

Sufficiency and subsistence – on two important concepts for sustainable development

Wystarczalność i samozaopatrzenie – w sprawie dwóch ważnych dla zrównoważonego rozwoju idei

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Abstract

Since in 1992 the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) has been held in Rio de Janeiro, efforts to achieve sustainable development appear to have made only insufficient progress, as the results of the 2012 follow-up conference show. One reason for this is that among the various paths to sustainability being discussed, the strategies enjoying greater support are those that continue to be committed to economic and material growth, this as opposed to those that question the growth paradigm. Among the latter are the sufficiency and subsistence approaches. The sufficiency approach delves into the causes and (supposed) boons of a continuous increase in material and immaterial goods. With the demand that individuals not always be forced to always want more, it points out a way to a structural transition in society. The subsistence approach, on the other hand, seeks to draft a path to greater autonomy and quality of life by strengthening regional, local or individual self-provisioning. To be in harmony with sustainability, it must be possible to freely choose the two ways of life; they must not be mandated by the authorities.

Key words: sufficiency, subsistence, sustainable development, degrowth, feminist approaches

Streszczenie

Od 1992 r., kiedy w Rio de Janeiro odbyła się konferencja ONZ na temat środowiska i rozwoju, starania ludzkości, aby zmierzać w kierunku zrównoważonego rozwoju, wydają się być niewystarczające, jak pokazała kolejna konferencja z 2012 r. Jedną z przyczyn tego stanu związana jest z tym, że wśród różnych dyskutowanych ścieżek, które mają prowadzić do zrównoważoności, większe wsparcie otrzymują te, które nadal bazują na wzroście ekonomicznym i materialnym aniżeli te, które kwestionują paradygmat wzrostu. Pośród tych ostatnich znajdują się podejścia odwołujące się do wystarczalności i samozaopatrzenia. W ramach tej pierwszej analizy podaje się przyczyny i (domniemane) dobrodziejstwa związane z ciągłym wzrostem dóbr materialnych i niematerialnych. Na podstawie żądania, aby nie zmuszać ludzi ciągle chcieć więcej, podejście to wskazuje ścieżkę do strukturalnej przemiany społeczeństwa. Natomiast podejście odwołujące się do samozaopatrzenia stara się wskazać drogi do osiągnięcia większej autonomii i lepszej jakości życia poprzez wzmocnienie regionalnego, lokalnego i indywidualnego samozaopatrzenia. Aby zapewnić zgodność ze zrównoważonym rozwojem, musi istnieć możliwość wolnego wyboru tych dwóch stylów życia, nie mogą one być narzucone z góry.

Słowa kluczowe: wystarczalność, samozaopatrzenie, rozwój zrównoważony, postwzrost/degrowth, podejścia feministyczne

Introduction

The results of the most recent UN summit on sustainable development, which took place in Rio de Janeiro in June of 2012, were seen by Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker as being tantamount to zero (von Weizsäcker, 2012). This raises the question as to why the sustainability process is currently road-blocked and where perspectives for the future might be found.

We see one blockade in the inadequate implementation of the *Local Agenda 21*. The intention there is for sustainable development processes to be embedded in local policies, and be shaped and supported by local operatives (UNEP, 1992). But how can the claim to *genuine* participation in *Agenda 21*¹ be realized if the familiar faces and the powerful operatives are to sit down around the table with the unknown faces of *socially weaker groups*, with equal entitlements in the discussion but without any reflection whatsoever on the distribution of power in society?

We see a further blockade in the fact that the Rio Conference of 1992 put forward a linkage of sustainability and development that was in line with the economic growth model. As a consequence, other approaches which highlight the preservation of livelihoods², instead of the more efficient domination of nature, receive almost no attention (Wichterich, 2002). Therefore it is important to strengthen an understanding of sustainable development in which the measurement of progress exceeds that of conventional economics and includes proxies for social justice and equity and for planetary boundaries, like the ongoing discussions about degrowth or beyond GDP.

That is why we seek, both theoretically and conceptionally, paths and approaches toward sustainability which, in the post-Rio-processes, were more repressed than acknowledged. What distinguishes sufficiency approaches from other sustainability approaches and why are the former devalued when compared with the latter (Section 2)? To what extent does sufficiency make reference to subsistence and what impact do the sufficiency and subsistence approaches have upon the processes aimed at achieving sustainable development (Section 3)?

¹ *Critical to the effective implementation of the objectives, policies and mechanisms agreed to by Governments in all program areas of 'Agenda 21' will be the commitment and genuine involvement of all social groups (UNEP, 1992: Preamble to Section III).*

² *Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN)*, a network of women from the global South, argues in favor of *sustained livelihood*, i.e. for sustainably ensuring the bases for living and for sustainably generating a means of subsistence (von Winterfeld, 2012).

Sufficiency as a path to sustainability

Sufficiency continues to be an alien and cumbersome concept in Germany. In some languages, however, it is used without thinking twice. In Italian, *È sufficiente* tells us that we have enough of something. And in France one even talks about *Ça suffit!* whenever there is quite certainly enough!

In the debate on sustainability, sufficiency is the concept that insists on boundaries – regardless of whether these are boundaries for the (excessive) use of the environment or boundaries on individual consumption. The situation must not and may not be that everything simply grows unchecked. Quite the opposite, excessive and multiple consumption have to be curbed. At the international level, the sufficiency approach was adopted as a concept by Ernst Friedrich Schumacher (1977) and by Herman Daly (1991). In Germany, the term *Suffizienz* was introduced into the debate by Wolfgang Sachs (1993) and was compared and contrasted with the concept of *Effizienz*.

The efficiency approach, by comparison, marks out a different path toward sustainability: More wealth at less resource consumption; this was the plan put forth by Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker, Karlson Hargroves and Michael Smith (von Weizsäcker et al., 2010). Those lights can stay on because higher-efficiency lamps use less electricity. The refrigerator can be just as large as ever, because it is more energy-efficient than its predecessor was.

Ultimately, the consistency approach represents a path to sustainability that puts its faith in using different physical materials and substances. Thus it is not a question of limiting quantity, but instead of aligning quality with environmental requirements (Huber, 2001). The lights can stay on and the refrigerator can be large because the energy source has been replaced through the transformation from coal and oil – finite resources and producers of CO₂ – to a regenerative basis.

The insistence – in line with sufficiency concepts – that not everything has to be bright and large – has been pushed aside by the efficiency and consistency approaches. Sufficiency is quite heavy-handed in terms of standards, is morally rigid, and carries a connotation of the *ethics of sacrifice*. Thus, the sufficiency approach threatens to discredit, in terms of both society and politics, the concern that CO₂ reduction is important. Sufficiency is not a basis upon which a government can be established or environmental and sustainability policies implemented.³

³ This attitude is advocated in the world of science, for example, by Hartmut Grassl, a meteorologist and climate researcher in Hamburg, and in politics, for instance, by the Minister of the Environment in the State of Baden-Württemberg, Franz Untersteller.

If sufficiency stirs up so much anger and resistance, then this is due to the fact that the global North (and the Occident) has little cultural background that would encourage such an approach. *It is essential that the mechanical arts prevail in competition with nature* (Bacon, 1990 [1620]). Francis Bacon formulated this guideline in 1620, in his treatise *Novum Organum Scientiarum*, and thus laid it in the cradle of the modern era. The limits imposed by nature are to be overcome by the mechanical arts, by technology. If today, for instance, research is conducted on the over-fertilization of the seas and experiments are carried out, then this is in the spirit of Bacon. It is all a question of technology gaining mastery over nature.

His compatriot Thomas Hobbes presented a more political argument a few decades later. In the thirteenth chapter of *Leviathan*, he asserts that anyone who is modest and satisfied with moderate wealth will not long survive, since all the others – in the pursuit of property, glory, power and fame – strive to subdue the entire earth (Hobbes, 1980 [1651]). Of course Hobbes, the theoretician of the social contract, makes this statement with a view toward the *natural state* (the status in which no social contract has yet been concluded and in which a civil society has not yet come into existence), but his words mirror the principle of competition in the market economies then forming. No one who is modest can survive. When seen through these glasses, which Thomas Hobbes laid in the cradle of the modern era, sufficiency appears to threaten continued existence; not wanting a new computer appears to be suicidal or in the best case ludicrous. A good century after the appearance of *Leviathan*, Adam Smith based his *Wealth of Nations* (Smith, 1978 [1776]) on the precept that each individual should, with a minimum of hindrance, pursue his or her own advantage and that the task of the state is to impose fair rules on the competition which results. Sufficiency is not envisaged in these modern economic premises. Quite the contrary. Having an advantage means that someone receives something *in advance*, before sharing or dividing begins. An *advantage* implies being in a better position than others. If people then declared themselves satisfied with what had already been achieved – or even less, then the entire game would be challenged.

In the works of Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes and Adam Smith, it is possible to see which paradigms are inherent to modern thought. But as a cultural accoutrement, they are not of much use neither for the sufficiency approach nor for tackling the *great sustainability challenge*. This is because the precept of sustainability includes the necessity of considering the consequences for future generations, which means nothing more than considering the welfare of something that we cannot yet know. This cannot be achieved by anyone who is in competition with

nature, wrestling for scarce (material and immaterial) goods, and pursuing his or her own advantage.

When accepting the challenge implied in sustainability, all the paths to sustainability – including those based on efficiency and consistency – are of significance. A sufficiency approach, however, opens up an ethical and political foundation rather than the two other approaches.

However, the challenge and the laying of the groundwork would be missed if the sufficiency approach were to be presented without its political aspects and as an appeal for individual abstention from consumption. It is not as though this would be entirely unimportant. But this presentation could get tangled up in the *art of correct behavior within the wrong structures* (von Winterfeld, 1993). In this instance, individual behavior – but not structural change within the society – appears to be the solution to the environmental and sustainability problem. But how, for instance, are individuals to exercise *proper* consumption when, collectively, production is *improper*? How is individuals' willingness to use less supposed to become established in the face of political adherence to the growth paradigm?

The melody of sufficiency becomes audible above all when it is clear that sufficiency does not fit with the existing mindset – be it the cultural, the political or the economic orientation and the society's constitution. Instead, it points beyond that mindset. Sufficiency is not in line with a culture of domination over nature, nor with politically motivated promises of wellbeing and wealth, nor with profit expectations. Thus the political issue associated with sufficiency is that it cannot be used to win elections. Rather, it points to the necessity for a fundamental and thoroughgoing transformation in society: securing the basis for life instead of efficient domination of nature and instead of efficient management of the environment; a right to participation without incurring any obligation to growth; orientation on what is necessary for the good life⁴ instead of on profit. The sufficiency approach is also an approach to alternative solutions. Jorgen Randers refers to the need of new policies, legislation and societal institutions for creating a better future (Randers, 2012⁵).

In spite of that, sufficiency itself can become a problem, especially when it is mandated by the authorities. Basically, this happens all the time, even though the term *sufficiency* is not heard. This may be because it is necessary to save money, because dips in business activity require some belt-

⁴ The concept *Caring Economy* is based on three principles of action: care, cooperation, and orientation of that which is necessary for the *good life* (Netzwerk Vorsorgendes Wirtschaften, 2013).

⁵ 40 years after the first Report about *The Limits of Growth*, Randers as one of the authors has made a forecast of what will happen over the next forty years.

tightening and moderation of expectations, because the social welfare state has proven to be too expensive and the social claims thus become unrealistic and objectionable. This is where a fundamental conflict appears. At governmental level, there is a continuous call for the populace to exercise moderation (e.g. in regard to expectations for increases in wages or retirement benefits), and these calls are in fact cast in legislation. At the same time, the same political class is collared – both morally and materially – by the global capitalistic growth imperative. In this way, however, any thoughts about sufficiency are discredited – because it is forced upon the people by the authorities or because political appeals for sufficiency become implausible since the political and social environment is fixated on growth.

This obsession with growth however loses sight of the connection between sustainability, sustainable development and *The Limits of Growth*. A new Report from the Club of Rome exposes the systemic flaws in the money system and the missing link between money and sustainability. The unsustainable money system is outdated and needs an update. A monetary ecosystem has to quit the current monopoly system and to enter a monetary system with complementary currencies (Lietaer et al., 2012).

In respect thereof sufficiency is not only *less* but also less of the existing monopoly and more of a sustainable diversity within the monetary system. Sufficiency also becomes a problem if it is stated in morally rigorous terms. It then appears to be a sermonizing and chiding catalog of rules for behavior. It is not as though this would not be inappropriate or unimportant. There are instructive debates about environmental ethics and *strong sustainability* (Ott, 2010). But this path leads us astray if it is imposed on individuals as the primary way to achieve sufficiency. This is because there is virtually no consideration of the social structure of the conditions surrounding the situation. One possibility to overcome the dilemma of isolated individual behavior without the possibility of empowering action is the approach of Political Social Ecology (Bookchin, 1997) where individual practice is contextualized in the surrounding framework of structures, norms and incentives.

Furthermore sufficiency is able to unfold its critical and analytical potential above all when it is couched in a negative manner.

When sensed in a negative connotation, sufficiency asks about the causes and the inconveniences of *too much*; it asks about the disruptions imposed by *better, more, faster, higher and further*. Why has government-run pension insurance become so distressed that a *better* system would seem to be possible only by way of the private-sector capital markets? Why do people always have to work *more* in order to earn a living? And who or what has unbri- dled the efficiency of work to the extent that it is

always necessary to work *faster* in order to accomplish the tasks at hand? Why do crop yields always have to be *higher*, so that a farm can continue to exist at all? And why are the distances we have to cover to satisfy daily needs always *further*?

If one poses such questions, using sufficiency as the compass, then the unreasonable demands of the growth-oriented society become clear; the existing mores – and the attractiveness of the *better, more, faster, higher* and further mindset – become dubious.

Thus, however, the exact point is that sufficiency is not ordered by the authorities but, on the contrary, politics and the economic system are questioned critically from the sufficiency viewpoint. It is against this background that sufficiency can also be formulated as a protective right: *No one should ever have to always want more* (von Winterfeld, 2002). And part and parcel of sufficiency-oriented human rights would be what Christine and Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker once formulated with a view toward the future of labor: *The right to do one's own work instead of a mandate for growth* (von Weizsäcker, von Weizsäcker, 1979). The approach to *one's own work* can be traced back to Ivan Illich and follows this maxim: doing it oneself (by permission) instead of buying (due to compulsion). At this point one's own work is related to subsistence and could be understood as the *right to take care of one's own needs (including local and regional provision) instead of the hegemony of the agro-industry*.

Subsistence as a path to sufficiency

The meanings of the terms *subsistence* and *subsistence economy* are explained in one dictionary as being *self-provisioning* or as an *agricultural system which produces entirely or largely for self-provisioning* (Wissenschaftlicher Rat der Dudenredaktion, 2000). The relationship of subsistence, the subsistence economy and sustainability proves to be just as varied and multifaceted as the relationship between sufficiency and sustainability. There are indeed similarities in the way in which sufficiency and sustainability – and subsistence and sustainability – contradict each other or make reference one to another. In addition, subsistence and sufficiency can be set in relationship to each other in various ways.

If subsistence production, which is perceived as being small-scale production, is felt to be an economy of poverty, as a way of life not voluntarily chosen (i.e. by people who would rather produce in a different way), then subsistence and sustainability are in contradiction one to the other. This is because sustainability is obliged to observe the imperatives of justice and fairness; *having to be poor* while others *are able to be rich* appears to be anything but just. Subsistence, in this interpretation, would have

to be understood as the compulsion to achieve sufficiency. If subsistence production is, however, understood specifically as economy focused on the local area, as something which is inherently alternative and resistive because people show that production can be undertaken in a different fashion and can function quite well, even beyond the capitalistic market, then subsistence certainly references sustainability. In this interpretation, subsistence belongs to a sufficiency-oriented path to sustainability.

In the Bielefeld subsistence approach, which will be introduced in greater detail later, the ambivalence inherent to subsistence production is analyzed and found to be a disparity between subsistence production and commodity production and is expanded to form a critical theory of society. The approach was developed in the 1970s and 80s by Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, Maria Mies and Claudia von Werlhof. Since the 1990s and in the context of critical comments on globalization and debates on sustainability, it has received renewed attention. The reference points for the approach are, on the theoretical level, Marxist theory in particular and its further development by Rosa Luxemburg. In empirical terms, these are based on case studies in Latin America (Bennholdt-Thomsen and von Werlhof) and India (Mies).

In the spirit of a feminist-materialistic theory, the subsistence approach asks above all which functions subsistence production, understood as *utility-oriented work, directed at the creation and maintenance of livelihoods, has for the capitalistic mode of production* (Baier, 2004, p. 73). Here the representatives of this approach take umbrage at the assumption that subsistence production is a legacy element of traditional societies, one that would gradually die out. Instead, they assume that, *in spite of the decline of autonomous, regional subsistence economies, subsistence production as the creation of the immediate necessities of life cannot disappear. Instead, it will only change in character when it is subordinated to capitalistic commodity production* (Baier, 2004; Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1999).

The approach was applied when conducting a critical examination of the relationship of subsistence production and commodity production. In this respect the researchers in Bielefeld, referring to the so-called *housework debate*, focus on the character and the economic significance of unpaid work rendered by women (Hofmeister, 2013). In their analysis of these non-remunerated labor and production relationships, and in their reference to wage labor and the accumulation of capital (Baier, 2004), they determine that capitalism does in fact not recognize female subsistence efforts as work and, accordingly, does not place an economic value on the same; capitalism is, nonetheless, dependent on this work. This process, in which capitalism appropriates housework, is designated in the Bielefeld subsist-

ence approach as *housewife-ization*. The researchers in Bielefeld expand their critique by determining that it is not just women who are exploited by the capitalist mode of production. Those people who work as peasant farmers in the so-called Third World are exploited in the same way and the area thus becomes a subsistence region in the world economy (Baier, 2004). Following the Bielefeld subsistence approach, this housewife-ization of women's work and the colonization of the countries of the South are directly linked one with another. In both cases, it is a question of creating an exploitative relationship between subsistence production and commodity production as a result of the capitalist takeover.

In spite of this critique of the interconnection of subsistence production and capitalistic commodity production, there is a visionary potential associated with the subsistence perspective⁶. Subsistence production can be seen as the starting point for current and future resistance (Baier, 2004). This resistance is based on the ambivalent character of the subsistence perspective, according to which subsistence is both the opposite of and the ongoing basis for the modern industrial society (von Werlhof, 1991). Accordingly, subsistence is understood by the proponents of the Bielefeld approach as *an approach to the bottom-up economy, as a living and survival economy (...), as a way in which 'many little people' can quite consciously take their day-to-day provisioning into their own hands once again* (Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1999). The representatives of the Bielefeld subsistence approach assume that a subsistence orientation will bring among other things independence, quality of life and autonomy. Thus subsistence is more than *self-provisioning*; it represents a cultural mindset and access to the world (von Werlhof, 1991). Making the potential inherent to subsistence orientation visible and viable, in the spirit of a *liberated subsistence* (von Werlhof, 1991), is the transformative intention pursued by the Bielefeld subsistence perspective.

The Bielefeld subsistence perspective has been and is being reflected upon as an eco-feminist approach (e.g. Lenz, 1987; Knapp, 2007 [1988]; Hofmeister, 2013). The heart of the critique is, firstly, the essentialist assumption that women are closer to nature and, secondly, the associated stabilization of dominance-oriented divisions, such as woman vs. man, subsistence vs. commodity production, or nature vs. civilization.

In spite of – or in recognition of – these critical estimates, the Bielefeld subsistence approach offers docking points for the debates about sustainable development and for the formulation of positions

⁶ Bennholdt-Thomsen (1999) decidedly opposes designating subsistence as an utopia (e.g. von Werlhof, 1991) and emphasizes that in the subsistence perspective it is not an action oriented on the future but rather that it is action in the present.

that are critical of globalization (Adler, 2010; Hofmeister, 2013). However, the theoreticians of subsistence do not place their concept in the context of the sustainability discussion, which they criticize due to the fact that it can be co-opted by interests promoting growth-oriented economy (Adler, 2010). In the currents of the sustainability discussion, where an explicitly growth-critical position is taken, the subsistence perspective is quite certainly accepted and furthered. Here sufficiency and subsistence combine and represent, for example, the core elements of a degrowth economy (Paech, Paech, 2011). The combination of sufficiency and subsistence thus opens new perspectives for a good life that is in fact not equated with a continuously rising living standard (Adler, 2010). In this perspective the local aspects – and here in particular the regional economies – gain increasing significance for the *good life*, both in the city and in the country (Müller, 1999; Baier et al., 2005; Paech, Paech, 2011).

Conclusion

Discussed in this article are approaches – sufficiency and subsistence – which are more likely to be dismissed than acknowledged in the discourse on sustainability. The questions raised at the beginning – regarding the differences between sufficiency and other sustainability approaches and regarding the connections between sufficiency and subsistence – can now be answered against the background of the theoretical-conceptual considerations.

It was possible to show that the relationships between sufficiency, subsistence and sustainability are ambivalent. Wherever sufficiency and subsistence are imposed from above, they are unable to contribute to sustainable development. But where they come into being as a voluntarily chosen cultural, political and economic alternative, they can unfold a critical and visionary potential for sustainable development. Their critique is found in that they question, categorically, a growth paradigm that is generally felt to be certain. Their vision is found in trying out the paradigm of the *good life* and thus in contributing to a critical-emancipatory understanding of sustainability. Here sufficiency and subsistence are achieved at smaller scale, are embedded in the locality, and make reference to each other in that sufficiency is understood to be a right to self-provisioning and – *vice versa* – subsistence can be a way to realize a sufficient way of life.

Liberating oneself from the culturally, politically and economically imposed compulsion and urge for material growth and nonautonomous acting appears to be one of the greatest challenges for capitalist societies of the northern hemisphere. This will be possible, however, only if questions aimed at defining the *good life* are actively and assertively posed, and if sufficiency and subsistence can be esteemed

economic, ecologic and social contributions to sustainable life plans that are chosen voluntarily.

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