

Introduction

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The cover of this book shows a tree in a much smaller flowerpot. Why might this image seem strange to observers? The tree is green and thriving, even though it feeds off little soil. For us, this is an analogy of sufficiency in business. Sufficiency in businesses is about strategies that reduce production levels, curb sales and promote lower consumption with the aim to stay within ecological planetary boundaries and ensure well-being. This is at odds with current economic thinking and, like the tree in our image, does not yet stand firmly on solid ground. However, the growing interest in research and practice in sufficiency-oriented businesses promises a blooming future. This book is a contribution to present some of the latest work and provide an interdisciplinary perspective on this innovative field of research.

What is sufficiency and how does business relate to it? There is no generally agreed definition of sufficiency but the idea is intuitive: “It is the sense that, as one does more and more of an activity, there can be enough and there can be too much. I eat because I’m hungry but at some point I’m satiated. If I keep eating I become bloated.” (Princen 2005: 6) This is similarly logical at the collective level, because it is recognized that sufficiency is not an individual responsibility but a collective endeavor. In the context of ecological overshoot, this commonplace principle of sufficiency has been revived to represent an ecological principle: when does too much resource and material use threaten social well-being and ecological boundaries?

Sufficiency in the sustainability context thus is a response to two major challenges: First, it addresses environmental degradation, with its accompanying effects, such as the extraction of more resources than can be replenished and the emission of more greenhouse gases than can be absorbed. Here, it is often understood in a triad with efficiency and consistency. Efficiency means using fewer resources to produce the same amount or even more. Consistency refers to producing in accordance with nature: designing products that are not harmful or closing the resource cycle, such as in a circular economy. Sufficiency complements these two principles by reducing the overall consumption of resources.

The second major challenge that sufficiency addresses is to secure human needs and social well-being. Many humans struggle to meet their basic needs, while the wealthier sections of society consume far more than is necessary for their basic well-

being. A particularly striking example is that in 2018, one per cent of the world's population caused 50 per cent of CO₂ emissions from commercial aviation, particularly private aircraft (Gössling/Humpe 2020). This contrasts with the estimate that 89 per cent of the world's population did not travel by air. Similar examples can be found across sectors, where the excess by some groups is mirrored by the scarcity of others. Sufficiency addresses this inequality, as it proposes to reduce overconsumption in affluent communities so that resources are left for communities that are struggling. As such, it aligns with the goals of a Doughnut Economy (Raworth 2017), where the social needs of all should be met within the ecological boundaries of the planet.

Sufficiency has seen increased interest both in academic research (Sandberg 2021) and in the real world. Global events such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the following energy crisis increased public awareness in Europe of the need to reduce resource and energy consumption. While it is still the "ugly duckling" of sustainability principles and often left aside next to its more popular siblings efficiency and consistency, sufficiency is starting to step out of the shadow as a real necessity for a sustainable future.

One highly under-researched question is: what role can businesses play in driving sufficiency? As a central decision maker in processes of production and consumption, businesses are increasingly called upon to take responsibility in a sustainability transformation (Hoffman/Ehrenfeld 2017). Businesses can create new demands and wants, with mainstream marketing and advertising practices stipulating that people keep buying new products. As such, the node of business is a potential transformation point in spreading the sufficiency principle across society. The field of research on sufficiency-oriented companies can be traced back to the 1990s, when Wolfgang Sachs (1993) defined four dimensions of a sufficiency economy: less clutter, less speed, less distance and less market. Dyllick and Hockerts (2002) also introduced sufficiency as a fundamental element of a sustainable company. A few years later, Bocken and Short (2016) used practical examples to demonstrate how companies can develop sufficiency-oriented business models. Niessen and Bocken (2021) built on earlier work and provided an overview of strategies that companies can use to promote sufficiency. The most common strategies originate from the marketing toolbox (Gossen et al. 2019): Sufficiency-oriented product strategies that focus on the development of durable, high quality and repairable alternatives to conventional products, as well as extending the warranty period and offering repair services. These strategies are often complemented by communication measures such as anti-consumerist messages, raising awareness of the impact of consumption on the environment and humans and challenging the materialistic norms of a consumer society.

This book is a snapshot of the growing interest and community around sufficiency-oriented businesses. With ecological and social challenges becoming ever more pressing, it is necessary to imagine alternative forms of business and explore

real-world cases of courageous frontrunners. The book is structured into three parts. It combines contributions from academics and practitioners, some of which are based on empirical data and some of which are conceptual in nature.

Part I introduces sufficiency in business more broadly, through presenting different viewpoints. Julia Bruckner gives an overview of the existing academic debate on sufficiency-oriented business. Christel Maurer then looks at strategies that businesses can pursue for sufficiency. This is followed by a chapter by Maren Ingrid Kropfeld and André Reichel on transforming into a purpose-driven business. Part I also includes an exploration of what sufficiency in business means through the lens of critical realism by Iana Nesterova and Hubert Buch-Hansen. Finally, Laura Beyeler connects sufficiency to the principle of care.

In Part II, experiences with sufficiency in business are explained using empirical examples. The chapter by Jana-Michaela Timm and Michaela Hausdorf deals with community-supported business models in various sectors. Jessica Jungell-Michelsson and Iana Nesterova explore the process of embedding sufficiency in the food business. The chapter by Joshua Hurtado Hurtado, Heini Salonen, Tina Nyfors, Pasi Heikkurinen and Kristoffer Wilén stays in the food sector and looks at cultures of sufficiency in business. Beatriz Garcia-Ortega, Javier Galan-Cubillo, F. Javier Llorens-Montes and Blanca de-Miguel-Molina then provide an example from the fashion sector: they examine social media communication of a sportswear brand for sufficiency. The chapter by Maëlle Soulis and Oksana Mont explores how the sufficiency-oriented business model is applied in French fashion SMEs. Then, Viola Muster and Marlene Münsch examine the role that minimalism can play in hindering sufficiency. The next chapter by Laura Niessen, Nancy Bocken and Marc Dijk gives an example of how sufficiency-oriented efforts can influence users in the mobility sector. Then, Isabelle Dabadie reports on her experiences with sufficiency in the ICT sector. Finally, Jana Gebauer, Laura Niessen and Maïke Gossen look at how sufficiency can address the rebound effect in a steel and metal processing company.

Part III goes beyond businesses and deals with the necessary changes in broader society. Isaac Arturo Ortega Alvarado critically reviews the role of the market in social transformation. Maïke Gossen, Josephine Tröger and Vivian Frick discuss economic and societal barriers that still stand in the way of sufficiency businesses. The broader part of the transformation is then linked to politics with the chapter by Jonas Lage, Benjamin Best, Tobias Froese and Carina Zell-Ziegler, who examine the interplay between business action and policy for sufficiency.

References

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