In search of sufficiency politics: the case of Sweden

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ABSTRACT

In transitions toward more sustainable and just societies, there is an urgent need to address overconsumption and to include a sufficiency perspective. This article contributes to previous research by exploring what a framework for a politics of sufficiency might entail and how such a framework can be used to analyze existing public policy. Our case analysis is the policy field of sustainable consumption and waste prevention in the context of Sweden. Based on interviews with public officials and civil society representatives, we identify key areas to address when aiming for a sufficiency orientation. Our results suggest that local and regional governments that strive for a commitment to sufficiency should formulate clear goals that serve to set environmental limits, for instance, in the form of carbon budgets, and then steer toward well-being for the inhabitants within these limits. Efforts should be made to secure stable funding for work within sustainable consumption and waste prevention, especially for projects with synergies in terms of reducing consumption and strengthening non-market relations. Using public procurement is another key tool. In the absence of an overall national politics of sufficiency, the above-mentioned strategies can be and already are to some degree, used by authorities in Sweden.

Introduction

It is increasingly recognized that in order to work toward sustainable and just societies, more effort needs to be dedicated to targeting the sheer volume of consumption and use of natural resources (Alfredsson et al. 2018; O’Neill et al. 2018). Concepts such as sufficiency (Lorek 2018; Spangenberg and Lorek 2019) and consumption corridors (Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014)—setting maximum and minimum levels for sustainable consumption that acknowledge human needs and well-being (Gough 2020)—are central to this discussion.

We argue, in line with Rijnhout and Mastini (2018), Schneidewind and Zahrnt (2014), and O’Neill et al. (2018), that a sufficiency perspective is helpful when aiming to elaborate politics and public policies for more sustainable and just societies. Apart from addressing the unsustainability of overconsumption, a focus on sufficiency emphasizes the importance of justice in striving toward more sustainable societies and highlights the need for, and the responsibility of, the affluent of the world to withdraw from the excess environmental space that they occupy in order to enable others (both today and in the future) to enjoy their fair share of the environmental space (Callmer 2019; Sachs 2015; Spangenberg 2018). However, in light of the increasing inequalities and growing income gaps both globally and within countries such as Sweden (OECD 2019) and the practical difficulties that might be encountered by individuals who wish to live sustainably within a highly unsustainable system (Jackson 2008; Mont et al. 2013) such a withdrawal needs to be guided by an ambitious politics of sufficiency. In this article, we explore what a framework for sufficiency politics might mean and what the perceived obstacles to, and potentials for, such politics are in the context of Sweden. We build our framework on previous research on sufficiency—including sufficiency as an organizing principle (Princen 2005; Sachs 2015), the politics of sufficiency (Rijnhout and Mastini 2018; Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014), and related concepts such as politics of degrowth (D’Alisa et al. 2014; Parrique 2020). Our analysis emphasizes politics, pointing to the need to address the transformation of the larger sociopolitical and economic system; however, we also explore policies that can be used within the existing system and potentially function as steps toward deeper transformation even though they will not be enough to reach currently set sustainability goals (IPCC 2018).
Previous research on sufficiency has largely been conceptual (Princen 2005; Spangenberg 2018) and often focused on lifestyle movements and sustainable behaviors (Heindl and Kanschik 2016; Schäpe and Rauschmayer 2014; Speck and Hasselkuss 2015) and business models and strategies (Bocken and Short 2020; Reichel 2018). Ambitious work has been performed to elaborate a politics of sufficiency, defined as a politics that aims to make it easier for people to live the “good life”—in other words, a politics that regulates how people might live together in ways that allow them to “live their lives as they wish without thereby restricting the life choices of others” (Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014, 12). Others have presented several concrete sufficiency policies, such as environmental caps (Alcott 2018), labor-related policies like reduced working hours (Coote 2018), maximum income, and green taxation targeting luxury goods (Mastini and Rijnhout 2018). However, this work has only to a limited extent been applied to, or analyzed in relation to, empirical cases of sustainability politics, and the research on “sufficiency in practice” has been focused on individual practices such as households’ energy consumption (Sahakian et al. 2019) or individual consumption (Speck and Hasselkuss 2015). In this article, we aspire to bridge this gap and to contribute to the discussion on sufficiency by applying ideas of a politics of sufficiency to the empirical case of Sweden.

Recognizing the need not only for strong policy measures but also for considerable changes in the political-economic system in order to make possible an orientation toward a more sufficient society, our aim with this article is to address the role that governments, especially at the local and regional levels, can play in this transition. More specifically, we aim to identify possible paths for an orientation toward sufficiency in the case of Sweden by asking what seeds of sufficiency elements can be identified in the current policy field of sustainable consumption, what key areas need to be addressed in order to enable such an orientation, and what policy measures might be used to facilitate this objective.

Sweden’s central government has for several decades set out to be a frontrunner when it comes to sustainability (Hult 2017) and in 2015 the government established the goal that the country should become “the world’s first fossil-free welfare state” (The Partnerships for SDGs n.d.). However, at the same time, the per capita greenhouse-gas emissions are far beyond sustainable levels (eight metric tons per year when including consumption-based releases) (Naturvårdsverket 2020a). This volume suggests that it can be relevant to analyze the Swedish sustainability agenda from a sufficiency perspective. The empirical exploration presented here is focused on sufficiency in material consumption and on the policy field of sustainable consumption and waste prevention. Within this policy field, there are local, regional and central departments that are working with certain aspects of sufficiency, although not phrased in this term. Studying this policy field from a sufficiency perspective suggests an emphasis on a reduction in material consumption, this being the key connection between sustainable consumption and waste prevention.

The article is structured as follows. First is a section on the methods and materials used for the analysis and this discussion is followed by a section where we outline our conceptual framework for sufficiency politics and summarize our perspective (see Table 1). The article then provides in the third section our empirical results identifying key areas to address for a sufficiency orientation in Sweden today, focusing on material consumption. In the fourth section, we discuss the results in relation to the conceptual framework and, finally, conclude with suggestions on how to facilitate an orientation toward sufficiency in an affluent society such as Sweden.

Methods and materials
Focusing on sufficiency in public policy, this article has two main pillars—the first is a framework for a “politics of sufficiency” based on a literature review, and the second is a case analysis of obstacles to and potentials for a sufficiency orientation of Swedish public policy in the field of sustainable consumption. The literature review spanned various fields such as political ecology, degrowth, ecological economics, and sustainable consumption. In order to identify central elements within a politics of sufficiency, we conducted in-depth studies of the following key references that all deal explicitly with the sufficiency concept, both as an idea and at a more systemic level (Alexander 2015; Princen 2005; Sachs 2015). We also considered how this concept could be translated into politics or policy (Lorek 2018; Mastini and Rijnhout 2018; Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014; Spangenberg 2018).

After elaborating a framework for the politics of sufficiency, the empirical material for the case study was selected through a desk study identifying strategies, projects, and policy initiatives in Sweden that are of relevance for sufficiency politics. It should be stated that there are no explicit overarching sufficiency politics or policies in Sweden, but a policy field that does have certain elements of sufficiency in it is the field of sustainable consumption and waste prevention. The work within this field is
sometimes conducted in different administrative units—e.g., a waste-management unit and an environmental Unit—and sometimes integrated into joint projects. We chose to focus our empirical study on this policy field. Hence, a limitation of the study is that we have not explored other policy areas and issues where one might also identify elements of sufficiency, such as sustainable mobility, social inclusion, or working life.

The desk study was conducted from March 2017 to August 2020 and included a review of strategies and guidelines governing work in the field of sustainable consumption and waste prevention at the national level and ongoing projects and initiatives in Swedish municipalities and regions selected for their relevance in relation to sufficiency politics. The examples that we analyzed and refer to in the study are thus initiatives and projects assessed as frontrunners in the field of sustainable consumption and waste prevention.

The empirical case study included semi-structured interviews with ten public officials and three civil society representatives working in the field of sustainable consumption and waste prevention at the local, regional, and national levels in Sweden (see Appendix 1). We selected the interviewees based on our desk study which identified them as having key roles in municipalities, regions, and organizations at the forefront of work on sustainable consumption and waste prevention.

Most of the research was conducted as part of a project about sufficiency in practice and politics in Sweden, with a focus on sufficiency in material consumption (Callmer 2019). Additional material was provided from a separate study on the upscaling of spaces for sustainable consumption. The interviews were qualitative and semi-structured and were carried out from December 2018 to June 2020. Most of the interviews were conducted in person, but a few were held via telephone or videoconference. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the respondents were anonymized. The results were then analyzed based on the elaborated framework for a politics of sufficiency.

**A framework for sufficiency politics**

The concept of sufficiency is increasingly being discussed within the research field of sustainable consumption and sustainable lifestyles (see, e.g., Gorge et al. 2015; Heindl and Kanschik 2016; Lorek 2018; Spangenberg and Lorek 2019; Speck and Hasselkuss 2015). However, sufficiency as an idea reaches beyond consumption and individual lifestyles and several authors have described it as a principle that could constitute the foundation for organizing a more sustainable society (Alexander 2015; Princen 2005; Sachs 2015; Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014). Ambitious work has been done to outline some core elements of a politics underpinning such a “sufficiency society” (Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014; Rijnhout and Mastini 2018). The following framework is structured into four key elements and builds primarily on the abovementioned sufficiency literature and to some extent on the literature in the fields of political ecology, degrowth, ecological economics, and sustainable consumption. We develop our approach partly from the perspectives of Schneidewind and Zahrnt (2014), who focus their work on the elaboration of a politics of sufficiency—a politics that makes it easier to live “the good life.” They, in turn, draw on the ideas of the four “Lessens,” originally defined by Wolfgang Sachs (1993): less speed, less distance, less clutter (i.e., simpler and fewer material things), and less market (i.e., highlighting alternative ways of provisioning) (Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014, 50).

**Politics of limits**

One of the most fundamental elements of sufficiency is the recognition of the ecological limits of the planet and how the finiteness of natural resources and the Earth’s capacity must also be reflected in limitations on human activities. Princen (2005) argues for the need for sufficiency as an organizing principle in order to address the criticality of the environmental situation: “a different set of principles are [sic] needed, a set that embodies social restraint as the logical analog to ecological constraint, a set that guides human activities when those activities pose grave risks to human survival” (Princen 2005, 19, emphasis in original).

A society aiming toward sufficiency needs to restrict the use of resources and the emissions from the public, commercial, and individual activities through political decisions and regulations. This can, for example, be achieved through environmental caps on resource use and emissions, a rationing system, or a combination of caps and rationing (Alcott 2018; Cohen 2015; Mastini and Rijnhout 2018). Important to note is that social justice lies at the foundation of the idea of sufficiency. Spangenberg (2018) points out that the key variable to address, therefore, is affluence, and that limiting measures must be combined with distributive measures and a “social protection floor” (Spangenberg 2018). Mastini and Rijnhout (2018) suggest a combination of macroeconomic caps on total resource use that are fairly divided by nations and microeconomic caps that are applied per sector or per capita through rationing within nations. Other suggested measures are regulations of maximum income
Politics of less
The ideas of less clutter and less market are closely connected and emphasize the importance of not allowing overaccumulation or unnecessary material consumption to occur in the first place, and of building a society that is not entirely permeated by the logic of the market (Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014). This means that a politics of sufficiency might deal with waste prevention by limiting advertisements in public space and taking measures against planned obsolescence (Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014) as well as aiming for less market in the sense of strengthening alternative economies and forms of provisioning, such as community economies, cooperatives, and do-it-yourself (DIY) practices (Lorek 2018).

To reduce the extent to which society is infused by the market also includes looking at freedom of choice from a different perspective than the one promoted by the neoliberal consumer society. Political sufficiency strategies at the macro level might serve to take the pressure off of individual choice and make it easier for people to either choose to not buy something or to look for ways to meet their needs other than through purchasing goods on the market. Accordingly, sufficiency becomes another dimension of freedom for consumers (Lorek 2018; Reichel 2018; Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014).

Politics of slower and closer
Less speed and less distance (Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014) point to a sufficient society as one being more focused on doing things at a slower pace (i.e., travel, transport, production) and at the same time strengthening local economies and communities—a focus that is in line with various movements for slowing down and localizing production and consumption flows (Cittaslow 2016; The Slow Movement n.d.). To slow down—to shorten distances and to reduce (the need for) speed—implies an increased focus on the local, but it is further about the redefining of work and a focus on autonomy or self-sovereignty in regard to time (Sachs 2015; Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014) and a focus on “time affluence” rather than material affluence (Soper 2017). A politics of sufficiency should aim at reducing work time for the purposes of decreasing purchasing power while simultaneously increasing well-being (Coote 2018; Sachs 2015). However, as pointed out by Coote (2018), it is crucial that policies in the area of work time consider inequalities both in regard to income and control over one’s time and that they are combined with redistributive measures. Schneidewind and Zahrnt (2014, 55) argue on a similar note for the importance of policies designed to increase “time prosperity” and to strengthen employee rights.

Politics for well-being
Several of the sufficiency policies mentioned above, such as rationing and caps on emissions and/or income, are likely to be controversial policy tools. This highlights the importance of the need for a politics of sufficiency to develop in parallel with a reorientation of norms and culture that embraces sufficiency thinking and ideas such as rationing in order for the larger population to see such measures as acceptable (Cohen 2015; Sachs 2015). Such a reorientation includes both a rethinking of what constitutes “the good life” in the face of environmental crises and the adoption of new, more sufficiency-compatible ways of satisfying needs. Following the view of Max-Neef (1992, 200) that “[e]ach economic, social and political system adopts different methods for the satisfaction of the same fundamental human needs,” the question of what might be different satisfiers to adopt in the process toward a more sufficiency-oriented culture becomes an essential one. According to Gough (2020), applying human-needs theory in relation to consumption corridors “provides powerful normative support for sufficiency, for prioritizing needs over excessive wants, and for distributing resources more equally” (Gough 2020, 216). Soper (2017) argues that what is required for the necessary cultural reorientation to
come about is a promotion of the potential rewards of adopting a less materialistic approach to needs satisfaction and “a radical break with consumer culture’s glorification of speed and its understanding of prosperity in terms of efficiency” (Soper 2017, 29).

Schneidewind and Zahrnt (2014) discuss the ways in which a politics that builds on the elements of sufficiency can function as “symbolic politics” in staking out a different direction and in showing that politics can help to realize ways of living that differ from business as usual. This, they claim, can help shape culture with a different view of what the good life is and could be (Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014). To revalue what people generally construe as a high standard of living by focusing on well-being instead of material satisfaction is one way of potentially decreasing the ecological footprints of the affluent, but also of preventing the adoption of unsustainable lifestyles among people who come out of poverty.

Results: searching for elements of sufficiency in Swedish politics

Sweden today lacks a politics that aims for an overall orientation toward sufficiency. There are, however, various policies and political goals in place that seek to reduce environmental impact and resource use. In order to provide background to our case where we search for elements of sufficiency in the field of sustainable consumption and waste prevention, we briefly describe the national sustainability goals and strategies.

For the past several decades, the Swedish central government and its public-private bodies have promoted the country, as well as its politics, know-how, and technologies, as being at the international forefront of sustainability issues (Hult 2017). So what are the sustainability goals that Sweden is steering toward? Since 1999, there are sixteen so-called environmental quality objectives in place to guide the country’s environmental politics (Naturvårdsverket

Table 1. A framework for sufficiency politics—central elements, key concepts, and references.

| ELEMENT OF SUFFICIENCY | Key concepts and references |
|------------------------|----------------------------|
| Politics of limits     | Recognizing ecological and social limits (Alexander 2015; Princen 2005; Sachs 2015; Rijnhout and Mastini 2018; Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014). Limiting affluence (Spangenberg 2018) Social protection floor (Spangenberg 2018) |
|                        | Caps and rationing (Alcott 2018; Cohen 2015; Mastini and Rijnhout 2018) Maximum income (Mastini and Rijnhout 2018) Consumption corridors (Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014; Gough 2020) Recognizing limits to economic growth (D’Alisa et al. 2014; Parrique 2020) Less market (Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014) |
| Politics of less       | Decrease the influence of the market and strengthen alternative forms of provision (Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014; Lorek 2018) |
| Politics of slower and closer | Prevent clutter (restrictions to prevent unnecessary consumption) (Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014) A slower pace of production and consumption (Alexander 2015; Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014) Redefinition of work, work-time reduction policies (Coote 2018; Mastini and Rijnhout 2018; Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014) |
| Politics for wellbeing | More time and more autonomy over one’s time (Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014; Sachs 2015; Soper 2017) Localized production and consumption systems, repair (Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014; Lorek 2018) Redefining progress and alternative measures of prosperity (Sachs 2015) Cultural reorientation toward non-materialist values and acceptance of rationing measures (Cohen 2015; Sachs 2015; Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014; Soper 2017) |
|                        | Politics for the “the good life” (Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014) Satisfaction of human needs (Max-Neef 1992; Soper 2017) and more equitable distribution of resources (Spangenberg 2018) |
These objectives are in turn to be guided by an overarching “generational goal,” which states that environmental problems should be solved “without causing increased environmental and health problems outside of Sweden’s borders” (Naturvårdsverket 2018).

The objectives are phrased in terms of “reduced climate impact,” “zero eutrophication,” “thriving wetlands,” “a good built environment,” and so forth. None of them explicitly deal with sufficiency or limits, but the generational goal at least implicitly addresses the question of environmental justice on a global level by referring to the responsibility of not causing harm outside the country’s borders.

In the area of sustainable consumption, the Swedish government released its national “Strategy for Sustainable Consumption” in 2017 and it has received international attention for initiatives such as tax reductions for repairs. The strategy states that “the average consumption in Sweden is far from environmentally sustainable, not least in regard to the emissions from Swedish consumption occurring in other countries” (Finansdepartementet 2017, 2, authors’ translation). Despite this observation, however, the strategy lacks explicit goals in relation to reducing consumption volumes. The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency gathers yearly data on consumption-based emissions, but there is no set quantified national goal for the reduction of these releases. As of 2020, one of the government bodies1 has the political assignment to prepare and suggest such a national objective (Regeringskansliet 2019). Nevertheless, a few municipalities and regional governments in Sweden have adopted local and regional consumption-based environmental goals, which we discuss in more detail below.

In our investigation of the ongoing work in the policy field of sustainable consumption and waste prevention, we have identified five key areas that need to be addressed in order to orient politics and policy toward sufficiency. These are areas where we have observed sufficiency elements that have the potential to be harnessed or where there are considerable barriers that need to be overcome to make a sufficiency orientation possible. The first two areas deal with more systemic issues while the three remaining ones focus on policy work and tools identified as useful for such work.

**Key area 1: navigating in an unsustainable system**

Several of our respondents mentioned the difficulties involved in striving toward more sustainable and reduced consumption within the current economic and political system. This included aspects such as the price mechanisms of the global market that make unsustainably mass-produced products cheaper than more sustainably produced alternatives or services (such as repair) and the challenges in combining circular business models with the existing linear market logic.

One recurring suggestion for targeting the price mechanisms that serve to lock consumers into unsustainable consumption patterns and continue to benefit unsustainable production was for the true costs (both environmental and social) to be internalized in the price of products, with fees and taxes imposed on producers and higher prices for consumers. Other suggested policy measures included more far-reaching green tax shifts, further strengthening regulations on product sustainability, and extending producers’ responsibilities to better protect consumers’ rights in terms of warranties and to stimulate the production of more durable products. This is, however, something that needs to be regulated at the European Union level, and a 2017 public inquiry on the circular economy recommended that the Swedish government should push for such regulations (SOU 2017, 22). Two civil society representatives additionally promoted policy measures that more directly address the issue of affluence and reduce consumers’ “space for consumption,” for example, through a reduction in work hours or regulations demanding larger repayments of mortgages.

Several respondents stated that they experienced difficulty working more strategically with sustainable consumption because of conflicting political and economic interests, often between quests for economic growth and profits for businesses on the one hand and commitments to sustainability and waste prevention on the other. A municipal official explained:

> In my department we obviously think that we need to decrease the level of consumption…, but this is clearly in conflict with the Department of Business, which is trying to help companies to grow. And in the city budget, and the strategic business program, they talk about growth, sustainable growth, but what is sustainable growth?… That is the conflict, I think.

Due to these conflicting interests, several respondents disclosed that they chose their words carefully when speaking about sustainable consumption. One national official stated, “We talk very little about sufficiency or about reducing consumption,” and continued:

> We work with waste prevention, and that is kind of a more politically acceptable way to address the issue of overconsumption of resources. Even though preventing waste also aims at reduced consumption—it’s often the same thing—but you just can’t talk about reduced consumption.
A regional official argued along similar lines when asserting that it all comes down to reduced consumption, but explained that “we have chosen not to say ‘reduced’ because that really annoys some people, so we talk about changed consumption—more experience-based and second-hand.”

**Key area 2: changing norms**

Something repeatedly mentioned in the interviews with the officials and the civil society representatives was how current norms, habits, and culture represent direct obstacles to behavior change. One national official reflected on the connection between the lock-in effects of the current system and the norms governing our social behavior:

The largest obstacle I guess is…well, it’s the economic system and the pursuit of increased GDP, that’s probably the largest obstacle… Like, all of our culture around this endeavor that we become happier when we own more…. The view of ownership is linked to well-being. Those are probably the two biggest obstructions on an overall level.

There seemed to be a consensus among the respondents that a shift in current norms and culture—not only around consumption—is crucial for the potential to reach a more sustainable society. The ideas about how to generate such a shift varied, but in general, they emphasized the importance of making changes in infrastructure to make sustainable alternatives the easiest and most attractive ones to choose. The respondents further called for a normative transition, for a shift both in what people consider culturally desirable and attractive and what is valued as most important for well-being and happiness. It is also about changing the understanding about what a good standard of living is and highlighting the attractiveness of a simpler lifestyle with less consumption, or, in the words of one regional official, “[i]t’s probably about getting people to be a bit more content.”

Both the officials and civil society representatives were cautiously optimistic about what they perceived as signs of an ongoing shift in norms in Swedish society toward a greater tendency to question consumer culture and a growing concern about, and engagement in, the climate crisis. Most respondents also pointed out that public policy can help support and facilitate a normative and cultural shift. One example is that the national government of 2014–2018 recognized that the indicator of GDP per capita provides only a limited understanding of well-being and therefore decided (in the spring budget of 2017) to add complementary economic, environmental and social indicators, including environmental quality, educational level, and subjective well-being (Prop. 2016/17:100). Another example is a model developed by the Västra Götaland region that is used for reporting on its sustainable development. This model uses several economic, social, and environmental variables to report progress, and aims to give a more holistic picture of “the long-term conditions for the good life” (VGR Analys 2018, 8). The Västra Götaland region has also commissioned a study about different measures of happiness and subjective well-being, intended to provide guidance on what the adoption of such goals might mean in the context of regional development (VGR Analys 2019). The study includes a “final message” to the region’s inhabitants from the research on subjective well-being, advising them to “take it a little easy in regard to investing a lot of time and resources to increase your material consumption. Competition in that area does not provide much, really” (VGR Analys 2019, 104, authors’ translation).

**Key area 3: the need for goals and measurements**

A key issue that was highlighted in the interviews was the importance of having specific goals, both in the sense of their need to be ambitious and clear and with respect to what it is that is being worked toward. Respondents mentioned the lack of ambitious and clear goals as a source of frustration, both because such objectives were deemed necessary to facilitate the work and because stricter and more effectively communicated targets—especially at the national level—would be desirable as a way to strengthen Sweden’s international credibility regarding these issues. Clear and ambitious goals at the national level could also help clarify the expectations of municipalities and regions in the process of formulating their own goals. In the absence of clear objectives, uncertainty arises about overall responsibility for the work that needs to be done and for the necessary follow-up activities, as explained by this national official:

That not more is going on is perhaps because authorities at both the local and national level have not received a clear mission…. Because we don’t have a national goal that targets [waste] prevention, no one has the responsibility either to push for us to do things in a certain way or to monitor whether they have been done. So, the absence of the goal is an obstacle in itself.

In the reverse context, namely in the presence of ambitious and clear goals, such circumstances can help to strengthen efforts designed to foster sustainable consumption and waste prevention. The city of Gothenburg was the first municipality in Sweden to introduce a consumption-based environmental goal (Hult and Larsson 2016), which is now set to be a
maximum of 3.5 metric tons of carbon dioxide (CO₂) equivalents per capita by 2035 and 1.9 metric tons by 2050 (Göteborgs Stad 2020a, 14). These targets can be compared with the current average emissions of 9 metric tons per capita according to municipal sources. Another example is the clear need to reduce overconsumption as spelled out in Gothenburg’s Climate Strategy Program:

A large part of today’s consumption does not occur in order to fulfill basic needs, but in order to create identity. This so-called symbolic consumption needs to decrease (Miljöförvaltningen Göteborgs stad 2014, 60, authors’ translation, emphasis added).

Another example of the use of goals and measurements is the initiative of municipal and regional carbon budgets developed in collaboration between the Climate Change Leadership node at Uppsala University, a number of Swedish municipalities and regions, and the consulting management firm Ramboll (Anderson et al. 2018). The calculated carbon budgets are in line with the Paris Agreement of keeping global temperature increases below 2°C, and they focus on the equity commitments and fair allocation of the responsibility of emission reductions. From these calculations, the project presented a carbon budget for Sweden with an annual rate of reduction in emissions of 16.4% from 2020 and beyond, and the participating municipalities and regions have then been assigned a proportion of this national budget based on their estimated share of total Swedish emissions.

**Key area 4: stable funding and harnessing synergies**

A previous study has shown that municipal activities aiming to encourage sustainable consumption were most often externally funded and organized within specific projects (Bernstad Saraiva and Andersson 2017). This observation highlights that these types of undertakings, rather than being integrated into the core work of the municipality, are often “addon” initiatives or pilot projects. They are dependent on insecure financing and dedicated project leaders who are willing to coordinate applications for external funding from, for example, the European Union or regional development and innovation funds. The officials in our study further mentioned that such activities and projects were sensitive to shifts in political power and priorities due to a lack of core funding. These circumstances could lead to the cancelation of cross-unit collaborations in the event of changes or cuts in the municipal budget, as became the case in Gothenburg after a shift in the political majority following the election in 2018. A recurring theme in the interviews was the importance of such cross-unit collaborations, especially pertaining to the potential synergies between sustainable consumption projects and waste-prevention projects.

According to the “waste hierarchy” established in the European Commission’s Waste Framework Directive, the prevention or minimization of waste is the first step—and should be the first priority—of waste management before reusing or recycling (European Commission 2016). This highlights that the area of waste prevention is a crucial entry point for working with sufficiency in material consumption. The problems with the Swedish system of waste prevention and management experienced by the interviewed officials had to do not only with a general lack of clarity regarding the responsibility and mandate of municipalities in this area but also with the fact that the municipalities’ use of the refuse-collection fees from households was strictly regulated and could not be allocated to finance waste-prevention measures. Several of the issues brought up as problematic during the interviews were, however, addressed in the updated regulations for waste management in Sweden that apply from August 1, 2020 (Naturvårdsverket 2020b). The updated legislation puts a stronger emphasis on the prevention of waste—in line with the European Union waste directive—and opens up for using the mentioned charges to finance preventive measures (Avfall Sverige 2020). This means that municipalities now can use the refuse-collection fees to fund, for instance, public infrastructure that facilitates reuse and sharing, increasing the potential for harnessing positive synergy effects from such initiatives. Several municipalities—such as Malmö, Lund, and Gothenburg—have for many years been working to develop spaces and infrastructure for sharing and reuse, for instance, in the form of tool libraries, open repair workshops, swap shops, and toy and sporting equipment libraries (Hult and Bradley 2017).

However, a recurrent question has been how to fund these types of spaces and which parts of the municipal budget might be used for these purposes. Several of the interviewed officials pointed out that these spaces serve multiple purposes and involve different municipal departments because they contribute to the environmental goals in terms of waste prevention, facilitate social cohesion and equity, serve as sites for “job training,” and enhance urban attractiveness. This means that they have become appreciated icons for the sustainable city, as expressed by a public official when he described a municipal DIY repair workshop called Fixoteket as, “It is like our crown jewel, one of two places we show as attractive parts of the neighborhood.”

**Key area 5: using public procurement to reduce material consumption**

Returning to the importance of ambitious goals, one practical and useful tool that municipalities, regions,
and other public authorities might use to implement such goals is public procurement. Almost all officials mentioned this point as valuable in regard to both waste prevention and sustainable consumption. Public procurement can, for example, be used, as in the case of the City of Gothenburg, to limit purchases of single-use plastics in the public sector (e.g., plastic sheets in nursing homes) and to establish framework agreements for the procurement of reused or redesigned office furniture. Officials from Västra Götaland and Gothenburg described how public procurement is a way for public authorities to signal to local businesses that there is a demand for other types of business models and for more sustainably produced and reused goods. In Gothenburg’s municipal Environment and Climate Strategy it is stated:

In procurement and innovation procurement, the City of Gothenburg demands new climate-smart

### Table 2. The framework for sufficiency politics in relation to the case analysis of the policy field of sustainable consumption and waste prevention in Sweden.

| ELEMENT OF SUFFICIENCY               | Key concepts and references                                                                 | Presence of the element in our case study                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Politics of limits                   | Recognizing ecological and social limits (Alexander 2015; Princen 2005; Sachs 2015; Rijnhout and Mastini 2018; Schneidewind and Zahrt 2014). | Sharp environmental goals (e.g., Gothenburg Climate Strategy Programme).                                |
|                                      | Limiting affluence (Spangenberg 2018)                                                         | N/A                                                                                                       |
|                                      | Social protection floor (Spangenberg 2018)                                                     | N/A                                                                                                       |
|                                      | Caps and rationing (Alcott 2018; Cohen 2015; Mastini and Rijnhout 2018)                         | Elaboration of carbon budgets for a number of regions and municipalities.                                   |
|                                      | Maximum income (Mastini and Rijnhout 2018)                                                     | N/A                                                                                                       |
|                                      | Consumption corridors (Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014; Gough 2020)                                   | N/A                                                                                                       |
|                                      | Recognizing limits to economic growth (D’Alisa et al. 2014; Parrique 2020)                    | Acknowledged by several of the interviewees.                                                              |
|                                      | Less market (Schneidewind and Zahrt 2014)                                                      | N/A                                                                                                       |
|                                      | Decrease the influence of the market and strengthen alternative forms of provision             | Municipal provision of do-it-yourself repair workshops, infrastructure for sharing.                       |
|                                      | (Schneidewind and Zahrt 2014; Lorek 2018)                                                       | N/A                                                                                                       |
| Politics of less                     | Prevent clutter (restrictions to prevent unnecessary consumption) (Schneidewind and Zahrt 2014) | Ambitious waste-prevention initiatives in municipalities (e.g., City of Gothenburg) and for individual households (the initiative “minimizing masters” organized by the Gothenburg Region). |
|                                      | A slower pace of production and consumption (Alexander 2015; Schneidewind and Zahrt 2014)      | Through developing infrastructure for repair and sharing in, e.g., Gothenburg, Lund, and Malmö. Authorities directing public procurement to reused goods. |
| Politics of slower and closer        | Redefinition of work–time reduction policies (Coote 2018; Mastini and Rijnhout 2018; Schneidewind and Zahrt 2014) | Not observed in our case study, but mentioned as a key strategy by interviewed civil society representatives. |
|                                      | More time and more autonomy over one’s time (Schneidewind and Zahrt 2014; Sachs 2015; Soper 2017) | N/A                                                                                                       |
|                                      | Localized production and consumption systems, repair (Schneidewind and Zahrt 2014; Lorek 2018)  | Funding of local spaces for repair. Using public procurement to stimulate local sustainable businesses.      |
|                                      | Redefining progress and alternative measures of prosperity (Sachs 2015)                         | Complementary indicators for measuring progress and development (Prop 2016/17:100, 2017, VGR Analys 2018). |
|                                      | Cultural reorientation toward non-materialist values and acceptance of rationing measures       | Interviewees point to a cultural shift toward increased questioning of the importance of material consumption. |
|                                      | (Cohen 2015; Sachs 2015; Schneidewind and Zahrt 2014; Soper 2017)                              | Study on measures of well-being in the context of regional development (VGR Analys 2019).               |
| Politics for well-being              | Politics for the “the good life” (Schneidewind and Zahrt 2014)                               | N/A                                                                                                       |
|                                      | Satisfaction of human needs (Max-Neef 1992; Soper 2017) and more equitable distribution of resources (Spangenberg 2018) | N/A                                                                                                       |
business models and resource-efficient and nontoxic products. The City uses reused products and creates conditions for others to access such products as well, in a resource-efficient way (Göteborgs Stad 2020b, 37, authors’ translation).

The Region Västra Götaland has several initiatives for supporting municipalities and the region in procuring more circularly produced furniture and locally sourced and upcycled furnishings (VGR, n.d. (a)). The region also has an internal sharing system for used furniture, called TAGE (meaning “take” and “give” in Swedish) (VGR, n.d. (b)). The City of Gothenburg has developed a framework agreement for the procurement of reused furniture and services associated with reuse (Göteborgsregionen 2020, 16). It was further stressed in interviews with public officials and relevant documents that public procurement of more sustainable products and services stimulates investments and also influences the broader market and supply for individual consumers, beyond public-sector consumption, given that the regions and municipalities are powerful purchasers.

Discussion

Returning to the conceptual framework, which of the elements of sufficiency can be observed in our case analysis? We summarize the relevant issues in Table 2 and discuss the findings from our study in relation to the four outlined elements of sufficiency. This section also includes several reflections on how orientation toward sufficiency could be strengthened.

The first element of sufficiency—“politics of limits”—can be observed in our case in the form of ambitious and measurable environmental goals, particularly at the local and regional levels in the Gothenburg area. Limits in the sense of caps and rationing (Alcott 2018; Mastini and Rijnhout 2018; Cohen 2015) are, however, only present in the Uppsala project on calculating carbon budgets for the participating municipalities and regions (Anderson et al. 2018) and these are budgets that have yet to be implemented. Limits to economic growth (D’Alisa et al. 2014; Parrique 2020) were not explicitly dealt with in official documents or policies. It was, however, a recurrent theme brought up by the respondents who did acknowledge these limits and the need for drastic reductions in consumption, but they described how they consciously avoided explicitly addressing these concerns because of obvious conflict with other economic and political interests.

One thing stressed in the interviews was the need for clear and ambitious goals and, perhaps equally important, the need to follow up on these goals with leadership and funding. It is clear from both the interviews and the literature review that policy measures aimed at reducing consumption will not be enough if the overall orientation is still geared toward economic growth. Policies are simply not enough without an overall politics for sufficiency behind them that targets the unsustainable foundation of the economic system. It is, therefore, fundamental to discuss and develop more overarching politics that can contribute to a shift in societal values and goals. Policies worth considering are, for example, work-time reduction, carbon budgets, and maximum income—all of which are in line with a recognition of limits.

The second element—“politics of less”—in the sense of preventing clutter and unnecessary consumption (Schneidewind and Zahrt 2014), can be observed in our case through different initiatives to reduce the need for consumption, such as the project “The Minimizing Masters,” a waste-minimization challenge for households organized by the confederation of municipalities in the Gothenburg region. All of the interviewees from the local to national levels spoke clearly about the importance of reducing consumption but they also pointed out that at times they have to rephrase this into “changed consumption,” “facilitating sharing and collaborative consumption,” or other concepts that appear to be less subversive. Nevertheless, almost all of the respondents in the study were cautiously optimistic about what they perceived as an ongoing shift in the Swedish sustainability debate where cultural aspects are increasingly being given more weight. Parallel to the growing engagement in the climate crisis, the public discourse on sustainable consumption has also shifted in the last few years to more explicitly emphasize the need to reduce the overall volume of consumption and on living well on fewer resources (Callmer 2019, 187–188). Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg and other young activists have also pushed this change in the public discourse, for instance, in a recent opinion piece where they highlight the need to account for—and drastically reduce—consumption-based emissions (Neubauer et al. 2020).

The “politics of less” element also includes strategies to reduce the influence of the market (Schneidewind and Zahrt 2014; Lorek 2018). Such attempts can be observed in our case in the municipal efforts to develop infrastructure for collaborative self-provisioning in the form of DIY repair workshops, including swap shops and different spaces where people can make and share items and develop new skills outside of the market. The new regulations on waste prevention and management (from August 2020) have strengthened the possibilities to work for waste prevention, and the potential
benefits of this emphasis might multiply further if waste-prevention projects are coordinated with these types of shared infrastructure in ways that can harness positive synergistic effects in terms of social cohesion, urban attractiveness, and so forth.

The third element—“politics of slower and closer”—deals with work-time reduction and time autonomy (Coote 2018; Mastini and Rijnhout 2018; Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014), but we did not observe these aspects in our case, except for being mentioned by two civil society respondents. If we had organized our interviews with a broader empirical scope and included policies around work, we would likely have identified such projects because there are indeed public policy initiatives around work-time reduction in Sweden (Larsson et al. 2020). When it comes to slower in the sense of more unhurried production and consumption systems (Alexander 2015; Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014), we can observe strategies for slowing down consumption through municipal initiatives of setting up facilities for DIY repair such as the Fixotetket spaces in Gothenburg. Furthermore, governmental authorities such as Västra Götaland and the City of Gothenburg are working to promote slower consumption, as well as locally sourced products and services, by supporting the procurement of, for instance, reused goods such as upcycled furniture for public environments.

In terms of slowing down consumption, there are several other policy measures that can be used, such as extended producer responsibility and a green tax shift that increases the levies on environmentally damaging activities and lowers them on, for example, repair services. The Swedish government has already used green taxation, but from a sufficiency perspective, it can be argued that the scope of environmentally damaging activities needs to be expanded. For example, as suggested by Mastini and Rijnhout (2018), a “progressive VAT (value added tax)” could be introduced to increase effective prices for consumption of luxury and resource-intensive goods higher than consumption of everyday essentials (Mastini and Rijnhout 2018).

The fourth and final element—“politics of well-being”—can be found in our case, for instance, through the use of regional goals oriented toward well-being and complementary indicators for measuring prosperity and development (VGR Analys 2018). Questions pertaining to how societal goals are formulated and what indicators are used to follow up on the process are highly significant. A political decision to elevate the well-being of a region’s inhabitants to become an overarching goal will most likely lead to different policies and activities than are common when economic growth is the privileged goal. However, in line with the first element of the framework, we need to stress that such a transition in political priorities will not be enough if the politics are not also guided by social and ecological limits. A concrete way of implementing this shift might be to adopt the type of strict carbon budgets based on a fair allocation of the responsibility for emission reduction that has been elaborated for a few Swedish municipalities and regions (Anderson et al. 2018). At the same time as setting the frames for the activities that are possible within each jurisdiction, carbon budgets might also contribute to shifting the public discussion about—and the cultural perception of—limits, thus also functioning as “symbolic politics” of importance to the sufficiency orientation (Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014).

Taken together, all four elements of sufficiency can, at least to some extent, be found in the contemporary work on sustainable consumption and waste prevention in Sweden. However, the overall politics and the socioeconomic system are far from a sufficiency orientation. Furthermore, our selection of frontrunners suggests that most municipalities and regions are doing far less in terms of sufficiency compared to the initiatives and projects highlighted in our case. Nevertheless, the identified cultural change toward more post-materialist values and greater awareness of the need for setting ecological limits are indeed not confined to the vanguard municipalities and regions but are broader values to which the younger generation of Swedes in particular ascribes (Novus 2019), and these trends might prefigure a larger cultural and political shift.

Conclusion

Starting from a recognition of the need to focus on reducing overall consumption to build a sustainable and just society, we argue for a politics of sufficiency to guide such a transition. This article has aimed to report on conditions for a politics of sufficiency in an affluent society by providing an analysis of contemporary work pertaining to sustainable consumption and waste prevention in Sweden. First, we outlined the following elements central to a politics of sufficiency: 1) To recognize and respect ecological and social limits and to politically design limitations and regulations that reflect them; 2) To reduce excessive consumption and the influence of the market in everyday life; 3) To slow down the speed at which we consume, produce, and move around and to reframe the role of work to increase time prosperity; and 4) To support a reorientation in culture and norms that might help shift the focus in regard to what is considered a “good life” and
toward more sufficiency-oriented ways of meeting needs.

In our empirical study, we interviewed public officials and representatives from civil society who are engaged both strategically and practically with sustainable consumption and waste prevention at the local, regional, and national levels. The findings show that the following five areas can be considered as key for orienting Swedish society in a more sufficient direction: addressing the unsustainability of the larger system, working for normative changes, setting clear political goals that reflect actual ecological and social limits, securing stable funding for and harnessing synergies of sustainable consumption and waste-prevention projects, and making effective use of existing policy tools such as public procurement.

This article highlights the role that municipal and regional authorities can play in leading a transition toward a more sufficient society. One way to do this is to use practical tools such as public procurement to set new standards for businesses and to stimulate demand for more sustainable goods and services. Another way is to set clear and ambitious goals for their own operations, for example, in terms of a reduction in CO₂ equivalents or by adopting carbon budgets. The ways in which goals are formulated and communicated also matter because the identification of particular targets sets the path forward and shapes political priorities. This highlights the need for politicians at all levels to shift the focus toward goals of well-being, public health, and environmental sustainability and in this way indicate a change of priorities from the societal level that can facilitate a cultural reorientation. More research on sufficiency strategies in other policy fields such as mobility, housing, and working life is needed to provide further insights into this reorientation process.

Looking to the future, the findings from the Swedish context might be relevant for other nations and cities that are considering a sufficiency orientation and might provide guidance regarding obstacles along the way. The need for such an orientation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has, for example, been highlighted by the OECD (OECD 2020) and cities such as Amsterdam (Boffey 2020). The many uncertainties that will follow in the wake of the ongoing crisis could offer a rare opportunity to change the direction of the current path of unsustainable development. The rapid changes brought on by the pandemic are a painful reminder—but nevertheless an important signal—that disruption is possible when we face threats to human health and survival.

Note
1. The body is called Miljöområdsberedningen, which is a governmental commission with representatives from all political parties that has existed since 2010 with the assignment to propose how the environmental quality objectives are to be reached.

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## Appendix 1. List of interviews

Interviews with public officials are marked as PO; three different officials from the City of Gothenburg were interviewed, hence named PO1–3. Civil society representatives are marked as CS.

| Entity                                               | Date               |
|------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| City of Gothenburg, PO1                             | June 23 2020       |
| City of Gothenburg, PO2                             | April 2 2020       |
| Bostadsbolaget, Gothenburg public housing company, PO| April 24 2020      |
| Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, PO         | January 28 2019    |
| Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, CS         | January 15 2019    |
| City of Gothenburg, PO3                             | January 15 2019    |
| Gothenburg Region, PO                              | January 15 2019    |
| Region of Vastra Gotaland, PO                       | January 14 2019    |
| Conscious consumption, CS                           | January 11 2019    |
| Swedish Consumer Agency, PO                         | January 9 2019     |
| Orebro municipality, PO                            | January 7 2019     |
| Swedish Waste Management Association, PO            | December 5 2018    |
| Buy Nothing Day Sweden, CS                          | December 4 2018    |