

The Case for Sufficiency

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June 12, 2024

Moving away from extractivism and overconsumption would drive positive transformation in Europe while addressing global injustice. This could be achieved by implementing sufficiency policies, which aim to reduce demand for energy, materials, land, and water while delivering wellbeing for all within planetary boundaries. An interview with Yamina Saheb, a lead author of the IPCC report on climate change mitigation.

María Dios: The first European Climate Risk Assessment, published this year by the European Environment Agency, shows that Europe is unprepared for growing climate risks. For the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), climate strategies need to include “transformational adaptation”. What does this mean?

Yamina Saheb: Transformation is not enough, because it means staying in the same system. What we need is a metamorphosis, which is about radical system change. Moreover, adaptation is not separate from mitigation, and we should have climate policies that consider both at the same time. The split between the two categories is misleading and wrong, because if we don't drastically reduce emissions, the temperature will go up and we will no longer be able to adapt.

The first step towards climate adaptation is to cut emissions. Policymakers need to realise that having an unambitious climate target and insufficient climate policies means that millions of Europeans will die. This might occur well before the end of the century – sooner than we ever thought. With the current policies, if nothing is done to stop the damage, climate change is going to be the biggest genocide ever committed.

What would this metamorphosis look like?

Metamorphosis means putting sufficiency front and centre. Sufficiency tackles both mitigation and adaptation, because it is about emissions reduction on the one hand, and equity and access to wellbeing on the other. Currently, the first aspect is considered mitigation and the second adaptation. But if global warming continues, governments will not be able to guarantee a good quality of life for everyone. That is why we need to talk about sufficiency and address mitigation and adaptation jointly.

How could the EU move towards sufficiency?

The current EU policies do not include sufficiency, but we cannot decarbonise without embracing it. For example, in the case of residential buildings, it has been calculated that the lack of sufficiency policies over the period 1990-2019 has led to a missed opportunity to decarbonise the sector by around 30 per cent.

At the moment the EU's approach is technosolutionist. But such an approach entails extracting more resources and creating more emissions. Even if these emissions will not happen in Europe, they will take place because of and for the EU. In practice, this means that we are not decarbonising.

Europe's techno-solutionism is most evident in the emphasis on negative emissions through carbon capture and storage (CCS) and natural carbon sinks. However, this is just a big lie, because we cannot count on these solutions on a large scale. Take the reliance on forests, for example. The models we have do not take into account the impact of climate change on these ecosystems. Natural sinks are heavily affected by climate change. There is already a discussion in France about the fact that French forests cannot absorb any more carbon. So instead of talking about "net zero" and "negative emissions", we should be working towards achieving zero emissions. And then, if we are lucky and our forests are still working as sinks, all the better.

Besides, when aiming at zero emissions targets, the EU should also consider its historical responsibility for climate change. What makes climate change is cumulative emissions, not only those of today or of the last century. If we take this into account, acknowledge our responsibility for the climate mess, and consider planetary boundaries, then the EU as a whole should be carbon neutral by 2033. The emissions we will produce between that year and 2050 should be the right of countries that have less historical responsibility for global warming. By setting 2050 as a target for carbon neutrality, we are effectively colonising the atmosphere. This is what I call the neo-colonialism of the Global North's climate targets.

So when we talk about climate targets, we cannot focus narrowly on Europe or look exclusively at the present, but we must address global extractivism and historical responsibility for climate change. How can sufficiency help?

Sufficiency sets two thresholds. The upper threshold is planetary boundaries. It should help calculate carbon budgets, because sufficiency is about equity. This is where 2033 as the year of Europe's climate neutrality comes from. The lower threshold of sufficiency is wellbeing and human rights for all – not just for white people in rich countries.

When you take these two thresholds into account, it becomes clear that the effort Europe must make is huge. One may ask, is this fair towards our kids or even ourselves, considering that we did not make the decisions that have led to climate-changing emissions? The thing is, we do benefit from all the infrastructure that was built with these emissions. Thanks to this infrastructure, my life is completely different and much easier here in Europe than it would be in North Africa. So, this responsibility is part of our heritage.

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How do we address this global responsibility? At the moment, even the European Green Deal is being called into question.

The European Green Deal is not a good deal, even if everyone is happy with it. From a political point of view, it was a good thing to do. But from a climate perspective, it is not ambitious enough. That is why the Green Deal being under threat is a positive thing. It takes time and a lot of money to put climate policies in place. Before mobilising these resources, it is essential that we get the policies right by pursuing sufficiency on all levels.

At the EU level, we should start with the Stability and Growth Pact. If you do not have sufficiency there, you can only have a debate on behaviour change, as happened in France. Second, we should rethink

EU monetary policy. These two policy instruments will decide the future of Europe, and Europe has no future without sufficiency.

Today, we can no longer avoid global warming. We are in a situation of damage control for humanity and our ecosystems. It is not just Europe that does not have a future without sufficiency but humanity as a whole. With sufficiency, we will not go back to how things were before because this is no longer possible. But we will halt global warming and avoid being in a more catastrophic situation. At that point, we can adapt.

Why was the sufficiency debate in France reduced to behaviour change? And do you see France's recognition of sufficiency as a positive step forward?

France is the only EU country where sufficiency appears in the law, but it is only mentioned in relation to energy in the Energy Transition Law. What happened is that, with the energy crisis that resulted from the war in Ukraine, the president asked the government to prepare energy sufficiency plans. But France is an EU country, and you cannot implement sufficiency in only one member state without changing EU policies. So the French government ended up preparing behaviour change plans, encouraging people to reduce energy consumption. Energy emissions related to residential buildings went down, and the government celebrated it as a success. Yet that was not sufficiency. It was precariousness or energy poverty; people could not afford to heat their homes.

The only positive thing that happened in 2022 is that the [IPCC report](#) on mitigation was published, and people discovered that sufficiency exists. There are plenty of experts focusing on sufficiency, because everyone who works on climate policies knows that we are going in the wrong direction. The Franco-German Forum for the Future, for example, is discussing energy efficiency and sufficiency. There is also a group of NGOs in Brussels discussing sufficiency – something that would have been unimaginable only five years ago. We received more questions and requests on sufficiency than we could address, so we established the World Sufficiency Lab to build a sufficiency community. We will have an EU hub and, most likely, national hubs in France and Germany – the two countries where there is an ongoing discussion on sufficiency.

Beyond Europe, are there any countries or regions that can serve as positive examples of implementing sufficiency principles in their approaches to climate adaptation or resource management?

The only country where sufficiency principles have been embedded in all policies is Thailand. But there is no economic evaluation of what impact this is having. And Thailand is not part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Plus, Thailand is not a democracy, and many European colleagues are very critical of this. It is true that you cannot really compare Thailand to Europe, but I think that even non-democratic regimes can have some good ideas.

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are effectively colonising the atmosphere.*

For example, Thailand introduced sufficiency in its education programme. My generation there learned about sufficiency at school, which was not the case in France. We need to shift our mindsets, and school is good for that.

How does sufficiency interact with economic growth? And is it compatible with capitalism?

Capitalism and the current economic paradigm are not compatible with life on this planet. So the question is, do we want to have life or do we want to have capitalism?

In terms of growth, we do not know the economic impact sufficiency will have if it is embraced at an EU level because the EU Commission has not produced scenarios that include sufficiency policies. But we do have data for France, where sufficiency has been assessed from a macroeconomic perspective. The findings show that if sufficiency is implemented drastically, GDP would fall by 0.2 per cent by 2050 compared to the reference scenario. If it is implemented gradually, France's GDP would be 2.4 per cent higher than in the reference scenario. It is likely that we would end up with similar results for the EU.



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Published June 12, 2024

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/the-case-for-sufficiency/>

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