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Sustainable welfare as a new paradigm in social policy

Martin Fritz, Kajsa Emilsson and Jayeon Lee

Introduction

In this chapter, we argue that the social and ecological risks of our time are interconnected and that overcoming them requires integrated eco-social solutions that provide welfare without transgressing planetary boundaries. Since around the year 2010, this new direction in policy development has been discussed increasingly in social policy research under the term *sustainable welfare*.

Sustainable welfare is not just a new concept, as it has been described in much of the literature so far (Gough, 2015; Brandstedt and Emmelin, 2016; Büchs and Koch, 2017). In the following we introduce sustainable welfare as a new paradigm in social policy research responding to the unfolding socio-ecological crisis. Just as the term social policy is used for both a research field and a policy area, sustainable welfare could be understood either as a scientific paradigm or as a policy paradigm, or as both. Policy paradigms, first systematically discussed by Hall (1993), can be defined as an internally coherent set of ideas that are held by policy actors and that contain underlying values, a conception of the problem, specific goals and solutions (Daigneault, 2014). Since ideas of sustainable welfare are only beginning to spread among policy actors but have emerged first in academic debates of social policy research, we assume that sustainable welfare is not yet a policy paradigm but an *emerging scientific paradigm* in the sense of Thomas Kuhn's (1996) conceptualisations (see also Fritz and Lee, 2023). According to Kuhn, paradigms are universally recognised scientific achievements that, for a time, provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners (Kuhn, 1996). In the process of 'normal science', unexpected results that contradict the existing paradigm accumulate until a critical mass is reached, which would then cause a crisis and ultimately lead to the rejection of the existing paradigm. At this point a new paradigm is created or emerges, which enables the reconciliation (not the replacement) of the old results with the new anomalous results (Kuhn, 1996, pp 43–51).

In the following sections, we attempt to apply the theory of paradigm change in science to the field of social policy. The goal is to describe the development of social policy research in three stages: from the period of the Fordist industrial economy to the post-Fordist period and to the currently unfolding period characterised by interlinked social and ecological crises (for a similar periodisation, see Chapter 4 in this volume). The elements in the process of paradigm change according to Kuhn are i) problems, ii) solutions, iii) new empirical material, and iv) a crisis. We discuss the relevant problems for each period and how these were intended to be solved by social policy (see Figure 3.1). Moreover, for each period, we highlight how new economic and societal conditions, partly shaped by new empirical findings in science and social policy research, have challenged the existing paradigm and how this led to a crisis and ultimately, a paradigm shift that brought new problem definitions and solutions to the fore.

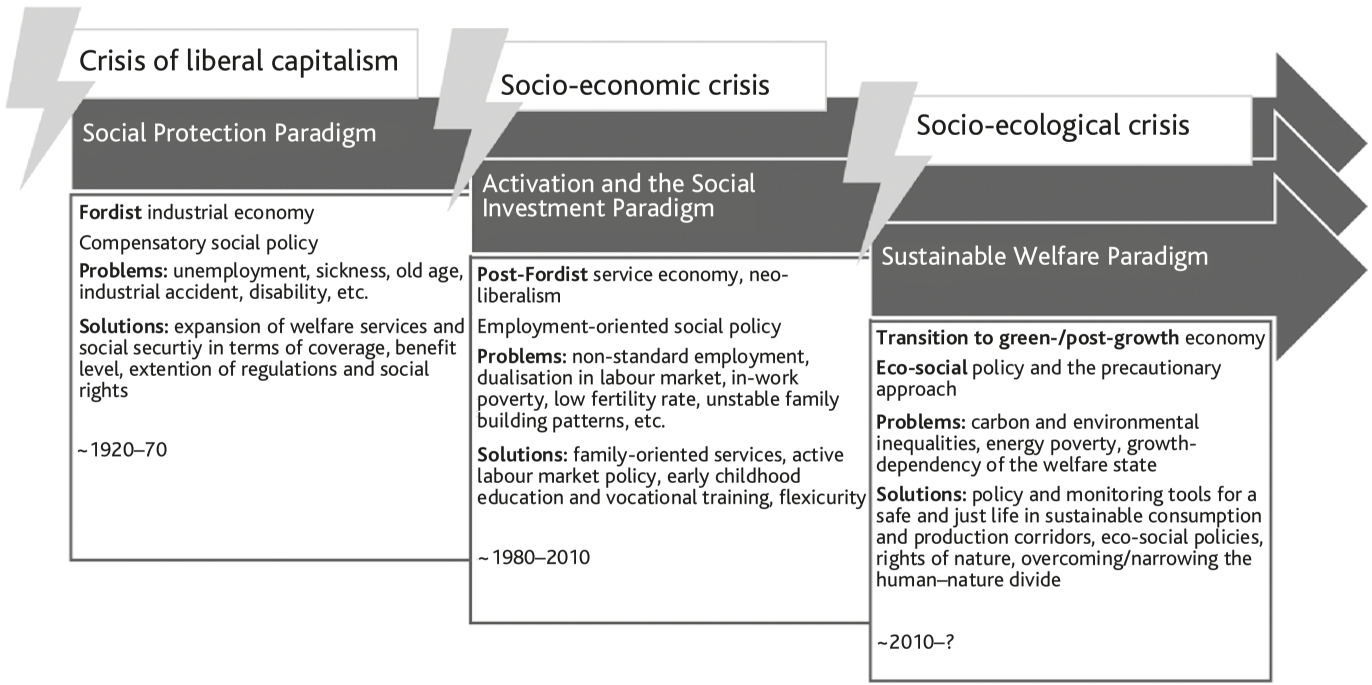
From Fordist social protection to post-Fordist activation and investment

Henry Ford, founder of the Ford Motor Company in the early 20th century, introduced standardised mass production for his famous Model T ('available in any color as long as it is black') and promoted a demand-oriented as well as scientifically planned organisation of work. Faced with the low productivity of the masses of low-skilled, poorly paid and unmotivated workers – typical for early liberal capitalism, which had reached a state of crisis due to the widening gap between the rich and the poor (Polanyi, 1944/2001) – the entrepreneur looked for new ways to expand production and generate more profit. He started to pay higher wages and built houses for his workers with the goals of offering long-term employment prospects, raising workers' living standards, increasing their purchasing power and stimulating domestic demand. In a paternalistic exchange for the benefits of the Fordist system, the workers were expected to be loyal to the company and to integrate into the rigid norms of industrial production on the Fordist assembly lines. The practical insights of the entrepreneur found their echo in the world of science when macroeconomist Keynes demonstrated the feasibility of anticyclical state interventions to raise public welfare and stabilise the economy through increasing demand.

Fordist industrial development and the social protection paradigm

After the Second World War, the realisation of the ideas of Ford and Keynes contributed to Western nations' high productivity increases and rapid economic growth, the building of public infrastructure and the expansion of welfare states (Hall, 2022). More people, for example, family members, were

Figure 3.1: Paradigms in social policy research over three periods of the Western welfare states



covered by social protection schemes, and security systems were extended to cover more risks, such as elderly care and health insurance. Also, benefits were raised to levels that enabled the majority of the population to meet minimum basic needs. Moreover, the welfare state stipulated regulations and social rights (for example, employment protection, co-determination) that improved material living standards and provided possibilities for people to take part in economic development. While the development of social expenditure and programmes before the war was selective, targeted to the deserving poor, the post-war development of social protection in Western European countries can be characterised by their relatively universal and encompassing ambitions, covering not only workers but increasingly the wider population (Nullmeier and Kaufmann, 2010). Old-age pensions, sickness benefits, unemployment insurance, employment injury insurance, maternity benefits and so on comprised the backbone of the welfare states with their inbuilt mechanism of redistribution, underpinned by collective risk pooling and obligatory coverage (Hicks et al, 1995; Rehm, 2016).

The *social protection paradigm* of social policy was thus based on a class compromise between workers and employers (Koch, 2006), characterised by loyalty, a strong performance ethos and a (working) lifelong membership in a company on the one hand and decent wages and employment protection on the other hand. Under the conditions at that time, the provision of decent social protection functioned as a solution for at least two problems. First, the improving material living standards of populations of democratic welfare states secured stable political conditions, and second, the domestic demand, sustained by interventionist economic policies and social protection systems, strengthened the national economy. This in turn generated sufficient economic growth and profit levels that satisfied corporate interests and capitalists.

The Fordist compromise worked relatively well as long as economic growth was high enough to finance welfare systems. From today's perspective, however, this model appears to be doomed to fail in the long run because of its strong dependency on economic growth and industrial mass production, which both contribute highly to the destruction of nature. In addition, it is geared towards male breadwinners and traditional family forms, excluding and disadvantaging many others. The economic success of Western nation states was significantly built on further appropriating resources from the Global South and the former colonies (Hickel, 2020, pp 51–54). The productivism of this period deepened the *human–nature divide* that emerged at the dawn of the modern era (Merchant, 1990; Salleh, 2017). Since then, modern humans would increasingly be alienated from nature and nature itself be seen as a big resource pool, subordinated and determined to be used and dominated by humans. As famously depicted in Charlie Chaplin's movie 'Modern Times', the Fordist mode of industrial production carried this to

new extremes with its standardised and scientifically planned and measured workflows that were dictated by the rhythm of machines.

Post-Fordist neo-liberalism and the paradigm of activation and social investment

The demise of the 'golden age of welfare states' (Pierson, 1998; Castles, 2004) was driven by several factors that disrupted the regulation of industrial capitalism under the social protection paradigm. First, the oil price crises of the 1970s triggered economic recessions in many Western nations, constraining social expenditures due to rising unemployment and state debts. Second, demographic changes, such as an ageing population, increased female participation in the workforce, and rising rates of divorce and single parenthood created new needs for social security systems. Third, the globalisation of the economy intensified competition, leading to the relocation of industrial production to countries with lower labour costs, thereby transforming Western economies structurally.

These changes led to the rise of the service sector and an increase in atypical forms of employment, challenging the traditional notion of lifelong employment for industrial workers. While a new class of knowledge workers emerged, benefiting from upskilling and education and finding employment in lucrative service sectors, another group of working poor faced unstable employment and limited career prospects in low-wage service jobs. The growing disparity between these groups highlighted new social risks (Esping-Andersen, 1999), leading to labour market dualisation (Emmenegger et al, 2012).

Beginning in the 1980s, it became widely accepted that expanding the welfare state was no longer sustainable to address emerging social risks and economic challenges. Instead, a political shift towards liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation occurred where social expenditures, including public services and cash transfer programmes, came under attack for allegedly hindering productivity growth and fostering 'welfare-dependency' (Mead, 1992).

During the 1990s, a new rhetoric in the defence of social policy interventions in the neoliberal era developed: The British Third Way approach (Giddens, 1998) used the concept of human capital and emphasised 'active' social policies focusing on 'enabling' productive workers at the expense of social transfers for the sick and the unemployed, which were referred to as 'passive' social policies (Gilbert, 2004).

Faced with these new social risks or problems and the inadequacy of the welfare policies designed for the male breadwinner model, the policy solutions suggested the reallocation of social expenditures towards family-oriented services, active labour market policy, early childhood education

and vocational training in order to increase the human capital of individuals, improve the productivity of the labour force and achieve high employment rates in the new economy.

The *paradigm of activation and social investment* provides a powerful legitimisation for the importance of social expenditure and social policy interventions by states, reframing what was previously perceived as 'cost' into 'investment' (Cantillon, 2011; Hemerijck and Vandenbroucke, 2012). The role of social policy was redefined from one of 'repairing' to one of 'preparing', underscoring a future-oriented approach and supporting long-term economic growth and competitiveness. While this fosters environmentally detrimental productivism (Dukelow and Murphy, 2022), critique has also been raised regarding the emphasis on self-enhancement and flexibility in the labour force during the neoliberal era, which would have detrimental effects on societal trust, democracy and the ability to envision a shared future (Sennett, 1998; Bauman, 2000) as well as individual psychological effects such as depression and burnout (Ehrenberg, 2010). It can be concluded that the paradigm of activation and social investment is not only subject to the growth imperative, just as in the case of the social protection paradigm during the Fordist era, but also that it exacerbates the challenge of balancing self-care and caregiving responsibilities, further widening the gap between humans and nature.

The paradigm of sustainable welfare in times of socio-ecological crisis

The biggest crisis in human history to date has developed over the decades of the Fordist and post-Fordist periods: the *socio-ecological crisis*. During these periods, contemporary welfare states relied on an expansive economic model that assumes infinite economic growth and continuously rising material living standards (Corlet Walker et al, 2021). The dependence on growth continues today and contributes to the socio-ecological crisis through increasing levels of greenhouse gas emissions and the appropriation of nature and human labour (Koch and Mont, 2016a). Thus, what is being perceived as desired forms of welfare and human well-being occurs at the expense of ecosystems, particularly in Western countries (O'Neill et al, 2018).

The relevance of incorporating the ecological dimension in social policy was already recognised in the 1980s when some scholars started discussing and questioning the expansionary economic model of Western welfare societies: 'Green social policies require an ethical rethinking, so that material growth and consumerism are no longer regarded as the yardstick of well-being and 'welfare sustainability' becomes an organising principle of welfare reform' (Fitzpatrick, 2001, p 187). But only since the beginning of the 21st century, the scholarly discourse in social policy has gained

momentum and expanded in scope, culminating in the emergence of a new paradigm: sustainable welfare (for example, Koch and Mont, 2016a; Gough, 2017; Matthies and Närhi, 2017; Hirvilammi et al, 2023).

Sustainable welfare refers to 'the satisfaction of human needs within ecological limits, from the intergenerational and global perspective' (Koch and Mont, 2016b, p 5). We thus have to rethink human well-being and human needs satisfaction beyond continuously rising material living standards, and moreover to understand social welfare systems as being 'embedded in ecosystems and in need of respecting the regeneration capacity of the biosphere' (Koch, 2022, p 448).

In summary, the paradigm of sustainable welfare can be understood as an attempt to solve the newly recognised *problem* in social policy: how to achieve the provision of human well-being within planetary boundaries. In the next sections, we discuss key *solutions* to this problem proposed within sustainable welfare research. First, we consider alternatives to the growth-dependency of the welfare state (see also Chapter 4 in this volume). Second, we delve into relational conceptualisations of well-being and discuss how these imagine reconnection with nature, even on the individual level. Third, we address the role of public support and participatory democracy for sustainable welfare.

Alternatives to the growth-dependency of the welfare state

Although economic growth has been recognised as a significant driver of greenhouse gas emissions (IPCC, 2022), the dependence of welfare states on growth persists (Corlet Walker et al, 2021). Advocates of green growth claim that ecological impacts can be decoupled from economic growth. In some instances, increases in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) that are larger than the associated increases in carbon emissions have been achieved, but actual reductions in emissions in a situation of economic growth are considerably less common (Haberl et al, 2020; Hickel and Kallis, 2020). Consequently, sustainable welfare seeks to establish links to alternative economic models such as post-growth, degrowth and steady-state economies (Daly, 1991; Schmelzer et al, 2022).

One prevalent economic model in the sustainable welfare literature is the doughnut model, visualising how social and ecological goals can be achieved in synergy (Raworth, 2017). The inner ring of the doughnut reflects the social foundation and includes 12 basic human needs. The outer ring symbolises ecological ceilings based on the concept of planetary boundaries (Rockstrom et al, 2009). In various applications of this model as policy tool, for example, at the country level (Domazet et al, 2023), needs and boundaries are operationalised with indicators to monitor whether social shortfalls and ecological overshoots can be avoided. Instead, there is a 'safe

and just operating space' between the inner and the outer rings in which needs are met without transgressing planetary boundaries.

A similar approach is represented by sustainable consumption corridors: 'Such corridors would be defined by minimum standards, allowing every individual to live a good life, and maximum standards for every individual's use of resources guaranteeing access to sufficient resources (in terms of quantity and quality) for others, both in the present and the future' (Di Giulio and Fuchs, 2014, p 184). While the notion of minimum and maximum levels of consumption is crucial for sustainable welfare, Bärnthaler and Gough (2023) argue that it may be more important to highlight the role of production in causing excess consumption, promoting destructive needs satisfiers and reproducing class structures, as it is the owners of the means of production who decide what is produced and available for consumption, not the consumers. The lower boundary of their production corridors is marked by 'essential production', including the foundational economy of daily essentials as well as unpaid care and reproductive activities. The upper boundary consists of excess production which arises through unnecessary labour – 'bullshit jobs' (Graeber, 2018) – and also includes parts of the financial, military and luxury sectors.

Besides overcoming the need for constant economic growth, democratically set limits are also discussed for defining desirable boundaries to social acceleration and blind technological solutionism in order to enable a good life for all (Kallis, 2019). Along these lines, sustainable welfare is linked to philosophical discussions about *limitarianism*, where drawing an absolute affluence line is suggested (Robeyns, 2024) to stay within ecological boundaries *and* to avoid the socially detrimental effects of extreme wealth and inequalities. Finally, sustainable welfare draws on the principle of *sufficiency*, or 'enoughness', which stresses the importance of absolute reductions of energy and material use (Jungell-Michelsson and Heikkurinen, 2022).

Sufficiency, the idea of using an amount that is enough, optimal or satisfactory, is in stark contrast to the dominant social paradigm of Western modernity that is geared towards continuous progress, growth and expansion. The logic of expansion produced eco-social problems as 'side-effects' that were externalised (Lessenich, 2019), but today it has become apparent in the socio-ecological crisis that 'spaceship' earth is a largely closed system where nothing can be externalised.

Schneidewind and Zahrnt (2014) argue that in order to avoid a breakdown of ecosystems, more careful and 'resource-light' lifestyles would need to be promoted by a politics of sufficiency. They highlight four strategies of sufficiency: decentralisation, de-cluttering, deceleration and decommercialisation. While these strategies could be put into practice on the societal level through designing and implementing the eco-social policies that are discussed in the sustainable welfare literature (see Part III) – for example,

income and wealth caps (François et al, 2023) to achieve de-cluttering or working time reductions to decelerate (Hidasi et al, 2023) – there is also an individual dimension of sufficiency which is reflected in the call for not only resource-light but also more relational lifestyles.

Relational well-being and reconnecting with nature

Sustainable welfare also draws on the interdisciplinary discussions about different conceptions of human well-being. In recent years, the previous focus on material resources and standards is complemented by a *relational* understanding of well-being (Hirvilammi et al, 2023). It highlights the importance of social relationships and human interactions, as well as human–nature relationships, both from a physical and mental health perspective. It has been emphasised, for instance, in efforts to conceptualise 'green social work' or 'eco-social work' (for example, Matthies and Närhi, 2017) and the 'well-being economy' (Fioramonti et al, 2022).

The relational understanding of well-being is elaborated by Hirvilammi and Helne (2014). They analyse the hegemonic anthropocentric paradigm and its basic assumptions, such as the separateness of humans from nature, the superiority of humans over nature, materialism, individualism and a subordination of intuition and emotions under rationality. The goal of a relational and nature-inclusive understanding of well-being would be to overcome the dichotomies of anthropocentrism (Helne 2021, p 220). Based on Kuhn's concepts of scientific paradigms, the authors notice the emergence of a relational paradigm with roots in, among others, Arne Naess' deep ecology and Erich Fromm's humanist psychology. The basic assumptions of the relational paradigm would be i) the interconnectedness of humans and nature; ii) respect for the boundaries and capacities of nature; iii) the intrinsic value of all living beings; iv) the importance of caring for others; v) long-term orientation; vi) consideration of non-material dimensions of progress; vii) the precautionary principle; viii) critical use of technology; ix) prioritisation of ecological and social goals over economic growth and profits; and x) emotions, wisdom and intuition being equally valued as intelligence. Moreover, Hirvilammi and Helne (2014) conceptualise relational well-being as a multidimensional HDLB scheme, where H stands for 'Having', which is the material dimension and refers to ensuring a decent and fair living standard. D stands for 'Doing' and highlights that well-being involves meaningful and responsible activities. L stands for 'Loving', which is at the core of relational well-being and includes connective and compassionate relations to others including nature. B means 'Being' and consists in what the authors call 'alert presence' in the sense of a good mental and physical health as preconditions for self-actualisation. Just as in the case of the politics of sufficiency, these four dimensions of relational well-being can be supported

by eco-social policies and practices: for example, a basic income, income and wealth caps as well as taxes can be used to regulate 'Having', while green jobs and working time reductions can improve 'Doing'. Strengthening invisible and unpaid care activities in society and promoting green care contributes to 'Loving', and generally slowing down in life and downshifting consumption are good for 'Being' (Hirvilammi and Helne, 2014, p 2169).

Narrowing the divide between humans and nature is key to conceptualising sustainable well-being within planetary boundaries. Similarly, ecopsychology calls for an identity transformation to reconnect humans with nature. Koller (2021), for example, highlights the central role of shifting from a *defensive suppression* of existential fears – which would encourage extrinsic orientations towards wealth, fame and the like – to a *reflexive engagement with* existential fears and respecting the limits of the biosphere, such as our own mortality. This would be linked to intrinsic motivations to seek competence, relationships and autonomy. It is a rather inconvenient thought, but the idea of sufficiency, or 'enoughness', ultimately is, on the individual level, reflected in how we deal with the finiteness of our lives and contrasts sharply with the recent efforts of an anthropocentric science to achieve longevity and defeat ageing.

Public support and participatory democracy

How can the task of collectively defining 'the safe and just operating space' be done? What social, cultural and political conditions are needed for reaching a democratic consensus on the ecological 'ceiling', or 'enoughness'? How can we reflect not only individually but also collectively on questions about relational well-being or our connectedness to nature?

These are crucial questions when thinking about the implementation of policies within the new paradigm of sustainable welfare. Efforts to answer such questions have resulted in a range of different empirical studies. To date, scholars have mainly focused on public support for eco-social policies. Research shows that support is rather modest, but not negligible. In an international comparison, Koch and Fritz (2020) found that in some countries like Sweden, Finland or Germany around one third of the population supports sustainable welfare, while in other countries such as Ireland, Poland or Portugal these are only around 15 per cent. Despite cross-national variations, there are also some general patterns. Carbon taxes, for example, find little agreement, while subsidies for renewable energies are met with much higher support (Koch and Fritz, 2020, p 99). Different studies discovered the common pattern that various kinds of eco-social policies are more supported by politically left-leaning persons and those who are in socio-cultural occupations and positions (Otto and Gugushvili, 2020; Fritz et al, 2021; Khan et al, 2022; Emilsson, 2023; Fritz and Eversberg, 2023).

Overall, the political legitimacy of sustainable welfare measured in terms of public support is limited.

A possible way to gain more traction could be through 'citizens' assemblies' or 'citizen councils', which have taken place in several European countries in recent years through public deliberation of policies for addressing the climate crisis in socially just ways (Lage et al, 2023). The citizen assemblies can be understood as attempts to activate an element of participatory democracy. In contrast to current mainstream policy discussions, scholars found that European citizens, as a result of such deliberation processes, support to a large extent measures that are in line with the sufficiency principle (Lage et al, 2023).

Other studies have explored the potential of democratic processes for bottom-up public deliberation with a more explicit focus on sustainable welfare (Lee et al, 2023; Lee and Koch, 2023). Through participatory and deliberative citizen forums, the importance of nature for human well-being was affirmed, while it was also shown, for instance, that principles of sufficiency were seen as positive needs satisfiers. While sustainable welfare literature highlights the importance of participatory democracy (Gough, 2017; Büchs et al, 2024), it is contested whether the policy recommendations that result from participatory citizen forums can gain wider public support in practice, not least due to well-known structural barriers to ensuring truly inclusive representation of all socio-economic and minority groups.

Conclusions

This chapter discussed sustainable welfare as a new scientific paradigm in social policy research. We traced the development from the social protection paradigm during the Fordist industrial era to the paradigm of activation and social investment that emerged in the post-Fordist development, and lastly to the newly emerging paradigm of sustainable welfare. Each period was characterised by its specific crisis, problems and solutions within the respective paradigms. We highlighted that sustainable welfare responds to the socio-ecological crisis and the problem of how to provide human well-being within planetary boundaries. We then described in more detail three solutions proposed within interdisciplinary research on sustainable welfare: building a politics and economy of sufficiency, promoting relational well-being and strengthening participatory democracy. Finally, we point to some critical questions for which we need more research efforts.

An urgent task, also in view of secular stagnation, is to better understand the growth-dependency of the welfare state (see also Chapter 4 in this volume), especially its fiscal dependency on continued economic growth (Bailey, 2015). How can alternative fiscal bases for sustainable welfare be secured in non-growing economies, for instance for the provision of

encompassing de-commodified public services to meet basic needs (for some initial discussions see Büchs et al, 2024)?

The magnitude of the cultural and societal transformations that are required to truly go beyond the human–nature divide is huge. Even though the new paradigm of sustainable welfare provides ideas and concepts for bridging the human–nature divide, it still needs to be elaborated what this means in practice, for example, regarding issues such as animal and nature rights. From a normative sustainable welfare perspective, possibilities should be investigated how we as humans can use our power in responsible ways *with*, not *against*, nature. As the societal process of agreeing on the necessary structural changes to enable a good life for all within planetary boundaries should be democratic and involve critical, reflexive thinking about the current human–nature divide, future sustainable welfare research could explore how to scale up the positive experiences from citizens' assemblies to dimensions that can trigger deep and fast transformations in all areas of society to overcome the socio-ecological crisis.

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