

Intersectionality and Climate Policy- making: Ways forward to a socially inclusive and sustainable welfare state

Final Report

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Report Compiled by: Wilma Henning

Financed by: FORMAS- National Research Program on Climate

Formas project number: 2018- 01704

Project period: 2019-2024

[2025-04-30]

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Research questions and objectives	4
Theoretical entry points	4
Methodology	7
Cases	7
Method	7
Results	10
Path-dependency and “sticky” institutional norms	11
The agencies’ understanding of social differences: Ecomodernist discourses.....	12
Directives from the government.....	13
Civil servants, not climate activists.....	14
Local level institutions working with climate issues	16
Policy Recommendations	19
Political will and governance	19
Knowledge and expertise	20
Reforming institutional practices.....	21
Further reading and research.....	22
The project’s publications	23
Forthcoming in 2025	24
Other References	24

Introduction

This is the final report of the research project *Intersectionality and Climate-policy Making: Ways forward to a socially inclusive and sustainable welfare state*. The researchers who participated in the project were: Annica Kronsell, Gunnhildur Lily Magnusdottir, Nanna Rask, Benedict E. Singleton, and Angelica Lundgren.

Climate change presents major challenges for decision-makers at all levels. World leaders have agreed upon common goals in the Paris Agreement, the UN's sustainable development goals (SDGs), and European states have committed themselves to carbon neutrality through the European Green Deal and national goals (COM/2019/640, Skr 2023/24). Achieving these goals demands considerable action and collaboration among national and local institutions, which need to be coordinated with efforts to achieve other SDGs for positive synergies to arise and to avoid conflicting objectives. Increasing equality and achieving peace and justice are examples of SDGs related to climate change addressed in this project (although all goals are related in some way and should not be separated). National and local institutions such as government agencies and municipalities play an important role in producing policies for climate action. However, there are shortcomings in Swedish climate policy. Historically, Swedish environmental and climate politics have been characterized by ecological modernization which has meant a strong focus on technical innovations and economic incentives in climate policy-making and limited attention to social dimensions. Research shows how greenhouse gas emissions, vulnerability to impacts and political participation vary across the population according to gender, race, class, age and other intersectional factors (Djoudi et al. 2016; Kaijser & Kronsell 2014; IPCC 2014). The IPCC report (2022) further highlights “the increasingly severe, interconnected and often irreversible impacts of climate change on ecosystems, biodiversity, and human systems; differing impacts across regions, sectors and communities [...] (p. 5). Thus, the recognition of social differences needs to inform climate policy. If such differences are not recognized, climate policy risks being both ineffective—by focusing on the wrong targets—and unjust—by reinforcing inequalities. Yet, as we show in a previous study, the diversity of the public and the various needs and behavioural patterns of

different groups have not been sufficiently recognized in Swedish climate policy (Magnusdottir & Kronsell 2015, 2016). This non-recognition risks undermining action on climate change and causing conflicts with other sustainability goals.

Research questions and objectives

This project therefore aimed to explore how Swedish climate policy makers understand social differences and how a more inclusive and just climate policy could be achieved. To this end, we outline recommendations, which could be used as decision support for policy makers in their efforts to develop socially inclusive and just climate policies. In the project, we studied and collaborated with policy makers, thus civil servants, at the following authorities: the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA), the Swedish Energy Agency (SEA), the Swedish Transport Administration (STA) and The Swedish Innovation Agency-Vinnova (VIN). We also study how civil servants at the local level work with social differences in the climate work of three municipalities, Gothenburg, Malmö and Umeå. Our research questions drew on feminist institutionalism and intersectional theory:

- Why has Swedish climate policy hitherto generally not recognized the importance of including social differences?
- How can the awareness of social differences be increased among Swedish climate policy makers?
- How might intersectionally-informed climate policies be formulated?

Theoretical entry points

This project ties into and contributes to theoretical advances of feminist institutionalism and intersectionality. We argue that institutions produce and reproduce power through the organization of people by including or excluding them, but power is also (re)produced through norms, and actions in response to the normative context. Norms are expressed in formal (rules, laws, entitlements) and informal (guiding norms, routines, practices) ways in institutions. Accordingly, to understand how institutions are for example gendered, there is a need to look at institutional processes, i.e. political and material relationships and organizational dynamics of the studied institution. We also need to explore the meaning of intersecting social categories such as gender, reflected in procedures, norms, and organizational identities in institutions.

The project is informed by and contributes to institutional theory since the focus of the project is on climate policy-making institutions. Institutional theory coined the term ‘path-dependence’, i.e., rules and norms of behaviour that cause particular pattern-bound effects over time, making institutions resilient to change (Holmes 2020, Munck av Rosensköld 2014). Feminist institutionalism understands path-dependence as entailing normalization, where power is reproduced through everyday acts that are perceived as normal and make institutions ‘sticky’ as opportunities for innovation and change are constrained by previous choices (Bjarnegård and Kenny 2016, Ljungholm 2017, Holmes 2019). Institutions are reproduced through patterns of action in a ‘logic of appropriateness’ (March and Olsen 1989). Constructions of identities are intertwined in the daily life or logic of institutions (Lowndes 2014), as individual policy makers follow embedded rules and routines, according to what is appropriate for their social and professional role.

Feminist institutionalism attempts to understand power inequalities within institutions by studying the informal structures and norms that shape the practices and behaviours. This theoretical framework is helpful when studying how power is enacted in the production and reproduction of masculine norms. By applying this feminist institutional lens, we studied how climate institutions deal with gender and social differences by examining how they organise and institutionalize gender norms. Further, it allowed us to explore and analyse the gender power hierarchies within the studied climate institutions and asks which knowledge and norms are privileged and thus, directs attention to the question of who designs and forms institutions. The policy domains that we studied, have historically been perceived as gender neutral, and therefore gender power hierarchies have not been viewed as a problem to policy-making or to the outcomes of those policies. However, we argue that to claim that something is gender neutral is an expression of power in a move that belittles the relevance of gender.

Although feminist institutional theories focus on different expressions of gender and often ask the important questions where are the women, and where are the men? They lend themselves to the inclusion of an intersectional perspective. Intersectionality highlights how forms of oppression relating to gender rarely stand alone. Instead, it is interconnected with power dynamics between and overlapping with social categories, such as class, ethnicity, age, religion, location, and sexuality (Kaijser and Kronsell 2014). Intersectionality helps us make visible these intersections

of oppression by asking questions about whose voices and knowledge are heard. The project developed feminist institutional theory to include intersectional power relations and applied this to an understudied empirical field: climate policy-making.

Feminist environmental literature has made use of intersectional thinking to analyze “capitalism, rationalist science, colonialism, racism, (hetero) sexism and speciesism” (MacGregor 2017, pp. 1–2). However, empirical research on climate change has hitherto largely focused on the Global South and developing states; on the violence of climate events, storms, hurricanes, and fires; and on gendered vulnerability to such events. Less attention has been paid to what intersectional approaches could contribute to the analysis of climate policy within climate institutions, especially in the Global North. This motivated our intersectional approach to climate institutions operating in the Global North.

The project applied feminist institutional theory to address why social difference has remained largely invisible in Swedish climate policy and what would be required to make this change. We approached national public institutions working with climate issues and municipalities because they are key actors in tackling climate change as they have crucial roles in policy-making given their key functions in providing guidelines and norms, and in coordinating efforts across other SDGs. Their institutional practices help explain why certain differences go unrecognized and social concerns are excluded from the agenda. We learned that institutions are path-dependent and reproduce particular approaches and norms (Kronsell et al, 2021; Singleton & Magnusdottir, 2021; Magnusdottir & Kronsell, 2024), in line with what Jacobsson and Mujkic (2016:17) noted in their study on the Transport Administration, that certain perspectives and action repertoires are built into the institution. We have found that this “stickiness” fosters resistance among policy makers to acknowledging social dimensions, as they traditionally prioritize technical and economic solutions. This theoretical framework of intersectional feminist institutionalism was both applied and expanded throughout the project, serving as the foundation for critical policy analysis – the primary tool for examining the empirical material as further elaborated in the Methodology section below.

Methodology

Cases

The project used a qualitative case study approach with two types of cases – climate policy-making in four national agencies and in three municipalities – because achieving climate goals demands action at different levels of governance. In the Swedish government system, agencies are entrusted with providing the decision base for policies. We studied four state agencies involved in climate policy-making in different policy fields: The Environmental Protection Agency focusing on climate issues in relation to broader environmental policy objectives, the Energy Agency working on the conversion from fossil fuel to renewables and curbing energy use, the Transport Administration working with climate policies in relation to transport flows and the Innovation Agency (Vinnova) providing support to companies, research and municipalities for innovations that contribute to reaching climate objectives. The agencies have different tasks and responsibilities and rely on different types of expertise and experts educated e.g. as transport engineers, natural scientists, energy system engineers, innovation experts, economists, etc.

Studying how cities work with climate issues is as mentioned also highly relevant. With climate change, cities will face increased risks for extreme weather events, to which marginalised groups are most vulnerable. Urban-based activities are also major contributors to greenhouse gas emissions (IPCC 2023). In Sweden, municipalities are responsible for local policy-making and action to meet national policy goals. We focus on Gothenburg and Malmö, two of the largest municipalities in Sweden deemed particularly interesting to study as they, in 2021, had adopted environment and climate programs with aims to incorporate issues of social justice and equality (City of Gothenburg 2021; City of Malmö, 2021). As climate change effects differ with location and geography, we also focused on Umeå, a city in the northern part of Sweden.

Method

To the study of the state agencies, the project applied two different but interconnected methods to gather the empirical material: critical policy analysis and elite interviews. Due to the COVID-19 lock-down, we were unable to proceed as intended and had to adjust our methods accordingly. The elite interviews were conducted online which worked to collect necessary material but without the place visits and personal elements of an on-site interview, we were unable to build the kind of trust

that would have helped future interactions in the project. We also planned to conduct focus groups and mobile labs and both had to be amended for the same reason. Instead of focus groups we assembled the findings from the interviews into a report (Singleton, 2021), which was circulated for comments by respondents. We only conducted one mobile lab but it was online. To remedy this we organized seminars and workshops both online and on-site when this was possible, for example, with seminars and workshops at the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, The Gender Equality Agency, Gothenburg and Malmö where we presented the results from different parts of the project. At the end of the project December 2024, we organized a final conference and invited all of our respondents, but as so few registered among policy makers, we had to cancel the event. We think it was due to the delays resulting from the Covid pandemic and the lack of interaction between the researchers and the policy makers led to a lack of interest and commitment to the project on their part.

For the critical policy analysis, we began by systematically assembling scholarly work and grey literature relevant to intersectionality, social differences, institutions, and climate change. The intention was to build competence collaboratively within the research group and form part of a future database and decision support. Thereafter, existing climate policy documents of the four agencies were assembled and analysed through a critical policy analysis, based on discourse analysis, combined with intersectional methodology which poses critical questions to the material. We asked questions such as: What types of knowledge and what kinds of subjects are recognized? What norms are important for (non-)recognition of climate-relevant social differences? (as outlined in Kaijser & Kronsell 2013). Our questions served to identify and analyze assumptions about social groups, ideals and legitimacy embedded in institutions and manifested in their practices and policies. The critical policy analysis helped not only to demonstrate whether and how intersectional aspects have been taken into account, but also to point out which ideas influence the policies and shed light on possible path-dependencies policy-making in the agencies. The critical policy analysis helped us identify areas to address in the subsequent work, and provide insights and examples of intersectional aspects that could be useful in the interaction with policy makers.

We conducted reflexive elite interviews, i.e. open-ended interviews that encourage reflections and are kept anonymous. We found reflexive interviews to help us understand the way climate policy makers view and work with intersectional issues, including which obstacles and opportunities they

countered. Due to COVID-19, we had to adjust our original plan of conducting in-person interviews and instead organised online interviews. First, 31 interviews with a total of 32 respondents over two rounds from the four state agencies beginning in the spring of 2020. We initially selected respondents who had shown an interest in participating in our study. We then applied a snowball sampling method where the initial pool of participants recommended additional respondents. The risk with applying a snowball method is that one tends to interview those already connected with another, missing other important potential respondents. We made several decisions trying to mitigate that risk. First, we compared the data to the results of an earlier text analysis of relevant agency documents and websites. Second, we shared our findings and solicited comments from our respondents. By doing so we were able to verify our findings but also identify any significant omissions in our work (Singleton 2021). This then formed the basis for a series of follow-up interviews in a second round. Both round one and two interviews were organised around an interview guide consisting of questions concerned with climate policy practices, how information was taken in, which groups were listened to, and difficulties encountered in the policy-making process. Questions were divided thematically into three areas: 1) Questions on respondents' professional background, role and experience. 2) Questions exploring how social justice issues are interpreted at the different agencies. 3) Questions exploring the context within which the agencies operate (Singleton, 2021). We conducted the interviews in a semi-structured manner, allowing the respondents to prioritize their own interpretations of the questions rather than feeling bound to the interview guide. The first-round interviews were analysed and summarized in an interview report (See Interview Report Singleton 2021).

When it comes to the local level of the study, we approached the cases in a similar way. We collected policy documents and analyzed them through the critical policy analysis. We conducted a total of 34 semi-structured interviews, following the idea of the reflexive interviews and basing it on the questions used for the national agencies. The materials in the case of Gothenburg were more extensive as they were part of a PhD project. On top of analysis of relevant policy documents it consisted of 21 interviews pursued in 2021, and a meeting ethnography. The meeting ethnography took place in Gothenburg and consisted of participant observations in relevant meetings and workshops between 2020-2024 (Rask, Lundgren och Kronsell forthcoming in 2025). Of special importance has been participation in eight meetings/workshops during the spring and summer of 2021 which focused upon barriers and opportunities for the municipality to implement

the new environment and climate programme, as well as the monthly meetings with those civil servants working with the strategies in Gothenburg's Environment and Climate Programme between 2021-2025. The Malmö case consisted of policy documents and 9 interviews held from 2021-2023 and an online workshop in the spring of 2022. For Umeå 4 policy documents were analysed and 4 interviews were conducted in 2023.

In the broader analysis of the collected material we used our feminist institutional intersectional lens as a reading tool by posing questions to the material. We looked for the underlying logics, ideas and assumptions that influence the environment- and climate-related solutions that are pursued or ignored. The results of the project have been communicated and presented to academia, civil society, and policy makers on around 60 different occasions.

Results

This section discusses results on the national agency level and the local level. First, it shows how path-dependency emerged through our analysis and interviews and then illustrates how path-dependency may hinder innovation and prevent new perspectives from becoming part of the agencies' agendas. Second, we discuss how the agencies interpreted concepts such as equality, social differences, and climate change, through interviews and in selected climate policy documents. Thirdly, we explore the potential space civil servants have to implement an intersectional lens in climate policy-making. Here we noted a tension between adhering to institutional norms and established knowledge and making new policy suggestions, which might be perceived both as political and going beyond the mandate from the government. Then we turn to the local-level results. We discuss siloed structures and institutional logics as a potential institutional obstacle to applying an intersectional perspective for inclusive climate policies. We observed that the development of policies related to social issues was disconnected from climate policy-making, which hinders an intersectional approach to climate policy. Finally, we propose potential ways to incorporate and develop intersectional climate policies. Our strategies are based on the insights gained from interviews and policy analysis, as also presented in various project publications.

Path-dependency and “sticky” institutional norms

Our material made it apparent how the path-dependence to ecological modernization is the primary explanation for why Swedish climate authorities have hitherto generally not employed an intersectional lens in their policy-making nor implemented socially inclusive climate policies.

This path-dependence has led to “sticky” techno-economic institutional norms implying that technological and economic knowledge and solutions were reproduced not only as the most adequate but also perceived as apolitical. Thus, respondents were unsure and worried about whether it was appropriate to include social issues, justice, and equality, fearing that it could affect their professional legitimacy. Thus, although we saw that respondents acknowledged and understood the relevance of social concerns, efforts to integrate them into the main tasks were insufficient. This became apparent when respondents were asked to describe the main issues with incorporating new forms of knowledge and many emphasised that agency action was not a free choice but rather that they were restrained by the institution’s norms and expected behaviours (Singleton, 2021). One respondent stated: “We often go back to the starting point that this is the [STA], we feel comfortable when we build things” (Singleton, 2021, p. 10). It seems to be a bigger risk to start doing new things and incorporate new solutions and knowledge than to stay on the path the agency is on, which makes civil servants reluctant to come up with new innovations. A respondent expressed that “I think it can be hard to think in new ways, simply ... And one is more or less under time pressure and it becomes harder when one [says]: ... now we’re going to think in a different way” (Singleton, 2021, p.10). This highlights that moving to an alternative or new method often takes more time and resources, which makes civil servants hesitant to do so.

The interviews furthermore revealed a strong path-dependence related to knowledge, primarily because certain professions, such as engineers, economists, and scientists are common and their competence highly valued in the energy and transport sector. These fields often prioritise specific types of knowledge, which can create rigid frameworks that limit the adoption of innovative and novel solutions (Singleton & Magnusdottir, 2021). One respondent characterised the SEPA as “struggling to integrate social analysis into their work due to staff having educational backgrounds in civil engineering and civil and national economy” (Singleton, 2021, p. 10). Another respondent argued:

I think there are many at the Swedish Transport Administration who are engineers and thus, the culture is like engineering culture. We probably have many other professions as well, but the culture is engineering culture. Then you want to measure, you want it a little simple, you want little neat tables.” (Singleton & Magnusdottir, 2021, p. 95)

Respondents furthermore expressed that when assigned a new task they would associate the response to previous assignments and reach for resources immediately at hand. As a result, there was little opportunity for new knowledge and expertise to be introduced into the institution (Singleton, 2021). One respondent at Vinnova explained “that there are quite a lot of tools for improving social justice. However, there is an issue that many of those working with equality issues come from a research background, where they are experts in equality but perhaps are not experts in innovation and development work.” (Singleton, 2021, p 10). The main challenge we observed was therefore how to incorporate an intersectional lens when institutions are constrained by previous decisions and historical trajectories (Kronsell, et al., 2021).

The agencies’ understanding of social differences: Ecomodernist discourses

To understand why Swedish climate authorities overlooked the significance of social differences, we felt it necessary to examine the agencies’ perceptions of social difference and equality in relation to climate change. We identified that overall, the government agencies; “reveal a largely ecomodernist, environmental problem-solving and individualised environmental discourse, which resulted in the framing of several policies to enhance rational individual choices towards more sustainable lifestyles” (Singleton et al 2021, p. 15). When it comes to social differences, we argue that “the sampled agencies’ documents and interviews reflect simplistic understandings of social difference leading to a simplistic framing of the social consequences and impacts of climate change and climate-related action” (Singleton et al, 2021, p. 3).

Several respondents expressed difficulties with giving an exact definition of the meaning of social justice in relation to their agencies. They suggested that the term social justice could be problematic “due to what was felt to be its vague nature and its potential range of interpretations” (Singleton, 2021, p. 8), making it challenging to incorporate it into their main tasks without jeopardizing the legitimacy of their work. Respondents would instead point to the government to be the one who should give them directions on how to interpret and work with social justice. However, many understood social justice “as an integral part of the Swedish state” (Singleton, 2021, p. 7-8). One

respondent referred to it as a “basic value of the state” (Singleton, 2021, p. 8). In general, there was a broad consensus “that there should be acknowledgement that some societal groups will be more or less heavily affected by both climate change and climate change action.” (Singleton, 2021, p. 8). What we discovered from the interviews that was particularly interesting was that the respondents, when asked about social justice, tended to talk about it on a more global international scale whilst having difficulties relating these concepts to the Swedish context. This makes it seem like Sweden do not need to integrate the perspective of social justice and intersectionality. This disconnect could be one of the reasons why the intersectional perspective has been overlooked in Swedish climate policy-making.

Directives from the government

What we identified, from the interviews and policy analysis conducted, was a reluctance among civil servants to go outside their remits given by the government, as well as that their tasks were based on what they perceived to be appropriate given their mandate and the norms within their agency. When we asked respondents from SEPA, SEA, STA, and VIN about the potential for institutional change around climate action and social justice, a seemingly contradictory position emerged. Many respondents framed climate action and social justice as reliant on directives from the government, while simultaneously expressing that there was space for both individual civil servant and institution-initiated action (Singleton & Magnusdottir, forthcoming; Singleton & Magnusdottir, 2021). It was common among respondents to stress that they would like to focus more on the social aspects of climate change but that it was difficult since it was outside of their purview (Kronsell et al., 2021). A respondent expressed that “It is the government, or the parliament, which sets the [climate] goals one has (Singleton & Magnusdottir, forthcoming, p.9). Another respondent said: “An agency should obey the government [and] as such, we are a government agency so we follow government directives. (iSTA04) (Singleton & Magnusdottir, forthcoming, p. 10)

Other respondents said:

We have our government directive [regleringsbrev]; also every year we get a government directive that specifies content of role and budget. So that is a steering document for us (Singleton, 2021, p. 11).

But when it relates to climate, I believe that the agency [SEA] can handle it if one gets a clear directive to work with these questions... a government agency is of course less free to act than private businesses are. Private business may do anything that is not illegal but an agency *must do what it is assigned to do*. So one must always have an assignment in order to work with social equality and inclusion. (our emphasis) (Singleton & Magnúsdóttir, forthcoming, p. 10)

But as mentioned, at the same time respondents would also express some individual freedom:

What we do is we work with regard to our taskmaster, the government, and then give them analysis that they need, *or what we judge they need*. (our emphasis) (Singleton & Magnúsdóttir, forthcoming, p.10)

But we also do some self-initiated analysis where we try to be a little proactive and see what the things are that we will need to work on in the future. And do not just sit and wait for the assignments to come... (Singleton & Magnúsdóttir, forthcoming, p. 10).

As we can see here some respondents argue that they do have some individual freedom, based on their expertise, to make decisions about which path to go. However, when we asked the respondents how and if they could integrate an intersectional perspective to develop more socially just climate policies, the interviewers oftentimes kept on referring to the fact that for that to be possible those directives need to come from above, either from the government or senior staff (Singleton & Magnúsdóttir, forthcoming). Nevertheless, we saw an interest amongst the respondents to learn about an intersectional approach in climate policy-making. Several interviewers expressed the need to develop ways to better incorporate intersectionality and social justice into their agencies' climate work, but for that to be possible they would need concrete examples relating to their field on how to do it (Singleton & Magnúsdóttir, 2021).

Civil servants, not climate activists

An additional aspect we found in many of the respondents' answers, in addition to the government determining their roles regarding the incorporation of an intersectional perspective, was that they did not want to be perceived as climate activists. When looking further into the aspect of agency to act within the civil servants' work, we found that many of the respondents felt that it was not

easy to pursue issues of justice and issues related to gender and intersectionality due to anxiety about what they could and could not do. The anxiety was partly about a lack of clarity about what an official at the agency could do within the framework of their tenure and partly about not wanting to be entangled in politics (Singleton & Magnúsdóttir, forthcoming). The respondents spoke of the need for officials to stay within the framework of the authority and not act as activists. One respondent argued “that there are dangers to allowing personal passions affect agency work” (Singleton & Magnúsdóttir, forthcoming, p 11): Another expressed that:

[T]he most common disease is civil servant activism. That you want so much with your own agenda so that you push something very hard yourself, more than what you actually have a mandate for, either from a political or civic point of view. And to be honest, it is actually very common in the environmental field, and that’s probably because it is so important (Singleton & Magnúsdóttir, forthcoming, p. 11).

A respondent from SEPA highlighted that:

We are not a lobbying organisation... We should be clear that we put nature, environment and climate first, but we must stay within the lines set by the government. We are not a political organisation (Singleton & Magnúsdóttir, forthcoming, p. 11).

When discussing social justice-related climate change activities several respondents, as shown above, expressed concerns with legitimacy. The respondents assert that there is such a thing as being too “activist” which risks moving away from the mandate of the authority which could jeopardise the legitimacy of the authority (Singleton, 2021; Singleton & Magnúsdóttir, 2021). To varying degrees, many respondents framed an “ideal” civil servant, someone who is supposed to be neutral in their work. In our understanding, the consensus amongst the respondents seemed to be that ecological modernisation appeared to be a 'neutral' and commonly accepted approach, whereas issues related to gender and intersectionality were seen as political and associated with certain values that clash with the authority's mandate. This meant that if one tried to integrate issues related to gender and intersectionality, it risked crossing over to politics or even activism which would then risk diminishing the legitimacy of the agency’s work. We argue that when questions and concerns of social justice and equality are perceived as being political and thus as outside the remit of the institution, it limits the leeway for institutional change.

Local level institutions working with climate issues

As mentioned in the introduction, part of this research focused on if and why social differences and intersectionality had been included in Swedish policy-making at the local level (Rask, Lundgren & Kronsell, forthcoming). In a comparative analysis of our studies of Gothenburg and Malmö we show that both cities have ambitious environmental and climate projects but also signs of a holistic approach focusing on social justice and equality. However, we would argue that in line with the four agencies on the national level, Gothenburg's and Malmö's climate policy process and implementation is still centered around a technocratic and de-politicised discourse, premised on ecomodernist *logics*, at the expense of taking issues of power, equality, and justice seriously. As we have previously discussed, an ecomodernist discourse favours economic growth and technological approaches and solutions, which tend to promote the idea that contemporary society can be both sustainable but relatively unchanged.

Despite ambitious environment and climate policies, our analysis of Gothenburg and Malmö's work with climate transition revealed challenges in implementing more holistic and radical approaches that focus on intersectionality and social differences. This was described to be partly because of the fact that it is in the implementation process the institutional logics, norms, and cultures come into play. There is thus a discrepancy or gap between what is articulated in the policies and what is implemented. The policy documents contain a holistic and intersectional thinking and less separation of environmental and social issues, including issues concerning justice and (in)equalities whilst what is implemented reflects a more eco-modernistic approach.

As expressed by one civil servant from Gothenburg:

The problem is the difficulty to act and achieve results, and also the need for repercussions if the municipality does not act [referring to that there is too much focus on developing what is in the policies and not enough focus on what is actually done to reach the targets in the policies] (Rask, Lundgren, & Kronsell, forthcoming, p.8)

Furthermore, we found that the siloed structure of municipal departments is a key barrier to implementing more holistic approaches. This silo-structure prevents departments from addressing intersecting issues and developing integrated solutions, as they operate in parallel rather than collaboratively. As a result, incorporating social differences and intersectionality into social and

climate policies becomes challenging, as such efforts can extend beyond a single department's jurisdiction.

One respondent from Gothenburg explained it as:

There's this idea that, the environmental administration works with environmental issues [...] that's what they do [...] and then Equal City [another program in the municipality about equality work] they work with social sustainability and gender and equality. [...] It is this parallel process, but we need to think outside of the box, I think, so that environmental issues and equality stop being parallel processes. The environment and climate issues need to become part of the main processes in the City (Rask, Lundgren, & Kronsell, forthcoming, p. 8).

Another civil servant from Gothenburg stated that:

Many say that "oh yes, that is relevant", but also "that is not something we can work with because that is not in our task" and dismiss it [when talking about social sustainability]" (Rask, Lundgren, & Kronsell, forthcoming, p. 9).

Thus, arguably the silo-structure creates a separation of what is perceived as environmental and social issues within the organisations which could be a reason why the social aspect of sustainability and the understanding of social differences do not reach the department working with the climate and environmental questions, and vice versa. As further expressed by a civil servant in Gothenburg:

It is difficult for the administrations that are used to work with 'only' social issues to see the relevance for them to also work with environmental issues. To see the whole picture. The environment often gets neglected. [...] And [in the environmental administration] many are maybe trained only in the natural sciences and have those backgrounds. It is difficult for them to understand how social issues are interlinked or to think of it as something that needs to be considered (Rask, Lundgren, & Kronsell, forthcoming, p. 10).

The responsibilities of different departments allow for some degree of interpretation. However, these interpretations seem to be shaped by historical trajectories and path dependencies that

disconnect ‘environmental’ issues from ‘social’ ones, as expressed by one civil servant at the environmental administration in Gothenburg: “this is what we have always done, this is what we know and what we are good at [referring to environmental issues]” (Rask, Lundgren & Kronsell p. 9). This separation of social and environmental tasks could therefore be understood to be part of a path-dependency that prioritises ecomodernist discourses and technical framings and solutions to environment and climate problems over more social, holistic, and transformative ones. Or as one civil servant from Malmo explained:

It is a slow process to change the culture in a municipality. It is a bureaucracy that often feels reluctant to change. [...] People are used to doing things in a certain way. [...] The administrations have their defined tasks and ways of working, they have their own cultures (Rask, Lundgren & Kronsell, forthcoming, p. 9).

Another civil servant in Gothenburg said: “It’s like ‘as long as it’s electrical it’s great’ and ‘electrification will solve everything’, and a belief in that then we don’t need to change much else” (Rask, Lundgren & Kronsell, forthcoming, p. 10). We argue that to be able to address the negative aspects of silo structures in the municipalities and change the historical trajectory, efforts of change need to consider both the structural redesign (in the Weberian sense) and the transformation of underlying institutional logics (ways of thinking).

We followed up the work on Malmö and Gothenburg with a study on Umeå (Lundgren & Kronsell, forthcoming). Umeå was chosen for its geographical location in the North of Sweden, but also because Umeå has taken an ambitious and unique approach to sustainability, excelling in both social and ecological aspects. In the ambition to learn from its approach and in line with the overarching project theme we asked how Umeå envisions climate policy in relation to issues of equity, equality and human-nature relations using the intersectional approach of the project as we studied policy documents and conducted interviews with relevant civil servants. We explored if and how social and ecological dimensions are embedded in local climate policies. From the analysis we conclude that Umeå’s climate governance did not follow an eco-modern governance logic such as we have seen elsewhere and no note of problem of silos as we saw in the other municipalities, possibly due to the smaller size of the municipality being more conducive to collaboration. Umeå is also an exception in the way it has included ecological and social sustainability. It stands out for prioritizing the worth of nature, even articulating the intrinsic value

of nature in policy documents and by connecting the value of nature to the city's identity. Furthermore, the attention to social aspects is advanced via a long-standing commitment to gender integration, a process which is seen to pave the way for the inclusion of other social groups and perspectives. As such Umeå stands out as ambitious in both including nature and social aspects in climate governance.

Policy Recommendations

This section presents key takeaways from our research on how policy makers can increase their awareness of social differences and develop more intersectionally informed policies. These recommendations are elaborated under the headings: political will and governance; knowledge and expertise; and reforming institutional practice.

Political will and governance

Our respondents at both the national and the local levels emphasized the importance of leadership and political will as an important component in fostering confidence among civil servants to pay attention to social differences and develop more intersectionally informed climate policies. Civil servants were often hesitant to act unless their initiatives aligned with formal directives given by the government (state and/or local government) and with what was perceived as legitimate in relation to their remit. We argue that when the government does not explicitly express a commitment to social sustainability, equity, and gender equality, it constrains the ability of individuals within agencies and municipalities to take meaningful action on these issues.

A related challenge is that concepts such as equality, social justice, and intersectionality are often perceived as politically charged. Indeed, left and social democratic parties are more likely to pursue social justice issues, while right-wing parties emphasize aspects like violence against women. Our project which spanned a state governmental transition from a left-wing coalition to a right-wing coalition in 2022, revealed a subsequent decline in political will and interest in these issues. This shift was reflected in budget cuts, altered missions and redefined objectives, as articulated in the Swedish Equality agency's report (2024). To counteract such political fluctuations, civil servants can rely on long-standing policies in the issue area. However, the local political context for the three studied municipalities was different. In Gothenburg, for example, there was a power shift from a right-wing coalition to a left-wing (red-green) coalition in 2022 and, instead, an increased

political interest in and political support for moving the municipalities' environment and climate work forward.

Policies with legal standing – such as gender equality and anti-discrimination law – or those enshrined in international agreements (e.g., Agenda 2030) – or EU Treaties agreements (e.g., gender mainstreaming) provide crucial frameworks for civil servants on both the national and local level. These legal instruments can support civil servants in crafting policy suggestions and strategy proposals for equity and equality in climate policy. Furthermore, integrating intersectionality into Swedish agencies and municipalities strengthens their legitimacy and ensures that governance aligns with democratic values. The absence of the intersectional perspective constitutes a democratic deficit, whereas institutions that embrace intersectionality uphold democratic values more effectively.

We suggest that:

- Agencies and municipalities should base their climate policy-making on existing legal frameworks on gender and social inclusion and make them integral to climate policy-making.
- Successful gender mainstreaming practices should be extended to encompass additional intersectional categories.

Knowledge and expertise

Even though climate change and its gender and intersectional consequences have been widely studied (see for example: IPCC, 2022; IPCC, 2023, EIGE 2017; EIGE 2024, Nordic Council Report, 2022, OECD report 2023) many respondents still expressed the need for more field-specific knowledge. They emphasized that improved data availability would facilitate the integration of intersectional perspectives into their efforts. One critical area for development is context-specific statistics. For instance, data on how different groups are affected by rising energy prices, increased heat wave risks, or the allocation of climate mitigation or adaptation resources to different groups, can enable policy makers to design more equitable policies. This knowledge should not be an afterthought but should be incorporated early in the policy-making process to avoid unequal and unjust effects of climate strategies.

At the same time, we recognize that calls for more knowledge can sometimes serve as a mechanism of power – a way to delay or divert action. Arora-Johnson and Wahlström (2023) highlight how alleged ‘knowledge gaps’ are used as an excuse for inaction, despite well-documented evidence. For example, while it is widely known that the wealthy contribute disproportionately to carbon emissions, there are still no significant measures to address this disparity. Thus, knowledge alone is insufficient; it must be accompanied by reflection before crafting concrete actions.

The dominance of ecological modernization norms in Swedish climate governance has shaped institutional perspectives, often prioritizing techno-economic, masculine norms over social sustainability. This influences hiring practices and, by extension, the professional expertise that agencies rely on and, by extension, which knowledge dominates within the agencies and the municipalities. Expanding recruitment beyond traditional fields – such as engineering – to include social scientists and humanists would diversify the institutional knowledge base of the institutions and could make it easier to incorporate an intersectional perspective. This shift would also reduce reliance on external expertise, ensuring that agencies have in-house knowledge that understands both operational mandates and social justice concerns.

We suggest that:

- Agencies and municipalities should prioritize the collection and use of context-specific intersectional data in climate policy.
- Policy makers must actively engage with existing knowledge.
- Recruitment strategies should be diversified to include social scientists, humanists and experts in gender and intersectionality.

Reforming institutional practices

Institutional reform seems crucial for integrating intersectional perspectives into climate policy. As mentioned above, one significant step is diversifying recruitment to include gender experts and professionals with expertise in social justice issues. However, where these specialists are positioned within the institutional hierarchy also matters. If gender and intersectionality advisors are placed at leadership levels, it signals the importance of these issues at the core of the institution rather than as peripheral concerns.

A key institutional challenge is the persistence of path-dependence, where agencies and municipalities operate strictly within their traditional remit. To achieve meaningful reform, agencies must work with knowledge, reflection, recruitment and existing policies in a way that relates to and aligns with the core tasks of the institution, as defined in its remit. For example, STA should look for ways to integrate gender and intersectionality considerations into its remit or mission of ensuring safe and efficient mobility of people and goods. Similarly, SEPA should embed social issues within its climate action and care-for-nature proposals. Rather than treating gender and intersectionality as standalone issues, agencies should incorporate them within their existing mandates, leveraging this path-dependence as an advantage rather than a barrier.

We suggest that:

- Agencies and municipalities should embed gender and intersectionality experts at decision-making levels.
- Institutional mandates should be reinterpreted to integrate social justice considerations within existing policy frameworks.
- Intersectionality should be approached as an integral part of agencies' core missions rather than an external addition.

By implementing these policy recommendations, policy makers can foster a more intersectionally aware governance approach that promotes equity, sustainability, and long-term resilience in climate policy.

Further reading and research

In case the reader wishes to engage further with the project, we recommend having a look at the project publications, see below, the project's webpage as well as reaching out to us. The PhD research within the project is still ongoing and the dissertation is anticipated to be published and defended in 2026. The results from this project have also informed a new comparative research project titled “Gendered Norms and Practices in Nordic and Baltic Climate Policy Institutions: implication for the Climate Transition” (2024-2027), financed by Formas and NordForsk (Ref nr: 180198). The project explores how gender equality is understood in and practised by governmental climate authorities and ministries in the Nordic and Baltic states with the aim to support the implementation of gender equality in the climate transition.

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