

CDE POLICY BRIEF



Enough is good enough: Sufficiency to curb resource overconsumption

Sustainable development demands that we reduce global consumption of non-renewable resources, use renewable resources more sustainably, and enable everyone a good life. This will require much fairer distribution of resources¹, access, and opportunities than has been the case so far.² Despite widespread implementation of various measures to increase efficiency, global consumption of resources continues to rise. The global North, in particular, is called upon to recognize its responsibility and to cut back its excessive use of resources. This policy brief considers how practising a sufficient lifestyle may help to decrease resource consumption and enable a good life.³

Resource limits

For everyone to live as we do in Switzerland, nearly three planet Earths would be required (Pol-dervaart 2015).⁴ Globally, we are already at the point where one and a half Earths would be needed to prevent overuse of non-renewable natural resources at current consumption rates.⁵ Respecting planetary boundaries in terms of greenhouse gas emissions, for example, requires that we cut global

CO₂ emissions to a quarter of current levels and Swiss emissions to an eighth.⁶ Around the globe, vital resources are becoming increasingly scarce. Meanwhile, resource consumption grows unabated. Our knowledge and awareness of the resulting ecological and social harms, in particular, continue to mount. The urgency of reducing our resource use and enabling sustainable development is increasingly apparent.⁷



The research featured is focused on Switzerland.

KEY MESSAGES

- Efficiency and consistency strategies alone are not enough to reduce global resource consumption. Sufficiency strategies show added promise in helping to curb overconsumption in rich countries of the global North.
- Examples show that practising a sufficient lifestyle can decrease resource use and simultaneously support a good life. While obstacles remain, there are also existing factors that facilitate and promote living sufficiently.
- Approaches to overcome obstacles and strengthen enabling factors should focus on education, communication of role models, and creation of alternative work (time) models.
- These measures can contribute to spreading sufficient lifestyles, transforming societal values, and reshaping our economic system.

Box 1. Examining sufficient lifestyles in Switzerland

The results described here stem from a research project titled *The Importance of Sufficient Lifestyles for a Good Life* (2013–2016), sponsored by Stiftung Mercator, Switzerland.¹⁴ CDE researchers (Leng, Schild, and Hofmann 2016) investigated questions including:

What do sufficient lifestyles look like in Switzerland, especially in the areas of mobility and everyday consumption?

How do those practising a sufficient lifestyle conduct themselves, what attitudes and values motivate them, and what skills support their lifestyle?

What connections do those living sufficiently perceive between their lifestyle and their positive life satisfaction?

Research followed a mixed-methods approach, including a written survey (N = 150), structured interviews (N = 25), a workshop with experts, and literature analysis. Interviewees were asked how they get around and what they eat, for example, as these areas (i.e. mobility, daily consumption) have major resource implications. The other key consumption area of housing (Moser et al. 2016) was deliberately excluded due to its reduced scope for immediate change and personal influence.¹⁵

Sufficiency: a promising concept

Three types of strategies – efficiency, consistency, and sufficiency – have been devised to support more sustainable resource use. **Efficiency** strategies seek to reduce the amount of energy needed per unit of production or service, thereby increasing productivity.⁸ These often take the form of technological solutions, such as gradually reducing the amount of petrol needed to power cars. **Consistency** strategies address cycles of material usage, striving to harmonize nature and technology by reducing material throughput and waste, for example by replacing fossil fuel-based energy with renewable solar or wind energy.⁹ But strategies of efficiency and consistency cannot enable sustainable development on their own. **Sufficiency** strategies are also needed.¹⁰ These pursue a twofold objective: setting upper limits on resource use to ensure we cut back¹¹, and transforming our lives and economic models on behalf of a new understanding of wealth and well-being – one that especially emphasizes wealth of time and relationships.¹² The latter goal, in particular, highlights the role of changing value systems, which observers consider crucial to transformations towards sustainable development.¹³

Sufficient lifestyles

In a research project by CDE researchers (see Box 1), a **sufficient lifestyle** was defined as a mode of sustainable living in which *less* consumption of resources is associated with *more* life satisfaction. An individual's lifestyle may be considered sufficient when that person perceives a reduction in resource use not as a sacrifice, but rather as a contribution to a good life.

Pioneers of sufficient lifestyles suggest that it's possible to lead a fulfilling life while using fewer resources (see Box 2). These individuals gather experiences with sufficiency and share them with wider society, stimulating public

discussion and triggering multiplier effects. In this way, people living sufficiently perform vital preparatory and foundational work, providing a basis for development and adoption of similar measures and appropriate frameworks by others, individually or societally. With no need to acquire anything or make special arrangements, sufficient lifestyles have the distinct advantage of being possible to implement from one day to the next.

Living sufficiently in mobility and daily consumption

Interviews with pioneers of sufficient living show clearly how it contributes to reduced consumption of resources through specific behaviours.

Mobility. People living sufficiently enjoy getting around by bicycle whenever possible, or, when travelling longer distances, strive to use public transportation and avoid use of a car. They enjoy being in the fresh air, getting from one place to another by virtue of their own strength, and doing something for their personal health at the same time. They fly as little as possible and also rely on public transportation for holiday travel.

Food. When shopping for food, they buy only what they really need and consume goods that fulfil particular selection criteria (fairly traded, organically produced, in season, from the region). They pay attention to the environmental sustainability of product ingredients and packaging.

Clothing. When buying clothing, it is important to them that social and ecological standards were upheld in the production chain and fair trade criteria were followed. Ideally, they swap clothing with others or make purchases in second-hand shops or thrift stores, as these strategies spare the most resources.

Visitors to a Repair Café consult for free with a professional repairperson (right) at a local coffee shop in Bern, Switzerland. A growing trend in Europe, Repair Cafés encourage people to fix broken devices like smartphones rather than tossing them and buying something new. Photo: A. Lannen



Repairs. When devices break, people living sufficiently try to have them repaired, or make repairs themselves when possible – leading them to greatly appreciate so-called Repair Cafés. Or they seek out opportunities to share devices with others before considering purchasing something new on their own.

Less is more

At first glance, it might appear utopian that a lifestyle characterized by using fewer resources and consuming less could actually *increase* life satisfaction and promote a good life. How is it possible? And what do those living sufficiently identify as the source of added value in their resource-saving behaviour? The results from evaluation of structured, qualitative interviews suggest the following benefits.

Freedom through restraint. A sense of increased freedom is one of the key elements. Those living sufficiently claim to feel liberated when their buying criteria (see above) help them to make less time-consuming decisions in overflowing supermarket aisles, or when they realize just how little they need of what is on offer.

Room for self-determination. Another key contributor to life satisfaction is their feeling of living in a highly self-determined way, consciously deciding for or against specific products or behaviours and consistently taking action based on their own values.

Time for relationships. Also central to a good life for those living sufficiently is having the ability to cultivate and deeply experience successful relationships – with other people, but also with themselves and the natural world – and this requires adequate time.

Principle of mindfulness. They further cite living mindfully opposite themselves, others, and all living creatures as a significant ingredient of their way of life. Being mindful in this way entails thinking actively about the welfare of other living beings and altering personal behaviour to prevent harm both to oneself and to others. Further, they view living mindfully as striving to live consciously in the present, enabling a sense of inner calm and the ability to focus on what is essential.

Time and space for well-being. Finally, for those pursuing a sufficient lifestyle, having enough time for the things that enhance personal well-being is especially important, such as the time it takes to tend a vegetable garden and prepare meals from it.

Obstacles and opportunities

Our interviews with sufficiency pioneers revealed numerous factors that help or hinder sufficient lifestyles. On a personal level, the “force of habit” is one factor that can impede resource-saving behaviour. It is easier to con-

tinue established behaviours than to expend energy looking for alternatives and putting them into practice. Another hindering factor is the potential tension between the desire to be true to oneself and to live as intentionally as possible, on the one hand, and the desire to be accepted and valued by wider society, on the other. Finally, our reigning economic system and its inherent dictate of growth maximization was consistently cited as an obstacle to sufficient living.

But there are also many factors that promote sufficient lifestyles. In particular, there appears to be increasing recognition that owning too many material possessions can become a burden – both physically (just imagine moving house) and mentally (anxiety over maintaining one’s material status). This prompts desires to “declutter”¹⁶ and “live lighter”. Also very conducive to sufficient living is having a supportive personal environment – being surrounded by similarly minded people who can offer help both psychologically and with concrete advice and actions. Further, Switzerland’s institutional framework was frequently cited as beneficial, including its direct democratic system, corresponding legal structure, security, and freedom, as well as its peaceful surroundings and high living standards – all conditions that enable individuals a certain flexibility in choosing how to live in the first place.

Promoting sufficient lifestyles: what can be done?

To enable the spread of sufficient lifestyles, appropriate measures must be identified and implemented in different areas and on various levels. Above all, areas should be addressed that bear the greatest potential for impact. Among the measures formulated by pioneers and experts to promote and spread sufficient lifestyles (see also “Policy implications”, last page), particular importance was attached to education (in school and extracurricular), communication of role models, and the development of alternative work (time) models. Any supportive measures introduced should cover the greatest number of activity areas possible¹⁷, allow for different levels of intensity, and be capable of implementation on various timescales.¹⁸ Diverse actors (community, canton/state, federal) must be brought on board to effectively address and motivate the broader public in each area.

Box 2. Living sufficiently – two short portraits

Rahel is 36 and works in the mobility sector. Her preferred modes of transport are walking and biking, since she enjoys travelling at a slower pace. She considers it good for her well-being. It enables her to interact with people she encounters on her way, and makes her feel more connected to her city. It also satisfies her urge for movement while helping her to keep fit. She has not flown in 16 years.

Maria is 37 and works in the financial sector. She is critical of the environmental and social harms caused by excessive material consumption, and tries to consume as little as possible herself. She buys only what she really needs, and much of it second-hand. She shares many items and often receives things that others no longer want. When something breaks, she tries to fix it. Thanks to her lifestyle, she can afford to work part-time and has lots of time for family and for cultivating her social network, which she values highly.

Box 3. Similar lifestyle approaches

Several other concepts exist related to sufficient lifestyles. They share similarities, but also differ on key points. Lifestyles of Voluntary Simplicity (LOVOS), for example, strive for more life satisfaction and targeted reduction of consumption, but are not necessarily based on principles of sustainability. Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability (LOHAS), by contrast, are oriented towards sustainable development and seek to enable a good life. But they do not explicitly call for reducing consumption; instead, they emphasize “fair” and “ecological” consumption, which may still result in increased consumption and thus more resource use.¹⁹

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Policy implications of research

Education for a sufficient lifestyle

An overall transformation of societal values is necessary to best promote and spread sufficient lifestyles. This transformation should be initiated and accompanied by appropriate school-based and extracurricular education.²⁰ Emphasis should be placed on fostering particular skills, especially skills of self-reflection, as well as on concepts such as mindfulness of other living beings and oneself. Awareness-raising campaigns should draw people's attention to their own behaviour, stimulate reflection, and motivate change.

Communication of role models

In the context of social innovations such as widespread implementation of sufficiency in the global North, those already practising sufficient lifestyles can function as "change agents".²¹ They personally test certain changes, initiate shifts in their environment, and contribute to societal transformation. To date, however, they have not received enough attention and this has kept their sphere of influence relatively small. People practising sufficient lifestyles should be portrayed and communicated as role models in order to inform the broader public about how to reduce resource consumption in daily life and how this can contribute to greater life satisfaction.²²

Alternative work (time) models

Many of the activities that characterize sufficient lifestyles are time-consuming. This highlights the need to develop alternative work (time) models which make it possible to decrease the time spent earning an income and also enable work to be divided more flexibly over an entire lifetime.²³ Any such part-time models must ensure a decent livelihood. Models such as unconditional basic income point in this direction. The goal must be to better balance paid and unpaid work, placing increased value on the latter.

Ecological urgency versus willingness to change

Early adopters of sufficiency inspire change. But our wider consumption-related ecological crises remain urgent. So political leadership is also needed. People's sense of personal (consumptive) freedom must be carefully addressed to prevent backlashes to anything perceived as forced, top-down change. Policy measures should build upon each other, progressively increasing broader societal acceptance of sufficient living.²⁴

Suggested further reading

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This issue

Series editor: Anu Lannen
Editor/translator: Anu Lannen
Design: Simone Kummer
Printed by Varicolor AG, Bern



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ISSN 2296-8687

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Citation: Leng M, Schild K, Hofmann H, Hammer T. 2017. *Enough Is Good Enough: Sufficiency to Curb Resource Overconsumption*. CDE Policy Brief, No. 11. Bern, Switzerland: CDE.

Keywords: Sufficiency, resources, consumption, lifestyles, good life, transformation

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References and notes

- ¹ In this brief, the term “resources” generally refers to non-renewable natural resources.
- ² Considered with respect to the principle of distributive justice.
- ³ Consult the Sustainable Development Goals: <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/> (accessed 11 August 2017).
- ⁴ Poldervaart P. 2015. Ressourcenkonsum – Wo liegt das naturverträgliche Mass? [Resource consumption – how much is environmentally compatible?] *UMWELT* 2:39–41. https://www.bafu.admin.ch/dam/bafu/de/dokumente/naturgefahren/magazin-download/diese_ausgabe_alsdownload.pdf.download.pdf/diese_ausgabe_alsdownload.pdf
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- ⁷ Our problem-solving approach focuses on the global North. Questions of catch-up development and justice on behalf of the global South may be addressed separately.
- ⁸ Kleinhüchelkotten S. 2005. *Suffizienz und Lebensstile* [Sufficiency and Lifestyles]. Berlin, Germany: Berliner Wissenschaftsverlag. (See p. 54) <http://d-nb.info/974530034/04>
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- ¹¹ Care must be taken not to pit the three strategies against one another. The establishment of upper limits on behalf of sufficiency can enable maximization of efficiency and consistency strategies within these limits.
- ¹² Wealth of time (*Zeitwohlstand*) means having a high degree of influence in determining how you arrange the use of your time over the course of your life. Wealth of relationships (*Beziehungswohlstand*) refers to the extent to which you may cultivate relationships in a way that is satisfying. See, for example: Scherhorn. 2002. Die Logik der Suffizienz [The Logic of Sufficiency], pp. 15–26. In: Linz M et al. eds. *Von nichts zu viel: Suffizienz gehört zur Zukunftsfähigkeit*. Wuppertal, Germany: Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy. <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/106818/1/816926395.pdf> <https://epub.wupperinst.org/frontdoor/index/index/docId/1551>
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- ¹⁴ Comprehensive description of the project results may be found in: Leng M, Schild K, Hofmann H. 2016. *Genug genügt: Mit Suffizienz zu einem guten Leben* [Enough is Enough: Sufficiency for a Good Life]. Munich, Germany: Oekom Verlag. <https://www.oekom.de/nc/buecher/gesamtprogramm/buch/genug-genuegt.html>
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²⁰ Geibler et al. (2014) illustrate forms of social learning with experimental methods and laboratories that can support education in this direction: Geibler J, Erdmann L, Liedtke C, Rohn H, Stabe M, Berner S, Leismann K, Schnalzer K, Kennedy K. 2014. Exploring the Potential of a German Living Lab Research Infrastructure for the Development of Low Resource Products and Services. *Resources* 3:575–598. <http://www.mdpi.com/2079-9276/3/3/575>

²¹ Kristof K. 2010. *Wege zum Wandel: Wie wir gesellschaftliche Veränderungen erfolgreich gestalten können* [Paths to Transformation: How We Can Successfully Shape Social Change]. Munich, Germany: Oekom Verlag. (See p. 35) <https://www.oekom.de/nc/buecher/neuerscheinungen/buch/wege-zum-wandel.html>

²² According to Stengel (2011), such role models comprise an important part of the “interpretive elite” (*Deutungselite*): Stengel O. 2011. *Op. cit.* (See p. 306)

²³ There is increasing research on whether and how reducing time spent earning an income promotes subsistence and social engagement activities, increases quality of life, and leads to lower resource consumption. See, for example: Buhl J, Acosta J. 2016. Work less, do less? Working time reductions and rebound effects. *Sustainability Science* 11(2):261–276. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11625-015-0322-8>

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