

Politics of Sufficiency

The institutional framework for a sufficiency driven economy

Sufficient lifestyles can be considered both necessary and desirable on a personal level, but supporting framework conditions need to be created politically. This includes overall economic policy and its goals as well as specific sectors like mobility, education or health policy.

By Uwe Schneidewind and Angelika Zahrt

In standard economics, sufficient lifestyles can be understood as a specific consumption-related preference of distinct population groups. There are many reasons to believe that large segments of the population would be willing to adopt sufficient lifestyles, while existing framework conditions prevent such preferences from being translated into concrete action. Therefore, it is worthwhile to focus on the type of institutional framework conditions that are able to facilitate and enable sufficient lifestyles in the first place. Politics of sufficiency is in fact about creating the framework conditions that are needed to make sufficient lifestyles an actual possibility. To that end, four basic approaches can be distinguished.

1 What is sufficiency?

The term “sufficiency” has its roots in the Latin word “sufficere”, meaning “to be enough”. Sufficiency is about establishing what is the right measure. It is about having enough to meet one’s needs – while thinking not only about material needs.

Wolfgang Sachs introduced the concept of sufficiency into the sustainability debate in Germany at the beginning of the 1990s. He encapsulated it in four principles, which he named the “four Es”, from the German terms he used (Entschleunigung, Entflechtung, Entrümpelung and Entkommerzialisierung). These principles can be translated into English by using “four Lessens” which express the idea that we need to lessen our speed, our distance, the encumbrance of our acquired possessions, and the role of commerce and the market in our lives. We will consider these “four Lessens” in more detail later in this text as guidelines for a politics of sufficiency.

“Slower, less, better, finer” – this was how Hans Glauber, the founder of the Toblach Talks, framed the idea of sufficiency. Sufficiency is about the quality of “being in the world”, about

finding the right relationship to space and time, to possessions and the market.

2 Preferences for sustainable lifestyles and limits of their realisation

Departing from this definition, sufficiency is – in economic terms – about individual preferences of how to live one’s life. According to standard economic thinking, personal preferences are induced externally and they can be treated as a given factor. This culminates in an image of man corresponding to the ideal-typical “homo oeconomicus”, which is dominating standard economics. It implies that humans are creatures characterised by unlimited needs and desires who constantly aim at personal utility maximisation. According to this view, “more”, “faster”, “further” are the basic principles driving all human aspiration.

This view has been challenged as the field of economics has begun to open up to insights from psychology, cultural and social sciences. The “homo oeconomicus” is now contrasted by the image of a “homo sustinens” (Siebenhüner 2000) – which characterises humans as social creatures with a sense of responsibility and community. The decisive difference in this conceptualisation is the understanding that concrete individual preferences are not given exogenous factors, but rather the result of education and socialisation processes shaped by institutional framework conditions (cf. Becker 1996; Bowles 1998). Individual preferences are thus endogenous factors depending on personal learning processes (Siebenhüner 2000) in the context of institutional framework conditions. Consequently, changes in framework conditions have an effect on the development of individual preferences.

In this context, an interesting debate emerged in the late 1970s on so-called “meta preferences” (cf. Sen 1977; Thaler/Shefrin 1981; Grofman/Uhlener 1985). This term describes overarching moral preferences that are able to modify individual desires. Again, this debate shows that it is important to understand how institutional framework conditions enable the emergence of preferences that are based on moral considerations and a sense of responsibility.

3 Four approaches for politics of sufficiency

The observations and reflections outlined above clearly show that a debate about sufficiency should not be confined to the level of individually articulated preferences. If the debate is to be meaningful at all, it has to deal with the framework condi-

tions shaping the emergence and development of individual preferences. Thus, the idea of “politics of sufficiency” is at the core of this debate. It captures the plethora of political decisions and societal institutions that can improve the overall conditions for developing sufficient lifestyles and actually practising them at an individual level. The ultimate goal is to make it easier to live the Good Life. To that end, four basic approaches can be distinguished (cf. Schneidewind/Zahrnt 2014) [1].

4 Framing – The prospects for a new institutional politics

The concept of sufficiency-oriented politics is an extension and development of the market economy. It is about having an institutional framework for economic activity which is constructed not just with the national social contract in mind but with global social justice as well. So in the first place, sufficiency politics is institutional politics which creates a framework supporting the objective of the Good Life. This includes, for example, new measures of prosperity for the national economy – because gross domestic product (GDP) is an increasingly poor indicator of what constitutes genuine prosperity in a society. It is about having competition rules and a fiscal policy which ensure that common or collective goods – the commons – are not depleted; or at least that the user pays for their depletion.

Framework policy takes responsibility for infrastructure that enables a Good Life for all, from cycle lanes in cities to easily accessible recreation areas. Finally, policies for social justice and for redistribution are an important element of a framework policy for the Good Life, because prosperity in modern societies is driven to a much greater degree by relative equality and justice than by the absolute level of GDP. Recent research has demonstrated this impressively.

5 Orienting – The right measures for time and space, property and the market

Political approaches which provide orientation are a second pathway for sufficiency policy. They address the characteristic tendencies of modern societies: acceleration, globalisation, quantitative growth and commercialisation. These tendencies have structural causes. So on the one hand sufficiency politics has to address the structural causes; on the other hand, it requires policies which offer contrasting points of orientation, which demonstrate an awareness of the values of deceleration, localisation and the search for the right measure. Such political approaches also serve to raise consciousness: they point the way for the kind of development that is needed for the future, and thereby provide support for the simultaneous approach via the other political pathways described in a politics of sufficiency.

A politics oriented in this way, taking the “four Lessens” – less speed, less distance, less clutter, less market – as its compass, is symbolic politics, in a good sense. It demonstrates that a different configuration of the Good Life beyond the expecta-

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tion of linear escalation is possible, and that politics can support the realisation of such alternative ways of living. It can help to spread a culture based on different measures of time and space and different lifestyle priorities, involving fewer things and fewer commodities, and to demonstrate that such a culture is equally valid and has an equal right to be supported by the common institutional framework.

6 Shaping – Mobility, Housing, Food: policies for the Good Life in specific areas of our lives

Good Life policies apply to specific fields of human activity: transport policy, planning and housing policy, or food and agriculture policy. These are policy fields that offer great scope for the promotion of sufficiency. The great advantage of using such a targeted approach is that these are established policy spheres with dedicated departments at all levels of government. So sufficiency policies can be hooked onto existing policy instruments to extend them in new directions and integrate them across different departments. Moreover, it means that a healthy competition for effective sufficiency policies can arise between different countries, regions and municipalities – which presents an opportunity to develop a political culture of experimentation.

Mobility and transport is one important example for this kind of shaping of sufficiency: The foundation for this system of transport is provided above all by the fossil fuels of oil and natural gas. Therefore a comprehensive mobility transformation is needed. Motorised transport is also responsible for using up resources and land, intrusions into nature and urban landscapes, the spreading of pollutants and noise, and direct threats to health through accidents.

For this reason it is not enough to raise the efficiency of transport modes and to replace fossil fuels as energy sources; nor would the most efficient electric car possible represent a solution. Firstly because the forecast growth in air and lorry traffic will more than outweigh efficiency gains from car traffic; secondly because it is difficult to justify more than a small switchover to biofuels, given that their cultivation represents a competition for land use with food cultivation and has negative

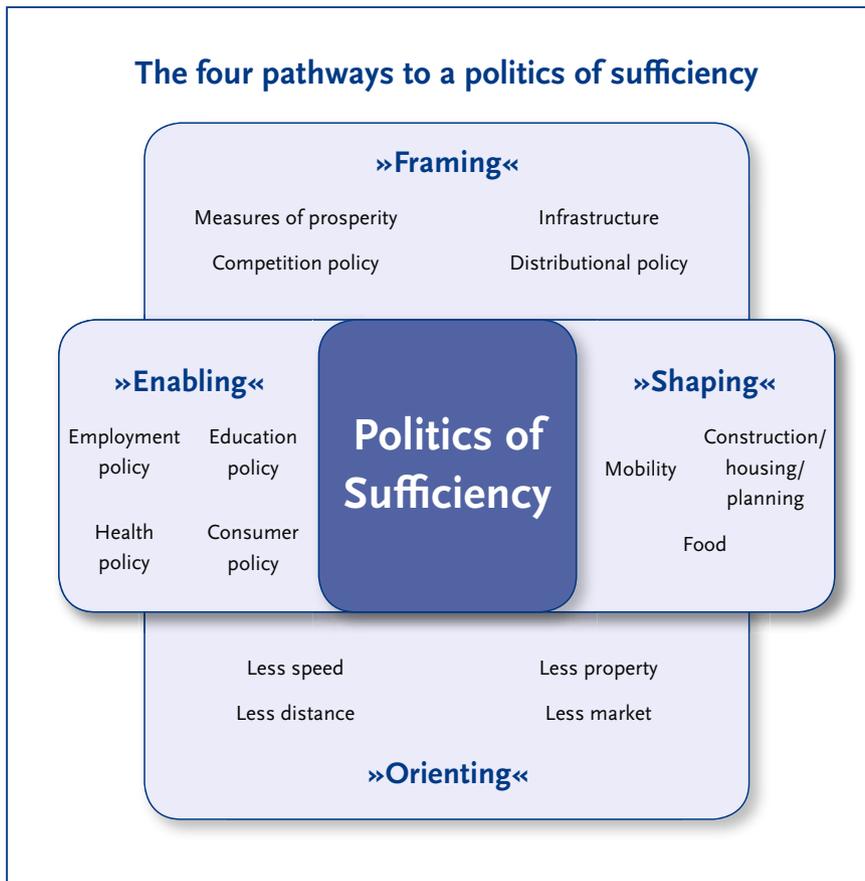


Figure 1: The four areas of a politics of sufficiency

environmental impacts; and thirdly because land use change and accidents can only be partially reduced through efficiency measures. Mobility policy for the future requires a change of direction along three dimensions:

Differently. We have to think in new categories in the transport field. Instead of allowing our perspective to be narrowed down to motorised transport, we should be thinking about mobility irrespective of the means of locomotion – that is, with equal regard for pedestrians and for those on bikes or in wheelchairs or prams. We should stop giving priority to individual car traffic and start favouring collective and integrated transport systems.

Slower. Deceleration is called for. It makes more sense to adapt infrastructure and driving culture to natural conditions than to continue endlessly trying to overcome “spatial resistance” by widening and straightening roads and building new tunnels and bridges. In fact, if we want cars to travel more slowly and safely, in built-up areas especially, it makes sense to increase spatial resistance.

Less. We should also ask ourselves again what our mobility needs are. Why do I want to travel what distance, and at what speed? For shopping, on the way to school or the office, in my leisure activities, on business or holiday trips ... What generates mobility? For people? For goods? Which infrastructure ele-

ments, what price structures, what mental structures support and enable it?

A change of direction of this kind can be promoted by a range of policy measures.

7 Enabling – Creating resources for sufficiency through employment, education, health and consumer policy

The fourth pathway to sufficiency politics – Enabling – looks at different policy areas. These include labour policy, education policy, health policy and consumer policy. They have a big impact on the ability of individuals to lead and contribute to the Good Life in a sufficient society. What is needed here is to build capacity and resources for the Good Life beyond economic growth. The whole concept of Politics of Sufficiency is about enabling sufficient lifestyles. The idea here is about a specific aspect of that enabling, namely the personal resources that make living the Good Life easier: resources like education, knowledge, the freedom and capacity to choose one’s own path, time and health.

The policy branches capable of creating such resources are today often still dominated by the dogma of economic growth, and so they are often focused on the creation of jobs and of more consumption – which means that they pass up opportunities to support lifestyles based on sufficiency.

Supposedly “unproductive” areas of policy then become the focus of political attention because of the perception of some problem or deficit, such as the need to integrate groups such as the unemployed – or older people who have left the labour market, or men and women who are under-employed because they are looking after children – back into economically measurable productive labour. Young people, too, must be made as productive as possible through appropriate training – and this is called “investing in education”.

The health economy is seen as an important growing market in an ageing society, so health policy too becomes a branch of economic growth policy.

This fixation on work and consumption fails to do justice to our lives in their entirety. It is also a mistake in purely economic terms, as over half of all work takes place outside the formal economy, in the household, in caring for children and others and in voluntary work. Moreover, this informal work is a prerequisite without which no formal paid employment would be possible. And it is essential for social cohesion. Politicians

are now becoming aware of this link between formal and informal work and are bemoaning the “erosion of social capital”. But this sort of economic instrumentalism threatens to turn our cultural institutions, nurseries and hospitals, which used to be part of what supported and gave purpose to our lives, into mere factors of economic investment decisions.

A sufficient society will not be primarily concerned with functionality within the economic system. It takes its orientation from a conception of human beings as social and cultural creatures with a wide and diverse range of needs, of which the economic ones are only a sub-group. According to Skidelsky, these needs are:

- Health
- Security
- Respect
- Personality
- Harmony with nature
- Friendship
- Leisure

Resource policies are designed to improve the conditions for the satisfaction of these needs, independent of any measurable contribution they might make to raising GDP. Of particular importance for this goal are health policy, labour policy, education policy and consumer policy.

Good Life policies benefit greatly from being flanked by complementary approaches in other policy fields: education policy, employment and working time policy, appropriate consumer and health policies. In these fields, too, the foundations and the skills for the Good Life are being and will be created. The further these “resources” for the Good Life can be developed, the easier it will be to live a life based on sufficiency. Figure 1 provides an overview of the central areas of a “politics of sufficiency.”

8 Outlook – the politics of sufficiency and implications for further research

The aim of this article has been to demonstrate the need for “politics of sufficiency” and to provide an overview of the relevant policy fields. It has been shown that politics of sufficiency is itself a multi-level and multi-sectoral field of policy. It affects national, regional as well as local politics. Politics of sufficiency equally affects economic, transport and education policy. Further research is thus needed to develop concrete fields of sufficiency politics (for an early attempt in this direction see Schneidewind/Zahrnt 2014).

To move politics of sufficiency further, questions related to broader issues in economics and the social sciences need to be discussed:

- Macro-economic effects of politics of sufficiency: How is the development of sufficient lifestyles related to De-growth? Can politics of sufficiency initiate and support De-growth politics? What feedback effects would this have on processes of preference formation?

- How can the idea of a politics of sufficiency be linked to the economic discourse on individual preferences as endogenous factors and on the development of meta preferences?

- What type of processes is needed to ensure democratic legitimacy of politics of sufficiency? The fact that individual preferences are shaped endogenously represents a critical challenge with regard to democratic legitimacy.

The concept of “Politics of Sufficiency” opens up a wide field of future research that is crucial for the development of a responsible civilisation of the 21st century.

Annotations

- [1] The following discussion is based on the argument presented in the book on “Politics of Sufficiency” which is authored by Uwe Schneidewind and Angelika Zahrnt and is published by oekom, Munich.

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