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From sufficiency to sustainable abundance: dispelling a myth

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Keywords

Sufficiency, business models, policies

1 Introduction

The Paris Agreement sets the goal of a complete global phase-out of fossil fuel use by the end of the 21st century and an 80-95% reduction of carbon emissions in affluent countries by 2050. Obviously, efficiency gains alone cannot deliver the required reductions (Alfredsson et al. 2018), due to rebound effects (York, Adua, and Clark 2022) and the increasing pace of growth (Hickel 2020). It is suggested that efficiency improvements must be accompanied by demand-side innovations and, more specifically, by sufficiency-oriented efforts, i.e., “doing with less” - reducing the absolute amounts of resources and emissions associated with modern lifestyles (Wiedmann et al. 2020). Sufficiency encourages individuals and societies to make conscious choices about what they consume, focusing on quality rather than quantity and seeking fulfilment and well-being beyond material possessions. However, discourses about limits to consumption are often met with resistance from almost all stakeholders (Gumbert et al. 2022). Individuals associate sufficiency with “living in caves” (Mont et al. 2013). For businesses, sufficiency often challenges the entire business logic of growth and profit maximisation (Bocken and Short 2016). Policymakers are reluctant to engage with sufficiency for fear of losing their electorates, as sufficiency is often viewed as a too radical and contested idea. Thus, a paradox emerges: international agreements have finally agreed upon the need for a radical transformation of our economy, yet necessary measures for enabling radical transformations are seen as too radical. These views and narratives help maintain the growth-dependent economy that no longer fits within planetary boundaries and influence what our societies deem possible and desirable (T. Jackson 2006).

The question we explore in this contribution is: How can we dispel these dominant societal narratives that prevent us from considering sufficiency as a salient part of sustainability governance? How have policymakers and businesses operationalised and practised the contested notion of sufficiency?

2 Origins

Sufficiency is often seen as a reversal of progress with fewer material possessions and fewer activities with high energy consumption, resulting in less fun, less convenience, and a lower standard of living. The myth originates in the understanding that higher levels of material wealth lead to higher levels of happiness and well-being.

It is also linked to the realisation that to fit within the 1,5° target of the Paris Agreement, we need to drastically reduce levels of material consumption. For example, each Swede must reduce her emissions by 92 per cent by 2050 compared to today. This is to reach 0.82 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalents per person per year (Fauré et al. 2016), allowing Sweden to meet the 1,5° target.

3 Consequences

The myth that sufficiency means living in caves can negatively impact consumption policy and business strategies in the following ways:

1. Policy: The myth may discourage policymakers from considering sufficiency as a viable strategy for promoting sustainable consumption. If policymakers believe that sufficiency means living in caves, they may see it as unrealistic or undesirable. Consequently, they may seek to develop weak sustainable consumption policies that aim to green markets and improve consumption patterns leaving consumption volumes unaddressed (Mont et al. 2013).
2. Business: The myth may also discourage businesses from adopting practices that promote sufficiency. If businesses believe that sufficiency means a lack of demand for their products, they may not be motivated to explore ways to reduce overall levels of production and output and improve the efficiency of products and services (Niessen and Bocken 2021). Opportunities to develop sufficiency-oriented business models based on sharing, closed-loop, and local production might also be overlooked.

The result is a reluctance to address consumption-related resource use and impacts and a weakness of policy instruments and business strategies that aim to improve consumption patterns merely by greening markets, leaving consumption level unquestioned.

However, if nothing is done about unsustainable consumption patterns and especially levels, more and more people in the world will be condemned to living with severely reduced living standards. At the same time, other parts of the population will spend their lives in pursuit of conspicuous consumption. In this contribution, we present some emerging examples of policies and business strategies that can be framed as sufficiency-inspired and discuss changes in institutional contexts that need to occur for sufficiency to become more acceptable and mainstream notion.

4 Exploring sufficiency-inspired policies

Sufficiency goes against the prevailing economic paradigm of economic growth, expressed in GDP. Evidence shows that GDP growth is closely linked to greater resource use and associated environmental and social impacts (IPCC 2022). Therefore, many researchers and activists and a small but growing number of decision-makers call for a profound rethinking of our economic system that encourages growth at any cost and where the benefits of growth are not distributed fairly.

One of the alternative proposals to growth-dependent economies is *post-growth* - an umbrella term encompassing heterogeneous approaches that include *a-growth* (Van den Bergh 2011), *prosperity without growth* (T. Jackson 2009), and *beyond growth* (OECD 2020). Some of these share more similarities with the green growth discourse, while others have more in common with degrowth and sufficiency, calling for intentional downscaling of economic activity and resource consumption to a size compatible with planetary boundaries (G. Kallis 2011). A common feature of these positions is that they all seek to turn the discourse away from economic growth for its own sake to discuss the best ways to achieve desired environmental and social outcomes. They all highlight the limitations of the efficiency approach and call for increasing the sufficiency efforts (Van den Bergh 2011), leading to a debate over the *quality* of growth (i.e., how sustainable it is) and how wealth can be distributed to ensure wellbeing (Millward-Hopkins et al. 2020; Wiedmann et al. 2020; O'Neill and Corvellec 2018). Both the sustainability of economic growth and the distribution of wealth have to do with embracing sufficiency. This is especially critical for countries with slow-growing or stagnant economies since social welfare and security systems rely on economic growth.

So, is it possible to envision a society where sufficiency ideas are at work at a macroeconomic level? Indeed, macroeconomic models have shown that it is possible to organise the economy in a way that maintains basic societal structures with slower economic growth (Druckman and Jackson 2010; Tim Jackson and Victor 2020; Victor 2010; 2008) and within environmental and social limits (Giorgos Kallis et al. 2018; Schmelzer, Vetter, and Vasintjan 2022). Other studies demonstrate that Western countries could reduce their resource use significantly without impairing wellbeing (O'Neill et al. 2018).

When discussing alternative economies and different ways to incorporate sufficiency into governmental policies, it is important to rethink how we measure a country's success. The World Happiness Report 2023 states that consensus is growing about how happiness should be measured to become an operational objective for national governments (Helliwell et al. 2023). It stresses that health, and especially mental health, are growing in importance when measuring happiness, together with the long-standing parameters such as the presence and quality of work, quality of family life, and engagement with and support of the community. Furthermore, an additional component influencing happiness is effective government and policies (Helliwell et al. 2023). Thus, a few governments, called WEGo - Wellbeing Economy Governments: Finland, New Zealand, Scotland, Wales, Iceland, and Canada, have committed to sharing knowledge and transferring good practices among other governments working with advancing wellbeing economies rather than dogmatically pursuing GDP growth (WEGO 2023). Recently, the EU multi-stakeholder conference Beyond Growth was organised with the aim to "discuss and co-create policies for sustainable prosperity in Europe" (European Parliament 2023). The declaration resulting from the conference called for "Pluralising EU economic thinking and beginning work towards a 'post-growth' world that embraces sufficiency, equality and economic democracy".

When examining specific policies, numerous interesting suggestions are surfacing at the national level. For example, policies for shorter work hours have been developed and implemented in many European countries (Larsson 2012; Oksana Mont 2016). Concurrently, there is an upswing in research focusing on tangible strategies for achieving sufficiency, encompassing concepts like environmental caps (Alcott 2018), limits on income, and green taxes targeting luxury goods (Mastini and Rijnhout 2018) and local carbon budgets as a means to restrict consumption levels (Callmer and Bradley 2021) and personal carbon allowances (Fuso Nerini et al. 2021). The latter allows people to fulfil their needs and wants as they choose but within the allocated carbon limits.

So, we observe that ideas of sufficiency, growth within limits, and fair distribution of economic advancement are slowly penetrating different levels of policymaking. Political objectives for sufficiency, framed around reducing consumption levels, have been explicitly set in very few instances. For example, France and Austria have introduced a ban on short-distance flying (Grasso Macola 2021), which led to a discussion about introducing a similar ban in the EU. Restrictions on consumption or tax on red meat (Simmonds and Vallgårda 2021; Säll 2018; Caro et al. 2017), sugar (Véliz et al. 2019) or cigarettes (Cheng 2023; Devi 2023) have also been introduced in some countries.

So while some initiatives have been introduced, there is still an overall reluctance among politicians to directly limit consumption of, for example, "elite consumers" who account for a significant portion of all environmental impacts from consumption (Wiedmann et al. 2020), reduce the advertising of climate-harmful products or indirectly reduce environmental and social impacts of individuals' investments by regulating the financial sector (Dalhammar, Mont, and Lehner 2022). So, for sufficiency to become broadly institutionalised in society as a political goal, there is a need to develop international and national politics of sufficiency (Callmer and Bradley 2021).

5 Exploring sufficiency-oriented businesses

Sufficiency as an idea was initiated by consumers voluntarily taking on responsibility for their everyday choices and behaviours with the goal of reducing their overall environmental impacts. Only lately, the idea spread to businesses as the critical role of business models and marketing strategies in shaping consumer behaviour has been recognised also in relation to sufficiency-oriented products, services and lifestyles.

There has been a surge in research on business models, including studies of sufficiency-driven business models (Bocken, Niessen, and Short 2022; Bocken and Short 2016; Freudenreich and Schaltegger 2020; Maike Gossen, Ziesemer, and Schrader 2019; Maike Gossen and Heinrich 2021; M. Gossen and Kropfeld 2022; Kropfeld, Reichel, and Aagaard 2021; Niessen and Bocken 2021; Smeke Morales 2019; Soulis 2023), "other-than-profit" goals for businesses (Johanisova and Fraňková 2017), non-growth-driven business (Gabriel et al. 2019; Gebauer 2018), degrowth business models (Froese et al. 2023), and for-benefit production (Kostakis and Bauwens 2014). Research on sufficiency-driven business has tended to focus on niche models such as cooperatives, community organisations, and local barter schemes (Khmara and Kronenberg 2018), social enterprises (Johanisova, Sovová, and Fraňková 2020), and B corporations (Khmara and Kronenberg 2018). Many of these studies have a strategic design origin, exploring how business models can be developed considering company specifics (Bocken and Short 2016; Freudenreich and Schaltegger 2020). In contrast, the limited sufficiency-oriented business literature has roots in socio-ecological studies, starting with the ideas of environmental limits and minimum social standards (Raworth 2017; Fuchs et al. 2021), within which businesses should develop. Principles for organising production and consumption are being devised to help businesses move beyond the prevalent growth paradigm. Some recurring principles include a shift from efficiency to sufficiency (Steinberger 2022), from extraction to regeneration (Raworth 2017), from accumulation to distribution, from private ownership to commons, and from control to care (van der Velden 2021; McGreevy et al. 2022). To align with these principles, businesses must redefine their relationships with profit, ownership, and governance structures.

Few management studies discuss the nature of sufficiency and business growth in a resource-scarce, growth-independent economy (Cyron and Zoellick 2018; Gebauer 2018). Some posit that business growth cannot stop in a post-growth economy, but understanding what is to grow should change (Cyron and Zoellick 2018), similar to the macro-economic literature on a-growth, degrowth and beyond growth. Others argue that growth *per se* needs to be redefined (Daly 1973). Instead of measuring quantitative outcomes, it can be viewed as a qualitative improvement in the nature and features of a business (Khmara and Kronenberg 2018). The role of resources also needs to be reconceptualised: they need to be treated as capital that needs to be regenerated and not merely used up as inputs (Daly 1973). One way of framing sufficiency in business is to realise that in a resource-scarce economy, physical resources are limited, but resources that include knowledge, creativity, and skills are abundant. Thus, the physical resources must have a much longer useful life in the economy, they should be regenerated where possible and substituted with knowledge, creativity, and skills.

At the company level, several learnings for introducing sufficiency have been identified. First, some companies realise that they can be profitable and have viable business models only because natural resources remain under-priced or their extraction - even subsidised, while environmental and social costs associated with producing goods and services continue to be externalised (Mont, Whalen, and Nussholz 2019). This then becomes a driver for companies to explore alternative business models that can still be feasible under the new conditions. These businesses are at the forefront and ask questions about whether they: "should see profit as a means to achieving sustainability as an end; or if sustainability should be seen as a means to achieving profit; or if profit and sustainability should somehow be both means and ends" (Hinton, 2021a, p. 46)." Earlier research suggests that besides profit, businesses should have a mission and that they should strive not only for operational sustainability, assessing whether the business generated more outputs than inputs, but also for mission sustainability, evaluating to which extent their mission has been pursued (Katz and Page 2013).

Lately, conceptual discussions about degrowth often suggest the no-growth strategy for businesses. A recent study that explored German energy cooperatives came to the conclusion that these organisations were partially compatible with ideas of degrowth in that they were "locally embedded, strongly purpose and not profit-driven, open to collaboration and striving for independence and community wellbeing" (Bartling 2023). However, these organisations exhibited only limited engagement with key features related to sufficiency: promoting demand-side sufficiency or abstaining from organisational growth. These findings are supported by another study of small sufficiency-oriented fashion companies that shows that, in most cases, these companies did not have an ambition to completely end their growth. Instead, they strive for balanced growth based on trade-offs between profits and sustainability aspirations (Soulis 2023). They reconcile the trade-offs by, for example, redistributing their profits or ensuring fair wages in their supply chains. They purposefully work with sufficiency by operating with slower rhythms and having a long-term mindset, which is reflected in their relations along supply chains and with customers. They often employ a pre-order strategy and on-demand production and seek to keep as small stock of products as possible, thereby reducing potential waste and costs.

The study revealed many obstacles for companies to engage with sufficiency, starting with the prevalent context of fast fashion and planned obsolescence, in which all these companies work and work against (Soulis 2023). An important finding of the study is that working with sufficiency in a company should be done holistically and not through one or few strategies, e.g., extending product life. Sufficiency thinking needs to infuse a company's vision, product design, marketing and supply chain strategies, and many other features and organisational structures. For example, offering second-hand choices or repair services must be "integrated into a larger context of slowing the loop and reducing consumption" (Soulis 2023, 58). Working with sufficiency does not necessarily mean avoiding profits; instead of profit maximisation, companies can be profit seeking and engage in fair profit distribution. Thus, some of them do not see a contradiction between sufficiency and growth. They also seek to grow; not to increase profits for shareholders and owners, but to expand the ideas of sufficiency and sustainability.

The few studies of sufficiency-oriented businesses offer fascinating insights, but also demonstrate that they represent tiny niches in the broad landscape of mainstream small and large companies. The latest research calls for exploring political and cultural contexts that could support and foster sufficiency-oriented businesses (Beyeler and Jaeger-Erben 2022).

6 Concluding remarks

The role of sufficiency in policy-making and business strategies has been explored above. The main finding is that while examples of sufficiency-inspired policies and sufficiency-oriented business models can be found, they remain outliers. The rhetoric of sufficiency, including definitions and main features, remains fluid and diverse among practitioners and researchers. Understanding sufficiency in society and how it can be operationalised and mainstreamed is impossible without exploring the role of individuals in accepting, shaping, and practising sufficiency-oriented lifestyles. Future research could explore the interplay and dependencies between sufficiency-oriented policies, business strategies and individuals' and households' practices.

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