

## CHAPTER 14

# Consumer-Citizens as Leaders of Change: The Case of Food Waste

ELINA NÄRVÄNEN, MALLA MATTILA & NINA MESIRANTA

## Takeaways for Leading Change

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We examine consumer-citizens and their roles in leading change in the context of food waste reduction. Food waste is one of the “wicked problems” facing society, businesses and consumers alike. It provides an interesting case for the LFC approach because it is a complex and dynamic issue where multiple actors and interests are at stake. In this chapter, we take the consumer-citizen’s perspective and explore the roles they can adopt regarding the issue of reducing food waste. The chapter provides an overview of consumer-citizenship and identifies a continuum of roles: choice-maker, carrier-of-practice, and leader of change. The characteristics of these roles are illustrated by drawing empirical insights from the Wastebusters research project examining consumer-citizens as active reducers of food waste. The continuum demonstrates that consumer-citizens’ food waste reduction involves an evolutionary change from making more sustainable purchasing decisions, to reconfiguring everyday life practices, and finally mobilising other consumers to join the movement. In their relational leadership roles, consumer-citizens also have the ability to affect the system as a whole. The chapter argues that in order to address the food waste issue, moving away from top-down, informational policies and expert-led campaigns toward participatory grassroots and bottom-up ways of engaging consumer-citizens is necessary.

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In this chapter, we focus on the issue of food waste, one of the biggest global sustainability challenges. Food waste can be described as a “wicked problem” (Reinecke & Ansari, 2016; Weber & Khademanian, 2008) for many reasons. It is a complex issue involving a great paradox: as people keep throwing away edible food, others are suffering from starvation and hunger. Due to the complexity and inefficiency of the food system as a whole, surplus food is most often not consumed. It has been estimated that if we could cut the amount of food currently being lost or wasted by just one fourth, this amount would be sufficient to feed 870 million hungry people (FAO, 2017b). The environmental effects of food waste are also considerable: in Finland, the annual CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from household food waste are equivalent to the emissions of 100 000 cars (Lund, 2015). Food waste is a wicked problem because many stakeholders are involved, ranging from individual consumer households to retailers, manufacturers, farmers, politicians, NGOs and companies. Political awareness of the food waste issue is increasing. However, in the UN’s Goals of Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2017) and at the EU level (European Commission, 2017), interests relating to the issue are divergent and sometimes conflicting.

Various studies point to the role of households in producing food waste as significant; especially in developed countries (Gustavsson, Cederberg, Sonesson, van Otterdijk, & Meybeck, 2011). Consumer-citizens therefore can play a key role when looking for possible solutions to the problem. The consumer-citizen as a leader of change embraces sustainability and collective well-being in addition to or instead of maximising their self-interest in the market (Gabriel & Lang, 2015; Jacobsen, 2017). There are various examples of how consumer-citizens are taking leadership roles

in transforming their everyday lives and the lives of others by advocating more sustainable food consumption practices. This includes prevention and reduction of food waste. The purpose of this chapter is to describe and analyse the roles of consumer-citizens in food waste reduction. The role adopted by consumer-citizens is an example of bottom-up relational leadership where ultimately,

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consumer-citizens try to influence the social order (the existing food system) through transforming their own and others' consumption-related values, attitudes and behaviours.

The chapter draws insights from the Wastebusters research project examining consumer-citizens as active reducers of food waste. The three-year project (2016–2019) is carried out at the University of Tampere, Faculty of Management, and funded by Emil Aaltonen Foundation. Our findings are based on qualitative research materials regarding food waste reduction, including interviews (e.g. with consumers, food bloggers, and company representatives), an expert panel as well as documents about consumer food waste campaigns and food waste-related operating or business models in Finland and abroad.

We begin by introducing the sustainability challenge of food waste and the consumer-citizen concept. We then present a continuum of consumer-citizens' roles in the context of food waste reduction. The continuum is a typology of ideal types that can also overlap. Constructing a typology is a commonly used strategy in qualitative research to understand the different characteristics related to a complex phenomenon such as consumer-citizenship. Yet, the typology we present is not exhaustive and further roles or hybrids of different roles may exist in the real world. The section includes examples of initiatives and solutions that mobilise consumer-citizens to reduce food waste. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the key implications of the chapter in relation to the leadership for change approach and its main themes: a complex world, relational leadership, and dynamic change.

## Food Waste as a Sustainability Challenge

Food waste can be defined as “any food, and inedible parts of food, removed from the food supply chain to be recovered or disposed” (Östergren et al., 2014). The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) has estimated that globally about one third of food produced for human nutrition is lost or wasted, piling up to about 1.3 billion tonnes of food per year (Gustavsson et al., 2011). In the EU, food waste is estimated

to be about 88 million tonnes per year; equivalent to 173 kilograms of food waste per person (Stenmarck, Jensen, Quested, & Moates, 2016). In developed countries, food waste occurs mostly at the consumer and retail level of the food system. In developing countries food is lost mostly at earlier stages, during post-harvest (Gustavsson et al., 2011).

Food waste creates environmental and economic, but also social and ethical concerns. From an environmental perspective, the carbon footprint of food waste is almost equal (87%) to global road transport emissions. If food waste was a country, it would rank third in greenhouse gas emissions (FAO, 2015). However, the size of carbon footprint varies depending on

where in the supply chain the food waste occurs as well as the type of food wasted. The later in the supply chain the food waste occurs, the greater carbon footprint. Reducing food waste in the later stages of food supply chain, namely at retailers and households, is especially impactful for the environment. Even though wasted meat, for example, constitutes less than five per cent of total food waste, it contributes to over 20% of the total carbon footprint of food waste (FAO, 2015). Economically, the direct financial costs of food waste amount to about USD 1 trillion each

year. When factoring in the indirect environmental costs (the lost value of ecosystems) and social (the loss of well-being associated with natural resource degradation), the full costs reach USD 2.6 trillion globally each year (FAO, 2017a). It is also morally questionable to waste food while people suffer from hunger.

In the next section, we focus on the roles of consumer-citizens as potential leaders of change in the food waste issue. Even though the problem of food waste cannot be solved by any one actor alone, focusing on consumers is important because their preferences, attitudes and behaviours influence the food system. We utilise the concept of consumer-citizen to provide a view of the world where consumption and citizenship are not seen as opposites but as thoroughly inter-linked and overlapping. This unleashes the potential for consumer-citizens to lead the charge toward more sustainability and overall well-being.

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## From Consumers to Consumer-Citizens

The development of the modern consumer society has led to a situation where the current levels of consumption are too high for the next generation to sustain. This has resulted in stark ecological consequences. Environmental issues have become increasingly visible in society. As consumers become more aware of the environmental effects of their actions, they feel increasing pressure to make changes in their consumption habits.

Consumer and citizen roles have traditionally been portrayed as opposites – consumers maximise self-interest in the market, consuming more and more in order to satisfy neverending needs created by consumer culture. Citizens, on the other hand, care about the wellbeing of others and try to behave morally, taking responsibility for their actions (Gabriel & Lang, 2015; Trentmann, 2007). Today these seemingly contradictory roles are increasingly intertwined. The hybrid term which refers to this configuration is *consumer-citizen* (or citizen-consumer) (Gabriel & Lang, 2015; Jacobsen, 2017; Johnston, 2008; Jubas, 2007).

There are two reasons for why consumer-citizens should be analysed as a hybrid. First, consumption has for a long time been conceptualised as more than rational utility maximisation. Through consumption, consumers build their identities and maintain social relationships. Consumption provides a language of symbols and meanings with which we communicate with others and understand the world around us (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). As societal and personal values shift toward an emphasis on sustainability, consumption provides an important forum for people to express these values and meanings in their daily lives. In other words, you increasingly are what you eat, wear, drive and use. Second, there has been a shift in what activities are considered as political. Civil participation is moving beyond the formal domain of the state and voting behaviours. This points to a renaissance for civil society (Trentmann, 2007). Neoliberal ideology further emphasises responsabilising consumers – obligating them to enact their lives through independent and free consumption choices rather than as directed by the government or other central authority (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014).

There is a variety of examples of behaviours of consumer-citizens related to sustainable consumption and political consumerism. These

can be broadly positioned within three roles. The first role reflects the consumer-citizen's role as a choice-maker. This involves making different, more sustainable purchase decisions, such as, for example, buying fair trade or organic products (Prothero, McDonagh, & Dobscha, 2010, p. 153). In political consumerism, the marketplace is seen as a political arena where each consumer "votes" through buying or non-buying. Consumer boycotts punish companies for unsustainable behaviour, for example, Nestlé boycotts. "Buycotts", like "carrotmobs", reward companies for sustainable behaviour (Micheletti, 2003). This view, however, has been criticised as too narrow, because it focuses on purchasing and emphasises individual agency in changing the system (Southerton & Evans, 2017).

The second role focuses on consumer-citizens changing their everyday life consumption practices more holistically. Examples of behaviours include mending things instead of buying them new, buying and selling second-hand, or joining a slow food movement (Chaudhury & Albinsson, 2015; Southerton & Evans, 2017). This role draws from a practice theoretical understanding of consumers (Shove, 2010; Warde, 2014). Here, consumers are seen as (re)performing different practices and routines embedded in social and cultural contexts. The focus is extended from the consumer as "shopper" toward their everyday lives where things are appropriated in use and ultimately removed from use through disposal behaviours. All of these interlinked activities are highly dependent on social norms, values and related cultural meanings, practical, embodied knowledge, and the material world (Warde, 2014). From this perspective, the key to changing consumption behaviour lies not in individual choices made by consumers but rather in disrupting and dismantling unsustainable consumption practices and reassembling them in a more sustainable manner (Shove, 2010). For instance, when joining the slow food movement, consumer-citizens gradually start to amend their everyday practices and routines, while also improving their civic mindedness (Chaudhury & Albinsson, 2015).

The third role reflects consumer-citizens as leaders of change. This role draws from the new forms of political consumerism (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Concerned consumer-citizens may engage in different activities to try to change not only their own behaviour but also that of others and of society more broadly; for example, through utilising social media. The activities of

consumer-citizens who adopt this role no longer affect only their own lives, communities and social networks. As leaders of change, consumer-citizens commit increasing amounts of time and effort to mobilising other people, whether through establishing their own grassroots social movements or joining alternative lifestyle movements like voluntary simplicity and cultural jamming (Cherrier, 2009), or freeganism (Barnard, 2011).

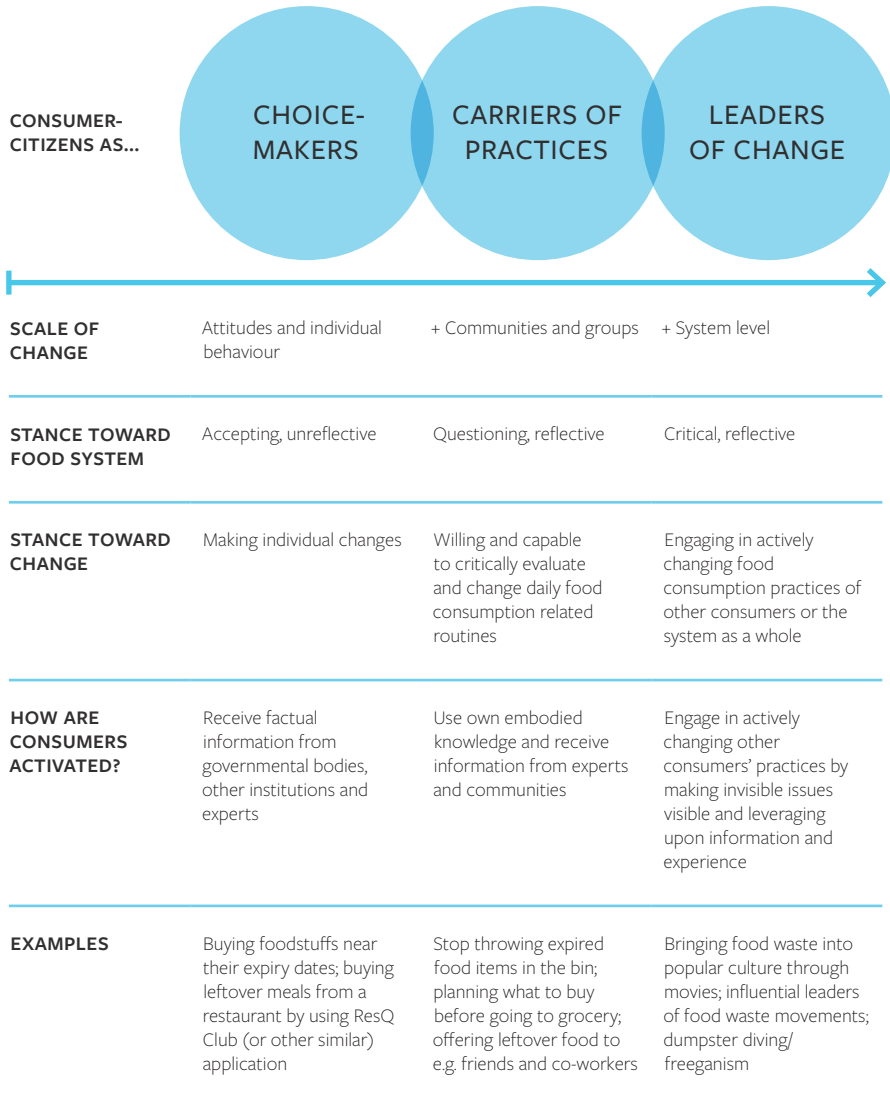
Using these concepts, we identify three roles of consumer-citizens: choice-makers, carriers of practices and leaders of change. These are illustrated in Figure 1. The circles are presented as overlapping because the latter roles also incorporate previous roles. The identified roles are ideal types in a typology constructed to make sense of a complex phenomenon. In the real world, they are not mutually exhaustive and may also overlap.

Next, the identified roles are elaborated in more detail, together with examples of initiatives and solutions that mobilise consumer-citizens to reduce food waste.

## Consumer-Citizens as Choice-Makers

The first role designates consumer-citizens as *choice-makers*. They are autonomic actors who pursue individual interests, but seek sustainability by making changes in their consumption decisions. They make discrete consumption choices related to food waste, such as choosing to buy foodstuffs near their expiry dates at discount (vs. choosing something with a longer expiry period) or by buying leftover meals at discount from restaurants through mobile applications (e.g. the ResQ Club service or similar).

Here, food waste reduction ultimately concerns individual sustainable consumption choices. Individual consumption behaviour is influenced by increased awareness of the issue of food waste. The consumer-citizen becomes aware of the problem of food waste and has a positive attitude toward reducing it, but at a very general level. The consumer-citizen as choice-maker participates in food waste reduction through purchasing acts that may help to reduce retailers' or restaurants' food waste. However, the consumer-citizen may not recognise the full complexity of the issue. Even if consumer-citizens try to avoid wasting food in their everyday



+ = includes earlier presented category/categories

FIGURE 1. Consumer-citizen continuum in reducing food waste



lives, as choice-makers they are not reflective of the everyday routines and practices of how food waste occurs. Hence, the choice-maker more or less accepts the food system as it is. Discrete acts do not affect the food system as a whole.

Many food waste related campaigns are based on the idea that giving (expert-led) information about food waste will lead to increased awareness of the issue and further to positive attitudes toward reducing food waste (see also Evans, Welch, & Swaffield, 2017). For instance, a Finnish “Waste week” campaign, organised annually by a non-governmental organisation, focuses on educating consumers about the effects of food waste (for other similar campaigns, see Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2017). It promotes action by organising events, disseminating information about food waste, and encouraging companies, public organisations and other parties to battle against food waste together with consumers. The problem with campaigns relying on attitude change is that there is a recognised attitude-behaviour gap particularly in sustainability issues – having the intention to do something does not necessarily lead to action (Shove, 2010). This issue is addressed through a practical and theoretical understanding of consumers underlying the second role of consumer-citizens discussed below.

## Consumer-Citizens as Carriers of Practices

The second role denotes consumer-citizens as *carriers of practices*. Here, consumers are seen as (re)performing different practices and routines in their everyday lives. Consumption is seen as broader than mere purchasing behaviour, and includes the phases of use and disposition. Individual consumption behaviours do not necessarily depend upon conscious and deliberate choice but instead, on participating in socially learnt practices depending on upon cultural meanings, values and understandings (Shove, 2010). From the perspective of this second role, the route to reducing consumer food waste is through consumers either dropping unsustainable practices, changing elements of existing practices or adopting new more sustainable practices (Phipps & Ozanne, 2017). Earlier research has found that being able to plan and manage

routine aspects of grocery shopping, cooking as well as food preservation, storage and display are central to managing food waste (Evans 2011, 2012; Närvänen, Mesiranta, & Hukkanen, 2016).

Consumer-citizens as carriers of practice are willing and able to evaluate critically and change their daily food consumption-related routines. They also question the (effective) functioning of the current food system. An example of dropping an unsustainable practice is when consumer-citizens stop throwing food items in the bin based on use-by and best-before dates. Instead, consumer-citizens begin utilising their senses such as sight, taste, and smell in assessing whether food products are still edible. Similarly, they can change their existing shopping routines by making plans (e.g. shopping lists) beforehand in order to avoid buying excess food. Existing food storage and cooking practices at home may also be modified in order to account for leftovers or use food items in their order of expiry. Different kitchen appliances such as blenders and freezers may be added to the existing array of practices to help consumers transform potential food waste into new dishes or to prolong the life of food items (Närvänen et al., 2016). Consumer-citizens are also capable of adopting completely new practices, such as starting to offer leftover food to house guests and/or bringing it to the office to share with co-workers.

As consumer-citizens adopt the aforementioned practices, the scale of change expands from their own behaviour to the communities and groups where they are members. Becoming more reflective of their behaviour at home and in other contexts where they encounter food waste may result in a questioning or at least reflective orientation toward the food system (Chaudhury & Albinsson, 2015). Consumer-citizens may for instance learn to distrust date labels or start purchasing fruit and vegetables that do not look perfect yet are perfectly edible. They may also share this practical knowledge with their family members and communities. For example, a Finnish company Paulig initiated the “Waste Challenge” campaign in 2016. It encouraged consumers to post their best tips for reducing food waste on social media. Experts and authorities are no longer seen as the only relevant source of information. Instead, consumer-citizens learn from each other and can themselves become experts on the issue. This increased civic-mindedness and expertise results in consumer-citizens becoming even more

involved in the issue and adopting the third identified role of consumer-citizens as leaders of change. We now discuss this role in more detail.

## Consumer-Citizens as Leaders of Change

The third role identifies consumer-citizens as *leaders of change*. In this role, consumer-citizens are personally concerned about the negative aspects of affluent consumer society as well as the environment. They are thus interested in the future welfare of other people, species, and the environment and capable of making a difference and leading change.

Consumer-citizens in this role engage in actively changing the food consumption practices of other consumers and/or the system as a whole. For instance, the Finnish “From waste to delicacy” blog campaign, initiated by several active Finnish food bloggers from May 2012 onwards, has encouraged other consumers to reduce their food waste. Posting tips, receipts, and visually appealing photos, the food bloggers have shown that, with a little effort and/or cooking knowledge, anyone can reduce household food waste and “make the world better” one meal at a time (Närvänen et al., 2016). The campaign has appealed primarily to young, working-age (female) consumers interested in cooking and ready to adopt novel, up-to-date and/or fashionable consumption patterns.

The scale of change within this role is related to the food system and society as a whole, thus expanding the sphere of social change compared to the first or second roles. The consumer-citizens who adopt the third role actively try to reveal the flaws of the current food system as well as other issues related to it. Examples of these types of actions include efforts to bring the food waste issue into popular culture. Movies like “Just eat it” (<http://www.foodwastemovie.com/>) and “Wasted – the Story of food Waste” (<https://www.wastedfilm.com/>) make invisible things visible and abstract things concrete. These documentaries show that incredible amounts of food items are thrown away or recalled from groceries for various reasons as well as point out the fact that large amount of food is never harvested due to standards set by retailers or the preferences of (wealthy) Western consumers.

Another example of consumer-citizens as active leaders of change are the influential leaders of grassroot food waste related movements and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). These include the Danish “Stop wasting Food” (<http://stopwastingfoodmovement.org/>) campaign by Selina Juul, the British “Feedback” (<https://feedbackglobal.org/>) and “Toast Ale” (<https://www.toastale.com/>) campaigns by Tristram Stuart, the Dutch “Taste Before You Waste” (<http://www.tastebeforeyouwaste.org/>) campaign by Luana Carretto, and the Finnish “From Waste to Taste” project (<http://waste2taste.com/>) by Johanna Kohvakka. These food waste movements/NGOs, usually starting as grassroots interest groups in the social media, are led by committed individuals keen to address the social problem of food waste. They try to increase awareness of food waste, educate consumers, and encourage the public to participate in the discussion and take action. They may also give tips regarding how to cook from leftovers, how to shop for groceries in a sensible manner and how to donate surplus food. The message comes from one consumer to another. In this way, consumers themselves encourage other consumers to be active in terms of not wasting their food.

There are currently several other NGOs that, with the help of a multitude of (consumer-citizen) volunteers, collect surplus food (from farmers, manufacturers, and retailers) and donate it to those in need. These include food banks as well as other related NGOs such as Hole Food Rescue (<http://www.holefoodrescue.org/>) in Teton County, Wyoming, U.S. and Food Angel (<http://www.foodangel.org.hk/en/>) in Hong Kong. Social media channels have also been used to share surplus food. Foodsharing.de (<https://foodsharing.de/>) is an online platform which enables consumers (together with farmers, manufacturers, and retailers) to offer and collect leftover food. Mobile applications have been developed for the purpose of enabling consumers to share their leftovers with other consumers living near them, such as the Finnish Neighbourfood (<https://neighbourfood.org/>).

Voluntary dumpster diving for food or freeganism can also be seen as an example of consumer-citizens as active change agents. Freegans engage in an alternative mode of consumption as they collect food items from supermarket garbage bins. They also operate as modern-day Robin Hoods as they snatch food from multinational retailers and give to those in need

– either using it themselves or donating it to charities. Freegan practices involve using the senses in assessing the edibility of food items, embodied knowledge and skills about optimal collection time of food items, what kinds of food products are to be picked from the bins, and how to prepare them (Edwards & Mercer, 2012). Engaging in the practice, consumers enact their ethical and political beliefs including the commitment to minimise food waste produced by the capitalist food system.

## Discussion

This chapter has examined the role of consumer-citizens as leaders of change in the context of food waste reduction. In reviewing literature on consumer-citizenship and drawing empirical insights from the Wastebusters research project, we have identified a continuum of roles regarding food waste reduction: choice-maker, carrier-of-practices, and leader of change. The roles emphasise the capability and willingness of consumers to recognise themselves as change agents regarding food waste reduction. However, the ways and means for achieving change varies among roles. In the first, change occurs through increased sharing of (usually expert-led) knowledge and consequently an increased awareness of the issue of food waste. In the two other roles, socially shared food waste reduction related choices and practices are incorporated so as to promote a more sustainable way of life, expanding from single households to communities and groups and the food system as a whole.

The continuum paints a positive picture of the ability of consumer-citizens to lead the change in solving wicked problems such as food waste. However, there are also some critical views that should be presented. First, consumption activities related to developing more sustainable ways of living can easily be undervalued as alternative and marginal lifestyles rather than becoming a universal moral

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consumerist model (Jacobsen, 2017). A key issue for making an impact is then how to scale sustainable consumption practices for the masses and normalise them. It must also be acknowledged that even though we are discussing global challenges, the abilities of consumer citizens to change their own and others' behaviour are not equal. These abilities depend on economic, social and cultural capital – i.e. the resources that consumer-citizens have available for them. Second, political consumerism in general fits the neoliberal political agenda of freeing regular political bodies from handling difficult issues and giving them instead for consumers to solve on their own (Evans et al., 2017; Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). The effectiveness of the activities of consumer-citizens, however, depends on infrastructural arrangements (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Jacobsen, 2017). This means that the activities of consumers-citizens to reduce food waste need to be situated within the broader context of the food system, aiming for shared and distributed responsibility between actors (Evans et al., 2017). The system has to be transformed so that it makes it possible for individual actors (consumers and companies alike) to drop unsustainable practices, modify existing practices, and adopt new, more sustainable, practices (Phipps & Ozanne, 2017).

Food waste, like any other wicked problem, is a systemic issue and cannot be solved by the activities of any one actor (Reinecke & Ansari, 2016). Instead, relational leadership that mobilises different actors is needed. Policies should also recognise the complexity of consumer behaviour in all its aspects rather than viewing consumers as choice-makers only (Southerton & Evans, 2017). Our continuum highlights that when attempting to involve consumers in making a change, grassroots oriented and consumer-driven initiatives are more likely to succeed than top-down, informational campaigns (cf. Barnett, Clarke, Cloke, & Malpass, 2008).

Finally, in discussing consumer-citizenship, it must be noted that both concepts (consumer and citizen) are continuously contested and unstable (Gabriel & Lang, 2015). There are various interests at play and many other actors in addition to consumer-citizens themselves (such as retailers, NGOs and politicians) are increasingly claiming to represent the consumer's interest and talking on their behalf. As argued by Trentmann (2007, p. 151), it may be better to approach citizen-consumers in terms of

“multiple identities that are only slowly (and unevenly and incompletely) fused into a universal subject”.

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