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An Eco-Social Policy Mix for 1.5°C Lifestyles: A Multi-Country Policy Delphi Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Bridging the gap between welfare and climate policies is essential for simultaneously pursuing increased well-being and reduced carbon emissions. This study uses a policy Delphi approach, involving experts and stakeholders from five European countries: Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Spain, and Sweden, to assess the perceived desirability and feasibility of six eco-social policies for enabling 1.5°C lifestyles. The results show that eco-social policies are challenged by current growth and work paradigms, which transcend welfare-regime-related, ideological, social, and institutional rationales. Of the selected policies, stakeholders found low-efficiency housing retrofits the most desirable, but income caps the least desirable. Worktime reduction, job guarantees, and income ceilings raise deep concerns over work, motivation, and consumption. However, universal basic services, free public transport, and public renovation raise concerns about service efficiency, innovation incentives, and welfare entitlement. Stakeholders agreed that eco-social policies are desirable and feasible, but only when combined in a way that balances social and environmental impacts. They believe it might be easier to address challenges in understanding and implementing these policies if they were part of a broader, coordinated approach at a supranational level, rather than isolated, single-issue policies targeting specific sectors.

1 | Introduction

In the quest for a sustainable and equitable future, the intersection of climate change and welfare systems has come into focus. Recognizing the need for urgent and transformative action to limit global warming as close as possible to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, the question of how public services and welfare provision can deliver higher levels of satisfaction of human needs at lower levels of energy use becomes critical (Vogel et al. 2024). We currently lack a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between climate change and welfare provision, but eco-social policies that integrate social and environmental goals (Bohnenberger 2023; Neier et al. 2024) are likely to spur controversy due to long-standing ideological debates (Gugushvili and Otto 2023). After all, the history of welfare states is closely linked to global industrial capitalism and an expanding economic sphere, with environmentally "perverse" consequences (Hirvilammi and Koch 2020).

In particular, the alignment of welfare states with GDP growth and full employment to finance welfare spending has created conflicts between government provisions and unintended social and environmental impacts (Schnaiberg 1980). How can this situation be changed? What policies that can, in principle, simultaneously promote social welfare and reduce resource consumption are seen as desirable and feasible by key stakeholders? Despite a growing literature on sustainable welfare states, post-growth welfare models, and eco-social policy

support, there remains a significant research gap regarding these questions (Hirvilammi et al. 2023). Accordingly, this article pursues the central question of how European stakeholders perceive the feasibility and contributions of eco-social policies toward enabling "1.5° lifestyles," exploring both constraints and opportunities for their implementation. Through this exploration, we also examine the policy mix that experts consider complementary to eco-social policies, making them both desirable and feasible for fostering an eco-social transformation. We use the term "lifestyles" to refer to aspects of consumption that individuals can influence through personal choices, recognizing that these choices are enabled or constrained by wider structures. "Climate-friendly living" (Aigner et al. 2023), "solidary modes of living" (Brand and Wissen 2013), or "1.5°C lifestyles" (Hirth et al. 2023; Kreinin et al. 2024) are perspectives that share a common view that societal transformations toward a sustainable future should focus not only on changing individual behavior but also on redesigning the structural conditions within which daily life takes place (Hirth et al. 2023; Kreinin et al. 2024).

Drawing on existing literature and acknowledging the shifts in welfare paradigms, our research seeks to fill the gap in the literature by examining the attitudes and perceptions of European stakeholders toward selected eco-social policies. Specifically, the study examines stakeholders' views and debates on the desirability and feasibility of three labor and three service-related policies proposed in sustainable welfare literature, assuming that such views indicate the likelihood of their adoption and implementation. Theoretically, we contribute to the sustainable welfare literature by showing how policies become "eco-social" only if part of a broader policy package and enabling regulative frameworks. Empirically, the analysis utilizes data gathered via multiple expert policy surveys and focus group discussions, conducted in five European countries: Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Spain, and Sweden. Through mixed methods research we show the complex interactions between experts' desirability and feasibility concerns that influence the overall perception of eco-social policies, including their eco-social contributions, risks, and enablers.

By exploring the perceived contributions and barriers of specific eco-social policies, our research sheds light on the European rationales affecting policy acceptance and feasibility as well as the prospects of imagining and integrating sustainability goals within welfare systems, ultimately paving the way for a more sustainable, fair, and resilient society. We show how the growth paradigm, welfare regimes, ideologies of work and welfare entitlement, lifestyle expectations (wage and consumption), and nationally bounded solutions affect perceptions of eco-social policies and how European stakeholders envisage ways to overcome them. We show which policies are perceived as more desirable or feasible from an eco-social perspective after discussions.

The structure of this article is organized as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical framework and a comprehensive literature review that provides the foundation for the study. Section 3 outlines the methodology, including participant recruitment, data collection (surveys and focus group discussions), and data analysis. Section 4 presents the quantitative assessment of stakeholders' views on the desirability and feasibility of various eco-social policies and links these to the concerns expressed in the focus groups. It also addresses cross-cutting issues, including challenges of aligning policies with the 1.5°C target, feasibility concerns, and proposed solutions. Section 5 discusses the findings, while Section 6 concludes by summarizing the key insights and recommending eco-social policies to support 1.5°C lifestyles.

2 | Framework and Literature Review

Environmental crises and globalization have been named as the most recent challenges to welfare systems, but the "welfare state has been declared to be in crisis since its very inception" (Esping-Andersen 2000). Welfare states have been terrains of (and shaped by) fierce political battles, in the crossfire of interests, actors, political parties, and movements. Beliefs around how human needs should be met—via the market, the family, or the state—have also shaped many academic discussions and debates (Esping-Andersen 1989, 1990, 2000). In the following, we will outline key research on welfare states, with a particular focus on studies related to sustainable welfare and needs satisfaction within the 1.5°C climate limit.

Esping-Andersen's (1989, 2000) groundbreaking theory of ideal-type welfare regime clusters, based on studying Eurocentric welfare state models, has provided a key analytical approach for distinguishing different welfare regimes based on the (de)commodification of welfare provisioning and social stratification. The approach differentiates between: (1) The ideal Nordic or social-democratic model that tends toward the state provisioning of needs and universal rights; (2) The ideal Anglo-Saxon or liberal model that tends toward the market provisioning of needs and maintains a residual welfare state, specifically a limited system primarily serving the working class and the poor, while middle-class welfare needs are met through the market-provisioning with private insurance and fringe benefits; and (3) The continental European or conservative-corporatist model that is characterized by its development under conservative political forces and the maintenance of socially segregated social insurance programs and pension reforms (Esping-Andersen 1989, 1990, 2000). Additions and specifications to the ideal types in Esping-Andersen's model, like the separation of a Southern-European or "Latin" type (Ferrera 1996; Orosz 2019; Saint-Arnaud and Bernard 2003) or mixed post-socialist "ideal" types (Fenger 2007; Lauzadyte-Tutliene, Balezentis, and Goculenko 2018; Orosz 2019) are under debate. There is also a debate about convergence toward a shared European welfare model. Some suggest that there is little overall convergence, while others argue that convergence occurs within specific regime types (Draxler and Van Vliet 2010). Relatively stable regime clusters indicate that welfare state policy choices are influenced by path dependency (Saint-Arnaud and Bernard 2003). This path dependency also shapes the possibilities for 1.5°C-aligned transformations of welfare regimes as starting points to sustainable welfare (Hirvilammi et al. 2023). However, comparative eco-social performance analysis shows that welfare regimes do not predict ecological performance—even if the social–democratic Nordic cluster represents higher people's willingness to accept a lowering standard of living for ecological reasons (Koch and Fritz 2014) and better "eco-welfare" outcomes, other

clusters vary—suggesting different ecological determinants (Zimmermann and Graziano 2020).

While differences in perspectives on necessary minima in state provisioning of welfare and on the "right" mix between state-, market-, and family-based needs-provisioning characterize different welfare states in theory and empirical reality, they share a common reliance on the growth paradigm (Fritz and Lee 2023; Gough 2015). Whether pursuing decommodified needs-satisfaction and state involvement in social–democratic ideal types, family-based needs-satisfaction with social insurance schemes tied to (male breadwinner) employment in conservative ideal types, or market-based needs provisioning in liberal ideal types, all welfare states have historically contributed to both social stability and capitalist accumulation (Esping-Andersen 1989, 2000), with social–democratic models combining comprehensive social security with continued economic growth particularly successfully (Hirvilammi and Koch 2020). In turn, this means, however, that all existing welfare regimes, irrespective of their specific state–market–family orientations, are on a collision course with the environment (Hirvilammi et al. 2023; Neier et al. 2024), since the decoupling of economic growth from emissions and environmental impacts fast enough to stay below 1.5°C-warming cannot be achieved (Vogel and Hickel 2023; Wiedmann et al. 2020). In other words, achieving a high quality of life for all within the biophysical limits of the planet is a significant challenge for all of today's societies (Martin, Maris, and Simberloff 2016; O'Neill et al. 2018).

At the same time, research has shown that collective and/or decommodified (non-market-based) public provision of basic services can satisfy basic human needs for more people at lower energy use and emissions (Brand-Correa and Steinberger 2017; Oswald, Owen, and Steinberger 2020; Vogel et al. 2021). Indeed, there is a strong consensus in sustainable welfare research that a shift in the conceptualization of welfare from a subjective or utilitarian approach to a focus on needs satisfaction is necessary (though not sufficient) for achieving well-being for present and future generations while staying within the 1.5°C-limit (e.g., Gough and Doyal 1991; Gough 2015, 2017; Lindellee, Alkan Olsson, and Koch 2021; Hirvilammi and Koch 2020). Unlike wants, needs are finite (Di Giulio and Defila 2021; Gough and Doyal 1991). The simultaneous pursuit of social and ecological objectives requires not just changes in individual consumption patterns and lifestyles, but especially, structural changes in welfare systems (Fuchs et al. 2021; Kreinin et al. 2024; O'Neill et al. 2018).

Sustainable welfare is increasingly researched through the perspective of eco-social policies. Eco-social policies have been proposed through re-envisioning social policies' potential ecological contributions as well as through considering specific consumption domains. In this article, we have selected for analysis six eco-social policies prevalent in the literature (see Gough 2022)—three representing labor-related policies (working time reduction [WTR], job guarantees, and income ceilings) and three public service-related policies (universal basic services [UBS], free public transport, renovation programs for least energy-efficient buildings). While other policies, such as universal basic income (UBI), were also highlighted during focus group discussions and are prominent in the literature, we limited our selection to six policies due to methodological constraints (e.g., time limitations) and the need for focused analysis (see Section 3).

WTR encompasses various strategies such as shorter work weeks, 6-h workdays, extended holidays or parental leaves, and earlier retirement options (Kallis 2017; Petschow et al. 2020) potentially affecting production and consumption. The literature suggests WTR could yield positive social, political, and economic outcomes (Kallis 2017; Petschow et al. 2020), such as diminishing gender disparities (Biesecker, Wichterich, and Winterfeld 2012) and enhancing life satisfaction and quality, social integration, and even civic engagement (Buhl and Acosta 2016; Kallis et al. 2020; Schor 2015; Stöger et al. 2015; Wittmann 2014). A national job guarantee program, which provides employment for all seeking work, is proposed as a partnership between the government and the private sector (Gough 2021; Unti 2014). This policy is seen to focus on sustainable industries and mitigate the adverse effects of job losses in high-emission sectors on economically vulnerable households, thereby promoting a more equitable economy (Alcott 2013; Neier et al. 2024).

UBS aims to rectify the unequal distribution of essential services, including healthcare, transportation, housing, and food (Bohnenberger 2020; Coote 2021; Mastini, Kallis, and Hickel 2021). This policy envisions ensuring universal access and social rights to a broader array of public services, addressing basic human needs while reducing resource use and reliance on employment for accessing these necessities (Bohnenberger 2020; Coote 2021; Gough 2019, 2021; Kallis et al. 2020). The proposal for free public transport seeks to increase the appeal and accessibility of public transportation, aiming to decrease greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the transport sector and reduce the reliance on the use and ownership of private vehicles. While it can be included as part of UBS, we have separated it here to assess rationales related to mobility as a consumption domain. The renovation program for energy-inefficient buildings targets greenhouse gas emissions in the residential sector. It suggests financial and technical assistance for upgrading less energy-efficient residences, with particular attention to supporting low-income households as an eco-social policy. Finally, the concept of income or wealth ceilings involves limiting incomes and increasing taxes on wealth to curb GHG emissions resulting from the consumption of (luxury) goods and services (Alexander 2014; Buch-Hansen and Koch 2019; Gough 2021). This includes setting outright income limits and applying income ratio policies.

While these are proposed as eco-social policies, their sustainability potential depends on implementation criteria and their impact on social disparities suggesting the need for applying a policy mix approach in their design (Hirvilammi et al. 2023). This concept was initially employed to integrate fiscal and monetary policies (Rosenow et al. 2016), but has since been extended to the integration of eco-social policies (e.g., Mandelli 2022; Domorenok and Trein 2024). Effective policy mixes should be complementary, consistent, and coherent in addressing the multifaceted nature of sustainable welfare (Capano and Howlett 2020; Cejudo and Michel 2017; Howlett, Vince, and Río González 2017). Crucially, they must also address socio-ecological risks—significant changes in social risks arising directly from environmental hazards or indirectly from the distributive effects of environmental

policies—that can lead to income loss, employment disruptions, housing instability, and social exclusion (Mandelli 2022). The absence of stakeholders capable of advocating for and promoting a truly integrated eco-social agenda, to bridge gaps between different policy domains remains a serious impediment (Domorenok and Trein 2024). Our aim, therefore, is to examine the policy risks perceived by divergent stakeholders and the policy mixes that they find acceptable and "eco-social."

Despite a growing literature on the need for a broad sustainability transformation of the welfare state, with specific eco-social policy formulations and the need for public acceptance (Fritz and Koch 2019; Khan et al. 2023), qualitative studies on these topics are still lacking (Hirvilammi and Koch 2020). This study contributes to filling this gap, by exploring European stakeholders' views on the desirability and feasibility justifications of selected eco-policy options. It also answers Khan et al.'s (2023) call to examine reactions to eco-social policy designs and openness to shifting views on their desirability and feasibility upon discussion. While similar studies can be conducted with representative groups of the general population, our focus on experts opens an additional layer of examining policy mix concerns and simulates a multi-stakeholder policy development context.

3 | Methodology

To explain and analyze stakeholder understandings of eco-social policy conditions that could enable 1.5°C lifestyles, we used a multi-national hybrid policy Delphi approach (Gahbauer et al. 2022), a complex decision-making methodology consisting of multiple rounds of soliciting expert feedback on policy discussions (Linstone and Turoff 1975). The method sheds light on aspects that influence support and likelihood of action and shows how discussions shape participants' willingness to change their minds.

To capture different perspectives, including dissenting views, we used a hybrid policy Delphi approach that included (1) three rounds of online quantitative surveys of participating experts on policy choices and (2) in-person qualitative focus group discussions on the rationale for evaluating the policy choices (Gahbauer et al. 2022). While the original Delphi approach aims to reach a consensus among more homogeneous experts, the policy Delphi aims to elicit and elaborate on the different policy positions held by stakeholders from heterogeneous backgrounds (Manley 2013). For our purpose, we used the method not only to examine the diversity of experts' concerns in imagining the possibility of implementing eco-social policies but also to analyze their barriers and potential enablers.

3.1 | Delphi Participant Selection and Recruitment

As part of a broader project, and to achieve a comparative perspective and gather broader concerns, the policy Delphi process was organized in five European countries—Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Spain, and Sweden. These countries cover all three ideal welfare regime clusters: Sweden reflects the "social democratic" model, while Germany (Esping-Andersen 1989) and to some extent, Spain and Hungary can be considered in the "conservative" cluster (Aspalter, Jinsoo, and Sojeung 2009). Hungary, as a post-socialist European Union (EU) member, presents a more nuanced picture, blending elements of conservative and hybrid welfare approaches (e.g., Orosz 2019). Similarly, Latvia is most often seen as being in the "liberal" camp with "neoliberal" market-oriented needs satisfaction and limited state intervention, but also with some unique hybrid characteristics due to its post-socialist past (such as higher pension expenditures) (e.g., Esping-Andersen 2000; Aidukaitė 2010; Orosz 2019). The case selection aimed to balance theoretical rigor with practical considerations, acknowledging the nuanced and often hybrid realities of welfare regimes, but was also limited by project-participating countries (excluding, e.g., the United Kingdom as the ideal type). This diversity, however, allows for a richer analysis of how different socio-economic contexts influence the feasibility and desirability of eco-social policies.

The policy Delphi experts in these countries were selected for diversity in expert backgrounds, allowing for country context differences. The aim was to recruit stakeholders holding expertise or key positions in social or ecological policy development. Following the recommendations for a hybrid policy Delphi (Gahbauer et al. 2022) and logistical concerns of organizing the process in several countries, we aimed for a group of 15 experts. In the end, 10–18 experts were recruited in each country. While only eco-social policies are analyzed in this article, the arrangement also included an equivalent synchronously organized process around sustainable business models. The proposed Delphi process expert quotas covered 3 local and national policymakers, 2 politicians (political party members), 2 researchers, and 2 representatives from private and public companies, including social enterprises, 2 business associations, 2 trade unions, and 2 civil society organizations. While in each country there were slight deviations, the coverage remained close to the proposal.

Due to local specificities and limitations in recruitment, there were differences in each country in how participants represented a different spectrum of fields and ideological leanings. While representatives of political parties of different leanings were invited, those on the left and green side of the spectrum were more likely to participate in three out of five countries. Recruitment was carried out through personalized and general invitations to relevant stakeholders as well as to already established contacts of the partner organizers.

3.2 | Delphi Surveys and Focus Group Discussions

The eco-social policy Delphi process consisted of three rounds of online voting 1 week apart and a full-day workshop in the second week to allow participants to reassess and potentially revise their evaluations of the eco-social policies based on the information and discussions provided. The survey included a question on how the participants evaluated the importance of eco-social policies for climate change mitigation and the evaluation of the different policies mentioned above. Each policy was rated on a four-point Likert scale on its desirability (very desirable, desirable, undesirable, and very undesirable) for enabling 1.5° lifestyles and its feasibility for implementation in the future (2030, 2040, 2050, and never). While different approaches have since proliferated (De Loë et al. 2016), to

ensure that positive and negative feedback is collected, the survey followed the original policy Delphi guideline of not including neutral options (Turoff 1970).

The expert Delphi focus groups were organized in the second week, dividing the participants into two focus groups of 5–9 people. The opening presentation included a brief description of each eco-social policy that was also sent before voting and showed the results from the first survey. The following discussions delved deeper into the participants' reasoning on the desirability of proposed eco-social policies, followed by a report from each group to the plenary. The second survey followed these discussions, capturing any shifts in perception influenced by the group dialogue, and the results were reported back to the participants. After the second survey, feasibility focus group discussions were held. Due to time constraints, only six policies could be thoroughly discussed in the process.

The third survey was organized online and aimed to consolidate the participants' views after reflecting on the cumulative insights gained through prior surveys and focus group discussions. Participants were provided with a summary of the previous rounds' outcomes and key discussion points, offering them the opportunity to refine their evaluations further. This iterative process was crucial in understanding how stakeholder perceptions evolved and identifying areas of consensus or persistent disagreement, which is reflected in the varying voting results shown in Figure 1 and the narrative analysis.

There were two participants who completed the first survey but did not participate in the focus group discussion, which explains a slight decrease in participation in the second and third surveys (see Table 1). In Latvia, one participant did not properly submit the first survey, but several did not complete the third survey within the required time. As a result, the quantitative results for Latvian participants were more variable in the third survey.

3.3 | Data Analysis

The data collected in the Delphi process included the results of the three rounds of online survey including rationales expressed in open questions; voice recordings and protocols of the focus group discussions analyzed and reported to the authors by partner organizers; focus group discussion worksheets completed by participants; and photos from the focus group meetings documenting the materials and the process.

For this article, we analyzed the data through a three-step process. First, we examined the quantitative outcomes of the policy Delphi surveys, combining the desirability and feasibility results across countries as well as comparing the differences. Second, we analyzed the focus group discussion data coding it for how selected European experts saw the policies' (1) perceived contributions to an eco-social transformation; (2) structural barriers and risks, and (3) enabling policy mix and measures in their implementation. Additionally, we analyzed how welfare regimes, ideological convictions, and lifestyle expectations affected these assessments. In the following sections, we report on these results.

TABLE 1 | Number of Delphi survey participants.

Country	Survey 1	Survey 2	Survey 3
Germany	13	12	12
Spain	10	10	10
Hungary	18	17	17
Latvia	10	11	7
Sweden	14	14	14
Total	66	65	60

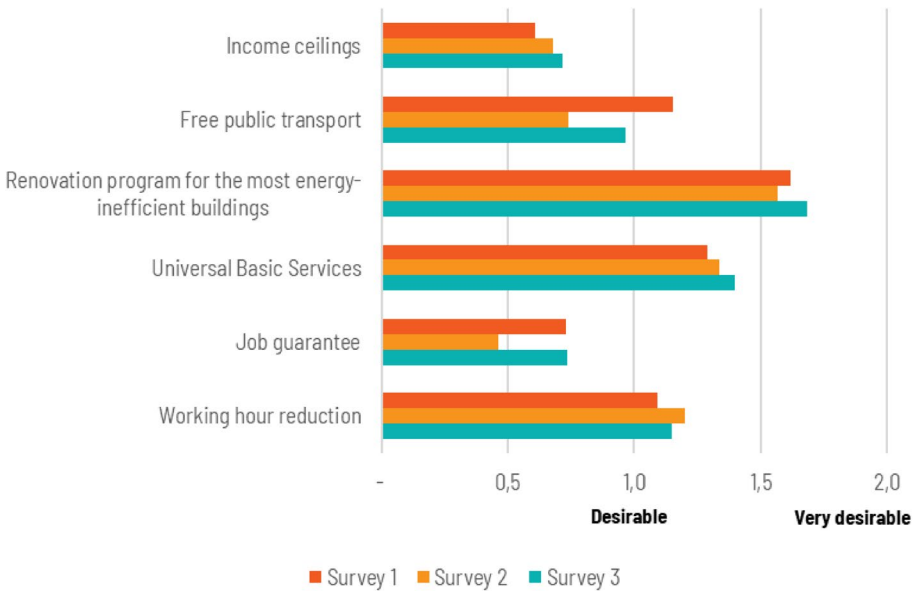

FIGURE 1 | The desirability of eco-social policies (average aggregated policy Delphi survey results by policy options; from −2 (very undesirable) to +2 (very desirable)).

4 | Results

This section presents findings from the policy Delphi survey and focus groups, where stakeholders assessed eco-social policies for 1.5° lifestyles. Stakeholders voted in three rounds on the six proposed eco-social policies, which are shown in Figure 1 (desirability) and Figure 2 (feasibility). While all policies were evaluated as ecologically desirable, the building renovation program, UBS, and WTR were the most favored, but job guarantees, income ceilings, and free public transport garnered less support.

In the initial survey, income ceilings were the least popular policy, followed by job guarantees, which received less support after discussions. Participants struggled to associate job guarantees with the 1.5° target due to skepticism about the effective distribution of skills and labor, while income ceilings were seen as slightly more relevant. The renovation program, which was widely supported, was the easiest for stakeholders to link to the climate target. Although free public transport was also seen as relevant, it received less support than WTR, and discussions further decreased support due to concerns about quality and convenience. UBS gained in desirability after the discussions but was seen as less directly linked to environmental goals without additional measures. Support increased for WTR, UBS, income caps, and the renovation program, while free public transport and job guarantees declined. However, perceptions of feasibility remained mixed.

4.1 | Working Time Reduction

While WTR is often discussed as a cornerstone of sustainable welfare policy and a win–win policy for environmental and social welfare in literature (Antal 2014; Antal et al. 2020; Frey 2019; Gerold and Nocker 2018), most Delphi participants thought it would only aid climate goals if paired with consumption caps and reduced inequality. Overall, the discussions increased participants' perception of WTR's eco-social desirability but challenged its feasibility. Nevertheless, participants' feasibility perception increased a week after the discussions suggesting potential afterthoughts (Figure 2). WTR was mostly seen as a reward for providing better work–life balance, personal agency, and health, but as a sacrifice in income. It was, however, acknowledged that it can function only if it does not compromise the quality of life and fairer distribution of time and resources since WTR might not be beneficial for people combining several low-income jobs. Participants, who perceived WTR as leading to less production and consumption assumed that personal, friend, and family leisure activities, as well as volunteer and political activities, do not require more material consumption, but rather lifestyle change.

Meanwhile, others argue additional leisure time will not decrease production due to productivity increases but will encourage carbon-intensive consumption, such as driving or flying more, especially in high-income countries and groups. These participants argued for measures like discouraging unsustainable travel (German participants), raising awareness, promoting telecommuting (Spanish participants), and settling for a 6-h working day instead of a 4-day working week to mitigate such risks. Productivity, however, was often a feasibility concern with participants worrying whether WTR is fair for productive workers and how it would work under conditions of labor shortage (Latvian participants) or whether the productivity in the country is sufficient for WTR to be possible without losing global competitiveness. Nevertheless, the feasibility of WTR was perceived as dependent on individual and collective living standards. To address the risks of decreasing wages and forcing people to work multiple jobs, German participants suggested wage compensations to support reduced working hours for those at risk. Other proposals included measures to counter inflation, enhance social security in case of lower wages, and foster adequate regulation and cooperation among various stakeholders. Potentially due to fewer concerns about inequality, competitiveness, and social guarantees, German and Swedish participants were more optimistic about the feasibility of WTR (Figure 3).

In discussions, work was seen as important to self-realization and striving for rewards in a highly competitive environment. It often led to debating UBI, which supporters saw as a better

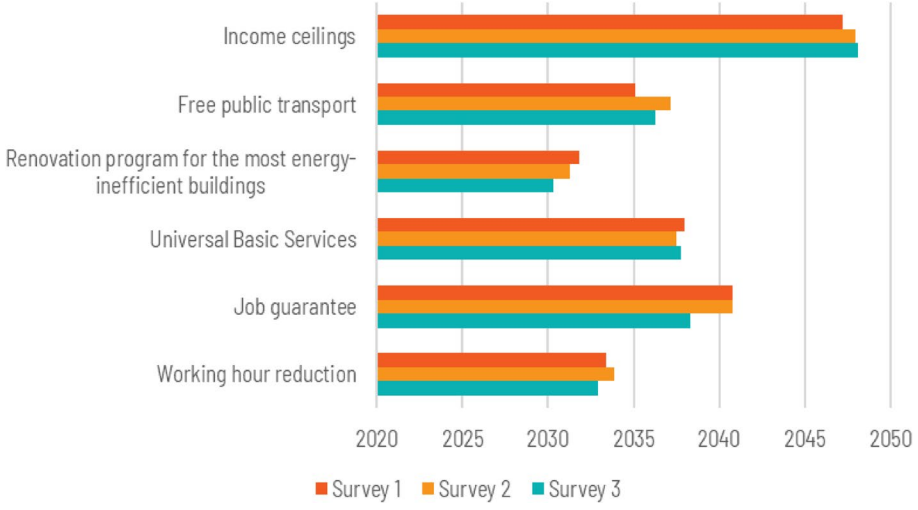

FIGURE 2 | The feasibility of eco-social policies (average aggregated policy Delphi survey results by policy options). Note that higher feasibility perception is to the left on the graph—earlier on the time scale.

alternative to WTR for providing personal agency and reducing production, but opponents presented it as leading to depression, addictive behaviors or reduced service quality in undesired service work. Critics presented WTR and UBI as misunderstanding people's motivations and social expectations to work. The most pessimistic views related to assumptions that people need to be forced to work, or else the public welfare would collapse. Such risks were thought to decrease support for the policy not only by employers who would need to reconstruct their workforce and fear shrinking profits but also by the employees, many of whom barely make ends meet and desire higher wages rather than less work, to feel more secure. Stakeholders viewed the shift in perception—toward valuing reduced work hours—as a long-term process of changing deep-rooted "work ethic" ideology (Weeks 2011) that must be driven by individuals and grassroots demand.

4.2 | Job Guarantee

Although job guarantee is often discussed as among the key measures for ensuring sustainable welfare (e.g., Vogel et al. 2024; Neier et al. 2024), it was the hardest of the proposed policies for participants to connect to enabling a 1.5° society. Participants recognized that job guarantees may assist in transitioning from job losses in emission-intensive industries but may not inherently address climate goals and could reinforce the "work ethic" and economic growth, exacerbating the climate crisis. Job guarantee policies were seen as potentially contributing to an eco-social transformation if well-integrated with existing labor structures, income guarantees, and basic service arrangements. In several countries, job guarantee was seen as less eco-socially desirable after discussions. Nonetheless, participants saw it as similarly desirable a week after them and as more feasible after the Delphi process.

Similarly to WTR, the job guarantee raised discussions on what constitutes meaningful and efficient work. Experts advocated policies that promote high-quality, well-compensated jobs over mandatory low-paying work. In Latvia, participants referred to inefficient jobs prevalent in Soviet Latvia as a bad example, while Swedish discussions revealed a leaning toward job guarantees strongly supporting the market economy's decision-making (see Figure 4). In Germany, supporters of the job guarantee saw a

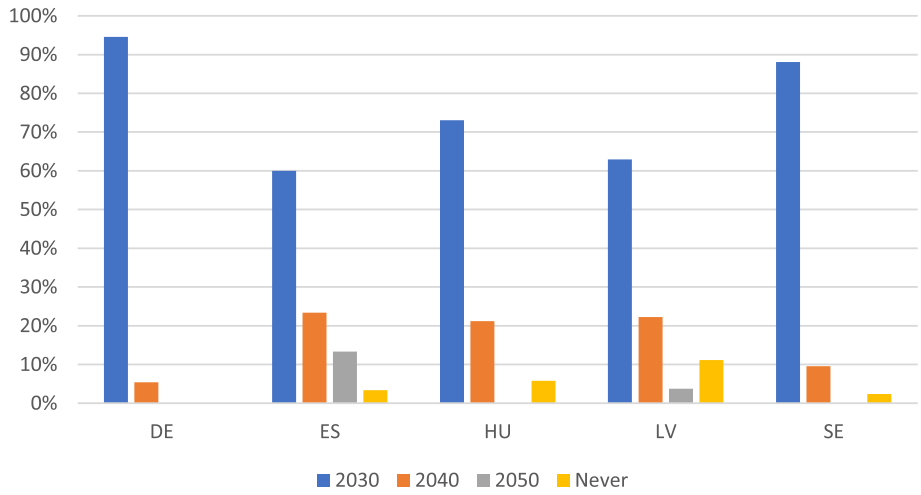

FIGURE 3 | The feasibility of the policy "Reduction of Working Hours."

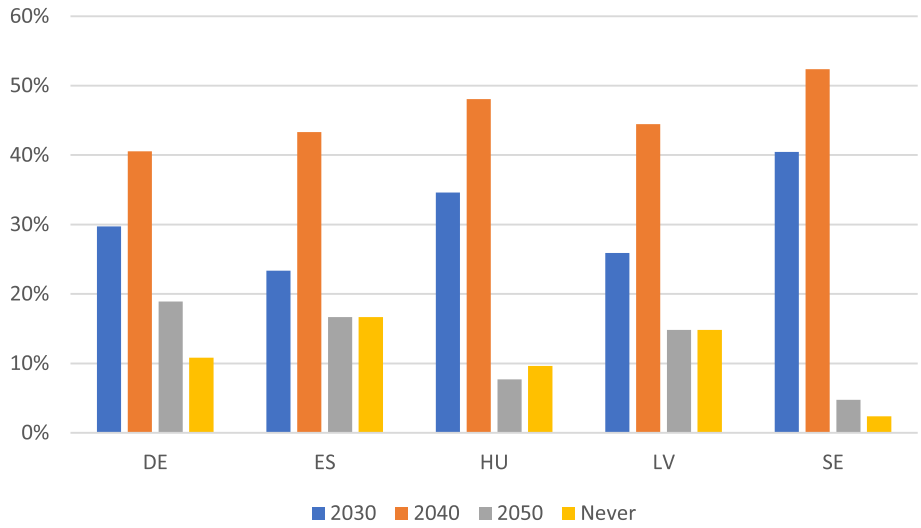

FIGURE 4 | The feasibility of the policy "Job Guarantee."

strong state role in providing desirable employment opportunities. There was an emphasis on preventing unemployment, addressing individual needs, and quality of employment rather than simply the quantity of jobs. However, across most countries, experts were pessimistic about whether the allocation of skills would allow such an endeavor. The policy focus leaned toward the need for quality education and professional training guarantees as a prerequisite for the policy to be effective. Additionally, concerns were raised about the program's ability to guarantee equal pay between different sectors.

The sustainability side was thought to be dependent on implementation design, for example, guaranteeing that the employment is in a non-polluting industry and at a regional level, so people are not forced to move. Otherwise, the policy was thought to be counterproductive. Job guarantee debates invoked considerations of UBI, with Swedish experts seeing them as complementary, the strongest critic in Latvia prioritizing UBI over job guarantee, but Hungarian discussions leaning toward job guarantee as more acceptable than UBI due to assumptions about work ethic. Hungarian participants also thought that a job guarantee could improve the working situation of women and relieve psychological pressure related to job insecurity.

4.3 | Universal Basic Services

While UBS and decommodified needs-provisioning are strongly linked to satisfying human needs within the Earth's limits (e.g., Vogel et al. 2024; O'Neill et al. 2018), participants struggled with directly linking UBS policies to 1.5° lifestyles. UBS was perceived as focused on social welfare rather than carbon emissions. While UBS was generally well-supported by participants, many feasibility concerns arose. Most participants viewed UBS as possible only after 2035 (see Figure 5), with discussions increasing its desirability rather than feasibility perception. There were diverging views on which services should be included in UBS, with some emphasizing collective responsibility for meeting individual needs (decommodified provisioning), but others expressing individual responsibility for needs-satisfaction (market-provisioning of needs), including concerns on welfare deservingness. Some also differentiated education, health, and social services from consumption-related services (such as housing, food, and transport) perceived as either more efficiently served by the market or as leading to overconsumption if served by the market. Interestingly, Hungarian and Latvian participants exhibited more optimism about providing UBS compared with other countries, possibly influenced by past experiences with state provision of services.

Key feasibility concerns revolved around funding and sustaining UBS policies, with discussions on whether all services can be feasibly funded. Some participants argued for private sector involvement in service delivery, while others expressed concerns about state capacity issues and long waiting lists. Participants, who favored a market-based and individual or commodified provisioning, also suggested that potential increases in consumption among disadvantaged groups through the provision of basic services could result in higher emissions. While this is strongly refuted in research (emissions related to overconsumption beyond needs-satisfaction is largely considered the key problem for sustainability, e.g., Vogel et al. 2024) this rather signaled further ontological barriers around responsibility and fairness when it comes to the feasibility and desirability of UBS policies. The feasibility of UBS policies hinges on debates surrounding efficiency, justice, alignment with societal needs and environmental standards, administrative requirements, and funding sustainability.

Thus, UBS was seen as only possible if implemented with a policy package that prioritizes sufficiency, uses robust ecological standards in public procurement, optimizes products and services, getting rid of carbon-intensive or luxury products and inefficient low-quality and luxury services. For some, such regulation and monitoring of need-satisfaction invoked risks of state paternalism and bureaucratization. It was argued that community provisioning and different high-quality services provided outside of the state framework sometimes would still be needed. If the services provided were of low quality and certain groups were underserved, alternatives would still emerge—raising questions on fairness, security, and sustainability of the gap-filling solutions.

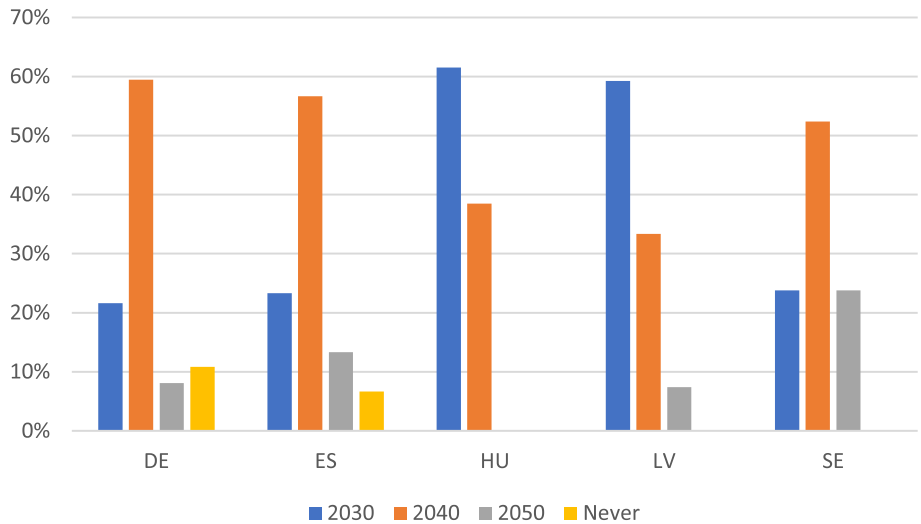

FIGURE 5 | The feasibility of the policy "Universal Basic Services."

Additionally, participants commonly discussed whether UBS or UBI is more desirable, with some suggesting that they should be combined.

4.4 | Free Public Transport

Most participants recognized free public transport as an eco-social policy. Stakeholders believed that by enhancing the accessibility, affordability, and appeal of public transportation, the policy would foster a transition from individual car use, aiding in (1) the reduction of transportation-related carbon emissions and (2) improving societal well-being through better air quality in urban areas and greater social inclusivity in mobility services. At the same time, there was less agreement on the priority, quality, and efficiency of free public transport, making concerns about the desirability and feasibility of the policy highly integrated. Due to these ambiguities in the policy's efficiency, after discussions participants' perception of both the policy's desirability and feasibility slightly decreased. Except for Hungary, stakeholders across the studied case countries viewed the feasibility of "free public transport" favorably, deeming it achievable by 2030 (see Figure 6). Nevertheless, they identified several significant risks that could hinder implementation.

Opinions diverged on whether it would effectively decrease private car usage, noting that it might instead diminish cycling and walking, while dedicated car users remain reluctant to forgo the benefits associated with driving. Public transport was thought to require more time for route and schedule planning, meaning that savings need to be significant enough to compensate for potentially lost time. This sentiment was particularly strong in Germany, where the deep-seated car culture and the status symbol associated with private vehicles were noted. German and Hungarian stakeholders speculated that offering "free" public transport could inadvertently devalue the service and elevate the prestige of car ownership. Latvian participants, in turn, dismissed the importance of pricing, noting that public transport fares were already low in Latvia and that it was comfort and time-saving that favored private car use even when it costs significantly more. Some stakeholders also feared that free public transport could lead to overcrowding and strain on already inadequate transport and service infrastructure and quality, which could not be quickly upgraded due to limited public funding.

In response, participants believed it crucial to enhance the efficiency, speed, and convenience of public transport services, confident that this would gain widespread public support. Others suggested it might be more effective to make private car driving and parking more challenging and costly even if this is a more unpopular policy. Additional recommendations supported concepts like the "15-min city," where all essential services are within a 15-min reach, facilitating the integration of public transport into the existing infrastructure and improving its accessibility. However, realizing these changes would necessitate substantial national and municipal investments in public transport services and infrastructure to be funded by other means than transport fares.

4.5 | Renovation Program for the Most Energy-Inefficient Buildings

The renovation policy stood out for stakeholders as most desirable for limiting climate change to 1.5°C. Despite some uncertainty about whether it is necessary to renovate all buildings, the program was lauded for its emission-reducing potential. The policy caused little ideological disputes since it easily complies with the growth paradigm. The stakeholders anticipated feasibility by 2030 (see Figure 7); with perceptions of feasibility increasing over the three votes, mostly because the participants saw many climate-unrelated reasons to renovate that fuel the process. Nevertheless, participants raised many feasibility concerns and considered supporting policies.

Ecologically, the Delphi participants were concerned about the potential adverse impacts of the rebound effect from efficiency gains, where renovations not accompanied by changes in lifestyle and habits could lead to unintended increases in resource use. To address this, participants proposed integrating measures to regulate consumption behaviors and infrastructure usage within the renovation program, such as setting limits on indoor temperatures and adopting a life-cycle perspective on building materials. As the Hungarian participants emphasized,

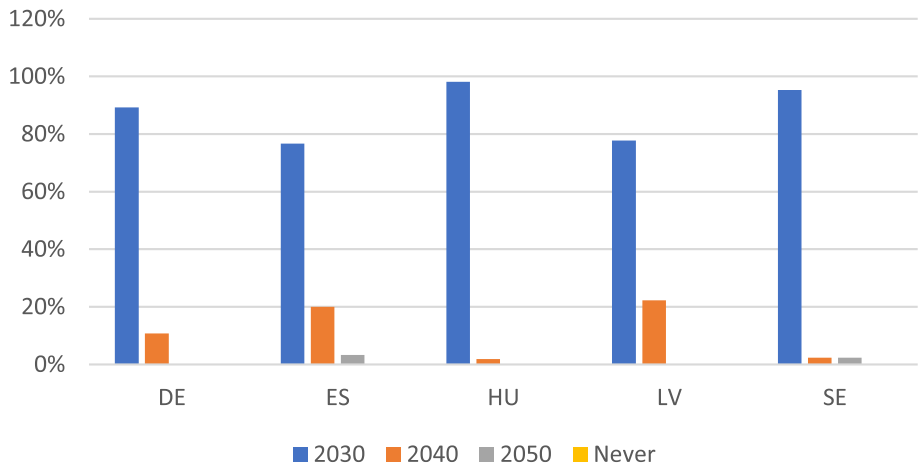

FIGURE 6 | The feasibility of the policy "Free Public Transport."

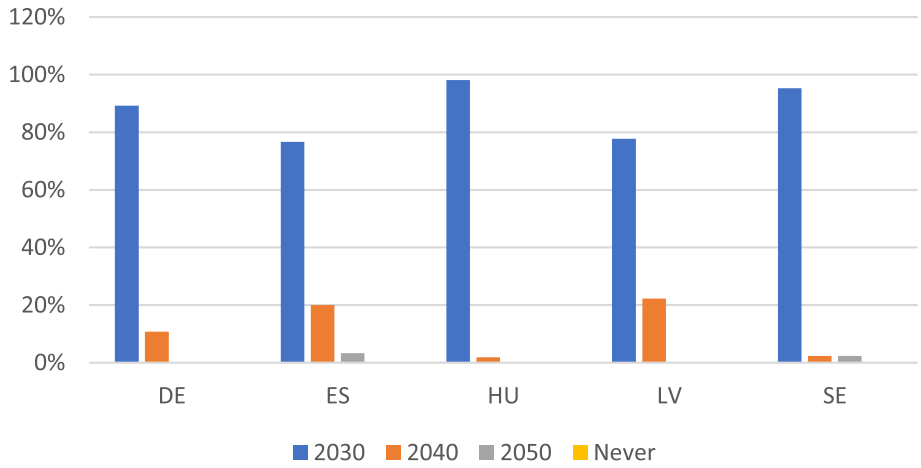

FIGURE 7 | The feasibility of the policy "Renovation Program for the Most Energy-Inefficient Buildings."

the process should not end when the renovation is completed. Similarly, of concern was social inclusivity, with worries that the renovation efforts might not adequately reach the households most in need and could inadvertently benefit property owners and investors more than tenants, particularly as increased rents could disproportionately impact low-income residents. To mitigate this, discussions in some Delphi's considered subsidies to support low-income property owners in homeowner markets or caps that maintain affordability in rental markets.

Administratively, concerns were widespread regarding the adequacy of governmental support and funding as well as addressing the reluctance of some residents to undertake renovations. In Latvia, for example, the low uptake of renovations prompted discussions on whether participation should be compulsory, with opinions divided between preserving resident autonomy and encouraging, or even mandating, involvement through incentives or penalties. In contexts where significant financial investment and escalating construction costs are concerns, the fear of corporate manipulation and corruption in awarding construction contracts was prevalent, as highlighted by the Hungarian Delphi participants. Ensuring compatibility with existing housing regulations and maintaining standards in a large-scale renovation effort was seen as a substantial challenge, potentially straining the construction sector. Additionally, the pace of renovation and the adoption of technologies like heat pumps, which, despite their long-standing availability, have not seen widespread use, emerged as additional concerns.

4.6 | Income Ceilings

From the selected policies, income ceilings met the highest expert resistance. Some perceived the policy as unfair and overly restrictive, based on the belief that individuals should be entitled to the full amount of their earnings. This stance is rooted in the view that the value of labor varies, with the market mechanism ensuring that less efficient services are supplanted by those that offer greater value. In Latvia, for example, a labor union spokesperson contended that advocating for workers' rights and better living standards has historically centered on the pursuit of higher wages, rendering the notion of income ceilings off-putting. Nevertheless, participants' perception of income ceiling desirability slightly increased after the Delphi process due to exploring different options and the potential eco-social benefits. Less optimistically, the perception of its feasibility slightly decreased after discussing the key challenges.

Despite the initially strong opposition, some participants eventually acknowledged that income ceilings could potentially rectify the imbalances in income, wealth, and emission distribution. They argued the policy might increase a sense of fairness in a context where certain jobs are disproportionately valued over others that are crucial yet under-compensated. Proponents believed that capping the wealth and earnings of the affluent is crucial for reducing excessive resource consumption and those policies like caps on capital gains could lead to a more equitable distribution of wealth. This discussion highlighted a larger debate on when the relative value of work becomes unjustifiable, merely facilitating the purchase of luxury items and high-carbon footprint services. Therefore, some participants advocated for limiting the excess profits earmarked for luxury consumption. Overall, the idea of progressive taxation and net wealth taxes found more favor than earnings limitations. Despite deep-seated social, gray market, and business innovation concerns, there was a consensus on the immediate impact of such policy measures on reducing resource use and emissions.

While opinions diverged, especially among Hungarian and Swedish participants, many experts viewed income ceilings as not viable until 2050 or later (see Figure 8). A critical concern was policy loopholes that might enable the wealthy to evade restrictions by transferring assets to less regulated jurisdictions. This risk was deemed particularly high in countries with substantial gray markets, such as Hungary and Latvia, where the threat of both capital and talent flight was a concern. To mitigate adverse effects, experts agreed on the necessity of incorporating income ceilings within a broader, ideally global, regulatory framework. Additionally, participants expected public resistance to such measures due to expectations for salary increases, potential shifts in income and wealth distribution, and disinterest from those in positions of political and economic power to "disadvantage themselves." Another shared concern was that income ceilings might prompt lower motivation to strive for excellence and innovate and thus, lower the quality of services and consumption while underreporting income and wealth, thereby harming

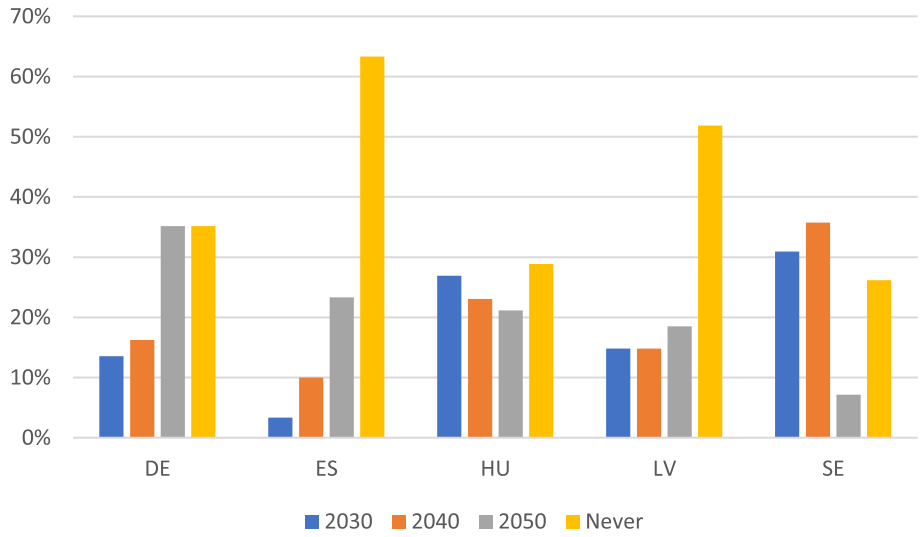

FIGURE 8 | The feasibility of the policy "Income Ceilings."

state finances. However, some saw the potential for wealth and progressive taxes, along with redistributed income, to ultimately benefit the state's financial health. While acknowledging various challenges to the policy's viability, Spanish participants suggested that income collected through ceilings could fund UBS. In Latvia, a novel idea emerged where excess income would be directed to personal accounts, accessible only after significant societal low-carbon transitions or for low-carbon purposes.

4.7 | The Cross-Cutting Policy Mix Supporting an Eco-Social Transition

As can be seen, all policies' eco-social desirability and feasibility were thought to depend on a policy mix mitigating the potential consumption and inequality increases. Table 2 summarizes the key perceived structural barriers and risks and the policy measures proposed by the experts for their mitigation.

Overall, we found two key cross-cutting directions of participants' policy suggestions: (1) to mitigate policies' negative social and environmental consequences and (2) to integrate sustainable welfare with systemic institutional, administrative, and socio-cultural changes.

First, while the selected policies were recognized as holding eco-social merits, all invoked concerns of negative social and ecological consequences, such as increased inequalities and GHG emissions. Participants questioned eco-social policy implementation, administration, resource, and financial capacities to properly satisfy needs within biophysical limits. Similarly, the policies were also seen as not socially equitable if they did not distribute benefits and burdens fairly across different income groups and regions, ensuring that the most vulnerable populations were not disproportionately affected. Most such concerns were raised for the renovation program (risks of utility, rent, and apartment price increase), work time reduction (risks of unequal distribution of incomes and workloads), and job guarantees (ensuring meaningful and well-paid jobs). In response, participants argued for cross-cutting policy instruments and mixes that (1) ensure equity and fairness concerns are integrated into all policies and reach groups most in need; (2) combine eco-social policies to achieve overarching goals (e.g., it was common to link WTR, UBI, and job guarantees, even if that produced contested and different variations); and (3) improve the quality, efficiency, and accessibility of public services, ensuring effective flows of funding and allocation of adequately paid work.

Second, the Delphi participants considered the policies unlikely to be efficient and feasible if not part of broader socio-cultural and institutional changes. Several Delphi participants proposed mainstream changes in the understanding of the merits and positive investment value in wealth distribution, of the perception of welfare as not ever-expanding, and of considerations of receiving services without a precondition to work. Regardless of ideological convictions, most participants tied eco-social policy implementation with increasing the role of welfare in society. The ideological debates, however, revealed different positions on 'the right balance' between state and private solutions (e.g., integrating job guarantees in market-based solutions). The policy efficiency was thought to depend on long-term commitment, holistic governance framework, and data-driven adjustments. Importantly, many participants suggested designing robust supranational legislation (e.g., EU directives and regulations) that fosters sustainable welfare and mitigates the risks to the economy from welfare changes (such as UBS or income ceilings) being implemented only in select countries. On an individual and household level, policy implementation was thought to depend on educating consumers to reach higher well-being through low-carbon consumption and more quality time spent with friends and family (e.g., for WTR or income ceilings to be efficient). There were also proposals to deliberately involve communities in decision-making processes regarding eco-social challenges and give them more instruments to tackle them on a local level.

5 | Discussion

In recent years, eco-social policies have gained prominence in discussions and research on climate governance. Research has developed normative models for sustainable welfare

TABLE 2 | Overview of the eco-social policies' contributions to transformation, associated structural barriers and risks, and enabling policy measures.

Eco-social policies	Contributions to an eco-social transformation	Structural barriers and risks	Enabling policy mix and measures
Reduction of working hours	• Reduction of health expenditures • More sustainable production and consumption patterns • Reduced energy usage	• Increased consumption in affluent societies (more leisure time) • Decline in the quality of services • Financial consequences • Lack of support among employers and employees • Insufficient productivity/collective living standards, risk of decreasing wages	• Reducing carbon-intensive consumption • Rewarding fewer material goods and services (e.g., addressing inflation and social security, discouraging unsustainable travel, raising awareness, promoting telecommuting) • Wage compensation • Leverage digitalization to reduce commuting and promote longer working lives • Support and promote local development and community projects that align with sustainability goals
Job guarantee	• Support transition to low-carbon industries (prerequisites: employment in non-polluting industries and at the regional level) • Improve working conditions for women	• Exacerbating climate crisis by reinforcing work paradigm, economic growth, and production • Narrative of inefficient jobs • State's inefficiency in allocating work • Reinforcing compulsion to work and traditional wage labor concepts, stigmatization—State as a coercive apparatus	• Provision of desirable, sustainable, and equitable employment opportunities coupled with prevention of unemployment and promotion of individual needs • Quality education, and efficient professional training guarantees • Combine with UBI • Provide job guarantee voluntarily • Alignment with existing labor system • Reduce fossil subsidies
Universal basic services	• Protection from precarity and social exclusion • Decommodification of critical aspects of life	• Increasing consumption for disadvantaged groups • Paternalistic policy style limiting choice and participation • Insufficient funding and ineffective state capacity and provision of certain services • Excessive bureaucracy	• To counter negative ecological side-effects: prioritize sufficiency, optimize products and services, reduce carbon-intensive/inefficient/luxury goods and services • UBS vouchers to increase citizen agency • Combine with UBI • Enforce public procurement and trade policies that prioritize environmental considerations

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

Eco-social policies	Contributions to an eco-social transformation	Structural barriers and risks	Enabling policy mix and measures
Free public transport	• Social inclusion due to accessible and affordable transport • CO_2 emission reduction due to reduction of individual car use • Improved quality of life (attractive mobility options, cleaner air)	• Insufficient short- and mid-term funding for improvements of public transport infrastructure leading to low-quality public transport services • Car culture preventing reduced car use	• Measures increasing efficiency and convenience of public transport • Measures making driving and parking a car more difficult and more expensive • Promote the "15-min city" • Strengthen national and municipal funding
Renovation program for the most energy-inefficient buildings	• Improve energy efficiency in buildings • Target by efficiency instead of activity	• Extent and financing of government support • Increased rental and apartment prices and residents' choice not to renovate • Rebound effects of efficiency improvements (increased material use, overheating) • Social exclusion of households in need, while landlords and speculators benefit • Skepticism regarding the environmental benefits of renovating all buildings. • Risk of big business interference and corruption in construction contracts • Bureaucracy overburdening the construction industry • Insufficient speed of renovation and technological change	• Widespread political and financial support for renovations • Subsidies to low-income households to ensure affordability of rental and apartment prices and incentives to promote resident decision-making in favor of renovation (or disincentives to avoid decision-making against renovation) • Regulating consumption patterns and infrastructure use (life-cycle approach to building materials, limit room temperatures) • Ensure policy's integration with existing housing regulations and renovation standards
Income ceilings	• Reduced resource consumption (esp. luxury) leading to reduced CO_2 emissions • Making current wealth distribution more socially just: valuing crucial yet under-compensated labor	• Unfair and restrictive: devaluing "higher valued" labor and lowering wages—Risk of lower quality services, reduced consumption, and underreporting of income and wealth harming state finances • Loopholes enabling system evasion • Resistance from politico-economic elites • Administrative challenges (defining, managing, and implementing income ceilings, designing fairness principles, etc.)	• Establishing a robust EU-wide or global regulatory framework to close loopholes • Caps on extreme wealth, capital, and assets (less resisted) • Capping excess profits directed toward luxury spending • Progressive taxes and net wealth taxes • Income ceilings could help fund UBS • Excess income directed to personal accounts accessible only after significant transition or for low-carbon purposes

(Gough 2022; Koch and Fritz 2014; Vogel et al. 2024) and examined eco-social policy acceptance (Fritz and Koch 2019; Khan et al. 2023) and its social and eco-welfare state determinants (Fritz and Koch 2019; Zimmermann and Graziano 2020; Gugushvili and Otto 2023). By assessing and discussing selected eco-social policies (WTR, job guarantee, UBS, public transport, renovation program, and income ceilings) with experts, we have focused on the links between perceived barriers and risks and potential supporting policies mitigating them. Indeed, all policies' eco-social desirability and feasibility were thought to depend on a supporting policy mix.

The policy mix approach provides a useful framework for understanding these complexities, emphasizing the need for a coherent combination of policy instruments that complement each other positively to achieve broader goals (Kivimaa and Kern 2016). Achieving sustainable welfare involves developing a cohesive set of eco-social policies that integrate environmental and social goals. In this vein, Delphi's feasibility discussions showed that such complexity makes eco-social policy implementation much more complicated. If Khan, Hildingsson, and Garting (2020) observed that policies linking ecological and social goals are often stronger on a rhetorical level than in practice, where it can be found only on an experimental and project basis, we have shown the leap of policy imagination it takes for experts to consider their implementation.

We have shown that European experts found it challenging to link selected eco-social policies with the 1.5° target perceiving them as primarily about welfare increases, suggesting it is even harder for the general population (see Khan et al. 2023). The policies were not seen as ecologically feasible if not complemented with (1) consumption-reducing mechanisms, such as through integrating minimum–maximum consumption standards (Fuchs et al. 2021) into welfare and wealth distribution policies; (2) higher ecological standards in public procurement to ensure that state services are indeed more resource-efficient; and (3) the integration of clear redistributive mechanisms in how policies are funded, for example, adopting higher tax rates to limit wealth and carbon-intensive consumption and fund UBS. Otherwise, welfare was often thought to increase consumption since most experts upheld the growth paradigm, which critical scholars deem incompatible with reconciling social needs and environmental limits (see Büchs and Koch 2017).

Nevertheless, our expert's evaluation of the policies' relative desirability was comparatively higher than that of the general population, likely due to Delphi's sample size not aiming for general representation and limitations in recruiting participants who are strongly against eco-social policies. The Delphi participants considered the policies unlikely to be efficient and feasible if not part of broader institutional and socio-cultural changes. Gugushvili and Otto (2023) have noted how structural and institutional (welfare regime) determinants as well as self-interest, ideology, and welfare deservingness shape support for eco-social policies. The qualitative analysis of the Delphi's revealed an additional layer of perceptions to this. While reduction of working time and free public transport was seen as necessary for lifestyle changes to be effective, support for income ceilings and job guarantees would require an ideological shift in how people see the role of the state and the value and distribution of jobs and wealth. UBS and the renovation program were relatively well supported, but even their implementation would require the state to take a higher degree of responsibility over need-satisfaction that some were not willing to support due to perceived high costs and less consideration of biophysical limits.

These concerns underscore that sustainable welfare depends on the development of new regulative frameworks that facilitate sociocultural changes covering understandings of well-being, sustainable lifestyle practices, and more equitable relations—fostering what has often been described as a new eco-social contract (Gough 2022; Krause et al. 2022). Bridging welfare and climate policies requires new regulative frameworks that align with governance perspectives. The discussions highlighted two key areas: (a) a systemic approach to raising eco-social administrative capacity and managing trade-offs between achieving climate goals and maintaining economic and job stability and (b) facilitating global socio-cultural changes in lifestyles and thinking. While the emphasis on supranational solutions suggests a global and regional harmonizing of welfare regimes prevalent in the literature (Büchs and Koch 2017), local debates on state–private arrangements illustrate how these could operate within different sustainable welfare regimes.

For some policies (UBS, UBI, WTR, labor guarantee, and income ceilings), there were explicit single-country ideological differences in how participants saw their desirability based on convictions about human nature related to willingness to work and state capacities to ensure sustainable and quality provisioning. Attitudes toward work, income distribution, and responsibility for needs-satisfaction (state–family–market) influenced the reception of policies like income ceilings or reduction of working hours. Due to such ideological disputes, multi-partisan support was seen as unlikely in the near future. This sentiment was most pronounced in Hungary and Sweden, where participants thought current governments (in 2023) were not supportive enough of either climate or social policies. This also shows that stakeholders' perception of policy feasibility was affected by current governments' political leanings in case countries.

While each country's socio-economic, historical, and political context shapes perceptions of feasibility and desirability, requiring tailor-made proposals for public approval and effective implementation (Neier et al. 2024), eco-social policy rationales went beyond welfare regimes in the Delphi's (see also Fritz and Koch 2019). Although conservative–corporatist narratives support policies like working time reduction in Germany, other results, like less support for job guarantees, reveal a more complex picture, where ecological, implementation, and feasibility rationales challenge common perceptions of the policy. While Sweden's social–democratic model is said to prioritize sustainability, equality, and welfare provision, market efficiency narratives challenging eco-social policies were not less prevalent there. Latvia's neoliberal welfare model, influenced by its post-socialist past, revealed both participants' skepticism of state efficiency and belief in higher state provisioning capacities. While Hungarian participants also expressed mixed welfare views, they also highlighted political and corruption concerns affecting perceived outcomes. Esping-Andersen's (1989, 2000) framework on welfare regime clusters nevertheless helps contextualize these varied perspectives by highlighting the influence of welfare

state typologies on eco-social policy rationales. His emphasis on decommodification and the role of state, market, and family in needs provisioning underscores the path dependencies that shape perceptions of policy feasibility and desirability. While welfare regimes and the state status quo social and ecological configurations influence experts' rationales, growth and market narratives are highly prevalent in all countries. Nonetheless, the potential for creating changes via the right policy mix could also be identified. Importantly, despite participants representing different ideologies, these proposals that reflect core ideas in line with the sustainable welfare literature (Hirvilammi et al. 2023; Bohnenberger 2023) also reveal the potential for a multi-stakeholder approach in overcoming the structural and perceived barriers.

6 | Conclusions

The policy Delphi results from Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Spain, and Sweden reveal persistent challenges in integrating welfare and climate policies within European contexts, despite increasing literature and policy advocacy for a just eco-social transition. This study highlights the critical role of ideological constraints; particularly the growth paradigm, the absence of robust supranational welfare and wealth distribution mechanisms, and the necessity for integrated governance architectures (see also Domorenok and Trein 2024). These factors collectively hinder the seamless integration of environmental and social policy objectives.

Our findings underscore the value of examining eco-social policies not in isolation but as part of a synergistic policy mix. This approach allows for addressing interconnected concerns such as sustainability of welfare, industry transformation, and consumption regulation. By shifting the focus toward complementary policy interactions, there is significant potential for advancing both scholarly understanding and practical policy-making in eco-social policy development.

Additionally, this research contributes to the broader eco-social and policy studies literature by demonstrating the utility of the policy Delphi methodology in capturing expert consensus and divergence on complex policy issues. Future research should expand this approach to include deliberative processes involving citizens or representative mini-publics to gain deeper insights into public acceptance and democratic legitimacy of eco-social policies.

Transforming deeply held assumptions about work, governance, and innovation is essential for the desirability and feasibility of eco-social policies. Systemic, multi-sectoral arrangements are needed to simultaneously address welfare, consumption, emissions, employment, and lifestyles within the constraints of biophysical limits. Although divergent eco-social welfare regimes may emerge due to historical, ideological, and contextual variations, the overarching need for a supranational regulatory framework remains clear.

The study's implications for policymakers are profound, suggesting that fostering a coherent policy mix and promoting civic engagement, education, and sufficiency can facilitate the transition toward a sustainable 1.5° society. Encouragingly, our discussions indicate a gradual shift in European stakeholders' willingness to integrate environmental and social objectives, signaling a promising avenue for future policy innovation.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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