

# Invitation

You are cordially invited to the public defense to obtain the academic degree of

**DOCTOR OF ECONOMICS**

by Damaris Castro

**Lessons in less: Paving the way for sufficiency and working-time reduction**

Supervisor:

Prof. dr. Brent Bleys

**Thursday, 29 August 2024 at 17h30**

In room 'Faculteitsraadzaal', Campus Tweeakerken, Tweeakerkenstraat 2, 9000 Ghent

Please confirm your attendance no later than 15 August via the following link:

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## Abstract

This dissertation studies approaches that question limitless economic growth and prioritize wellbeing and the environment instead, explicitly focusing on sufficiency (as a broad paradigm) and working-time reduction (as a specific initiative). Sufficiency approaches are increasingly recognized as essential complements to efficiency-driven strategies for achieving environmental sustainability. Moreover, proponents argue they have the potential to enhance wellbeing and promote global justice.

Despite the promise of sufficiency approaches in addressing various 21st-century challenges, more is needed to know about the societal level of support and the characteristics of those who advocate for or against them. This dissertation uses micro-level empirical analysis techniques to investigate support levels and explore associated characteristics in two main parts.

Starting from a general viewpoint, Part I estimates the experience of subjective sufficiency in society using an income perspective (Chapter 1) and a material perspective (Chapter 2) based on a Flemish survey. Findings in Chapter 1 show that most individuals consider their income to be sufficient, although a broad spectrum of interpretations exists as to what constitutes a sufficient income level. Findings in Chapter 2 reveal that individuals consistently experience high levels of enoughness (having enough on a material level) but considerably differ regarding aspiration (wanting more on a material level), highlighting the importance of factoring in aspiration beyond mere enoughness when assessing openness towards sufficiency practices. Moreover, findings on characteristics suggest that welfare policies and policies aimed at curbing consumerism could enhance people's experience of sufficiency.

Part II shifts focus towards a particular beyond-growth initiative, i.e. working-time reduction. First, Chapters 3 and 4 use a mixed-methods approach to investigate revealed preferences for two types of individual-level working-time reduction (part-time work and additional leave days in a flexible benefits plan) among employees in a Flemish company. Findings show pronounced support for both types, with both being more prevalent among women (Chapter 3). Furthermore, analyses of motives and planned time use indicate that choosing additional leave can enhance wellbeing (by increasing autonomy over time management and replacing work hours with individual and social leisure activities) and have modest environmental implications. This suggests that the additional leave option in a flexible benefits plan could support a wellbeing economy (Chapter 4). Second, Chapter 5 uses a factorial survey experiment to explore stated preferences for collective working-time reduction policies with pay reduction. Findings reveal that employees favour policies that minimize pay reduction, reduce working time moderately rather than extensively and establish a high degree of flexibility for taking up the additional leisure time. Additionally, policies are better evaluated if colleagues as well as close friends and family equally participate, although the latter primarily matter in company cultures that are supportive of working-time reduction.

The findings in this dissertation enhance the understanding of public support for sufficiency approaches, thereby bringing sufficiency from the margins into mainstream discourse. They provide valuable guidance for developing policy pathways designed around the notion of sufficiency and aim at fostering environmental sustainability and wellbeing.

## Curriculum vitae

Damaris Castro (°1993, Gent) holds the degree of Master of Science in Business Engineering, with a major in Operations Management (2016, Ghent University) and obtained the diploma of Academic Teacher Education in Mathematics (2017, Ghent University). Since 2018, she has been a Research and Teaching Assistant at the Department of Economics at Ghent University (Faculty of Economics and Business Administration). Her research covers topics related to ecological economics, with a focus on sufficiency and working-time reduction. The first chapter of her dissertation is published in *Ecological Economics*. Damaris presented her research at several international conferences, including the International Conference of the European Society for Ecological Economics (Manchester [virtual], 2021; Pisa, 2022), the International Degrowth Conference (Vienna [virtual], 2020; The Hague [virtual], 2021), the International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies Conference (Vermont, 2022), the International Labour Process Conference (Glasgow, 2023), the WORK Conference (Turku, 2023) and the Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics Conference (Limerick, 2024).