



Beyond the sustainability Drama: Transformative response-ability and relational dynamics in transdisciplinary processes

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Abstract

Efforts toward sustainability transformations increasingly rely on effective collaboration among diverse actors. Yet such collaborative processes are frequently undermined by recurring interaction patterns that impede shared responsibility, learning, and effective problem-solving. Drawing on the Drama Triangle from transactional analysis, this article conceptualizes these patterns as a Sustainability Drama, characterized by relational roles of Victim, Persecutor, and Rescuer that stabilize blame, dependency, and over-responsibility in sustainability-related discourse and practice. While existing scholarship has either focused on diagnosing such dysfunctional dynamics or on promoting empowerment-oriented models of collaboration, less attention has been paid to how these dynamics coexist and are navigated in real-world sustainability contexts. In response, this article introduces Transformative Response-Ability (TRA) as a relational and processual capacity that enables individuals and groups to remain constructively engaged in the presence of Drama dynamics without reproducing them or suppressing conflict. Transformative Response-Ability is conceptualized not as an individual mindset or skill, but as a relational field quality that recalibrates responsibility and power toward shared, situated agency. Rather than depicting a linear transition from Drama to empowerment, the article emphasizes the ongoing tension between these dynamics and articulates how TRA supports collective orientation toward more empowering patterns of interaction under conditions of uncertainty, urgency, and moral pressure. By integrating psychodynamic insights with sustainability science, this conceptual contribution advances understanding of why collaborative sustainability efforts so often become stuck and how transformative spaces can support response-able engagement without denying the persistence of conflict. It offers a theoretically grounded framework for rethinking collaboration, facilitation, and collective agency in sustainability transformations.

Keywords Relational approaches to sustainability transformations · Transdisciplinary process knowledge · Transformative spaces · Group dynamics · Psychodynamic leadership · Facilitation · Drama Triangle

Introduction—collaboration under transformational pressure

As sustainability-related challenges become increasingly salient in public discourse and everyday life, the need for transformative action is widely acknowledged (Caniglia et al. 2021; Sachs et al. 2022; UN 2023). Across policy,

science, and civil society, there is broad agreement that incremental adjustments are insufficient to address the depth and complexity of current social–ecological crises. Yet despite growing awareness, expanding bodies of knowledge, and ambitious sustainability goals, progress toward transformative change remains limited.

Due to the complex, interconnected, and often global nature of sustainability-related problems, effective collaboration among actors from diverse disciplinary, institutional, and cultural backgrounds is widely regarded as indispensable (Klein 2020; Lang et al. 2012). In sustainability science, transdisciplinary research approaches have therefore gained prominence, emphasizing the integration of scientific and practical knowledge and the involvement of non-academic stakeholders in knowledge production processes

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(Fritz and Binder 2020; Horcea-Milcu et al. 2024; Lang et al. 2017; Padmanabhan 2017; Reed et al. 2023).

A critically relevant and yet often underexplored aspect of sustainability transformations is the quality of interaction among collaborating actors. Beyond questions of knowledge integration, governance design, or methodological rigor, the ways in which people relate to one another under conditions of uncertainty, urgency, and moral pressure play a decisive role in shaping collaborative outcomes (Edmondson 1999; Edmondson and Lei 2014; Seiferth et al. 2025). Creating conditions that enable constructive exchange, generative mutual learning, and effective joint problem-solving therefore emerges as a central challenge for sustainability-oriented collaboration (Norström et al. 2020; Reed et al. 2023).

Against this background, this article examines barriers to effective collaboration in sustainability and climate-related contexts by focusing on interactional dynamics that shape how actors engage with one another in practice. It develops an interactional framework to explain why collaborative processes frequently become dysfunctional, applies this framework to climate-related discourse and media dynamics, and synthesizes conditions that enable or obstruct more constructive forms of engagement. Building on this analysis, the article outlines a relationally grounded way forward, highlighting how groups of stakeholders may navigate dysfunctional interaction patterns toward more empowering modes of collaboration. Selected experiences from an experimental communication space at the Conferences of the Parties (COPs) under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) serve as illustrative examples.

Theoretical background: transdisciplinarity, collaboration and transformative spaces

Transdisciplinary sustainability research has emerged as a key response to the challenges of integrating diverse forms of knowledge in complex transformation processes. Rather than focusing solely on the generation of knowledge, it emphasizes how different actors engage with one another in practice (Klein 2020; Lang et al. 2012, 2017).

To better understand how such processes can realize their transformative potential more fully, it is necessary to examine how diverse forms of knowledge and experience are brought into relation in practice. A growing body of literature highlights that collaborative sustainability processes often face difficulties in achieving deeper integration across disciplinary and experiential domains (Hirsch Hadorn et al. 2006; McGregor 2017; NRC 2013; Pohl and Hadorn 2008; Simon et al. 2018). In practice, this can result in perspectives

that coexist alongside one another without becoming meaningfully connected.

Transdisciplinary sustainability research is characterized by multiple structural and relational conditions that shape how such interaction unfolds in practice (Brandt et al. 2013; Hakkarainen and Lazurko 2025; Lang et al. 2012, 2017; Lawrence et al. 2022; McGregor 2017; Simon et al. 2018; Wiek 2007). Case evidence further illustrates how collaborative learning processes can falter when expectations, roles, and institutional conditions remain misaligned (Axelsson et al. 2020).

Beyond structural considerations or methodologies, sustainability transformations are also shaped by the ways in which actors interact, communicate, and relate to one another under conditions of uncertainty, urgency, and normative pressure (Seiferth et al. 2025). As such, attention has shifted toward interactional dynamics, collective sense-making, and the role of narratives and identities in shaping collaborative processes (Chabay et al. 2019; O'Brien 2018). This perspective aligns with a growing recognition of the relevance of reflexive practices for addressing deep leverage points or more broadly the so-called “inner” dimensions of sustainability, including values, worldviews, emotions, and patterns of meaning-making, for enabling transformative action (Abson et al. 2017; Charli-Joseph et al. 2023; Fazey et al. 2018; Hakkarainen and Lazurko 2025; Ives et al. 2023; Popa et al. 2015; Wamsler and Bristow 2022; Wamsler et al. 2020; Woiwode et al. 2021).

In the context of sustainability transformations, collaboration across diverse stakeholder groups is frequently impeded by latent interactional patterns, including tendencies toward victimization, scapegoating, saviorism, avoidance, and other forms of dysfunctional communication which represent major barriers to achieving meaningful transformative outcomes (Lang et al. 2017; Schneider et al. 2019; Wiek 2007; Wiek et al. 2014). Strengthening the quality of interaction in such processes therefore emerges as a key condition for enhancing both the scientific robustness of outcomes and their capacity to contribute to broader societal transformation (Edmondson 1999; Edmondson and Lei 2014; Seiferth et al. 2025).

Transformative spaces as a response to the limits of collaborative practice

In response to the challenges observed in transdisciplinary sustainability processes, increasing attention has been directed toward the creation of so-called transformative spaces. These spaces have been proposed to further advance the capacities of participatory and collaborative formats.

Transformative spaces are commonly described as intentionally designed environments that enable actors engaged

in sustainability transformations to reflect, experiment, and engage with one another in ways that differ from dominant institutional and discursive settings. Pereira et al. conceptualize transformative spaces as “*safe-enough collaborative environments where actors invested in transformation can experiment with new mental models, ideas, and practices that can help shift social-ecological systems onto alternative pathways*” (Pereira et al. 2018).

Central to this understanding is the emphasis on dialogue, reflexivity, and mutual learning, as well as the deliberate inclusion of diverse perspectives that are often marginalized in established decision-making arenas. Rather than focusing solely on the production of knowledge or the negotiation of predefined solutions, these spaces aim to support processes of joint sense-making and co-creation that can contribute to systemic change (Pereira et al. 2015, 2020).

At the same time, the literature on transformative spaces largely articulates what such spaces are intended to provide, rather than how the underlying interactional challenges can be understood in greater depth. While attributes such as “safe-enough” environments, reflexive learning, listening practices and openness to multiple perspectives are frequently emphasized, less attention has been paid to the relational dynamics that make these qualities difficult to sustain in practice (Branny et al. 2025; Hakkarainen and Lazurko 2025; Seifert et al. 2025). In particular, existing accounts tend to describe desirable characteristics of transformative spaces without systematically addressing why collaborative settings so often revert to familiar, dysfunctional patterns of interaction. This observation points to an important theoretical need.

While there is increasing development of process knowledge how to design and facilitate them, it remains less explicit about why these conditions are often so difficult to sustain in practice (Charli-Joseph et al. 2023; Hakkarainen and Lazurko 2025; Lawrence et al. 2022). Our contribution builds on this work by focusing more explicitly on interactional and relational dynamics that often remain implicit.

Inspired by the Drama Triangle, a well-established framework for transformative work is The Empowerment Dynamics (TED), which reframes the roles of Victim, Persecutor, and Rescuer into the roles of Creator, Challenger, and Coach (Emerald 2016). While the Victim is oriented toward constraints and a perceived lack of agency (“I can’t”), the Creator takes desired outcomes as a starting point and engages with what can be created within existing conditions (“What do I want, and what can I do?”). In contrast to the Persecutor, who assigns blame and seeks to correct others, the Challenger focuses attention on reality, inviting others to acknowledge also inconvenient facts, constraints, consequences, and responsibilities without moral judgment. The Rescuer, who takes over responsibility and reinforces

dependency, is reframed as the Coach, who supports others in developing their own agency while remaining in relationship without taking control.

This reframing shifts the focus from blame, dependency, and over-responsibility toward more constructive forms of engagement, emphasizing orientation toward outcomes, accountability to reality, and the cultivation of self-responsibility. TED highlights the importance of agency, creativity, and solution-oriented engagement, and has been widely adopted in coaching, facilitation, and organizational development contexts. At the same time, the framework largely presupposes conditions in which actors are able to step out of Drama roles and consciously adopt empowering orientations. As such, it offers a valuable normative contrast, while leaving open the question of how empowerment can be sustained in situations where Drama dynamics remain active. So, while the Empowerment Dynamic provides a useful heuristic for reinterpreting interpersonal roles, our focus extends beyond role transformation to the relational conditions that enable groups to remain constructively engaged even in the continued presence of Drama dynamics.

For the further development of transformative spaces, it is therefore crucial to be aware of underlying dynamics and patterns that influence whether and how a process enables or obstructs effective problem solving and empowerment.

The shift toward a relational perspective

Related to this, an increasing body of scholarship emphasizes relational ontologies and approaches to sustainability and to stakeholder interaction as key foundation for transformative learning (Böhme et al. 2024; Bruhn and Böhme 2021; IPBES 2024; Larigauderie et al. 2025; Walsh et al. 2020; West et al. 2020). A relational perspective shifts analytical attention from individual actors or isolated system components to the patterns of interaction through which meaning, responsibility, and action are co-constituted. Among other aspects it is grounded in understanding a human being not as an isolated individual but as a relational self (Andersen and Chen 2002; Chen et al. 2011). From this viewpoint, collaboration is not understood primarily as the alignment of pre-existing interests or capacities, but as an emergent process shaped by how actors relate to one another in practice.

This implies that the quality of interaction, such as how participants listen, respond, attribute responsibility, and engage with difference, becomes a central unit of analysis. Rather than locating obstacles to collaboration solely in individual attitudes or structural constraints, a relational perspective highlights how recurring interaction patterns can stabilize or constrain collective engagement across difference.

Modern psychology offers valuable insights that can complement and deepen such relational approaches. By illuminating recurring patterns of interaction, emotional dynamics, and role-based responses, psychological perspectives can help explain why collaborative processes so often revert to constraining dynamics, and how conditions for generative exchange and joint problem-solving may be strengthened in the design and facilitation of transdisciplinary processes and transformative spaces (Bruhn 2017, 2021).

To better understand these dynamics, it is necessary to examine the patterned ways in which actors relate to one another when collaboration takes place under pressure. This requires an analytical perspective that focuses on recurring role constellations, communicative patterns, and the relational logics through which collaboration becomes constrained or enabled. The following section therefore introduces a diagnostic framework from psychology that illuminates how well-intentioned collaborative efforts can become entangled in self-reinforcing interaction patterns and why these patterns continue to shape sustainability-related collaboration.

The Drama Triangle as a diagnostic lens for dysfunctional interaction

The Drama Triangle was originally introduced by Stephen Karpman within the tradition of transactional analysis, a relationally oriented psychological tradition concerned with patterned interaction rather than individual pathology (Berne 1958; Solomon 2003). The Drama Triangle provides a model describing patterned role constellations in interpersonal conflict through the relational roles of Victim, Persecutor, and Rescuer (Karpman 1968). While originally developed to analyze interpersonal conflict, comparable dynamics of blame-shifting, avoidance, and disempowerment have since been documented in group, organizational, and institutional contexts (Argyris 2002; Edmondson 1999; Schein 1993, 2017). In complex sustainability-related processes, where collaboration across diverse perspectives is essential, such dynamics can critically undermine collective problem-solving and are therefore examined here as a diagnostic lens.

Importantly, the Drama Triangle is not understood as a typology of individual personalities or intentions. Rather, it describes relational role constellations that emerge and stabilize through interaction. Individuals, organizations, or stakeholder groups are not inherently Victims, Persecutors, or Rescuers; instead, they temporarily occupy these roles in relation to one another. This relational perspective avoids individualizing blame and shifts attention toward

the communicative patterns through which collaboration becomes constrained. In this sense, the Drama Triangle offers a useful analytical framework for understanding why well-intentioned actors repeatedly become entangled in cycles of blame, dependency, and over-responsibility, even when there is shared awareness of the urgency of sustainability challenges.

Core roles and their relational logic

The Drama Triangle distinguishes three interdependent roles: Victim, Persecutor (sometimes also referred to as Perpetrator), and Rescuer (or Savior) (Burgess 2005; McMahon 2005). Each role contributes in a specific way to the stabilization of dysfunctional interaction patterns.

Actors positioned in the Victim role typically experience themselves as helpless, constrained, or overwhelmed. This role is associated with feelings of injustice and a perceived lack of agency, often accompanied by an implicit appeal for support or intervention. While such experiences may be grounded in real constraints, the Victim role narrows the perceived scope of action and discourages responsibility-taking. The Persecutor role is characterized by criticism, blame, and moral judgment directed toward others. Actors in this position identify perceived wrongdoers and emphasize failure, negligence, or harmful intent. Although such critiques may be based on legitimate concerns, the Persecutor role tends to escalate conflict by personalizing responsibility and reinforcing adversarial dynamics. The Rescuer role emerges in response to perceived victimhood and is defined by an impulse to intervene, help, or fix the situation on behalf of others. Rescuers often derive a sense of purpose, identity, or self-worth from their supportive actions. However, rescuing behavior can unintentionally reinforce dependency by positioning others as incapable of acting for themselves, thereby undermining empowerment.

Each role within the Drama Triangle offers emotional and social incentives (such as sympathy, control, or moral superiority) that make it attractive to remain within the respective role, (Clark 2020; L'Abate 2009; Liras 2015; West 2020). The heightened emotional intensity associated with these roles, such as distress, indignation, or over-involvement, further entrenches individuals and groups within Drama dynamics.

Interdependence, role switching and self-stabilization of Drama dynamics

The three roles of the Drama Triangle are not independent; they are mutually reinforcing and stabilize one another through their relational logic. Victims seek emotional relief or assistance, while Rescuers derive validation from

providing help – creating a symbiotic relationship that discourages autonomy and empowerment. Victims may also, consciously or unconsciously, provoke blame from Persecutors, whose actions in turn confirm the Victim's sense of oppression. Rescuers may intervene against Persecutors as the perceived source of harm, but in doing so risk adopting persecutory behavior themselves (Anđelković and Jovančević, 2024; Choy 1990; Karpman 2014; West 2020).

These interlocking patterns create a closed relational system that is difficult to exit and in which responsibility is continuously displaced. Rather than addressing underlying causes or shared accountability, the Drama Triangle sustains itself through repetitive cycles of interaction that offer emotional coherence and moral clarity at the expense of constructive problem-solving.

A defining feature of Drama dynamics is the fluidity with which individuals and groups move between roles, contributing to the persistence of the overall dynamic. For example, actors who initially position themselves as Rescuers may adopt a Persecutor stance when their efforts are criticized or insufficiently acknowledged. Conversely, those framed as Persecutors may portray themselves as Victims of unfair regulation, public scrutiny, or media attacks. Similarly, individuals who initially adopt a Victim role may later seek validation by helping others, thereby shifting into a Rescuer position. Rescuers, in turn, who overextend themselves may experience burnout and subsequently perceive themselves as Victims and so forth (Graham 2017; L'Abate 2009; West 2020).

Role switching can also occur across different social contexts. Individuals may act as Rescuers in professional settings while positioning themselves as Victims in private relationships, or vice versa. While the specific roles occupied by individuals may change, the underlying Drama dynamic remains intact. This flexibility also makes Drama dynamics particularly resilient in public and organizational contexts. Because roles can be reinterpreted and reassigned without altering the underlying relational logic, the Drama Triangle can adapt to changing circumstances while continuing to structure interaction in familiar ways.

Implications for communication and problem-solving

When actors become entrenched in Drama dynamics, communication tends to prioritize emotional reactions and interpersonal positioning over constructive problem-solving, escalating conflict rather than resolving it. As a result, attention is diverted away from underlying issues and systemic causes, reinforcing binary framings of conflict, undermining trust and limiting opportunities for genuine learning or

transformation (Anđelković and Jovančević, 2024; Clark 2020; Ilya 2015; Karpman 1968, 2014; West 2020).

From a diagnostic perspective, the central limitation of Drama dynamics lies in their impact on collective sense-making and responsibility-taking. By framing challenges in terms of innocent victims, guilty perpetrators, and heroic rescuers, the Drama Triangle simplifies complex problems into binary moral narratives. Communication becomes oriented toward justifying one's position, or responding to perceived attacks, rather than toward shared exploration of options and constraints. Responsibility is continuously displaced making it difficult to articulate differentiated, context-sensitive forms of agency.

As a result, collaborative processes shaped by Drama dynamics often appear highly engaged while remaining ineffective. Considerable energy is invested in communication, yet this energy does not translate into learning, coordination, or transformative action. Instead, the Drama Triangle stabilizes a pattern of interaction that offers emotional coherence and moral clarity at the cost of practical problem-solving.

Drama as a relational phenomenon relevant to transformation

Drama roles can also be understood as manifestations of dominant dualistic worldviews that separate agency, responsibility, and moral positioning, an issue increasingly addressed in relational sustainability scholarship (Bozalek and Zembylas 2023; Clarke et al. 2018; Rauschmayer 2019). As a relationship dynamic, the Drama Triangle does not locate dysfunction at the level of individual deficits or psychological pathologies. Instead, it captures relational patterns that emerge through repeated interaction within specific social and discursive contexts. This relational perspective shifts attention from individual blame to the conditions under which role-based interaction patterns become likely. While the Drama Triangle offers a powerful diagnostic lens, it also points beyond diagnosis toward the question of how such dynamics might be navigated or transformed.

Drama dynamics in sustainability and climate discourse

Building on the diagnostic understanding of the Drama Triangle outlined above, this section examines how Drama dynamics manifest within sustainability and climate change discourse. Rather than emerging only in concrete interaction settings, Drama dynamics already shape how sustainability challenges are framed publicly, how responsibility is attributed, and how agency is distributed among different actors.

From this perspective, we apply the Drama Triangle as an analytical lens for understanding recurring patterns that structure sustainability discourse. A roughly similar idea has recently been explored in more confined scope by Gehring and Grigoletto (Gehring and Grigoletto 2023).

Structural conditions fostering Drama narratives

Sustainability and climate change discourses exhibit several structural characteristics that make them particularly susceptible to Drama framings. They are marked by high moral urgency, strong normative claims, and an emphasis on existential risks and irreversible harm (Kahan et al. 2012). Responsibilities and impacts are distributed unevenly across regions, social groups, and historical trajectories, giving rise to asymmetries that complicate shared responsibility-taking (Hulme 2008, 2009; Jasanoff 2010). These conditions create a fertile environment for simplified moral narratives that assign clear roles of innocence, guilt, and heroism.

Several authors have observed typical features of Drama dynamics in the discourse on climate change (Billett 2010; Boyce and Lewis 2009). Broadbent et al. described the discourse on climate change such that *in a global blame game, postcolonial poor nations tend to blame the rich nations for the problem and say they must act first. But the rich nations tend to say, “if the large poor nations don’t act, our reductions will be meaningless”* (Broadbent et al. 2016, p. 2). Through the lens of the Drama Triangle, this “blame game” creates or perpetuates identities of stakeholders in their respective role, i.e., as a Persecutor, and create opportunities for others to take on the roles of Victims and Rescuers (Olausson 2011).

Victim framings in sustainability discourse

Victim framings play a central role in sustainability and climate discourse. Commonly portrayed Victims include future generations, ecosystems, endangered species, and populations in the Global South or in small island developing states that are disproportionately affected by climate change despite having contributed little to its causes. Such framings are widely used to highlight vulnerability, injustice, and moral urgency (Garai et al. 2022; Shreedhar and Thomas-Walters 2022).

While these portrayals may be empirically and morally justified, they also shape expectations about who can and should act. Responsibility for change is implicitly shifted toward others, often invoking the need for intervention by more powerful actors.

From a diagnostic perspective, the issue is not whether victimhood claims are legitimate, but how it structures discourse. When entities are repeatedly positioned as passive

recipients of harm, the range of perceived agency narrows, and dependency relationships may be reinforced. This can unintentionally undermine empowerment and obscure differentiated forms of agency that exist even under conditions of vulnerability.

Persecutor framings in sustainability discourse

Persecutor framings constitute the discursive counterpart to Victim narratives by identifying actors deemed responsible for environmental harm. In sustainability and climate debates, typical Persecutors include fossil fuel industries, large corporations, industrialized countries, or broader systems such as capitalism or the “modern paradigm.” These framings are often supported by empirical evidence regarding historical emissions, lobbying practices, and environmental impacts (Guenther 2024; Supran and Oreskes 2021).

Within Drama dynamics, however, Persecutor framings tend to moralize responsibility in ways that amplify polarization. Actors positioned as Persecutors are framed primarily as wrongdoers, which often triggers defensive responses and resistance rather than openness to dialogue. While accountability is essential for sustainability transformations, primary reliance on Persecutor narratives can reduce complex systemic dynamics to binary oppositions, thereby limiting opportunities for shared learning and coordinated action. Importantly, the diagnostic focus here is not on disputing responsibility claims, but on examining their communicative effects. When responsibility is framed predominantly through blame, discourse may become locked into adversarial patterns that hinder collaborative problem framing and the exploration of mutually acceptable pathways forward.

Rescuer framings in sustainability discourse

Rescuer narratives are particularly prominent in sustainability discourse and often appear in the form of heroic individuals, activist movements, technological solutions, or policy interventions promising to “save the climate” or “save the planet.” Examples include environmental NGOs, youth movements, renewable energy technologies, visionary leaders or even geoengineering proposals, portrayed as capable of averting catastrophe (Reynolds 2023; Zürn and Schäfer 2013).

Within the Drama Triangle, the Rescuer role is characterized by an impulse to intervene and take responsibility on behalf of others. While Rescuer narratives can mobilize hope, engagement, and innovation, they also concentrate responsibility in a limited set of actors. This can unintentionally relieve others from confronting their own roles in sustainability transformations and reinforce dependency

dynamics similar to those observed at the interpersonal level. Moreover, Rescuer framings often rely on simplified solution narratives that underplay uncertainty, contestation, and unintended consequences. By emphasizing decisive intervention and technical fixes, they risk reproducing patterns of over-responsibility and disempowerment that stabilize Drama dynamics rather than enabling shared agency.

Role switching in sustainability discourse

One of many examples for the fluidity of role assignments within the climate change discourse can be recognized in the fossil-fuel industry. Historically, it was narrated as a Rescuer of prosperity, providing affordable, reliable energy that underpinned industrial growth and poverty reduction. In contemporary discourse it is often cast as a Persecutor responsible for emissions and environmental degradation, backed up by research findings about how major producers were aware of climate risks while funding communications that delayed policy responses. At the same time, the sector claims Victim status in the transition, warning that abrupt phase-out policies endanger jobs, investment, and energy security, and invoking the need for a “just transition” that protects workers and communities. These contested role attributions are not fixed properties but strategic, audience-dependent frames that shift across venues and over time (Hermwille et al. 2023; Lempinen et al. 2025). Alternating among these frames helps individual companies navigate contested legitimacy and sustain their social license to operate (Noor 2024; Supran and Oreskes 2021; Worland 2021).

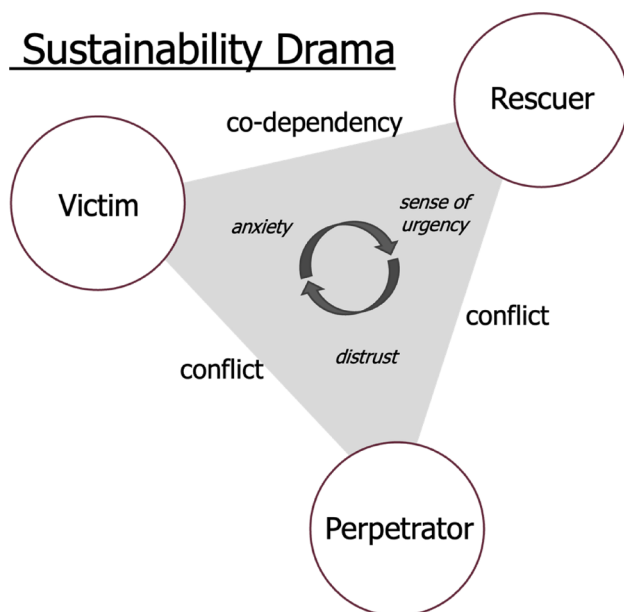


Fig. 1 Characterization of typical roles and relationship patterns in the Sustainability Drama Triangle

The self-reinforcing structure of Drama narratives

Taken together, Victim, Persecutor, and Rescuer framings form a self-reinforcing narrative structure within sustainability discourse. Victim narratives invite rescue, rescue legitimizes the identification of Persecutors, and Persecutor framings reinforce perceptions of victimhood. This closed narrative loop offers emotional coherence and moral clarity, but, as described in the previous section, also stabilizes interaction patterns that inhibit shared responsibility and collaborative problem-solving. This constellation that we would like to call the “Sustainability Drama” is illustrated in Fig. 1.

As a result, sustainability discourse may appear highly dynamic and mobilizing while remaining limited in its capacity to generate transformative action. Drama narratives simplify complexity, reduce ambiguity, and channel attention toward role-based positioning rather than toward reflexive engagement with systemic interdependencies. Understanding sustainability discourse through the lens of Drama dynamics thus helps explain why increasing awareness, scientific knowledge, and moral commitment do not automatically translate into effective collective action.

At the same time, this diagnostic perspective prepares the ground for examining how such dynamics are further amplified through mass and social media and why leaving Drama narratives requires more than replacing one set of roles with another. These questions are taken up in the following section.

Media as amplifiers of Drama dynamics in sustainability and climate discourse

Public and social media platforms play a pivotal role in reinforcing and stabilizing Drama Triangle dynamics within sustainability and climate change discourse. Rather than merely reflecting existing societal debates, media environments actively shape how challenges, responsibilities, and potential responses are framed.

Media systems tend to privilege sensational and emotionally charged content. Headlines and narratives designed to provoke outrage, fear, or empathy are especially effective in capturing attention, fostering identification, and stimulating audience engagement (Berger et al. 2021; Pearce et al. 2015; Xu et al. 2024). Such content is more likely to be shared, commented on, and remembered, thereby gaining disproportionate visibility in public discourse (Berry and Sobieraj 2013; Boyce and Lewis 2009; Hulme 2008; Mousoulidou et al. 2024). Particularly, moral-emotional language significantly increases the diffusion of political content on social networks—a tendency that is further

reinforced by algorithmic curation systems (Brady et al. 2017; Molek-Kozakowska 2013).

From a diagnostic perspective, these dynamics resonate strongly with Drama Triangle patterns. Drama-oriented storytelling thus dominates not only because of its narrative clarity but also because of its affective utility within digital communication environments.

In climate change discourse, this often translates into binary moral framings depicting nations, corporations, or industries as villains responsible for environmental degradation, while others appear as heroes leading sustainability efforts (Frermann et al. 2023). These narratives allow audiences to externalize responsibility and locate agency primarily in external actors, thereby reinforcing blame-oriented or rescue-oriented positions (Boykoff 2007; Ellen Good 2008).

While such representations can mobilize attention and moral concern by making complex environmental issues more accessible to broad audiences, they often do so at the expense of nuance and relational complexity. By emphasizing crisis, conflict, and moral responsibility, media narratives can obscure interconnected responsibilities, reinforce polarization, and entrench cyclical Drama roles (Kubin and Von Sikorski 2021).

From the perspective developed in this article, media thus function as powerful amplifiers of Drama dynamics rather than as their root cause. By repeatedly privileging emotionally charged, morally polarized narratives, media environments provide fertile ground for the stabilization of Victim, Persecutor, and Rescuer roles within sustainability discourse. Recognizing this reinforcing function is essential for understanding why Drama-based patterns persist in public debates and why efforts toward more collaborative, reflexive forms of engagement often struggle to gain traction.

Conceptual deepening: navigating the coexistence of Drama and empowerment

Existing sustainability and transformation scholarship has made substantial progress in identifying both dysfunctional interaction patterns and capacities that enable transformative action. On the one hand, a growing body of literature documents how sustainability discourses and processes are shaped by conflictual dynamics such as blaming, moral polarization, scapegoating, saviorism, and avoidance, particularly in complex multi-stakeholder settings. On the other hand, an equally rich strand of research emphasizes empowerment, agency, hope, and collaborative capacities as key ingredients for sustainability transformations, articulated through concepts such as empowerment dynamics,

inner transformation, transformative spaces, or collective action capacities.

Despite these advances, much of the existing literature implicitly treats Drama dynamics and empowerment-oriented dynamics as mutually exclusive states: processes are either captured by dysfunctional patterns or succeed in establishing empowering forms of collaboration. Analytical attention therefore tends to focus either on diagnosing dysfunctions or on promoting empowerment, while the relationship between these dynamics in practice remains under-theorized.

Empirical observations from sustainability transformations, transdisciplinary research, and climate-related multi-stakeholder processes suggest that Drama dynamics are rarely absent. Rather, they persist and frequently re-emerge even in settings explicitly designed to foster collaboration and empowerment. Feelings of urgency, fear, moral outrage, historical injustice, and responsibility are not external disturbances but intrinsic features of sustainability challenges. As a result, attempts to simply replace Drama with empowerment often remain fragile or short-lived.

At the same time, empowerment-oriented frameworks risk underestimating the relational and emotional forces that sustain Drama dynamics. By emphasizing agency, solutions, and positive narratives, they may encourage premature closure or the bypassing of unresolved tensions, power asymmetries, and entrenched role identities. In such cases, Drama is not transformed but temporarily suppressed or externalized, only to resurface later in renewed forms.

This issue becomes particularly salient when viewed through the relational ontology increasingly emphasized in sustainability transformation research (Bozalek and Zembylas 2023; Cabello 2024; IPBES 2024; Vogel and O'Brien 2022). Transformations unfold within dynamic relational fields shaped by histories, power relations, emotions, narratives, and institutional constraints, rather than through linear processes driven by isolated actors. Thus, Drama dynamics cannot be understood as individual pathologies or communication failures alone; they are relationally co-produced within specific interaction contexts. Responses to Drama therefore also need to be relational and processual, rather than prescriptive or purely normative.

So, existing frameworks tend to oscillate between diagnostic accounts of dysfunctional interaction patterns and normative models of desirable end states. What remains insufficiently developed is a conceptualization of the transition itself: how actors can remain response-able in situations characterized by persistent Drama dynamics, without reproducing them, and while still enabling movement toward more constructive forms of collaboration.

Building on relational ethics and feminist philosophy, the notion of response-ability reframes responsibility not

as individual control or obligation, but as a situated, relational capacity to respond within entangled social and material conditions (Barad 2007; Bozalek and Zembylas 2023; Cabello 2024; Haraway 2015, 2016). This perspective points to a potential for further conceptual deepening within current sustainability frameworks, particularly with regard to how actors can remain constructively engaged in the presence of ongoing conflict, uncertainty, and destabilizing dynamics. The following section introduces the concept of Transformative Response-Ability (TRA) as a contribution that seeks to specify and advance this relational dimension.

Transformative response-ability

To address this challenge, this article introduces **Transformative Response-Ability (TRA)** as an emergent relational field quality that shapes how participants relate, respond, and take responsibility within sustainability processes marked by persistent and emotionally charged dynamics. It becomes visible in the cultivation of relational presence, the capacity to remain engaged amid tension and fragility, the enactment of distributed agency, and the ability to engage power asymmetries without collapsing into role-based dynamics. Rather than an individual capacity, it denotes a fragile, processual quality of sustained engagement under conditions of uncertainty and conflict.

TRA refers to a quality of the relational space that emerges through interaction and shapes what can be expressed, held, and transformed within a group. While individual awareness and self-regulation can contribute to its emergence, this quality cannot be reduced to individual traits. Instead, it is co-produced through interaction, facilitation, and structural conditions, and may stabilize over time as a recognizable characteristic of a collaborative setting even as participants or facilitators change.

Participants often experience such field qualities directly when entering a space and sensing “how interaction works here”. Facilitation can support their emergence, for example by creating reflective moments or slowing down interaction. However, TRA itself refers to the emergent quality of the relational field rather than to individual competences.

The following four interrelated features characterize relational fields in which Transformative Response-Ability can emerge.

Relational presence

Relational presence refers to a mode of interaction in which participants remain aware of themselves as being in relationship with others and act accordingly.

This becomes visible not through any single behavior, but through small and often subtle interaction patterns. Participants acknowledge one another as relevant voices in the conversation, actively invite perspectives that are not yet present, and show awareness that their own contributions affect others in the room. For example, this may take the form of explicitly inviting quieter participants into the conversation (“I am curious how you see this”), pausing to consider how a statement may have been received, or referencing others’ contributions in ways that signal attentive listening.

At a collective level, relational presence manifests as a shared orientation in which participants do not merely speak about an issue, but remain attentive to the relational dynamics through which the issue is being engaged. The group becomes capable of noticing shifts in tone, inclusion, or tension without immediately reacting defensively, thereby sustaining a relational space in which different perspectives can remain in contact.

Relational presence can be supported through the design of interaction settings that invite attentiveness, inclusion, and reflexivity. This may include, for example, practices for deep listening or changed perspective-taking, explicitly inviting diverse perspectives, or structuring dialogue in ways that make relational dynamics visible. Such design elements do not guarantee relational presence, but they can create conditions that make it more likely to emerge and be sustained.

Fragility and the capacity to stay with what emerges

Relational fields characterized by TRA are inherently fragile. Moments of frustration, blame, moral judgement, or helplessness do not disappear; rather, they continue to arise as part of collaborative processes under pressure. Instead of aiming to design Drama-free settings, TRA acknowledges the empirical reality of sustainability processes, in which such dynamics are often already present, historically embedded, and emotionally charged.

What distinguishes such fields is not the absence of these dynamics, but the group’s capacity to remain with them without immediately collapsing into Drama patterns. Expressions of anger, perceived injustice, or responsibility can be acknowledged without triggering automatic counter-reactions such as defensiveness, escalation, or role-based positioning. For instance, a participant may voice frustration or attribute responsibility without this leading others to respond with immediate justification or counter-blame. Instead, such expressions can be received as part of what is present in the field, creating space for reflection rather than escalation.

Fragility, in this sense, refers to the vulnerability of the relational field to being pulled into reinforcing patterns of polarization and role fixation. TRA involves recognizing this vulnerability and sustaining engagement without reverting to control, avoidance, or moralization. Rather than indicating weakness, fragility reflects the conditions under which meaningful transformation unfolds: situations of uncertainty in which outcomes cannot be guaranteed and relational positions cannot be fully stabilized.

From this perspective, empowerment is not understood as a stable state that can be achieved once and for all, but as a fragile and situational quality that must be repeatedly re-established in the presence of Drama tendencies. While structural arrangements and facilitation can support this process, TRA as a relational field quality may also emerge and stabilize without explicit facilitation. How such fields can be intentionally cultivated under different conditions is an important question, but lies beyond the scope of this article.

Responsibility and distributed agency

A third feature of Transformative Response-Ability concerns how responsibility and agency are enacted within the relational field.

In fields characterized by TRA, participants orient more strongly toward what they themselves can meaningfully contribute. This is not expressed as individual heroism, but as a situated and relationally embedded form of agency. Rather than externalizing responsibility (“someone should act”), participants engage with what lies within their own sphere of influence, while remaining attentive to the relational context in which action unfolds.

This involves articulating both possibilities and limitations: participants may state what they can realistically contribute within their role, while also acknowledging constraints and uncertainties. Importantly, this is accompanied by an openness to interdependence. Where individual capacity ends, participants invite others to contribute, allowing action to emerge through coordination rather than delegation (“if we want to move this forward, who here could take this on?”).

At the collective level, agency becomes distributed and compositional, emerging through the alignment of partial contributions rather than through singular actors. Responsibility is neither denied nor individualized, but negotiated in relation to the capacities, constraints, and positions present within the group.

This shift is closely related to a broader reconfiguration of how power and responsibility are understood, moving from hierarchical notions of “power over” toward more relational and systemic forms of “power with” (Abizadeh 2023; Pansardi and Bindi 2021; Partzsch 2017).

Engaging power and asymmetry in relationship

Finally, relational fields characterized by TRA do not avoid questions of power and asymmetry but enable them to be engaged within the relational space.

TRA does not assume “collaboration on eye level” as a precondition. Differences in influence, resources, and institutional position are treated as constitutive features of collaborative settings. Rather than being bracketed out or flattened, such asymmetries can be acknowledged, articulated, and explored without immediately triggering defensive reactions or role entrenchment.

In such fields, participants may point out differences in influence (“from your position, you are able to affect this process in ways others cannot”) or express expectations toward those with greater leverage. At the same time, those in more powerful positions can acknowledge both their capacities and their limitations without being pushed into justification, denial, or “rescuer” roles.

Engaging power in this way often involves tension and potential conflict. What characterizes Transformative Response-Ability is the group’s capacity to remain in relationship while working through these tensions, rather than reverting to blame, withdrawal, or moral polarization. In this sense, power is not resolved but continuously negotiated within the relational field.

Figure 2 situates Transformative Response-Ability within the broader tension between Drama dynamics and empowerment-oriented interaction patterns, providing a visual representation of how different relational dynamics shape collective engagement. Drama dynamics are often reinforced through what we refer to as “Drama-reinforcing attractors”, i.e., immediate emotional intensity and clearly defined role positions (see Section “[Why Drama remains attractive](#)”). Relational fields characterized by empowerment-oriented interaction and Transformative Response-Ability, on the other hand, are sustained through more subtle forms of reinforcement which we describe as “quieter relational rewards”, i.e. experiences of mutual recognition, trust, and belonging (see Section “[The quieter rewards of leaving Drama](#)”). Although these dynamics are less visible and often less immediately gratifying, they play a crucial role in stabilizing constructive interaction over time.

Obstacles and enablers—why TRA is attractive and yet remains fragile

While the four characteristics of Transformative Response-Ability provide a conceptual orientation for navigating Drama dynamics constructively, the enactment of TRA in practice remains challenging and fragile.

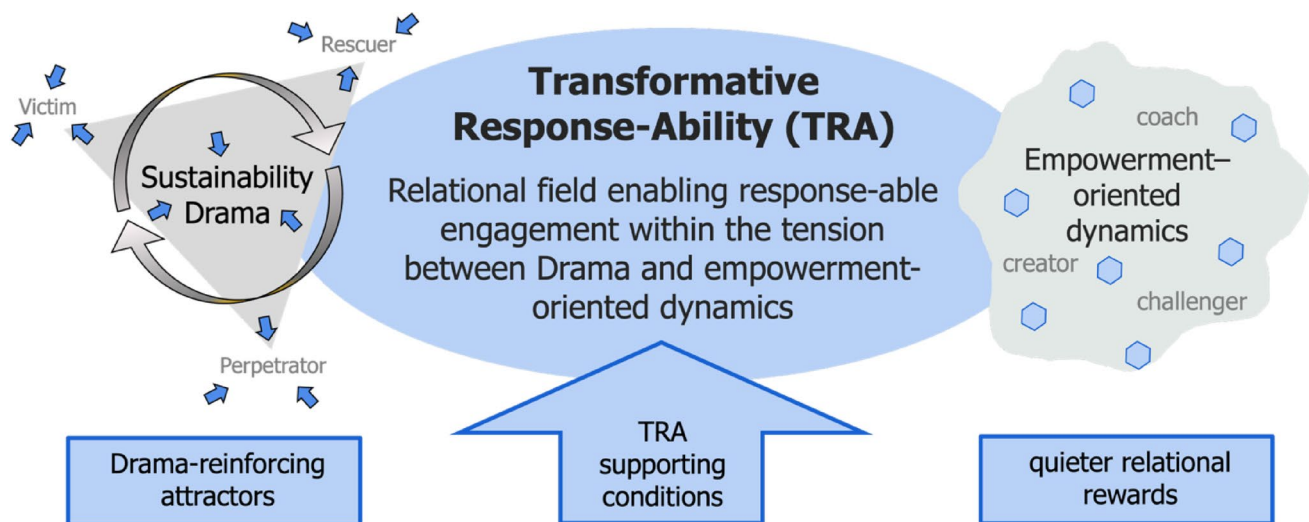


Fig. 2 Transformative Response-Ability as a relational field mediating between Drama dynamics and empowerment-oriented interaction. The Drama Triangle (Victim, Persecutor, Rescuer) describes reactive relational roles that stabilize blame, dependency, and over-responsibility (Karpman 1968). The Empowerment Dynamic (Creator, Challenger, Coach) reframes these roles toward more constructive interaction patterns (Emerald 2016). Transformative Response-Ability is conceptu-

alized as an emergent relational field quality that enables groups to remain constructively engaged in the presence of Drama dynamics. Rather than depicting a linear transition from Drama to empowerment, the figure highlights how response-able engagement is sustained within this tension, shaped by relational and structural conditions that support presence without suppressing conflict or reverting to role-based interaction

Sustainability-related collaboration unfolds within interaction fields shaped by incentives, emotional dynamics, institutional pressures, and historically sedimented expectations that can either stabilize Drama patterns or support more empowered forms of engagement. Understanding why Drama dynamics persist, and under which conditions actors are able to remain response-able in their presence, therefore requires attention to the factors that hinder or enable the emergence of Transformative Response-Ability. This section therefore examines these obstacles and enablers with a focus on relational, psychological, and situational dynamics.

TRA-supporting conditions in relational fields

The emergence of Transformative Response-Ability depends on structural and institutional as well as relational field conditions that allow actors to remain present and responsive under tension.

Relational conditions On a relational level, psychological safety, trust, and listening practices enable engagement without immediate role fixation or attribution. Tolerance for ambiguity and the suspension of premature solution pressure widen the space for reflexivity and shared sense-making. These conditions support response-ability by slowing reactive dynamics and keeping responsibility negotiable rather than displaced (Branny et al. 2025; Juri et al. 2022). Importantly, they help prevent the rapid collapse of interaction into Drama constellations when uncertainty and pressure intensify.

Institutional and structural field conditions Time pressure, rigid accountability regimes, and performance metrics privileging visibility and decisiveness tend to amplify reactivity and role stabilization (Edmondson and Lei 2014; Power 1997). Conversely, mandates that allow process orientation, protected spaces for reflection, and facilitative containment can stabilize response-ability under strain (Norström et al. 2020; Schön 1992). Such conditions reduce structural incentives for blame, rescue, and over-responsibility. They thereby influence whether collaborative fields remain open to relational navigation or are pulled back into Drama dynamics.

Why Drama remains attractive

Even in carefully curated conditions, Drama dynamics persist and remain attractive not despite, but partly because of the emotional and social incentives associated with the respective Drama roles as well as concrete obstacles that make it difficult to leave Drama roles once they have been adopted.

Rewards of Drama On an individual level, each Drama role provides different powerful incentives such as sympathy, control, or moral superiority (Clark 2020; L'Abate 2009; Liras 2015; West 2020). Professionals in the field of sustainability frequently derive meaning, recognition, and moral legitimacy from helping others (Graham 2017; L'Abate 2009). Aspirations of "saving the world" reinforce patterns of over-responsibility and paternalistic intervention

(GCF 2022; Harris 2020; Jacobson 2023; Morris et al. 2019). Importantly, individual rewards of Drama are stabilized also through institutional incentives through visibility, funding structures, and performance metrics emphasizing demonstrable impact (Clark 2020; Liras 2015), and discursive structures that make them resilient over time (Clark 2020; Karpman 2014; West 2020).

On a collective level, Drama dynamics generate attention, emotional intensity, and a sense of urgency that can temporarily mobilize actors and audiences. By assigning clear roles of Victim, Persecutor, and Rescuer, they reduce uncertainty and provide orientation in situations that would otherwise remain ambiguous and difficult to navigate. These dynamics are further reinforced by discursive and institutional structures that privilege clear problem framings, identifiable culprits, and visible acts of intervention. Particularly in public, media-oriented, and policy-facing arenas, Drama offers highly communicable narratives that increase visibility and legitimacy, while more tentative, dialogical, and process-oriented approaches struggle to gain attention.

Obstacles to leaving Drama roles: justice narratives and identity investment In sustainability debates, role attributions are often anchored in historically grounded justice narratives. Discourses on cumulative emissions, ecological debt, and differentiated responsibilities provide compelling reasons to frame industrialized countries as Persecutors and vulnerable regions as Victims (Roberts and Parks 2009; Warlenius et al. 2015). Competing principles of responsibility, such as historical contribution, capability, proximity, and effectiveness, produce divergent expectations of who should act, when, and how (Shreedhar and Thomas-Walters 2022). When selectively invoked, these principles function less as coordination devices than as tools of attribution, reinforcing adversarial role constellations. Absent context-specific recalibration of responsibility that integrates justice claims with capacity and opportunity (Hermwille et al. 2023), Victim and Persecutor framings tend to harden and invite Rescue narratives (Olausson 2011). While such framings are analytically and morally justified, they may inadvertently stabilize Drama dynamics (Cuomo 2011; Füssel 2010; Rocha et al. 2015).

At the individual level, leaving Drama roles, particularly the Rescuer role, entails significant identity costs. Stepping back from over-responsibility often evokes guilt, anxiety, and fears of abandonment, while redefining one's role threatens established sources of validation and purpose (Korotov et al. 2012; Lampis et al. 2017; Lindley et al. 1999).

Moving beyond Drama requires tolerance for ambiguity, slower processes, and shared ownership. Yet organizational cultures often privilege certainty, speed, and decisive action, suppressing precisely those qualities needed to sustain TRA (Edmondson 1999). Institutional settings such as the

UNFCCC COPs illustrate this ambivalence. While mechanisms like nationally determined contributions and global stocktakes can function as Challenger or Coach structures following a logic of Empowerment Dynamics that invite learning and recalibration (Dagnet et al. 2020; Obergassel et al. 2019), political communication often re-moralizes these processes, pulling participants back into Drama roles.

The quieter rewards of leaving Drama

Rather than offering immediate relief or moral clarity, TRA allows individuals to step out of rigid role expectations, discomforts and co-dependencies associated with Victim, Persecutor, or Rescuer positions, shifting attention from mutual blame (and associated negative emotions) toward fields of agency, autonomy, well-being, and constructive action (Anđelković and Jovančević 2024; Clark 2020; Ilya 2015; Liras 2015).

In contrast, actors experience TRA as a process of contributing meaningfully while experiencing themselves as part of a relational field, including, for example, the emergence of trust, the experience of being heard without needing to defend oneself, the gradual development of shared understanding, or the sense that responsibility is held collectively rather than displaced. While less immediately rewarding than Drama roles, these experiences can provide a deeper and more sustainable sense of meaning and belonging.

At the field level, TRA can give rise to a palpable sense of aliveness: moments of mutual recognition, curiosity, and relief when reactive dynamics loosen and new possibilities become perceptible. Such experiences are often accompanied by quiet joy, vitality, and renewed engagement, arising not from agreement or success, but from staying present to tension without collapse. These qualities tend to remain subtle and easily overshadowed by the louder dynamics of Drama, yet they strengthen collective motivation and resilience. Over time, this lived sense of aliveness may become a critical resource for the further process.

Facilitation and space design as navigation

Facilitation and space design play a critical role in navigating the tension between the strong attractors of Drama dynamics and the emergence of TRA in collaborative sustainability processes.

A central function of facilitation is to slow down reactive dynamics before they solidify into fixed roles. By suspending premature problem-solving, blame attribution, and solution advocacy, facilitation creates space for reflection and perspective-taking. Practices such as structured listening, pacing, and reframing help regulate affect without suppressing conflict (Branny et al. 2025). Because the

rewards of TRA are subtle and easily overshadowed by the intensity of Drama, facilitation also involves making these experiences perceptible at the field level. Moments of shared presence, mutual recognition, relational relief, or quiet joy often remain unnoticed unless explicitly named or held in awareness. By amplifying such experiences, without instrumentalizing them, facilitators help counterbalance the louder incentives of Drama. Making lived experiences of aliveness, dignity, and shared agency visible strengthens collective motivation and supports the sustained holding of response-ability over time.

While facilitation practices are clearly crucial for sustaining Transformative Response-Ability, detailing concrete facilitation techniques would exceed the scope of this conceptual contribution.

Importantly, all these dynamics also concern transdisciplinary researchers and facilitators themselves. Commitments to enabling dialogue and transformation can easily slide into over-responsibility or subtle rescue dynamics. From a Transformative Response-Ability perspective, reflexivity about one's own positioning becomes a key condition for sustaining relational integrity in collaborative processes.

Illustrative vignettes from COP-related collaboration

The following short vignettes illustrate how the dynamics discussed in this article may manifest in concrete multi-stakeholder settings. They are not presented as systematic case studies nor as empirically representative evidence. Rather, they draw on experiential observations from practice to illuminate how Drama dynamics emerge in real interactions, how they are reinforced by broader discursive and media contexts, and under which conditions tentative shifts toward more empowered forms of engagement become possible.

The vignettes are situated in the context of the Conferences of the Parties (COPs) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), one of the most prominent arenas of global sustainability governance. The convergence of high moral urgency, unequal historical responsibilities, geopolitical tensions, and intense public scrutiny makes COPs a particularly dense environment in which Drama dynamics become visible.

Between 2019 and 2023, the Research Institute for Sustainability at the Helmholtz Centre for Geosciences in Potsdam (RIFS, formerly IASS) hosted an openly accessible pavilion in the UNFCCC Blue Zone to experiment with innovative formats for science communication and dialogue. This Co-Creative Reflection and Dialogue Space

(CCRDS) served as an experimental setting to explore conditions for constructive transdisciplinary exchange. Its design principles and facilitation practices have been documented elsewhere (Bruhn et al. 2024; Fraude et al. 2021; Mar et al. 2021, 2023; Wamsler et al. 2020). Through practices such as boundary-setting, relational attunement, and attention to participants' situated capacities for response, several principles aligned with Transformative Response-Ability were implicitly enacted.

When conducting dialogue sessions in the CCRDS, Drama dynamics surfaced regularly. Participants often entered the space with high aspirations to “change the world,” alongside deep frustration about dysfunctional negotiations and anxiety about a looming environmental collapse. The tension between urgency, fear, and hope created an emotionally charged atmosphere marked by distress, distrust, and latent conflict. Even before sessions formally began, participants sometimes engaged in heated exchanges, blaming absent actors or institutions for perceived failures. Many described feeling overwhelmed by the scale of climate challenges and by their own limited capacity to influence outcomes, reinforcing an “us versus them” mentality. This often translated into criticism of stakeholders perceived as bearing special responsibility while simultaneously obscuring participants' own potential contributions. Further analyses of group dynamics in political negotiation settings at COPs have been published elsewhere (Domnich and Bruhn 2024).

Vignette 1: Vulnerability, Boundaries, and the Limits of Openness

(Quotes from memory, not protocolled literally)

An impactful incident occurred at COP26 during a dialogue session that had been constructive and trustful for nearly 45 min. A guest speaker (A) with business background shared openly about the tensions and ambiguities of trying to navigate change in a field where many organizations have a strong interest in continuing fossil fuel-based business models. Participants were seated in a circle, jointly reflecting on their related struggles and supporting each other in identifying potential opportunities for action.

Suddenly, a person (B) from outside the circle entered the space, listened briefly, and then began shouting at A in loud, offensive tone, accusing A of being responsible for planetary destruction and for stealing the future of B's daughter.

The moderators attempted to de-escalate the situation by acknowledging the pain, frustration, and anger B expressed. While this helped calm the atmosphere, B refused to engage in conversation with A. After staying for a few minutes, B left the circle again without further interaction. Visibly shaken with some tears, A expressed understanding for the emotions voiced by B and noted that he had encountered similar situations before. Also, A admitted wondering regularly “whether I am part of the solution or part of the

problem". After holding the emotional impact of this incident together in a moment of joint breathing in silence, the group subsequently returned to a constructive exchange, reflecting together on how to engage with stakeholders in intense emotional states in their respective contexts.

Vignette 2: Small Interventions, Rapid Shifts

(Quotes from memory, not protocolled literally)

In another CCRDS session at COP28, a small group of women from different cultures (India, China, Middle East, Europe) gathered shortly before the official start of a session on the topic of structural patriarchy at the COPs. A heated conversation quickly emerged around experiences of exclusion, oppression, and injustice, reinforced by recent media reports about the COP presidency's meetings with fossil fuel representatives. Within minutes, the group coalesced around shared anger and a sense of structural oppression.

As facilitators, we initially allowed the dynamic to unfold until the initial "steam seemed vented". After several minutes, we acknowledged the intensity of the moment and the challenges of the conditions under which we gathered. We invited participants to shift their attention to the fact that, despite everything, they had chosen to spend 90 min together in conversation. We suggested a small physical intervention, moving our chairs slightly closer, to express that, for the duration of the session we decided to focus on working constructively with the people that were here together and not be pulled into the dynamics around us. We invited participants to take a few deep breaths, make conscious eye-contact with each other and then invited them to introduce themselves by sharing their names and their meanings in their mother tongues.

This simple relational practice led to a radical shift. After the first participant (the oldest person in the circle) shared the story of her name, the atmosphere softened. Participants were amazed about the complexity behind the name and expressed curiosity about each others' different cultural backgrounds. Appreciation about the others' presence was expressed and after the round of introduction was completed, the group moved quickly into constructive conversation. Participants explored connecting themes and identified realistic concrete next steps within their own agency.

Together, these two short vignettes illustrate several core insights central to this article:

- Drama dynamics can emerge abruptly, even in settings that have been experienced as constructive and trustful. Their activation is often triggered by perceived moral urgency, boundary crossings, or unresolved responsibility attributions rather than by a lack of information or goodwill.
- Empowerment-oriented interaction remains fragile, particularly in open or weakly bounded spaces. Moments

of vulnerability require not only openness, but also relational containment and clearly held boundaries.

- Transformative shifts do not primarily result from better arguments or moral appeals, but from situational, relational interventions that interrupt reactive role patterns and reorient attention toward shared presence, mutual recognition, and situated agency.
- Small, well-timed facilitation practices can have disproportionate effects on the relational field, enabling rapid transitions from polarized or blame-oriented dynamics toward more constructive forms of engagement.

Discussion and outlook

This article examined how collaboration in sustainability and climate change contexts can more fully realize its transformative potential.

Drama Dynamics as a Relational Challenge for Sustainability Transformations By applying the Drama Triangle as a diagnostic lens, this article contributes to a more differentiated understanding of collaboration challenges in sustainability contexts. It shows how sustainability discourse and stakeholder interactions are frequently structured by patterns of victimization, blame, and rescue, which can become self-reinforcing within complex systems. These dynamics are particularly pronounced in climate-related contexts, shaped by uneven historical responsibilities, asymmetrically distributed impacts, and high emotional stakes.

The analysis of sustainability discourse and media dynamics further illustrates how Drama framings are repeatedly reproduced and amplified, simplifying complexity, externalizing responsibility, and reinforcing polarization. As a result, they can undermine capacities such as mutual learning, shared responsibility, and reflexive collaboration that are widely recognized as essential for transformative change.

The Contribution of Transformative Response-Ability Against this background, the concept of Transformative Response-Ability (TRA) was introduced. While empowerment-oriented models provide valuable normative orientations, they often assume that dysfunctional dynamics can be left behind once more constructive roles or mindsets are adopted. In practice, however, Drama dynamics tend to persist, latently or explicitly, even in settings designed to foster collaboration.

TRA addresses this tension by focusing on how actors remain constructively engaged in the presence of such dynamics. Rather than an individual competence, it is conceptualized as a relational field quality that emerges within specific interaction contexts. It describes the ongoing work of remaining responsive, reflective, and accountable while

navigating uncertainty, conflict, and emotional intensity. This conceptualization is complemented by an analysis of the relational conditions and incentives that enable or obstruct its emergence.

Implications for Transformative Spaces and Facilitation The illustrative vignettes highlight the practical relevance of this perspective. They show how Drama dynamics can surface rapidly in highly charged sustainability settings, and how subtle facilitation practices and structural conditions can make a decisive difference. Constructive collaboration emerged not through the elimination of conflict or emotion, but through ways of holding tension that prevented escalation into fixed Drama roles. At the same time, the COP-related examples underscore the limits of such interventions: while facilitation can temporarily recalibrate responsibility and agency, these shifts remain fragile and can be overshadowed by structurally reinforced Drama dynamics.

From this perspective, transformative spaces are not defined by the absence of conflict or emotional intensity, but by their capacity to support Transformative Response-Ability. Their potential lies in enabling stakeholders to remain engaged with tension and disagreement without defaulting to blame, helplessness, or rescue. This underscores the importance of careful design, facilitation, and boundary-setting in multistakeholder processes, particularly in contexts shaped by historical injustice and power asymmetries.

Limitations and Future Research Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the analysis is conceptual and illustrative rather than empirical. The vignettes presented do not claim representativeness but serve to ground the conceptual argument in concrete practice-based observations. Future research could build on this work by systematically examining Drama dynamics and Transformative Response-Ability across different sustainability contexts and methodological approaches.

While facilitation practices are clearly crucial for supporting and sustaining Transformative Response-Ability, detailing concrete facilitation techniques exceeded the scope of this conceptual contribution. After clarifying the relational dynamics such practices need to navigate, further investigations are recommended to develop a systematic understanding of adequate, context-sensitive process knowledge.

Lastly, while this article focused primarily on relational and discursive dynamics, these are always embedded in broader structural and institutional conditions. Further work is needed to explore how governance arrangements, funding structures, and organizational incentives interact with Drama dynamics and either constrain or enable Transformative Response-Ability.

Outlook Rather than closing the discussion, this article opens up a perspective on how sustainability-related

collaboration might be understood and practiced differently. Sustainability transformations demand capacities for relating, collaborating, and responding to complexity under conditions of uncertainty and emotional intensity. By introducing the Drama Triangle as a diagnostic lens and Transformative Response-Ability as a relational capacity for navigating its dynamics, this article offers a contribution to ongoing debates on the inner and relational dimensions of sustainability transformations.

Rather than proposing a definitive solution, the analysis invites a shift in perspective: from asking how to eliminate conflict or assign responsibility, toward exploring how stakeholders can remain response-able in the midst of unavoidable tensions. In this sense, Transformative Response-Ability does not promise Drama-free sustainability, but it opens pathways for more honest, resilient, and generative forms of collaboration in the face of planetary challenges.

Conclusion

This article has examined sustainability-related collaboration through the lens of the Drama Triangle, showing how recurring role-based dynamics can constrain collective problem-solving in contexts marked by complexity, uncertainty, and emotional intensity.

By introducing Transformative Response-Ability as a relational field quality, it offers a process-oriented perspective on how actors can remain constructively engaged in the presence of these dynamics. Rather than seeking to eliminate conflict or assign responsibility in simplified ways, this perspective highlights the importance of sustaining response-able engagement within ongoing tensions, including those shaped by uncertainty and power asymmetries.

The article situates these insights in relation to transformative spaces, reframing collaboration in sustainability contexts as a relational practice that must be continuously cultivated. Such spaces are not defined by the absence of conflict, but by the capacity to remain engaged within conditions that are inherently fragile, contested, and evolving. Further research is needed to explore how these relational capacities can be cultivated, sustained, and adapted across diverse sustainability contexts.

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