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RESEARCH ARTICLE

From responsibility ping-pong to shared responsibility for 1.5° lifestyles? Examining European stakeholder perspectives

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We are currently witnessing a paradox in climate governance (CG): despite growing awareness of the socio-biophysical impacts of current lifestyles, there remains a persistent commitment to high-consumption habits with large carbon footprints. Around this paradox, a debate on responsibility for change has developed. Which actor can and should do what to solve the problem? Simultaneously, however, scholars depict trends towards 'organised irresponsibility' (Beck, 1988) and individual responsibilisation bound to be ineffective in the context of existing structural challenges. The most likely result of such dynamics is a responsibility ping-pong with actors assigning responsibility to each other, which, in turn, invites the question of how it might be overcome. What other forms of talking about and organising responsibility might exist that could provide an actual basis for transformation change? Disentangling discourses around responsibility in CG, thus, is crucial for enabling a shift in consumption patterns and lifestyles that are compatible with the 1.5° Paris climate target. The present article pursues this objective. Building on a multi-method research approach, including stakeholder laboratories, expert interviews,

and Delphi workshops across several European countries, it explores to whom and how European stakeholders in CG, specifically governments, businesses and citizens, assign responsibility, what risks and opportunities are involved, and what indications of a potential for game change exist. The findings uncover a complex web of pre-empted responsibility, which frequently leads to pessimism or ineffective strategies. However, the research also identifies some opportunities for organising a shared, justice-oriented and comprehensive notion of responsibility (Young, 2006).

Keywords sustainability • responsibility • narratives • transformation • 1.5° lifestyles • stakeholders • climate governance

Key messages

- Current climate governance perpetuates 'responsibility ping-pong', which hinders meaningful progress.
- Achieving a transformative change in consumption and lifestyles requires understanding how stakeholders conceptualise and assign responsibility.
- A potential for organising shared responsibility offers opportunities for enabling transformative change.

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Introduction

There is a deep contradiction at the heart of climate governance (CG): growing scientific knowledge and public awareness of the environmental and social impacts of modern lifestyles go hand-in-hand with a strong focus on preserving and ensuring growth-based economies and high-consumption lifestyles (Wiedmann et al, 2020). The primary objective of CG involves coordinating and implementing strategies for climate mitigation and adaptation through various actors. However, this goal is currently hindered by the prevailing prioritisation of economic growth and consumption. Instead, efforts centre on minor changes in consumer behaviour and eco-efficient technologies, placing the burden on individuals and limiting transformative possibilities (Maniates, 2001; Grunwald, 2022).

In the midst of this sustainability paradox of CG, responsibility has emerged as a central point of contention, with an intense debate over who is (most) responsible for what (Eckersley, 2016; Grunwald, 2022). At the same time, scholars witness an empirical prevalence of 'organised irresponsibility' (Beck, 1988) and individual responsibilisation (Maniates, 2001; Uggla, 2018). The result is fragmentation and collective evasion of responsibility, leading to persistent unsustainability, reflected, for instance, in the continued externalisation of ecological and social costs (Young, 2006). The focus on individual responsibility, in particular, while central to many current approaches in CG, overlooks the broader systemic forces that shape unsustainable behaviours and outcomes (Hirth et al, 2023).

The sustainability paradox of CG, in general, and the challenges to shift societies towards consumption patterns and lifestyles that align with the 1.5° Paris climate target, in particular, highlight the constraints that economic, political, technological, and societal structures impose on individual choice and impact (Hirth et al, 2023). Indeed, the scale of action and organisation required to overcome relevant structural barriers can lead to resignation, engagement in 'excusing discourse', or a tendency to shift blame onto others (Young, 2006: 124). Its most likely outcome is a 'responsibility ping-pong', where actors, facing structural disincentives, avoid accepting their share of responsibility and shift it to others. The ping-pong dynamic, therefore, is a symptom of deeper structural forces tied to capitalist growth imperatives. As a result, critical policy and economic changes are delayed, preventing sustainability from becoming a true state priority.

What could a different, more fruitful way of dealing with the question of responsibility look like? Drawing on Young (2006), we delineate a concept of shared responsibility that entails collective efforts and a justice-oriented approach. Would organising responsibility in such a shared manner be possible in European CG?

This article explores discourses around responsibility in European climate governance, against the background of these questions. Specifically, it asks:

> To whom and on the basis of what arguments and narratives do European CG stakeholders assign responsibility to which actors? To what extent can a responsibility ping-pong and to what extent can indications of a potential for moving beyond that towards shared responsibility be identified?

We have conducted this research in the context of a European project focusing on 1.5° lifestyles, that is, lifestyles that would be compatible with the 1.5° Paris climate target. Importantly, we conceptualise lifestyles as embedded, that is, we look beyond individual consumption choices to consider the broader structural contexts shaping these choices and their impacts. Within this project, we have collected data from stakeholder thinking laboratories (STLs), expert interviews and Delphi workshops in five different European countries (Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Spain and Sweden), which we examine here in terms of the assignment of responsibility among core CG stakeholders (governments, businesses and households), and the associated narratives, risks and potential for deeper structural change.

Our findings reveal a complex web of pre-empted responsibility, while also recognising the intertwined roles of multiple actors and thus identifying entry points for reorganising responsibility in a shared manner. On this basis, we argue that an effective move towards shared responsibility will require action in the public sphere as a space that is inherently shared, specifically engagement in public accountability systems as well as systemic, society-wide deliberation on (strategies for effective sharing of) responsibility.

We begin by laying out different conceptual perspectives and debates on responsibility from the environmental and climate governance literatures, followed by an explanation of our methodology and a presentation of the empirical findings. Finally, we discuss their implications for policy interventions and the broader discourse on responsibility for achieving 1.5° lifestyles in the context of the sustainability paradox in CG, and offer a concluding outlook.

From responsibility ping-pong to shared responsibility

Responsibility ping-pong: organised irresponsibility and individual responsibilisation

Our concept of 'responsibility ping-pong' strongly builds on Beck's (1988) notion of 'organised irresponsibility' as well as scholarly critiques of responsibilisation as an instrument of neoliberal governance (Uggla, 2018). Beck (1988) argues that instead of addressing accountability directly, institutions and governments often create systems that diffuse responsibility among various actors, leading to a collective failure to act on pressing problems, such as climate change. Young equally critiques the absence or misdirection of political responsibility in climate and environmental governance, emphasising how both structural and actor dynamics perpetuate socio-ecological injustices (Eckersley, 2016; Gumbert, 2022). Both scholars criticise the fragmentation of responsibility that results from a lack of organisation as well as a collective evasion of fragmented responsibilities. This collective evasion materialises in shifting blame onto one another, which can best be described as 'responsibility ping-pong'.

Building on this perspective, scholars have highlighted the focus of dominant concepts of responsibility in (environmental) governance on individual accountability and liability, arguing that it is too narrow, blame-focused and backward-looking to enable transformative change (Park and Kramarz, 2019; Gumbert, 2022). This critique does not suggest that irresponsible actors should evade criticism or accountability for their actions, nor does it entirely dismiss the value of responsibility understood as blame or liability within a legal system. Instead, it emphasises the importance of questioning dominant conceptualisations of responsibility and of understanding the structural causes and consequences of organised irresponsibility (Gumbert, 2022).

Drawing on Foucauldian thought in their analyses of the conceptualisation and role of responsibility in (environmental) governance, other scholars have argued that we can witness a process of 'responsibilisation', with governments shifting responsibility to individuals (for example, as consumers or citizens), private actors like businesses, local authorities and communities (Uggla, 2018). From this perspective, responsibilisation is a core element of neoliberal governance, aiming at encouraging individuals to take responsibility for sustainability in their role as consumers, while failing to address the broader structural conditions that shape consumer behaviour (Soneryd and Uggla, 2015; Pyysiäinen et al, 2017; Mustalahti et al, 2020; Hirth et al, 2023). Scholars have described the underlying narrative as 'magical thinking' (Fuchs et al, 2021; Kreinin et al, 2024b) and have criticised it for overestimating individuals' capacity to achieve significant sustainable outcomes and relying on an unrealistic expectation of moral heroism (Grunwald, 2022). This narrative holds individuals accountable for systemic outcomes over which they have limited control, while also overlooking the differences in individuals' capacities to make responsible choices (Massey, 2004).

Together, then, the narrow understanding of the responsibility of organisational actors in terms of accountability and liability and the shifting of responsibility to individual consumers in climate and environmental governance have led to a situation which can best be depicted as 'responsibility ping-pong' and thereby created a fundamental barrier to transformative change. What could a different and more sustainability-enabling concept of responsibility look like?

Shared responsibility as an alternative approach

Following Young (2006), we argue that the organisation of shared responsibility among different societal actors has the potential to provide a basis for more effective CG, in general, and for achieving 1.5° lifestyles, in particular. The need to move beyond a focus on individual efforts becomes particularly clear when considering the role of ideational and material structures as barriers and enablers of transformation and lifestyle change (Hirth et al, 2023; Kreinin et al, 2024a). It also resonates with the literature emphasising the social embeddedness of lifestyles (Middlemiss, 2010; Newell et al, 2021), and concepts such as 'solidary' (Brand and Wissen, 2017) and 'climate-friendly' (Aigner et al, 2023) living.

Young argues that addressing responsibility in today's globalised neoliberal society requires a model that transcends the traditional liability framework and the dynamic of blame-shifting (2006). Using the example of sweatshops, she contends that a form of shared responsibility (SR) is needed that not only holds owners and managers but all actors directly or indirectly participating in ecologically and/or socially harmful textile production and consumption accountable. On this basis, she develops a 'social connection model' (SCM) of responsibility, emphasising forward-looking perspectives, avoidance of isolating wrongdoers, and the importance of collective action. Social structures, she explains, provide the 'background conditions for individual actions by presenting actors with options' that can both enable and constrain their actions (Young, 2006: 112). The central idea is that individuals' daily lives are shaped by their social positions within these structures, which in turn influence their behaviour. They unknowingly perpetuate the structural properties of these positions, such as when buying clothes sustains the structural injustices of the global textile industry (Gunnemyr, 2020). According to Young (2006), then, everyone involved in structural processes leading to unjust outcomes shares responsibility, even if they do not directly intend those outcomes.

Yet even if it might be generally accepted that the prevention of environmental and social damage must be the subject of collective responsibility, the question of how this should be shared between different actors remains controversial. In the context of CG, critical scholars and climate justice activists argue that Young's concept of SR fails to adequately acknowledge the historical responsibility of developed countries for their accumulated emissions since the onset of industrialisation (Eckersley, 2016). Additionally, they highlight the lack of social recognition and political participation for affected groups (Schlosberg, 2007; Eckersley, 2016). Similar arguments can be made regarding the distribution of power and responsibility within states (Fuchs et al, 2016). Thus, for Young's notion of responsibility to effectively address structural injustice in the context of climate, it must imply that while all actors share responsibility, some bear more due to their power and privilege.

Finally, as Gumbert (2022) notes, caution is needed when applying the concept of SR to governance practice. He argues that even strategies promoting 'shared' efforts often adopt individualised perspectives and focus on self-accounting practices to solve complex challenges.

In sum, Young's comprehensive concept of shared, forward-looking and justice-oriented responsibility offers a promising starting point for enabling joint governance efforts in pursuit of transformative change. Yet, it needs to be combined with attention to questions regarding justice and power. Moreover, attention will need to be paid to the question of whether any notion of 'sharing' extends beyond an individualised perspective to the consideration of collective action and structural contexts.

Against these different conceptual perspectives, we consider it essential to understand the discursive dynamics around responsibility in the context of CG, in general, and the pursuit of a shift towards 1.5° lifestyles in particular. To that end, we assess *to whom and on the basis of what arguments and narratives European CG stakeholders assign responsibility to which actors*. Moreover, we explore *to what extent indications for a potential for shared responsibility, considering also different roles and resources, exist*. In our analysis, we focus on governments/policy makers, businesses, and individuals/households, as this triangle represents a central interface for assuming and attributing responsibility for and leveraging change towards 1.5° lifestyles.[1]

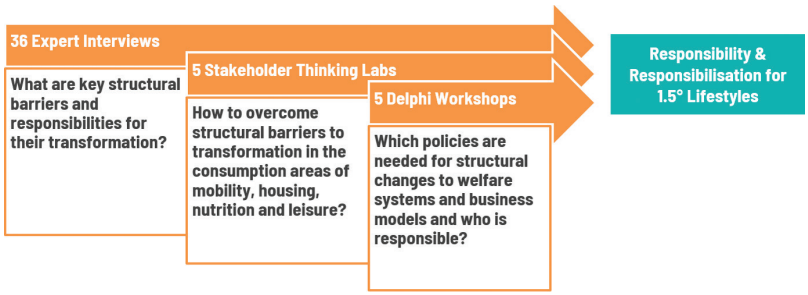
Multi-method research approach

The analysis presented in this article is part of a larger, multi-step process (visible in Figure 1) which has been described elsewhere (Kreinin et al, 2024a; Vadovics et al, 2024). We used a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses, to understand stakeholder roles in shaping 1.5° lifestyles in five European countries: Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Spain and Sweden. The focus was on forms of assumed responsibility and responsibilisation discourses used by different stakeholders regarding a transformation towards 1.5° lifestyles. These stakeholders are professionally involved in sustainability transformation, hence, our empirical analysis allows us to zoom into discourses of actors *within* CG arrangements and to elucidate in what ways governments, businesses and households are assigned responsibility by experts.

The selection of case countries was strategic to capture a broad spectrum of factors (Kreinin et al, 2024a; Vadovics et al, 2024):

- Geographical diversity: Germany (Western Europe), Hungary and Latvia (Eastern Europe), Spain (Southern Europe) and Sweden (Northern Europe).
- Economic diversity: high-income countries (Germany, Sweden) versus middle-income countries (Latvia, Hungary) to explore economic influences on sustainable lifestyle policies.
- Historic diversity: histories of communist regimes in Hungary, Latvia and partly Germany provide insights into legacy effects on policy attitudes towards sustainability.

Figure 1: Multi-method research design



- Political diversity: Germany, Latvia, Spain and Sweden are comparatively stable democracies, while Hungary presents a case where sustainability policies might be influenced by a centralised political system that is represented by an accumulative state (Scheiring, 2021).
- Carbon footprint diversity: Germany has higher footprints per capita due to the carbon intensity of its energy sector, while Sweden, Latvia, Hungary and Spain have lower footprints in comparison (in descending order) (Cap et al, 2024).

Our analysis follows a three-step process integrating expert interviews, STLs and policy Delphis to address different dimensions of the research question (see Figure 1).

Step 1, expert interviews: building on previous research (Kreinin et al, 2024a), semi-structured interviews with 36 experts (see Annex, Table 1) across five countries were conducted. The interviews aimed to identify impactful structural barriers and discuss the roles and responsibilities of various actors in promoting change. Experts were presented with a compendium of 22 structures (see Annex, Table 2) and asked to identify the most influential ones, focusing on the roles of consumers, suppliers and policy makers in impeding or facilitating transformative changes. This process helped narrow the list to seven key structures (see Annex, Table 3) and provided foundational insights for further analysis.

Step 2, STLs: building on the expert interviews, STLs explored policy scenarios to address the seven key structures across the consumption areas of mobility, housing, nutrition and leisure (Kreinin et al, 2024a). Participants from business, academia, civil society, policy making and media discussed structural barriers and stakeholder roles and responsibilities in overcoming them. The STLs produced over 700 measures, categorised by responsible actors (businesses, individuals/households, policy makers/government). Participants, between 19 and 27 per country, connected expert-identified structures with actionable measures to support 1.5° lifestyles.

Step 3, policy Delphi process: this process gathered iterative feedback from 142 experts (26–33 per country) to refine our understanding of policy impacts on sustainability and climate change. It captured diverse perspectives on stakeholder responsibilities in implementing welfare and business model policies. Participants from academia, business, civil society and government took part in a policy Delphi process (Gahbauer et al, 2022) combining quantitative surveys and qualitative focus group discussions. Over three rounds, the feasibility and desirability of 12 policy options were assessed, allowing for modification of views and elaboration on reasoning. This emphasised stakeholder responsibilities and provided a nuanced understanding of the complexities in CG.

Each method uniquely addresses the research question, inquiring into the transition from responsibility ping-pong to SR for sustainable living. Together, they create a multi-layered understanding of sustainable lifestyles and policy impacts. By integrating methods through deliberative discussion, our research offers a multivocal understanding of how responsibility is assumed and assigned in transforming towards 1.5° lifestyles.

Empirical data from expert interviews, STLs and policy Delphi processes were collected using documentation sheets in each case country and translated into English. The data was analysed using qualitative methods, including deductive content coding, discourse and narrative analysis. This approach identified key themes and patterns,

uncovering nuanced perspectives on the forms of responsibilities and responsibilisation discourses and the associated risks and opportunities in transforming to 1.5° lifestyles.

Combining findings from expert interviews, STLs and the policy Delphi process allowed us to triangulate results, enhancing the validity and reliability of our conclusions (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2021; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2023). This comprehensive approach thoroughly explored how responsibility is apprehended and assigned among stakeholders to achieve 1.5° lifestyles.

Empirical findings: the complexity and contradictions of stakeholder responsibilisation discourses

This section explores to what extent the phenomenon of responsibility ping-pong can be identified in CG in Europe and whether indications of a potential for change in the form of organising shared responsibility exist. By analysing the views of European stakeholders professionally involved in the sustainability transformation, we show how responsibility for change, specifically for a shift towards 1.5° lifestyles, currently is understood, highlighting risks and opportunities. The analysis also reveals to what extent SR already is present in current discourses among CG actors and identifies entry points for developing and strengthening the joint organisation of responsibility.

Governments: catalysts of structural change?

Government roles and responsibilities for climate action were the most discussed and divisive in our workshops and interviews. The three most prevalent modes of government responsibility were demands for radical structural change, increased regulation and pursuit of social justice. Other calls for governmental change focused on long-term planning, infrastructural development, and balancing state and private sector solutions.

First, the government was assigned responsibility to make radical changes in fiscal, economic and welfare governance. Several interviewees emphasised the critical role and power of politicians in initiating and implementing structural changes (DE5, INT2, INT3, HU1). They argued that political leadership and encompassing policy changes are crucial for tackling environmental challenges: 'Politicians are clearly the primary carriers of responsibility in this crisis' (DE5). Some interviewees noted that politicians and policy makers act both as individual professionals and as representatives of their institutions, with the latter's actions being more significant: 'what counts are the actions of their institution' (INT1).

Many participants doubted politicians and policy makers' willingness to encounter opposition in making statements like: 'We're not going to focus on GDP growth anymore' (DE2). Interviewees also doubted state involvement due to powerful vested interests and a lack of political will and action: 'A shift away from growth would significantly impact industry and everyday life, necessitating state involvement' (DE2). The current political climate sparked discussions on changing the responsibility of governmental actors. Swedish participants felt fewer climate initiatives increased business responsibility, while Hungarian participants were pessimistic about environmental policies due to government scepticism. Most participants believed that changes in politicians' and the public's perceptions of the urgency of climate change would lead to more effective political risk-taking in policy choices.

While some stakeholders saw changes by politicians and governments at various levels as necessary for meeting the 1.5°C target, others feared these changes could lead to authoritarianism, paternalism or inefficient central planning. Concerns about excessive government roles were most prevalent in Hungary and Latvia, where participants remembered communist regimes. For some, fears of moving away from liberal democracy underpinned their rejection of significant state interventions. In discussions on welfare and business policies, the most divisive issues involved strong state roles, such as income and wealth caps, universal basic income or state-driven choice editing. While there was broader support for voluntary choice editing, many viewed state-driven choice editing as more effective. However, state-led policies were seen as potentially counterproductive due to societal resistance or state intervention that tended to absolve other actors of their responsibilities. Overall, these debates pointed to the need for new forms of shared responsibility and democratic decision-making that could overcome the risks of increasing authoritarianism. While the actual functioning of democracy and possibility of environmental prioritisation was questioned at times, most participants strived to imagine state interventions within its bounds.

The second prominent call for government responsibility was increased state regulation of high-carbon consumption to drive changes in business models in a forward-looking and risk-preventing way: 'It is important that boundaries are set which make certain business models, like coal power plants, economically unviable. This principle should be broadly applied' (SE5). Regulatory measures, incentives or bans can immediately influence individual or corporate behaviour, relieving consumers from making poor choices and aligning business practices with climate goals (INT4). Participants in the five STLs viewed the state as crucial in setting consumption boundaries and directly providing for citizens' needs. They assigned most measures to reach the 1.5°C target to the state. Taxes and bans were the most popular measures, including those on aviation, driving in inner cities, sugar and other foods, and other unsustainable consumption behaviours.

In the five Delphi discussions, calls for increased boundaries and regulation raised concerns about bureaucratisation, which could involve extensive monitoring of emissions and mitigation efforts. This bureaucratisation might also affect public procurement, potentially privileging certain actors. Besides, interviewees expressed scepticism related to entrenched interests and the risk of co-option: 'Governmental policies haven't significantly altered private companies' actions; there's been an expansion in fossil fuel use' (SE5). In this view, the dominant growth paradigm poses a pervasive risk, making it challenging to meet the 1.5°C target: 'The expectation of necessary growth is institutionalised in the German welfare system. … The state's incentives are incompatible with the 1.5°C target' (DE3). While these debates reflect concerns about increasing government regulation, there was a general consensus that government responsibility needs to shift away from prioritising economic growth towards greater social and environmental responsibility.

In response, many participants emphasised the need for the government to take more social responsibility, particularly by developing alternatives for low-income households who may be disadvantaged by policies that include environmental costs in prices. This justice-orientation was seen as a key strategy to mitigate the risks of consumption-reducing policies and to increase public support for change. While it provoked conflicting debates about the mechanisms, climate impacts and the extent to

which the state should redistribute wealth and intervene in provision, such as through increasing basic services, taxing wealth or a job guarantee, a shift in the perceived need for justice-orientation was evident across countries. For many, regulations on consumption and the pursuit of sustainable welfare were complementary measures of government responsibility.

Overall, stakeholders emphasised the responsibility of governments for deep structural changes, including radical interventions, increased regulation of high-carbon consumption, supporting sustainable business models, and a focus on social justice through welfare-based inequality reduction. However, concerns were raised about the government's ability to implement these changes due to entrenched interests and the dominant economic growth paradigm. Risks associated with government action – such as bureaucratisation, authoritarianism, inefficiency and co-option by vested interests – were seen as particularly acute in contexts with a history of authoritarian or inefficient regimes. Transparency, participation and oversight by other actors, such as civil society, courts and business associations, was seen as necessary to reduce these risks. While perspectives on the desired policies, extent of government involvement and need for economic growth differed, most stakeholders saw such mechanisms as a direction for sharing responsibility. While these are promising signs of SR, discussions also highlighted current insufficiencies and the risk of a responsibility ping-pong, particularly the avoidance of responsibility, where the state imperative of economic growth weakens political will and reduces the prioritisation of climate action and sustainability.

Households: SR as an opportunity to strengthen individual agency?

While stakeholders did not see households as central responsibility holders due to a variety of structural barriers, they recognised their specific responsibilities and influences on other actors through electoral choices, demand for products and services, and standards of living. The key modes of responsibility assigned to individuals and households were increased consumer awareness, shared living and civic activity.

First, several interviewees (ES1, ES5, LV1, LV4, INT4, INT7, HU4) emphasised the importance of individuals as consumers in driving structural change. Key responsibilities for households in Delphi discussions included changing norms and values towards working and consuming less. Stakeholders agreed that transitioning to a low-carbon society requires shifts in lifestyles and narratives of a good life, not just technological solutions. All discussions highlighted the need for consumer awareness, responsible consumption practices and collective action in tackling environmental challenges: 'The role [of the consumer] is very relevant. The consumer adopts responsible consumption habits in their daily life' (ES5). Although many stakeholders acknowledged the limited influence of individual consumers within the broader system – likely due to their professional engagement in sustainability transformation – statements like this one reveal that the narrative of the 'influential consumer' still perpetuates the risk of overemphasising individual responsibility.

In fact, many stakeholders saw individual responsibility as fundamental to establishing a low-carbon society. Their views on the way forward, however, built on diverging assumptions about people's motivation to work and consume, deeply entrenched in dominant values and lifestyles. Some participants were pessimistic, viewing individuals as self-centred and short-term thinkers: 'Individuals only focus

on satisfying their own needs without considering [the global impact]' (LV4). Others critiqued this perspective, noting that people's willingness to share and maintain goods collectively has been deprioritised due to perceived inefficiency and discomfort. This highlights the existence of nuanced perspectives on both the risks and opportunities associated with assigning responsibility to consumers.

These discussions led to considering households and individuals as in need of adopting higher rates of sharing, thus raising an intriguing question: could SR also foster greater acceptance of new sharing behaviours? A lifestyle highly dependent on sharing, however, was considered challenging due to the perceived conveniences of individual transport, flying, and the relative unpopularity of shared housing and plant-based diets. While policies can encourage these lifestyle changes, stakeholders noted that acceptance depends on households. Some experts also warned that increased regulations could expand grey and black markets, particularly in countries with existing significant grey markets, like Latvia and Hungary. Overall, lifestyles of sharing could be imagined as the most direct form of SR between households.

Third, interviewees highlighted that individuals are not just private persons but also act as change agents (SE2). In their everyday and professional capacities, individuals participate as members of actor groups and representatives of institutions and neighbourhoods, enhancing their influence and opportunities for leadership (SE2, LV2, HU1, INT1). A related perspective saw individuals as integral to the overarching system of CG, which both demands action from consumers and limits their influence (DE2, DE3, INT1, INT9). Interviewees emphasised that change should occur at multiple levels and not solely rely on individual consumers:

> Consumer focus distracts from the fact that we need change at a much deeper level. At the same time, we all need to be a part of the change. If you want social acceptance that these changes are necessary, [it is] better to have everyone participate in change as it happens. Individuals have a role to play, but we need to recognise the limits of that. Change needs to happen at all different levels. (DE3)

This underlines the complexity of responsibilisation discourses around individuals. While some interviewees assign fundamental responsibility to individuals in their role as consumers, this quote not only acknowledges the different roles individuals have next to being consumers, but also refers to webs of SR in which everyone has 'a role to play'.

Furthermore, interviewees stressed that individuals' civic responsibilities should extend beyond participation to actively redesigning social and material infrastructures (INT3). Similarly, they raised concerns about democratic processes becoming mere simulations labelled as sustainable, with green citizenship being reduced to consumer responsibilities. Both considerations carry the expectation of a more diverse and proactive citizen agency. For example, it was common to praise government-supported citizen-led action: 'It's not that a city needs to plan and build [everything. Instead, they can simply allocate] this area to the community and say, "You wanted [a gardening space? Here it is, enjoy]!"' (INT7). In this way, individuals were attributed responsibility to act in collectives and take some responsibilities from other actors.

To conclude, the stakeholders' assessment of household responsibility revealed notable contradictions. On the one hand, participants supported the individualisation

of consumer responsibility, encouraging individuals to adopt responsible consumption practices. However, they were also pessimistic about individuals' capacity to do so, citing self-centredness and short-term thinking as inherent human traits. On the other hand, there was clear scepticism about the effectiveness of individual consumer responsibility. Stakeholders recognised that households are part of a larger system of consumption and values, with their responsibility shaped by political and economic frameworks. Despite these contradictions, stakeholder perspectives suggest that individuals, as both citizens (influencing policy) and consumers (driving corporate sustainability), hold significant power to promote SR, extending beyond their primary role of adopting lower-carbon and more communal consumption habits.

Businesses: towards shared corporate responsibility?

In all discussions, stakeholders advocated for distinct and strong business and corporate responsibility. Stakeholders identified three major responsibilities for businesses: driving green innovation; balancing climate responsibility with corporate interests; and designing industry-led sustainable business models.

Most experts acknowledged the critical role of investors and businesses in driving change: 'Consumers are constrained; they may choose a product in the supermarket, but they cannot change the portfolio and structure of the supermarket. Investors[, however,] use financial power [to] influence [strategic decisions of companies]' (DE5; also ES1, ES3). Thus, stakeholders stressed the impact of investment choices, corporate decisions and financial power on environmental outcomes and resulting business responsibility for green innovation, circularity and eco-efficiency. Green innovation and voluntary choice editing was perceived as the domain of businesses even if many were sceptical if it can work without a government-led level playing field and lack of profit incentives when greening makes prices less affordable.

While investors and businesses were considered fundamental agents for promoting structural change towards a 1.5° society, many interviewees were pessimistic about greenwashing and 'vested interests [being] able to influence policy and delay climate action [for profit reasons]' (DE2). Thus, they urged businesses to avoid such lobbying as leading to irresponsibility and injustice. Conversely, some participants, particularly in Sweden, viewed businesses as more capable and willing to lead the way and advocate for more sustainable policies than the current government. In this view, responsibility to increase ecological and climate transparency and develop checks and balances, if necessary, independently from the state was attributed to businesses.

Stakeholders stressed that vested interests thrive on structural injustices and the perceived need for growth. If the state enforced new rules, non-compliant companies would not survive, while compliant ones would adapt to reduce material flow, aligning with degrowth models (ES2). Interviewees also highlighted the need for structural changes, requiring companies to report on sustainability to investors and providing examples of successful sustainable businesses (INT6). For policies like working time reduction, stakeholders noted the need for increased business productivity, regardless of a country's current productivity levels. This adherence to economic growth, productivity and 'improved living standards', on the one side, and proposals for degrowth, on the other, revealed divergent views on consumption levels and sustainable business models even if future-orientation and justice concerns through accountability were prevalent in both.

In both STLs and Delphis, business measures were often linked to government responsibilities, such as limiting businesses' manoeuvrability, incentivising responsible practices, promoting circular business models and educating small and medium-sized enterprises, which opens the space for shared responsibility between governments and businesses. Suggested measures included reducing the fossil fuel lobby's influence and regulating better material use in the construction sector. Policies like tax incentives for low-carbon R&D and public procurement for low-carbon products sparked discussions on the risks of short-termism in business decisions. Nonetheless, stakeholders critiqued business dependence on state values and expressed concerns about businesses' ability to change models. For some, this led to consider trade associations as crucial vectors of sharing corporate responsibility.

In conclusion, participants located corporate responsibility in green innovation, social and climate accountability, and industry-led sustainable business models. However, stakeholders also emphasised that green innovation alone is not sufficient to offset current consumption and production levels. Different perspectives on the required radicality of structural change emerged in the discussions, with some participants more aligned with the existing economic growth paradigm, while others were rooted in the degrowth paradigm. Notably, despite the openness to deeper structural change, more radical solutions such as sufficiency business models were little discussed. While participants acknowledged the risks of over-reliance on corporate responsibility, such as lobbying, self-interest, short-sightedness and greenwashing, they stressed the need for companies to take on costs, increase transparency and improve eco-efficiency.

Concerns about companies lobbying against climate targets reflect the complex dynamics between corporate interests and environmental advocacy. Nevertheless, stakeholders overwhelmingly see business as a potential leader in promoting sustainable policies in ways that individuals or governments may not be able to. Importantly, vested interests and structural inequities remain significant barriers, underscoring the need for government and civil society intervention to ensure sustainable practices. At the same time, the power of these vested interests to undermine SR should not be underestimated. As the article has shown, these vested interests and the imperatives of economic growth are a similar problem within governments and policy making as well as civil society.

Discussion: building responsibility for 1.5° lifestyles through public participation and structural accountability

Our findings highlight a critical impasse: actors in CG attribute responsibility for inducing transformative change primarily to each other, thereby creating a responsibility ping-pong. While some narratives on responsibility address the notion that it can and should be shared between different actors, many identified attributions of responsibility focus on one actor type instead of regarding them jointly. If this impasse is not overcome, there is little hope of resolving the sustainability paradox.

The insights regarding businesses highlight how social and ecological challenges can persist under a supposedly 'green' agenda focused only on green innovation. Similarly, focusing on households reflects the depoliticising strategy of individualising sustainability issues. Moreover, focusing solely on the government is unlikely to challenge the narratives supporting the persistence of the unsustainable status quo,

as long as governmental agendas are tied to growth and consumption priorities. However, explicitly connecting these contradictions to Young's idea of SR unveils various opportunities for democratic structural change towards effective CG and the pursuit of consumption patterns and lifestyles aligned with (or at least pursuing an outcome close to) the 1.5° Paris climate target. This discussion aims to deepen understanding of these dynamics by proposing a nuanced approach to responsibility in the transformation process.

Looking forward, a key objective is to strike a balanced approach in assigning responsibility. This involves recognising the intertwined roles of multiple actors and acknowledging that those with greater capabilities bear special responsibilities, as elaborated by Young (2006; 2011). This approach requires crafting a broad web of joint responsibilities that is impactful, yet measured. It emphasises the significant role of civil society and the public arena in influencing governmental actions.

Our analysis also emphasises the important distinction between the responsibilisation of individuals as consumers, as mostly perceived, and understanding them in their role as citizens. While individuals as consumers tend to pursue their immediate self-interest, research has found that as citizens, people tend to be concerned with public rather than personal interests (Sagoff, 2008: 8). However, citizen and civil society efforts should not be regarded as a panacea for solving the problem of responsibility ping-pong. Although public pressure, for example, from non-governmental organisations, is necessary and valuable, an overemphasis on civil society can still lead to responsibility being shifted away from more structurally influential actors and onto citizens. Additionally, while vested interests may be less pronounced in civil society than in the politico-economic sphere, they still play a significant role. Non-governmental organisations, in particular, can face conflicts of interest when reliant on corporate or government funding, potentially compromising their independence and advocacy efforts.

This discussion of SR particularly highlights the significance of power dynamics and calls for a broader understanding of influence, including relational and discursive elements. SR can thus connect the issue of responsibility to the underlying social relations within growth-based economies, which shape environmental outcomes and without which discussions around responsibility become abstract and depoliticised. This sensitivity to structural constraints and opportunities for change, the empowerment of actors in their specific scope of action as well as interdependencies between different actors and the interwovenness of their responsibilities is what the ambitious, yet pragmatic SR has to offer. It embraces a more holistic, interconnected understanding of responsibility that fosters transformative change through multi-level collaboration and a forward-focused approach to justice. However, current power imbalances and the lack of inclusive decision-making processes remain significant challenges to achieving effective collective responsibility.

The analysis also shows that creating SR necessitates action in the public sphere. This realm, defined as a 'sphere of political communication that stands between civil society and the state' (Chambers, 2024: 180), does not belong solely to any single actor type – that is, that only foregrounds civil society – but is rather one where diverse agents interact in their multiple roles. It follows logically that this is where SR can and must be forged. Concretely, this could be achieved through diverse stakeholder engagement in public accountability systems, that is, decentralised networks with mutual checks and balances, full transparency and

shared goals (Gumbert, 2022). The general connection between SR and the public sphere as well as the specific proposal of accountability systems stress the crucial role of broad actor participation. This includes, for example, acknowledging the indispensable role of courts in bridging gaps left by governments and short-term-focused politicians, upholding long-term commitments that political entities may neglect (Beauregard et al, 2021). Furthermore, drawing on Young's work (2000; 2006; 2011), this broad participation must not only focus on the inclusion of diverse actor types and people but also on the recognition and addressing of structural inequalities that shape the interactions of diverse agents in their multiple roles. The public sphere must allow for the voices of marginalised and less powerful groups to be heard, ensuring that political communication is not dominated by elites or state actors. Thus, SR cannot merely arise from formal deliberation but must emerge from a genuinely inclusive and participatory process that recognises diverse forms of expression and accounts for the power imbalances that pervade political dialogue. To this end, also, the power of vested material interests will need to be curtailed.

Clearly, achieving effective SR is not going to be easy. Current power imbalances and the lack of inclusive decision-making processes remain significant challenges to achieving a reconceptualisation and effective reorganisation and sharing of responsibility. Yet, we are hopeful that understanding the inherent limits of responsibility ping-pong and the potential for achieving collective and just responsibility via the strategies outlined earlier will allow us to set out on this road to a more sustainable future. This is all the more the case, since the question of responsibility concepts and attributions is not just relevant for CG but for the many challenges currently faced by democracies.

Indeed, the interplay between deliberation and power imbalances delineated in this article ties into a broader understanding of democratic politics, which balances deliberative (communicative) and agonistic (conflictual) dimensions of politics. Based on our stakeholder workshop experience, we show that overcoming the deep-seated barriers to transformation and addressing power imbalances requires not merely more participation, but also different, more engaging forms of deliberation. Here, the way forward that we propose entails synthesising the deliberative and agonistic dimensions of politics, harnessing both dialogue and contestation to create a more inclusive and resilient political process.

Recently, the contrast between these democratic theories has softened, recognising political disagreement as essential to democratic politics and deliberation (Chambers, 2024). Machin states that '[d]isagreement in environmental politics allows alternative futures to be imagined, articulated, negotiated, and demanded, and it prevents the foreclosure of political questions around climate change' (2023: 849). Mansbridge et al emphasise that deliberation partly relies on 'suitably constrained forms of self-interest' (2010: 66). This can be linked to Young's (1996) understanding of deliberation, which advocates for using narratives and testimonies to amplify marginalised voices. The interplay between conflict and deliberation is particularly relevant to the distinction between democratic deliberation and deliberative democracy (Chambers, 2009) or deliberative systems (Mansbridge et al, 2012). These considerations take the division of labour and potential complementarity of various elements of democratic opinion and decision-making processes seriously, linking back to Gumbert's emphasis on mutual checks and balances and viewing conflictual or participatory processes as instances of deliberative democracy (Chambers, 2009: 333).

This suggests that driving genuine transformation is possible through collective action systems engaging in systemic, society-wide deliberation that consciously addresses political disagreement rather than hiding it behind superficial consensus. This approach ensures participation is not instrumentalised by top-down managed politics but is seen as proactive agency, essential for nurturing democratic values and culture (Blühdorn and Butzlaff, 2020: 379). Moreover, we consider it crucial for setting into force diverse stakeholder engagement in accountability systems as pointed out in the previous sections as well as harnessing the potentials the public sphere offers for enabling shared responsibility. This, we argue, is crucial for targeting and countering the power imbalances within and across societies, including their material bases. It is also essential for overcoming responsibility ping-pong, creating the conditions to assume responsibility as a shared endeavour that is forward-looking, that challenges unjust structures and that prepares for truly sustainable political and policy action for 1.5° lifestyles.

Conclusions

Despite an increasingly better understanding of the social and biophysical impacts of modern lifestyles, efforts to reverse unsustainability continue to fall short due to democratic states' ties to economic growth and high consumption (Wiedmann et al, 2020). Sustainability efforts are popular in rhetoric but elusive in practice. A shift to radically sustainable consumption and lifestyles, which climate scholars highlight as urgently needed, is nowhere in sight. In consequence, a debate about who is responsible for (lacking) change has arisen.

Many scholarly assessments of how responsibility is understood and implemented do not offer a hopeful account, however. They highlight the dominance of 'organised irresponsibility' (Beck, 1988) and of the responsibilisation of individuals, especially in their role as consumers (Maniates, 2001; Uggla, 2018), which given the strong influence of broader structural contexts of lifestyle choices and their impacts (Hirth et al, 2023; Kreinin et al, 2024a) can only lead to frustrations and blame shifting. Can a different conceptualisation and organisation of responsibility be imagined, one that would allow overcoming this impasse and enable the necessary transformative change?

Against the background of these dynamics and questions, our research offers a comprehensive examination of how responsibility is apprehended and assigned among European stakeholders, when it comes to CG and specifically the pursuit of 1.5° lifestyles. Drawing on the concepts of 'organised irresponsibility' (Beck, 1988), 'responsibilisation' (Uggla, 2018) and 'shared responsibility' (Young, 2006) from the (environmental) governance literature as well as the empirical implementation and analysis of stakeholder laboratories, expert interviews and Delphis in five European countries, we untangle a system of attributions of responsibility that strongly resembles a responsibility ping-pong. Stakeholder perspectives on responsibility highlight deep-seated barriers to transformation in European democracies. In addition, they reveal a range of more specific concerns relating, for instance, to authoritarian tendencies and greenwashing. Simultaneously, however, some indications of existing or potential starting points for the development and organisation of shared responsibility exist, the fostering of which will, though, require well-targeted strategies.

This research has critical implications for CG policy and discourse. Policy makers, researchers, businesses and civil society must recognise the challenges posed by democratic states' current priority sets, in terms of growth and consumption, and reframe sustainability as an equally important if not surpassing imperative. Real change hinges on shared responsibilities, which in turn requires deeper citizen engagement, frameworks for businesses aligning their interests with a 1.5°-fit economy, and deep structural changes to the global economic system.

Our findings show that although stakeholders assign responsibility to various actor types, their approaches to responsibilisation vary significantly. Some narratives emphasise the shared responsibility among actors, but many modes of responsibilisation focus solely on one actor type, enabling a responsibility ping-pong and perpetuating the sustainability paradox. To tackle current challenges, a more inclusive and effective approach to responsibility is essential. This requires shifting towards a shared, justice-oriented and forward-looking concept of responsibility, embedded in social norms and focused on future outcomes while recognising the unique capabilities of various actors.

Note

[1] Future research should also investigate the role of science/academia and courts, for example, in this context.

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Ethical considerations

We conducted expert interviews, stakeholder thinking labs, and Delphi workshops, adhering to the ethical code of the International Sociological Association (ISA Code of Ethics: https://www.isa-sociology.org/en/about-isa/code-of-ethics). The EU 1.5° Lifestyles project was approved by institutional ethics boards, as outlined in the Ethics & Security section of the proposal. Local ethics regulations were complied with by case country partners. We ensured informed consent from all participating stakeholders and experts, including permission for data usage in research and publications.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Annex

Table 1: Expert interview participants per interview ID* and field of expertise

Interview ID	The core field of expertise
DE1	Urban development
DE2	Mobility
DE3	Administrative studies
DE4	Nutritional ecology
DE5	Fair trade
HU1	Health sociology
HU2	Ecological economics
HU3	Urban planning
HU4	Energy management
HU5	Environmental economics
LV1	Urban planning
LV2	Urban planning
LV3	Environmental engineering
LV4	Environmental governance
LV5	Tourism
LV6	Food consumption
ES1	Circular economy
ES2	Urban planning
ES3	Waste management
ES4	Sustainable consumption
ES5	Sustainability consulting
SE1	Sociology
SE2	Sustainable consumption
SE3	Sustainable consumption
SE4	Climate advocacy
SE5	Human ecology
INT1	Political economy
INT2	Environmental studies
INT3	Sustainability
INT4	Sociology
INT5	Sociology
INT6	Political economy
INT7	Ecological economics
INT8	Law
INT9	Transport policy
INT10	Industrial ecology

Note: *The ID either specifies the country code or uses INT for an international context.

Table 2: 22 key barriers and enablers (not ranked)

Barriers		Enablers
1	Economic growth paradigm	Alternative narratives and measurements of wellbeing
2	Efficiency focus	Citizen assemblies
3	Exclusion of relevant mobility sectors from government emission calculations	Economic incentives/internalisation of costs
4	Rising energy demand	Sustainable energy mix
5	Inequity in resources, resource use and power	Integration of information and skills about sustainable lifestyles in education
6	Infrastructural lock-in effects	Policies fostering product durability
7	Lack of consistent, predictable, integrated policies	Shifts in work–life balance
8	Lack of societal vision of a low-carbon society	Strong institutionalization and coordinated efforts across governance levels
9	Lack of understanding of the severity of environmental crises	Sufficiency-/justice-focused narratives/norms
10	Systematic influence of vested interests	Systems perspective on technology
11	Unequal global competition	Low-carbon technologies

Table 3: 7 key structural barriers (not ranked)

	1. Economic growth paradigm
	2. Lack ofstringent and holistic policies for sustainability
	3. Influence of vested interests
	4. Externalisation of environmental and social costs

(*Continued*)

Table 3: Continued

	5. Marginalised alternative narratives and measures of a good life
	6. Social inequity
	7. Lack of knowledge and skills for sustainable lifestyles