modern industrial society is characterized by separation of consumption and production, nuclear families and industrialised education.

"The Second Wave Society is industrial and based on mass production, mass distribution, mass consumption, mass education, mass media, mass recreation, mass entertainment, and weapons of mass destruction. You combine those things with standardization, centralization, concentration, and synchronization, and you wind up with a style of organization we call bureaucracy."

The third wave is the post-industrial society where consumption and production are integrated again. Increased productivity results in people having to devote less time to work but still being able to fulfil all their needs. Shorter working hours free up more time for socialization and leisure. As a result, de-industrialization and de-marketization would occur while small social groups would re-emerge as basis of society. These small communities would be not based on kinship but rather on common interests and shared world views on-line and off-line (Toffler, 1984 as cited in Haller, 2011).

Transition from the first to the second phase, that is from pre-industrial agricultural society to modernity required profound transformation on all levels – personal, communal, institutional and global. These changes happened in process of industrial revolution (ibid). With increasing abundance of modern life and as people in the developed countries have satisfied their basic needs there is a space for reflection on the status quo and change – oriented activism (Wang and Kang, 2019). For the global society evolving into the third wave would mean massive change comparable with the industrial revolution. Vehicles capable of starting and sustaining momentum of change are social movements.

Social movements

Social movement is a collective expression of protest where “sustained and self-conscious challenge to authorities or cultural codes” occurs as a result of organizational or multiple individual actions employing institutional and extra institutional means of influence. Social movements can integrate into existing framework by forming recognized organisations or participating in existing governance or decision making structures which leads to their institutionalisation. Alternatively, social movements can lead to transformation of existing social order by acting outside the system (Louis and Montiel, 2018). Social movements or social protests bring together people with similar concerns who then reinforce their views by creating common narrative for the movement. With a consensus on movement’s unity and once it is formed as a distinct entity participants can identify themselves as parts of the bigger whole. This directional participation of multiple individuals leads to formation of distinct collective identity which brings its point of view into public discourse through actions and spokespersons (Gongaware, 2010).

Sociologically there are two main approaches to social movements. Political perspective on social movement is an approach developed within American tradition which places much importance on political representation of peoples’ feelings and ideas where strength of any

social movement is relative to strength of its presence in politics and the ability of representing organisation to lobby its agenda and to mobilise grassroots' activists when necessary (Connolly and Hourigan 2006, p.11). Within this paradigm social movements are seen as rational entities competing for their share of resources and power which makes them indistinguishable from other actors in modern capitalist society such as corporations and political parties. Informal component of social movements in this model is only relevant to the extent it contributes to achieving political goals. The aim of social movement in this perspective is to include presently ignored or marginalized groups into decision making process and make their voices heard (ibid, p.12).

The alternative or European perspective sees social movements as ongoing cultural experiments in developing new forms of communal existence and interactions which may result not in merely change in political representations via formal organisations but provide new forms of existence (ibid).

Viewed from Marxist conflict perspective existing contradictions and tensions in society will result in people trying to find their own solutions outside existing frameworks of political interactions. Types of social movement and directions they would take will depend on contemporary inequalities arising from current social organisation. Existence of these movements is not necessarily formalized and politically represented but sum of activities of their members may serve as engine for social change (ibid, p.18).

Self-sufficiency as social movement

Contemporary social movements tend to be quite different from the two above described groups and especially those with no central organisation such as alternative food networks or self-sufficient homesteaders. These 'movements' themselves are large and diverse continuums which are difficult to quantify, entirely informal and self-directed (ibid, p.168-170)

People embracing self-sufficiency do so mostly on individual basis and seek to move away from society instead of forming political groups or organized societies. Their form of personal social activism applied to own lifestyle is quite different from classical organized social movements. Individual participants come to their lifestyle changes through personal motivations (whether food security, health, concerns about climate change, or fossil fuel use), and embark on their own informal learning processes trying to succeed in their new role often using social media as learning and community building tool. Therefore, even though many people take a move to the same direction and act in similar way they are not formalizing their activities (Smith, 2015).

Despite their individualistic nature this pattern of making conscious choices which are contrary to the ones accepted by the majority of people, connecting to others with similar views, forming virtual subculture and hoping to be part of the larger community which brings change to an existing order is consistent with the defining elements of social movements (Connolly and Hourigan 2006, pp. 145-147).

This study is focusing on modern Irish *back to the landers*, people who disagree with urban capitalist way of life where production and consumption are separated, where people fill strictly defined niches and live in artificial environments. As they disagree with mainstream practices they will often have to make conscious choices of what aspects of the modern civilization to accept and sometimes will have to struggle with their consciousness to make compromises between their ideals and reality.

Back to the land movement was at its most famous in late 60s and early 70s in the USA when over a million of mostly educated middle class youth moved to rural location in pursuit of alternative self-sufficient lifestyle. They did so as individuals, families or communities aiming to create new way of life by shunning consumerism and working the land instead. Most of these ventures were unsuccessful in the long term however, homesteader families who

integrated with local communities or formed cooperative networks of like-minded families have survived and were able to keep their intended lifestyle (Miller, 1997).

Those moving towards self-sufficiency are driven by “A rising sense of distrust toward government, corporations, and the food system; concern for the environment; the gloomy economy; discontent with contemporary work culture; the draw of hands-on work in a technology-driven world; an increasingly intensive standard of parenting” (Matchar, 2013, p. 15).

Embracing and practicing change

Lifestyle is defined as the distinctive behavioural expression of a characteristic pattern of values and beliefs; lifestyle is operationalized in terms of a recognizable set of personal construct ratings of everyday activities (Jacob, Jovic, Brinkerhoff, 2009). Quality of life have been linked not only to material affluence or status in the society but also to ability to follow one’s ideals. Consequently, when one’s behaviour matches one’s ideals, particularly in relationship to as an emotionally charged project as planetary survival, one is likely to experience a sense of fulfilment reflected in subjective well-being (ibid). People who decide to change their lives by embarking on the journey to self-sufficiency are inevitably rejecting mainstream values as they question and challenge the dominant socioeconomic system. They subscribe to what is named as ‘new paradigm rural development’. In contrast to traditional approach to rural development which seeks to extract primary resources from the land and use them for profit creation in global processing and distributing networks new paradigm calls for ‘deepening’ or creating more value where food is produced, e.g. by farmers making cheese themselves rather than selling milk to factories; ‘broadening’ or creation of agriculture related activities such as agri-tourism or local cooperative; ‘re-grounding’ or relying on local social and ecological capital instead of being dependent on global financial system (Connolly and Hourigan 2006, pp. 176-177).

Moving back to the land and detaching from overwhelmingly consumerist society is likely to result in change of living standards and work practices. This change is not necessarily easy as it will require giving up some comforts and assurances, therefore, choices and trade-offs are made when ideals face everyday living (Sanford, 2014).

According to Gandhi any experiment is confrontation with society or oneself and people can make the change by being the change when they practice their beliefs (Fox, 1989, cited by Yee, 1994; Vijayam, 2004). Lifestyle change, especially the one leading to challenging mainstream concepts is a challenge and a confrontation both with oneself and the society. It has to be morally rewarding to be sustainable. People who give something up need to gain something in return in order for that change to be worthwhile. It can be assumed that those who choose alternative lifestyle gain in improving their quality of life, however it has been shown that it is difficult for people to make choices which will lead to increased subjective well-being in the long term but may result in temporary difficulties (Vazquez, Hervas, Rahona, Gomez-Baya, 2009).

Environmentally conscious people who make transition to self-sufficient living want to succeed in their journey and they also want to make a difference. This journey is not an easy undertaking and people who start dramatic changes in their life soon realize that they need to work hard to cultivate the land, that food production requires skills and experience while items from the “outside” world such as manufactured tools, clothes etc. still have to be obtained. The rapid pronounced change can result in disillusionment and return to the system as it happened to majority of people involved in the Back to the Land movement in 1970’s USA (Jacob and Brinkerhoff, 1986). For them to succeed they need to find mechanisms for sustainable change and ways to cope with challenges which their new way of life will inevitably bring about.

How to sustain change to self-sufficiency?

Capitalist consumer-oriented economy is the most widespread form of social organisation in the world since the collapse of Soviet Union. Our society is oriented towards creating and satisfying individual desires, increasing specialization of societal roles, jobs and technical skills (De Grazia, 2005, p. 4). Commodification affects all material and spiritual aspects of life as even mindfulness practices and religious beliefs have become ways to generate revenue leading to degradation of their original meanings (Hyland, 2016; Borup 2016; Gaffney, 2017).

These tendencies coupled with continued urbanisation and creation of increasingly artificial environment propel modern civilization towards unsustainable future and overexploiting natural resources.

It has been theorized that current producer-consumer systems which creates alienation through separation of work/leisure activities and family/collegial relationship will give way to more balanced system which will not be based on industry and market economy but on mutual collaboration and local relationships aided with modern information technology. This would incorporate new rural development paradigm focused on creating local value both in terms of agricultural production and human cooperation (Toffler, 1984 as cited in Haller, 2011).

If such change was to occur it would do so against prevalent interests of global growth-oriented economy. Existing order would have to be challenged from outside and within governance systems through social movements. Increased individualisation is characteristic for modern day social movements especially in case of self-sufficient small holders who are mostly interested to follow their own ideals but not to actively engage in social action such as participation in any formalized movement. Nevertheless, substantial numbers of people who made transition from urban consumerism to rural self-sufficiency were able to make hard choices and overcome difficulties to live in harmony with their ideals.

Growing environmental consciousness can be seen as opposite process to commodification of spirituality. Once a person is aware of environmental issues, she or he can progress to thinking, creating motivation for change and ultimately engage in some actions based on new ideas (Cherdymova et al., 2018). Environmental consciousness can be triggered by outside influences such as encountering new information or going through life changing events which break old behavioural patterns and open individual's mind to new influences. If this results in continued change of behaviour, then new radical habitus is established driving people towards critical evaluation of their reality and some degree of confrontation with the existing system (Crossley, 2003).

Even though there is considerable amount of research published about environmentally friendly and self-sufficient lifestyle, Irish Organic Food and Back to the Land movements very little information is available on personal experiences of going through change caused by transition to self-sufficiency and how people cope with choices and compromises they have to make with consumerist society. This is the first study specifically looking at how people who choose self-sufficient living in Ireland incorporate their choice in interaction with wider communities and what would make their transition success or failure.

Therefore, the research question is how and to what extent do people who reject current consumer capitalist societal values and try to become self-sufficient find compromise between their ideals and participation in the wider economy of contemporary Ireland? To gain meaningful insight into this questions several aspects have to be looked at such as why people choose to become self-sufficient, what modern conveniences do self-sufficient smallholders use, how do they justify compromise between their motivation for self-sufficiency and participation in the economy and do they want to become completely independent?

Methodology

Design

Experiences of sustainable living in modern Irish society have multiple dimensions on personal, family, community and wider societal levels. This qualitative research used engaged scholarship approach to reveal how people make choices and compromises between their ideals and reality of living in consumerist growth-oriented society. Engaged scholarship uses interaction and personal connections between researchers and their subjects who become active collaborators rather than just study material. This approach combines scientific perspective with personal knowledge of the research topic and allows for better understanding of data (Bansal, Smith & Vaara, 2018). The possibility of using this approach was due to researcher herself being in ongoing transition to environmentally friendly and sustainable lifestyle in rural Co. Donegal and therefore the research topic presented not only academic but personal significance. This also helped in recruiting participant for the study as appeal for voluntary participation was posted in social network groups of which researcher was already a known member.

The study was conducted in a period of two months following approval of the project proposal by the Dublin Business School. The questions for interviews were compiled based on review of existing literature with the aim to find how idea of being self-sufficient and environmentally friendly impacts individual's interaction with the society. Study participants were selected from voluntary applicants through social media. Semi-structured interviews were carried out at participants' convenience. One interview was face to face and the other three were conducted over the phone. Consent forms were emailed to all participants prior to interviews and returned signed before interviews were carried out. All interviews were recorded using Dictaphone app on researcher's mobile phone.

Interview transcripts were done verbatim immediately after each interview while coding and data analysis took place after all four interviews were complete.

Materials

Interview questions (Appendix 1.) were previously approved by the research supervisor and arranged in a logical sequence to cover all aspects of the research question. The questions covered several aspects of interviewees' lifestyle – their journey to where they were at the moment of the interview, how long they lived the life they did, how did they make the decision to move towards self-sufficiency as well as if and where did they get support for their decisions. The other section of questions covered compromises between being self-sufficient and being part of wider society. These questions were focused on use of unsustainable items if any, participation in banking system and virtual social networks. Participants were asked how they chose which unsustainable items they use. The final part of the questions focused on the impact interviewees' life style is making on them and about their future plans. This final part was aimed to investigate if participants were satisfied with their choices, degree of discomfort they may have experienced as they were compromising between their ideals and reality as well as satisfaction with the degree of self-sufficiency they have achieved so far.

Participants

A purposive sampling method was used to collect data for this study. Participants were asked to apply voluntarily by placing an appeal for collaboration in the research on two Facebook groups – Irish Sustainable Living Network and Permaculture Ireland. Both groups are aimed at people who are interested in or practicing some form of self-sufficient living. Prospective applicants were asked to contact the researcher via private message on Facebook Messenger. After the initial application and up to the interviews all further communication between the researcher and volunteers was carried over the phone or messaging apps. The First four applicants were invited for interviews and provided with the full information about the reasons

and aims of this study. The structure of interviews was explained, and interviews were carried out at participants' convenience over the phone or in person. Written informed consent (Appendix 2) was obtained prior to interviews via email and permission was sought every time for use of voice recording app in researcher's phone during the interview.

Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the Sociological Association of Ireland Ethical guidelines (SAI, 2019). Researcher was clear and open to all prospective participants about this study being done as part of her degree in Social Science in Dublin Business School and the personal interest she had in the research question. Participation in the study was open to all consenting adults interested in or practising sustainable living regardless of their location, nationality, beliefs, gender, race or disability. None of the participants belonged to any vulnerable group, e.g. children, the very elderly, or people with an intellectual or learning disability. Interview questions were approved by study supervisor and participants were assured of their anonymity.

According to the engaged scholarship approach participants were treated as equal collaborators and contributors to the study. Before commencement of interviews participants were informed that they are free to stop participation at any time and for whatever reason. Participants were also informed that they can ask to stop recording at any time during their interviews. As part of the informed consent it was explained to participants that should they change their mind they can withdraw their data at any point before the study will be published and they should not answer any questions they may consider uncomfortable or inappropriate. They were informed that resulting thesis will be published with open access through the Dublin Business School Library at Dublin Business School, Dublin. Participants were assured that their data will be only used for this study and not distributed to any third party or used for any commercial purposes. All data including interview recordings and transcripts as well as thesis write-up

including citations from transcripts was stored on password-protected hard drive. Interview recordings were immediately transferred onto the hard drive from researched mobile phone and mobile phone copy of recordings was deleted. No identifiers were used in the transcripts and write-ups, answers were coded by assigning random letter to each participant to maintain anonymity.

No external funding was used to conduct this study and no sponsorship was sought. Therefore, there was no conflict of interests or sponsors agenda.

Procedure

One to one interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 1.5 hours following semi structured protocol and all unfolded as informal conversations with researcher asking specific questions in the course of conversation. Interview questions (Appendix 1.) were previously approved by research supervisor and arranged in logical sequence as they were introduced into conversation. Voice recording app was on for the whole duration of interviews after obtaining permission from interviewees to use it. There was no compensation or reimbursement for interviewees time, however all participants requested and were promised to a copy of the final version of the research to be send to them.

In the study thematic analysis method was used. The recordings were transcribed verbatim onto Microsoft Word files. Theme coding and analysis was performed using NVivo 12 software. Interviews were coded and compared according to the themes of the research question such as reasons change or become self-sufficient, use of unsustainable items and lack of choice or sustainable alternatives of the same, integration in the community and role of social media, importance of their lifestyle and future plans.

Findings

For the purpose of this study four interviews were conducted with people who are practicing some form of self-sufficient environmentally friendly living in Irish small towns and rural locations.

As per the research question this study focused on reasons for choosing self-sufficiency and any impact this choice has made on subjects' interaction with wider consumerist society. Themes in the data related to subjects' motivation for opting into their current lifestyle and impact that decision has made on their lives.

Transition and support

Change in life style has coincided with or preceded by migration. Y has moved from Hungary to Dublin and then to Co. Donegal, A has moved from the UK to Co. Donegal and L has returned to Ireland from Slovenia after spending 15 years there. Each participant has made a conscious decision to live their lives the way they do. The degree of change from the previous lifestyle varied in relation to subject's upbringing and previous life experience. For A the process was relatively easy:

“I didn't really change. I always been like that. I suppose because my parents been in similar things. It felt like natural progression to take next step”.

L has always been conscious about environmental issues but embarked on transition to self-sustained living in the last five years:

“I have been interested in the environment for 40 years or more since I was in school and for a long time I was devoted to environmental thing, not in a big way but a little bit in the 80's. And then nothing seemed to work to change. And then about 5 years ago we started reading about Universal Basic Income. What an amazing idea! To everybody to live on. It was tried and it was some success there. We started to read a lot more, loads of different books [...]”.

Y has decided to change her life when her children were born:

“I started with my kids when they were born. I started to think about legacy how to live with”.

F had to make this choice due to health issues and even though for him it was the only viable option, that was still a long struggle to accept shift in values:

“I was making good money. It was a case that I gave up money. It took 3 years for me to accepted. It was very drastic beginning”.

Most participants were supported in their life style choice by their partners or immediate family. This support is seen as really helpful for transition. For F partner’s support was very important:

“If you have good partner, journey to sustainability is much easier”;

for Y it was her husband and mother:

“My husband, he supports me whatever I do. My mother was always like it”;

whereas for A it was her father and a local parenting group.

Compromise

All interviewees still use unsustainable and non-environmentally friendly items, they shop in supermarkets, drive cars run by fossil fuels, and are linked to the global financial system by using bank accounts. At the same time they are conscious about the contradiction of the aforementioned things with their lifestyle philosophy and clearly point out lack of available alternatives which forces them to compromise on their ideals. L is very clear about it, for her:

“At the moment being completely self - sufficient is not possible [...] we are not given proper choices, we don’t have choices to live sustainably. We only can do what we can. Everything you buy is wrapped in plastic and it is impossible, almost impossible to avoid it”.

A expresses similar sentiment about her car and use of energy in general:

“I have a car which drives me bonkers. It was hardest compromise. I would like not to have a car but cannot see a way around at the moment. It is necessity in terms of my kids who want to be part of society around them. I am happy to be witch in the end of the village but they not [...] I rent and I use oil central heating which I find quite painful [...]. How to deal with energy I have no answers to. We have to do it. One of answers is to use less, a lot less”.

Banks are also perceived by all participants as something they would be happy to go without but there is no choice. A says “Hate banks but I need bank account”. The main reason for opposition to banks is their investment practices. Participants are not happy with banks investing in fossil fuels and unsustainable developments and would opt for environmentally friendly banks if such were available in Ireland. L says:

“In the UK I’ve been with the Coop bank for many years. I’ve been with them more than 35 years, I still have bank account with them and they actually are quite ahead of a time in thinking ethically and are clear where they invest. So I am still happy to have an account with them. But I haven’t yet found an equivalent in Ireland”.

Having a bank account is unavoidable as all have to receive some income from employment or social welfare, to pay bills or mortgages. Credit unions are seen as an alternative to bank accounts as people try to limit their exposure to global networks. L expresses a common sentiment in this regard:

“We have Credit Union account which is local, I am quite happy with that, we have bank account which I am not happy about. So now we try to withdraw from the system as much as we can. And you can do it to a certain extent when you are self-employed rather to be completely in the system. We did not come out of the system altogether, we earn money, we need money and we have to have things, access it”.

Social media and community

All study participants use mobile phones and social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp. There was no sentiment against using these technologies. They are seen as useful learning tool and knowledge database. Those who did not have skills or experience with growing their own food or looking after animals get that information from the internet and learn from experienced people in Facebook groups. Virtual communities of like-minded people can replace real life connections as none of the participants have immediate neighbours who share their approach to life. Furthermore, a lack of disposable income and different pace of life are seen as limitations to conventional socializing as F summarizes it:

“When you live sustainably you don’t earn much. And it is 20 euro to get a taxi to town and back for 3 pints what cost you 10 euros each. It is better to buy 4 cans what cost 3 euros. And even if you go, you go for 3 – 4 hours and for you it will be enough, where your friends could be out at 7 and they wanted to go at 2. But you go at 11 because you should feed birds and milk goat. You live different time scale with other people”.

Moving to an eco-village can be an alternative but only few people are able to do that and none of participants have realistically considered this as an option. Social media provide relief from isolation and for A being part of virtual network provided real physical help when her house was flooded:

“And after I had a floods it was fantastic – I put up in Facebook that it was floods Friday night and it was 30 people to show up to help. And helped to fix garden up. It was trees and bushes out of place. Litter was everywhere, it came from illegal dump. It was really humanity there, a lot of people showed up”.

Spatial separation also prevents people from tool sharing or community schooling projects, however each participant would welcome such forms of collaboration in their neighbourhoods.

There is longing for real community as A states “I don’t have little hamlet around me I connect with, so I feel quite vulnerable” and F is expressing the same sentiment:

“It is old Irish term *comhoibriu* it is like cooperative farms, everybody helps everybody else. For example, in the summer farmers help to remove hay from field and then I go to help them. And it is all around circle.”

Future changes and coping with challenges

All interviewees agree that small changes they make in their life are important and they wish to become increasingly self-sufficient in future. According to Y, small step-by-step changes are the safe way forward: “It is a lot of small changes. Small changes doesn’t give space for big mistakes. We are doing everything step by step”. They also see themselves as keepers of knowledge and future teachers, someone who would be more prepared and ready to face coming societal and environmental crises as A suggests: “would like to run some community resilience, workshops and get people thinking how it will be with everything falling apart“. Likewise, L would like to “[...] develop more networks with people who are thinking like we do. We would like to make our place as example what you can grow here”.

The general theme emerging from all interviews is that of modern civilisation losing its way and going towards self-destruction. It occurs to the participants that the normal modern way of way of life based on ever increasing consumption while losing connection with nature is flawed. For F it is obvious:

“We are not weirdos they are the weirdos. It is different lifestyle, forgotten lifestyle which is remembered now. People were living in state houses and apartments in the last 40 years, new normal, which is not normal at all. And it is costing the Earth because people just consuming so much, we consuming more than planet can give. We destroying it, we chipping out stone from our own feet. And we cannot balance on one leg”.

With the old way of life disappearing and destroyed ecosystems become the new normal, doing little things to improve one's immediate surroundings is important for A :

“It is not making difference on ground scale but is making difference to me and my small community that things could be done different way [...]. There is fellow, he lives a mile and a half away. He is old and he is kind of bit odd with his animal keeping practices but actually just having conversation with him, lifestyle things, he is very chatty about how people would have lived in area before. All the mountains were full with grouse but they killed them all, and river would have been full with brown trout and salmon but they blocked down the stream”.

For all participants their new life style has come with challenges but they are determined to continue their journey for the sake of the future, the planet and their children. They realize that they are making compromises but acknowledge the importance of small changes for the future. None of the participants expressed will to completely cut ties with civilisation. L thinks it would be actually worse for the environment if everyone would try to live completely self-sufficient life:

“But only few people are able to live in eco village or off grid. It is just not possible or practical or in fact it will be bad for the environment if you try to do that [...] just to pack off and go somewhere in the woods is not practical”.

Discussion

This study was conducted to look into interactions and compromises made between people practising elements of self-sufficient lifestyle and modern Irish consumerist society. Incorporating self-sufficiency and consumerism into coherent living model inevitably requires making choices about which unsustainable items to use and extent of participation in global economy. Conducting and analysing four in-depth interviews helped to gain more

understanding about individual motivations for change and difficulties people are facing while starting and practicing self-sufficient living.

The current prevailing social model of consumerist capitalism is powered by loans issued by banks relying on expected continued economic growth which enables business to pay back initial loans with interest and turn a profit (Fan and Qianlin, 2017). Ever increasing production of commodities is therefore essential for continuation of our present lifestyle but is ultimately unsustainable due to finite resources of the only habitable planet we know and due to limited capacity of its life support, e.g. functional global ecosystems. Nevertheless, the lifestyle championed by the West has become the benchmark for the majority of the world's population. All aspects of life including religion, beliefs and spiritual practices become commodified retaining their superficial elements but losing deeper meaning which cannot be reduced to monetary values and material gains (Hyland, 2016; Borup 2016; Gaffney, 2017).

Environmental consciousness and the radical habitus of self-sufficient living are opposite to consumerism by their nature as they require reducing consumption and being aware about the long-term and short-term consequences of human impact on nature.

Participants of this study were drawn to self-sufficient lifestyle due to very different reasons from family upbringing to personal health problems, however, as they have progressed on this path, they have become very similar in their attitudes towards environment, food, consumerism and globalisation.

Destructive effects of humankind

All four interviewees express similar sentiment about humans acting as destructive force on nature by consuming more than Earth can give. They see our current way of development as wrong and are concerned about anthropogenic destruction of environment; the effect people have on the natural diversity, how numbers of wild animals such as birds and fish are gone down. Study participants prefer consuming food they produce themselves and are not

comfortable with modern retail practices such as wrapping everything in plastic and would take action with hope that retailers would take notice and change. Two interviewees mentioned that they will remove plastic packaging from products they buy in supermarkets and bin it on the premises as they think retailers should not transfer the responsibility for waste disposal onto customers who have no say about retailer's choice of packaging. There is universal agreement amongst study participants that the current banking system contributes to non-sustainable development and all are looking for environmentally friendly alternatives such as local credit unions or opening accounts with banks who are open about their investments and divest from supporting unsustainable businesses. Similar attitudes and ways of thinking brought them to the same groups on social media such as Sustainable Living Network and Permaculture Ireland on Facebook where they interact with like-minded people.

Non-extremist environmentalists

Their understanding of fundamental flaws of modern civilization leads to them making deliberate decisions about how to live which are not in line with those made by the most people. Even though they are not living in like-minded communities they use social media to connect with people sharing same ideas. They hope that their actions will make a difference and are willing to share their knowledge. All that actually makes them a part of the diffuse social movement (Connolly and Hourigan 2006, pp. 145-147). Participants of this study are not radical environmentalists, they do not denounce property rights and have no intent in participating in illegal activities such as those of Earth First! or Earth Liberation Movement (Taylor, 2008); they are not vegetarians or vegans and even though everyone grows some of their own food, they do not produce or consume exclusively organically produced food. They all use bank accounts, drive cars and get some income from the state or employment. Still all of them in their thoughts, actions and choices are protesting against the existing system even though they are part of the system themselves.

Drastic and rapid lifestyle change while attempting to break free from the modern civilization can be seen as an attractive option, but it is rarely sustainable and does not provide viable development alternative for the society as a whole. Participants of this study have been attempting some form of self-sufficient living for periods from two to fifteen years and none has reverted to their previous way of life. Their success seems to be built on small gradual changes and maintaining connections with society around them which is consistent with a Gandhian approach (Fox, 1989, cited by Yee, 1994; Vijayam, 2004). They would gradually increase share of their own food in their diet, aspire to drive less and use less fossil fuels, choose credit unions instead of banks and do shopping by strictly defined lists avoiding impulse buying. Non-violent opposition to global corporations by choosing local and sustainable sourced products where possible, realizing importance of individual actions for global improvement and being truthful to oneself admitting difficulties, failing but striving for the way forward and believing in the potential good outcome of one's practices. All these tactics and attitudes can help in overcoming inevitable problems anyone will face on a path of alternative lifestyle.

Fusion of sustainable and non-sustainable living

People who make a conscious decision to deviate from the mainstream and to follow their ideals will inevitably have to compromise with larger society. All study participant reported feeling of being different from the majority but in their perspective the majority has lost its way while they are on the right path. They still use things they consider wrong but in doing so they try to limit the number of unsustainable items used and extent of exposure to unsustainable practise. Use of items contrary to their world view is acceptable as the least possible evil. This compromise on ideals is not ignored and it is rationalized that complete separation from civilization is not a viable way forward and not an option for humankind to progress. L makes

the point that everyone living in ecovillages would be bad for the environment, while A is willing to be an outsider but puts her kids' social needs first and therefore is not becoming "[...]witch in the end of the village[...]". They see themselves on continuous journey of improving themselves and the land on which they live, the journey which will eventually result in better future for themselves, their children and their ecosystems. On this journey they will become more self-sufficient as they progress but will do so one step at a time. They see themselves as guardians of their land and hope to make an example of how the land can be put to the best use. They try to prepare for times when "everything will be falling apart" and when these times come, they will be able to show others the way forward.

Internet and social media were the only technological items accepted with no reservations and seen as useful tool for communication, sharing and community building even though it is obvious that use of internet is only because of global connectivity ensured by transnational corporations and underpinned by advanced of technological civilization.

Compromise as key to success

It is estimated that there are over million people in the USA at any given moment who are part of global economy but who have moved to rural locations and practice some degree of self-sufficient living (Miller, 1997). The majority of established self-sufficient household which are single family homesteads and only 6% of them derive their main income from agriculture. Most of them are people with third level education and previous history of relatively well-paid jobs, most are either in part time employment or have their own small businesses with income sufficient to cover their needs. Their degree of self-sufficiency varies from small urban gardens to being almost completely off the grid but in any case, those who success are able to combine both approaches, e.g. elements of sustainable approach and necessary participation in the economy (Miller, 1997). There are no data on number of such people in Ireland, but it can be speculated that this approach of small gradual change is the most resilient form of

environmentally motivated self-sufficient living capable of sustainable future development one homestead at a time. The ability to compromise and having this rational approach to satisfying their own needs and needs of their families, making small changes one step at a time seems to be the key to their success and foundation on which they hope to build better sustainable future.

Limitations of the Study and Implications for Future Research

This study was conducted in two months' time including only four participants. Due to time constraints, complexities of travel arrangements along the Western seaboard and personal preferences of interviewees only one interview was conducted in person while the other three were done over the phone thus limiting personal connection opportunities between the researched and the participants.

Placing appeal for collaboration on thematic Facebook social groups limited participants to the group members and likely was the reason for all the interviewees being positive about using social media. All participants were new to self-sufficiency and only have been keeping this lifestyle for a few years. Three out of four participants were recent immigrants to Ireland. Therefore, even as they were all successful in their live choices so far, the long terms implications of self-sufficiency and possibility of enduring success, especially spanning over generations are unclear.

For this research to provide more insight into long term sustainability of environmentally friendly life and evolution of self-sufficiency it would be beneficial to conduct face to face interviews with people who spent most of their life as homesteaders or even with their children who would be having similar lifestyle. It would be also valuable to contact prospective participants via personal acquaintance rather than using social networks as that can give the opportunity to capture viewpoint of those who do not use that part of modern technologies.

Conclusions

This study was not only the research project but also part of researcher's personal journey in exploring alternative lifestyle based on environmentally friendly choices and emphasis on self-sufficient living. The research question of how people reconcile their ideals with realities of modern life and being part of today's society has revealed open minded and balanced perspective of the study participants. They are people with ideals and passion towards the natural world, they are concerned about the impact our species is making to the planet and about how human activities will affect the generations to come. At the same time, they are themselves parents, children, partners to their significant ones and part of their communities. They have their obligations to fulfil and they are not escaping from their responsibilities. Combining all that into coherent approach to life is not an easy task and can only be achieved via compromise between ideals and reality. Even though all people who were interviewed for the study are relatively new to their current lifestyles they have been successful so far. The key to their success appears to be the realistic approach they are taking and embracing change one small step at a time. None of them have gone completely off the grid but they all aspire to become increasingly self-sufficient with time through gradual progression. The answer to the research question is that the participants of this study cope with unsustainable choices they have to make by seeing themselves as the ones who are doing the right thing, example of to how to be good caretakers of land and as future teachers of resilience when the time comes helps to cope with problems caused by modern way of life. It is not easy for them to change but they are determined to make this change a success even if it will take long time to happen.

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Appendix 1.

Interview questions

1. How long you are living here (where you are now)?
2. Please briefly describe what you do.
3. Most people who try to live sustainable lifestyles sometimes have to make compromises like using unsustainable items, shop in supermarkets or use waste collection services. Do you use any of such things?
4. How did you make the decision to change your lifestyle? Can you tell me about that process? Tell me about how you made the decision? Who did you get support from?
5. How is your life now compared to the one you had before? (How do you feel about your life now? Is there anything you find difficult?)
6. How did you learn skills and get knowledge about sustainable living practices?
7. Do you use banks, credit societies or pension funds? Which ones, how do you feel about that?
8. Are you in touch with like-minded people?
9. Do you participate in local sharing/exchange networks like sharing tools, helping others to do bigger jobs in their households, food/seed/animal exchange, home schooling etc.?
10. Do you feel supported by other people in any other ways (family, friends, neighbours?) How do they support you?
11. What are your future plans?
12. Living this lifestyle, do you get what you are looking for? Do you feel your way of life is making a difference?

Appendix 2.

Self – sufficient living in consumerist society

My name is Ieva Tuca and I am conducting research that explores sustainable living in Ireland.

You are invited to take part in this study and participation involves an interview that will take roughly 40 minutes.

Participation is completely voluntary and so you are not obliged to take part. If you do take part and any of the questions do raise difficult feelings, you do not have to answer that question, and/or continue with the interview.

Participation is confidential. If, after the interview has been completed, you wish to have your interview removed from the study this can be accommodated up until the research study is published.

The interview, and all associated documentation, will be securely stored and stored on a password protected computer.

It is important that you understand that by completing and submitting the interview that you are consenting to participate in the study.

Should you require any further information about the research, please contact Ieva Tuca 10294224@mydbs.ie or my supervisor Annette Jorgensen Annette.jorgensen@dbs.ie

Thank you for participating in this study.

Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____