

# Sufficiency as a “Strategy of the Enough”: A Necessary Debate

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## Why we need a discussion about sufficiency

Global ecological crises are presenting mankind with massive challenges. The pressure of the global middle and upper classes on our planet’s vital ecological systems has now become so strong that a climatic and ecological destabilization of the Earth has begun (RICHARDSON et al. 2023). This destabilization endangers the ecological foundations of life, which include a stable climate, a functioning biosphere, sufficient availability of clean water, healthy soil and clean air. Six out of nine planetary boundaries have already been exceeded and the effects are increasingly being felt (ibid.). Hence, the destabilization of environmental conditions poses a considerable threat—especially in a world that is also confronted with numerous other global and regional crises such as war and poverty.

Therefore, the consumption of resources, energy and land, which has been steadily rising for decades, must be reduced quickly and to the extent necessary. Globally, however, the measures taken so far have at best slowed down the Earth’s development towards a “Hothouse Earth” (STEFFEN et al. 2018) and a severely damaged biosphere. For instance, Germany has not yet managed to sufficiently comply with ecological limits. The majority of the environmental goals of the German Sustainable Development Strategy for 2030 are at risk of being missed.

Anyone who takes a realistic look at these facts must recognize that the current strategies are not sufficient to maintain healthy living conditions for young and future generations. That the transition to sustainability can be achieved through innovation and technology alone is a hypothesis for which there is insufficient evidence—on the contrary, there are many arguments against it. Nevertheless, the environmental policy debate often relies exclusively on technological innovation and assumes that people cannot be expected to make any major changes. In view of the increasing polarization of society and populist tendencies, concern about social cohesion is justified, indeed necessary. It is crucial to shape the transformation towards sustainability in a fair and inclusive way. At the same time, it would be wrong to close our eyes to the realities: Innovation and technical solutions make indispensable contributions to reducing energy and resource consumption, but from what we know, they are not enough. This is shown by historical studies on the relationship between economic activity and environmental consumption as well as future-oriented sectoral analyses, for example in the areas of energy, climate, raw materials and land. There are also strands of research that point to fundamental (e. g. thermodynamic and chemical) limits to the decoupling of social functions and resource and energy requirements.

Contemporary phenomena—such as food waste, the destruction of goods, fast fashion and the electronic throwaway society—illustrate that a critical examination of our forms of production and consumption is overdue in order to reduce our excessive consumption of raw materials, energy and land. A socially broad-based environmental policy therefore requires an honest examination of the required changes.

The concept of sufficiency is suitable for conducting such a discourse: firstly, sufficiency is a long-established concept in the environmental sciences. It is distinct from efficiency (less input per output) and consistency (more environmentally friendly input). In contrast, sufficiency aims at an absolute reduction of outputs, i.e. a conscious collective self-limitation of ecologically critical goods and services. Secondly, sufficiency with the meaning of “enough” (lat. *sufficere*) can be linked to questions of justice: sufficiency aims to ensure that all people have sufficient access to natural resources. For people living in poverty, “enough” can therefore also mean “more”. Sufficiency requires “less” for resource-intensive groups. These are the middle and upper classes, especially (but not only) in rich countries. A life in dignity for all within the planetary boundaries is therefore also the guiding principle of German and international sustainability strategies.

## Sufficiency: the neglected dimension

Socially, politically and economically, the topic of sufficiency currently appears to be hardly compatible. It seems to conflict with the dynamics of a growth-based consumer society. Sufficiency can too easily be reinterpreted as an attack on freedom and as “green moralizing”, instead of being understood primarily as collective self-restraint to preserve freedom. The hope that “green technology” alone is sufficient to decouple material growth from ecological burdens is too dominant. Globally, industrialization based on the Western model has led to unprecedented access to energy and resources. Other forms of social organization, collective welfare, and the use of nature and resources have been and continue to be displaced by the promise of progress of Western modernity. The increasingly obvious ecological damage and growing cracks in the social cohesion of Western societies are hardly taken into account.

Against this background, the German Advisory Council on the Environment (SRU) would like to broaden the discussion. It is part of the SRU’s mission to provide science-based support for the public debate on environmental policy and to point out undesirable developments. The aim of this discussion paper is to clarify the *why* of sufficiency. The *how*, for example in the form of concrete recommendations for sufficiency measures, is not the main focus of this paper. This is in recognition of the complexity of the issues involved, which require considerably more detailed treatment. Above all, however, a broad social discussion is overdue regarding what concepts of social welfare are viable in the long term. The paper presents evidence that in order to successfully address the crises and challenges of the 21st century, we must go beyond technological solutions.

Sufficiency is often framed as a purely individual lifestyle issue. On the contrary, according to the SRU, sufficiency should primarily be understood as a collective challenge. Environmentally relevant behaviour arises in social contexts and is structurally integrated. At present, framework conditions often make resource-conscious behaviour more difficult. Yet, they can be changed so as to facilitate such behaviour. More efficient forms of production and consumption can only become established if politics, society, business and science work together. Emphasizing shared responsibility also defuses the cultural conflict over the social evaluation of different lifestyles that resonates in discussions about sustainable consumption: for example, some people accuse a “green” milieu of trying to impose certain lifestyles on other social groups. Contrasting or devaluing lifestyles would indeed be counterproductive. On the other hand, the ecological consequences of decisions must not be ignored. There is no moral right to understand environmentally harmful behaviour only as an exercise of personal freedom and to ignore negative effects on others. In total, however, the individual ecological footprint is

more strongly influenced by income than by environmental awareness: people from precarious backgrounds have the least negative impact on the environment.

Social acceptability also affects the choice of policy instruments. Some stakeholders consider market-based instruments to be fundamentally preferable, as they appear to be more efficient and more compatible with our liberal concept of society than regulatory law. However, price increases can be just as drastic for people with little financial leeway as a ban. Due to their impact on social justice, market-based instruments are often less socially accepted than regulatory law (see SRU 2023, chap. 4.1). To be sure, economic instruments contribute to systematically orienting the economy towards lower resource consumption. Yet, due to the complexity of ecological assets, they cannot be the sole policy instrument.

Moreover, in order for societies to become sustainable, a comprehensive understanding of how they have become unsustainable is required. Thirty years ago, the environmental economist Richard Norgaard wrote that we would only be able to meet the challenge of sustainability if there was a consensus on how modernity became unsustainable. This would require a new interpretation of history (NORGAARD 1994). He thus suggested adopting a perspective that understands the relationship between society and the environment as reciprocal, rather than viewing the environment merely as a resource for society to exploit. In this way, the history of civilizations would have to be rethought from the perspective of their material relationships with the environment. Thus, a conception of history would have to be developed from the perspective of its real-world, material and ecological consequences. So far, such a change of perspective has hardly taken place on a broad social level.

Further deterioration of the ecological basis of life can still be limited. Decisive action can lead to positive results as progress in important areas of environmental, health and social policy shows. To this end, societal learning processes are fundamental. The challenge of material self-limitation requires such a learning process. It is part of a historical project of the democratic ecologization of the social constitutional state (SRU 2019). The primary goal of material self-limitation is to adapt our collective ways of thinking, living and doing business to planetary and other ecological limits. However, sufficiency also aims to achieve important social goals. Humans contribute to and are affected by ecological crises to extremely different degrees, and they have very different levels of access to important environmental resources—in blatant contradiction to the right of all humans to live in dignity. This right is an important part of the self-image of (especially) Western industrialized nations. If a global, increasingly interconnected humanity wants to be able to cope with the Anthropocene across cultures and perceptions, it must address the historical challenge of “sufficiency” from different perspectives. Sufficiency can be more than just an ecological necessity. It opens up opportunities for a dialogue on new understandings of quality of life, prosperity and social justice. Thus, it counteracts the negative social effects of modernity on justice, health and quality of life—in other words, it aims for a democratic, ecological civilization based on the goals and values of the Enlightenment.

With this paper, the SRU would like to stimulate a debate on sufficiency. It shows why sufficiency strategies are necessary to solve environmental challenges in specific areas. Drawing on various disciplines and case studies, it formulates a series of theses—some of them controversial—on a topic that defies simple answers.

*This summary is based on a discussion paper published by the German Advisory Council on the Environment (SRU) in March 2024. The full reasoning, further details and extensive references can be found in the German-language long text version („Suffizienz als ‚Strategie des Genug‘: Eine Einladung zur Diskussion“ [↗](#)).*

## Literature

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