



SCHOOL OF GLOBAL STUDIES

# **INTERVIEW REPORT**

## **Intersectionality and Climate Policy Making**

Ways forward to a socially inclusive and sustainable welfare state

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## Acronyms used

EPA	Swedish Environmental Protection Agency/ <i>Naturvårdsverket</i>
SEA	Swedish Energy Agency/ <i>Energimyndigheten</i>
STA	Swedish Traffic Authority/ <i>Trafikverket</i>
VIN	Vinnova – Sweden’s innovation agency

## Introduction

This document presents findings from an interview study, forming part of the four-year FORMAS funded project Intersectionality and Climate Policy Making: Ways forward to a socially inclusive and sustainable welfare state (FR-2018/0010, in Swedish: *Klimatpolitik och intersektionalitet: vägar fram till en social inkluderande hållbarhet*). Our interdisciplinary research group seeks to develop scientifically based guidance for policy makers. Through various methodologies, we explore how policy makers in government agencies work with social inclusion and how intersecting inequalities relate to climate policy-making in the local municipal context. The overall aim of this project is to increase knowledge among climate policy makers about intersectional factors so they may develop socially inclusive and just climate policies in line with Agenda 2030. The Intersectionality and Climate Policy Making research team consists of Professor Annica Kronsell, Nanna Rask and Benedict E. Singleton, School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg and Gunnhildur Lily Magnúsdóttir, Department of Global Political Studies, Malmö University.

This interview report focuses upon four Swedish government agencies: the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (EPA, *Naturvårdsverket*), the Swedish Energy Agency (SEA, *Energimyndigheten*), the Swedish Traffic Authority (STA, *Trafikverket*) and Vinnova, Sweden’s innovation agency. The Swedish political system is characterised by small government departments supported by large government agencies. As such, these four agencies are important actors around climate change in their respective fields. These are respectively the environment (EPA); energy system (SEA); transport system (STA) and innovation system (Vinnova). It is possible to identify particular agency roles that relate to Swedish climate change. The

Swedish government sets each agency's remit. However, this remit continually evolves as the government allocates new tasks to the agencies and reorganisations occur. Likewise, agencies interpret their tasks and engage proactively in their respective sectors. Each agency's climate work has thus emerged through a combination of top-down (government diktat) and bottom-up (self-organised) action.

Swedish government agencies, as holders of expertise have a role in providing knowledge and advice to the government on their respective sectors. This can be advisory and task dependent but at times civil servants seek to anticipate and identify relevant information. Linked to this, agencies have a role in stimulating and funding other actors within Swedish society, although the extent of this varies between agencies. Agencies also have a role in building, maintaining and regulating social, economic and physical infrastructure. These different roles and the different emphases of each agency thus feed into Swedish climate change action and issues of social justice.

*Intersectionality theory* originates in black feminist research as a tool for problematizing simplistic conceptualisations of individuals and society. It highlights the complex effects of the *intersections* of societal power structures. Thus, for example a "black woman's" experience overlaps with and differs to the experience of "black men" and "white women". Similarly, the mobility of a population will differ by age group, gender, place of residence and wealth. A change in transport policy (e.g. away from cars) will have complex effects and intersect with other societal vulnerabilities. Thus, hypothetically if older people rely on car transport to ensure their political participation and health, transport policy will intersect with their other, extant vulnerabilities.

In this report, we identify thematic areas relevant to transmitting knowledge of intersectionality theory to agency staff. This report draws upon interviews with 32 civil servants at four Swedish government agencies. It represents a set of preliminary results, which will be developed further within follow-up interviews and focus group discussions. It is a public document, intended for dissemination to respondents and to form the basis of continued dialogue with representatives of the different agencies. As such, it is primarily descriptive in content intended to be accessible outside of

academia. It forms part of an ongoing dialogue with respondents at each of the agencies. The report is organised as follows. In the next section, methods are specified. We then discuss several thematic areas that emerged through analysis, each of which contains learning points and future research questions. The report concludes with a summary of main findings.

## Methods

The data in this report were collected in an interview study conducted in spring 2020. It forms part of a wider project, which also draws information from documentary analysis, focus groups and further interviews, with data collection continuing into 2022. Future analysis will explore both national and local policy-making organisations. As noted in the introduction, one of the purposes of this report is to provide a tool for further data collection, in cooperation with respondents.

### Respondent selection

Respondents were initially selected purposively, with several individuals at each of the four agencies to be studied having previously signalled their interest in participating in this study. Researchers identified and contacted civil servants who had carried out work on social sustainability and justice. This initial pool of people then provided a springboard for the selection of further respondents utilising a snowball method whereby researchers asked interviewees to recommend others. In total 32 respondents were interviewed over 31 telephone interviews (one interview involved two respondents). The research team made continued efforts to find new respondents until a feeling of saturation emerged, with different respondents proposing the same names repeatedly. Table 1 lists details of the number of different respondents interviewed at each agency as well as the codes allocated to each online interview.

**Table 1 List of interviewees**

<b><u>Agency</u></b>	<b><u>No. of respondents</u></b>	<b><u>Interview codes</u></b>
Swedish Energy Agency	7	iSEA01-07
Swedish Environmental Protection Agency	9	iEPA01-09
Swedish Traffic Authority	6	iSTA01-06
Vinnova	10	iVIN01-09

## Interview process

Owing to the ongoing Covid-19 crisis, we made a decision to alter the planned research format and switch from face-to-face interviews combined with research visits to online interviews using a combination of Zoom and Skype communication software. With both respondents and researchers instructed by their employers to work from home and avoid unnecessary travel this was the most pragmatic approach possible. Interviews took place from 16 March to 20 May 2020. All interviews were carried out by a single member of the research team (Singleton).

Interviews were organised around an interview guide. This was initially drafted and circulated within the four-person research team before the document was finalised. Small amendments were made to the questions through the interview process. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, with a preference for respondents' own interpretations of their role over a need to stick to the interview guide.

Interview questions were designed based on the study aims (see introduction).

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.

Each interview was recorded and subsequently transcribed, with the transcriptions being checked. This was then combined with various notes taken during interviews and entered into ATLAS 8 qualitative analysis software for analysis.

## Study limitations

Whilst the research team made efforts to get as broad a sample of respondents as possible, the nature of snowball sampling is that one tends to interview those already connected with one another. There is thus a risk of missing important respondents and that the results are not representative. This is particularly the case within large organisations like Swedish government ministries. The research team took several steps to ameliorate this: first, we compared the data to the results of an earlier text analysis of relevant ministry documents and websites. Second, we intend to share our findings including this report with respondents as part of on-going data collection activities. As such, the interviews are understood as only one step in an effort to build up a fuller picture. It thus will be possible to test findings with respondents and identify any significant omissions in our work.

## Reflexivity and ethics

As with any research project, the safety and ethical treatment of respondents is a paramount concern. As such, respondents provided verbal consent prior to being recorded as part of this research project. Similarly, the interviewer clearly informed respondents when recording devices were in use. The interviewer also gave respondents the opportunity to specify if certain information should be considered off the record. Whilst participation in this research project is unlikely to result in any negative consequences towards respondents, we have taken the precaution of rendering respondents anonymous in the text.

# Analysis

Through analysis of the interview material, several themes emerged with implications for the integration of intersectional insight into agency climate change action. This section is divided into four subsections:

- Agency definitions of climate change.
- Agency definitions of social justice.
- Institutional path dependency.
- Legitimate action

Each subsection is representative of a wider swath of material, providing a summary of the collected data. The data is then discussed with regard to the implications for socially just climate action and/or the integration of intersectional insights. Each subsection is appended with a text box summarising the section and posing one or more questions for future research dialogue with agency staff.

## Agency definitions of climate change

Across the sample, respondents tend to define climate change as driven by carbon emissions. Consequently, respondents described various agency actions aimed at reducing carbon emissions. For example, the SEA and STA seek to reduce the carbon emissions within the transport and energy systems respectively. At other times, respondents would also describe climate adaptation work – for example, VIN supports innovation that is adapted for changed climates. Many respondents framed agency climate change work as reactions to guidance from the Swedish government. Climate change activities were thus structured around domestic and international commitments such as Agenda 2030. For example, all Vinnova funding calls connect to Agenda 2030 in some form (iVIN01).

In this, respondents largely framed climate change as something to address with technical solutions rather than explicitly targeting Swedish people's lifestyles or the fundamental assumptions upon which agency work is based upon. Several examples illustrate this. The EPA in their work may explore how to continue to make Swedish

cities liveable with a changed climate, for example by investigating which trees may have a cooling effect (iEPA04). More generally, the STA does not problematize the transport sector as a whole. At times, climate change work links to existing action. Thus, SEA respondents framed their climate change activities as part of a general push towards greater energy effectiveness within the Swedish energy system.

### **Box 1 Summary**

Agency work around climate change is framed by national and international commitments and links to pre-existing activities and responsibilities of each agency. Respondents tend to understand climate change action in technical terms, maintaining/improving the status quo rather than fundamentally questioning the nature of society.

*Future research question: To what extent can Swedish government agencies problematize and amend their remits around climate change?*

## **Agency definitions of social justice**

When asked to define social justice for themselves and for their agencies respondents at times found the exact definition difficult to define. Thus social justice was understood as an integral part of Swedish state (and thus agency) activities and value systems. One respondent referred to it as a “basic value of the state” (iEPA03). However, at other times respondents felt social justice problematic due to what was felt to be its vague nature and its potential range of interpretations. Respondents would highlight that justice may be a matter of perspective and indeed may be politicised. For example, one respondent felt that the word “equal” was easier to integrate in their work than “just”, with the latter having associations of guilt and blame (iVIN03).

There was however 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. Likewise, some societal groups globally and nationally contribute disproportionately to climate emissions. As such, successful climate action needs to integrate social justice concerns in order that people cooperate and work

towards climate goals. Otherwise, there was risk that sections of the population would resist climate change action. Several respondents from different agencies gave the French 'yellow vest' protests as an example of this to avoid. However, alongside this, several respondents from different agencies also reported a certain amount of uncertainty about the legitimacy of taking action around social justice without explicit direction from government (see below).

There was also variation over which social groups were of interest and affected by climate change work. At different times, respondents pointed towards sex and gender, class, ethnic background, age and geography as factors affecting the impact of climate action and change. Throughout, with a few exceptions, there was only limited recognition of the term intersectionality and the effects that intersecting categories of social difference may affect different people's vulnerability to climate change.

### **Box 2 Summary**

Respondents described the Swedish population in undifferentiated fashion. Periodically, they identified relevant subsections of Swedish society. Respondents for the most part voiced limited recognition that inequalities intersect, with diverse effects. There was hesitancy about integrating social diversity into work without clear government direction.

*Future research question: To what extent can agencies integrate the insight that multiple, intersecting social structures will affect people's vulnerability and responses to climate change?*

### **Institutional path dependency**

When asked to describe any issues that may exist in incorporating new forms of knowledge, respondents would repeatedly highlight how agency action was not a completely free choice. Each agency was on a particular historical trajectory with regard to its government-mandated remit. As such, a form of path-dependency was in evidence.

As such, a first identified challenge to changing current practice and integrating new knowledge was a temporal one. Respondents have a variety of pressures and moving to an alternative way of doing things often takes more time. As one respondent put it: “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’...” (iSEA05).

As such, when tasked with a new activity (for example relating to climate change) respondents reported a tendency to reach for resources immediately at hand. This occurs on two levels: firstly, on a personal level, respondents drew upon their own professional and academic histories and networks in order to solve new problems. So one respondent characterised the EPA as struggling to integrate social analysis into their work due to staff having educational backgrounds in civil engineering and civil and national economy (iEPA04). Respondents at other sampled agencies reported similar things to varying degrees. Respondents also characterised their actions as dipping into shared cultures of ways of doing things. Indeed, respondents at several agencies highlighted how there was a tendency to hire people from engineering or economics backgrounds. While the extent that respondents mentioned this varied between agencies, there was a marked preference for quantitative measurements and framing of problems based on previous experience. This was by turns a source of strength (in the form of extant expertise) but also an issue when it came to dealing with things outside of respondents experience as they conceived of it, whilst also presenting a challenge for outside experts e.g. for gender and social justice to contribute in ways relevant to civil servants. Linked to this, several respondents described how at times agency staff could be risk-averse, with one drolly stating: “We often go back to the starting point that this is the [STA], we feel comfortable when we build things” (iSTA04).

This presents a challenge for people from outside seeking to provide aid and input; they lack institutional understanding of an agency’s particular role. One respondent at Vinnova articulated this problem clearly: “There are many tools [around social justice] that can contribute, but there is a weakness within equality-expertise area and that is that many of those who work there come from a research background and are

experts in equality but perhaps are not experts in innovation and development work...” (iVIN02). In sum, simply applying an academic tool such as intersectionality theory, without paying heed to agency expertise within their own areas of responsibility is unlikely to be helpful.

Secondly, on an institutional level, each agency is the product of a history of evolving tasks as laid down by the Swedish government, to which their own actions contribute. For example, the STA is a product of the merger of two previously extant agencies. Thus, government directions towards climate change and social justice are integrated into the existing portfolio of tasks that each agency held. The various reporting frameworks that agencies were involved in determined the types of information that agencies were required to collect and respond to. As such, a theme across all respondents was that the government is important in delimiting agency roles. “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” (iVIN01)

### **Box 3 Summary**

Agency responses to new tasks and challenges link to responses to previous assignments and tasks. Agency responses to the social justice dimensions of climate change form a continuity with existing tasks. Respondents described drawing on personal and institutional histories; reaching for extant tools and previously acquired knowledge. Agencies thus evidence path-dependency in their action. Furthermore, this institutional knowledge presents a challenge to efforts to integrate and apply academic knowledge and tools in agency work.

*Future research question: what expertise – information, concerns and knowledge – are important for incorporating intersectionality into the work of government agencies?*

## Legitimate action

When discussing social justice related climate change activities several respondents expressed concerns with *legitimacy*. Respondents argued that through government definition their roles gained legitimacy. The government has this role as the democratically chosen representatives of the Swedish people. This effectively means that respondents need to consider the legitimacy of any actions outside of clearly defined remits. This affects the extent that civil servants feel they can innovate. Innovation must conform to legitimate remits: “I don’t believe the agency itself can put too many of their own thoughts and ideas into a project if one doesn’t have an assignment to do it” (iSEA01)

In addition, several respondents defended the ideal of the neutral bureaucrat and felt that taking “activist” action risked damaging the legitimacy of ostensibly databased government agencies. These respondents asserted there was danger that agencies could become embroiled in wider societal culture wars (with social justice interpreted as a preoccupation of the political left) or that agency staff may take action counter to the concerns of the Swedish public. Amongst these respondents, there was a concern that when civil servants acted according to their own priorities or concerns there was a risk that they acted on preconceptions rather than empirical reality: “It shouldn’t happen, but in all honesty too often one bases action on anecdotes. Or, if one wishes to be nasty, preconceptions [laughter] ... Really, people have good intentions, but people aren’t always as objective as they should be” (iSTA06).

## Box 4 Summary

Respondents are concerned about the legitimacy of their actions. Legitimacy derives ultimately from the Swedish people via its democratic representatives. Any efforts to effect institutional change need to pay heed to this concern, showing how any potential change does not damage agency legitimacy. Any action toward socially just climate change action must highlight how it falls in line with either government mandates or Swedish popular opinion.

*Future research questions: how does socially just climate action link to agency action already considered legitimate? What sources of legitimacy are already extant for the integration of intersectional insights into agency work?*

## Conclusion

Through the interviews, respondents described how their respective agencies interpreted the terms climate change and social justice. This linked to respondents' understandings of their own and their agencies' respective roles within Swedish society. Therefore, if respondents interpret social justice as beyond agencies' remit then respondents may find it problematic or difficult for the agency to take action. This remit emerged from the interaction of top-down and bottom-up actions within the agencies. Agency staff take direction from the Swedish government as the democratic representatives of the Swedish people. However, at the same time agency staff collect information for the Swedish government and at times make decisions about what issues to flag. Likewise, in practice agency staff have room to manoeuvre in interpreting their official roles. As such, it is inaccurate to depict Swedish government agencies as simply obeying the Swedish government and staff have flexibility with the amount varying on the particular tasks that the government assigns. A certain amount of action is possible for civil servants based on their own priorities and principles. However, respondents were at pains to highlight that they needed to take care to ensure that they did not go too far and damage their agencies' democratic legitimacy.

Agency understandings of climate work were thus products of their individual historical trajectories, which were the product of top-down directions and bottom-up actions from both within and outside each agency. Thus, the agencies' institutional path-dependency might make the inclusion of gender and other social factors appear less desirable or appropriate and thereby limit the room for action. Path dependency manifested at several times in interview data. Firstly, for various reasons including time constraints previous practice directly affected the types of information that agencies accessed and utilised. Several respondents discussed the difficulty of assessing social justice post hoc in work that focused more heavily on climate emissions. Secondly, integral to agency remits and interpretations of remits are framings of Swedish society, which affect how agencies approach their different tasks. Thus, prior practices on both institutional and individual levels influence even tasks where agency staff have the possibility for action. Put another way, several respondents pointed out that identifying what is unknown is a challenge since their viewpoint is partial and temporally and institutionally embedded.

Any efforts to integrate intersectionality theory (or indeed any attempt at change) into Swedish government agencies' work needs to take into account the agencies' positions in Swedish society and the legitimacy that they draw authority from. This *legitimacy* links to their professional identities as civil servants (*ämbetsmänniskor*). Respondents consistently described an ideal that civil servants should be neutral in their work and this limited the amount of "activism" they could engage in around climate change (and any other issues). This identity was at times a source of pride. As such, many respondents revealed a concern for their continued legitimacy and a concomitant logic of appropriateness to their roles, which will influence the action they take. Some respondents voiced concern that civil servants risked illegitimacy. Institutional understandings of legitimacy will thus likely have an effect on how far a civil servant can move away from the formal tasks/remits of their agency. In doing this, they revealed fears of dragging agencies into heavily politicised societal debates. This may affect the willingness of individual civil servants to take action without explicit direction from superiors or collective agreement within their agency. As such, in order to effect institutional change within Swedish government agencies

one must consider civil servants' own understandings of their and their agencies' social legitimacy.

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