

## Kohtuus ja kohtuusliike

Teksti tarkastelee kahden empiirisen tutkimuksen pohjalta kohtuutta maailmankuvana. Keskustelemme aktivistien itsensä kohtuudelle antamista merkityksistä. Suomalainen ruohonjuuritason verkosto Kohtuusliike edistää maltillista elämäntapaa, kulutuksen vähentämistä ja pyrkiä huomioida planeetan rajoja sekä sosiaalista oikeudenmukaisuutta. Väitämme, että integroimalla ruohonjuuritason näkökulmat – kohtuus maailmankuvana – politiikkatason toimiin, kohtuus edustaa vaihtoehtoista strategiaa nykyään vallitseville tehokkuuslähtöisille lähestymistavoille. Havainnollistavana esimerkkinä keskustelemme energian tuottaja-kuluttajien (*prosumer*) roolista ja vaikutuksesta: yksilöistä tai yhteisöistä, jotka sekä tuottavat että kuluttavat energiaa. Tuottaja-kulutajuuden tehokkuus energian riittävyyden käytäntönä on kyseenalaistettu, liittyen huoleen tahattomista seurauksista, kuten energian kokonaiskulutuksen mahdollinen lisääntyminen. Kohtuus korostaa riittävyyttä ja edistää absoluuttista kulutuksen ja tuotannon vähentämistä. Se muistuttaa ekologisten rajojen olemassaolosta ja ehdottaa vaihtoehtoa kasvuvetoiselle taloudelliselle paradigmalle.

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# Looking at the world through “sufficiency glasses”

## INTRODUCTION

Sufficiency is increasingly brought up as necessary to address the urgent sustainability crisis. In a situation where six out of nine planetary boundaries have been transgressed (Richardson et al. 2023), prevailing strategies to mitigate human impact on the environment have proven deeply inadequate. Over the past decades, improving efficiency has been a key strategy. Targeting production has resulted in relative reductions in environmental impact and resource use per unit of output. However, these efforts have not reduced environmental impact and emissions in an absolute sense (IPBES 2019; IPCC 2022).

In contrast, the concept of sufficiency directs attention to ‘enoughness’ and absolute reductions in both consumption and production to stay within ecological limits (Jungell-Michelsson & Heikkurinen 2022). While sufficiency is receiving increased attention, there is no shared definition of the concept. The notion of sufficiency itself remains contested and open to various, at times contradictory, interpretations (Sorrell et al. 2020; Jungell-Michelsson & Heikkurinen 2022). Early attempts at conceptualising sufficiency driven by environmental concerns were inspired by the futility and potential harm of boundless economic growth on a finite planet (e.g., Daly 1991). Sufficiency thus emerged as an alternative social ordering principle, which “begins as a simple idea and, under certain conditions, especially ecological constraint, can lead to major social organizing principles, ones that rival, indeed, compete with cooperation and efficiency” (Princen 2003, 43).

Sufficiency hence represents an alternative and complementary strategy to the prevailing efficiency-oriented approaches (Princen

2003). The former can be characterised as "strong sustainability" and the latter as "weak sustainability" (Holland 1997). The more specific strategy of energy sufficiency, which focuses on limiting or reducing the consumption of energy services, spurred discussions in the 1970s and 1980s, driven by concerns over the looming scarcity of natural resources (Sorrell et al. 2020).

How problems are understood and experienced determines how they are addressed (e.g., Marton 1981; see also texts by Haila and Berglund in this volume). Therefore, we examine empirically the meanings given to sufficiency, both in terms of how it is defined and as a way of looking at the world. In the first half of this chapter, we focus on descriptions of sufficiency in the Finnish grassroots network *Kohtuusliike*, a small citizens' network that questions the current growth-based economic system and promotes a moderate lifestyle. The analysis builds on interviews by Laakkonen (2021) and Nyfors (2021). Based on the descriptions of sufficiency in *Kohtuusliike*, we suggest that looking at the world through "sufficiency glasses" could provide a new direction as eco-crises accumulate into more diverse bundles of problems.

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Positing the sufficiency discussion in a larger perspective, we furthermore suggest that sufficiency brings together earlier waves of environmentalism in Finland (see Konttinen & Peltokoski 2004; also Mustonen & Lehtinen in this volume). This poses the question of whether there are signs of ecological limits being placed centre stage through approaches such as sufficiency and degrowth.

Firstly, we discuss the meanings given to sufficiency in *Kohtuusliike*. Secondly, based on the sufficiency descriptions derived, we introduce the notion of "sufficiency glasses" as a way to organize experience and guide action. Thirdly, we discuss

suggestions for sufficiency-informed policies together with examples from the housing, mobility, and agricultural sectors. Then, as a practical approach, we use these considerations in the context of prosumers (i.e., producers-consumers). Lastly, we discuss some implications of integrating a sufficiency-oriented grassroots perspective in top-down policy measures.

#### GRASSROOTS APPROACHES TO SUFFICIENCY

The *Kohtuusliike* grassroots network, which started in the Finnish region of North Karelia as a local group called *Kohtuus Vaarassa*, is a loose group of activists. The group initially worked against uranium mining in North Karelia (Ulvila 2018; Lehtinen 2019) but soon expanded its focus and began to highlight, for example, the problems of the efficiency-oriented green transition approach more broadly (Ulvila 2018). The network brought together people, many having a long history in civic activities, for example, in 1970s environmental activism (Ulvila 2018; Laakkonen 2019).

In 2009, the first *Kohtuus Vaarassa* -seminar was held in Koli, in Eastern Finland, and from that on, the seminars have taken place bi-annually. The network has grown over the years; the seminars have attracted more participants, and groups have been founded in other parts of Finland. The group in North Karelia is still active. Over the years a wide range of questions have been addressed in publications, seminars, and events (Aho 2019). In addition to the core questions, topics have included enquiries related to the military industry and forestry. In recent years, self-sufficiency has become a topic of interest for *Kohtuusliike*, too. Hence, the network can be seen as a combination of different waves of environmental activism, addressing complex questions by integrating social, ecological, and even cultural sustainability.

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Sufficiency, or *kohtuus* in Finnish – the central concept of the network – promotes, for example, a moderate way of living. Similarly to the sufficiency concept, the term *kohtuus* cannot be defined in a straightforward way (see Laakkonen 2022). In the Finnish language, the word *kohtuus* is associated



First meeting of sufficiency researchers' network 22.9.2022.  
Image: Tina Nyfors.

with a sense of enoughness, adequacy, and avoiding excess. Here, we link the two closely related concepts of sufficiency and *kohtuus*, and the terms are used interchangeably.

*Kohtuusliike*, being closely linked to the degrowth movement (Lehtinen 2019) and sometimes even seen as a part of the degrowth movement (Ruuska 2021), furthermore criticises the growth paradigm in economics and promotes social justice instead of (over)consumption as a way to build human well-being (see Demaria et al. 2013). Despite similarities between sufficiency and degrowth, these two approaches have their distinctive features, for example, degrowth problematizing questions related to power struggles to a larger degree. Also, there are differences related to scale – while there is an international degrowth movement, there is no corresponding international ‘sufficiency movement’. Also, the activists interviewed in Laakkonen’s (e.g., 2022) study reminded that the *Kohtuusliike* network started in North Karelia before the degrowth movement was established in Finland.

In the aforementioned studies on *kohtuus* (Laakkonen 2021 and Nyfors 2021, referred to below as “L” and “N” followed by a number linked to the interviewee) we have encountered multiple ways of describing of the concept. Simultaneously, we recognize that there might be as many interpretations of the term as there are activists in the network. The fact that we are also part of the network, has likely supported building trust with the interviewees and comprehending

the shared experiences (see Juvonen 2017). In this text, we focus on a few aspects which caught our attention when analysing the data. In both studies, we have concluded that *kohtuus* can be described as a way of looking at the world. Furthermore, planetary boundaries and social justice are among the underpinning values of the entire network.

So, what exactly is sufficiency? The studies with *Kohtuusliike* activists show that it was difficult even for the activists themselves to define the term. Here, we focus on views related to sufficiency as a worldview and as a ‘good life’. Activists referred to *kohtuus* as a worldview, a mindset, or “as glasses through which one can interpret things, as a way to structure the world” (N2).

The *Kohtuusliike* network aims to tackle complex problems: A key feature is its integrated approach to social and ecological sustainability (Lehtinen 2014; Aho 2015). One activist explained to Laakkonen – in a rather humorous tone – the goal of the network:

“First, we would need a change in the Western worldview to a holistic, sufficient worldview. We should appreciate our own Finno-Ugric traditions, their significant features and so, as a result, our society and economic system would become sufficient, and we would forget the need for economic growth. We would reduce our consumption so that Finland’s and global nature would tolerate it in the long run. And at the same time, life would be more communal and there would be more time for art and other things. Like this, small goals!”

Study participants pointed out that a sufficiency-informed worldview can be utilised, for example, at work even though it is not explicitly connected to *kohtuus*, or serve as an angle from which to reflect when watching the news:

*"A really classic example is ... renewable energy, and then somehow it is not mentioned anywhere in that piece of news that energy consumption must be reduced, such things immediately catch your eye."*

(N2)

Sufficiency is also repeatedly referred to as something related to the mind: as "a mental thing", "mental state", or "mental transition", as a thing in "one's head", "between the ears", an attitude or as certain types of values.

One view brought forth was that a sufficiency worldview has "provided freedom from much that is unnecessary" (N13). According to one activist, nature-centeredness, or ecocentrism, were keywords regarding the need to change the worldview and the conception of human beings. Also, a deep nature connection was seen as playing a central role. In the context of sufficiency, art was also referred to as a tool for changing worldviews, as an incentive for acting differently, offering other possible worlds, as a tool for visioning as well as changing structures. For example, in the seminars organized by *Kohtuusliike*, art has been an essential part from the beginning. The expert lecturers may speak in precise scientific terms, but in the workshops, the participants may work by means of poetry, music, movement, and other forms of art (Laakkonen 2021; 2022).

The study participants also told stories about everyday incidents and situations in which they had become aware that they had adopted a sufficiency mindset and could recognize other people with the same worldview. For example, Laakkonen was told a story about a visit to a bicycle repair shop where the activist illustrated how she noticed a sufficiency mindset around her. The person working in the shop did not want to recommend tires that will not last long and the atmosphere in the shop is very friendly; they even offer extra services, like tire storage, that are not officially available.

According to the activists, the whole consumerist mindset should be changed. Not buying is a radical act at a time when consumption is a way to build

one's identity, take a stand, and even be part of society (see Kurenlahti 2021). Kurenlahti and Salonen (2018) claim – based on several studies – that consuming is a way of creating meaning in life and finding a purpose in the contemporary world (see also Brand & Wissen 2021). Activists in *Kohtuusliike* have found other sources of happiness and satisfaction. Next, we will examine these and how they link to notions of a good life.

As stated above, studies on *kohtuus* indicate that a "sufficiency worldview" is not about making life poorer; it can be about discovering and noticing the richness in life. Instead of buying goods, *Kohtuusliike* activists enjoy art, nature, and spending time with friends and fellow activists. The activists emphasized that *kohtuus* is not scarcity (Laakkonen 2019). Buying something may give happiness for a short while, but doing things together and enjoying art and nature will provide something more, as an interviewee claimed:

*" - - speaking about consumption or this - - Let's travel somewhere, [laughing] to a sunny beach and life will smile. And the joy in it is so short-lived, in my opinion, the real satisfaction and joy, it is much more long-lasting, for example, you can get it from - - about the ability to be empathetic, considering others and, and the possibility to go to nature and, - - you "consume" culture - like going to concerts or singing together - -."* (L2)

Activists also reflected on the topic of to what extent a shift to sufficiency was perceived as giving something up or receiving something. Several of them said they have not given anything up, rather emphasising receiving, and benefits like higher levels of well-being, more happiness, more time, and the possibility to do things perceived as important and getting life to a "more understandable size" (N6). Others recognized situations of giving things up – like having a car, a meat-rich diet, or dreams of travelling – but simultaneously connected this to receiving something else, an exchange – like a better physical condition and health.

Discussions about sustainable living and reducing consumption are at the very core of *Kohtuusliike*. Embracing a *kohtuus* mindset frees one from buying more and "needing" – that is wanting – new things all the time. In other words, a person is satisfied when they do not need more. One of the



interviewees said that they do not strive for new things because they have something more valuable:

“ - I don't need that much to be satisfied, - - it's not tied to things. - - For me, it is more like human relationships - - and of course one needs to have a place to live and move around, and human relationships and nature are very important to me, a lifeline. - - And of course, trying to have influence in your own way or speak up for these things.” (L2)

Joutsenvirta and Salonen (2020, 122) have suggested that in a growth-based economy being satisfied is “a threat to the society”. In this sense, a sufficiency mindset is a radical way of thinking. An interviewee said that they refuse to consume just to generate economic growth. They said: “It's not my job to consume.” In their words, people are “pleased to consume” and to help the economy grow. However, they stated that “consumption is not well-being”.

The various ways of interpreting sufficiency lead to different dwelling solutions, including some living off-grid and practising partial self-sufficiency in terms of energy and food. This included producing all or some electricity through solar panels, generating electricity through a stationary bike, or owning a forest which provides firewood. Rationales for this included that it “makes sense”, enables “understanding where things come from”, that it gives a sense of “security” and “independence”, and that it “feels wrong to import food from the other side of the world”.

#### SUFFICIENCY IN POLICYMAKING

The social-ecological transformation addressed by sufficiency concerns is a systemic, epoch-defining process of change requiring interventions both at micro and macro levels. In this chapter, we argue that a sufficiency-informed public policy could play a crucial role in carrying out a managed, successful, collective reorganization of industrial civilizations. What could policy focussed on bringing overconsuming and overproducing societies into planetary boundaries look like? How could the key aspects of sufficiency, including a sense of “enoughness”, and a good life for all within planetary limits, be integrated into policymaking? And what is the sufficiency potential of grassroots practices like energy prosumerism? Next, we will discuss these questions in the context of housing,

mobility, and agriculture.

In the interviews presented above, sufficiency is referred to as a worldview, encompassing change at different scales. At a micro-scale, consumptive behaviours are called into question against alternative ways of satisfying individual needs. This could translate into simply consuming less, reconsidering consumption patterns, rebranding, or switching from wage labour to essential work outside the job market (e.g., homesteaders, caretakers). Complementarily, the collective dimensions of sufficiency address issues of resource distribution and the shortcomings in provisioning systems like food, health, education, sanitation, and energy. While policy prescriptions most often revolve around supply-side approaches – such as technical upgrading, efficiency measures, and intellectual property rights (IPR) enforcement – demand-side solutions have recently gained more visibility. For example, a report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change for the first time features a whole chapter on the demand aspects of climate mitigation (IPCC 2022).

Also, the Finnish Climate Change Panel has outlined suggestions related to demand, with a focus on climate policy and recomposing consumption (Linnanen et al. 2020; Nyfors et al. 2020). The approach builds on identifying high-impact options, on the one hand, and low-impact alternatives, on the other. Here, we extend the focus to include the structural dimension. Policy measures informed by sufficiency principles have been advanced or proposed in sectors with high environmental impact, such as housing, mobility, and agriculture (Nyfors et al. 2020; Sandberg 2021; McGreevy et al. 2022). Concerning housing, large per capita living spaces and detached single housing represent options with high environmental impact. On the other hand, small-sized dwellings like apartments and forms of shared living spaces represent low-impact alternatives. Similarly, in the case of mobility practices, private cars and air travel represent high-carbon options, while public mobility, cycling, and walking are the preferred options for reducing overall climate change emissions. Finally, regarding agriculture, global agri-business is a primary driver of unsustainable overproduction, waste, and climate change (Clapp et al. 2018). Contrariwise, low-carbon alternatives

exist in the form of post-growth agrifood systems predicated on the principles of agroecology, permaculture, and sufficient production, defined as "producing enough healthy food for those who need it and doing so in ways that promote the welfare and stewardship practices of those who produce it" (McGreevy et al. 2022, 2).

Low-carbon options like co-housing, public mobility, and agroecology can be promoted by targeted regulatory instruments (Nyfors et al. 2020; McGreevy et al. 2022). Firstly, policy measures could restrict or ban high-carbon options, such as banning the production of cars running on fossil fuels, supporting smaller living spaces, enforcing energy performance standards for new buildings, or phasing out the use of pesticides in agriculture. Secondly, minimum standards could enforce the provision of low-carbon alternatives, like public transport, public housing, and locally produced food. Thirdly, regulatory instruments could restrict advertising of high-carbon options, for example, concerning large luxury dwelling options, holiday flights to distant destinations, or consumption of food produced overseas as monoculture crops. Economic instruments could also introduce environmental fiscal measures, such as considerable carbon taxes and fees on high-carbon options on the one hand, and subsidies and tax exemptions for low-carbon options, on the other hand. These levies and economic instruments could be also extended to designing personal carbon rationing, the number of vehicles per household or intercontinental flights, and public procurement quotas for organic food.

Polymaking can thus strongly influence the ways in which sufficiency actions can unfold. By the same token, the success of these policy measures is also dependent on the inclination of the general public to embrace or resist them. The same policy initiative can thus result in a variety of outcomes depending on contextual features like demographics, availability of resources, motivations, and competing narratives. Next, we explore a sufficiency angle in the context of an increasingly widespread self-sufficiency practice: energy prosumerism.

Prosumers are actors that both produce and consume a certain good or service. In view of the growing consensus around the need to

decentralize energy systems and improve their extensive coverage, energy prosumers and so-called "community energy" projects are ever more popular, particularly in the Global North (Brown et al. 2020). There are various forms of prosumerism. These range from archetypal upper-middle-class households installing rooftop solar panels for self-consumption and for selling to the grid, to the self-sufficient production of solar and wind energy in remote communities with the intent to reduce energy inputs in tune with natural cycles (thus adapting daily routines to the availability of low-carbon energy). This is a consequential distinction. The effectiveness and coherence of prosumerism as an energy-sufficiency practice have been questioned recently (Sorrell et al. 2020; Boccard & Gautier 2021; Pel et al. 2023). While energy prosumers certainly represent an important step towards decentralisation and energy descent, the real effects of reduced consumption ultimately depend on the interplay of motivations, social commitments, and holistic approaches leading to the installation of low-carbon energy sources next to the point of consumption (Vezzoni 2023).

Particularly over the past decade, both decreasing costs of solar photovoltaic (PV) systems and growing public support have favoured the rise of energy prosumerism. Nevertheless, there are clear biases in the sampled population, which is often represented by affluent homeowners located in Europe (e.g., Palm et al. 2018; Brown et al. 2020; Kratschmann & Dütschke 2021; Hansen et al. 2022; Wittmayer et al. 2022). As one such study found, "adopters tended to have higher incomes, be older, live in rural areas, have newer houses, and use individual heating" (Hansen et al. 2022, 1). These types of individual prosumer initiatives are often plagued with undesired consequences, such as rebound effects – extra savings or energy surplus leading to increased overall energy consumption. Studies have found that, due to poorly designed governmental schemes, households have tended to oversize their installed solar PV and substantially increase their electricity consumption in several European countries (Boccard & Gautier 2021; Kratschmann & Dütschke 2021; Hansen et al. 2022). This perception of "free energy" is a recurrent theme in empirical studies on prosumers' behaviour – pointing to what scholars have called "moral licensing" to pollute

(Dütschke et al. 2018). Not to paint a complex issue with too broad a brush, individual prosumers are not careless about reducing their consumption levels. Rather, the awareness of the current environmental predicament, and the knowledge of the role played by energy sufficiency (also acquired while installing the production and storage equipment), is often “just not important enough for prosumers to change their everyday habits” (Palm et al. 2018).

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**The environmental movement and activists (as well as researchers), have been pioneers in bringing environmental concerns to public awareness.**

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Moreover, even when driven by noble intentions, self-reported environmental attitudes and practices have been found to correlate weakly with total energy use and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reduction (Sorrell et al. 2020). Besides the above-mentioned cases of rebound effects and “moral licensing”, this weak correlation could be explained also by self-reporting bias (thus overstating implemented measures) and poor prioritisation of effective energy-sufficiency actions. Prosumers may act with the intention of reducing GHG pollution, yet this may also result in wicked trade-offs. This is exemplified by the disputable outcomes of low-carbon energy transitions, which lead to new forms of environmental degradation in order to mitigate climate change (Vezzoni 2023). As a case in point, the *Kohtuusliike* network started precisely from the opposition to uranium mining operations in North Karelia (see e.g., Lehtinen 2019).

As evidenced by Wittmayer and colleagues (2022, 10), “unless there are pre-existing motivations, prosumer activities will not necessarily consider action related to broader environmental problems”. Moreover, this holistic awareness and knowledge of the bigger picture should translate into consistent and prolonged sufficiency-inspired reductions on a variety of fronts, from housing to mobility and diets (Sorrell et al. 2020). Once again, the paradoxical outcomes of rebound effects, “moral licensing”, and other forms of misalignment between value propositions and

actual behaviour highlight the importance of clearly demarcating sufficiency from efficiency actions. After all, as Kratschmann and Dütschke (2021, 10) remark, “the most climate friendly and cheapest kilowatt hour is still the one that is not consumed”.

#### **SUFFICIENCY – PROVIDING THE MISSING PIECE FOR SUSTAINABILITY TRANSFORMATIONS**

Discussions on environmental limits have taken place since the 1970s. Still, the notion of planetary boundaries has gained momentum only since the mid-2010s, along with the effects of trespassing ecological thresholds increasingly being experienced also in the Global North. However, there is disagreement over what ought to be done. From a strong sustainability perspective, action along the lines of sufficiency is called for (IPCC 2022). The prevalence of efficiency or ecological modernisation discourses – such as environmental-economic decoupling, technological efficiency, and similar “win-win” solutions – is considered deeply problematic, as these have failed to reduce the scale of societal matter-energy throughput.

In contemporary capitalist societies, sufficiency represents a latent principle of social organization that provides an alternative to the economic growth imperative. Therefore, sufficiency actions can currently only manifest in circumscribed and compromised forms, as they necessitate negotiation with the established social order.

A characteristic of the interpretations of *kohtuus* in *Kohtuusliike* seems to be the comprehensive and holistic approach to addressing the environmental crisis. We suggest it represents features of all earlier waves of environmentalism in Finland (see Konttinen & Peltokoski 2004). Many features are related to the ‘second wave’ of environmentalism in the late 1970s. Perhaps sufficiency could reintroduce in the societal discussion the limits to growth (see Ruuska et al. in this volume), a critique of modern society and its orientation towards consumerism and economic growth, including responses related to alternative culture and lifestyle (Konttinen & Peltokoski 2004; see also Harkki 2021, 70–74). In a context where more than half of the planetary boundaries have already been transgressed, placing ecological limits centre stage would appear to be the only adequate and certainly urgent course of action.

However, within the path-dependent constraints

bound to a system predicated on relentless economic growth, policy prescriptions emphasizing efficiency often take precedence over sufficiency principles. Moreover, sufficiency-oriented change in affluent societies can be challenging to implement. Resistance can be found both at the political and citizen levels, sometimes stronger in the former. For example, Vaarakallio (2021, 14) argues that the Finnish political system has never “systematically produced effective environmental and climate policies”. He states that even politicians themselves “often apathetically admit that the necessary scale of changes within the required timeframe seems politically impossible” (Vaarakallio 2021, 14). On the contrary, the environmental movement and activists (as well as researchers), have been pioneers in bringing environmental concerns to public awareness (see, e.g. Stranius 2021). Examples of citizen-level resistance to top-down sufficiency measures include the French “yellow vest” movement against a carbon tax on fuel which started in 2018, and the 2024 farmers’ protests contesting (among other things) cuts to livestock farming and pesticide use in several European countries. This indicates that, even in cases where sufficiency-oriented policymaking has gained sufficient acceptability at the top, simply introducing policy may not solve the problems. Grassroots perspectives need to be integrated into the process.

Kohtuusliike are crucial. In these times of urgent environmental challenges, researchers’ calls for transformative action often clash with those social actors deeming such changes “impossible”. We propose that grassroots embracing a sufficiency approach can help bridge this gap.

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### Different interpretations of the sustainability crisis lead to different prescriptions for courses of action.

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As the studies presented here indicate, different interpretations of the sustainability crisis lead to different prescriptions for courses of action. For instance, worldviews like the ones expressed by activists in the Kohtuusliike network encompass change at a deeper level, including alternatives to capitalist ways of thinking, and questioning anthropocentric and extractivist mindsets. We argue that to address the unprecedented sustainability challenges of the 21st century, sufficiency – or something like it – is needed, and that insights from sufficiency-oriented grassroots networks like



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