

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHALLENGES TO SUFFICIENCY

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Mathieu Saujot heads the Lifestyles in Transition program at the Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations (IDDRI). His recent work focuses on integrating lifestyles into environmental foresight, transitioning to sustainable food supplies that are accessible to all, and the social and democratic dimensions of the transition. He has been conducting research at IDDRI since 2010, examining a number of issues linking cities and the ecological transition: the transition to low-carbon cities and urban modelling; policies to combat fuel poverty in housing and mobility, affordable housing policies, and analysis of the relationships between lifestyles and technical systems in the project for a sustainable city. Mathieu is a graduate of ENSTA ParisTech and holds a PhD in economics. He completed his thesis on planning low-carbon cities at Mines ParisTech under the supervision of Pierre-Noël Giraud.

Sufficiency benefits from considerable resonance in the public sphere. Understood as a re-interrogation of the legitimacy of our needs, it makes no sense unless implemented at individual and collective levels. Public policies have a key role to play, but they must make the link between sufficiency and solidarity in order to strengthen its social acceptability. In addition to developing sector-specific policies to encourage sufficiency in various industries, from digital to textiles, teaching people about the main cycles that govern our day-to-day lives is fundamental if we are to grasp the purpose of the sufficiency approach.

The sufficiency concept has recently shifted from being relatively unknown to being one of the pillars of energy transition scenarios.¹ How do you view this change?

Mathieu Saujot: Three elements are useful in charting the emergence of sufficiency as a concept.

- First is the current crisis. A crisis can be defined as a moment during which customary analytical frameworks are no longer relevant, meaning we no longer understand how to interpret a situation. Against this background, new concepts for charting the crisis may be required in place of the inoperative former concepts. The energy crisis caused by the invasion of Ukraine has played a major role in the emergence of the concept of sufficiency.
- Then there is the work in recent years by a number of actors in France, including négaWatt,² ADEME³ and RTE,⁴ to put the sufficiency concept on the agenda. These actors have embedded sufficiency into their transition scenarios and have prepared the ground via a close-up study of the concept and its variants.
- Lastly, we must stress the growing interest in the concept of sufficiency shown by scientists, as illustrated in particular by the presence in the chapter V of the 3rd IPCC report⁵ of the question of demand and the challenges facing sufficiency.⁶

The convergence of these three dimensions explains the growing popularity of the sufficiency concept and its legitimization in the public sphere.

¹ During a period of inflation and with the energy crisis resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the French government adopted an energy sufficiency policy at the end of 2022.

² Sufficiency is one of the three core pillars of the approach advocated by négaWatt since its creation in 2001, alongside energy efficiency and ramping up the use of renewable energy.

³ The notion of sufficiency occupies a key place in three of the four scenarios outlined in *Transition(s) 2050*, a forward-looking study published by ADEME.

⁴ Sufficiency has a large place in the scenario described in *Futurs énergétiques 2050*.

⁵ Chapter V is entitled *Demand, services and social aspects of mitigation*.

⁶ In the IPCC report, challenges surrounding frugality are predominantly referred to using the term sufficiency.



How do you define sufficiency?

M.S.: A definition of sufficiency means starting by examining its multiple origins.

The concept of sufficiency has its roots in Greek philosophy, a philosophy that had a major influence on European culture.⁷ But sufficiency also has spiritual and religious roots, particularly in Christianity where a “good life” is associated with a form of moderation. In this regard, *Laudato si'*, an encyclical letter by Pope Francis is very interesting as it offers a spiritual rereading of the concept of sufficiency.⁸ Another definition of sufficiency, focused on critiquing the industrial society, was seen during the 1970s.⁹ But other approaches prefer a highly quantitative definition of sufficiency, breaking down the various sources of our environmental footprint and quantifying the corresponding demand.

My preferred definition of sufficiency, which aligns with the IPCC definition, consists of re-examining needs (and thus demand) at source, with the aim of satisfying our vital needs without threatening our well-being or that of the planet and future generations. Sufficiency cannot be reduced to simply restricting needs without discrimination: it presupposes a reassessment of our ultimate needs (travel, food, etc.) and their legitimacy. This very complex question is encountered with increasing frequency in our societies.

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But it is also important to refrain from thinking of sufficiency solely at the individual level. Consuming and acting frugally is pointless if all the infrastructures are wasteful. If macro systems fail to evolve in parallel, calls for individual sufficiency will be close to inaudible.

This definition of sufficiency, centered on re-examining needs and demand, has the merit of distinguishing itself from the concept of efficiency. In an ideal world, both approaches would be combined so that we can be sufficient *and* highly efficient! But such an association is far from easy. Historically, efficiency has actually tended to favor the adoption of behaviors that run contrary to sufficiency, as theorized in the famous Jevons paradox (the more efficient the use of coal becomes, the more that coal is used).¹⁰ But it is crucial to properly distinguish between these two approaches.

At present, the concept of efficiency has greater political currency than the concept of sufficiency, as it is compatible with the prevailing model and the production-led strategies of most businesses. We also already have the standards and tools needed to implement efficiency.

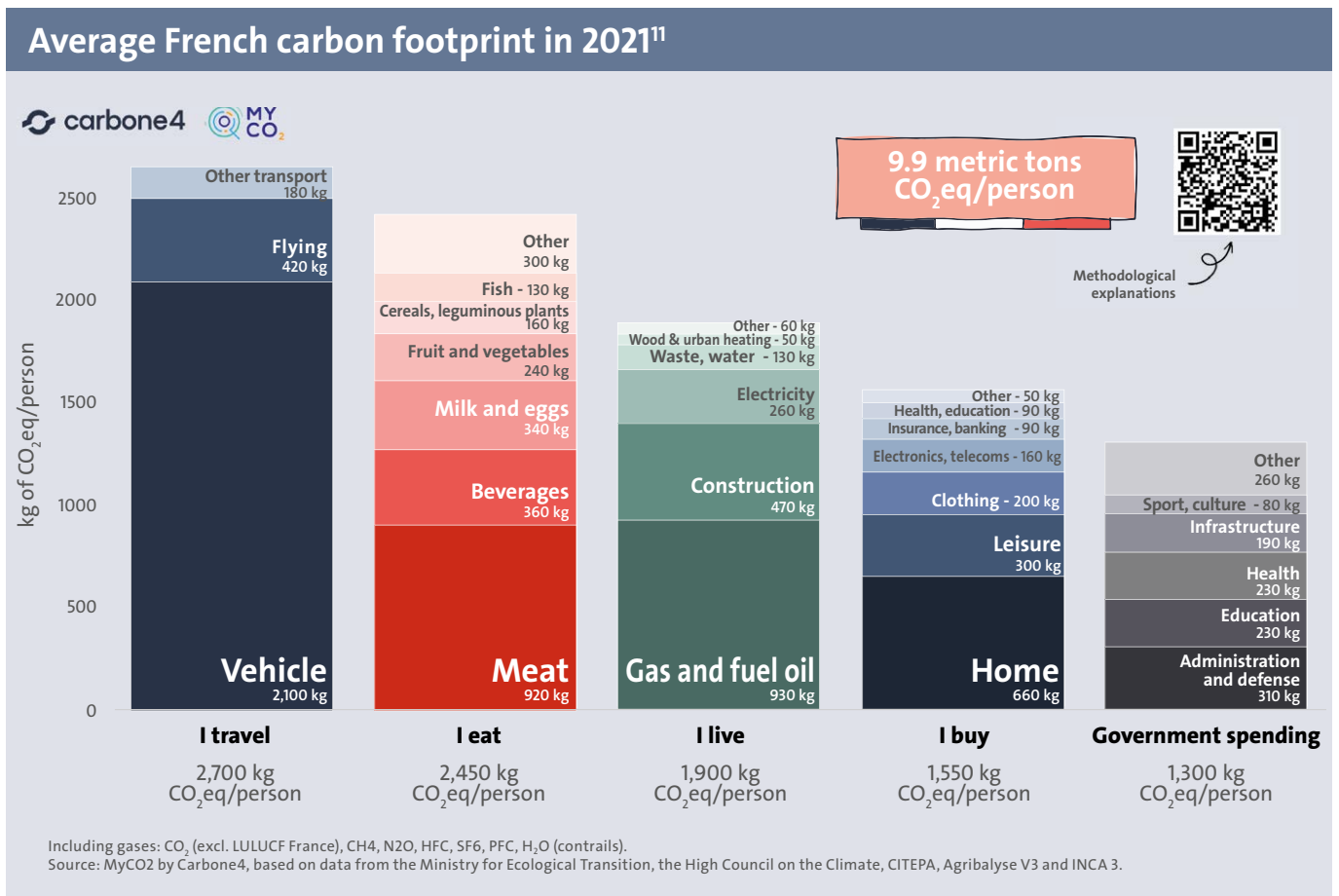
Sufficiency, however, continues to attract widespread suspicion and anxiety: it is seen as synonymous with all-round degrowth and the end of progress. These anxieties aside, sufficiency is harder to implement in policy terms. A large number of actors are working on these questions but the answers are still in the process of emerging, particularly as there are so few examples of spontaneous sufficiency.

⁷ Sufficiency can contain echoes of the virtues of temperance and moderation favored by several Greek philosophers, including Plato and Aristotle.

⁸ *Laudato Si'* (Praise Be to You, my Lord), encyclical letter from Pope Francis on protecting our common home, published in 2015.

⁹ Critiques of technology in the 1970s formed around the work of thinkers such as Dupuy J.-P. Ellul, J. and Illich, I..

¹⁰ The Jevons paradox, described by English economist Jevons W.S. (1885) in *The Coal Question*, states that as technological improvements increase the efficiency of resource use, overall resource consumption is liable to increase not decrease.



For many people, sufficiency is imposed more than anything else, a response to trade-offs caused by reduced purchasing power. For these people, messaging about sufficiency can seem to miss the point completely. How can this social factor be taken into account when shifting to sufficiency?

M.S.: This is a question with a threefold response.

First, and this may seem obvious but it is actually pretty much absent from the debate: we can only demand sufficiency from those who have enough wriggle room to be able to put it into practice. This reflects the sometimes overlooked idea that our societies are governed by rights and obligations and that we should expect those with the greatest resources (financial, social, cultural, temporal) to act first.

Furthermore, political messaging needs to put more focus on sustainable practices already implemented by those who face the greatest constraints, in terms of the fight against food waste and growing food for personal use. These practices are not necessarily sufficiency in the strict sense, but they are part of a drive for sustainability that would benefit from being recognized as such. Otherwise, we run the risk of cautioning

the idea that sufficiency is accessible only to well-off urbanites, something that is both false and highly damaging for the transition. We must create the conditions needed for a collective drive to support this idea.

Lastly, it is important to adapt to each audience, to preserve a form of basic decency and consistency, to take account of the situation facing the individuals being addressed. To paraphrase a sociologist: “when society constantly downgrades your status, the idea that you, as an individual, have a mission to save the planet seems somewhat out of alignment.”¹²

How can sufficiency become a desired outcome for as many people as possible when consumption remains one of the pillars of our social contract?

M.S.: A preliminary remark first of all. When we point fingers at the consumer society and the influence of consumerism in our societies, we think instinctively of the consumption of goods. In reality, in the West the three leading drivers of our environmental footprint are food, mobility and housing,

¹¹ My CO₂, Carbone 4.

¹² Mallier H., a sociologist who works on issues surrounding environmental questions and the working classes. Extract from an article by Richardot, R. (March 6, 2023) *Entre sobriété subie et sobriété choisie, les questions écologiques s’installent dans les quartiers populaires, [Between chosen and suffered frugality, ecological issues are taking hold in working-class neighbourhoods], Le Monde.*

which occupy a far larger place than the consumption of goods. So, our individual CO₂ emissions mostly relate to meeting our vital needs: food, housing and mobility. This means care is needed to avoid the idea that consumption can be reduced to being simply the purchase of distinctive goods for the purpose of standing out from the neighbors.

In this context, to consume like a member of the middle classes remains a powerful marker of social inclusion, as several sociological studies have shown.¹³ But the vision of what constitutes upper-middle class consumption norms is shaped by advertising and the emergence of standards of consumption that are increasingly unattainable for many people. So the challenge is to define collectively what might be the “right” level of consumption, moving beyond sterile debates and taking account of people’s desire for social distinction and a sense of belonging. Because sustainable consumption also frequently responds to a desire for distinction: “I made a sustainable purchase because I can afford to.”

The question of consumption is also inextricably linked to the amount of control people have, or not, over their lives. For somebody facing many constraints, working in a low-status job with little social recognition, the domestic sphere is one of the few spaces that provides a sense of control. It is very difficult to constrain yourself within this sphere, to impose a sufficiency that is undesired. Conversely, an ecology-minded engineer

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working in a job with high social recognition benefits from a controllable sphere that extends beyond the domestic alone. From their perspective, adopting sufficiency-led behaviors equates to exercising a form of control over their life, and is more meaningful. But these configurations demand an effort and remain a minority, for the time being.

Autonomy, freedom and emancipation are fundamentally sources of happiness and well-being that are fed via different mechanisms: social recognition through work, social protection that makes it possible to plan for a future, consumption of certain goods and services, political activism, etc. However, the space controllable by the individual is currently too limited to allow us to live in sufficiency. For sufficiency to be possible and meaningful, it is vital that individuals have their margin for maneuver restored

to them, are given a sense of autonomy, freedom and emancipation in the various spheres of their lives.¹⁴

How can public policies help accelerate the shift to sufficiency?

M.S.: The government clearly has a role to play in several ways. Political discourse is important, as are the policies for different sectors set out in various future-facing studies, such as from négaWatt.

¹³ For example, works by Lazarus, J. (2006). *(Les pauvres et la consommation [The poors & consumption]. Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire vol n°91, n°3, 137-152)* and more recently Fourquet, J. *(La France sous nos yeux. [France before our eyes]. Points).*

¹⁴ To examine this issue in greater depth, see: Saujot, M. (octobre 2022). *Quel contrat social dans un monde fini ? [Which social contract in a finite world?]* Décryptage Iddri n°3.



In recent studies we have described pricing measures that may help accelerate sufficiency, which raise complex challenges.¹⁵ Progressive pricing is one interesting possibility that has been adopted for water services in several cities (Montpellier, Dunkirk, and Libourne), but this has not yet been sufficiently documented. Is this something that could be extended to electricity, as has been trialed in countries such as Germany? This is a difficult subject, because electricity use varies widely according to the make-up of the household, quality of the accommodation, etc.

Aside from pricing, regulation is also key. If we require automakers to build smaller vehicles, they will likely have no choice but to obey the law. The types of regulations to design will vary enormously depending on the sector: work on this fundamental issue needs to begin immediately. And at the same time, the social acceptability of sufficiency also requires strengthening.

Are certain sectors more advanced than others in terms of sufficiency?

M.S.: Levels of sufficiency maturity vary greatly between sectors, with seemingly contradictory evolutions coexisting.

- **Digital:** one interesting measure is extending the length of product guarantees. But technological advances, such as 5G, have not really led to the type of debates that they merit. It was presented as inevitable, the march of progress, based on claims about new uses, and criticisms centering on the impact of the exponential growth in data usage failed to pave the way to any meaningful discussion. A few months later, an advertising campaign by one of the operators merely highlighted the marginal nature of the needs being met.¹⁶
- **Mobility:** the debate on bonus-malus measures failed in terms of tackling vehicle weights. The proposal from France's Citizen Climate Convention was massively watered down. Conversely, the uptick in bicycle use is something that promotes a shift toward sufficiency.
- **Food:** encouraging people to eat less meat remains something of a taboo, or at least it is politically divisive. We are, however, seeing more questions being raised on these issues, such as the debate about serving vegetarian meals in school dining halls. But you also have to make allowances for the political and financial clout of certain industries, particularly livestock rearing, regardless of changes in consumer attitudes.¹⁷

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- **Residential:** the energy crisis has been a watershed moment, with energy efficiency encouraged and campaigns to see home heating reduced to 19°C. The key is to massively ramp up renovations in an attempt to reconcile efficiency with sufficiency.
- **Textiles:** various potentially interesting projects concerning environmental labelling are emerging, but we are also seeing the explosion of fast fashion.

Does the adoption of ambitious sufficiency policies require the invention of new decision-making methods?

M.S.: Sufficiency raises major democratic concerns. Some researchers are working on the concept of consumption corridors that would be compatible with planetary boundaries.¹⁸ But how can these limits be defined collectively? How can we reach agreement on what is, and is not, an essential need?

I believe that participatory democracy is one credible route. In France, the Citizens' Convention for the Climate at least had the benefit of offering an innovative model. It failed to have the desired political impact but did create a precedent. The dial has shifted and we can clearly see just how relevant it is for citizens to have their say on issues as critical as the ecological transition in order to arrive at concrete proposals. These mechanisms are complex, demand considerable resources and cannot replace experts and elected politicians. But these tools are of interest because they make it possible to anchor the discussions in people's everyday lives, which vary according to gender, social and cultural origin, etc. This

is quite unlike the abstract approach that considers only the "average person", meaning that the issue of acceptability can be addressed in a far more nuanced and relevant manner, something that the many opinion polls on this issue, for example, fail to do.

Ultimately, what do you see as the main brakes and challenges to implementing sufficiency?

M.S.: Several challenges coexist.

The first, and this is under-estimated, is our ignorance about all the structural components that make our day-to-day lives possible. How is our food produced? Where does water in our tap come from? How is our waste recycled? All of these are essential topics that most of us know little or nothing about. But without some degree of understanding, even rudimentary, of the major cycles that support our lives it is difficult to adopt sufficiency-led behaviors. We are to an extent acting blind,

¹⁵ Saujot, M. et Rüdinger, A. (octobre 2022). *Un besoin urgent de faire rimer sobriété et solidarité. [An urgent need to combine sufficiency and solidarity]. Décryptage Iddri n°2.*

¹⁶ As shown, for example, by the slogan used to advertise 5G by telecoms operator Free: *Le plus grand réseau 5G, au prix de ce que vous en faites vraiment* (The biggest 5G network, for a price that reflects what you really use it for).

¹⁷ See, in particular, the study from Greenpeace's Europe unit: *Feeding the problem. The dangerous intensification of animal farming in Europe / Study by IDELE: Dossier Annuel Bovin Viande : Année 2022 – Perspectives 2023* (Annual Meat Cattle Dossier: Years 2022 - Outlook for 2023)

¹⁸ Fuchs, D. (2019). Living Well within Limits: The Vision of Consumption Corridors. in *Routledge Handbook of Global Sustainability Governance*. 296-307. Kalfagianni, A., Fuchs, D., & Hayden, A. (Eds.). Routledge. Coote, A. (2020). Universal basic services and sustainable consumption. *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, 17(1), 32-46.



unable to assess the full relevance of sufficiency and its positive implications. Certain NGOs fully understand this and are trying to educate and raise awareness, even if this risks shocking some people. It is vital that this understanding and sense of meaningfulness are re-established.

A second clear brake is the weight that competing narratives other than sufficiency occupy in our imaginations. We are raised with the idea that more is better, and it takes a lot to turn your back on this mental framework.

But we must guard against a form of defeatism. It is important to remember that individual and collective preferences evolve all the time. There is a discourse that states people are incapable of changing voluntarily and, therefore, there is no alternative other than imposing ecological change in an authoritarian manner. This type of discourse is not only false it is also dangerous, because it encourages inaction. History shows us that lifestyles are variable over time, contradicting the claim that human nature is unchanging.

For sufficiency to be possible and meaningful, it is vital that individuals have their margin for maneuver restored to them, are given a sense of autonomy, freedom and emancipation in the various spheres of their lives

We should also leverage the network effect of social norms. When a critical threshold is reached in terms of the number of people adopting a social norm, it then tends to become generalized, leading to wider changes: the rise in the number of vegetarians accelerates the rise in vegetarian food offerings, which in turn facilitates the adoption of a vegetarian diet. This changeover mechanism is non-linear,¹⁹ and we are only at the start of the cycle. But it is probable that sufficiency will benefit from these network effects.

Finally, one of the conditions required for change is an interconnection between changes at the individual and structural levels. There is no sense in teaching our kids to act with sufficiency if this does not materialize in day-to-day life. On the other hand, if teaching people about sufficiency in their eating habits goes hand-in-hand with a policy for vegetarian school meals and environmental labelling of products sold in supermarkets, these discrete

components support each other and may trigger real changes in representations and behaviors. For the moment we rely all too often on communication campaigns alone.

¹⁹ See the debate on tipping points.