

# INTRODUCTION

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Can sufficiency save us from raw material scarcity and global warming? Sufficiency is all about restraint, moderation, and absence of excess, and so necessarily involves curtailing our desires and needs. By reducing what we consume, sufficiency also reduces the pollution we release into the natural world and the resources we take from it. Its roots

lie in notions of temperance, echoing virtues the ancient Greeks saw as prerequisites for a life well lived.

Sufficiency is not the same as degrowth. Sufficiency does not inevitably result in a contraction of GDP, whereas degrowth certainly does. In fact, if we want to tackle the ecological challenges that humanity faces, rather than focusing on shrinking the economy we need to shrink physical flows and the extraction of raw materials, energy and water from nature.

Like many concepts, sufficiency comes in many forms: weak or strong, incentivized or punitive, temporary or permanent, elective or imposed. There is energy sufficiency, the form we hear of most often, and there is sufficiency in the use of materials, water, and even land in order to limit soil sealing.

Is *Homo sapiens* destined to become *Homo sobrius*? Quite possibly. But it will take time. Because right now sufficiency is espoused by only a handful of European countries. And because sufficiency stands in stark contradiction to the foundations of our economic system: excessive consumption, over-production and wastage. Many sectors behave in ways that are the antithesis of frugality. In the fashion industry, Zara releases 52 collections every year. Becoming sufficient is an arduous task in a society that never ceases to glorify the exact opposite.

And yet, sufficiency is not out of reach, as demonstrated by France during winter 2023 when it delivered a rapid cut in its energy use. An example that highlights one of sufficiency's limitations. In developed countries it has mostly happened only in response to a crisis: an energy crisis, with the sharp spike in gas prices caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine; an environmental crisis with the drought of summer 2022 that led to severe water restrictions being imposed in Europe.

Shifting to temperance after the excesses of consumer society requires actions to be taken at different levels. Starting with the individual level. This is probably the easiest but also the least effective. Modifying their behavior would allow Europeans to cut their ecological footprint by a quarter. But why not more? Because we have little control over our choices: our behavior is governed by social context, education, incentives, regulations, and prices, but also by infrastructure, urban planning, and how work is organized. How can we live without a car when public transportation, land-use policies and the spatial distribution of housing and jobs make it impossible?

Frugal individual behaviors can emerge only where reliable and affordable options exist. This requires consistent policymaking at local and national levels. Policies have to be equitable to ensure that the efforts required to live sufficiently do not unfairly penalize low earners. And policies have to be attractive and place value on sufficiency. People will not be won over by having their desires restricted. This is why there is a need to create positive perceptions of sufficiency, to present it as a new social ideal rather than a constraint resulting from finite resources.

Paving the way to controlling demand has to happen upstream through a change of mindset. Sufficiency acts at the root of the problem by questioning our needs in order to limit them to what is adequate, but it also requires a high level of personal commitment. And government policies cannot be based on the hope that people will all become virtuous. So does this imply forcing through sufficiency, imposing it through unpopular laws, taxes, quotas and norms? To an extent it does, because voluntary changes in behaviors will not have enough impact.

Sufficiency is undeniably one manifestation of responsible management of natural resources. But on its own it is not enough, no matter how far we take it. There are other levers we also need to bring into play, such as efficiency in the use of resources, and the circular economy. We cannot hope to tackle the massive ecological challenges we face by opposing sufficiency and efficiency, by hampering technological innovations, and by failing to use every available solution.

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