13

MYTH 12

Strong sustainable consumption governance means sacrificing freedom and well-being

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13.1 Myth that strong sustainable consumption governance means sacrificing freedom and well-being

Strong sustainable consumption policies endanger freedom and well-being and will therefore never be accepted by people.

Strong sustainable consumption (SSC) policies, addressing levels and fundamental patterns of resource use, are often framed and perceived as interfering with quality of life, freedom and well-being. It is the unshakable belief in this myth that makes policymakers shy away from SSC policies. Instead, they opt for weak sustainable consumption (WSC) policies focusing on improvements in energy efficiency, micro-targets, and efforts to convince consumers to buy allegedly 'more sustainable' products and services (Fuchs & Lorek, 2005).

Why is this problematic? SSC policies have several fundamental characteristics that make them a necessity in our times of concurrent social and ecological crises. First, they create the basis for protecting and – where necessary – restoring the environmental foundations of societal well-being. While such a governance focus might seem obvious as well as highly acceptable, it is, in fact, not evident at all in a system that is structured first and foremost around the pursuit of economic growth. Second, SSC governance addresses this very system with its structural barriers and deep intertwinement with the transgression of planetary and social boundaries. It thus offers an alternative to *business as usual*. Third, empirical evidence has shown that reductions in energy use enabled by improvements in energy efficiency tend to be more than eaten up by simultaneous increases in consumption levels, due

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to so-called *rebound effects*. Thus, efficiency gains are insufficient for a sustainability transformation and, for example, for reaching the 1.5° goal of the Paris Climate Agreement (Cap et al., 2024; Fuchs et al., 2021; Spangenberg & Lorek, 2019). Given this fundamental shortcoming, SSC policies focus instead on levels and quality of consumption, oriented towards human needs and the pursuit of a good life for all.

And yet, SSC policies are perceived as harming 'quality of life' because they supposedly restrict freedom of choice. Due to the dominance of this framing in public discourse, political decision-makers may well consider SSC policies too controversial. Countering this perspective, this chapter argues that SSC policies are indispensable for protecting freedom as well as enabling a good life for all.

13.2 Origins

Our current social and economic system is reigned by deeply unequal power relations. As economic growth is the overriding imperative, those actors most aligned with the pursuit of profit and perpetuating the growth paradigm, such as big businesses with vested interests, wield unparalleled and highly disproportionate political power. These power relations are ingrained in societal, political, economic and technological structures (Brand & Wissen, 2021; Fuchs et al., 2016). *Weak* sustainable consumption policies maintain these very structures through the idea that natural resources can be replaced by human and physical capital. For advocates of this form of sustainability, a system is sustainable as long as the total capital (consisting of natural resources, human and physical capital) remains the same or grows. A decline in natural capital, that is, the extraction of raw materials or the decline of natural habitats, is still sustainable if it is offset by increasing capital in the other areas. This increase in artificial capital particularly refers to the idea of technical progress, in which many green growth advocates place their hopes (see Chapter 5). In this system, the preservation of the environmental and societal foundations of well-being is not the main focus, but rather the maintenance and increase of economic growth, which benefits powerful elites that became powerful through the exact treadmills of growth. *Strong* sustainable consumption governance on the contrary, does not accept the idea that natural resources can easily be substituted or replaced by human or real capital (Ott & Döring, 2004). Accordingly, it rejects the idea that technological progress alone will solve complex sustainability problems, especially in light of rebound effects. Set around the objectives of freedom and just societies, SSC governance therefore challenges the undifferentiated prioritisation of growth and underlying power relations. Instead, it calls for the establishment of new and different structures that can genuinely protect the ecological foundations

for life on Earth. What keeps the myth that SSC policies endanger freedom and well-being alive, however, is the will of powerful actors to maintain current power relations. Hence, they uphold the perception that SSC policies are inacceptable.

But what does power have to do with consumption? Power is fundamental to consumption governance because it shapes who makes decisions about systems of production and consumption, how these decisions are made and whose interests are prioritised (Fuchs et al., 2016; Stör, 2017): Who sets the agenda, who defines the rules, and who controls the narratives around (sustainable) consumption and lifestyles? Mostly, this power lies in the hands of corporate actors who control production, and the investors owning these corporations. In an economy dominated by mass production of cheap goods, producing and selling as much as possible is the basis for making profit and thus the primary interest of these actors. Accordingly, they need individuals to (over-)consume. Less consumption would equate to less growth. To maintain and continuously increase consumption levels, actors with non-sustainable vested interests thus create narratives around the connection of well-being and material consumption and push for WSC policies.

This already shows that limiting consumption would contradict its economic functions in growth-oriented societies. However, consumption also has a social function, best captured in the concepts of conspicuous and compensatory consumption. Understanding this social function is also crucial to understanding the powerful bases of the myth addressed in this chapter.

Conspicuous consumption is an idea coined by the American economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen in his widely known book *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) that refers to the purchase of goods or services for the specific purpose of displaying one's wealth and social status. Often these are easily recognisable as expensive items, such as the latest technology, high-end cars and luxury accessories. If consumption was limited, those consuming most excessively as part of their lifestyle would be affected the most as they would lose a means to show off their affluence. The fact that this dynamic already existed in 1899, when Veblen developed the concept, illustrates how deeply rooted it is. Strong sustainability would precisely imply tackling inequities in resources, resource use and power. The benefits of growth have been distributed extremely unevenly, with material benefits of growth accruing mostly to those with existing wealth and high levels of overconsumption, and many of the poorest members of global societies becoming effectively poorer. However, powerful, affluent actors naturally try to maintain their powerful position and continue consuming conspicuously. For less affluent parts of society, this excessive consumption is perceived as desirable to signal success in increasing social competition. This dynamic contributed to the creation of the myth by promoting the idea that limiting consumption inherently threatens social mobility and the demonstration of status.

Compensatory consumption is another function in growth-oriented societies. In a system where the growth imperative is inscribed not only in the profit margins of companies but also in narratives of continuous self-improvement, performance and personal growth in every area of life, consumption serves as a means to achieving these. This link helps explain why reducing consumption is perceived as a threat to well-being, thereby contributing to the myth. But why does consumption lead to perceived self-fulfilment? As working hours and demands are ever-increasing and ever-flexible, they co-opt more and more of our time, leaving less time and energy for other non-consumptive activities that would contribute to personal well-being (Schor, 1991). In this system, consumption is a fast reward – treat yourself! On the other hand, limiting consumption in the social and economic system we currently live in is therefore likely to expose people to the negative psychological impacts of unsatisfactory conditions, alienated relationships and the ever-increasing demands in growth societies.

These functions of consumption are coupled with a specific interpretation of freedom that is just as well strongly connected to the logics of a growth- and efficiency-oriented system. The idea of freedom as unlimited consumption choices and volumes forms an important part of the dominant narrative of what makes a good life. Freedom forms a central value in neo-liberal, growth-oriented democracies. Neo-liberalism in particular is characterised by the focus on individual freedoms to shape one's life according to one's own preferences (Wissenburg, 2001). While the autonomy of the individual is emphasised, neo-liberalism interprets social, state, intellectual or political rules and regulations as coercion. Even limiting one's own preferences for the sake of the environment is understood as coercion. This is because the neo-liberal mainstream defines freedom as the absence of physically coercive interventions or intrusions into the privacy and personal property of individuals (Dierksmeier, 2019) – a definition that is characterised above all by non-interference. For the idea of a good life, this would accordingly imply an infinity of one's own freedom and choices. The connection of the myth with this idea of freedom, in particular, is often what makes people argue that SSC policies are too controversial.

Assessing limits on behavioural options as an encroachment on personal freedom is consistent with the impression that boundlessness seems to characterise our society. The mantra 'further, faster, higher, bigger' shows how we are in the throes of a growth addiction. On an individual level, this manifests itself in the constant growth of the goods we own and the pursuit of a steady wealth accumulation. In social and economic terms, it is reflected in the commitment of states worldwide to the goal of GDP growth, seen as a central indicator of the well-being of society. Yet, GDP disregards important – even economic – components such as the distribution of inequality, while at the same time, it is rising due to the industrial destruction of the environment.

The existence of such narratives around consumption and associated definitions of freedom, the influence of vested interests, which maintain these narratives for the sake of their own power, the inscription of the economic growth paradigm in social relations, political priorities, and everyday life, all these deep barriers reinforce each other and lock in the myth that SSC policies endanger freedom and well-being (Hirth et al., 2023). The opportunities and potentials of SSC policies for an economy that foregrounds societal well-being are neglected as it challenges existing power relations. The idea of individual well-being that results from these barriers strongly opposes visions of sufficiency, on which SSC policies would be built. Hence, such policies are perceived and framed as unacceptable even though they would lead to a higher quality of life for all and reduced social inequality.

13.3 Consequences

The maintenance of this powerful myth has major consequences on consumption and provisioning systems. Most importantly, relying on WSC policies and shying away from SSC governance manifests the systemic lock-in that drives current ecological crises and the widening of social gaps. *Holistic provisioning systems* would sustainably mediate how resources are extracted and transformed into the material and cultural things that contribute to needs satisfaction (O'Neill et al., 2018). Instead, what we see is *appropriating systems* that focus on rent-seeking (Kreinin et al., 2024a). The food system could for example be set up in a way that ensures everybody is provided the alimentation they need to thrive. Instead, it is driven by profit-seeking: from the total global food system supply chain, only 19% of the aggregate profits are captured by producers and traders, while food manufacturers and distributors capture more than half of the total profits (54%). It is therefore not surprising that the very workers who provide much of our food, particularly from the Global South, are the most food insecure and malnourished (Planet Tracker, 2023). In the following, we will break down the consequences of the myth with regard to policymakers, economic actors and citizens respectively.

For policymakers, the myth causes reluctance to implement or even suggest SSC policies. The consequence is a lack of stringent, holistic, predictable, consistent policies. Very few SSC policies are actually in place. Instead, policymakers keep prolonging policies, which are curing emerging problems superficially, but hindering strategic developments for systemic change, which would necessarily address socio-economic power relations.

The mobility transition provides an example of this. In many countries, particularly in Germany, where the car lobby is especially powerful, a fundamental transition was largely prevented and instead left to industry, resulting in far too large electric cars with an undersupply of charging technology. Still, the promotion of (large) electric cars is framed as sustainable, while in fact

neither the policy approach is consistent regarding the increased needs for provision of charging technology nor does it actually have a positive environmental impact (Font et al., 2021). At the same time, investments in internal combustion engine vehicles are prolonged while rethinking and reorganising mobility, for example, by investing in public transport and bike infrastructure, is hardly considered.

This illustrates that while sustainability seems to be everywhere – in every policy justification, on every packaging, and in every e-SUV – only weak sustainability that focuses on enhancing efficiency instead of reducing the sheer amount of consumption is considered by policymakers. The Circular Economy Action Plan provides another example of this. It was developed by the European Commission in 2020 with the aim of increasing recycling rates, promoting product longevity and reducing waste. However, while recycling rates have improved, absolute material consumption continues to rise as rebound effects stimulate more consumption and production. This underlines the inadequacy of approaches that only focus on technological change, yet overlook and neglect the need for behaviour change enabled by reshaping the structural context of practices.

Still, such policies are framed as being 'sustainable'. Sustainability governance has thus become ubiquitous. This paradox is also referred to as *sustained unsustainability* (Blühdorn, 2016): a high level of sustainability-related activity is secured through politics that actually sustain unsustainability without challenging socio-economic structures and power relations. Hausknost (2017) suggests that this association of political legitimacy with economic growth and material well-being of those with the most powerful voices forms a *glass ceiling* to truly deep socio-ecological transformation. The glass ceiling describes the dilemma that, on the one hand, state action is seen as essential for socio-environmental transformation, but, on the other hand, for more transformative state action to be possible, it is first necessary to gain broader democratic legitimacy for a sustainability imperative over the growth imperative. This is difficult, however, because consumption-oriented lifestyles are currently perceived as non-negotiable imperatives for democratic legitimacy and state stability (Kreinin et al., 2024b). The myth that SSC policies threaten well-being, which makes them unacceptable, is both a symptom of, and reinforces, sustained unsustainability and the glass ceiling – a vicious cycle that deeply curtails the room for manoeuvre for actual strong sustainability governance.

For the market economy and economic actors, the myth and its interaction with the paradigm of sustained unsustainability, creates a paradoxical position. On the one hand, it is precisely this market economy of growth that has swallowed sustainability: WSC policies follow the capitalist market logics of consumerism, profit-orientation and efficiency. In line with these logics, sustainable consumption is individualised, privatised and de-politicised. On

the other hand, economic actors tend to evade their immense responsibility for unsustainability. Instead of rethinking ways of production in order to enable needs-oriented provisioning systems, they participate in a *responsibility ping-pong* with other actors (Mamut et al., 2025). Instead of using their power to change unsustainable structures, economic actors primarily ascribe responsibility to others than themselves, which leads to the diffusion of responsibility and collective failure with regard to the sustainability transformation.

These dynamics seem even more paradoxical with regard to the logical dependence of capitalist actors on environmental and social resources that are continuously depleted through unsustainable practices. While most business models critically depend on stable ecosystems and societal support, their practices contribute to global warming, pollution, and social unrest – ultimately undermining the very foundations of long-term economic stability and human well-being (Fraser, 2022). This strongly underlines the fact that WSC policies, following the growth- and profit-orientation that is built into capitalism, do in fact endanger well-being.

For citizens and consumers, government inaction, faith in technological solutions and growth-oriented narratives around the good life and individual freedom cause confusion and scepticism regarding the necessity of SSC governance (Lorenzoni et al., 2007). In reality though, weak sustainability puts most pressure on individual consumers. The fragmentation and avoidance of responsibility perpetuate and deepen socio-ecological injustices: It superficially holds consumers responsible for systemic outcomes over which they, as individuals, have only very limited control, while differentiated responsibilities for the climate catastrophe, as well as differences in the power of actors, are relegated to the background (Fuchs et al., 2021).

In addition, despite the fact that societies over-produce and over-consume almost all goods on the market to such an extent that we are confronted with the consequences of human activity on the environment and the limits of finite resources (Richardson et al., 2023; Sanye Mengual & Sala, 2023), many people still grapple with a lack of access to necessary resources. Today, 8.5% of the world's population lives in extreme poverty (less than $2.15 per person per day) and, at a poverty line more relevant to upper-middle-income countries (less than $6.85 per person per day), 44% of the world's population lives in poverty (World Bank, 2024). This is a crucial problem of weak sustainability that is not in line with sustainable provisioning but with growth-orientation. While on the one hand in the current system, most consumers are expected to spend as much money as possible on consumption, on the other hand, it is not even guaranteed that all people will have access to the necessary services and products to meet their needs at all. Social inequities are increasingly reinforced, with many people struggling to satisfy their most basic needs and suffering from the negative effects of environmental

degradation – for example, people living in low-income communities or near coastlines being more vulnerable to flooding, severe storms, and sea level rise – while a few, particularly the affluent and powerful, are responsible for the vast majority of emissions, resource depletion and ecological crises (Dorninger et al., 2021). Paradoxically, given that WSC policies often are about adjusting pricing mechanisms, which put a special burden on the poorest, most vulnerable parts of population, this enforces the myth that well-being is necessarily curtailed because of sustainability governance. Besides, the overemphasis on material over-consumption entirely neglects other aspects of well-being, such as community, engagement with nature and a sense of purpose. As a result, instead of enabling well-being, WSC policies push the good life for all further and further away.

13.4 Dispelling the myth

As we have shown, the origins and consequences of the myth that SSC policies endanger well-being and would therefore not be accepted are in close interaction, mutually reinforcing themselves. This implies that, in the current system – within the deeply ingrained structures, the current power relations and the prevailing ideas of well-being – there *is* some truth at the heart of the myth. The question therefore is not only how to dispel the myth but also how to transform the very system that produces it.

13.4.1 Quality of life depends on the satisfaction of human needs

Quality of life, first and foremost, depends on the satisfaction of human needs. While many factors may influence life satisfaction, such as comparison to other people, life events, subjective and wishes. '[N]eeds are absolute demands for human functioning that do not adjust to any and all conditions; in fact, they mark the limits of human adaptability' (Veenhoven, 1996, p. 23). As argued in Chapter 8, we can identify needs – access to material necessities for life, a sense of belonging to some form of community, bodily health, etc. – that are universal to every human being across cultures and historical periods.

What does this mean for the myth that SSC policies endanger well-being and will therefore never be accepted? It shows very clearly that focusing on human needs is, in fact, decisive for sustainability policies to support well-being. Subjective preferences do play an important role in individual well-being. Still, not every want actually enhances well-being, nor is their satisfaction compatible with the satisfaction of others' needs. Therefore, governance should be directed in such a way that it enhances societal well-being and, thereby, also individual well-being. This requires a universal point of reference: the needs we share as humans. In a world with limited resources,

this shines a light on the conditions that allow for the satisfaction of universal needs for everyone, bringing the principle of sufficiency into focus.

Contrary to the myth, SSC governance that focuses on these conditions, which are the basis for individual as well as societal well-being, is exactly what is needed in order to support well-being. Policies promoting free or subsidised plant-based meals in public institutions, as for example the 'Barcelona + Sustainable Food' strategy, reduce environmental impact, which benefits future generations and secures their well-being, while promoting health and aligning with the basic need for nutritious and sufficient food for present generations. Beyond providing sustainable meals, the strategy ensures food security by making healthy food accessible to all, supports local farmers and sustainable agriculture and fosters food literacy. By addressing health, equity and ecological sustainability, it demonstrates how SSC policies can meet universal human needs while countering the myth that they threaten well-being.

13.4.2 Freedom results from agency

Despite what the neo-liberal, growth-oriented mainstream would have us believe, freedom cannot be understood solely as non-interference, nor does it necessarily result from unrestrained overconsumption. As we have seen, the latter can rather be described as a symptom of the growth-dependent system we live in. Instead of relying solely on quantitative and non-interference approaches to freedom, it can also be understood through a qualitative lens that focuses on agency instead of the sheer availability of options.

Dierksmeier (2019) contrasts quantitative freedom with 'qualitative freedom', which focuses on the nature of options, while Pettit (2003) uses the term 'agency freedom', which is determined by the recognised, protected status of a person in relation to their fellow citizens. These conceptions show that in addition to the number of options, criteria such as human dignity, rationality, universality and autonomy must also be considered in connection with freedom. Moreover, these conceptions introduce the idea that a distinction can be made between meaningful freedoms, such as democratic freedom of expression, and less meaningful freedoms, such as driving without speed limits. Non-restrictive overconsumption might, therefore, be less meaningful and less critical for well-being than, for example, the freedom to participate in democratic practices. Moreover, these notions show that freedom is never a purely individual matter. Unless you live on a desert island, you always articulate yourself interacting with other people. This is why well-being, as well as freedom, must always be seen as societal issues – an important acknowledgement that the myth lacks. Lastly, Dierksmeier and Pettit underline that decision-making power for – or against – certain actions is the highest expression of freedom. In this context, Cheryl Hall (2010) argues that 'sacrifice' in the sense of voluntarily restricting one's own quantitative freedom, that is,

deliberate acts of renunciation, also represents an act of freedom. A sacrifice means giving up something important to us for something else that is even more important. However, we only sacrifice something voluntarily, which in turn underlines the connection to agency (Gumbert & Bohn, 2021).

Progressive Energy Pricing, such as California's Tiered Electricity Rates, provides an example of a policy that balances freedom and strong sustainability. What 'progressive' means in this context is that electricity prices increase as consumption rises. This policy discourages excessive energy use while ensuring basic needs remain affordable. Another example is Paris' Vélib' System, a heavily subsidised bike-sharing program. Such subsidies, combined with investments in cycling infrastructure, encourage sustainable mobility while preserving individual freedom of transport choice. Citizens are enabled to voluntarily reduce or give up car use, which, in turn, increases their health, improves air quality and reduces energy consumption, while preserving freedom.

The point is not to deny the legitimacy of quantitative aspects of freedom per se. However, limiting oneself to this perspective is insufficient, as is often the case regarding the prevalent narrative around individual freedom. The complexity of the social world requires a perspective on freedom that combines quantitative and qualitative elements. Such an interpretation of freedom, which can grasp its different forms in different situations, seems much more compatible with a good life for all than the concept of boundlessness described before. Freedom is a cornerstone of democracy, as liberalism rightly emphasises, but the question arises about *what kind of* freedom (Becker & Fuchs, 2023). A reduction of freedom to the sheer number of options available ignores essential aspects of human interaction and interdependencies with our non-human environment. Freedom mainly results from agency, not from non-restrictive overconsumption, which is why the myth around SSC policies endangering individual freedom falls short. Active participation in discourses and practices concerning sustainable policies or local projects, such as local greening, community-supported farming or local deliberative citizen assemblies, on the other hand, perfectly correspond to the idea of agency-freedom: They involve utilising personal freedom to exert democratic influence and help shape society in the interests of the common good.

13.4.3 Sustainable welfare increases quality of life while decreasing environmental pressure

An important aspect of an SSC governance approach resides in the design of welfare systems. Especially from a holistic provisioning perspective, welfare plays a crucial role, both for staying within planetary boundaries and for increasing societal and individual well-being. In fact, the powerful role of deep structural barriers, as pointed out in the 'Origins' section, becomes

particularly visible with regard to welfare systems. They are designed to depend on and reinforce economic growth by stimulating consumption (Laksevics et al., 2025). Their transformation towards the satisfaction of basic needs is, therefore, crucial. This is particularly the case with regard to justice aspects. On the one hand, the gap between the rich and the poor leads to worsening environmental degradation and ecological crises that affect every member of a community, while on the other hand, the negative impact of ecological crises is most pronounced for the most disadvantaged parts of society and, therefore, increases inequalities. Historically, social and environmental goals have often been treated as separate, sometimes conflicting, objectives – a dichotomy that is largely mirrored within current polarisation and harsh discussions around sustainability. However, well-designed ecosocial welfare policies following the notion of strong sustainability and devoted to enabling a good life for all, such as income ceilings or universal basic services, can, in fact, reduce inequality and increase quality of life while decreasing emissions (Kallis et al., 2025).

Implementing universal basic services (UBS), such as healthcare, education and housing, often comes up as a promising measure to address the unequal distribution of such basic services, with more affluent parts of the population over-exploiting resources, while others have inadequate access to them. UBS can thus be regarded as an essential measure that prevents increasing inequalities. Providing citizens with a wide range of public services to meet their basic needs also reduces the need for individuals to purchase these services from private, often more resource-intensive providers, and lessens their reliance on employment for accessing basic necessities (Gough, 2019). The positive ecological effects are particularly evident with regard to free public transport, which is generally seen as part of UBS. If people are generally provided with the universal opportunity to access public transport, the reliance on private vehicles shrinks drastically (Holmgren, 2020).

Income ceilings and wealth taxes are examples of complementary policies that tackle socio-ecological inequalities by directly targeting the wealthiest. Such measures can reduce excessive consumption and limit the carbon footprint of the wealthiest individuals who often engage in – particularly conspicuous as well as polluting – luxury consumption while also promoting a fairer distribution of resources (Buch-Hansen & Koch, 2019).

Further measures that could be implemented in order to create a sustainable, needs-oriented welfare state through SSC governance could be work time reduction, job guarantee, and renovation programs for the least energy-efficient buildings (Laksevics et al., 2025). All of these policies aim to foster societal well-being and decrease environmental harm in an ecosocial manner. They necessarily form an important part of any strong sustainability governance approach which clearly shows the deficiencies of the myth around SSC policies.

13.4.4 Addressing specific barriers can increase the acceptability of strong sustainable consumption policies

While SSC policies do interfere with neo-liberal narratives around governance as well as well-being and, therefore, undoubtedly do challenge what citizens are used to in terms of politics, research shows that the acceptability of such policies can be increased if specific conditions for acceptance are acknowledged.

As pointed out in Chapter 8, policy acceptability can be increased through the discussion of sustainable lifestyles with other people. Participants tended to shift from lower to higher acceptance rates as their reservations were challenged through collective dialogue and deliberation.

Moreover, specific conditions for acceptance of sustainable lifestyle options can be identified. The most critical barriers to adoption – and, reciprocally, factors for acceptance – are (1) costs, (2) convenience and accessibility, (3) cultural attachments and societal norms, (4) lack of awareness and misinformation and (5) consumption in field-specific conditions such as health concerns (Vadovics et al., 2024).

While these factors currently often form barriers that hinder people from adopting sustainable lifestyle options, an SSC governance approach would reflect on and put into place the necessary infrastructures and implement adequate supporting policies. At the same time, it would consider these barriers and turn them into factors for acceptance. Meat substitutes, electric vehicles, housing and energy improvements like installing heat pumps or solar panels would be guaranteed to be affordable. Public transport would be made no less convenient than car use. Educational campaigns, promoting new norms and narratives around the good life and providing transparent information would be developed. This would share positive experiences of plant-based diets and raise awareness of the environmental impact of air travel. Concerns about insufficient nutrition connected to diet change or on technical performance for electric vehicles would be addressed constructively. Acceptability hinges on such specific conditions, which can and must be addressed. If this is the case, then governance with a focus on well-being is indeed likely to be highly acceptable.

What is more, in a different system where scientific knowledge on environmental issues is widely accessible, and environmental education and first-hand interactions with nature are part of everyday life, acceptance of policies that reduce absolute consumption levels would likely be much higher. Over time, as communities and shared values take centre stage, such policies might eventually become unnecessary. The strength of a strong sustainability governance approach is that bringing about the transformation to such a system is inherently built into it as it is aimed at societal well-being on a large scale.

13.4.5 Effective societal deliberation is needed for the implementation of strong sustainable consumption governance

It is often argued that SSC policies are too controversial to be taken up. In fact, it is true that strong sustainability governance is controversial. It challenges power relations, prevailing practices and dominant narratives about individual freedom and well-being, which necessarily makes it controversial. Anything with a transformative scope is bound to be controversial. We would not need transformation if such policies could be easily agreed upon. It is precisely because of this that we argue that societal conflict and controversy are essential for disruptive politics.

As Amanda Machin (2023: 849) argues, '[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'. How should we be able to come to new ideas about what society looks like if we do not have controversial discussions that bring out the different ideas people have about a just and socio-ecological future? The literature on agonal (conflictual) democracy has widely highlighted the value and relevance of conflict and dissent in pluralistic societies if the emancipatory potential of democracy is to be realised (Mouffe, 1995). Even political thinkers who do not start from the assumption that politics is necessarily about conflict, as agonal democrats do, have emphasised the need to provide space for 'reasonable disagreement' (Bohn & Fuchs, 2019). Too narrow an orientation towards consensus might conceal existing conflicts and suppress marginalised ideas, interests or identities (Young, 1996).

So, should we instead think of conflict than of dialogue, communication and deliberation? What it rather means is that the successful implementation of SSC policies requires exactly the combination of both. Driving truly deep 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. Overcoming deep-seated barriers to transformation and addressing power imbalances requires highly engaging forms of deliberation. Harnessing both dialogue and contestation to create a more inclusive and resilient political process can provide a way forward for this.

Apart from accommodating conflictual elements into discussions and deliberations on sustainability, the good life and societal well-being, acknowledging the need for disagreement for change also implies supporting practices that challenge the unsustainable status quo, such as social movements, strategic climate litigation and civil disobedience. Only the combination of different democratic practices can enable a deep-cutting change that prioritises societal well-being over economic growth. This is sure to lead to controversial discussions, but that is exactly what is needed for an effective transformation to take place.

13.5 Implications

So, what to do? The previous chapters have offered a range of suggestions for new practices, solutions that can and should be implemented as we move towards a world that prioritises societal well-being and inspiration from examples around the world that show how change is already happening. Given the broad focus of this chapter, many of these hopeful implications could be repeated and underlined here. Instead, focusing on the *how* of the transformation, we want to point out three crucial strategies that are essential for bringing about these changes and for debunking myths around sustainable consumption.

First, policymakers, businesses and individual citizens and consumers should begin looking at the transformation ahead in terms of shared responsibility. This represents a balanced approach that recognises the intertwined roles of multiple actors and acknowledges that those with greater capabilities bear special responsibilities (Young, 2011). Looking forward, we must embrace a more holistic, interconnected understanding of responsibility that fosters transformative change through multi-level collaboration and recognises current power imbalances (Mamut et al., 2025). Encouragingly, we already see examples of this emerging – such as European cities implementing participatory climate budgeting, where citizens have a direct role in shaping local sustainability policies. These initiatives demonstrate that shared responsibility is not an abstract ideal but an evolving reality. As outlined before, this particularly demands a combination of agonistic (conflictual) and deliberative (communicative) elements in the public sphere. A starting point for this lies in critically scrutinising any narrative that puts all responsibility on individual consumers – a narrative that should be dispelled once and for all.

Second, a deep integration of social justice and ecological sustainability is needed. Far too often, social and environmental policies have been regarded as separate, even conflicting sectors. The solution cannot lie in playing out different policy sectors against one another. As we have shown, SSC governance that holistically reflects on resources and needs for a good life for all is necessarily socio-ecological. Initiatives such as the Wellbeing Economy Governments (WEGo) partnership – comprising Scotland, New Zealand, Finland and others – show that governments can shift policy priorities beyond GDP growth towards holistic societal well-being. These efforts demonstrate that integrating social and ecological concerns is not just possible but already happening. For any stakeholder engaging in discussions and actions around sustainability and sustainable consumption, this implies questioning exclusive framings that only include either ecological or social aspects. Often, these two go hand in hand, and if they do not, then the idea in question should be re-evaluated from a holistic standpoint.

Third, while SSC governance clearly demands a responsible democratic state that addresses barriers to transformation, prioritises societal well-being

over economic growth and creates structures that enable sustainable consumption and provisioning, change does not only come from this level. Throughout the different chapters, multiple successful examples from local practices have been introduced. For instance, experiments with reduced working hours in Sweden and Iceland have not only improved worker well-being but also contributed to sustainability by reducing energy use and consumption. Similarly, city-level policies in Paris and Amsterdam that reduce car dependency through expanded cycling infrastructure and pedestrian-friendly planning provide scalable models for rethinking urban mobility. While it will certainly take many consistent and interlinked actions to change entrenched social structures, practical experimental spaces that take the first steps in this direction can provide valuable insights while preparing the ground on a small scale for more comprehensive change. Moreover, local action can also foster trust and increase acceptability for larger scale SSC governance. Hence, any policymaker, business and individual can think of their realm of action and try to implement sustainable practices within the scope that seems feasible to them. The welfare states of Northern Europe already offer broader systemic examples of how strong state capacity, public infrastructure and redistribution mechanisms can support sustainable lifestyles in ways that are both just and effective. While they are not without contradictions, these models illustrate that prioritising collective well-being through policy design is not utopian but achievable. Social change comes from all directions.

By drawing attention to these real-world examples, we underscore that SSC governance is not just a theoretical aspiration but also a tangible, evolving process. While challenges remain, emerging practices show that transformation is already underway and can be expanded, adapted and institutionalised.

13.6 Main message

This chapter has shown that current power relations and the profit interests those with power pursue foster only WSC governance and perpetuate a system that moves further and further away from the potential for an effective sustainability transformation and a good life for all. SSC policies, on the contrary, can enhance societal and individual well-being by moving societies towards a more inclusive and resilient quality of life. Doing so, such an approach necessarily challenges hegemonic paradigms as it confronts limitless consumption and signifiers of 'status' as the essence of quality of life, related definitions of 'freedom', as well as entrenched narratives of growth. Rather, it focuses on alternative ideas of freedom and well-being that underline the role of agency as well as a good life for all, living now and in the future. Especially if given attention to affordability, convenience and accessibility, the focus of SSC policies on well-being and qualitative freedom is precisely what makes this governance approach acceptable. Nevertheless, our discussion has also

shown the deeply ingrained sources of the myth that strong sustainable consumption policies endanger freedom and well-being and will therefore never be accepted by people. Challenging it successfully thus requires an effective and inclusive political and societal debate as a force for creating an understanding for what is necessary and feasible in the pursuit of a world worth living for all of us, now and in the future.

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