Policy-Making as a Crucial Element for Sufficiency on the Business Level

Discussing the Role of Policies to Push Sufficiency beyond Pioneers

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Abstract *Research into sufficiency at business level often focuses on pioneers and a bottom-up approach to transformation. However, business activities are shaped and limited by political framework conditions. We analyze the interdependent relationships between business and policy making, arguing for greater emphasis on the structural perspective to foster sufficiency-oriented shifts in business.*

1. Introduction

Evidence supporting the notion that sustainability goals cannot be achieved solely through technological innovations but rather by incorporating sufficiency strategies grows year on year (Haberl et al. 2020). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change now recognizes sufficiency as a crucial strategy for achieving climate goals (IPCC 2022) and an increasing number of energy scenarios integrate sufficiency approaches, acknowledging their significant potential (Wiese et al. 2022). However, the implementation of a sufficiency strategy remains unusual at all levels of society, including in business and policy making.

Building on a growing body of sufficiency definitions (Sandberg 2021; Lage 2022; Jungell-Michelsson/Heikkurinen 2022), we define sufficiency as *a strategy for reducing the consumption and production of end-use products and services through changes in social practices in order to comply with environmental sustainability while ensuring an adequate social foundation for all people*. In this chapter, we focus specifically on the production side. For business, this means that sufficiency encompasses limits on absolute production levels of end-use products and services, aiming to stabilize or even reduce production levels in certain areas or countries and to influence consumers accordingly (Lage 2022; Niessen/Bocken 2021). Additionally, sufficiency entails changes in the nature of the goods produced. For instance, a sufficiency-oriented approach in the automotive industry could mean producing significantly fewer cars and instead prioritizing the production of trams and buses, which would help reduce the need for private vehicles while ensuring basic mobility for a large part of the population. Similarly, the construction industry would shift from new construction to renovation and refurbishment, and the clothing industry would significantly reduce the amount of material produced, while supporting the reuse and repair of clothing. Thus, adopting a sufficiency perspective in business strategies entails a fundamental shift in business activities, with the overall aim of reducing production and consumption. Therefore, it is not surprising that sufficiency-oriented business strategies and corresponding business models are rare when it comes to downsizing, shifting or reducing production (Niessen/Bocken 2021).

Research into sufficiency and businesses often focuses on the activities of first-movers, examining their potentials, practices and obstacles regarding sufficiency-oriented production (Bocken et al. 2020; Gossen/Kropfeld 2022). Such studies frequently analyze best practice examples, where niche actors develop new practices and make them viable. Many studies on sufficiency-oriented business activities seem to adopt a strong bottom-up approach, relying on the diffusion of sufficiency-oriented business practices from the niche to move the production side towards sufficiency. This research is significant as it provides crucial insights into the transferability and limitations of sufficiency-oriented entrepreneurial actions. However, it neglects the effect of political framework conditions on sufficiency-oriented business strategies and their mainstreaming. Business activities always occur within politically shaped frameworks, while simultaneously directly or indirectly influencing political conditions. These interrelated and diverse relationships between sufficiency in business and policy making are rarely explored.

In this chapter, we examine this relationship between business and policy making on sufficiency and argue for a shift in the focus of sufficiency-related business research from the analysis of pioneers towards a more structural perspective. First, we analyze the relationships between business and policy making on sufficiency, focusing not only on pioneer businesses but also on businesses that hinder the implementation of sufficiency policies. Then, we analyze the role that policy making can play in influencing businesses to adopt sufficiency and explore sufficiency policies in different dimensions.

2. The influence of business on policy making on sufficiency

2.1 Pioneering businesses as drivers of sufficiency policies

Business can stimulate sufficiency policies and influence public debate, societal culture and market structures by successfully implementing sufficiency-oriented business models and showcasing sufficiency as a current possibility. Businesses can support sufficiency-oriented consumer practices and shifts in business culture, as well as reshape market structures in ways that can eventually instigate policy changes. Thus, following Palzkill and Schneidewind (2014), the basic assumption is that while businesses are exposed to market pressures and structural constraints (as explained below), they do have the potential to act as agents of change in several ways.

Firstly, pioneering businesses are instrumental in changing public discourse and common practice by initiating changes in consumer behavior, actively sharing knowledge through peer learning activities and providing replicable templates for other businesses (Froese et al. 2023). By way of illustration, PREMIUM, a German beverage producer, renounces profit and advertising and openly shares its business model with peers (e.g., through advisory services). PREMIUM's ambition is to promote its business logic in order to showcase and mainstream their approach to doing business (Edinger-Schons et al. 2019). Furthermore, in France, Murfy, a business offering professional repair services for home appliances, launched a marketing campaign featuring slogans, such as "The best value fridge is already in your kitchen", to promote product repairs (Munten/Vanhamme 2023: 14). Other businesses operating in France, such as Spareka and iFixit, also offer repair guides, repair services and spare parts, demonstrating the feasibility of repair-oriented business models. iFixit, in particular, is known for rating the repairability of laptops, smartphones and tablets. Against this background (although there is no proof of direct causality) it is worth noting that France introduced a ban on planned obsolescence in 2015 and the repairability index law for certain electrical devices in 2019 (Légifrance 2021; Ministère de la transition écologique 2021). The latter now mandates producers to provide repairability scores to consumers. Subsequently, in April 2022, the European Parliament demanded a legislative proposal for a 'right to repair' to ensure, among other things, that products are easier to repair, contain replaceable parts and are more durable (EUR-Lex 2022). Consequently, in line with Bidmon and Knab (2018), we argue that successful, sufficiency-oriented business models can influence the discourse and practices of consumption and production and, eventually, contribute to a socio-economic environment that makes it easier for policymakers to implement sufficiency policies.

Secondly, businesses that are pioneers of sufficiency can join forces to gain political power and proactively influence political actors. As Beyeler and Jaeger-Erben (2022: 21) highlight in their study on fourteen sufficiency pioneers, "sufficiency practitioners turn to their peers to collaborate for a sufficiency-oriented ecosystem and lobby for legislation that supports sufficiency practices". For example, Too Good To Go, together with other businesses, is campaigning for labels on food products to indicate that food is often still edible after the best-before date (Too Good To Go 2023). This initiative represents an effort to build on and change established policies, encouraging responsible consumption and reducing food waste.

However, the food industry also highlights how the relationship between pioneering businesses and policy decisions is dynamic, complex and anything but univocal. The spread of vegetarian and vegan diets around the world is an example of this. This cultural shift has not been driven solely by business. Social movements and non-governmental organizations, such as ProVeg and PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), play a pivotal role (Whelan/Gond 2017). Nevertheless, Oatly (a producer of plant-based dairy alternatives) and Beyond Meat (a producer of plant-based meat alternatives) have responded to this movement very successfully. Along with similar businesses, they have contributed to the normalization of plant-based diets and the availability of associated products in supermarkets (Bocken et al. 2020). As outlined above, such changes in public perception can lead to supportive policy measures. They can, however, also cause incumbent and powerful businesses to respond with counter-measures as happened in 2020 when, under pressure from agricultural associations, the EU Parliament decided that plant-based dairy alternatives could not be referred to as 'milk' or 'cheese', etc. (Beret 2019). In summary, the adoption of sufficiency into the mainstream and policy making is a complex and conflicted process, which in many cases is actively hindered by incumbent businesses.

To conclude, pioneering businesses can contribute to a shift in discourse, power structures and socio-economic conditions and thus influence policy making on sufficiency. However, while these pioneers exhibit the potential for radical and authentic sufficiency strategies, they are usually small businesses operating in market niches. While there are attempts to join forces, such niche businesses do not generally have the same influence as larger businesses (e.g., corporations) to drive widespread policy change. The subsequent sections will explore how businesses may both inhibit and be influenced by policy change, shedding further light on the complex interplay between business practices and sufficiency policies.

2.2 Businesses as inhibitors of sufficiency policies

In numerous instances, businesses actively inhibit the development of policies geared towards sufficiency. When the aim of a sufficiency policy is to decrease the volume of cars, meat, dairy products, clothes or appliances produced and consumed, it has the potential to threaten the fundamental income models of some businesses. Therefore, it is likely that while certain businesses will experiment with sufficiency-oriented business models (as mentioned above), others will oppose sufficiency policies. Following the literature on climate action delay and denial, we identify four different ways in which businesses might hinder sufficiency-oriented policy making.

As outlined above in the case of sufficiency-oriented businesses, one way in which businesses can influence policy making on sufficiency is via direct lobbying. In contrast to many sufficiency-oriented businesses, companies whose business models would be endangered by sufficiency policies tend to be economically and politically powerful and influential. According to an analysis by the NGO Lobby-Control, for every meeting with environmental associations between 2018 and 2021, the transport minister of Germany had 80 meetings with the automotive industry (Deckwirth 2021). The car industry in Germany donates millions of euros to the political parties in government and especially to those known for their car-friendly policies (LobbyControl 2017). Moreover, many politicians start working in high positions in businesses directly after resigning from the political sphere, known as the "revolving door" effect (Blanes i Vidal et al. 2010). A similarly strong connection between policy making and businesses opposed to sufficiency can be found in several industries.

A second way in which businesses use their economic and political power to hinder the implementation of sufficiency policies is by influencing the public discourse. Think tanks and industrial associations, such as the *Heartland Institute* in the USA or the Institute *Neue Soziale Marktwirtschaft* in Germany, run campaigns against well-established and well-researched phenomena such as the negative health impact of tobacco consumption or global warming. They fund thousands of fabricated studies to disrupt scientific evidence (as is well-documented for the tobacco industry), speak on talk shows, provide teaching materials for schools and roll out big campaigns in the media (Götze/Joeres 2020; Oreskes/Conway 2010). Such campaigns are used to erode the legitimacy of health protection or climate mitigation policies in the public discourse.

A third way in which businesses delay policy making on climate change mitigation is by voluntarily committing to develop sustainable business strategies and by pushing "pseudo-solutions" (Götze/Joeres 2020; I.L.A. Kollektiv 2017). These technical innovations (such as electric cars, synthetic fuels for aeroplanes or net zero campaigns) are necessary and indispensable as part of a socio-ecological transformation. However, they become a climate delay strategy when they are used to suggest that no big changes in modes of living are necessary, that endless growth can continue and that businesses are part of the solution and do not need further regulations (Bragg et al. 2021). Many of these "solutions" are criticized as being unfeasible and only possible on a small-scale because of a lack of resources, because they involve other ecological burdens (e.g., mining or land use change), or because they externalize costs to poorer regions (I.L.A. Kollektiv 2017).

Finally, businesses indirectly hinder the implementation of substantial sufficiency policies due to their structural entrenchment. Regions and nations depend to some extent on their key industries and businesses thriving. These dependencies comprise a material dimension, such as tax revenues or jobs, and a cultural dimension, such as the identities connected to the specific industry, as it can be noticed for example in regions where the coal mining or automobile industry dominates. Sufficiency policies, including both further environmental regulations on the production process and an absolute reduction in production levels, conflict with these dependencies. From the perspective of business, these dependencies are a source of power that can be used to effectively hinder sufficiency policy. From the perspective of policy making and research on sufficiency, these dependencies emphasize the importance of developing structures of growth independence.

The arguments outlined above hold true for many forms of climate protection policies. However, what makes these points sufficiency-specific is that sufficiency often poses a fundamental challenge to business models. Firstly, at the level of products and services, sufficiency questions conventional business models by emphasizing the need for fundamental changes, such as the construction of trams or cargo bicycles, or transitioning towards mobility service providers rather than producing electric cars. Secondly, sufficiency challenges the growth paradigm of businesses and the economy. As sufficiency entails setting absolute limits on the production and consumption of consumer goods, business models must shift away from growth-oriented approaches. Therefore, sufficiency policies are expected to face even greater resistance from influential businesses than climate protection policies. Consequently, it is unlikely that businesses alone will play a major part in the mainstreaming of sufficiency-oriented business models. Pioneer businesses are likely to remain a niche phenomenon. In contrast, it is important to acknowledge the primacy of policy making, which needs to set the framework conditions and guide business in a sufficiency-oriented direction. In the following, we therefore outline the dimensions of business-related sufficiency policies.

3. Sufficiency policies for sufficiency-oriented business strategies

3.1 Sufficiency-oriented framework conditions for business

Policies to incentivize and encourage the adoption of sufficiency at business level need to address framework conditions at both the macro- and meso-economic level. At the macro level, sufficiency policies entail changes to the current structures of the prevailing economic system in which businesses operate. The liberalized and globalized market is generally characterized by cheap resources, low cost energy and transport possibilities, prevailing weak environmental and social standards and large gaps between labor costs in the Global North and the Global South (Hickel et al. 2022; SERI et al. 2009). Consequently, production constantly moves to those countries (mostly in the Global South) where standards are lowest and labor is cheapest, so supply chains become excessively long and complex. Scholars describe this system as externalizing and imperial because it is based on discrimination and exploitation of people (especially in the Global South) and nature, while material wealth is primarily generated in the Global North (Brand et al. 2021). Sufficiency policies would address this externalization and the long supply chains by internalizing environmental and social costs through regulations and incentives aimed at changing the purpose of businesses from maximizing profit to maximizing the common good (Salleh 2010). Such policies may entail redistribution of material wealth, focus on the quality rather than quantity of products and emphasize a regional production

Another dimension of the prevailing system that impedes a sufficiency orientation at business level is the growth imperative driven by competitive framework conditions and market pressure. In competitive markets, businesses are driven to secure and increase their market share in order to survive and avoid bankruptcy (Richters/Siemoneit 2019). Businesses may try to maintain their competitiveness by increasing their productivity capacities or by lowering wages. This growth orientation is also driven by the businesses themselves through an artificial increase of the "needs" (probably better described as "wants") of consumers, e.g., through advertisements or the creation of ever-shorter fashion cycles (Mahmood 2022).

In recent years, some laws have been implemented (or discussed) that aim to change framework conditions on the macro level in a sufficiency-oriented way (even though sufficiency might not have been the starting point for these laws). The Supply Chain Act (EP 2023) and the Critical Raw Materials Act (EC 2023a), which are under discussion at EU level, and the German Act on Corporate Due Diligence Obligations in Supply Chains (BMAS 2023), intend to secure supply chains (e.g., in the textile industry) without the use of child labor, environmental destruction and with fair wages. In general, these regulations are intended to make businesses take more responsibility for their whole supply chain. Such measures are called "push-measures" and they intend to guarantee social and environmental standards. These regulations are likely to reduce exploitative fast fashion practices because cheap unsustainable products that incentivize overconsumption will no longer be available. At regional level, we tend to see "pull-measures" aiming to reduce externalization such as regional labels intended to shorten supply chains, bring value creation back into the regions and connect consumers to the producers (e.g., the label "Regionalfenster" in Germany).

These examples are starting points for policy to reshape the macro-economic framework conditions in order to support businesses to move towards sufficiency. There are, however, no explicit regulations on overconsumption or on the reduction of production – most of the existing policies focus on buying different products that are less ecologically and socially problematic. Therefore, to make a significant transformation towards sufficiency at business level possible, it is necessary to introduce more policies at the macro level. Such policies could entail a tax system that not only taxes the profit or turnover of a business but also takes its contribution to the common good into account such as in the approaches put forward by the Economy for the Common Good (Felber et al. 2015). This could change framework conditions and make sufficiency-oriented business models more profitable. Import taxes in proportion to the distance travelled by a product could incentivize more localized production. We identified about 300 policies in the "European Sufficiency Policy Database" on different levels and with different transformative potential to show that policy can support sufficiency in many ways – also beyond the business level (cf. Zell-Ziegler et al. 2023).

On the meso level, there are many incentives that impede sufficiency-oriented business models (Bocken/Short 2016). Examples include low standards for the repairability of products and reusability of primary materials, a lack of restrictions on advertisements (for specific products) and the absence of financial incentives to sell and drive adequately-sized cars. The relevance of such framework conditions on the meso level can be observed in the field of energy efficiency. Without the European Emission Trading System (ETS) (with its associated carbon costs), businesses would not have had an incentive to invest in energy efficiency technologies (Elmer et al. 2016)[1]. Moreover, without the EU's Ecodesign and Energy Labelling Framework Directives, producers of electrical devices would not have had such an incentive to invest in efficiency improvements and high-consuming devices would not have been banned from the market (EC 2023b).

In the field of sufficiency, alternative framework conditions for product design, such as repairability and longevity (as described above for France) would be desirable. Financial bonus systems for repair, such as in the German federal state of Thuringia (Verbraucherzentrale Thüringen 2023) or in Austria (BMK 2023) are good approaches, but are only a patch as opposed to being systemic solutions to the problem. Repairing is much more expensive and time-consuming for consumers than buying a new product, and it is often impossible due to the lack of spare parts or design that does not lend itself to being repaired. Regulations for longer warranties covering more aspects of a product and mandatory affordable repair services could increase the lifecycle and repairability of products and decrease the growth in production. Despite the fact that pioneer businesses continue to demonstrate sufficiency business cases, the current political framework conditions contain disincentives that cannot be overcome (especially not at the required pace)

1 It should be noted, however, that the ETS is also criticised because it could stimulate greater energy efficiency (Elmer et al. 2016).

by individual pioneer businesses. Timely and collective change cannot be achieved without political regulation and targeted incentive structures.

3.2 Structural policy enables sufficiency-oriented business strategies

In addition to policies directly addressing business, as described above, an orientation towards sufficiency also depends on structural policies. Businesses are often deeply connected with the regions in which they are located (Bracyzk et al. 2004). This interconnection of business and region, on different levels and in both directions, impedes the implementation of sufficiency policies. Therefore, sufficiency as a strategy for reducing production and consumption poses a challenge not only for businesses but also for industrial regions, which are partly dependent on key export industries. It is an open question which regions and sectors would be most affected by sufficiency policies. The most obvious examples in Germany are the automotive, dairy and construction sectors. Such industries are of high economic importance: for example, the automotive sector employed 786,000 workers in 2022 in Germany, according to the "German Association of the Automotive Industry" (BDA). Therefore, sectoral sufficiency policies (as proposed in 3.1) need to be complemented by structural policy (Marks 1992) in order to develop future-proof visions and imaginaries (Marquardt/Nasiritousi 2022) for the sustainable transformation of both industries and regions.

This must happen faster and more 'preventatively' than in the past. Traditional structural policy has been 'aftercare', only implemented after significant policy delay and sheltering of old industries. However, sufficiency demands proactive regional structural change in industrial regions – long before the respective business models become uneconomic (Gärtner/Frenzel 2014). At the same time, it should be avoided to put the system we live in at risk, by eradicating system-relevant industries in an uncontrolled way. Therefore, sufficiency policies must include structural policies for a stepwise transformation towards sufficiency-oriented modes of working and doing business, addressing also the embeddedness in the region (Princen 2005). The interconnectedness of regions and business entails different dimensions. We distinguish material, institutional and cultural dimensions.

The *material* dimension relates to assets, jobs and fiscal revenues. The economic impact that regions could experience when large industries reduce, shift or even stop their production needs to be softened by structural policies as part of a sufficiency program. The classic toolbox of structural policies includes early retirements, short-term allowances and the settlement of government institutions, as well as the promotion of education, art, culture and science. Interestingly, many promising business models, such as bus and train construction, will also expand due to sufficiency-mainstreaming and may allow for new jobs using similar skillsets to some traditional industries. Traditional structural policy aims to push regional clusters, businesses and technologies in order to generate growth and exports. Future-proof and sufficiency-oriented programs, however, should refrain from material growth orientation. Repurposing, recycling, repairing and reusing are the economic models of the future, which include many opportunities for civil society, research and business.

The *institutional* dimension refers to the underlying norms, rules and processes of policy making. In regions that are highly dependent on certain businesses, such as in the German city Wolfsburg where Volkswagen is located, the political and business decision makers are closely connected (see section 2.1). In order to loosen this connection, participatory decision-making should be strengthened – although this will not necessarily lead to a stronger sufficiency orientation. Participatory governance of this sectoral and regional structural change should involve actors from policy, business, associations and non-governmental organisations (environmental and other), following the framework of the Quadruple Helix (Carayannis/Campbell 2012).

On a *cultural* level, a region's identity (especially in industrial regions) is often connected to its predominant businesses and industries. These cultures need to be addressed by sufficiency policies in order to render a major transformation towards sufficiency possible at business level. New visions and knowledge about socio-spatial development plays an important role in small-scale regional transitions. The seminal example for a successful cultural change is the IBA Emscher Park (Ganser 1999). Located in the northern Ruhr area, it is nowadays a destination for recreational trips and a venue for major art fairs; however, until the 1980s, it was a structurally weak region, polluted by industrial waste and open sewage canals. The IBA Emscher Park did not aim to build new housing or develop new growth pathways, but to foster "change without growth", by including art in landscape design and through regenerating the natural environment (Best 2019: 214). However, culture, art, bottom-up initiatives and civic actors are often neglected or ignored in structural policies. These agents should be included in sufficiency-oriented structural policies through participatory processes. Culture and the arts can facilitate the reflection and transformation of imaginaries, visions and power structures to support sustainable development and the escape from high-energy and high-carbon lock-ins (Marquardt/Nasiritousi 2022).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, we find that the focus on individual business models remains limiting and should be complemented by a perspective on the interrelationships between policy making and business. Sufficiency policies are needed to push sufficiency on the production side out of the niche. We identify various relevant linkages that exist between sufficiency policy and sufficiency at business level: how policies can hinder, enable and cushion sufficiency in businesses, but also how businesses hinder sufficiency policy. These linkages have so far received little attention in business-related sufficiency research.

It could be argued that our critique of the predominant focus on pioneer businesses in sufficiency-related business research derives from a different approach to socio-ecological transformation, which focuses on structural change instead of bottom-up activity (Lage 2022; Hirth et al. 2023). However, from research into socio-ecological transformation, we know that both approaches are needed. We do not argue that the focus on pioneer businesses is wrong, but rather that it should be complemented by a focus on the relationship between policy making and business activities. This would include a shift in the research object and research questions. Instead of pioneer businesses, the analysis of power structures in the context of policy making on sufficiency and the role of businesses within these power structures could become a central research object. Main research questions might focus on the effects of business-related sufficiency policies, what kind of conflicts arise around the implementation of these policies and how business-related sufficiency policies can gain leverage. A crucial research question, not only connected to business research but also to sufficiency policy research in general, is how to put sufficiency policies into practice.

On the level of policy making, we conclude that business models and economic sectors need an orientation towards sustainability criteria (e.g., planetary boundaries, Sustainable Development Goals). Linking social and ecological perspectives instead of playing them against each other would enforce long-term thinking on the business side. Businesses require a stringent policy framework; otherwise, sufficiency-orientation at business level will lead only to shifts in consumption, rather than to absolute reductions in consumption and production. Sufficiency policy also needs to include structural policies in order to create viable economic visions for the fossil industries and associated regions. Policy must expect resistance from companies against the mainstreaming of sufficiency, which can be particularly interesting for researchers.

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