

**Doughnut Economics in Amsterdam:
Tensions and potential power disparities among stakeholders**

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Background

As global crises such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and wealth inequality threaten the health and well-being of humans and the environment, many scholars and activists are critiquing the capitalist economic system dominant in most countries around the world, which is dependent on perpetual economic growth and the unrestrained use of natural resources.¹ Consequently, many people are reimagining social, economic, and political systems to address the root causes of these issues.² Models of sustainable development—such as “Doughnut Economics”—have emerged to provide clarified visions for a just and sustainable economic future.³

Doughnut Economics is a model for political and social action that envisions a social and ecologically thriving economy—*independent of GDP growth*. Its goal is to encourage political and civic stakeholders to evaluate policies and initiatives through a lens that delineates a sustainable future for humanity, instead of relying on criteria that stem from free-market neoclassical economic ideology.

Doughnut Economics principally depicts a long-term vision for societal economic prosperity: a safe and just space for society to function within rational social and environmental boundaries. This space is portrayed by a doughnut, with a “social foundation” on the inner ring comprising twelve basic human needs that ensure social well-being, and an “ecological ceiling” on the outer ring comprising nine planetary boundaries that mark the sustainable limits of resource extraction and economic development.

¹ Kallis and Hickel, 2020.

² Raworth, 2017

³ Raworth, 2017

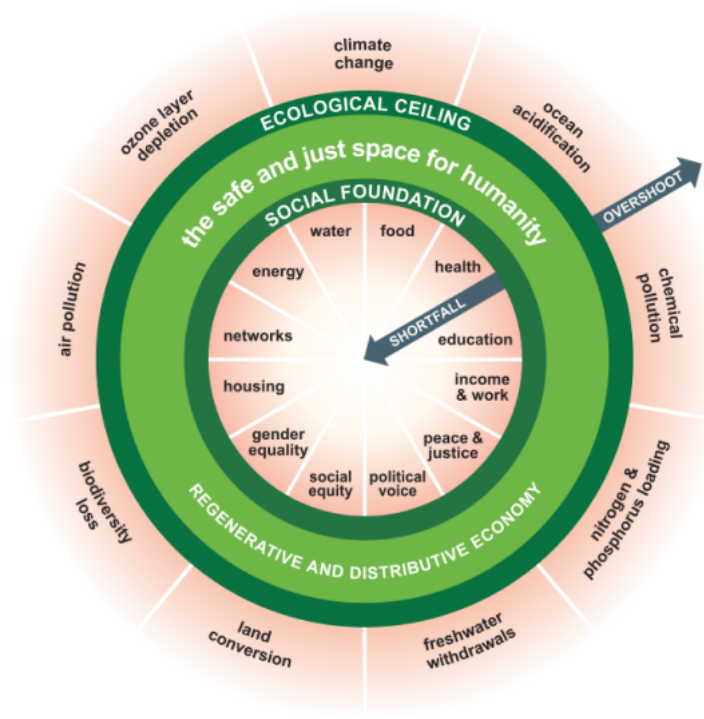


Figure 1. 1: the Doughnut of social and planetary boundaries

The key tenets of Doughnut Economics include:

- See the big picture: the economy is shaped by the market, state, commons, and household, and is embedded within natural environments.
- Humans should be viewed as social, adaptable, and complex beings—instead of simply rational economic decision-makers.
- Economies should be designed to distribute wealth and democratize wealth ownership. The democratization of wealth should change who controls land, money creation, enterprise, technology, and knowledge.
- Economies should be designed to be regenerative, which means they should center and incorporate patterns of natural environments, and support the preservation and creation of living resources.
- While economic growth may be necessary for some countries to thrive, it may not be for others. Economics should be agnostic about growth instead of viewing it as inherently favorable.

These ideas are meant to inform projects, policies, and institutional designs that shape social, economic, and political life. The creator of Doughnut Economics, Kate Raworth, proposes strategies for stakeholders to translate each idea into action.⁴ For example, to redistribute the ownership of monetary currency (a form of wealth), states could fund cooperative banks, in which members are owners and customers of the bank, or communities could start “complementary currencies” that can be used alongside a nation’s official currency whenever there are spare resources and unmet needs of any kind.⁵

Doughnut Economics is a theoretical model, yet Raworth and others promote its use as a practical tool to guide and encourage enthusiastic stakeholders in advancing concrete actions towards its vision. Toward that end, Raworth founded the nonprofit Doughnut Economics Action Lab (DEAL) to engage stakeholders interested in the Doughnut Economy vision to use its ideas to reframe economic narratives, influence policies, and co-create tools and strategies that make a just and sustainable economy possible. DEAL currently works as a third party consultant with businesses, academia, local governments, nonprofits, and community groups to explore Doughnut Economics’s potential as a practical tool. They do not prescribe specific courses of action because they believe in learning through experimentation alongside institutions and communities.

Since DEAL was founded, over 30 cities around the world have begun working with Doughnut Economics to promote sustainable urban planning and policymaking.⁶ Cities are ideal governance units for implementing the DE model because, relative to national and international governments, they have greater capacity for policy innovation and progressive thinking. Cities also hold significant influence in the global economy⁷. The first city to adopt Doughnut Economics as a model to inspire a vision of urban sustainability was Amsterdam, NL in 2020; cities such as Brussels, Berlin, and Melbourne followed suit.

Doughnut Economics has potential to promote transformative action, yet thus far little research has been done on how cities and communities are implementing the framework. My research explores how stakeholders in Amsterdam, NL are interpreting and engaging with

⁴ Raworth, 2017

⁵ Raworth, 2017. Pg. 188.

⁶ DEAL, 2022

⁷ Taylor, 2012

Doughnut Economics, to answer the question: what tensions and/or power disparities are arising in the practical implementation of Doughnut Economics in Amsterdam? To answer this question, I interviewed and conducted participant observation research with stakeholders working with the Doughnut model. I chose to focus on Amsterdam because it was the first city to adopt Doughnut Economics as a model for action, and diverse stakeholders from the city, businesses, universities, and community groups are collaboratively engaging with it.

This report explores differing interpretations of Doughnut Economics between “institutional” and “grassroots” stakeholders, which suggests the existence of power disparities between these two groups. I define “grassroots” stakeholders as members of community-led initiatives working with residents in Amsterdam neighborhoods, and I define “institutional” stakeholders as employees of the city, businesses, academia, or think tanks, who promote urban sustainability through institutional pathways. I also observed a lack of confrontation of urban social inequities, such as racial discrimination and inequality, among Doughnut Economics stakeholders, and the potential for social inequities to be perpetuated within Doughnut Economics initiatives. These tensions and power disparities are important to analyze because they influence who has most power in narrativizing and implementing Doughnut Economics, and they can pose challenges for the actualization of a truly just and sustainable economy.

The subsequent sections of this report will 1) situate this research within the broader literature on alternative economic frameworks and Doughnut Economics, 2) provide an overview of the practical application of Doughnut Economics in Amsterdam, 3) explain the methodology of this research project, and 4) discuss the findings.

Literature review

This literature review positions Doughnut Economics within a broader landscape of alternative economic thinking, discusses the interaction between theory and practical action within social movements, and reviews early research on Doughnut Economics in Amsterdam.

Doughnut Economics is one of many frameworks that challenges neoclassical economic theories to promote social and ecological thriving within society.⁸ These models question the legitimacy of GDP growth as a core indicator of economic prosperity, due to the intensification of crises like climate change and wealth inequality. The groundbreaking 1972 paper *Limits to*

⁸ Klomp and Oosterwal

Growth (Meadows, 1972) was the first major publication arguing that continuous economic growth is ultimately impossible and inherently detrimental to people and the environment. This influenced the creation of “ecological economics” in the 1970s, which argues that economies should constrain GDP growth and consumption to prevent resource depletion and environmental degradation.⁹ While ecological economics does not address the importance of social welfare within their vision of an ecologically sustainable economy, political economists such as Karl Marx and John Maynard Keynes argue that free market capitalism will lead to extreme economic inequality and the exploitation of workers.

Recently, a plethora of theories emerged exploring pathways towards centering social and environmental well-being within economic ideas and decision-making. One current ideological movement called “degrowth” argues that a socially sustainable reduction of society’s economic production and consumption is crucial in preserving environmental health.¹⁰ Ecological economist Giorgos Kallis asserts that policies such as a universal basic income, reduction of working hours, and support for cooperative ownership structures would enable a reduction in economic output to advance improvements in social well-being and equity.¹¹ However degrowth has not gained widespread popular support or political viability, thus there have been few practical applications.¹²

Another economic model, called well-being economics, aims to center social well-being by providing people with equal opportunities for advancement, a sense of social inclusion, and stability—all of which contribute to human resilience—while sustaining harmony with the natural world.¹³ This model gained traction when Scotland, New Zealand, and Iceland came together at the 2018 OECD Well Being Forum and formed the Well-being Economy Governance Alliance, which aims to share policies and strategies towards practically implementing this model.¹⁴

Other alternative economic frameworks have emerged from practical examples of communities organizing their local economies and resisting capitalism. One prominent example is the “solidarity economy” movement, which is a network of initiatives and local institutions

⁹ Ropke, 2004

¹⁰ Kallis, 2010

¹¹ Kallis, 2010

¹² Karlsson: Case Study of the Doughnut Economics Model in Amsterdam

¹³ Chrysopoulou, 2020

¹⁴ Chrysopoulou, 2020

building cultures and communities of solidarity and cooperation. The concept was first used among Spanish economic justice organizers in 1937, and then emerged within working-class cooperative movements in France and South America during the 1980s.¹⁵ Examples of solidarity economy initiatives include: worker cooperatives, community land trusts, credit unions, alternative currencies, community gardens, and community supported agriculture programs (CSAs). In contrast to Doughnut Economics, which engages those who are interested with the theoretical framework, the solidarity economy movement “connects and builds upon the many economic practices of cooperation and solidarity that already exist.”¹⁶ A solidarity economy approach is not a vision for economic organization, but rather an active process of collective visioning.¹⁷

The contrast between the solidarity economy movement and Doughnut Economics—which is a theoretical framework first, and tool for collective action second—highlights potential tensions between theory and practice in movements advancing economic transformation. Because of the academic origins of Doughnut Economics, its adoption as a tool for collective change may require connections between academic and community spheres. Research shows that tensions can arise within social movements that connect academic actors and community organizers: Edelman (2009) found that tensions often occur between rural activists and academic researchers because the two groups occupy different social roles in society and emphasize different kinds of social action.¹⁸

In some cities, Doughnut Economics is only being used in institutional spheres to shift government decision-making practices. An undergraduate thesis by Clementine Moule titled “Is a Doughnut Economics Based Framework a Viable Tool to Enhance Effective Decision-making in English Councils” explains the case of Cornwall, UK, where the city government has developed a “decision-making wheel,” using the Doughnut model that highlights the social and environmental impacts of projects or policies.¹⁹ According to Moule’s research, the Doughnut framework increases the transparency and accountability of Cornwall governmental actions and

¹⁵ Miller, 2010

¹⁶ Miller, 2010

¹⁷ Miller, 2010

¹⁸ Edelman, 2009

¹⁹ Moule, 2022

raises the quality of their decision-making, which is a vast enhancement from current inadequate decision-making practices that don't evaluate social and environmental metrics simultaneously.²⁰

In Amsterdam, on the other hand, Doughnut Economics is used as a framework to connect community-based and institutional initiatives contributing to the doughnut economy vision. One report on Doughnut Economics in Amsterdam titled "Pathways to Sustainable Economies: a Case Study of the Doughnut Economics Model in Amsterdam" by Sofia Karlsson, found that institutional engagement with the Doughnut framework is producing little tangible change, while grassroots initiatives are creating the most impact towards the vision of the doughnut economy. Karlsson's research criticizes the municipality for implementing few tangible action steps after announcing their adoption of the Doughnut model in 2020, due to the challenge of centering the interconnectedness of social and environmental issues within governance structures.²¹ Karlsson concludes that grassroots initiatives are primarily driving the Doughnut's adoption in Amsterdam, despite the fact that these initiatives have not received as much attention from the media. They argue that grassroots contributions to the Doughnut vision deserve more recognition because they could offer important insights for governance issues faced by the municipality.²²

A participatory action research study on the landscape of Amsterdam Doughnut Economics initiatives conducted by local entrepreneurs Zinzi Stasse and Rieta Aliredjo also emphasizes the importance of grassroots groups in the model's practical implementation. They argue that "real, radical cooperation across organizations, institutions, sectors and social strata is important [because] a municipality that embraces the doughnut is nothing without a community that also gets to work with it."²³ They note that the Doughnut model adds value to local groups promoting well-being and sustainability by 1) providing inspiration for new and existing initiatives to determine ecological and social objectives and action steps, 2) connecting parties that want to continue to the doughnut economy vision, 3) testing and steering tools for initiatives to achieve maximum positive social and environmental impacts.²⁴ Although many grassroots projects engaged with Doughnut Economics weren't initiated because of the model, they argue

²⁰ Moule, 2022

²¹ Karlsson

²² Karlsson

²³ Stasse and Aliredjo, 2020

²⁴ Stasse and Aliredjo, 2020

that Doughnut Economics can “bring together existing elements in an inspiring and workable way.”²⁵

Doughnut Economics has been critiqued as a tool for practical action because it does not encourage cities and communities to explore contextual systemic inequities behind social foundation shortfalls (Rawsthorne, 11). According to an article about downscaling the Doughnut in Cornwall, UK, social foundation benchmarks are difficult to measure and track, because social well-being and equity are context-specific and subjective ideas that can only fully be explored through qualitative data collection (Turner and Wills, 2). Turner and Wills also find that top-down sustainability initiatives can easily exclude or diminish the perspectives of marginalized communities, and that aggregate indicators about social well-being can mask social and spatial urban inequality (Turner and Wills, 5). They assert the need for more research on how social and spatial inequalities impact the realization of social foundation benchmarks and the overall doughnut economy vision (Turner and Wills). My report, by exploring power disparities between stakeholders working with Doughnut Economics in Amsterdam, contributes to this gap in the literature.

Despite these illuminating findings, no previous research has been done on the tensions and power disparities that can arise among diverse stakeholders engaged with Doughnut Economics, or how social inequities are addressed or perpetuated within Doughnut Economics initiatives. My research reveals tensions and power disparities between institutional and grassroots stakeholders, and a lack of confrontation of racial inequities among Amsterdam Doughnut Economics initiatives.

Doughnut Economics in Amsterdam

Stakeholders working with Doughnut Economics in Amsterdam generally work for *institutions*, such as the city, academic institutions, and businesses, or community-led *grassroots* initiatives and organizations. While most stakeholders can be classified as either “institutional” or “grassroots,” some work in both grassroots and institutional spheres. In this section I will provide an overview of how each stakeholder group has engaged with Doughnut Economics in Amsterdam so far. I will refer to the landscape of these groups as a “movement” throughout this paper, to simplify the description of their collective work.

²⁵ Stasse and Aliredjo, 2020

The municipality embraced Doughnut Economics as a strategy to promote transformative sustainable development in 2020.²⁶ Amsterdam then joined the Thriving Cities Initiative, which is a collaboration between DEAL, the nonprofit organization Circle Economy, and the global climate action network C40 Cities to apply the Doughnut on a city level.²⁷ Using the Doughnut as a visual guidance tool, they created a “city portrait” that evaluates how the city is performing socially and ecologically, through a local and global lens.²⁸ According to policymakers, Doughnut Economics has helped the city address social challenges, such as the lack of affordable housing, through strategies that minimize ecological impact.²⁹ In 2022, the municipality created a Circular Economy Monitor, which is a tool that measures the material resource flows in and out of the city.³⁰ However, the city has done little to integrate social foundation metrics into their circular economy plans, and the city portrait has had little follow-up.

The most prominent academic group working with Doughnut Economics is the Center for Economic Transformation (CET) at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS). The CET is using Doughnut Economics alongside various other alternative economic theories to promote sustainable business models. They initiated and led a project called “When Business Meets the Doughnut” that consisted of collaborative workshops with business leaders to envision and implement business models that support a regenerative and distributive local economy.³¹

The Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition is an open network of people enthusiastic about the Doughnut Economy and working together to put it into practice.³² They connect people and initiatives working with the Doughnut model by hosting events and showcasing projects on their website. The coalition is coordinated by university researchers and staff (institutional stakeholders), yet works closely with several members of grassroots community groups. There are 100 projects listed on their website; the majority of which are grassroots (engaging with Amsterdam neighborhood residents and communities), while the rest are academic projects led by researchers and professors. To qualify as a coalition project these initiatives must be contributing to the doughnut economy vision, and anyone can submit information about their initiative to the coalition through a form on their website, which is then posted publicly by

²⁶ (Boffey)

²⁷ “Thriving Cities Initiative”

²⁸ Amsterdam City Doughnut

²⁹ (Boffey)

³⁰ Gemeente Amsterdam, 2022

³¹ DEAL, 2022

³² Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition

coalition coordinators. Based on their website alone, the degree and nature of connection between the coalition and these projects is unclear.³³

Most grassroots stakeholders I interviewed worked within Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition projects. Some of these projects directly engage the Doughnut model by using the language to describe their goals and impacts, while others do not. An example of a grassroots initiative that is directly engaging with the Doughnut is the neighborhood cooperative “Groene Hub.” This cooperative started projects called “Doughnut Deals” that address three issues from the social foundation and one issue on the ecological ceiling to advance social and ecological thriving. Doughnut Deals include a biodigester project in one Amsterdam neighborhood, which collects organic waste from schools and community centers and in return supplies them with free renewable energy, and a community solar project that allows residents to purchase electricity at a lower price.

An example of a project involved with the Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition that does not directly engage with the model is the “Community Land Trust” in the Bijlmer neighborhood of Amsterdam. They are promoting permanent affordable land ownership in their neighborhood, which will contribute to the social foundation goals of the Doughnut and thus the overall vision of the doughnut economy.

Methodology and positionality

During June-August 2022, I interviewed 17 Amsterdam stakeholders and conducted participant observation of five Amsterdam sustainability initiatives. I gathered data under the assumption that the diverse perspectives of individuals is necessary to inform collective understandings of knowledge itself.

Literature on Doughnut Economics in Amsterdam recognizes grassroots initiatives as the primary drivers of the Doughnut economy vision.³⁴ Yet very little detailed knowledge about grassroots Doughnut Economics initiatives has been shared in the media and academic articles. Therefore, I chose to dive deeply into the perspectives of grassroots initiative leaders and community members. I also explored the perspectives of institutional stakeholders.

³³ Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition

³⁴ Karlsson, 2022

I first connected with grassroots initiatives by attending events hosted by Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition projects, which were open to the public. I also attended events hosted by environmental justice and sustainability initiatives that had no connection to Doughnut Economics or the Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition, to learn from Amsterdam residents who had little knowledge of the framework yet were working towards similar goals. At these events I established connections with many residents and community organizers, and developed a better understanding of social and environmental initiatives in Amsterdam overall. I took detailed participant observation notes.

Next, I conducted 17 interviews with a diverse range of grassroots and institutional stakeholders. I used a purposive sampling method, reaching out to 11 members of projects listed on the Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition website, two Amsterdam residents working on non-Doughnut related climate justice initiatives, one staff member of the Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition, one professor from the CET, one member of a local policy think tank, and one staff member from the municipality. My interviews were on average 45-60 minutes long, and I followed different scripts for Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition projects, Amsterdam residents, Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition leaders, and employees from CET, the municipality, and think tanks.³⁵

Finally, I volunteered weekly with two grassroots initiatives minimally engaging with Doughnut Economics yet still contributing to social and ecological thriving: a community land trust in the Bijlmer neighborhood and an urban food forest initiative in Amsterdam Noord. Working closely with both these projects helped me better understand theories of change among various grassroots stakeholders, and general understandings of Doughnut Economics among residents not engaged with the model. It also helped me better understand relationships between project initiators and neighborhood residents, and the power dynamics between these groups.

I took participant observation notes from volunteer sessions and events I attended in a Google Drive document, and I transcribed and coded interviews in Nvivo (March 2020)³⁶, a qualitative coding software.

While collecting these data, I was highly aware of my positionality as an outsider, which was both an asset and a mild obstacle. Initially, my outsider status made it difficult to understand

³⁵ Interview guide is attached as an addendum at the bottom of this report.

³⁶ QSR International Pty Ltd., March 2020

conversations about local historical, spatial, and cultural knowledge, and I had to do extensive background research on these topics to better understand context. Additionally, although the majority of conversations at meetings and events were in English, I was not able to understand occasional conversations in Dutch. Yet because I had no personal attachment to any project or stakeholder I encountered, I brought a balanced and critical perspective to my observations. I felt more driven by the research process than the outcome, since my primary motivation in doing this project was deepening my learning and qualitative research skills. I focused much of my energy on developing honest, reciprocal relationships with stakeholders and analyzing what I learned without prejudging my research question. The findings of this research evolved from these unfolding relationships, and were minimally influenced by my preconceived knowledge of Doughnut Economics or Amsterdam Doughnut initiatives.

As a White woman from the U.S. with a privileged educational background, I am aware of personal biases I likely brought to this research. Most prominently, my understanding of urban segregation and inequities was influenced by my upbringing in a progressive yet racially and socioeconomically segregated U.S. city—Minneapolis, MN. There, I frequently observe and openly discuss the impacts of racial and socioeconomic inequities with peers and community members. These experiences are also informed by the academic knowledge about U.S. urban segregation and systemic racism I obtained through my Urban Studies degree at Stanford University. Consequently, when I arrived in Amsterdam I quickly became attuned to ethnic and socioeconomic divisions and power dynamics within Amsterdam neighborhoods, institutions, and grassroots initiatives. I also recognized that my racial, educational, and citizenship privileges likely contributed to the respect and openness I received from institutional stakeholders in Amsterdam, and I tried to maintain an awareness of these privileges throughout my interviews and observation.

Findings

Doughnut Economics is both a theoretical framework and a practical tool. It contextualizes multiple categories of economic and social activity in a broad vision of sustainability, yet is non-prescriptive as to how progress can or should be achieved. While its broad and flexible nature is one of Doughnut Economics's greatest strengths, those qualities also generate the potential for very differing perspectives among stakeholders as to its value and the

specific courses of action that should be stimulated. Differing perspectives can then perpetuate power disparities, when one set of stakeholders has greater influence over narratives about Doughnut Economics and its implementation.

My observations suggest that institutional groups have more power in driving narratives about Doughnut Economics in Amsterdam, because its academic and theoretical origins lead it to be less accessible for grassroots initiatives and residents. I also observed a lack of confrontation of urban inequities, such as racial discrimination and inequality, within the Doughnut Economics movement, which creates potential for these inequities to be perpetuated within Doughnut Economics initiatives. I argue that these tensions and power disparities are important to confront in order to achieve meaningful progress towards the vision of a just and sustainable economy.

I will explain these tensions and power disparities through three sections:

1. How Doughnut Economics is valued by grassroots and institutional stakeholders
2. How differing views on the framework lead to a power imbalance between grassroots and institutional groups
3. How these power imbalances can perpetuate pre-existing racial and ethnic inequities in Amsterdam.

It's important to explore the potential for power disparities because they can cause exclusivity and further marginalization within the Doughnut Economics movement. This can undermine progress towards social foundation goals on the doughnut, especially goals such as advancing social equity and increasing the political voice of citizens, thus creating challenges in the ultimate realization of a just and sustainable economy.

Part 1: How is Doughnut Economics valued differently by grassroots and institutional stakeholders?

Given the broad, flexible, and non-prescriptive nature of Doughnut Economics, different stakeholder groups view and value it differently. I observed that institutional groups generally used the theoretical language of the framework to challenge neoclassical economics and transform internal policies and programs, while grassroots groups more often used the framework as a tool to obtain external resources and attention. This suggests that grassroots

groups may not rely on the theoretical aspects of the framework as much as institutional groups to promote just and sustainable socioeconomic change.

Value for institutional stakeholders: inspiring internal innovation

In general, institutional stakeholders I interviewed valued Doughnut Economics because of its ability to challenge neoclassical economic thinking and promote policy and program changes within powerful institutions. For these applications, the theoretical language of Doughnut Economics is particularly important. For example, the Centre for Economics Transformation, which is part of the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences Business School, uses Doughnut Economics as an inspiration tool to redesign business practices and leadership structures. One professor from the CET said that businesses are important institutions within which Doughnut Economics should be implemented because they are so integral to economic activity: “if you want to be serious about Doughnut Economics, you have to work with companies because the economy is the companies.” The professor also described how Doughnut Economics inspires innovation within business design and activity: “We focus on the design of companies, enterprise design, because as a company, you can say look, we are now sustainable... But then what happens if there comes a new CEO who has a different view? Or what happens if a company is being taken over by some other big corporation that has a totally different vision?... Our starting point was that companies need another design to be able to work within the doughnut.” In this case, Doughnut Economics is most useful in challenging the profit-driven neoclassical economic ideas that often shape company structures and practices, and inspiring innovative thinking and design.

Doughnut Economics can also challenge status quo governance structures within the municipality and promote new forms of cooperation across departments and policy plans. Salomé Galjaard, the circular economy program manager and sustainability strategist for the municipality, said: “We have a circular economy transition, an energy transition, and a transition to a green and healthy city. Those are the three sustainability transitions we are working on. In the last couple of years, we’ve made policies on all these transitions and are executing them. But what is very clear is that there’s an important relationship between these transitions which has not been illustrated yet. So what we’re doing now is bringing together people from different departments... and we always bring the doughnut in to help people have a broader view. The

doughnut really brings in a whole new set of angles to look at a given situation... increasing the solution scope, so to say.”

These examples demonstrate that Doughnut Economics is generally useful in supporting internal dialogue and planning within institutional groups. However, this contrasts with how many grassroots groups are using Doughnut Economics: as a tool to highlight the value of transformative work they’ve already been doing.

Value for grassroots stakeholders: highlighting what’s already being done

On the Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition website, local projects contributing to the vision of the Doughnut framework are described as “inspired by the Doughnut Economy.” Yet many grassroots stakeholders said that their projects were not inspired by Doughnut Economics, nor are they actively using the model in their work. Instead they generally consider the model to be a tool that can demonstrate the practical impacts their work is already creating.

Some grassroots projects found Doughnut Economics useful in bringing attention and resources towards previously established initiatives in their neighborhoods. For example, the “Doughnut Bakery” project brings together neighborhood leaders and residents to determine shared neighborhood values, locate initiatives, and organizations in the neighborhood that are exemplifying these values, and create a “revolving fund” of private and public capital that can be directed towards neighborhood initiatives. While the neighborhood initiatives are not necessarily engaging with Doughnut Economics, the Doughnut Bakery is using the model to communicate their social and environmental value to city staff and private donors. One staff member from the Doughnut Bakery is advocating for neighborhood projects to receive funding from multiple city departments simultaneously. He said, “Now, many activities are not done because if they are evaluated they are only evaluated on one aspect. And that's why they are sometimes not financed.” Yet the language and visual depiction of Doughnut Economics helps “show that certain projects or certain activities are working better if they are integrated with other activities on the local level...the Doughnut Bakery can show to the other departments like you guys, you know this is not working because you are not collaborating enough.”

Another member from the Doughnut Bakery described how their co-worker, “knows people at the municipality [and] was able to free up this budget. She can really construct projects around Doughnut Economics and that's what she did... I think she made it possible to conduct

these experiments, because it was a Doughnut project and because she framed it like that. The city uses Doughnut Economics, and we have the worldwide Guardian article³⁷ that made Amsterdam famous as the first city that embraces the doughnut. Because the city and the politicians are saying that this is important, [we realized] maybe this is a language that we can use to achieve our goals and that's also very pragmatic, opportunistic almost.”

These findings demonstrate a prominent difference in how Doughnut Economics is used in Amsterdam: institutional stakeholders generally use the model for the internal development of their projects, while grassroots initiatives more often use it to obtain external resources. Institutional stakeholders also generally found the theoretical concepts offered by Doughnut Economics more valuable in their work, while grassroots stakeholders were more interested in practical action. These findings suggest that narratives about Doughnut Economics may be less accessible and useful to grassroots stakeholders, which is relevant in the discussion about potential power disparities between grassroots and institutional groups.

Part 2: How is Doughnut Economics’s implementation perpetuating power disparities between institutional and grassroots groups?

In my observations, institutional stakeholders generally have greater influence over the narratives and implementation of Doughnut Economics in Amsterdam, despite the fact that grassroots stakeholders constitute the majority of Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition initiatives. This is partially because the theoretical emphasis of Doughnut Economics can make it inaccessible at the community level. I observed this dynamic in three specific ways: 1) the language used to explain Doughnut Economics is primarily academic and inaccessible to residents, 2) grassroots stakeholders are less connected to the Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition, and 3) a prevalent focus on innovation has the potential to overshadow grassroots initiatives that have existed prior to Doughnut Economics’s establishment.

Language is often less accessible and useful for grassroots stakeholders and residents

As a theoretical model, Doughnut Economics can be abstract, and thus challenging for some people to grasp. Additionally, because discourse about Doughnut Economics often

³⁷ Boffey, 2020

involves academic language—such as the phrases “regenerative economy” and “circular economy”—the model’s language is generally more accessible to institutional stakeholders.

In casual conversations with residents, I observed a general lack of awareness about Doughnut Economics in Amsterdam. Many people I met said they did not know what Doughnut Economics is; those that did had only heard of the city’s 2020 commitment to embrace the model.

Additionally, 12 out of 17 stakeholders I interviewed said they find Doughnut Economics difficult to explain to residents. Even grassroots stakeholders actively engaging with the Doughnut framework generally didn’t find the language useful when interacting with residents. For example, one grassroots stakeholder said “I hardly ever talk with the people I see in the neighborhood about the Doughnut Deals. I say, yeah, this is a Doughnut Deal and then I explain it a little bit, but [people] usually come back to me like, “hey your project, no one actually calls it a Doughnut Deal.” She said that “by just saying healthy and green it’s easier...people get that we want to keep [the neighborhood] green and healthy. That’s something people understand.”

Some institutional stakeholders, such as Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition community manager Rosa Tibosch, recognize the inaccessibility of Doughnut Economics among residents. Tibosch said, “there are very few people that feel the appeal of something that is explained very academically...If you talk like that they’re like “this just doesn’t feel like something for me” or “I don’t get enthusiastic about it. I don’t get energy from this.” So how can you appeal to them?” She said that many coalition partners have been working with Doughnut Economics in an accessible way, within education, community groups, and companies.

Despite efforts to increase accessibility, some grassroots stakeholders have felt alienated by the Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition due to a predominant use of academic language. One grassroots stakeholder said that she feels “like an outsider” in coalition meetings, because “I’m in a room full of professors and academics who want to talk on the higher level, and I understand that, but I don’t want to talk on a higher level, I want to act.” The predominance of academic language and the theoretical nature of Doughnut Economics may be a factor in alienating grassroots stakeholders who are more interested in the logistics and implementation of concrete actions at the community level. This may also contribute to a power imbalance between grassroots and institutional stakeholders.

Insufficient institutional support for grassroots stakeholders

Many grassroots stakeholders stressed to me that institutional stakeholders, such as the leaders of the Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition, generally did not put in much effort to build relationships with them or support their projects. Consequently, several grassroots stakeholders questioned whether the Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition is genuinely inclusive to grassroots initiatives. Because the Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition holds significant power in influencing narratives and practical applications of Doughnut Economics in Amsterdam, their lack of fostering a thoroughly inclusive environment could likely further a power imbalance between grassroots and institutional stakeholders.

Multiple grassroots stakeholders I interviewed said they had little connection with the Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition, and wished that the coalition would provide more support to them. One grassroots stakeholder said their connection with the coalition, “is very limited... I’ve been at two or three zoom calls. Yeah, and apart from that, I don’t notice too much of the existence of this thing.” They hoped to connect with members of the coalition to investigate the theme of “value” in economics and “make this theme sort of part of the public debate.” They also suggested that the coalition could coordinate collective action research projects to explore big questions in collaboration with the various stakeholders engaged with Doughnut Economics. Another grassroots stakeholder said, “they approached us and said, can we put your initiative on the website? And we were like, yeah, of course. And then they did, and then they also asked me for a quote and put it on Instagram and that was actually the last I heard of them.” They wished that the coalition would more actively “connect [initiatives] with each other, and talk to different initiatives to see what they need.”

The fact that the Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition highlights grassroots projects on their website but does not provide much further support towards them demonstrates a potentially inauthentic depiction of their network. One grassroots stakeholder critiqued the Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition for this reason: “You can showcase that we’ve got so many profiles already on our platform...[but community projects] become a commodity. If you use your community as a commodity I’m out. Community is people, community is not numbers, community is not a growth figure.” She said that the Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition should increase efforts to build authentic relationships with members of grassroots projects.

Some grassroots stakeholders said their belief in community-level theories of change was not always sufficiently represented within the Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition because it contrasted with the theory of change held by many institutional stakeholders. For example, one grassroots stakeholder believes in community-level projects that promote less consumption, in service of a “degrowth” economic vision in which welfare improves while the throughput of resources decreases. He said, “I have difficulties with promoting my idea of a local economy within the coalition....Everybody still believes it is possible to do the transition with the same amount of consumption. And I don't believe in that, but I'm a minority.” He said that many institutional stakeholders within the coalition “are not supporting the movement to give people the freedom to experiment...with the transition in their lifestyle,” which they could do by “support[ing] local organizations... and not treat[ing] them as commercial organizations...we need to have a new sector, that is not market or government but is civic.”

The phenomenon of grassroots stakeholders feeling less authentically connected to and supported by the Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition could further hinder an accurate public representation of views within the Doughnut Economics movement. This can limit the ability of grassroots stakeholders to influence the framework and exacerbate the power imbalance between grassroots and institutional stakeholders.

Focus on theory and innovation has potential to overshadow pre-existing sustainability work

Finally, the predominant focus on theoretical change and innovation among institutional stakeholders can overshadow community-level sustainability projects that existed well before the conception of Doughnut Economics.

Focusing primarily on innovation can detract energy from the importance of repairing past social and environmental harms caused by colonialism and centering traditional indigenous knowledge within sustainability movements. An interviewee who is a climate justice organizer and advocate said, “I was always a little bit suspicious...of the people who often embrace [Doughnut Economics], and don't know anything about indigenous solutions to environmental problems, and feel this huge need for some type of innovative model that kind of bypasses long-lasting answers that have been here for a long time.” Instead, she believed more institutional resources should be directed toward indigenous tribes and environmental justice initiatives focused on repairing the harms of colonialism: “Indigenous people protect 80% of the

remaining biodiversity. If we translate that to economics, which is the language that everybody seems to want to speak, how about funding 80% of environmental funding to indigenous-led land defending and indigenous-led restoration.”

Furthermore, the predominant focus on the theoretical model of Doughnut Economics can divert attention from grassroots sustainability projects that aren't engaged with it. These projects may not receive as much attention without the use of academic language associated with Doughnut Economics, even though they may create similar impacts. One grassroots stakeholder who works on “Doughnut Deals” projects also works on separate sustainability initiatives that don't engage with the Doughnut Economics framework. He said he's frustrated that Doughnut Deal projects “are doing the same thing I was already doing... there's nothing special about them.” However, the Doughnut Deal projects have received significant attention within the media and conferences, locally and internationally, because they are using the Doughnut framework to explain their goals and impacts. The same staff member said that proponents of Doughnut Deal projects “can talk in very fancy words, but I always say “don't go after statements” because they don't get anyone anywhere.” He said that a predominant focus on theory and academic language may cause stakeholders to miss out on impacts made by community-led projects disconnected from the model, and he believed that stakeholders working with Doughnut Economics should focus on learning from community initiatives already present within neighborhoods.

Despite the fact that grassroots groups have been credited by certain studies as the primary drivers of tangible impact among stakeholders engaged with Doughnut Economics in Amsterdam, and they represent the majority of projects within the Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition, they have less power to drive dominant narratives about language and implementation of Doughnut Economics in the media and the Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition. However, there is a distinct opportunity for narratives about economic transformation to shift away from a predominant focus on academic theory and innovation to highlight and uplift local, community-based solutions that are not necessarily new. Furthermore, institutional stakeholders driving predominant narratives about Doughnut Economics in Amsterdam can more clearly highlight the key contributions these grassroots groups are making towards a just and sustainable economy, even if Doughnut Economics is not an essential model for action in their work.

Part 3: Racial power disparities

Finally, I observed a lack of confrontation of urban social inequities, such as racial disparities and discrimination, within most initiatives engaged with Doughnut Economics. Because systemic racism is very present in Amsterdam, this lack of engagement with this issue could ultimately undermine the overarching goals and intentions of Doughnut Economics, especially given its inclusion of “social equity” benchmark goals. To elaborate this concern, I will describe the racial and ethnic disparities I observed among initiatives and stakeholders engaged with Doughnut Economics, and discuss how these may further power imbalances and inequities within the Doughnut Economics movement.

Amsterdam is a very ethnically diverse city, with substantial Surinamese, Turkish, Moroccan, and Indonesian populations. Although many Dutch people deny the existence of “race” and “racism” within the Netherlands, research shows that racism impacts 10-50% of the population through instances of everyday racial discrimination and institutionalized racism in educational, occupational, and housing domains.³⁸ In particular, due to institutional racism in the education system, many people of color are tracked to vocational schools and university populations are disproportionately White.³⁹ Yet racism is rarely confronted within Dutch society because of a widespread denial that “race” exists and a cultural portrayal of White Dutch people as innocent.⁴⁰

These patterns of racial exclusion were reflected among Doughnut Economics stakeholders in Amsterdam—who in my observation were predominantly White, despite the ethnic diversity of Amsterdam. For example, a picture of an Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition meetup includes only White faces--reinforcing an impression of Whiteness. While many stakeholders I interviewed recognized this lack of racial diversity, others were resistant to talking about racial disparities or denied that they are a problem. I also observed racial tensions and power disparities within initiatives in racially diverse areas. I will focus on one example of an organization using Doughnut Economics to promote sustainability in an Amsterdam neighborhood disproportionately populated by non-White, low-income immigrant groups.

³⁸ Weiner, 2014

³⁹ Weiner, 2014

⁴⁰ Wekker, 2016.



Figure 1.2: photo of an Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition meet-up (from the coalition's website)

I attended an event hosted by this organization, at which I observed that four out of six of their staff appeared to be White. The event had two parts: a presentation about a recently launched project, and a community celebration. There were about 25 attendees at the presentation, and only three appeared to be non-White. However, the community celebration afterwards was far more racially diverse; I estimated that about 50% of attendees were non-White. This suggested to me that the demographics of this organizations' staff did not align with neighborhood demographics.

I interviewed several staff members of the organization who shared contrasting perspectives on the racial and ethnic diversity in their leadership team, suggesting the potential for racial tension within the group. One staff member expressed a desire to increase diversity among leadership: "I find it very, very frustrating and I actually, I've been trying to get other [non-White] people here. Our newest additions are all multicultural so from all different parts of the world, I really love that.. But we need more...especially I would love it if we would have more also in higher positions of our organization...our board is all White. And the project coordinators are all White." However, when I brought up my observation about the lack of racial diversity in the leadership team to a different staff member, who is White and native Dutch, they assured me the staff was actually very racially diverse: "Oh, but that's not the case at this moment. No, there are several... We have many colors. Yeah, we have at this moment many colors," and proceeded to list the staff members of color on the team. These contrasting perspectives about the current level of racial diversity, and whether it is a problem that should be

addressed, poses challenges for addressing the tensions and power imbalances related to disproportionate White representation in the group's leadership.

I observed racialized power dynamics, including stereotypes about non-White residents in the neighborhood shared by White staff. One white Dutch staff member I interviewed described a group of majority-Black residents as “a bit lazy” because they joined one of the organization's projects and then left the project later on. She said, “they wanted to sit and say okay, we will get money from the government. So, that's also a thing of culture. Not everyone wants to work for their money.” At the same time, she believed that she had a role in helping residents in the neighborhood. “After a few years that I lived here, I felt “uh-uh” this is the real world. This is the world in small with all those cultures, all those problems of rich and poor, Black and White, low employed, low educated and so on, but rich in cooking, singing, helping each other, et cetera... all that I learned in all my life, I want to connect it with what happens here. So [this neighborhood] needs me.” The assumption that residents in this majority-Black neighborhood need her help implicitly suggests her belief in a superior ability to ideate solutions to address neighborhood problems, which can perpetuate racial power disparities.

This “savior” mindset can cause White staff members to implicitly assert themselves into a position of superiority over residents of color. Another staff member from the organization explained that some White staff, “talk like our neighbor from across the street isn't good enough... They say things like they have a low social status or low socioeconomic status, and then they generalize it for the whole area: everybody who lives here has a low income, everybody who lives here has no education, everybody who lives here needs help. And it's all focused in a positive way, like we want to help them, but at the same time you're talking about them like they're very sad and they need your hands to get somewhere, and I don't believe that's true because they are doing it already for many years since they've been here.”

A Black staff member I interviewed spoke angrily about the savior mindset, asserting that many residents were already helping their neighborhood without the organization's involvement. He said, “Keeping the lights on is the only thing [the organization's staff] need to do. Pay the bills. People are already doing their own thing.”

Several staff members I interviewed said these dynamics are difficult to confront because race is rarely discussed openly within most sustainability initiatives, which reflects the lack of dialogue about race and racism in the Netherlands overall. One grassroots stakeholder said, “It's

one of the things that people feel really uncomfortable still talking about and some people are actually acting like... everybody's here, so everything's okay, we're open, we're multicultural, and everybody can do their own thing. But at the same time, we're all segregated and don't talk to each other.” Furthermore, Doughnut Economics does not encourage initiatives to interrogate the social inequities already present within their communities and initiatives, and because the framework is primarily propagated by White Amsterdam residents, it can become associated with whiteness and privilege, furthering racial divisions and power disparities. This is especially the case when White stakeholders use Doughnut Economics to promote their projects and solutions instead of uplifting pre-existing sustainability work led by residents of color in their neighborhoods.

To be clear, the staff of this group are now beginning to confront and work through the challenges of racial divisions and discrimination, yet it is in spite of and not because of their engagement with the Doughnut Economics model. Because Doughnut Economics does not encourage the confrontation or mitigation of pre-existing social inequities, the framework has potential to perpetuate racial disparities and divisions when used primarily by White Amsterdam residents. This vulnerability in the framework can potentially hinder the goal it purports: a just and sustainable economy for all.

I submit that the proponents of Doughnut Economics would benefit greatly from engaging in open discussions about the predominant whiteness among its Amsterdam stakeholders, genuinely confronting issues of racism in the Netherlands, and fostering awareness about the obstacles that racism and racial power dynamics pose for just and inclusive socioeconomic change.

Conclusion

Because Doughnut Economics is a relatively new framework, its potential for measurably impacting major cities like Amsterdam are currently unclear. While it can bring diverse stakeholders together, challenge neoclassical economic assumptions, and spark conversations about necessary actions to build a just and inclusive economy, its broad nature means it can be interpreted differently by stakeholders and tensions may arise regarding its value and implementation. These tensions can perpetuate power dynamics, such as racial and ethnic power

disparities and power imbalances between institutional and grassroots stakeholders engaged with the framework.

My research highlights key dynamics between grassroots and institutional stakeholders: Doughnut Economics is generally less accessible to grassroots stakeholders because of its academic and theoretical nature, and their contributions and theories of change are perceivably less acknowledged within the Doughnut Economics movement. If grassroots stakeholders have less power to shape public narratives about Doughnut Economics, this can fuel power disparities within the movement. Additionally power disparities between White and non-White Amsterdam residents associated with Doughnut initiatives can perpetuate pre-existing racial inequities, undermining the impact and effectiveness of the Doughnut movement.

An acknowledgement of these dynamics is an invitation to confront power disparities and inequities and recognize how they present obstacles in realizing the vision of a just and sustainable economy. I hope that my research can contribute to ongoing efforts to explore tensions and power dynamics in the implementation of Doughnut Economics, explore how the framework can be adapted to become more accessible, and continuously highlight all efforts that are tangibly contributing to the framework's overall vision.