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Planned, unplanned and planning sufficiency: Uncovering the nexus  
between consumption reduction and wellbeing for imagining energy futures  
in Switzerland

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Moynat, Orlane

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# Everyday practices and needs as entry points for an operationalization of more collective approaches to sufficiency.

Orlane Moynat  
University of Geneva, Switzerland

## **Abstract**

When it comes to grappling with both the environmental and social dimensions of energy transitions, sustainable wellbeing can be seen as a normative aim to be achieved through the satisfaction of human needs. This article exposes an engaging conceptual framework that describes the reduction of consumption through social practice theory, combined with a eudemonic approach to well-being. Drawing on individual interviews with people who declare themselves as ‘living degrowth’ in French speaking Switzerland, the paper discusses everyday practice of consumption reduction that inform the actualization of fundamental needs. The paper proposes an operationalization of Max-Neef’s approach of needs satisfaction, showing that an emphasis can be placed on sustainable practices representing synergic satisfiers. To support social change towards sufficiency, the paper discusses that synergic satisfiers must be planned for collectively. Synergic collective changes are discussed in relation to synergic configurations of practices towards consumption reduction and needs satisfaction – or sufficiency.

**Keywords:** *Sufficiency, social practices, needs, satisfiers, collective change*

**Key messages:**

1. Sufficiency can be described by combining social practice theory with a need approach to wellbeing
2. Planned sufficiency is a situation where living with less and living well can be combined if supported by society
3. Synergic satisfiers must be planned for collectively to meet the needs of the most people in an energy transition
4. A way of describing synergic changes and configurations of practices towards sufficiency is proposed

## 1. Introduction

For the first time, the 6<sup>th</sup> Assessment report of the IPCC provides a definition of sufficiency, as: “a set of measures and daily practices that avoid demand for energy, materials, land and water while delivering human wellbeing for all within planetary boundaries” (footnote in IPCC 2022, 31). While the concept of sufficiency in this definition extends to different forms of demand, it is increasingly being discussed in the energy transition literature as a way to go beyond the focus on energy efficiency and renewable energy production that has dominated policy making to date (Toulouse et al 2019). Two normative aims are put forward in this definition: on the one hand, sufficiency must ‘avoid demand’. This echoes the increasing recognition that current patterns of production and consumption must be brought within certain limits or boundaries (Steffen et al 2015; Hickel 2020). The second normative aim relates to human wellbeing, building on the hypothesis that a ‘double dividend’ might be feasible, whereby human wellbeing could be achieved while consuming less (Jackson 2005).

How wellbeing can be accounted for in societies is an ongoing debate. In energy studies, the human needs approach has gained in traction in recent years (Brand-Correa and Steinberger 2017), building on various human needs theories (Doyal and Gough 1991, Max-Neef 1991, Di Giulio and Defila 2019). In such an approach, satisfying a finite number of human needs is seen as more effective – and more aligned with finite resources – than attempting to satisfy endless desires (Gough 2017). Authors argue that need satisfaction can be planned for and protected in society, whereas happiness or life satisfaction remain highly subjective and cannot be guaranteed, no matter the services provided (Di Giulio and Defila 2019). As Büchs and Koch (2019) suggest, “a change in collective meanings and understandings of wellbeing and needs can play an important role for ‘decoupling’ current dynamics between growth and wellbeing” (p. 156).

In a world of constrained resources, limits on consumption are necessary for allowing all people to actualize their needs. Yet the question of how to achieve sufficiency in more affluent countries is a particularly tricky one. The literature suggests that affluent societies are faced with a trilemma (or triple dilemma): achieving high levels of life expectancy (as a proxy for wellbeing) with high income per capita (or affluence) does not seem to be possible without high carbon emissions (Steinberger et al 2012). Similarly, the work around Donut Economics (Raworth 2017) has demonstrated that no country in the world has yet achieved the provision of a social foundation (as another proxy for wellbeing) without trespassing planetary boundaries. While affluent countries account for most of the world’s emissions, others bear the consequences, hindering the possibility of their population to reach their most basic needs. In that context, consumption levels and related emissions in affluent countries must be challenged for everyone to be able to have access to needs satisfaction. This study considers the case of Switzerland as an opportunity to discuss sufficiency in affluent countries. How affluent countries might plan for sufficiency is a central question, as it is assumed that absolute reductions in consumption would still need to deliver high levels of human wellbeing. This leads to a central question: can people living in affluent countries reduce their environmental impact, while still maintaining a good life?

In this paper, I engage with people who are ‘living degrowth’ in Switzerland and have voluntarily reduced their levels of consumption. ‘Degrowth’ is intended to operate as a ‘missile concept’ that questions the hegemony of economic growth as a desirable end goal (Jackson 2017, 162). In practice, ‘living degrowth’ relates to people reducing their work time, switching to vegetarian diets, or renouncing air travel, among other changes which are significant when it comes to reducing fossil-fuel usage and

related emissions. Yet there is some skepticism as to whether living degrowth can lead to human need satisfaction (Koch et al 2017). The main goal of this paper is to explore whether and how people engaging in degrowth related practices achieve sufficiency, understood as reduced consumption while meeting basic needs, and under what conditions. As voluntary measures may not be enough given the urgency of carbon emissions reductions, I also consider how insights from this study could help support plans to organize for sufficiency at a societal level.

The next section discusses how wellbeing is understood in this paper, in relation to sufficiency and social practices. Section 3 describes the material and methods of the study. Section 4 presents the results on whether people living degrowth can achieve wellbeing, as well as how the practices they engage in must be organized at a societal level towards the normative aim of sufficiency. Section 5 discusses how sufficiency can be further planned for, and the conclusions provide a summary of the key findings and suggestions for further research.

## **2. Conceptual framework: where human needs meet social practices**

This study explores whether people living degrowth are meeting human needs, and what voluntary efforts might suggest for more collective planning and change. This is relevant in relation to previous work showing that voluntary simplicity - or minimalism - is positively related to wellbeing (e.g., Hook et al. 2023). Downshifting is usually addressed in relation to a broad consideration of wellbeing, but less is told about its link to needs satisfaction. In discussing ‘living degrowth’ in relation to sufficiency, two main concepts will be elaborated on in this section: human needs, as an approach to wellbeing, and social practices, as an approach to everyday life. The first has to do with the normative aim being studied: does living degrowth allow for a certain form of wellbeing? The second has to do with understanding how needs are satisfied, understood as playing out through social practices and their socio-material configurations. Further, the concept of practices-as-satisfiers allows to make a link between what people do (practices) and how these doings achieve a normative aim (needs satisfaction).

### ***2.1 Understanding wellbeing: a human needs approach***

In understanding wellbeing, two schools of thoughts exist. The hedonic approaches, based on Epicure’s philosophy around pleasure-seeking, see wellbeing as preference and desire fulfilment, based on potentially infinite and insatiable individual wants (Guillen-Royo and Wilhite 2015). In opposition, Aristotelian eudaimonic approaches consider human wellbeing as the possibility for humans to flourish and reach their highest potential in society (Brand-Correa and Steinberger 2017). This approach provides the “underpinning to a basic social minimum that should be guaranteed by constitutional right” (Lamb and Steinberger 2017, 3), thus informing debates around how to organize society for transitions. Different theories based on this approach consider the understanding of needs and their satisfaction (e.g. Doyal and Gough 1991; Max-Neef et al. 1991; Di Giulio and Defila 2019). Needs are distinguished from the ways in which they are satisfied, including “forms of organization, political structures, social practices, subjective conditions, values and norms, spaces, contexts, modes, types of behavior and attitudes” (Max-Neef 1991, 24). While needs are universal, the means to satisfy them are “culturally, socially and temporally flexible” (Brand-Correa and Steinberger 2017, 46), differing between regions, groups and individuals. The means to satisfy needs are defined through the concept of satisfiers (Max Neef et al. 1991). Within the needs’ framework, Max-Neef (1991) proposes a matrix of nine needs (*subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, idleness, creation, identity, and freedom*), related to four different ways in which the needs can be satisfied: *being* (attributes), *having*

(tools, norms), *doing* (agency) and *interacting* (social expressions in time and space). In Max-Neef's work, the needs satisfiers can be individual or collective (see Annex 1 for a simplified version of the Max-Neef matrix).

## ***2.2 Distinguishing needs from satisfiers: towards synergic satisfiers***

The concept of satisfiers is essential to understand the relationship between consumption reduction and wellbeing (Guillen-Royo 2018; Fuchs et al 2021). It allows us to explore the various means of meeting the same needs, or several needs at the same time, and to challenge what is more desirable towards needs actualization in a specific time and space. Satisfiers can have a positive or negative impact on needs actualization (Max-Neef 1991).. They can have a positive effect on one need while hindering the satisfaction of other needs (violators) or over satisfy a given need and curtailing the possibility of satisfying others (inhibiting satisfiers); they can generate a false sense of satisfaction (pseudo satisfiers); they can have a positive impact on one single need (singular satisfier) or support the actualization of several needs at the same time (synergic satisfiers). From a wellbeing perspective, it is particularly interesting to focus on *synergic satisfiers* – the satisfiers and groups of satisfiers that will have a positive effect on several needs at the same time. At a societal level, supporting synergic satisfiers would be the most effective way of meeting most needs; for example, safe bike lanes and bike riding classes in primary school could satisfy the need for *protection*, *participation*, and *freedom*, among others, for more people. The provision of a superyacht harbor, in contrast, might satisfy some needs for a select few, and be detrimental to the possibility for others to satisfy their needs.

Guillen-Royo (2018) operationalized Max-Neef's matrix of needs and Human Scale Development methodology (1991) to discuss negative satisfiers in relation to needs in participatory workshops. She describes how 'synergic bridging satisfiers' could achieve need actualization through more sustainable forms of consumption. In her study, reduced levels of consumption were seen as actualizing needs such as *subsistence*, *protection*, *understanding* or *identity*, leading to her notion of 'utopian satisfiers' that are desirable both in relation to needs actualization and more sustainable forms of consumption. Brand-Correa and colleagues (2018) also used Max-Neef's considerations of wellbeing in participatory workshops to relate energy services and human need satisfaction in Colombia. They identified structure, mechanical work, mobility and information and communication as synergic satisfiers. Other lists of needs, such as the Protected Needs by Di Giulio and Defila (2019), have been used in interview settings with people in South and Southeast Asian cities (Sahakian et al. 2020). The project explored how public spaces favor synergic need satisfaction – or how the provision of such spaces allows more people to satisfy their needs, as opposed to shopping malls.

## ***2.3 Social practices as satisfiers of needs***

How people live degrowth has to do with the social practices they engage in, in their daily lives, and how such practices tend towards reduced energy and material intensities. Social practice theory has increasingly been used to describe how people (as practitioners) do things, like getting around, or preparing a meal. For Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012, 14), practices are made of materials, "including things, technologies, tangible physical entities, and the stuff of which objects are made"; competencies, "which encompasses skill, know-how and technique"; and meanings, "in which we include symbolic meanings, ideas and aspirations". What practices are made of can differ in other interpretations of the theory (e.g. Sahakian and Wilhite 2014; Schatzki 2019). The socio-material configurations of practices refer to these combinations of elements that define how practices are performed and are reproduced or

transformed in the performance of practices (Shove et al. 2007). These configurations are crucial for needs satisfaction, as they allow people to perform practices in a specific way and influence the performance of practices towards more or less sustainable actions. Examples of these socio-material configurations include housing (e.g. availability of space) and the configurations around mobility (e.g. existing infrastructures). Although social practice theory has gained much traction in sustainable consumption studies, the theory does not assume any normative aim or goal. However, studies that link sustainability to human wellbeing have found the theory useful in explaining the choice of certain satisfiers over others (Brand-Correa and Steinberger 2017, 49). A study on social practices during the COVID-19 pandemic considered how practices were changed, renewed, or newly established, and how they served needs satisfaction, using Max-Neef's conceptual framework (Moynat et al 2022). Sahakian and Anantharaman (2020) have conceptualized how social practices allow for need satisfaction, related to how material arrangements, meanings, and competencies come together to allow people to 'practice' going to the park in a certain way, for example.

In this study, I build on Sahakian and Anantharaman (2020) in seeing practices as ways in which needs can be satisfied, or 'practices-as-satisfiers'. The most straightforward way to understand practices as satisfiers in relation to Max-Neef's conception of wellbeing is through the notion of *doing* and *interacting*, as forms of satisfiers, as these relates to what people do. However, the other forms of satisfiers are also relevant: *being* and *having* can be linked to practices, through materials, competencies, or meanings. I also build on Guillen-Royo and colleagues' (2023) study on sustainable transport in Norway, and their notion on elements such as norms, resources, and infrastructural arrangements as needs satisfiers. Such considerations allow us to move beyond individual actions to consider how what people do in everyday life can be planned for at the collective level. In this study, social practices are used for their descriptive quality to explore what 'living degrowth' looks like in Switzerland – or the interrelated practices around rethinking society (e.g. observing and reflecting), acting political (e.g. organizing), creating alternatives (e.g. doing it yourself), fostering connections (e.g. connecting with nature), and unveiling the self (e.g. enjoying the body) (Brossman and Islar 2020) - and whether such ways of living lead to needs actualization.

### 3. Methodology

This study is based on eleven in-depth interviews conducted in 2020, lasting from one and a half to two hours, among a sample of people who are voluntarily living a degrowth lifestyle in Western Switzerland. The case of Switzerland is used to illustrate the situation in affluent countries, where over-consumption is the norm, basic needs are met for most people, and public services are well-developed (to a certain extent). It allows to draw broader conclusions in relation to the opportunity for sufficiency in affluent countries, and the conditions under which this might be possible. Through purposeful sampling, people who identify with 'living degrowth' were approached through an announcement in a degrowth newspaper, which is read by members of a degrowth community – *Réseau d'objection de croissance (ROC)* (Network of growth objection). The three main criteria for selection were: people who consider themselves as 'living degrowth'; people living in the Geneva and Vaud area in Western Switzerland; and people who are (co-)responsible for their household. While the aim was not for the sample to be representative, some diversity was sought in relation to gender, age, housing type, education, income, household composition and work time (see Annex 2 for a sociodemographic matrix of the participants).

While Max-Neef's methodology on linking needs to satisfiers is based on group discussions and participatory research methods, the aim of this study was not to arrive at group consensus on how needs

satisfaction should be planned for. Rather, the aim was to understand if people ‘living degrowth’ could satisfy their needs, and whether some satisfiers would be more promising than others.

The in-depth interviews allowed for discussions on the social practices people engage in, and whether and how such practices lead to need satisfaction. The interviews were conducted through Zoom due to Covid-19 measures. Practices linked to ‘living degrowth’ were discussed around housing, transport, and food, which are the domains that exert the highest greenhouse gas emissions among Swiss households. Other domains, such as work and leisure, were also brought up by the participants. Some of the ‘degrowth’ practices that the participants engaged in reflected what can be found in the previous literature, such as reducing private transport and increasing public transport (Ivanova et al. 2020), downsizing the home and co-housing (Ivanova et al. 2020) and reducing or avoiding meat consumption (Ernststoff et al. 2020).

As it was essential to discuss the links between ‘living degrowth’ and needs satisfaction, a simplified matrix of human needs (as the one presented in Annex 1) was sent to people in advance with a short explanation around the differences between desires and needs, and the distinction between needs and the means of satisfying them. This was done to provide a common language for discussing wellbeing, and the researcher fully assumes this normative posture: leaving open the question of what wellbeing is could have resulted in lengthy discussions around happiness, life satisfaction or other hedonic approaches, while the focus of the interview was on exploring if and how people satisfy their needs.

The interviews were divided in three sections. The first section focused on how people came to live degrowth in relation to the different consumption domains, and its challenges and opportunities. The second section focused on how ‘living degrowth’ allowed the participants to meet their needs or not. The Max-Neef matrix sent to the participants was discussed, one need after the other, in relation to their practices. Participants were asked to describe what practices satisfy (or not) which need. They were then asked to discuss what helps or hinders needs satisfaction in their everyday life. The third section focused on how the participants imagined the future in relation to degrowth. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed, then analysed and coded using NVivo software. The coding was first inductive, allowing to gather a broad idea of the discussions and the main inputs. It then followed the interview guide in a more deductive manner. Final nodes were created around degrowth in general, degrowth practices, and needs satisfaction. Nodes related to degrowth in general included the stories participants told about their own experiences, and the limits of degrowth. Nodes related to practices included discussions on practices as well as elements of practices. Nodes around needs included nodes on each human need (Max Neef 1991) and specific inhibiting or synergic satisfiers. The respondents have been anonymized. The analysis allowed to construct two degrowth matrixes of wellbeing, a first one describing degrowth practices that satisfy needs, and a second one based on the first one describing socio-technical configurations of practices that help needs satisfaction (see results section).

#### **4. Results: needs actualization, organized at the collective level**

‘Living degrowth’ can take different forms and includes a myriad of practices. In this section, I first address how participants discussed needs (un)satisfaction in relation to their practices, bringing the concept of synergic practices (4.1). Then, I explore how such synergic practices could be best supported towards reduced consumption, allowing more needs satisfaction for more people, through configurations of practices – or the elements that shape practices and allow for their performance - and collective forms

of organization as synergic satisfiers (4.2). I end the section by focusing in on two synergic satisfiers and how they could be organized collectively (4.3).

#### **4.1 Degrowth as a form of (non) needs actualization**

The participants were able to distinguish needs from satisfiers, thanks to the research design and the explanatory note that was provided in advance. The link was made to the opportunity for flourishing, that is possible in specific situations, where consuming less while ensuring needs satisfaction is achievable:

*“Needs are satisfied in the same way [with less consumption], because if we try to focus on needs and not necessarily desires, we can drastically reduce many things, without affecting the satisfaction of needs at all” (Valentin, lives in the countryside in a detached house)*

Practices and the elements that allow them to be performed are crucial when it comes to needs satisfaction coupled with reductions in consumption levels. Different ways of doing things can represent different levels of energy demand. This poses the question of what degrowth practices towards need satisfaction would look like.

Based on Max-Neef’s matrix of needs, a needs matrix of degrowth was created (presented in Annex 3) based on the data that emerged from the interviews, showing what needs were discussed as satisfied through living degrowth. As much as possible, the satisfiers are described as practices. Following Jackson and Marks’ (1999, 436) argument that “there may be more and less materially intensive ways of providing foods, clothing and shelter”, the matrix shows how the participants’ daily practices revolve around consuming fewer material goods and focusing on less intensive ways of providing for goods. The matrix exposes several satisfiers to consider in relation to ‘living degrowth’ to actualize needs. Some can be considered as synergic satisfiers as they satisfy various needs at the same time, while also reducing negative environmental impacts. The synergic practices presented in the matrix are developed below.

The notion of minimalism related to the performance of everyday practices was common to all participants in relation to needs satisfaction. In relation to *subsistence* and *protection*, minimalism – mostly understood as minimal financial resources - was a way for people to live a simpler life. Spending less money allows one to feel that they could subsist in society and feel protected. ‘Living degrowth’ related to living with less also allows for the actualization of the need for *freedom*, allowing people to walk away from material attachment, as stated by Sam, who works part time:

*“I know from experience that the more objects we have, the more stressed we are (...) the more we are dependent. I need freedom more than anything else in my life, and material attachment sometimes is a toxic attachment.”*

Using public transport and slow forms of mobility, such as biking or walking, were also discussed as satisfiers for various needs. In relation to *subsistence* and *protection*, biking is a practice participants cherish for going to work and food provisioning. This relates to housing and the corresponding practices (such as sharing a home, heating the home, gardening, etc.), whereby most of the participant said they have the opportunity to live in the city and are therefore able to go food shopping by bike or walking, whereas people living in the countryside may be more car dependent. Biking was also related to the need for *idleness*, as a mean for having fun and enjoying unpaid leisure, or for occasional local trips and

vacation. Participants also emphasized the perks of biking when discussing the need for *freedom*, as it allows time for mental reflection and relaxation.

The practice of being in nature (Brossman and Islar 2020) was discussed by the participants as helping them to actualize several needs, such as *subsistence* and *protection*. As one of the participants emphasized, gathering food from nature is an alternative to being dependent on shops. Experiences in nature allow to actualize the need for *affection*, as people create a relationship with their close environment. Nature was thought as a relevant space for unpaid leisure, such as gardening in one's outdoor spaces, or in shared gardens, or allowing for walks and hikes. Going out in nature was also linked to the need for *freedom*.

Participants also put forward the idea of experimenting and doing things by oneself to satisfy needs, through the performance of diverse everyday activities. In relation to the practice of cooking for example, the needs for *subsistence* and *protection* were satisfied, in that people had experimented with ways of buying less and subsisting with less in different situations. Experimenting was also related to identity, as a way to create things by and for oneself that make sense, such as doing handiwork in the home or home-cooking. It was also related to *freedom* as it allows to create alternatives for 'living degrowth' following one's aspirations.

Although most participants' needs were satisfied by their everyday practices, some nuances were addressed in relation to the sustainability of practices and needs satisfaction. Needs unsatisfaction was also discussed, mostly in relation to how things are organized and understood in society - regarding infrastructures or norms and meanings mostly related to consumption in affluent societies:

*We're so tempted every day to try and fit into this over-consuming lifestyle, so it's more a question of resisting temptation, that's the hardest part, I'd say. (Gaspard, lives in the city center, self-employed working part time)*

Linked to how things are understood and organized in society for people to perform specific practices, participants discussed the fact that some needs – specifically related to socialization such as *affection* or *identity* – were hard to satisfy.

*Everything that relates to social needs is more difficult...I think it's much easier for someone who has a busy consumer life to develop socially... (Ethan, lives in the suburb, employed part time)*

These discussions around needs unsatisfaction expose that practices that are not yet broadly developed (such as engaging in consumption reduction in everyday life) are likely to marginalize or isolate people performing them. This might be the consequence of the status quo and the collective organization of practices that doesn't allow for niche practices to diffuse. It poses the question of what is needed for sufficiency - or consumption reduction with needs satisfaction – to be possible.

#### ***4.2 Practices elements for needs satisfaction, organized collectively***

As can be seen above, 'living degrowth' was not always easy. All participants discussed that degrowth should be organized collectively, at the societal level. Different ideas were addressed for synergic needs satisfaction, such as bike lanes available for safe transit, workshops organized for learning new repair

skills, or the availability of products in local shops. The diverse situations of the participants and their (lack of) access to certain resources (e.g. outdoor space, nature, specific skills) highlighted the need for practice configurations that would allow need satisfaction with less energy consumption. Infrastructures, objects, and services are crucial for the performances of practices to satisfy needs, and are therefore also interesting satisfiers in and of themselves, as I will now turn to.

Building on Max-Neef idea of a matrix to go from negative to positive satisfiers, a second matrix was created based on the analysis that proposes one answer to the question of how to allow for the development of synergic practices (see Annex 4). Based on the discussions with the participants in relation to what helped or hindered the performance of their practices, the matrix shows the configurations of practices and changes in how things are organized that could lead to more sustainable needs satisfaction. The satisfiers arise from the interpretation of the interviews in relation to what changes should happen to reach needs satisfaction. Configurations of practices and changes are mostly related to the matrix through the notions of *being* and *having*. The synergic configurations of practices-as-satisfiers and synergic changes-as-satisfiers presented in the matrix are developed below.

When asked what would help (or stop) the participants' performances of practices, they spontaneously discussed elements of practices, such as materials, competencies, and meanings. In relation to **materiality**, participants deplored the lack of supply for local, healthy and sustainable food. Regarding mobility, the train system in Switzerland was seen as unfavourable to need satisfaction, as it is more expensive and harder to organize than flying. The bike lanes were mentioned as not developed enough to ensure security, as Thomas put it: *"If you're a cyclist in Geneva, you must not be afraid of risk"*. In relation to housing, one synergic satisfier was shared living spaces (e.g. shared guest rooms in cooperative housing). In relation to **competencies**, the importance of experimenting was mentioned, which relates to accessing new competencies – and having the time to do so. Participants learn new skills in different ways, online and offline: *"On the internet I find a lot of recipes or tips, techniques, and ideas in general"* (Lynn). Roxane lived for a few months in a transition town and acquired new skills: *"What helped me is that I took a course in organic vegetarian cooking, it helped me a lot with the new products I didn't know about"*. Competences and knowledge also come from other people, showing how social relations with family and community peers are important in shifting to more sustainable practices. Regarding **meanings and the normative dimension of practices**, being part of a community was mentioned as important for the participants to perform more sustainable practices: for Mark, who lives in cooperative housing with his wife and three teenage-children, *"What helps us is to be in a building with people who think pretty much like that [degrowth]"*. However, relationships with other people were argued to be a threat to the life balance of some respondents, in specific situations, as Valentin explained: *"Difficulties? mainly social! We are very quickly considered as marginal"*. This goes back to the idea that the way things are understood in relation to norms in the status quo can lead to isolation and needs unsatisfaction. This is prominent in an affluent country where over-consumption is the norm and mainstream practices are organized around it.

Taking into account the configurations of practices and how things are organized at the collective level allows to consider how to support the existence of crucial synergic satisfiers that participate to the double aim of reducing energy consumption and satisfying wellbeing for all. Two examples of how things are organized that were discussed in the interviews as forms of sustainable needs satisfaction – or sufficiency - are zoomed on and detailed below.

### ***4.3 Highlighting time sovereignty and community living as strong collective synergic satisfiers***

In this section, I build on the work of Guillen-Royo (2018) and her notion of *utopian satisfiers* which have the potential of achieving a sustainable wellbeing dividend: time sovereignty and community living. The opportunity to have more free time – for example through work time reduction - gives more time to people for activities that are normatively considered as more sustainable. This can relate to provisioning for food, cooking healthy meals or slow forms of mobility, among others. The opportunity to be part of a community and enjoy community living is especially interesting towards sustainable wellbeing as it supposes overall energy savings as well as more sustainable collective practices. These utopian satisfiers emerged as overarching themes in the study, as I will now turn to.

The opportunity to have more free time was discussed by the participants as satisfying needs in and of itself and as an element that allows for the performance of practices that are also needs satisfiers. Most of them discussed reduced working time as the most important experience in their life in relation to needs satisfaction. Having more time is essential for people ‘living degrowth’, having two implications in relation to needs satisfaction: it offers spaces for thinking and reflection, and for performing various activities valuable for oneself. In relation to reflexivity, having more time relates to the need for *freedom*, allowing people to enjoy the little things, and avoid pressure and societal expectations. It can be related to the need for *understanding*, allowing to think, discover, and understand, as Mark puts it: “*I think one of the first things that counts is to have some free time (...) it must be something that slows people down a lot, to think for themselves, to be curious*”. It also relates to the need for *identity*, as having more time allows one to eliminate distractions and have more opportunities to face oneself. In a more practical sense, having more time allows people to do things that are useful to them and that they value. It can be related to *subsistence*, giving more time to plan and prepare food for example. It allows people to experience their passions and do things that matter to them, which can be related to the need for *affection*, but also *creation* and *participation*. In relation to leisure and trips, Lynn, self-employed, stated “*What helps me is that I have enough time (...) to travel slowly, and also the flexibility in my work to have time to make quiet trips*”.

The opportunity to be part of a community was another element discussed by the participants, along with the different practices related to it. Being part of a community was understood in two ways: in relation to a community of values, whereby people share common values and aspirations; or partaking in a community of practices (Wenger 2000), where in a more practical sense people share spaces and appliances. Being part of the degrowth community allowed people to join with others who question the growth-oriented system, and who live and think in similar ways, thus allowing them to develop strong relationships, as stated by Lynn, an active member of the community:

*What I really like about the ROC is that I find that there’s a lot of love between people, a lot of kindness, they’re very nice people and I really like the social aspect of it.*

Being part of a community offers the possibility for exchanging knowledge and learning (Brossmann et Islar 2020) as well as discovering new information (Wenger 2000), in relation to the need for *understanding*. Participants argued that it develops curiosity and allows for new experimentations. With regards to *participation*, a community such as the ROC offers a space for questioning and debating. In relation to *identity*, being involved in a community allows to share one’s values, perceptions, and beliefs

and to bring a sense of belonging, as shared by most of the participants. Beyond supporting the realization of personal identity, it helps to conceive a common identity. As an example of a community of practices, living in a cooperative, and the practices it entails were discussed by participants as satisfying several needs. It was addressed in relation to *subsistence*, as it offers accommodations at affordable rates, or *protection*, which is also actualized by the fact that people create trusted relationships with neighbours, illustrated by Mark:

*We are among those who almost never lock the door, except at night (...) I think we benefit from an exceptional personal situation of benevolence with the neighbours.*

This also links to the need for *affection*, as sharing spaces and appliances allow people to meet and create relationships, as they encounter on a regular basis to debate about alternatives and make decisions. With regards to the need for *understanding*, cooperative living opens to discussions and a deeper *understanding* of situations and of oneself. Cooperative living was also discussed in relation to the need for *leisure*, as it offers various opportunities to share time with people and enjoy activities in shared spaces (e.g. shared garden). People discussed a sense of *freedom* related to living in cooperatives, for many of the reasons already mentioned – affordable costs or spaces for exchanging, and for leisure.

To conclude on this section, both time availability and the possibility of engaging in a community (together with other synergic satisfiers) are interesting in relation to needs satisfaction and must therefore be planned for at the collective level. They involve infrastructures, rules, norms and competencies, configuring the practices that can then be performed by people. Yet there is no guarantee that more free time will necessarily lead to more sustainable ways of living: this study only concerns people who have decided to ‘live degrowth’ and find themselves in a situation of planned sufficiency. This might not work for everyone and must be considered in relation to the context specific nature of satisfiers. However, more time can help people to have “space for intellectual, political and practical work.” (Brossmann et Islar 2020, 926), if collective support for working less exists for example. There is also no claim that community living is always more sustainable, and it requires collective support as well, for example in the form of cooperative and eco-neighborhood design. It is the case for newer cooperative buildings in Switzerland, where energy efficiency, renewable energies, slow forms of mobility, and local and sustainable food provisioning are built into the design.

## **5. Discussion: living degrowth as planned sufficiency for the good life**

I now turn to the central question of this study: how sufficiency can be planned for collectively to satisfy needs. I also discuss how the notion of sufficiency could be further operationalized, based on my study.

### ***5.1 Degrowth as planned sufficiency towards needs actualization***

When considering consumption reduction in relation to needs satisfaction, the study follows other research arguing for the positive impact of downshifting on wellbeing (Hooks et al. 2023). Interesting alternatives were discussed towards reduced consumption and needs satisfaction – or sufficiency. However, this depends on how practices are configured so that people have access to more sustainable alternatives that satisfy their needs. In that regard, one can ask if it is even possible to live sustainably while satisfying needs in Switzerland, representing an example of affluent countries where life is organized around consumption. Section 4.2 shows crucial configurations of practices and the

development of synergic practices challenging the status quo. This is crucial for sufficiency, in relation to norms, but also to infrastructures and competences, in order for consumption reduction to not hinder the possibility of needs satisfaction. This approach seems relevant for imagining changes towards more sustainable practices and synergic satisfiers at the society level. It follows the idea that “we need to start from the account of wellbeing, and ask what the relevant inputs are that are needed to reach high levels of wellbeing” (Robeyns 2021, 75).

Section 4.3 presented two examples in relation to how things are organized towards supporting sufficiency, following research on the synergic nature of free time and community (Guillen-Royo 2018). As an example, supporting the development of cooperative living can be considered as a synergic satisfier in itself. Indeed, it allows specific configurations of practices – access to affordable living, access to private and shared areas and appliances, access to outdoor facilities, among other things. In turn, those configurations support the performance of practices satisfying several needs at the same time (*subsistence, protection, affection, participation, identity, freedom*) – such as living in a cooperative housing, sharing time with neighbours, and participating in growing vegetables in the shared garden. The consideration of collective measures towards supporting synergic practices allows to address the question of how to plan for sufficiency in the future. Relying on Max-Neef’s process of transforming negative satisfiers into positive ones, it seems relevant to study examples of synergic satisfiers and how they can be enhanced. In relation to housing, it could be about going from most of the population living alone in large apartments, towards developing cooperative living with smaller apartments and shared spaces; but this requires strong efforts for affordable and desirable living arrangements. In relation to having more free time, an example could be shifting from working 5 days a week, towards working less, having more time for performing more sustainable practices and giving some time to the community. However, Sahakian and Rossier (2022) have found that work-time reduction is highly gendered in Western Switzerland. Changes in norms and institutions is thus necessary. Such measures can be considered as synergic satisfiers in themselves, as they allow different practices to be performed under specific configurations. This follows the idea of considering how modal shifts in need satisfiers (e.g. from large private appartements to cooperatives) and their provision (e.g. from the construction of large apartments to supporting shared eco-neighbourhoods) “could provide the same level of need satisfaction with much lower energy use” (Vogel et al. 2021, 13).

In relation to the situated nature of satisfiers, the results presented here are not to be considered for situations where people struggle to satisfy their most basic needs. The consideration of tradeoffs between different practices is also crucial: growing food or cooking homemade meals everyday might not function well for someone that works full time, or getting around by bike to go to work might not work for someone who decided to live in a cooperative away from the city. This also relates to inequalities, as some practices can have negative environmental consequences and negative effect on wellbeing, depending on the configurations and the support available for accessing resources to perform those practices.

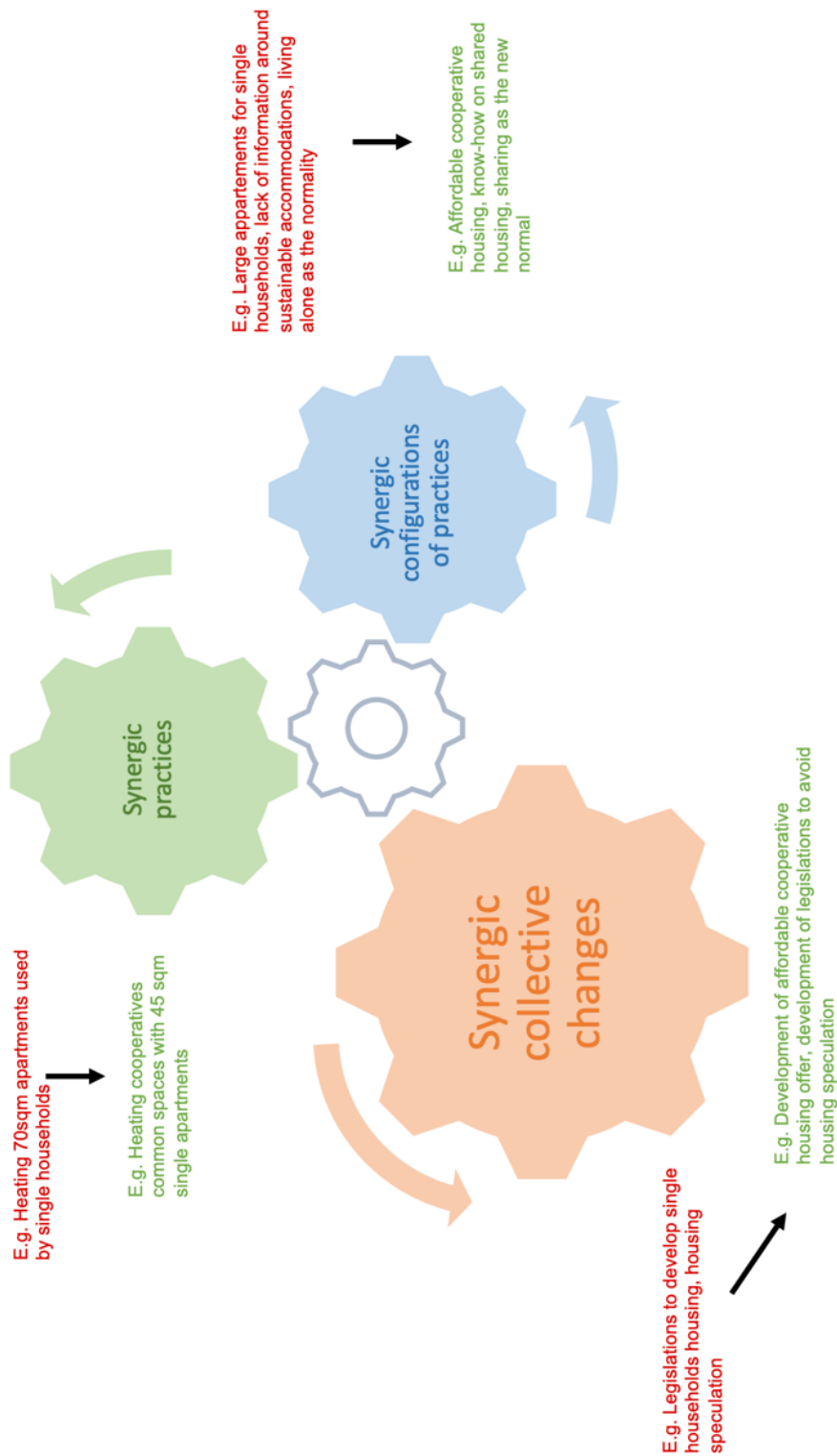
## ***5.2 Towards the operationalization of sufficiency***

Discussing the transition through social practices and wellbeing as entry points allows for the development of an exploration of sufficiency that goes beyond the individualization of consumption and techno-centrism, considering sufficiency as the main aim. How to meet needs with relevant satisfiers that can be planned for at the collective level becomes essential. To support a disruption in practices, and therefore shift the satisfiers, a focus on the changes needed at the collective level is important, namely how society gets organized for those alternative satisfiers to exist.

Based on specific examples presented in the research, Figure 1 describes a ‘constellation of synergic satisfiers’ (Guillen-Royo 2020). The figure shows how synergic practices, configurations of practices and collective changes should be enhanced towards sustainable needs satisfaction. The figure describes the importance of moving from inhibiting satisfiers, which hinder the possibility of needs satisfaction, towards synergic satisfiers that allow for the satisfaction of several needs at the same time.

Synergic collective changes are described as crucial for replacing inhibiting changes to organize towards sufficiency. Those changes could allow synergic configurations of practices – or elements that people have access to in their everyday life that influence and shape their practices. For example, instead of building large apartments for single households, better access to affordable cooperative housing should be provided. This, in turn, shapes how everyday practices such as heating are performed. Synergic practices can then shape consumption and how change is imagined, in a virtuous circle towards sufficiency in everyday life.

Figure 1 can be useful for imagining a shift towards synergic practices for sufficiency. It considers specific and context dependent satisfiers and what alternatives can be imagined to meet needs. It brings inputs at the policy level, or how sufficiency could be put into practice. However, this contribution is limited to the location studied, and the figure must be understood in relation to the specific context of an affluent country. This leads to the crucial consideration that sufficiency cannot be addressed in the same way in countries where most basic needs are not met and where public services might not be developed as much. This contribution is also limited in relation to the practices discussed, and other practices and ways of life that could inform consumption reduction and wellbeing in the future are also crucial to consider.



**Figure 4.1: Imagining synergic practices, configurations and changes taking the example of housing**

Alt text for figure: The figure describes a gear where synergic collective changes replace inhibiting changes and influence synergic configurations of practices as opposed to inhibiting configurations of practices, that then shape synergic practices as opposed to inhibiting practices.

## **6. Conclusion: organizing society towards the good life through a collective but practical approach to sufficiency**

This study looked at how people voluntarily live degrowth in everyday life in Switzerland, in relation to needs satisfaction. The contribution reflects on how everyday practices should be organized collectively in affluent countries to allow for consumption reduction and needs satisfaction – or sufficiency - for more people. Living degrowth in Switzerland while meeting needs is facilitated when living in a city that provides the necessary practices configurations to do so. It is thus important to consider how cities or neighbourhoods can plan for sufficiency by providing specific configurations of practices - by creating bike lanes or cooperative housing, for example. However, while the Swiss public infrastructures have been much developed in the past years (e.g. extension of bike lanes), it is still not affordable for everyone to change practices (e.g. trains are still very expensive). Through the case study, the contribution highlights the importance of the collective dimension of change towards sustainable wellbeing. It addresses sufficiency at the collective level and how to organize society towards it, through an exploration of sufficiency in relation to ‘synergic collective changes’. A proposition is detailed around how synergic practices, synergic configurations of practices and synergic collective changes should be enhanced for building the ground for sufficiency. Further research would be relevant to understand how the operationalization of consumption in relation to needs could be expanded to other situations of *planned sufficiency* and to other regions that represent different living situations.

**Ethical approval**

The research protocol adheres to the ethical requirements of the Canton of Geneva.

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**Conflict of interest**

The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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## Appendices

### 1. Simplified Max-Neef's matrix shared with the participants

*The simplified matrix was shared in French but is presented in English below.*

Needs according to axiological categories	Needs according to existential categories	BEING (B) (personal or collective attributes)	HAVING (H) (institutions, norms, tools)	DOING (D) (personal or collective actions)	INTERACTING (I) (spaces or atmospheres)
<b>Subsistence</b>		<sup>1</sup> Physical health, mental health, adaptability	<sup>2</sup> Food, shelter, work	<sup>3</sup> Feed, procreate, rest, work	<sup>4</sup> Living environment, Social setting
<b>Protection</b>		<sup>5</sup> Care, adaptability, autonomy, solidarity	<sup>6</sup> Savings, family, work	<sup>7</sup> Cooperate, take care of, help	<sup>8</sup> Living space, social environment, dwelling
<b>Affection</b>		<sup>9</sup> Self-esteem, solidarity, respect, tolerance, generosity, passion, determination	<sup>10</sup> Friendships, family, partnerships, relationship with nature	<sup>11</sup> Express emotions, share, take care of, cultivate, appreciate	<sup>12</sup> Home, space of togetherness
<b>Understanding</b>		<sup>13</sup> Critical conscience, curiosity, discipline, rationality	<sup>14</sup>	<sup>15</sup> Experiment	<sup>16</sup> Setting of formative interaction, groups, communities
<b>Participation</b>		<sup>17</sup> Adaptability, solidarity, dedication, respect, passion	<sup>18</sup> Rights, responsibilities, duties, privileges, work	<sup>19</sup> Become affiliated, cooperate, propose, share, dissent (contestation), express opinions	<sup>20</sup> settings of participative interaction, parties, associations, communities, neighbourhoods, family
<b>Leisure/Idleness</b>		<sup>21</sup> Curiosity, imagination, recklessness, tranquillity	<sup>22</sup> Parties, games, spectacles, clubs, peace of mind	<sup>23</sup> Give way to fantasies, have fun, play, remember, relax	<sup>24</sup> Free time, privacy, intimacy, spaces of closeness, surroundings, landscapes
<b>Creation</b>		<sup>25</sup> Passion, determination, imagination, boldness (audace), rationality, autonomy	<sup>26</sup> Work, abilities, skills	<sup>27</sup> Work, build, invent, design, compose, interpret	<sup>28</sup> Cultural groups, spaces for expression, workshops, temporal freedom
<b>Identity</b>		<sup>29</sup> Sense of belonging, self-esteem, consistency, differentiation, assertiveness (affirmation de soi),	<sup>30</sup> Habits, reference groups, , values, norms*, work	<sup>31</sup> Commit oneself, integrate oneself, confront, decide on, get to know oneself, recognize oneself, actualize oneself, grow	<sup>32</sup> Social rhythms, everyday settings, settings which one belongs to, maturation stages
<b>Freedom</b>		<sup>33</sup> Autonomy, self-esteem, determination, passion, assertiveness, open-mindedness, boldness, rebelliousness, tolerance	<sup>34</sup> Equal rights	<sup>35</sup> Be different from, dissent, choose, develop awareness, commit oneself, disobey	<sup>36</sup> Temporal/spatial plasticity

## 2. Participants' matrix

Pseudo	Mark	Lynn	Ethan	Charles	Thomas	Roxane	Valentin	Sam	Gaspard	Michelle	Barbara
<b>Date of interview (2020)</b>	21.04	22.04	23.04	23.04	27.04	27.04	28.04	28.04	04.05	07.05	08.05
<b>Profile of respondent</b>											
Age of respondent	53	35	45	38	30	45	32	50	40	42	40
Gender of respondent	M	F	M	M	M	F	M	M	M	F	F
<b>Place of residence</b>											
Genève	City		Suburb	City		Countryside	Countryside		City	City	
Vaud area		City			Countryside			City			City
<b>Years in residence</b>											
Short (less than 1 year)						x					
Medium (1-5 years)											
Long (over 5 years)	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x
<b>Housing type</b>											
Single-detached house		x	x		x	x	x	x			
Flat/Mansionnette/Appartment									x	x	x
Cooperative housing	x			x							
<b>Access to outdoor spaces</b>											
Private garden		x	x		x	x	x	x			
Shared community space	x										
Terrace/Balcony				x							x
<b>Owner/tenant</b>	NA			NA							
Owner			x		x		x	x		x	
Tenant		x				x			x		x
<b>Laundry</b>									?		
Laundry in building	x			x							
Laundry in home		x	x		x	x	x	x			x
<b>Household income per year (CHF)</b>											
Lower (0 - 48,000)		24'000	55'000	34'000	x	x				x	
Middle (49,000- 96,000)									50'000		
Upper (above 96,000)	100'000						150'000	x			200'000
<b>HH size</b>											
Household members	5	4	5	1	3	1	2	2	1	1	4
<b>Education of respondent</b>											
Post-graduate degree	x	x	x	x	x					x	x
Undergraduate degree						x		x	x		
Vocational training							x				
HS degree and below											
<b>Occupation</b>											
Activity rate	10-80%	50%	70%	50%	0% (student)	30%	80%	40-50%	50-120%	80%	80-100%

## 3. A degrowth matrix of wellbeing

Axiological needs	Existential needs	BEING	HAVING	DOING	INTERACTING
Subsistence		1	2	3 Balancing between work and personal life, Working part time, Food provisioning from local productions, Composting, Feeding oneself in nature, Cooking, Baking bread at home, Buying in bulk, Wild harvesting, Renovating accommodation, Self-producing, Joint production, Biking	4 Living in a co-operative, Living in the countryside, Flat sharing, Gardening, Growing vegetables in permaculture

<b>Protection</b>	5	6	7 Feeding oneself in nature, Spending little money in relation to everyday consumption practices, Depending less on savings in relation to everyday life	8 Living in a village, Enjoying interdependence with others in the performance of practices
<b>Affection</b>	9	10	11 Benevolence activity, Working in associations, Debating, Going to the library, Experiencing in nature, Sharing/exchanging, Exchanging skills (interdependence), Exchanging skills (interdependence), Getting help/advice (specific skills)	12 Benevolence activity with neighbours, Sharing an apartment, Being part of a community (ROC)
<b>Understanding</b>	13	14	15 Experimenting, Exchanging (including skills), Learning skills (including in relation to do it yourself), (Re)discovering , Self-training , Questioning oneself in relation to everyday consumption , Exchanging (including skills), Learning skills (including in relation to do it yourself)	16 Discussing with friends, Creating relationships in cooperative
<b>Participation</b>	17	18	19 Experimenting and changing in relation to the performance of practices, Working (having a job), Volunteering, Creating alternatives, Bringing people together, Debating	20 Live in a cooperative
<b>Leisure/Idleness</b>	21	22	23 Reducing work time, Working on the house (handiwork), Gardening, Cooking, Other unpaid	24 Living in a cooperative housing, Enjoying free time with others

			leisure activities, Going out in nature, Biking, Reading, Doing-it-yourself	
<b>Creation</b>	25	26	27 Transmitting, Making clothes, Cooking, Self-producing	28 Spending time with others, Sharing activities with others
<b>Identity</b>	29	30	31 Creating things that are in line with one's values	32 Enjoying relationships with others, Being part of a community, Interacting with degrowth community members
<b>Freedom</b>	33	34	35 Making choices in relation to everyday activities, Spending less money in relation to everyday consumption, Working less, Creating alternatives, Enjoying nature, Biking	36 Living in a cooperative housing

Source: *Moynat, 2024*

#### 4. A matrix of degrowth for the development of practices-as-satisfiers towards synergic needs satisfaction

Needs according to axiological categories	Needs according to existential categories	BEING (B) (personal or collective attributes)	HAVING (H) (institutions, norms, tools)	DOING (D) (personal or collective actions)	INTERACTING (I) (spaces or atmospheres)
<b>Subsistence</b>	1 Support priority to immaterial means, minimalism, Support vegetarian diet principle / norm in relation to the performance of food practices	2 <b>Access to part time work, More free time</b> , Development in minimum ensured by country , Access to short food supply chains, More offer of organic and local markets, farm/producer, Development of cooking skills	3 Better balance between work and personal life, <b>Access to part time work</b> , More offer to provision from local production, More offer to buying in bulk, Opportunities to pay a fair price for products	4 <b>Develop access to cooperative, Develop access shared garden</b> , Give access to the possibility to grow vegetables (e.g., vegetable paths in permaculture)	

<b>Protection</b>	5 <b>Opportunity to live with less money, therefore working less</b> , Allow minimalism in the performance of practices , Free people from material attachment in relation to consumption	6 Develop access to property ownership, Drive people away from the need to save money at all cost, Development in minimum ensured by country , Develop know-hows (including in relation to our link to nature, e.g., plants knowledge), Development of alternative banks, Opportunities to acquire life management skills	7 More opportunities to feed oneself in nature, Opportunities to spend little money in relation to everyday consumption, Opportunities to depend less on savings in relation to everyday life (e.g., better minimum ensured in relation to insurance)	8 Support interdependence between people, <b>Support the development of village living (vs urban development)</b>
<b>Affection</b>	9 Support radical ecological positions in relation to the performance everyday practices, Support respect to the environment and the people in relation to the performance of everyday practices , Foster solidarity between people; attention to the wellbeing to others in everyday actions, Foster benevolence, Support self-love	10 Support relationships with other in relation to the performance of everyday life activities, <b>Opportunity to have more free time (including for relations with family or close friends)</b> , Foster relationships between customers and local merchants, Support the development of social skills (e.g., offering local spaces for discussion)	11 Support benevolence activities and work in associations, Support discussions and debate , <b>Support exchange skills (interdependence)</b> , Opportunities to experience in nature, <b>Opportunities to access relevant public spaces (e.g., library)</b>	12 <b>Access to shared spaces – apartment, indoor and outdoor areas (including in cooperative, but not only)</b> , <b>Support conviviality</b> , <b>Develop access to outdoor space</b> , <b>Foster access to communities of shared values and goals</b>
<b>Understanding</b>	13 Support critical thinking in relation to one’s perception of things, Support questioning around lifestyles , Support experimental logic in relation to everyday activities	14 <b>Support access to more free time</b> , Support skills development	15 Support experimenting things, Access to (re)discovering things , Opportunities for self-training , <b>Support exchanging and sharing (including skills)</b> , Support the development of learning skills (including in relation to do it yourself)	16 <b>Develop spaces for exchanging skills</b> , <b>Access to sharing with friends (or strangers)</b> , <b>Foster relationships in cooperative</b>
<b>Participation</b>	17 Supporting the degrowth movement (including values/meanings) in relation to people’s everyday actions ,	18 <b>More free time</b> , Development of critical skills	19 Support transitions (changing oneself), <b>Support working (including alternative ways of working)</b> , Support volunteering,	20 <b>Support cooperative living</b> , Support people’s opinions and freedom of speech, Development of the green political party

	Opportunities to feel listened to		Support the creation of alternatives (in various domains), <b>Bring people together</b> , Support debating	
<b>Leisure/Idleness</b>	21 Supporting the principle of getting back to basics in relation to the performance of practices	22 <b>Support access to association activities, Support access to the forest, Support part-time work opportunities , More free time,</b> Support the development of do-it-yourself competences	23 <b>Opportunities for reducing work time,</b> More working on the house (including gardening, handiwork), Supporting doing-it-yourself, More leisure activities (including cooking, and other unpaid leisure activities), <b>Supporting access to nature; going out in nature,</b> Biking opportunities , Reading opportunities	24 <b>Support living in a cooperative housing, Opportunities to enjoy free time with others</b>
<b>Creation</b>	25 Foster and support critical thinking, Support resourcefulness, <b>Opportunities to live with little (or with less)</b>	26 <b>More free time,</b> Foster critical abilities, Support the development of do-it-yourself competences, Self-imposed constraints	27 Foster transition, Develop skills for making (e.g., clothes), Support the development cooking skills , Support self-production	28 <b>Opportunities for spending time with others, Opportunities for sharing activities with others</b>
<b>Identity</b>	29 Support for narratives around ethics, Support around self-construction, Support around self-respect	30 <b>More free time,</b> Less distractions, Support for the development of critical knowledge	31 Support following one's values in everyday life	32 <b>Support relationships with others, Opportunities for being part of a community, Support communities towards consumption reduction (e.g., ROC)</b>
<b>Freedom</b>	33 Support for minimalism, Support for rebelliousness towards better futures, Support for self-emancipation towards change	34 <b>More free time,</b> Having just a few things, Support for the development of local knowledge	35 Support for making choices in relation to everyday activities towards less consumption, Opportunities for being emancipated , <b>Opportunity for spending less money in relation to everyday consumption, Opportunities for working less,</b> Opportunities for creating alternatives, <b>Access to nature,</b> Opportunities for biking	36 <b>Development of cooperative housing</b>

Source: *Moynat, 2024*