

Making simpler living simpler to achieve

A truly green economy renounces the pursuit of growth and aims for social equality

Breaking free from the consumption cycle takes perseverance and creative strategies. The markets remain locked on the target of “more” and constant growth. We need a broad social movement against the throw-away consumer mentality. This includes a commitment to sufficiency on all political levels and a mindful culture of “enough”.

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Shopping only in second-hand shops or leading a car-free or plastic-free life: individual attempts at finding an ecologically and socially responsible lifestyle are many and varied. A number of such attempts, with all the hurdles and conflicts they bring with them (especially when the entire family is asked to follow suit) have been portrayed in literature, some in the form of earnest reflections and others as amusing caricatures. Countless books offer advice on how to live, cook or travel in an environmentally-friendly manner or find one’s way in the jungle of “eco” and “fair” labels. There are also more profound meditations on how to live well with less, or how a life with less possessions can be richer in experiences. In fact, this is an idea which is supported by recent happiness research. So far, so positive.

Individual steps are not enough

However, a glance at pedestrian areas and shopping malls, or at statistics on the consumption of goods and resources, leads us to the sobering conclusion that all these individual efforts have little impact on the consumer society as a whole, and contribute only minimally to countering environmental damage. Though stimulating at first, swimming against the (consumption) current can become exhausting over time, and is not an activity which is likely to be taken up by the majority any time soon.

Individual sufficiency strategies, community sufficiency projects, local initiatives (from Local Agenda to Transition Towns) are not enough to bring about extensive social change with regard to the dominant consumption model. (1) Such change requires a policy of sufficiency creating essential conditions and measures to make simpler living simpler to achieve.

A policy of this nature could bring about a qualitative transformation in consumption and lifestyle enabling ecological limits to be respected and compliance with the necessary climate and resource targets to be achieved.

From its earliest days, the throw-away consumer society has attracted criticism and provoked appeals for a different way of life. (2) However, these appeals for moderation and contention will have only limited resonance as long as politics remain fixed on the target of growth, and consumption is regarded as the engine of this growth. It is this growth-oriented model that drives the production of goods and services away from the informal sphere of production for own use and mutual support within families and neighbourhoods, into the formal sphere of the market, where companies profit from the consumption of goods and services but not from saving or non-consumption.

We must therefore break free from our belief in unlimited growth, and alongside the necessary transition to a green economy, to simultaneously work towards an economy in which the main goal is not to increase the value arising from market production of goods and services, but well-being, quality of life and social equality on a national and international level. This transition to a post-growth society requires a number of components: new standards, such as the alterations to the Gross Domestic Product currently being discussed by the German Enquete-kommission (parliamentary commission of enquiry), greater independence of economy, society, institutions and individuals from economic growth, a different form of consumption and new ways of life. A policy of sufficiency must favour these elements.

Outline of a policy of sufficiency

The following list enumerates measures with the potential to limit the growth of consumption and waste, and to facilitate or enable a different way of life. The boundaries between them are not always clear-cut; there is a certain measure of overlap. The measures are presented in a summarised form, and an overview of existing initiatives is also provided. The list is intended as a preliminary outline of what a policy of sufficiency might look like. It provides an opportunity to assess which measures can be expected to be particularly well-received by the public at large, thereby serving to promote the concept of sufficiency, which measures have symbolic power, and which are particularly difficult to implement. It is also necessary to consider which areas provide opportunities for collaboration in the implementation of the measures.

A policy of sufficiency cannot be implemented as a master plan; it is not a “man-to-the-moon” project. The transition to a more sufficient society will occur to a large extent in an unplanned manner, arising from social dynamics and cultural change. Its implementation and establishment will be guided by the actual circumstances, needs and political opportunities in place. However, above all, initiatives and projects should come into being because they are fun, because they are useful, because they allow money to be saved, because the opportunity presents itself. Nonetheless, a policy of sufficiency is essential to encourage and facilitate approaches and initiatives.

Measures against overconsumption

- › Longer product guarantee periods;
- › Measures against planned obsolescence, e.g. liability regulations, seals of quality, technical inspections;
- › Development of eco-design for longevity, reparability and reusability;
- › Limits on advertising (e.g. by capping tax-deductible advertising costs), advert-free periods on television, advert-free areas in towns and cities;
- › Review of depreciation regulations (e.g. special treatment for company cars, depreciation periods);
- › Reduction of traffic speed (e.g. speed limits);
- › Massive reduction in food wastage.

Measures for sufficiency:

1. Measures at national level:

- › Ecological tax reform to make energy and resource consumption more expensive and reduce labour costs, making services, regionality, product longevity and repairs more worthwhile;
- › Shorter working hours, allowing production for own use, community initiatives and leisure activities to take on greater prominence in relation to consumption; tax benefits and a special social security scheme for part-time work;
- › Narrowing of social differences, tax measures to reduce major differences in income and wealth, as socially equitable societies are less consumption-oriented and potentially more open to social change.

2. Measures at regional and municipal level:

- › Creation of good transport infrastructure (cycle lanes, public transport);
- › Maintenance of publicly funded facilities such as libraries, swimming pools and theatres, or support for civic associations, non-profit organisations and others to take over (at least in part) the running of these facilities;
- › New shared use organisations (DIY facilities, public bookcases, workshops, toolsharing, urban gardening areas) with different possible management structures: municipal, private, cooperative, through a foundation, etc.;
- › Reuse of goods (second-hand shops, Ebay, charity shops, swap meets);
- › consumption-free areas, or creation of consumption-free leisure opportunities in commercial areas (e.g. benches in pedestrian areas);
- › Education (DIY, repair skills, self-organisation – development of appropriate continuing education opportunities);
- › New forms of shared living and neighbourhood networks;
- › Regional currency and other alternative exchange systems, including skill exchange systems.

3. Measures at corporate level:

- › Development of business models which enable profit while supporting and promoting sufficiency; (3)
- › New consumption concepts combining consumption and production (prosumption), e.g. farmland leased for own use or self-harvesting;
- › Offer of services instead of goods;
- › Development of business models not geared towards growth.

A policy of sufficiency should become a proactive part of the political debate, especially at a time when hopes rest on technology, a greener economy and green growth. Sufficiency strategies should not be regarded as a remedial measure for the distant future – when growth rates begin to fail – but as a political option for the present. We cannot just fall back on sufficiency overnight when it finally becomes clear that increased efficiency through technology is not enough. A culture of mindfulness and “enough” takes time to develop – in addition to favourable framework conditions.

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