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PATHWAYS TO SUSTAINABLE WELFARE

Inertia, Emergence and Transformation
in Swedish Cities

KAJSA EMILSSON, MARTIN FRITZ,
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Contents

List of figures and tables	iv
List of abbreviations	v
About the authors	vi
Acknowledgements	viii
one Introduction	1
two Theories of stability and change	17
three Local government and eco-social integration	32
four Civil society framings of sustainable welfare	52
five Public attitudes and dispositions of sustainable welfare	73
six Conclusion	98
Notes	113
References	114
Index	146

List of figures and tables

Figures

5.1	Sustainable welfare attitude patterns among urban residents	77
5.2	Support for an eco-social agenda among urban and rural residents	80
5.3	Support for eco-social policies among urban residents	82
5.4	Support for eco-social policies among urban and rural residents	84
5.5	Habitus in the space of social positions (urban and rural residents plotted)	88

Tables

2.1	Modes of stability and change	30
4.1	Climate protesters' frame support	67
4.2	Climate protesters' organisational affiliation (per cent and total numbers)	68
6.1	Drivers of stability or change at the urban level	103

List of abbreviations

ABF	Workers' Educational Association
CSO	civil society organisation
IPCC	International Panel on Climate Change
PRO	Swedish National Pensioners' Organisation
XR	Extinction Rebellion

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ONE

Introduction

We live in a time of multiple, overlapping, mutually reinforcing ecological and social crises that pressure states, markets and citizens to adapt. Responding adequately to such multiple crises requires deep and broad social-ecological transformations in the economy and society. However, although the existing mode of governance of environmental and welfare concerns needs to change, academics know that a ‘well-trodden path’ is hard to leave, as institutionalised solutions – in terms of established norms, modes of organising and formalised policies and routines – often result in stability, rather than change. Drawing on the concept of sustainable welfare, which stresses the need to analyse the connection between ecological and social dimensions of sustainability and to explore models that can reconcile them, this book explores the extent to which Western society is about to embark upon a path towards sustainable welfare, or whether welfare and environmental concerns and practices remain separate entities. The book is situated in an urban context as cities play critical roles in developing new policies and solutions linked to the social-ecological crises, where much of welfare policy and sustainability governance is manifested in practice.

Caught in the silo?

Reports by the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2023) demonstrate that human activities are the main drivers of climate change and that we are on a pathway that will cause us to fail to achieve the goal of restricting global warming to 1.5°C at some point between 2030 and 2050. The planetary/boundaries framework identifies thresholds for nine critical Earth system functions that should not be transgressed. However, several planetary boundaries have already been crossed, such as those relating to climate change and land-system change, while others show a negative trend but are still within the safe operating space, such as freshwater use and ocean acidification (Rockström et al, 2009; Steffen et al, 2015; Persson et al, 2022).

At the same time, the world is facing many social crises and problems that are at least partly driven by increasing inequalities and failed redistributive policies. Although worldwide poverty is declining, people still live in absolute poverty in many parts of the world and lack access to basic human needs such as food, shelter, clean water and sanitation, energy, education and means of living. Industrialised countries face problems such as unemployment, homelessness and poverty, alongside extensive and rising inequalities (IPCC, 2022). Wealth and income inequalities are accelerating between and within countries, resulting in a small number of wealthy individuals owning a large part of global wealth. Such disparities give rise to declining trust in public institutions and social policies as welfare states fail to redistribute welfare across generations, groups and social classes (Savage, 2021).

To address the double challenge of responding to the ecological crisis while providing critical amounts of social welfare, economies and societies need to find ways of staying below critical planetary boundaries (the ecological ceiling) while keeping above the sufficiency level required to meet people's basic needs (the social foundation or 'floor') (Khan

et al, 2023), which is illustrated by Kate Raworth's (2017) 'doughnut model'. The situation is gloomy, as industrialised countries in the Global North perform well on social thresholds but transgress most biophysical boundaries, while the poorest countries tend to do the opposite. In a study of over 150 countries, O'Neill et al (2018) found that no country met 'basic needs for its citizens at a globally sustainable level of resource use' (p 88) based on calculations of the performance of countries concerning staying below per capita biophysical thresholds and above critical social thresholds. Moreover, we know that high-income earners and wealthy groups have significant ecological footprints compared to people lacking financial resources. Kenner (2019) introduced the notion of a 'polluter elite', connecting extreme wealth concentration and ungeneralisable ecological footprints.

More fundamentally, the ecological crisis calls into question the expansionary economic model upon which contemporary welfare states rest. This model presupposes continuously rising material living standards and economic growth as a way of providing jobs and generating tax revenues, thereby providing wealth distribution (Fitzpatrick, 2011; Gough and Meadowcroft, 2011; Koch and Mont, 2016; Creutzig et al, 2022; Murphy, 2023). There is a relatively clear-cut and close link between a country's environmental and economic performance: the richer a country is, the worse its performance on environmental indicators (Fritz and Koch, 2016; Fanning et al, 2020; Gössling and Humpe, 2023). Despite this reality, mainstream policy responses to the climate crisis have been based on ideas about ecological modernisation and 'green growth', which assume that continued GDP growth can be decoupled from carbon emissions at a sufficient rate to maintain current levels of prosperity and meet decarbonisation goals (see Hickel and Kallis, 2020). However, there is little evidence that an economy-wide decoupling of GDP growth from carbon emissions can occur at a rate that is sufficient to prevent dangerous climate change (Haberl et al, 2021), and even less

evidence regarding the possibility of decoupling growth from unsustainable use of natural resources (Vadén et al, 2020a, 2020b). Given the lack of evidence for an absolute decoupling of GDP growth and environmental resource use in any existing welfare state, the traditional reliance of welfare states on the provision of growth has started to be questioned (Corlet Walker et al, 2021; Hirvilammi et al, 2023; Paulsson et al, 2024).

Beyond the problem of having to decouple welfare from growth (Büchs et al, 2024), the ecological crisis challenges existing welfare arrangements in several other ways (Gough and Meadowcroft, 2011). Welfare societies will have to deal with an expanded set of eco-social risks, including those that follow directly from changes in environmental systems, such as heatwaves or droughts related to human health, human security, employment and housing and so on, as well as those that emerge more indirectly as a result of climate mitigation policies (Schaffrin, 2014; Johansson et al, 2016; Hirvilammi et al, 2023). The required active management by public institutions in terms of adaptation and mitigation measures could result in conflicts in the struggle to reconcile different policy goals. Mitigation measures, or the lack of them, could, for example, undermine social objectives because poor households and individuals will be financially burdened by remedies to counteract climate change, as illustrated in discussions on fuel poverty (for example, Sherriff et al, 2022). This could lead to budgetary tensions concerning the limited ‘public purse’ when mitigation responses require more significant expenditure (Gough and Meadowcroft, 2011), potentially conflicting with the possibilities of providing for welfare needs.

Sustainable welfare beyond the silo divide

The concept of sustainable welfare, a topic of increasing interest among scholars and the central focus of this book, underscores the urgent need to understand better the intricate connection between the ecological and social dimensions of

sustainability and models that can reconcile them (Koch and Mont, 2016; Schoyen et al, 2022; Hirvilammi et al, 2023). In the 1980s, social policy scholars started discussing and questioning the expansionary economic model on which Western welfare societies are founded (see Fitzpatrick, 2001, for a resumé). Twenty years ago, it was stated that: ‘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; Fitzpatrick, 2014; Gough, 2017; Murphy, 2023).

Advocates of sustainable welfare argue that welfare systems should meet human needs and well-being while also preserving the planet’s life-support systems (Koch and Mont, 2016; Matthies and Närhi, 2017; Gough, 2017; Hirvilammi, 2020; Büchs, 2021). Sustainable welfare (for example, Koch and Mont, 2016; Büchs and Koch, 2017; Koch et al, 2023) delves into the intersection of the environment and welfare, integrating the previously distinct research traditions of environmental sustainability research on one hand, and social policy and welfare research on the other. This interdisciplinary research agenda (Hirvilammi et al, 2023) acknowledges that production and consumption patterns and welfare provisions are all within a finite natural environment. The term envisions a future where ecological and social issues are harmoniously resolved, offering a hopeful and inspiring vision. However, achieving sustainable welfare will necessitate significant social-ecological transformations, including new discourses, policies and mobilisation strategies that consider both social and environmental policies and concerns (for example, Fitzpatrick, 2011; Gough, 2017; Ripple et al, 2020; Emilsson, 2023).

Aim and purpose of the book

This book contributes to the still emerging but rapidly growing scholarly interest that explores the interplay between

sustainability and welfare studies, linked to concepts such as ‘sustainable welfare’, ‘eco-social policies’ and ‘eco-social work’ (Gough et al, 2008; Koch and Mont, 2016; Emilsson, 2022; Khan et al, 2023; Hirvilammi et al, 2023). We explore patterns of inertia, emergence and transformation in sustainable welfare governance at an urban level and investigate how and to what extent Swedish cities are about to overcome the separation between social welfare and environmental concerns and practices. Hence, while we use the concept of sustainable welfare in a visionary sense – that is, as a guide to identify when societies can meet human needs within planetary boundaries – we empirically operationalise and investigate it in connection with institutional stability and change across environmental and welfare divides in an urban context.

Our combination of theoretical approaches contributes to debates concerning the barriers and opportunities for transforming societies towards sustainable welfare models. Welfare state and public policy research has highlighted the resilience of existing institutional solutions despite significant pressures, indicating the relevance of theories of institutional inertia and path dependency. Sustainability studies have relied on theories of transition and transformation to examine patterns and drivers of change in economic, political, social and environmental systems. This book combines insight from both as we build on the concepts of inertia, emergence and transformation.

Path dependence theories suggest that change is rare and that inertia prevails despite the pressures of climate change and social concerns. Path emergence theories suggest that change occurs in a gradual, incremental process, partly because innovative practices explore new ways of thinking and doing in urban governance. While these two theories allow us to explore the complex interplay between a dominant order and a new path in the making, the addition of transformation theories opens an analysis of establishing a new order as a potential integration or amalgamation of environmental and welfare concerns in

urban governance. By synthesising research from both fields, we can better understand actual changes and the persistence of compartmentalised thinking and actions. Integrating established theories from various academic disciplines enables us to identify the drivers of change and stability associated with concepts such as inertia, emergence and transformation.

Cities as sites for experimentation

It is crucial to recognise cities as dynamic sites for experimentation, where innovative solutions to pressing social, economic and political issues are developed and mobilised. This understanding of cities as accelerators of change towards sustainability is a crucial aspect of our research (Emilsson and Koch, 2022). Urbanisation is ‘the most powerful macro-mechanism of change in coupled human–environment systems observed so far’ and has enormous environmental effects (Wolfram, 2016, p 121; see also UN DESA, 2019). Cities cover less than 2 per cent of the Earth’s surface, but they contribute to more than 70 per cent of global energy-related carbon dioxide emissions (Seto et al, 2014; UN Habitat, 2018). While cities and urban residents generate ecological and climate pressures (for example, caused by urban lifestyles), they also experience inequality, poverty, segregation and vulnerability, and social risks associated with climate change. They will likely become even more polarised than Fainstein and Harloe predicted (Fainstein and Harloe, 1992). At the same time, urban residents are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, such as air pollution, heat waves and potential rising sea levels, owing to the concentration of infrastructure, economic activities and communities in cities (Bulkeley and Betsill, 2013).

The study of cities is moreover essential because they are exposed to the localisation and decentralisation processes taking place in many European countries. Central governments have delegated responsibilities ‘downwards’ to local governments (for example, Kazepov, 2008, 2010; Johansson and Panican, 2016).

Therefore, problems such as unemployment, poverty and social exclusion are seen as localised social problems beyond national governments' reach and responsibilities (Kazepov et al, 2022).

The mounting pressure on local governments and urban actors to adapt justifies an empirical focus on urban transformation, but cities are also essential to study for other reasons. Urban sustainability research often emphasises the transformative potential of cities (Bulkeley and Betsill, 2013; Vojnovic, 2014; Wolfram, 2016; Fenton and Gustafsson, 2017; UN Habitat, 2017; IPCC, 2018), with the assumption that cities constitute sites for action where solutions to pressing social, political and economic issues are mobilised and developed. Cities can 'help bridge the gap between the aggregate national intended contributions agreed in Paris and the actual requirements of emissions reductions needed to keep temperature changes under 1.5 degrees' (Castán Broto, 2017, p 1).

As social, cultural, economic and political entities, cities can thus be seen as accelerators of change towards sustainability, encompassing sites where people and decision makers meet to deliberate, take action and mobilise support for (or against) urban transformations towards sustainable welfare (for example, McCormick et al, 2013; Wolfram et al, 2019; Hölscher and Frantzeskaki, 2021; Grainger-Brow et al, 2022). Recent academic interest in urban experimentation describes cities as places for disruptive or radical change (Bulkeley et al, 2019). Urban experimentation reconciles with the long-standing idea of cities as being vibrant and continually in the making (Karvonen et al, 2014; Karvonen, 2018) and forms 'an antidote to modern ideals of rational and comprehensive planning' (Ehnert, 2023, p 77), suggesting that cities are the places where new paths emerge, and are explored, tested and embarked upon.

Three sites of urban transformation

Empirically, this book explores the transformation towards sustainable welfare in connection with three sites of urban

governance: local government, civil society and public attitudes. We deploy the site concept, assuming that transformation towards sustainable welfare at the urban level is a contested process (for example, [Fainstein, 2010](#); [Blokland et al, 2015](#)). Since sustainable welfare is not (yet) an institutionalised model of governance, it is of significance to acknowledge the multi-site, multi-actor and potentially conflictual nature of environmental and welfare governance at the urban level, which encompasses relationships between state and non-state actors ([Bulkeley and Betsill, 2013](#); [Bulkeley and Newell, 2015](#); [Hajer et al, 2015](#)), including actors such as local governments and civil society organisations (hereafter CSOs), as well as communities and citizens. The concept follows a shift in the theorising of urban politics and governance, from focusing on local political institutions to emphasising urban governance as practised and shaped by its multi-level and multi-actor environment. In studies of urban climate governance, ‘site’ is often used to reflect the kinds of places and spaces where climate governance takes place and is shaped by a multitude of actors and where these actors come together to deliberate and debate, to contest and challenge and to express agency and exercise their power to act ([Bulkeley et al, 2015](#); [van der Heijden et al, 2019](#)). In the following, we introduce the three sites that form the basis of our empirical studies of sustainable urban welfare transformations.

Local government

Local government reflects a dominant order in urban governance but also includes elements of innovation and change as decision makers and civil servants develop new policies and practices that cut across policy domains. Studies of urban sustainability governance have explored the institutional capacities of local governments to adapt to current crises and the need for change, pointing to the challenges posed by the multi-level character of public governance ([Bridges, 2016](#)).

The focus of these studies includes developments concerning the built environment (van der Heijden, 2014; Smedby, 2016), transportation (Stead, 2016) and ecosystem services (Haase et al, 2014; Frantzeskaki et al, 2016). Urban climate governance has emerged as a particularly important subfield, as climate action cuts across almost all aspects of sustainability governance (Lee and Painter, 2015; Hughes, 2017). Recent studies have furthermore focused on urban climate change experimentation, where climate governance is framed as a series of experiments in cities with low-carbon technologies and practices involving a diverse set of actors (Bulkeley and Castán Broto, 2013; Bulkeley et al, 2015; Evans et al, 2018; Kronsell and Mukthar-Landgren, 2018; Marvin et al, 2018).

When envisioning local government as a site, we expect this to include tensions between priorities and policy goals. Despite climate change and welfare concerns being two critical challenges for local governments, with an increasing number of interconnections, there have so far been few studies examining whether, how and with what consequences these are integrated or kept as separate in urban governance. We will explore whether local governments have embarked on a new path treating environmental and welfare concerns in combination, what we term eco-social integration (Khan et al, 2020). The study draws on analyses of policy documents and interviews with urban policy makers and civil servants (see Chapter 3).

Civil society

Civil society plays a vital part in transformation processes, holding the potential to bring about significant change. It serves as an arena for citizens to unite, express and engage in collective action on shared issues and concerns (Diamond, 1994). This potential for change is particularly evident in its role as a sphere for citizen mobilisation and participation between political elections and alongside political institutions (Rosanvallón and Goldhammer, 2008; Keane, 2009). It

functions as an intermediary between governments and citizens, and its engagement in deliberation and influence on policies through advocacy and campaigning is a testament to its transformative power.

By conceptualising civil society as a site, we acknowledge the existence of a heterogeneous set of actors competing over resources and positions vis-à-vis others (for example, Crossley, 2003; Johansson and Kalm, 2015; Florea et al, 2022). The site of civil society is furthermore likely to include both contentious and collaborative practices and networks of cooperation (for example, Plüschke-Altöf and Sooväli-Sepping, 2022), and actors such as local associations, urban movements and urban activists who seek to ‘achieve some control of their urban environment’ (Pruijt, 2007, p 5115) and target the ‘problems, needs and lifestyles typical for the urban environment’ (Domaradzka, 2018, p 609; see also Mayer, 2012, 2013). We address both established and radical elements of urban mobilisation to understand practices of stability and change.

Therefore, this part of the book investigates whether and how civil society actors organise and mobilise across social welfare and environmental concerns. Our discussion draws on studies with protest participants and interviews with leading representatives of environmental and welfare-oriented civil society groups (see Chapter 4).

Public attitudes

To capture transformations towards sustainable welfare at an urban level, we investigate the support expressed by urban residents regarding attitudes to environmental and welfare concerns and the degree to which we can identify synergies and integration across attitudinal divides. We identify different patterns of support and discuss how they can be explained as a means to study inertia, emergence and transformation in urban governance. Public opinion and the expression of ideas are at the same time separate and interconnected with

formal policy making, based on the assumption that policy follows the public (for example, [Jacobs and Shapiro, 1994](#); [Tjernström and Tietenberg, 2008](#); [Burstein, 2010](#); [Beyer and Hänni, 2018](#); [Schaffer et al, 2022](#)). Seen from this perspective, public opinion and ideas can either provide legitimacy for or challenge different policies and institutional arrangements and can therefore be part of the drivers or the blockers of change ([Svallfors, 2010, 2012](#); [Hemerijck, 2013](#); [Lindvall and Ruead, 2018](#); [Rosenbloom et al, 2019](#)).

A focus on urban public attitudes and ideas becomes specifically important as urban residents are often seen as an avant-garde who are, compared to their counterparts in suburbs, smaller cities or rural areas, willing to embrace change ([McGrane et al, 2017](#); [Gimpel et al, 2020](#); [Huijsmans et al, 2021](#)). It has been shown in Western contexts that urban residents express higher levels of knowledge and awareness about climate change ([Mildenberger et al, 2016](#)), less climate scepticism and stronger environmental beliefs and concerns than rural residents ([Berenguer et al, 2005](#); [Weckroth and Ala-Mantila, 2022](#)). Despite this, the assumption that urban residents hold more cosmopolitan, liberal, tolerant, left-leaning and progressive cultural values and are more open to change and transformations towards sustainable welfare will be empirically investigated. In addition, we will explore the degree to which there is resistance and opposition towards sustainable welfare among urban residents. We do this through an in-depth survey of urban residents regarding their attitudes to environmental and welfare concerns (see [Chapter 5](#)).

The case of Sweden

This book focuses on Sweden, which provides a suitable case for studying transformations towards urban sustainable welfare. Sweden is often described as a social democratic welfare regime with comparatively universal welfare arrangements ([Esping-Andersen, 1990, 1999](#); [Blomqvist and Palme, 2020](#)) and as an

early pioneer in environmental governance (Lundqvist, 1980, 2004; Andersen and Liefferink, 1997). It has a well-developed and institutionalised environmental governance regime with relatively progressive environmental policies (Hildingsson and Khan, 2015; Duit, 2016).

Although the incremental progress of the past and relatively positive public attitudes of the present suggest that Sweden is a potential candidate for embarking upon the path towards sustainable welfare, the actual picture is far more complex. In the literature on social policy and climate change, it has been suggested, for example, that social democratic welfare states will be better at managing the intersection between social and environmental policies because these states have institutions and a political culture that ‘enable an interventionist state acting to promote the public good’ (Gough and Meadowcroft, 2011, p 498).

This view has subsequently been questioned as Sweden and other Western countries tend to score high on environmental indicators such as greenhouse gas emissions per capita and ecological footprints of production and consumption (for example, O’Neill et al, 2018; see also Koch, 2022). In addition, the standard narrative of Sweden as having strong redistributive institutions and features to fight inequalities has significantly been challenged – for example, by rising inequalities in wealth and housing (for example, Lundberg and Waldenström, 2018; Christophers, 2021; see also Johansson, 2022). At the same time, far from breaking what Hausknost (2020) refers to as the ‘glass ceiling’ of environmental states, the Swedish welfare state – as all Northern welfare states (Raphael et al, 2024) – has been demonstrated to be mainly dependent on the provision of economic growth. This ‘glass ceiling’ is primarily formed by the policy priority of providing economic growth, or the superiority of the economic imperative of the modern state (Hildingsson et al, 2019; Koch, 2020a). Not only is this indicative of a long-lasting tradition of stable institutions and an interventionist state in welfare and environmental

domains, but it also suggests patterns of change in political and public priorities.

Regarding local governments, Swedish cities and municipalities are among the most capacitated and best equipped to engage in societal transformation processes (Johansson, 2022). Compared to many other countries, Swedish local governments have far-reaching autonomy, self-governance and significant responsibility and authority regarding social welfare, environmental management and urban planning. This includes local mobilisation, encompassing a tradition of welfare and environmental movements, and, more recently, a new wave of climate activism with the birth of the Fridays for Future campaign as the then 15-year-old Greta Thunberg, in 2018, sat down in front of the Swedish parliament to protest against the lack of action on the climate crisis. In addition, it has been demonstrated that Swedish residents tend to be supportive of the welfare state and concerned about *both* social welfare and environmental issues (Franzen and Vogl, 2013; Svallfors, 2015; Fritz and Koch, 2019; Otto and Gugushvili, 2020; Sivonen and Kukkonen, 2021; Heggebo and Hvinden, 2022; van Oorschot et al, 2022). Urban residents, in particular, express a dual concern for social welfare and environmental issues (for example, Otto and Gugushvili, 2020; Emilsson, 2022).

This book draws on several empirical studies mainly focused on Sweden's three largest metropolitan cities: Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö. Although the cities in the study are by far the largest in Sweden, they are, by international comparison, small or medium-sized. Stockholm is the capital of Sweden, with a population of around one million inhabitants. However, it struggles with problems similar to those of other large European cities, such as segregation and housing shortages (Johansson, 2022). The political majority in Stockholm has shifted over the years. Between 2014 and 2018, a left-green coalition ruled with a Social Democratic mayor. Between 2018 and 2022, when the primary empirical material for this book was collected, Stockholm was governed

by a right-wing majority government based on an alliance between the Conservative Party, the Christian Democratic Party, the Liberal Party and the Centre Party, with the support of the Green Party. After the elections in 2022, the majority shifted again, and a new left-green coalition of the Social Democratic Party, the Left Party and the Green Party took over local government in Stockholm.

Gothenburg is the second largest city in Sweden, with around 600,000 inhabitants. The city has long been governed by left-wing political parties, with the Social Democratic Party traditionally being the dominant one. In the past decade, however, the city council has increasingly resembled a typical coalition government, where the Green Party and the Left Party have had considerable influence. Between 2018 and 2022, this coalition was challenged by a local protest party, the Democrats, the second largest party in the elections. During these years, the city was governed by a conservative minority with shifting majorities in the city council. In the 2022 elections, the Democrats lost much of their support, and a left-green coalition of the Social Democratic Party, the Left Party and the Green Party returned to power and currently govern the city.

Malmö is the third largest city in Sweden, with a population of around 350,000. During the past two decades, the city has faced high unemployment and challenges related to an increase in its population. Malmö has long been governed by the Social Democratic Party, except for two periods in the 1980s and the early 1990s. At the time of our study, the city was governed by a coalition of the Social Democratic Party and the Liberal Party, which the Green Party has supported since the elections in 2022.

Outline of the book

This introduction is followed by a chapter that explores the theoretical basis for our analysis. We engage with theories

of inertia, emergence and transformation, which form the framework for our study of transformation towards sustainable welfare at the urban level. [Chapter 2](#) reviews and combines political and sociological approaches to institutional stability and change and debates in sustainability sciences on societal transitions and transformations.

The subsequent three chapters present the results from the empirical analyses of each site. In [Chapter 3](#), we investigate the integration of ecological sustainability and social welfare concerns in local city politics and public governance. Based on an analysis of policy documents and interviews with policy officials, we show how and to what extent ecological and social concerns are addressed and integrated into the three cities' local government and urban planning. [Chapter 4](#) analyses patterns of integration or separation across environmental and welfare spheres in urban mobilisation. This chapter draws on a survey study of participants in the Swedish Fridays for Future demonstrations (2019) and an interview study with leading representatives of both environmental and welfare CSOs regarding collaboration, mutual frames and vested interests. [Chapter 5](#) addresses urban residents' attitudes to environmental and social welfare concerns and towards specific eco-social policies. Our analysis draws on an original cross-sectional survey study, which followed a stratified random sampling strategy targeting residents of Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö, including Sweden. Finally, the three empirical chapters are followed by a conclusion, which interprets stability and change across the sites and discusses the potential pathways to sustainable welfare at an urban level.

TWO

Theories of stability and change

In this chapter, we develop the framework for studying transformation patterns towards sustainable welfare at an urban level. We introduce three concepts to identify stability and change in urban governance: *inertia*, *emergence* and *transformation*. These build on institutional stability and change theories in sociology, political science and theories on emergence and transformation in sustainability sciences. Through a critical engagement with theories of path dependence, emergence and transformation, we develop an analytical framework that allows us to distinguish drivers of change and mechanisms of stability along such a pathway.

Inertia

The concept of inertia suggests no change in societal systems and institutional arrangements. Related path dependency theories try to explain why institutions and established political solutions are change-resistant and remain stable over time (Pierson, 2004). Institutional approaches often take a historical account and suggest that present actions and processes are ‘unable to shake free of history’ (David, 2001, p 19) or that ‘what happened at an earlier point in time will affect the

possible outcomes of a sequence of events occurring at a later point in time' (Sewell, 1996, pp 262–263). Mahoney (2000) argues that 'path dependence characterises specifically those historical sequences in which contingent events set into motion institutional patterns or event chains that have deterministic effects' (p 507).

Social policy research has long pointed to welfare states as stable entities. Esping-Andersen (1996) considered them as 'frozen landscapes' unaffected by extensive exogenous pressures. Welfare reform 'takes place within frameworks of historical institutionalisation' leading to welfare states being 'relatively historically stable' (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p 80). They are 'immovable objects' (Hemerijck, 2013, p 93) as reforms are negotiated with coalition governments, federal arrangements or strong regional actors and active social partnerships, where actors with veto power constrain policy reforms. Despite pressure to change (for example, linked to the labour market, demographics or financial crises), welfare state scholars tend to see welfare states as fairly stable. Change is 'essentially rare' (Djelic and Quack, 2007, p 165), occurring 'either in a big bang or hardly at all' (Schmidt, 2010, p 4).

Three strands of theorising allow us to explore mechanisms of path dependence: utilitarian, normative and habitual models (Sarigil, 2015). First, the stability of welfare and environmental states is tied to utilitarian models of stability and notions such as increasing returns, policy feedback, lock-in and path dependence as a self-reinforcing process (Pierson, 2004). In a utilitarian style, actors are seen as knowledgeable about given alternatives and capable of evaluating and making informed choices. Established institutions are argued to be founded to respond to collective bargaining problems, with stability arising from actors' cost and benefit calculations.

Although periods of social and political change come with significant ambiguity and include conflicts, Pierson suggests that once a path is put in place, 'the probability of further steps along the same path increases with each move down that

path' (Pierson, 2000, p 263). Actors' gains increase the more a path is trodden. As actors continue to invest, 'the costs of exit – of switching to some previously plausible alternative – rise' (Pierson, 2000, p 263). This points to the well-known phenomenon of reproduction as 'actors rationally choose to reproduce institutions – including perhaps sub-optimal institutions because any potential benefits of transformation are outweighed by the costs' (Mahoney, 2000, p 517). Change, therefore, comes with costs, and the benefits of staying on the established path are more profitable than investing in a new and unknown path (Pierson, 1996).

While such an approach assumes that actors are rational and calculating, driven by intentionality and strategic decision making, it recognises less behaviour as guided by a logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen, 1989). Actors are not isolated individuals (or organisations) but socially embedded, and engage in reproducing social practices 'not only because of the economic rationality of a standardised behaviour but because, in their agency, they thoughtlessly follow well-rehearsed cultural scripts' (Lessenich, 2005, p 348). They seek to be legitimate in the eyes of others and adapt to recognised standards and ways of thinking due to their isomorphic behaviour. They follow socially constructed ideals, norms and roles and adjust their behaviour to follow others (Goodin, 1996).

Despite their differences, utilitarian and normative models share some similarities as actors are assumed to be rational, or at least reflexive, regarding their choices. Habitual models follow a different approach (Hopf, 2010) and further stress the significance of adaptation to social norms, cultural scripts and socialised behaviours (Sarigil, 2015). Stability comes more from people doing what they have done before and less due to attempts to follow others (Hopf, 2010). It is fair to say that habitual action includes an element of reflexivity, as a habit is a way to reduce uncertainty through the routinisation of social practices.

Sociologists have long argued that habitual action (as well as utilitarian and appropriate action) is socially distributed. Bourdieu, for example, argued that people's social position is vitally important for their actions (Bourdieu, 1993; Koch, 2020b). While his theory primarily identified stability within fields, it showed why people's actions tend to remain stable over time, as they are shaped by the social positions into which they are socialised, thereby limiting their alternatives for action (Bourdieu, 1998). People's social practices are shaped by their habitus, pointing to the need to study social positions, dispositions and position takings to understand the conditions for an eco-social transformation among a given population (Koch, 2020b; Fritz et al, 2021; see Chapter 5).

Therefore, inertia and related theories indicate the unlikelihood of path departure or integration across environmental and welfare concerns. Each theory explains why change is rare (Nilsson and Eckerberg, 2007; Jordan and Lenschow, 2010). Path dependency theories, for example, explain why cross-cutting departments for sustainable development (such as Agenda 2030 councils and commissions) have been challenging to integrate into national and local administrations. Instead, political specialisation and silo organisation of public policies and administration tend to prevail. Arguably, the persistence of political and organisational silos can be attributed to utilitarian, normative or even habitual models, with a defence of administrative borders as well as professional loyalties and expertise. Mobilisation across causes and frames has also proven difficult, as environmental and welfare groups largely mobilise in connection with one cause and one group.

Emergence

The concept of emergence points to the start of something new. This could include a new path or a change within an established institutional order. Academic interest in emergence comes from a critique of the structuralist and deterministic

assumptions in path dependency theories. They point to a ‘deus ex machina’ explanation of future developments (Peters, 1999) or suggest that actors follow a specific trajectory without the possibility of change or exit (Crouch and Farrell, 2004). Theories of emergence suggest that change occurs through small, ongoing and incremental changes within existing systems despite a new path not being in sight. Instead of considering institutions as historically stable artefacts, emergence theorists emphasise them as being ‘inherently open and disjointed, containing many ambiguities, multiple layers, and competing logics’ (Hemerijck, 2013, p 96). As a result, stability and change cannot be conceptualised in an either/or mode. Emergence points to the practices and processes at work between inertia and transformation.

A well-known approach to emergence is Mahoney and Thelen’s (2010) theory of incremental change (see also Streeck and Thelen, 2005). From its name, we learn that the focus lies on change as being ‘likely to follow an incremental pattern of policy change’ (Ferrara and Rhodes, 2007, pp 276–277). Although an established order remains stable and adapts to external pressures because ‘challengers lack the capacity actually to change the original rules’ (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010, p 17), change constantly occurs. It happens through the continuous displacement of existing rules by new ones and the layering of new regulations on top of existing ones. This might occur due to what Hacker (2005) calls ‘drift’, a change of existing rules in response to environmental shifts. Drift can, therefore, signal inertia on the surface but a growing gap between formal rules and actual circumstances and practices. Change might also take place due to conversion practices or strategic redeployment. Actors exploit the ambiguity of a solution to change the rules of the game (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010, p 17; see Angelin et al, 2014, for an application to the Swedish welfare system). Hence, this approach assumes that changes towards sustainable welfare can occur, although present solutions and formal institutions may remain stable.

New functions and rules are added to improve the integration of ecological and social concerns, generating nested responses. Considering the increasing pressure and ambition from societal actors to act sustainably, this could lead to drift, as old rules and practices are applied in a situation requiring a more integrated approach, making old practices less relevant.

While theories of incremental change shed light on emergence as taking place within established orders, theories of path generation further explore how and why a new path might emerge. Emergence is identified as a complex process involving the interaction, combination and recombination of present established orders with new and emerging elements (Bothello and Salles-Djelic, 2018). This process is associated with significant ambiguity, and emergence is the potential start of a new path. Emergence, therefore, follows a Polanyian idea of movement and countermovement as being structurally shaped by a point in time that entails pressure for ‘continuity and stimuli for change’ (Djelic and Quack, 2007, p 182).

In that regard, an emerging path is not a singular entity but is shaped by its emergent qualities. Emergence is messy and shaped by crookedness, openness, unintended qualities and practices (Bothello and Salles-Djelic, 2018, p 96). Change towards emergence results from gradual and protracted processes of pressures, contestation and struggles between different interests. Rather than being the result of ‘grand designs’, it can emerge through ‘progressive incrementalism’ – that is, gradual developments that, over time, trigger change of an increasingly transformative nature and might generate new paths that emerge (Cashore and Howlett, 2007; Levin et al, 2012).

Actors play a crucial role in processes of emergence, as it occurs ‘through the cumulative impact through time of a multiplicity of agentic moves’, but it would be misleading to consider these as expressions of ‘purposive action’ (Djelic and Quack, 2007, p 96). To explore practices of emergence, urban

sustainability and governance research points to experiments as a driver for change in processes of emergence (Evans et al, 2018). Raven et al (2017) find that public administrators, entrepreneurs, citizens and researchers ‘increasingly come together in these “new political arenas”’, collaborating on ‘experimental projects’ alongside already institutionalised policies and practices. Others suggest that experiments have turned into an institutionalised way of urban governance (Bulkeley and Castán Broto, 2013; Kronsell and Mukthar-Landgren, 2018). In this respect, experiments are part of practising something new and often occur in less occupied spaces. Following Savini and Bertolini (2019), we argue that emergence occurs through ‘niche construction’. They define niches as ‘institutional spaces or episodes wherein social practices generate opportunities for disruption in their regulatory and physical context’ (Savini and Bertolini, 2019, p 833). Niches are linked to regimes following ‘a permanent tension within a particular socio-economic order’ (Savini and Bertolini, 2019, p 833).

The role actors play is less as rule followers and more as rule makers. Beckert’s (1999) distinction between managers and entrepreneurs is illustrative, as managers adapt to external pressure and follow routines, while entrepreneurs leave ‘these behind, looking for new and innovative options’ (Lessenich, 2005, p 349). MacKinnon et al (2019, p 123) use the concept of path advocates similarly as promoters and brokers of new ideas that have path-emerging effects – that is, ‘the development of collective visions or expectations to attract and enroll other interests and actors’. The notion of path entrepreneurs points even further towards the particular type of activity at play, as they challenge dominant rules, from inside or outside of an organisation, to introduce new ideas, practices and scripts. They might, in turn, engage divergent agendas in an amalgamated discourse to bridge divided discourses or policy solutions. Path advocates might also engage in anchoring new ideas with the established order – for example, by building

coalitions with prominent groups holding veto powers or aligning the ideas and discourse underpinning the emerging path with already dominant discourses and agendas. While path entrepreneurs might develop new models, path advocates engage in aligning new models with what is already in place to foster the ‘absorption of the novelty into the regime’ (MacKinnon et al, 2019, p 123).

The concepts of path advocates and path entrepreneurs allow us to interpret signs of emergence towards sustainable welfare. Within municipal administrations, we can expect to find these actors in positions between established bureaucracies, such as boundary-crossing projects or urban experimentation. Although the focus is often on political or economic actors, civil society can play a crucial role as actors engaged in path identification and path emergence. Many civil society actors play a significant role in advocating social, political, economic and cultural change. Through a wide range of political activities (for example, advocacy campaigns, petitions or protests), they challenge established orders and seek to change or transform public opinion and political agendas.

However, we need to be careful when making assumptions about actor rationality. Although actors with interests and convictions deliberate or compete over what ideas and rules will prevail, the emergence phase comes with significant complexity and ambiguity. Defining and reviewing what emergence might lead to and why is thus a challenge. Garud et al (2010) state that path emergence instead fosters a different type of agency, as agents with a capacity to reflect on the given conditions but who might act in a different direction to the current institutional order. Garud and Karnøe (2001, p 2) contend that actors successfully engaging in path emergence come with a particular mindset, as they are ‘knowledgeable agents with a capacity to reflect and act in ways other than those prescribed by existing social rules’. Therefore, it is not their resources or powers that make them path entrepreneurs or path advocates but rather

their capacity to think differently, which they refer to as ‘mindful deviation’.

Transformation

The concept of transformation provides further perspectives for the study of pathways towards sustainable welfare at an urban level. Many theories consider transformation as a complex process, and to date, it is not entirely clear ‘what transformation means, how it can be evaluated, and how the conceptions or transformation fit within the current understanding of dealing with policy problems in practice’ (Görg et al, 2017, p 3). Transformation is an umbrella term or metaphor requiring additional conceptualisations (Feola, 2015). One recent attempt (concerning degrowth) was proposed by Buch-Hansen and Nesterova (2021, 2023), who applied critical realism, especially ‘plane thinking’, to ‘deep transformations’ studies. Conceptualising transformational change on four ‘planes of social being’ – material transactions with nature, social interactions between persons, social structures and inner being – the two authors discuss how changes on one plane might lead to changes on others, thereby providing a theoretically advanced understanding of the complexity associated with transformative change. Buch-Hansen et al (2024) develop this approach by demonstrating how degrowth transformations may evolve on the four planes, three sites (business, civil society and the state) and various scales (including European, national and local).

Most transformation literature envisions a major shift away from established paths, such as ‘qualitative system change’ (Nalau and Handmer, 2015, p 350) or forming a fundamentally different system (Roggema et al, 2012). As the term suggests, transformation assumes a change in shape or a metamorphosis (Linnér and Wibeck, 2020; Scoones et al, 2020). In such a perspective, transformation is defined as ‘fundamental changes in structural, functional, relational, and cognitive aspects of socio-technical-ecological systems that lead to new patterns

of interactions and outcomes' (Patterson et al, 2017, p 2) or as a 'fundamental shift that questions and challenges values and routine practices and changes prior perspectives employed to rationalise decisions and pathways' (Nalau and Handmer, 2015, p 350). As emphasised by Scoones et al (2020), such fundamental changes could be generated by processes of transformative change that are structural (that is, societal organisation of production and consumption), systemic (that is, intentional, steered change of specific systems) and enabling (that is, facilitating human agency and collective action) in nature.

Theories rely on two different conceptualisations of transformation, either as rapid or as emerging. Traditional understandings of path dependence indeed consider transformation in its rapid form in response to ruptures, extraordinary large-scale historical events and external shocks. Such contingent episodes of radical change – for example, revolutions, regime changes or energy crises – cause tremendous pressures on existing systems and push actors to reconsider or leave present solutions for a different alternative. The vested interests, appropriate behaviours or habitual actions lose significance when the rules of the game change substantially, thereby giving rise to developments along a new path. In this regard, transformation is a shift from one established order (path) to another. Current debates concerning environmental emergence and the climate crisis carry a similar message of a crisis that requires 'a fundamental, radical, and possibly rapid change toward sustainability' (Feola, 2015, p 376).

Discussions on social tipping points follow a similar logic of change as forms of rapid transformation. Still, these are less linked to significant events and more to the diversity of collective actions that, over time, might trigger profound societal change processes (Otto et al, 2020; Stadelmann-Steffen et al, 2021; Andrighetto and Vriens, 2022; Moore et al, 2022; Winkelmann et al, 2022). It has been suggested that a minority

‘can trigger a shift in the conventions held by the majority of the population’ (Centola et al, 2018, p 1). Here, various actors can be understood as critical agents in transformations, ranging from politicians and leaders to grassroots organisations and the general public (Feola, 2015; Linnér and Wibeck, 2019; Otto et al, 2020). They are understood as having transformative capacity, such as acting as innovators or providing ideas or expertise, raising awareness, influencing decisions and steering or navigating change processes.

Transformations can also be understood as a process that is protracted and linked to cumulative changes and not to single events, or as Linnér and Wibeck express it, ‘from the very long period of the Neolithic transformation to the relatively fast 50-year period of the British abolition’ (Linnér and Wibeck, 2019, p 57). Similar to theories of emergence, such protracted transformation processes resemble an understanding of social change resulting from gradual developments that might lead to minor or more transformational modes of change. This is similar to the understanding of change as ‘progressive incrementalism’ (Cashore and Howlett, 2007; Levin et al, 2012) – that is, as a sequence or process of incremental changes that, over time, might become increasingly more progressive to trigger systemic and transformative change.

In contrast to the idea of change proposed by path dependency theories, sustainability transformation scholars suggest that transformations occur non-linearly, driven by ‘discontinuities, ruptures, or thresholds, and do not generally proceed smoothly’ (Feola, 2015, p 381). Instead of recognising external events or shocks, transformation occurs through endogenous and exogenous processes, which involve ‘emergent, inadvertent, unintended consequences and intended, deliberate ones’ (Feola, 2015, p 382). Linnér and Wibeck (2019, 2020) stress the significance of various mechanisms that might lead to transformation, such as change in values, public engagement, institutional and technological innovations and new ideas about or new narratives of sustainable societies. Each of

these can function as a trigger of either rapid or protracted transformation processes.

The formulation of new narratives, which refers to ‘changes in how we understand ourselves, in our worldviews or belief systems’ (Linnér and Wibeck, 2020, p 225), has, for example, been present in ‘any major societal transformation’ (Linnér and Wibeck, 2020, p 225). Changes in perspectives and meanings are often associated with longer time horizons. However, these might occur more rapidly, as in the case of the rather sudden widespread protests against slavery in the British Isles during the 1790s or the demonstrations against climate change in the historically unprecedented school strikes that attracted around six million protest participants (Linnér and Wibeck, 2020; see also Hochschild, 2005; de Moor et al, 2020). These two examples of protests have been understood in relation to the notion of a social tipping point or social tipping processes (Linnér and Wibeck, 2019, 2020; Otto et al, 2020), which ‘have received recent attention, as they encompass the required rapid, transformational system change to combat the climate and sustainability crises’ (Winkelmann et al, 2022).

It is fair to say that debates on transformation often take a ‘normative or political-strategic approach’ (Feola, 2015; Görg et al, 2017, p 3) as something desirable and unavoidable. This is apparent in debates on sustainability transformations, which take place in the context of the unsustainability of present systems. Much of the existing sustainable welfare theory carries such a meaning as it points to the unsustainable lifestyle and insufficient and unsustainable modes of welfare provision. Integration and mutual recognition of environmental and welfare concerns can, in that respect, be considered as an expression of societal transformation (Koch and Mont, 2016). However, for a complete transformation towards sustainable welfare, other planes of social being than social structures would also need to be considered. Following Buch-Hansen and Nesterova (2023), this applies to ‘material transactions

with nature', 'social interactions between persons' and people's 'inner being', including norms and values.

An analytical framework

Inertia, emergence and transformation refer to three conceptualisations of stability and change. Although, in combination, these could assume automatism and sequence of order, we use them as heuristic devices to identify whether, how and to what extent cities have embarked upon a path in which environmental and welfare concerns and practices are combined and treated in an integrated fashion. [Table 2.1](#) summarises the main analytical elements regarding theories of inertia, emergence and transformation across three dimensions: discourses, actors and practices. It serves as a point of departure for our analysis across the sites of local government, civil society and public attitudes.

Theoretically and ideal-typically, we can assume inertia to be shaped by two distinctly different pathways institutionalised into differentiated ideas and discourses, policy domains and modes of mobilisation. Politicians and civil servants address environmental and welfare concerns in isolation, as there is limited interest in addressing them in combination. Utilitarian, appropriate or habitual logic largely shapes practices, as actors define themselves as engaged in environmental *or* welfare concerns and practices. The separation between ideas, actor constellations and types of practices leaves limited room for path deviation or path emergence. Within spheres of public opinion and urban mobilisation, few initiatives follow a form of mindful deviation in terms of engaging with issues or exploring proposals beyond established identities or modes of interest formations.

Emergence points to changes in discourses, actor constellations and types of practices that increasingly and innovatively mix or span established domains and agendas. Within public opinion, actors increasingly relate to environmental and

Table 2.1: Modes of stability and change

	Inertia	Emergence	Transformation
	Eco <i>or</i> social concerns in silos	Eco <i>and</i> social concerns as interrelated	Eco-social concerns as integrated
Discourses and ideas	Ideas, frames and discourses as separate entities	Discourse coalitions, frame alignments and alternative path imaginations in contrast to established orders	Eco-social discourse established as dominant
Actors	Environmental and welfare actors as dominant within separate spheres	Path advocates and path entrepreneurs as challengers to dominant actors	Actor amalgamation across environmental and welfare divides
Practices	Utilitarian, appropriate or habitual practices in established silos	Experimental governance, niche exploration or mindful deviation towards new paths	Utilitarian, appropriate or habitual practices in an eco-social path

welfare concerns as interconnected and necessary to address in combination. Ideas and discourses of environmental and welfare concerns are, to a large extent, formed in isolation. Yet, path advocates or path entrepreneurs mobilise support in connection with new ideas, frames or discursive formations that cut across divides or mix elements from each as an act of discursive bricolage. Institutional entrepreneurs might act as path advocates but lack the power to operate as veto players or to mobilise people to such an extent that it changes the present order. Path advocates contrast with or oppose dominant actors and institutional orders. Emerging ideas, actors and practices thrive in experimental settings or less regulated niches.

Transformation signals a new stage shaped by a new set of dominant ideas, frames and discourses in which actors

invest interests and start to act. Eco-social concerns are not shaped by a separation between established orders but through the constitution of something qualitatively different. Differentiation across environmental and welfare policy domains or administrative responsibilities has lost significance. Whether driven by ruptures, gradual changes or entrepreneurial activities of path advocates, a path of sustainable welfare is established, and a new path of inertia and path dependence is embarked upon.

THREE

Local government and eco-social integration

Introduction

In this chapter, we study the integration of ecological sustainability and social welfare concerns in local politics and public governance, that is, at the site of local government. Local governments are critical actors in the public governing of cities and represent the institutionalised arena for democratic and authoritative decision making at the local level and in urban settings. While the authority of local governments varies significantly across jurisdictions, city governors are critical players in the multi-level governance architecture. The role of cities and local municipalities ranges from being ‘implementers’ of national (and EU) policies to ‘local champions’ of city politics, for example, on urban sustainability and climate governance (see [Bulkeley and Betsill, 2005](#); [Hughes, 2017](#); [van der Heijden, 2018, 2019](#)). In countries with substantial local autonomy, such as Sweden ([Pierre, 2015](#)), city councils are the main site for governing local public affairs and organising institutional responses to societal needs such as social welfare, housing, schooling, elderly care, urban planning and technical services and infrastructure for energy, waste handling, water

management and transport. For handling such functions and implementing local policies, city administrations have grown into large public institutions. Despite being subject to significant changes over time, including decentralisation of welfare policy (Johansson and Panican, 2016) and environmental management (Montin, 2009), city administrations are, as a public institution, characterised by high degrees of specialisation and silo organisation. In practice, this implies various forms of inertia.

Besides the institutional role of local governments, city governors and administrators increasingly act beyond their formal authority to promote city developments and support local initiatives in response to contemporary challenges such as social cleavages and environmental change. This has made cities become essential sites for urban experimentation and test beds through which local responses and solutions emerge (Bulkeley and Castán Broto, 2013; Marvin et al, 2018; Stripple and Bulkeley, 2019), notably on urban sustainability and on climate change where cities account for at least 70 per cent of global carbon emissions (Seto et al, 2014; UN Habitat, 2018; van der Heijden, 2018).

This chapter aims to explore how city governments and administrations work to integrate ecological and social concerns in practice and discuss the potential for eco-social integration in city governance. We investigate the extent and forms of eco-social integration, what shape it takes and where it takes place and the challenges of integrating ecological and social welfare concerns. We relate this to the concepts of inertia, emergence and transformation and find a dominating picture of inertia with persistent silos within city administrations, contradicting the established rhetoric of integration in the broader sustainability discourse. Still, we see clear signs of emergence with eco-social integration in specific policy areas and urban development projects, and increasingly so in more recent years.

The chapter builds on material from comparative case studies in the three Swedish cities of Malmö, Gothenburg

and Stockholm. The study, conducted in 2019, was based on semi-structured interviews with civil servants and a text analysis of over 20 strategic documents (see [Khan et al, 2020](#)). In the meantime, this study has been updated by analysing more recent policy documents. Additionally, new material has been used from a recent case study of the city of Lund, a neighbouring city to Malmö, and its recent attempts to reorganise and integrate its ecological and social sustainability strategies.

Local social welfare and environmental policies

Sweden's political and administrative system is divided into three levels: national, regional and municipal ([Pierre, 2015](#); [Norén Bretzer, 2021](#)). At the local level, 290 municipalities of varying sizes are distributed across 21 regions. The three largest municipalities are the cities of Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö, which in turn are centrally placed in the three main metropolitan areas in Sweden. The city councils in these municipalities also organise the country's largest municipal public administrations. In Sweden, local governments at the municipal level have a reasonably broad autonomy and responsibility for public service in several sectors. The autonomy is most visible through the municipal planning monopoly, which gives local governments substantial control over land-use planning, with state authorities eligible to override in questions of national interest only.

Social welfare and environment management are important policy areas for municipalities, although they have different histories and follow different policy logics. When it comes to welfare, municipalities in Sweden have the responsibility for crucial social welfare services such as elderly care, childcare and education in primary and secondary school, as well as for many public services such as household waste, energy provision, water and sanitation, housing and urban infrastructure, as well as health and environmental inspection ([Montin and Granberg, 2021](#); [Norén Bretzer, 2021](#)). In this regard, local municipalities

reflect the local face of the welfare state and have, over time, been delegated more and more responsibilities, particularly for social welfare services (Montin, 2015; Johansson and Panican, 2016). Most of these services are regulated by national laws that stipulate rights and responsibilities and are meant to guarantee an equivalent level of service irrespective of where in the country you live.

Municipalities have been responsible for local health protection since the early 20th century. With the environmental turn in the late 1960s (Larsson Heidenblad, 2021), municipal health protection authorities were delegated responsibilities also for environmental protection (Bro, 2000). In the early 1990s, ecological sustainability concerns became important local issues after the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987) introduced and popularised the concept of sustainable development (Hildingsson, 2010). After the UNCED conference in Rio 1992, the Local Agenda 21 movement swept the country and pointed out local authorities as crucial actors in addressing sustainability concerns (Eckerberg et al, 1998; Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 2000; Lafferty, 2001; Montin and Granberg, 2021). As a result, more comprehensive environmental management plans and strategies were formulated and adopted in many cities. Later, climate change became a main policy issue, together with several more local environmental issues such as eutrophication, air pollution, biodiversity and degradation of farmland.

While social welfare is regulated top down, local environmental and climate governance has largely been developed in a bottom-up fashion with fairly loose governance from the national level. From the start, it has been a strategic issue in municipalities guided by an environmental strategy programme. The sustainability discourse has mainly been framed in terms of ecological sustainability. Although social welfare is essential for local governments, it has not been framed as part of the sustainability discourse nor as a strategic issue for local governments. This has changed in recent years

with accentuated problems of social segregation and increasing inequalities in public health and well-being.

Parallel to this, the adoption in 2015 of Agenda 2030 and the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) has led to a renewed focus on the connections between different aspects of sustainability (UNGA, 2015). The SDGs are since 2017 incorporated into Swedish national policy, and in 2020, the government appointed a national Agenda 2030 coordinator to promote their implementation among various actors, including cities and municipalities across the country. However, the Agenda 2030 coordinator's assignment expired in March 2024 as the new government did not prolong the mandate. Still, municipalities are in the process of developing organisational structures for sustainability governance that are based on the Agenda 2030 model.

Eco-social integration in policy strategies and municipal organisation

Our material indicates that ecological and social welfare concerns are seen as significant challenges facing the metropolitan cities in Sweden. Ecological sustainability is addressed as a central concern in all three municipalities. In particular, climate change is high on the agenda, and both how climate mitigation can be achieved and how cities need to become more robust and resilient to the impacts of climate change are discussed. On the social side, the main issues discussed are social segregation, inequality and differences in public health, and all cities have conducted special commission inquiries focusing on this aspect.

However, there is an apparent lack of integration across the main policy strategies. This becomes most evident in policy documents related to environmental management (environmental programmes, climate strategies) or social welfare concerns (social sustainability reports). The environmental programmes and the climate strategies give limited attention to social issues (Malmö, 2009, 2021a; Gothenburg, 2013, 2021a;

Stockholm, 2015a, 2020). The social effects of environmental measures are seldom expressed, nor are differences in ecological footprints between various social groups. In the introduction to these strategic policy documents, the connection is mentioned in general terms, which represents indications of a general ambition to integrate ecological, social and developmental concerns in urban governance. However, when it comes to specific measures, only a few explicit connections are being made; for example, in Malmö regarding noise, air pollution, health effects from bicycling and climate adaptation for vulnerable groups (Malmö, 2009, 2021a); in Stockholm regarding energy efficiency measures and the risk of increased rents (Stockholm, 2015a, 2020); and in Gothenburg about green spaces and local food production (Gothenburg, 2013, 2021a). One interpretation of the limited attention to social concerns is that the environmental programmes explicitly focus on environmental impacts while leaving social issues to other arenas. This is confirmed by our interviews, in which environmental officers stated a wish to protect their core area of expertise and were reluctant to consider too many other aspects for fear of losing sight of the environmental objectives. As expressed by one environmental officer, in this case in Gothenburg, 'After all, it is our mission to represent the ecological dimension'. The social sustainability reports in the three cities focus exclusively on social and welfare issues, and very few connections are made to environmental aspects of social justice or inequality. In Malmö, the social sustainability report from 2014 (Malmö, 2014a) had two main recommendations: first, to establish a social investment policy to reduce differences in health and living conditions, and, second, to increase democratic governance and participation at the local level. In Gothenburg and Stockholm, the social sustainability reports focused similarly on health and living conditions without connecting this to ecological concerns (Gothenburg, 2009a, Stockholm, 2015b). In a recent follow-up assessment of Malmö's work on social sustainability (WSP,

2020a), the lack of attention to other sustainability concerns is emphasised, and, for example, an indicator model for integrated sustainability assessments is suggested. Similar comprehensive sustainability assessments are practised in all studied cities.

Regarding urban planning, the comprehensive master plans represent more deliberate attempts to integrate social and environmental issues. This is not surprising since the function of the comprehensive plan is to outline the developmental plans for future land use in the city, considering all relevant aspects. In all three cities, both environmental and social issues are prevalent when strategies and specific measures are discussed in the comprehensive plans (Gothenburg, 2009b; Malmö, 2014b; Stockholm, 2018). Environmental goals relate to, for example, increased use of renewable energies, shifts towards more sustainable modes of transport, preservation of green areas, farmland and urban ecosystems and improved air quality. Social goals include, for example, planning to decrease social segregation, increasing house construction and ensuring safety and liveability in the built environment. In most cases, however, ecological and social aspects are discussed separately even though apparent connections exist, for example, regarding a sustainable *and* just transport system, a functional mix in areas *and* mixes in types of dwellings, equal access to green areas and social impacts of energy efficiency measures in rental apartments. These connections are sometimes mentioned in the comprehensive master plans. Still, they are not detailed to any great extent, and solutions and measures are not addressed as a package or in an integrated fashion. A few exemptions to this are more specific programmes, such as the urban greening strategy in Gothenburg (2022) and the urban mobility plan in Malmö (2016).

The interviews confirm the perspective of urban planning as an arena with the potential for integrating ecological, social and developmental concerns. The urban planning process seems to constitute a municipal practice where environmental and social

issues are raised and considered. A Social Welfare Officer in Malmö revealed that they do not have much direct cooperation with the environmental office, but how they get in contact through their respective involvement in the planning process, which the planning office coordinates: ‘The planning office has that responsibility ... it is in this arena where we can gather and where environmental issues and social issues can meet’ (Interview, Social Welfare Officer, Malmö). Environmental officers in Malmö and Gothenburg confirm this, stressing the planning office’s specific role in collecting viewpoints from different departments and emphasising the importance of them providing ecological perspectives in the internal remittal processes. Other departments reflect other aspects and dimensions.

Agenda 2030 as a tool for integration

In all three cities, local Agenda 2030 work has been established, and the SDGs are used as tools to address ecological, economic and social dimensions of sustainability in an integrated and cross-sectional manner. The coordination of Agenda 2030 is centrally placed in all three cities within the city executive office, and an essential function is coordinating and putting together annual local sustainability assessments. In the sustainability reports for Stockholm and Gothenburg, an evaluation of each of the 17 SDGs is made, and the goal is discussed. The report from [Stockholm \(2021\)](#) discusses synergies with other goals, allowing for a cross-sectional analysis and eco-social integration. In the report from [Gothenburg \(2021b\)](#), strategies relevant to the different goals are listed, making it possible to identify links between strategies. The report from [Malmö \(2021b\)](#) has a different structure and is divided into social, ecological and economic sustainability. Even if all three aspects are covered in the same report, the three dimensions are treated separately, and few interlinkages are made between them. The experience with

the local implementation of Agenda 2030 shows that it holds the potential to be an essential tool for integrating different aspects of sustainable development. Still, it is yet too early to assess the effects in practice. In the aftermath of the Swedish national elections in 2022, the government is downgrading sustainability concerns. This includes the work on the 2030 agenda and funding for national coordination. This is due to both changed financial priorities and a political reorientation influenced by neoconservative and populist sentiments. The city councils in the three cities in focus here are, by contrast, controlled by red–green majorities and are still expressing ecological and social sustainability as critical concerns for their operations and local city developments. However, how well these concerns will be integrated into practice remains to be seen.

A case of local eco-social integration

In the city of Lund, which neighbours Malmö, we find a recent development of increased strategic integration between ecological and social sustainability, which partly contrasts with the experiences of Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö. Since 2020, Lund has had an overarching policy for sustainable development that addresses ecological and social sustainability (Lund, 2020, 2021). There are two main policy programmes, one for ecological and one for social sustainability. Both policy programmes have an equal standing and follow a similar structure as they have been established as part of the same policy process. While the programme for ecological sustainability contains only a few references to social aspects, the programme for social sustainability entails several references to environmental aspects and more of a discussion about eco–social integration. Some examples include active transport modes being viewed as beneficial for public health and the environment, as well as access to green spaces and public transport.

Eco-social integration is also visible in the sustainability work organisation in the Lund municipality. Within the central local council office ('Kommunkontoret'), a unit for sustainable development has been devoted to the chief responsibility for coordinating the sustainability work in the city administration, including developing programmes for ecological and social sustainability. Thus, strategic work on ecological and social sustainability is placed centrally. Lund has 11 municipal offices, including, for example, the environmental protection and health administration, the planning office, the technical administration office, the service administration, the social services office and the children, school and education administrations. This is similar to most municipalities in Sweden. Within each administration office, one person was appointed to coordinate the ecological and social sustainability work. These employees organise the day-to-day work and are responsible for reporting on activities and monitoring selected sustainability indicators. Thus, eco-social integration is organised in the central administration, and in the administrations that carry out municipal work.

Emerging eco-social integration in specific projects and policy areas

Though the general picture in the three cities is the separation of ecological and social dimensions of sustainability at an overarching strategic level, we find examples of quite developed integration in specific projects and policy areas. This confirms the impression that eco-social integration occurs either in an ad hoc fashion or is experimented with in a project-based manner. When respondents were asked to reflect on where integration occurs, a recurring answer was in urban development projects in socially problematic areas or new neighbourhoods. In the words of a sustainable development strategist in Malmö, 'It [integration] occurs in the pilot projects, it is there it happens. But in comparison to our gigantic production factory, it is on the margins'. In general,

integration is viewed as more feasible in specific projects since there are often additional resources devoted to cooperation and since participants get time to work focused on one project and have the opportunity to get to know each other and build trust among participants. 'I would say that so far we are better in projects than in day-to-day work. Cooperation is a challenge, and it requires more time to go beyond yourself and manage such cooperation' (Interview, Social Welfare Officer, Malmö). In all three cities, there are examples of urban regeneration projects in suburbs or urban districts characterised by social problems such as poverty, segregation, unemployment and criminality. These projects usually have a strong social focus, and in some cases, an important feature has been measures that seek to combine both social and environmental goals, for example, in Järva (Stockholm), Lindängen (Malmö) and Backa (Gothenburg). Examples of eco-social integration in these areas are energy efficiency retrofitting with a social profile, participatory renewable energy projects, improved bicycle infrastructure, bicycle courses for women with various ethnic backgrounds, urban farming and improved access to green spaces and parks.

In addition, we find examples of specific policy areas where the integration between social and environmental aspects has come a long way. In Malmö, the 2016 Transport and Mobility Plan has an equal focus on a transport system with lower environmental impact that contributes to a more inclusive and less segregated city (Malmö, 2016). The second chapter, titled 'Människan' (the human dimension), focuses on equality, segregation, gender aspects, traffic safety and involvement in planning. The third chapter discusses how more environmentally sustainable transport patterns could be developed, focusing on walking, bicycling and public transport. In the fourth chapter, titled 'Staden' (the city), the two dimensions are merged in terms of, for example, ideas on how to design city streets to provide a good living environment for the inhabitants and promote more sustainable modes of

transport. The links between ecological and social concerns in the transport sector have been explored in previous research. For instance, [Gössling \(2016\)](#) shows that there are often considerable injustices in urban transport systems in terms of, for example, exposure to noise, air pollution and accidents, and he argues for a transformation to more sustainable transport systems to be motivated from a justice perspective. [Martens \(2017\)](#), however, warns that sustainable transport planning risks perpetuating existing inequalities since much policy is devoted to persuading car drivers, often higher-income earners, to shift to public transport and bicycling while neglecting the transport needs of poorer communities.

In Gothenburg, the Green Strategy contains social and ecological goals that are given equal standing ([Gothenburg, 2022](#)). Social targets for social cohesion and economic targets for ecosystem services are addressed on par with ecological targets for biodiversity and the preservation of robust and coherent green structures. The social goals include equality in access to green areas and parks and goals linked to positive health impacts from recreation. Although the Green Strategy is primarily geared towards ecological objectives, social aspects are addressed throughout the document. Previous research has shown negative equity impacts of urban greening projects in cities if social aspects are not considered since they benefit affluent communities disproportionately ([Wolch et al, 2014](#)) and cause distributional injustices ([Anguelovski et al, 2022](#)). Other policy areas where eco-social integration could be relevant include urban planning, buildings, energy, food, consumption and waste.

Focus on synergies and localised issues

Our respondents mainly conceptualise the connection between ecological and social concerns as a synergetic relationship, that is, environmental measures reinforce and improve social conditions. This is confirmed in the policy documents.

Examples include the positive impacts of public transport and bicycling on public health and reduced carbon emissions; building regulations and inspection requirements promoting energy-efficient housing and better living conditions; and urban green areas that are positive for urban biodiversity and improved health effects. Respondents also state that striving for synergy and win-win solutions in urban planning is essential. At the same time, some of the respondents acknowledge that there can be conflicts between ecological and social objectives and view such tensions as critical to consider. Examples of potential conflicts and tensions are gentrification effects of energy retrofitting (causing higher rents), environmental standards for kindergartens versus the need for new kindergartens or the construction of new housing blocks versus preservation of green areas. Many respondents saw economic restrictions as a critical challenge and stated that some conflicts between social and environmental priorities could be solved with more financial resources. Generally, the types of social effects addressed when linked to environmental strategies are most often health issues.

The literature on sustainable welfare and eco-social integration has mainly emphasised general and global environmental issues, notably climate change (Koch and Mont, 2016; Gough, 2017, 2020). On the contrary, we find that eco-social integration at the urban level is mainly concerned with localised environmental issues and their relations to social welfare and public health. It is striking that the clearest examples of eco-social integration are found in urban regeneration projects where social problems are prevalent alongside local environmental problems. Examples of localised environmental issues are related to rain and storm water management, access to green spaces, improvement of local living environments and experiments with urban farming. Measures relating to these issues often have a vital social element, and social objectives are the driving component, while positive environmental effects are more of an add-on and beneficial side effect. There

are other examples of eco-social integration where climate measures are included. Though not common, these relate to, for example, sustainable transport, changes in travel habits and energy efficiency measures in housing. Many climate-related measures tend to be mainly driven by environmental or technical offices, where the connection to social aspects is often loose. Thus, when it comes to, for example, renewable energy, energy efficiency, transport, waste and electricity use in households, there is not much focus on social aspects. Instead, such areas are often characterised by techno-economic considerations and measures motivated by ecological concerns. Partly, this could be explained by the guaranteed energy supply in Sweden lowering the risks for energy poverty, otherwise being a critical social concern in many countries.

Two issues emphasised as central to sustainable welfare are equity concerns and the environmental effects of consumption and lifestyles (Murphy, 2012; Gough, 2017). Equity is deemed central to managing the distributional effects of environmental burden. Limitations on emissions and resource use necessitate mechanisms of burden sharing. Sustainable welfare furthermore questions present consumption levels and their associated resource use and calls for a renewed view on human needs satisfaction, well-being and its connection to material welfare (Gough, 2017; Helne and Hirvilammi, 2022). In our material, we find a reluctance in the cities to engage with these aspects. However, recent developments indicate that things might be starting to change. The first material for this chapter was collected in 2019. Then, we did not find much consideration of distributive and equity effects, neither in the policy documents nor in the interviews. Connections between environmental and social aspects were not considered, and there was no systematic analysis of the possible social impact of environmental measures, for example, regarding adverse distributional effects or which groups are targeted or affected. Notably, concepts like double or triple injustice (Gough, 2017) – that is, that vulnerable groups are more affected by climate change and policy measures to

mitigate it, while they are least responsible for causing it – were not noticed concerning climate change or other environmental effects. Social Welfare Officers expressed more reflective views on the social issues related to city environmental management.

There was also limited eco-social integration of sustainable patterns of consumption and lifestyles. Reducing ecological impacts from consumption is something that all three cities worked with. All cities have initiated specific projects, campaigns and guidelines that target consumption-related emissions and aim to influence citizens to change their habits and make choices to reduce their emissions in daily life regarding, for example, food consumption, travel habits and domestic energy use. However, these activities focused on behavioural changes to more climate-smart consumption with little attention to the need for drastic reductions in consumption levels and lifestyle changes. The differences in consumption patterns between income groups or geographical areas in the city were not raised. In the interviews, few respondents reflected on environmental effects related to consumption patterns or the social dimensions of such issues. In Gothenburg, the environmental officer showed awareness of differences in impacts across different groups (Interview, Environmental Officer, Gothenburg). Otherwise, it was mainly the Social Welfare Officers who addressed this topic. For example, in Malmö, a Social Welfare Officer brought up the issue that environmental choices, for example, regarding bicycling and recycling, depend on the local context in which you live while considering it a municipal responsibility to provide everybody with the same opportunities to lead sustainable ways of life:

How we approach environmental issues has to be more inclusive of all groups in society and not only for some who can adapt their lifestyle to an environmental way of living, for example, by having a cargo bike instead of a car or buying ecological and local food. There has to be an idea of how to involve all people in Malmö

in the environmental work. (Interview, Social Welfare Officer, Malmö)

He was also critical of national policies towards benefitting the middle class and specifically mentioned the subsidies for purchasing electric bikes. A Social Welfare Officer in Stockholm reasoned similarly:

Stockholm is very segregated and there are many areas that are far out and are built so that it is difficult to cycle or walk to work. And maybe your economy does not allow you to buy an electric bike. Then we have areas where all these possibilities exist. We, as civil servants, are a relatively homogenous category of people, and we are kind of guessing the needs in other areas. If you work irregular hours, how far do you have to work ... it is not evenly distributed whether you can live environmentally friendly. At the same time, those who earn the most are those who, in reality, have the largest environmental impact. (Interview, Social Welfare Officer, Stockholm)

In a follow-up study from 2023 and 2024, we found that the cities of Malmö and Lund had started to consider more systematically distributional effects of environmental impacts and the varying consumption and emission levels of different social groups and neighbourhoods. One example is urban planning in Lund and the comprehensive master plan. In 2020, the planning office commissioned a consultancy company to analyse the main urban development areas in the corresponding comprehensive plan. The report focused on climate mitigation and equal living conditions simultaneously (WSP, 2020b). First, an analysis was made of how the current situation in the municipality affected ecological and social sustainability, specifically concerning carbon emissions and equality in living conditions. This was followed by an analysis of how the plans for future expansion were expected to impact these two

aspects. These parallel analyses highlighted possible conflicts and synergies between climate and equity. The commissioned analysis can be seen as a pilot study in the municipality, and the same method can be used for future planning. There is ongoing work to revise the comprehensive master plan scheduled for 2025. The municipal planning office is further developing the integration of social and ecological parameters in the assessment of what effects different development plans are likely to have.

An essential prerequisite to introducing measures on equity is having relevant information. Therefore, work is needed to map socioeconomic differences in the municipality and relate this to various environmental indicators such as exposure to noise, pollution and environmental risks (for example, heatwaves, flooding) and access to environmental goods such as nature areas, parks and sustainable transportation forms. A further mapping relates to how the contribution to emissions and resource use is distributed among inhabitants and geographic areas. This is facilitated by a tool developed by a research group at the Stockholm Environment Institute where climate impacts of household consumption can be measured and compared on a fine-grained geographical scale down to postcodes (Axelsson et al, 2022). Although at an early stage, our studies indicate how Lund and Malmö have started to conduct this kind of data collection and mapping. Further municipalities and regions, including Gothenburg, have recently adopted local climate targets to reduce their consumption-based carbon emissions, for which such data will be critical. Collecting other relevant data is also essential, as it allows us to further capture the integration of ecological and social concerns. While monitoring ecological indicators has become an established practice and sociodemographic and socioeconomic data are used more frequently in urban planning, integrated analyses and sustainability reporting are still novel practices that remain to be established as an integral part of the day-to-day work of city administrations.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have examined the integration of ecological sustainability and social welfare concerns in local governments in Sweden. First of all, we find an overall picture of inertia. Even though there is a rhetoric of integration in the general formulation of sustainable development, there is still limited eco-social integration. The main reason for this is that municipal administrations tend to be highly specialised and organised in a silo fashion due to institutional traditions of compartmentalisation and professionalisation, generating inertia both in organisational and cognitive terms. A related barrier to integration is specialisation and the differences in professional language and culture between civil servants in the environmental and social administrations. Social officers stated that they sometimes had difficulties understanding the terminology and concepts used by environmental experts. At the same time, environmental officers revealed a wary attitude towards including too many other aspects in their assessments for fear of losing focus on ecological concerns. Lack of resources is a further barrier primarily visible in administrations' day-to-day work. At the same time, targeted projects often had more access to the resources necessary for integration and collaboration across administrative boundaries. However, the temporary nature of urban experimentation and development projects constitutes a challenge regarding the mandate commissioned and means of institutional learning.

Although inertia dominates, we see signs of emergence in urban experimentation and specific policy areas. Urban development projects constitute a site for eco-social integration. This is partly because ecological and social perspectives are equally visible in urban development, but more so because of the extra resources that come with targeted projects and organisational flexibility, allowing for organisational forms that break with the traditional silo structure. There are also examples of policy strategies indicating increased eco-social

integration, such as the policy programme for urban greening in Gothenburg and Lund and the sustainable mobility strategy in Malmö. However, these are, for the time being, best understood as islands of integration that have not (yet) broadly impacted the standard operations of city governance and local government.

So, are there any potential pathways towards eco-social transformation in city governance? Implementing Agenda 2030 and the current emphasis on social sustainability could be a tool for increased eco-social integration. As we have seen, the city administrations use the implementation of the 17 SDGs to make an integrated assessment of synergies and conflicts between different aspects of sustainability. This could be a first step towards more systematic eco-social integration. Furthermore, coordinating the Agenda 2030 work is centrally placed in all three cities within the city executive office, facilitating impact and coordination across city administrations. Monitoring practices and the emerging more comprehensive sustainability assessments may reinforce this.

The city of Lund is an exciting example of how ecological and social dimensions of sustainability are integrated at the strategic and organisational level since it partly contrasts with the experience in the three metropolitan cities. While still in an early phase, Lund is intentionally trying to integrate its ecological and social sustainability policy strategies and increasing integration within and between different municipal administrations. The Lund case raises questions about what might explain the difference in outcome: is this to do with Lund being a pioneering municipality when it comes to sustainability, or is it simply an issue about the size of the city administration being smaller than its metropolitan counterparts? While the former also applies to the three metropolitan cities we have studied, the latter might make it easier to overcome inertia and find ways to work around the silo organisation of municipal administrations.

There has, finally, been a slight move in the types of issues being dealt with. To date, eco-social integration has mainly

focused on synergies, localised environmental problems and the relations between the environment and public health. However, there are also indications of other issues attracting attention and slowly getting addressed, such as equity and justice aspects of ecological transformations and questioning consumption habits and affluent lifestyles. While this broadens the scope of eco-social integration, it might, as well, open new avenues towards more transformative pathways.

FOUR

Civil society framings of sustainable welfare

Introduction

Civil society plays an essential role in contemporary societies. It serves as a site for collective action alongside states, markets and families, where citizens come together to explore shared interests and to influence societal development (Diamond, 1994; Habermas, 1998). Causing and/or reinforcing social, political and cultural change, civil society actors, such as activist networks, social movements and advocacy groups, bring forward new ideas but also act as watchdogs against states and businesses (Arvidson et al, 2018b) regarding welfare developments (Martin, 2001; Annetts et al, 2009) and climate change transformations (Rootes and Brulle, 2013; Caniglia et al, 2015; Cassegård et al, 2017; Temper et al, 2020). Many of today's welfare and environmental reforms would not have occurred without the pressure mobilised by environmental movements and social welfare organisations (for example, Strømsnes et al, 2023).

This chapter investigates collaboration and integration patterns across established environmental and welfare domains concerning discourses, actor constellations and practices. Our

research focuses on how environmental and welfare-oriented civil society organisations (CSOs) and movements discursively frame their concerns regarding sustainable welfare. The aim is to capture patterns of stability and change and what factors drive integration or separation across environmental and welfare spheres. For this purpose, we use the concept of frames as a reference to ‘schemes of interpretation’ (Benford and Snow, 2000). It points to how organisations and movements produce and maintain the meaning of relevant issues (for example, climate change and social injustices) to mobilise supporters or demobilise antagonists. Furthermore, the chapter seeks inspiration from theories on movement coalitions (for example, Diani and Bison, 2004; Fisher and Nasrin, 2021) regarding collaboration patterns between organisations without forming a new unit. Climate change is of crucial relevance in this respect. As van Dyke (2003, p 226) noted, ‘local threats inspire within-movement coalition events, while larger threats that affect multiple constituencies or broadly defined identities inspire cross-movement coalition formation’. In this view, climate change constitutes a significant event, putting pressure on established frames and organisational identities and opening up for movement-spanning activities (see Flesher Fominya, 2010; Wang et al, 2018).

The analysis draws on two sets of data collections. First, we use interviews with representatives of environmental and welfare organisations active at the local level. The sample cuts across welfare and environmental divides and types of actors, that is, movements and organisations, as well as radical versus established organisations. It includes organisations like Extinction Rebellion, Friends of the Earth, the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, Save the Children, the Swedish retirement organisation and organisations working with civic education. A total of 24 interviews have been conducted with representatives of local and national associations in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö. Second, we capitalise on a survey with protest participants in Swedish

Friday for future demonstrations, which was fielded in 2019. The demonstrations took place in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö. We surveyed demonstrations in Stockholm (15 March, 24 May and 27 September 2019), Malmö (15 March and 27 September) and Gothenburg (27 September) to analyse support for welfare and environmental concerns by protest participants (see [Emilsson et al, 2020](#)). The response rate varied between 22 per cent (Stockholm), 28 per cent (Gothenburg) and 29 per cent (Malmö) (see [de Moor et al, 2020](#), for further information on methods).

Civil society silos

Swedish civil society is plural, diverse and in constant flux, as in most Western countries. However, it also constitutes a field of organisations with a certain degree of stability ([Johansson and Kalm, 2015](#)). Swedish civil society has primarily been formed in connection with a long-lasting tradition of popular movement organisations and close and cordial relations between the (Social Democratic) state and civil society actors ([Arvidson et al, 2018a](#)). Historically, civil society has been organised concerning workers' and women's rights, and charitable activities linked to marginalised social groups. This was later complemented by environmental concerns represented by a vibrant environmental movement ([Tranvik and Selle, 2007](#)).

These historical traits remain relevant as most Swedish CSOs follow the tradition of membership-based collective action organisations ([Einarsson, 2011](#); [Henriksen et al, 2019](#); [von Essen, 2019](#)). Many of the associations formed in the early 20th century continue to dominate Swedish civil society, as they hold extensive membership, have exclusive access to key decision makers and act as well-established stakeholders in relevant policy fields ([Johansson and Scaramuzzino, 2022](#)). In international comparison, Swedish civil society stands out as less oriented towards fulfilling public contracts and instead being dominated by associations with high membership counts

and extensive public legitimacy to act in politics (Johansson et al, 2019).

This way of organising coincides with a corporatist model of interest intermediation, that is, a system of institutionalised contacts, mutual negotiations and coordinated decision making between the state and civil society (Hermansson et al, 1999; Lundberg, 2017; Gavelin, 2018). Such a model relies on the premise that citizens can influence public policies in two different ways – through voting in general elections (the ‘electoral channel’) and membership in interest groups (the ‘corporate channel’) (Rothstein, 1992). The system assumes collaboration between the state and a set of recognised CSOs involved in exploring and implementing public policies (Micheletti, 1995). Partnerships between the government and CSOs have sometimes been criticised for being exclusive, mainly inviting well-established CSOs (Lundåsen, 2010). In his analysis of Swedish environmental politics, Lundqvist (2004, p 217) argues that the ‘dominant form for ecological governance is co-operation with organised interests and persuasion of the general public’ (see Hildingsson, 2010). Despite rumours of its demise, it is thus a model still alive in both policy areas (for example, Kronsell et al, 2019).

The corporatist model of interest intermediation promotes separation between civil society actors based on expertise and activity. CSOs are accredited with a special status to sit at the negotiating table with decision makers and elected politicians. Such inclusion and the corresponding ability to mobilise and organise citizens within an area of expertise and influence is, however, conditioned on state recognition. This model creates extensive lock-in effects and civil society actors who have a seat at the table benefit from reproducing rather than changing it. Moreover, although CSOs cooperate in umbrella associations, such cooperation patterns are primarily kept within established policy domains. CSOs stay within their domain as experts on a particular cause, while seeking collaboration across political and organisational divides is often considered risky. As theories

of path dependency propose, the benefits of staying with the established path tend to be more profitable than investments in new and unknown paths (Pierson, 1996).

Environmentalists' take on 'the welfare issue'

Environmental organisations form a significant part of Swedish civil society. In what follows, we ask how these view and approach welfare concerns and the challenges associated with diverging from established positions. Thörn and Svenberg (2016) contend that the Swedish environmental movement is diverse (Boström, 2001) and includes various actors mobilising on different ecological causes and concerns. In their study of local environmental activists, de Rosa et al (2022) found that local activities were extensively involved in pushing for change, even though the corresponding activities were often oriented towards national governments and less towards local conditions.

The Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (*Naturskyddsforeningen*) has over 200,000 members and is one of the most significant associations. It enjoys substantial public support, occupies a central position in the organisational field and is often invited to participate in public committees and events. Though organising considerably fewer members (10,000), the Swedish branch of Friends of the Earth (*Miljöförbundet Jordens Vänner*) has likewise a central position in the national environmental movement. Both organisations have been active for a long time. However, the internationalisation of environmental politics implied the entrance of a new range of organisations that more directly address climate change than nature conservation (for example, *Klimataktion*). This implied a re-orientation towards climate change issues within the broader movement and contentious tactics such as protests, civil disobedience and direct action campaigns. These tactics have brought forward changes in the general framing of the environmental question, not only regarding discursive

differentiation between nature conservation and climate change but also a set of newcomers to the environmental movement, changing the dynamics within the organisational field.

As an established actor in the field, the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation found a multidimensional take on sustainability difficult. Taking the ‘middle ground’ within the movement (Thörn and Svenberg, 2016), environmental protection and nature conservation lie at the heart of its mission statement, with human beings seen as responsible for causing environmental problems. ‘People are the cause of environmental issues, and we must, therefore, also create the solutions by changing our lifestyles and societies’ (Natuskyddsföreningen, 2024). Aside from its explicit focus on nature conservation and environmental protection, the organisation recognises all relevant sustainability dimensions. However, the social dimension appears to be the most difficult to integrate into its organisational domains. During our interviews, representatives talked lengthily about the organisation’s teams working with environmental change and protection and expressed clear views on how the economy should be reformed. While this captures two dimensions of the sustainability trinity, the social dimension was portrayed with uncertainty and ambiguity. ‘It’s hard to get at it. It’s that simple. The environment can be measured, and the economy can also be measured. But the social aspects ...’ (Interview, Swedish Society for Nature Conservation). Interviewees pointed out that even though workshops on environmental and economic concerns were held, the internal debates lacked clues about what a combined approach to environmental and welfare concerns could mean. One informant was confused about addressing environmental and welfare concerns in combination, stating ‘rarely we talk about it that way’. Another representative pointed to the general lack of such debates: ‘Unfortunately, we do not talk so much about it [the social dimension] at all.’ Despite the absence of internal discussion, representatives claimed that the problems and risks associated with climate change

nevertheless required changes to lifestyles and ways of living. The organisation instead envisioned non-materialistic opinions on welfare, including ‘clean water, fresh air, silence, peace and quiet and an opportunity to, a sense of coexistence with nature’ (Interview, Swedish Society for Nature Conservation). Statements of these kinds suggested an option for discursive alignment across environmental and welfare domains based on a non-materialistic redefinition of the latter.

Other highly institutionalised environmental organisations followed similar lines. Organisations working with civic education on environmental concerns (*Studiefrämjandet* – www.studieframjandet.se) considered environmental changes threatening humanity and approached sustainability as depending on environmental, economic and social problems. The association expressed that it primarily focused on two aspects of sustainability: ecological and social. However, it contended that it considered ‘economic sustainability a precondition to reach success in these areas’, indicating a less conflict-oriented view on sustainability dimensions (*Studiefrämjandet*, 2024). Although strategic documents placed social and environmental concerns on equal footing, interviewees expressed the organisation’s primary focus as being on ‘animal welfare’, ‘nature’ and ‘environmental concerns’ (Interview, *Studiefrämjandet*). While defining environmental sustainability appeared relatively simple, interviewees found it difficult to describe what may be meant by social sustainability. Social sustainability partly functioned as a ‘catch-all phrase’ or anything except ecological sustainability. Such challenges were sometimes met with humour, as one local representative expressed: ‘If you want to be cheeky, I would say that everything we do is social sustainability. Ha ha’ (Interview, *Studiefrämjandet*).

Studiefrämjandet’s central focus on environmental concerns is reflected in its membership. While the association holds membership with a wide range of environmental CSOs due to its role in providing civic education services, it had no

members specifically mobilising on welfare-related issues. It considered itself 'strong in terms of membership in ecological sustainability, but we have a lot of activities that are more social. So it would not have been wrong to complement [the current member base] with more members with a social focus' (Interview, Studieförbundet). While Agenda 2030 was embraced in general terms, the combination of environmental *and* social concerns caused some worries over organisational boundaries. Key representatives feared framing sustainability along left–right dimensions and suggested that adding a welfare dimension would bring the organisation (and the environmental movement) too close to the labour movement. Similarly, welfare organisations' involvement with sustainability was considered an intrusion into the domains of the environmental movement, as environmental concerns should not follow classic left–right divides. 'I think there is a risk of the sustainability issue being co-opted by the labour movement. If it becomes too red, so to speak. We could be a bridging force there, showing that the sustainability issue is not right–left' (Interview, Studieförbundet).

Environmental organisations with a more radical take on environmentalism viewed the combination of environmental and welfare concerns differently. Following its central claim of climate emergence, Extinction Rebellion (XR) argued that the current situation would require a radical shift in all societal systems, as 'we are facing an unprecedented crisis, a crisis that threatens to destroy everything we hold dear – our planet's ecosystem and the future for future generations' (Extinction Rebellion, 2024). When referring to the demonstrations organised by Fridays for Future, in which members of XR participated, the spokesperson we interviewed diagnosed the general environmental movement as in a state of change. The person considered climate change an existential question directly linked to human welfare.

However, unlike other environmental movement actors, XR refrained from using sustainability and rather referred to

climate change's justice implications and conditions. Some raised concerns about capturing the unequal conditions among social groups to embark on climate change transformation and their ability to change their lifestyles. Informants pointed out that the climate transition should not affect poor and less fortunate people. Claims were also made to redefine welfare and individual living standards. This included re-orientation away from welfare as high material living standards and a need to 're-evaluate what this means' (Interview, XR). At the same time, our interviewees carefully avoided the notion of a 'low' living standard. XR participants instead framed welfare as a set of needs (rather than wants) that welfare systems should address, suggesting that environmental and welfare concerns could be combined. From this perspective, welfare systems are essential in ensuring that 'we are protected, have a roof over our heads, health care, education and the ability to eat our fill, etc.' (Interview, XR).

This approach opened for cooperation across established and radical flanks. Still, interviews reveal barriers due to differences in tactics and overall aim. A study of local environmental activism (de Rosa et al, 2022) found that radical groups tend to be driven by bravery and continue to do what they believe is right. For an actor like XR, contentious action is essential. Though known for its costumes and public actions, interviews reveal that it also engages in non-contentious actions and monitors local politics. Participants write articles and arrange public lectures ('Extinction talks') to promote public and political awareness about the climate emergency. Although climate change is viewed as a global phenomenon, local branches carry out campaigns in their respective urban settings, such as collecting signatures for a 'citizen proposal' to publicly push local decision makers to declare a climate emergency.

Established actors like the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation however considered XR too radical, especially its choice of civil disobedience to cause a popular uprising ('*folkligt uppror*'). In contrast, the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation preferred to build a reputation, nurture good

contacts with political decision makers and public authorities and gain political influence (Interview, Swedish Society for Nature Conservation). This suggests that although different elements of the Swedish environmental movement can find frame congruence in terms of exploring a link between environment and welfare concerns based on non-materialistic and needs-oriented views on welfare, they were nevertheless splintered along differences in strategies on how to influence politics, public debate and hence societal developments.

Welfarists' take on 'the environmental issue'

Swedish civil society includes various CSOs working on welfare and social rights issues, such as workers, women, people with functional impairments and retired citizens. In many welfare states, civil society actors have been pivotal in pushing for more and better social rights for citizens and members, often connected with a materialistic welfare conceptualisation. Societies' focus on climate change challenges the ideas and ideals these organisations mobilise upon, with the Swedish labour movement being slow in incorporating climate change and environmental issues into organisational agendas (for example, Cassegård et al, 2017; Bell, 2020; Rolfer, 2020). Rätzl and Uzzell (2011) aptly framed this as the 'job versus environment dilemma'. Unions aim to protect workers' rights, salaries and working conditions and, at the end of the road, seek to secure better wages for members. This might be why previous studies find limited cooperation between environmental and labour movements (Lundström et al, 2015; Lundström, 2017).

We conducted several interviews with leading representatives of *Arbetarnas bildningsförbund* (ABF, the Workers' Educational Association), which can be considered a core part of the Swedish labour movement. Founded at the start of the 20th century by the Social Democratic Party, the Swedish Trade Union Confederation and the Co-operative Movement, it

aims to coordinate educational activities for workers and foster ideational debate on pressing issues. Its profile on civic education rather than advocacy could promote a more inclusive approach to environmental concerns than unions, which aim to protect workers'/members' rights. However, our interviews reveal this is not the case, with ABF considering class, inequality and financial redistribution as its core causes. In recent years, it has increasingly sought to include non-unionised groups.

All study associations have their different niches. ABF is the workers' study association, so we educate different union members. We have the workers' perspective, but in recent years, there have also been irregular employment [*timvikarie*], the precariat and gentrification. By tradition, we focus on resource-poor groups ... so-called marginalised groups with less power and high social status. (Interview, ABF)

Strategic planning documents however indicate that climate change is not integrated into mission statements and, if so, mainly considered a driver of social risks and inequalities. ABF representatives however recognised a growing demand among members to address sustainability issues, and considered themselves 'late in the game' (Interview, ABF). Informants thought this reflected a limited interest within the labour movement in environmental-related issues. The proposed combination of welfare and environmentalist frames furthermore caused tensions among its member organisations, with some taking a clear stance against putting environmental and welfare concerns on equal footing. 'We are not at the forefront when it comes to ecological sustainability. Undoubtedly, there is a conflict within the labour movement: the environment or jobs. There is no point in making fun of the fact that it's not like that' (Interview, ABF). Local representatives justified the hierarchisation of frames due to 'their groups' lacking

economic resources to engage in sustainability transitions. Like environmental organisations, which placed nature conservation or climate action first, welfare organisations prioritised welfare before environmental issues. For instance, ABF found it far easier to address sustainability linked to class differences than ecological sustainability, let alone linked to issues set in forests or the stratosphere.

Attempts to develop cooperation with environmental associations did not go well, with tensions arising regarding one's unique causes and ideals. ABF argued that climate change was too broad an issue to be monopolised by environmental organisations, a view not shared by environmental organisations.

We have sustainability in our programme of ideas, work with these issues and take them seriously. When we had this collaboration with the Climate Club [*Klimatklubben*], there were people from *Studieförbundet* [environmental civic education association] who expressed that 'we should have this because it is sustainability-related, the climate is our issue', but then we meant that it could not be that way. (Interview, ABF)

Other welfare-oriented CSOs felt the pressure to adapt to social, environmental and economic sustainability debates. One of Sweden's most prominent social welfare organisations (PRO, *Pensionärernas Riksorganisation*, the Swedish National Pensioners' Organisation, the largest national senior-citizen association with more than 260,000 members) expressed interest in exploring the relevance of an environmental agenda for members and future generations. It adopted a motion to reduce its environmental impact and push for sustainable development. However, our review of its strategic documents finds advocacy for better economic development, health and care services for members, and consumer politics to be its main priorities (see PRO, 2024). None included environmental or climate change issues. Local representatives found growing

member interest in sustainability issues. Considering the size of the organisation and its contacts with decision makers at local and national levels, they felt responsible for using their power to push for change. However, they expressed significant uncertainty about how to do this, as they lacked expertise on the climate issue (Interview, PRO).

Also other social welfare organisations considered the sustainability agenda to be ‘imposed’ on them. For instance, Save the Children (*Rädda Barnen*) experienced pressure to adopt environmental concerns, as funders expected them to incorporate green thinking into their activities as a form of sustainability mainstreaming. Although the organisation recognised that climate change and environmental disasters affected children, this was not something they had started to explore – especially not in connection to their activities in Sweden. As one representative expressed, ‘we have not had those glasses on’ (Interview, Save the Children). Such pressures caused uncertainty regarding the organisation’s identity. One informant expressed concern about whether the organisation would become ‘an environmental organisation’. Although adaptation to funders’ priorities was considered necessary, such adaptation could cause mission drift and change the organisation’s orientation.

Urban protests and sustainable welfare

Cities are dynamic places suitable for civic action, providing social, cultural and political infrastructures for bringing people together. The urban setting is particularly relevant to study in a Swedish context since much organising tends to follow institutionalised silos, including civil society organising. In August 2018, a trend of urban mobilisations on climate change took place in a wide array of cities across the globe. These started in Stockholm during the national election campaign when school pupil Greta Thunberg decided to demand forcible climate action from policy makers through a school strike

outside the Swedish parliament. At the end of 2018, the school strikes spread around Sweden and the world. Demonstrations in other countries attracted thousands of protesters, ranging from 100,000 in Melbourne and London, around 200,000 in Rome and Berlin to more than 300,000 in Montreal (Emilsson et al, 2020).

The Swedish climate marches gained extensive public recognition. While the first event in Stockholm attracted several thousands of participants, by September 2019, this number had risen to approximately 70,000 individuals. Activities in Gothenburg and Malmö attracted fewer participants, with three to ten thousand participants. While these strikes and protest events invigorated the Swedish environmental movement as climate change gained extensive public recognition, they also served as the basis for recruiting new groups to organisations and movements.

Inspired by Greta Thunberg, the first series of protest events primarily attracted school students; the later stages of protests included a broader range of participants across age cohorts. For instance, at the 2019 September demonstrations, more than 80 per cent of participants were 26 or older. While much previous research has shown that about equal numbers of women and men participated in protests, women were overrepresented in the Swedish Climate Strikes, with around 63 per cent of the total participants. A large share of the participants had completed a university education (more than 80 per cent in each city), and approximately 85 per cent identified as middle class (Emilsson et al, 2020). Most of the protest participants self-identified as 'left' (approximately two thirds among the participants) and 30 per cent with the green or left-socialist parties, respectively.

Whereas our previous analysis mainly addressed the integration of environmental and climate concerns on an organisational level, our survey with protest participants allowed us to explore how committed individuals viewed similar problems, that is, the potential conflict and trade-offs between

environmental and welfare concerns. Unsurprisingly, most participants agreed to claims of governmental redistribution ('the government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well off'), indicating social justice and redistribution as core values among participants. This resonates with the trend towards emphasising justice concerns in environmental and climate movements and, hence, a frame alignment about social and environmental justice concerns, potentially resulting from spillover effects from the global justice movement with its explicit anti-capitalist expressions.

Moreover, protest participants had clear priorities about potential environmental and economic trade-offs. As an illustration of support for an environmental frame, we asked them whether protecting the environment should be given priority, even if it causes slower economic growth and some loss of jobs (see [Table 4.1](#)). To a very high extent, the protesters supported an environmental frame and dismissed the relevance of an economic growth frame. Almost three quarters of the respondents (74.9 per cent) strongly agreed with an environmental frame, and only 1 per cent disagreed. Hence, the 'jobs versus environment dilemma' ([Rätzhel and Uzzell, 2011](#)), which influenced labour and welfare organisations' take on environmental concerns, was less relevant for protest participants.

However, respondents had difficulty exploring their view on whether to support measures to decrease CO₂ emissions, even if these worsened social welfare arrangements. Our results show that respondents mainly selected a mid-option, expressing neither support nor rejection of welfare versus an environmental frame. This might be interpreted as participants supporting sustainable welfare, that is, environmental and welfare concerns in combination. However, protest participants differed due to social background factors. To a higher extent, well-educated participants supported an environmental over a welfare frame. Active trade unionists were less likely to put

Table 4.1: Climate protesters' frame support

'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?'	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neither disagree nor agree (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)	Total (%)	Total (N)
'Protecting the environment should be given priority, even if it causes slower economic growth and some loss of jobs'	0.6	0.7	4.3	19.6	74.9	100.0	891
'Measures to decrease CO ₂ emissions cannot be allowed to make social welfare arrangements worse'	12.2	20.8	37.5	19.1	10.4	100.0	888

Source: [Emilsson et al \(2020\)](#)

‘the environment’ first and instead stressed the protection of jobs and economic growth.

However, the boundary-protecting practices we observed among environmental and welfare organisations appear less relevant at the individual level. Many of the protest participants held membership with different CSOs. While a large percentage were members of environmental organisations, we also found that many held membership in charitable and humanitarian organisations and trade unions. The low levels of union membership are most likely due to the low age of participants. Few were, however, active, and most held passive membership. Whereas protecting ideological boundaries is relevant for organisations, (some) individuals nonetheless crossed boundaries and supported environmental and welfare concerns through memberships in both types of organisations (see [Table 4.2](#)).

Civil society practices of sustainable welfare

Theories of path emergency stress small and incremental changes as significant for change. Niches form enabling

Table 4.2: Climate protesters’ organisational affiliation (per cent and total numbers)

Member of organisation (during last 12 months)	Not member (%)	Passive member (%)	Active member (%)	Total (%)	Total (N)
Environmental	63.3	27.4	9.3	100.0	842
Charity or humanitarian	66.0	29.1	4.9	100.0	842
Trade union	66.2	28.6	5.2	100.0	842
Political party	78.6	12.9	8.4	100.0	842
Women’s	93.5	4.6	1.9	100.0	842
LGBTI	95.4	3.8	0.8	100.0	842

Source: [Emilsson et al \(2020\)](#)

environments alongside dominant institutional settings. Community practices, voluntary activities and non-profits often explore niches to develop new ideas and practises (Clark and Johansson, 2016). Eco-social enterprises seek to deliver environmental and socially integrated services based on non-profit grounds (Johanisova et al, 2020). Community-based eco-social initiatives build on grassroots and community involvement in developing and regulating sustainable welfare practices (Sekulova et al, 2017). Whereas terms like eco-social enterprises point to initiatives that are different from but loosely integrated with markets, community-based initiatives stress civil society initiatives as local, small scale and of a voluntary nature.

Civil society practices are often portrayed positively as alternatives to large-scale systems and organisations (Stamm et al, 2020) and valued according to their emerging qualities. A review of eco-social innovations in Malmö found a complex mix of repair café, urban gardening projects and reuse of food and waste that combined environmental and social concerns, for instance, by engaging marginalised groups (Kennedy Tsunoda and Björngren Cuadra, 2022). Local activists or community groups ran some of these local practices as an association, but, at times, they took the form of a social enterprise. Relations to states and markets are however more complex than conceptual distinctions suggest, as some of these practices rely on voluntary work and others benefitted from public programmes of supported employment.

While these practices certainly can give rise to change, the niche metaphor comes with methodological problems as it primarily focuses on what is new and not so much on how it ties to established settings (Stamm et al, 2020). Our interviews with environmental organisations demonstrated this, as representatives found listing their environmentally motivated activities easy, yet problematic in expressing practices concerning sustainable welfare (Interview, Swedish Society for Nature Conservation). Practices like repair cafés, recycling communities or gardening projects gained support, but primarily seen as something odd,

outside ordinary environmental movement practices. ‘Many new organisations ... do environmentally related stuff, yet that is not called environmental organisations’ (Interview, Swedish Society for Nature Conservation). Often, the combination of welfare and environmental concerns meant the addition of a social dimension to existing established environmental projects and practices. For instance, the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation had a group working with urban meadows and was asked to initiate a project in one of the city’s suburbs. Aside from promoting green and environmentally friendly lifestyles, the project was considered particularly relevant as it was seen as capable of broadening the recruitment to the organisation. The term social was thus mainly interpreted as linked to social practices and participation rather than individual welfare or social justice.

Conclusion

Theories of inertia, emergence and transformation allow us to explore the role played by civil society in a dual way. On the one hand, civil society can be seen as a site where new ideas and claims for societal change emerge and gain traction as citizens engage in organisations and movements. In that respect, civil society is a source of transformation rather than inertia. On the other hand, civil society constitutes a site of actors and organisations shaped by relations of collaboration and competition over relevant resources (Johansson and Kalm, 2015). Whereas civil society actors might push for change in connection with other sites, internally, inertia might be the most appropriate interpretation.

Although environmental and welfare groups push for change and engage extensively in discussions and practices of sustainable development, this chapter has demonstrated that environmental and welfare organisations have difficulty breaking free of history and largely continue to act within established paths and policy domains. Although sustainable

development constitutes one of the most significant societal discourses of our time, it has not (yet) become a policy ‘field’ in its own right. For the time being, this means Swedish policies continue to be developed within silos. The ongoing relevance of a corporatist system is a vital reason why environmental and welfare-oriented organisations still act within their established domains. The structural influence of clearly divided policy domains is one reason why we find limited variation across the three cities of Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö.

The limited cooperation between environmental and welfare CSOs furthermore relates to factors at an organisational level. Swedish civil society actors have successfully gained influence based on what we consider a particularistic logic of mobilisation. Most mobilise on one core mission, which creates barriers to other organisations working with other policy issues. Whether or not this should be interpreted as habitual or utilitarian practice requires further exploration. However, this chapter has found that environmental and welfare civil society actors protect their domain and avoid too close cooperation with other organisations. While there is ambition to combine environmental and welfare concerns, this is hampered by a lack of a proper language to act across and engage in coalitional work. This includes the lack of expertise on climate and environmental issues for welfare organisations. Civil society can thus function as a catalyst for societal change, yet continue to be internally structured by path protection and inertia practices.

Inertia, however, only partly captures our study’s findings. While theories of path dependency stress the role of institutions, theories of emergence emphasise the role of small-scale development and individuals acting as path entrepreneurs or advocates. Emergence is, however, a messy process with extensive contingency involved. The protest participants’ dilemmas illustrate this: deciding whether to support an ‘environmentalist’ or a ‘welfarist’ frame. If participants had had an opportunity to express support for both, they may have

done so, acting as an avant-garde for both environmental and welfare concerns. What seems to support this interpretation is that committed individuals are not held back by organisational or movement divides. Although organisations benefit from marking boundaries with others, our study shows that committed individuals tend to hold membership in both.

Though framing environment and welfare as a 'justice concern' turned out to be vital for such boundary-spanning activities, our study demonstrates tensions between moderate and radical flanks within both the environmental and welfare movements. Actors that stress the reduction of material welfare in combination with unconventional methods tend to encounter criticism from moderate environmental and welfare organisations, and vice versa. Within the welfare movement, the divide follows splits between opting for more or less material welfare and within the environmental movement between ecological preservation and climate change (Thörn and Svenberg, 2017; Jasny and Fisher, 2023). A path towards sustainable welfare thus entails elements of frame separation and integration simultaneously.

FIVE

Public attitudes and dispositions of sustainable welfare

Introduction

In this chapter, we explore public attitudes and social dispositions related to the sustainable welfare of urban and rural residents in Sweden. We reveal patterns of support by investigating attitudes towards the general policy goal of an eco-social agenda and more specific eco-social policies. We focus not only on how public attitudes provide legitimacy for different policies and institutions or challenge established arrangements but also on more fundamental and often unconscious traits of people's dispositions that strongly shape and determine their positions in the eco-social spectrum. We interpret these attitude and disposition patterns concerning inertia, emergence and transformation towards sustainable welfare (Chapter 2).

We first study the support for an eco-social agenda in general and five eco-social policies in particular, that is, a maximum income, a wealth tax, a universal basic income (UBI), a working time reduction and a meat tax. This is guided by recent contributions to degrowth/post-growth and sustainable welfare, arguing for a move away from the policy priority

of economic growth in monetary terms of GDP towards identifying a ‘safe and just operating space for humanity’ (Rockström et al, 2009, 2023; Raworth, 2017; Koch, 2022) in biophysical and social terms and corresponding ‘ecological ceilings and social floors’ (Khan et al, 2023).

When discussing the extent of support for the general policy goals related to sustainable welfare and for corresponding eco-social policies, we consider the socio-demographic characteristics of the individuals supporting such an agenda and policies. Previous research results suggest that urban and rural residents differ significantly (for example, McGrane et al, 2017; Gimpel et al, 2020; Huijsmans et al, 2021). Hence, we compare urban vis-à-vis rural residents’ eco-social attitudes. We subsequently take a Bourdieusean perspective linking social positions, dispositions and position takings (Bourdieu, 1998). Since attitudes can vary and be short term while dispositions are more stable and fundamental, we can achieve a deeper and more complex understanding of the empirical material. In other words, we go somewhat beyond the surface of public attitudes and explore their links to deeper-lying habitus traits that we understand to be the products of long-term and socially specific appropriations of society and nature, beginning with socialisation processes in the family and school system. In addition, we study how the distribution of habitus types varies in cities and rural areas.

The concepts of transformation, emergence and inertia allow us to capture which parts of the population display joint support for environmental and welfare values and policies and for eco-social policies to be most prone to social-ecological transformations and sustainable welfare (that is, ‘transformation’). Just as previous research indicates that urban residents hold more progressive, tolerant and liberal values compared to their rural counterparts (for example, Huijsmans et al, 2021; Luca et al, 2023), we now explore if urban residents dominate an ‘avant-garde’ in pushing for change. Attitudes and dispositions that primarily convey a rejection pattern of

policy reforms can be understood in terms of ‘inertia’ and thus as representing the status quo or societal change in a direction other than towards sustainable welfare. Moreover, attitude and disposition patterns with a rather one-sided tendency to favour environmental or welfare issues can represent the silo-based logic of keeping environmental and welfare concerns separate, thus representing the status quo (that is, ‘inertia’). In cases, however, where there is a tendency of relatively strong favouring of environmental issues but still with traces of welfare support, and vice versa, we understand these as emergent standpoints of reforms (that is, ‘emergence’).

The chapter draws on a Swedish cross-sectional citizen survey fielded from January 2020 to April 2020. The survey questionnaire included questions and statements about environmental and social welfare policies and concerns, personal values, engagement in various political activities and individual background characteristics. To target residents living in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö, as well as those living in Sweden at large, a stratified random sampling strategy was used, targeting 5,000 Swedish residents in the age group of 18–84 years. In total, 1,529 individuals responded to the survey, giving an overall response rate of 31 per cent. The response rates differed, however, across the different strata, from 27 per cent in the Malmö stratum to 33 per cent in the Sweden at large stratum. Of these 1,529 respondents, 1,120 individuals (73 per cent) were urban residents, and 409 individuals (27 per cent) were rural residents. A post hoc non-response analysis indicated a slight over-representation of older respondents and respondents with higher education and incomes in the sample (see ‘middle class bias’ in survey studies – [Goyder et al, 2002](#)). For a more thorough methodological discussion, see [Emilsson \(2023\)](#).

Sustainable welfare attitudes

Research into different patterns of support and non-support for an eco-social agenda and eco-social policies takes various

forms. In contrast to well-established separate social welfare and environmental policy agendas, the precise elements of a combined eco-social agenda are not (yet) set in stone. The sustainable welfare literature, however, provides some suggestions as to what some of these constitutive elements could be: social justice, equality, redistribution of work and time and wealth and income, decarbonising measures and policies, distributist institutions and a questioning of the economic growth paradigm (for example, Koch and Mont, 2016; Koch, 2018, 2022; Hirvilammi, 2020; Büchs, 2021; see Chapter 1). This has been subject to investigation in research on welfare (Kumlin et al, 2021) and environmental attitudes (Cruz and Manata, 2020). By drawing on these two research fields, it is possible to explore the nexus between social welfare attitudes and environmental attitudes and thus operationalise attitudes related to an eco-social agenda.

Support for general policy goals related to an eco-social agenda

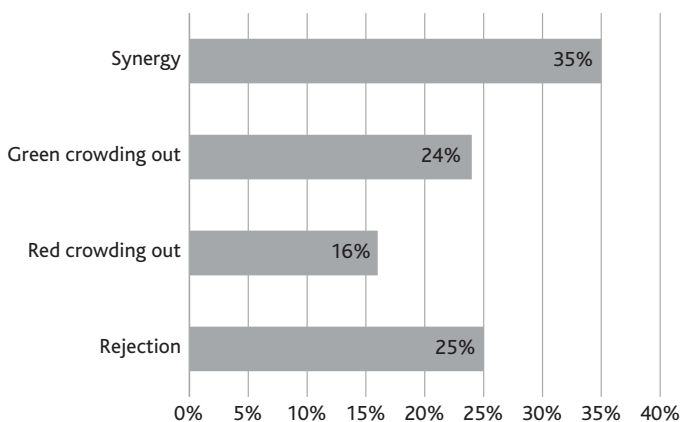
So far, only a few studies have investigated the intersection between social and environmental attitudes (Jakobsson et al, 2018; Fritz and Koch, 2019; Otto and Gugushvili, 2020; Armingeon and Bürgisser, 2021; Emilsson, 2022). Much of this research has studied potential conflicts or synergies between welfare and environmental attitudes. Accordingly, a four-fold typology of eco-social attitudes has been developed, consisting of (1) a synergy pattern in which individuals express joint support for social welfare and environmental concerns; (2) a green crowding-out pattern where individuals express relatively high support for environmental concerns but relatively low support for social welfare; (3) a red crowding-out pattern where individuals express relatively high support for social concerns but relatively low support for environmental concerns; and (4) a rejection pattern in which individuals express relatively little or no support at all for either concern. Compared to rural residents, urban residents have more often attitudes related to

a synergy attitude pattern and thus express support for an eco-social agenda (Otto and Gugushvili, 2020; Emilsson, 2022). This points to an urban and rural divide in attitudes related to sustainable welfare.

Before exploring potential differences in eco-social attitudes between urban and rural residents according to the four-fold typology, let us first look exclusively at the urban sample. Though previous studies indicate that urban residents tend to be more supportive of an eco-social agenda than rural ones, these studies do not supply much information about (potential or actual) differences within this group. Our results show a variation in attitudes among Swedish urban residents (Figure 5.1).

A relative majority of urban residents support an eco-social agenda: this is the synergy pattern, with more than one third expressing joint support for social welfare *and* environmental concerns. About equal shares, that is, about a quarter of the residents, express attitudes related to either a green crowding-out (24 per cent) or rejection (25 per cent) pattern. The least common eco-social attitude pattern is red crowding out, with 16 per cent of urban residents expressing relatively high

Figure 5.1: Sustainable welfare attitude patterns among urban residents



support for social concerns but relatively low support for environmental concerns.

Previous research that focuses on cross-national and national samples (Fritz and Koch, 2019; Otto and Gugushvili, 2020; Emilsson, 2022; see, however, paper 2 in Emilsson, 2023, with an explicit urban focus) further indicates that distinctive socioeconomic and value-based factors are associated with expressing relatively high or low support for an eco-social agenda. One previous study based on the same cross-sectional survey as in this chapter but focusing on the whole sample demonstrated that Swedish residents who express joint support for social welfare and environmental concerns (the synergy attitude) tend to have low- to middle-range income levels and high educational attainment. Almost at the opposite end of the spectrum were individuals expressing relatively low welfare and environmental support (the rejection attitude), who tended to have higher incomes and lower educational attainment (Emilsson, 2022). Concerning the education factor, these findings align with previous research (Fritz and Koch, 2019; Otto and Gugushvili, 2020), indicating that higher educational attainment is a crucial component for transformations towards sustainable welfare. However, the income factor needs to be explored further. In line with the study by Emilsson (2022), Otto and Gugushvili (2020) found that individuals less satisfied with their income are more inclined to express joint support. In contrast, Fritz and Koch (2019) indicated that higher income levels were associated with joint support. Lower income levels could instead explain the rejection pattern.

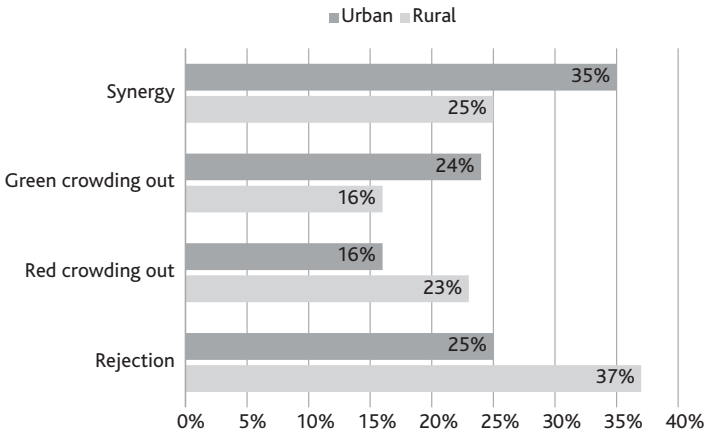
Nevertheless, these results indicate that classifications of individuals with synergy and rejection attitudes in the low to high socioeconomic continuum are more complicated. Traditionally, in the lower areas of this continuum, we find both lower income levels and lower educational attainment. In the higher areas, we see higher incomes and higher education levels. Individuals with red crowding-out and green

crowding-out attitudes seem to follow the low to the high end of the socioeconomic continuum and, as predicted by previous research, focus either on welfare attitudes or environmental attitudes (Svallfors et al, 2012; Calzada et al, 2014; Fairbrother et al, 2019; Sivonen and Koivula, 2020). Individuals with lower incomes and lower educational attainment are associated with a red crowding-out pattern. In contrast, individuals with higher incomes and higher educational attainment tend to feature the green crowding-out pattern (Emilsson, 2022).

Another determining factor of the attitudes is political ideology, which can be measured in terms of self-placement on the political left-right scale or identification with political parties. Whereas previous studies indicate that supporters of social welfare and environmental sustainability tend to be left wingers and also identify with red-green political parties, individuals with rejection attitude patterns tend to be right wingers associated with liberal, conservative and/or nationalist right-wing parties (Fritz and Koch, 2019; Emilsson, 2023). The results regarding individuals with green crowding-out and red crowding-out patterns are somewhat mixed, where, for example, the latter ones are right wingers in one national study (Emilsson, 2023) and left wingers in a cross-national study (Koch and Fritz, 2020).

Moreover, concerning previous research, there are good reasons to assume that urban residents' eco-social attitudes are different from rural residents' (Otto and Gugushvili, 2020; Emilsson, 2022).¹ Let us see how this is the case when focusing on residents in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö only and compare them to the rest of the population in Sweden. Can the former be understood as a sort of 'avant-garde' pushing for change towards sustainable welfare? Figure 5.2 indeed indicates that there are relatively significant differences between urban and rural residents. Compared to the rest of the country, urban residents in Sweden's three largest cities express more support for an eco-social agenda. A chi-square test confirms a statistically significant difference between the two groups.²

Figure 5.2: Support for an eco-social agenda among urban and rural residents



In addition, [Figure 5.2](#) indicates that urban and rural residents' attitudes stand in almost perfect opposition to each other. While the largest share, around one third, of urban residents express synergy attitudes and around a quarter relatively low or no support for an eco-social agenda (rejection), it is the other way around for rural residents. Around one third express rejection attitudes, and around a quarter express joint support for social welfare *and* environmental concerns. The same applies to the green and red crowding-out attitude patterns, where we find larger shares of urban residents in the former attitude category and smaller shares in the latter. Conversely, rural residents feature smaller proportions of green crowding out and larger ones of red crowding out.

Hence, people actively pushing for transformational change towards sustainable welfare will likely live in Sweden's three largest cities. Whereas the synergy attitude pattern is most common among urban residents, the rejection attitude pattern is most prevalent among rural residents. This aligns with previous studies on eco-social attitudes, indicating that urban residents tend to be more supportive of eco-social concerns

than rural ones (Otto and Gugushvili, 2020; Emilsson, 2022). If we consider that some of the survey items in the eco-social attitude variable are rather ‘radical’, for example, a maximum income cap and a meat tax, and combine this with other eco-social attitude studies indicating that individuals expressing joint welfare and environmental support tend to place themselves to the left on the left–right scale (Fritz and Koch, 2019; Emilsson, 2023), our results align quite well with previous research on the urban–rural divide and the ‘progressiveness’ and liberal tendencies of urban residents (for example, Huijsmans et al, 2021; Luca et al, 2023). Generally, thus, the results indicate an urban–rural divide in eco-social attitudes, where urban residents’ attitudes can be seen as expressions of emergence or even transformation towards sustainable welfare. Conversely, the rural residents’ attitudes are best understood in terms of inertia representing the status quo or societal change in a direction other than towards sustainable welfare. It should be noted, however, that there are also signs of inertia in urban residents’ attitudes.

In the next section, we explore attitudes towards five eco-social policies and whether the distinctiveness of urban residents is also apparent in these cases. Complementing our analysis of support rates of a general eco-social agenda, the subsequent exploration of support for specific policies provides insight into the different components concerning sustainable welfare.

Support for eco-social policies

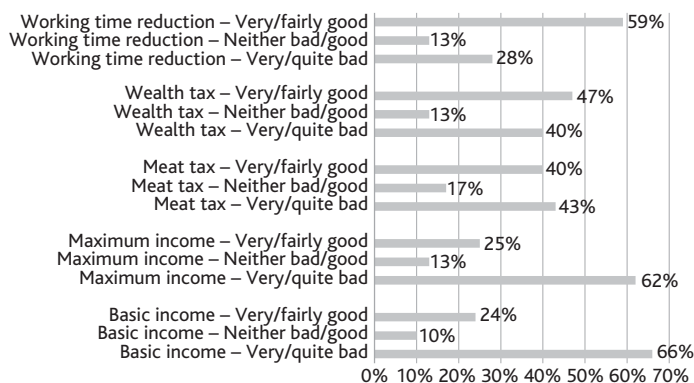
In the introduction, we defined eco-social policies as addressing production and consumption patterns to stay below the ‘ecological ceilings’ of planetary boundaries while at the same time providing ‘social floors’ to satisfy basic human needs. We now analyse the public support for five examples of such policies: a maximum income, a wealth tax, a UBI, a working time reduction and a meat tax. While UBI (on top of universal basic services and voucher systems) is often

discussed as a policy means that may turn out useful to safeguard needs satisfaction (for example, [van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017](#)) – the inner boundary or the social floor of the ‘safe operating space’ – a maximum income and the more known and discussed, albeit less radical, wealth taxation would address the upper boundary. New philosophical approaches defending ‘limitarianism’ in an ecologically constrained world ([Robeyns, 2019, 2022](#)) provide relevant theoretical discussions, while critical economists have suggested more concrete proposals of maximum incomes ([Concialdi, 2018; Pizzigatti, 2018](#)) as some quantitative proportion from minimum incomes (for example, 10:1 or 20:1; see [François et al, 2023](#)). Two further eco-social reform suggestions are reducing working hours to defuse the work–spend–consume circle and a tax on meat consumption to support ecological agriculture, more vegetarian nutrition and a general transition to a post-fossil lifestyle.

If we examine the support for these five eco-social policies among Swedish urban residents, we can see that the amount of support varies depending on the specific policies ([Figure 5.3](#)).

[Figure 5.3](#) indicates that working time reduction is the most popular eco-social policy among urban residents, with a relatively high level of support (59 per cent) and a relatively

Figure 5.3: Support for eco-social policies among urban residents



low level of non-support (28 per cent). The second popular policy is the wealth tax, with 47 per cent of the urban residents considering it very or fairly good. The meat tax policy is the third most popular (with 40 per cent support). However, the two latter policy proposals indicate that there are also large shares of urban residents who are sceptical. Around 40 per cent consider the wealth tax and the meat tax policies, respectively, to be very or quite bad. Maximum income and basic income are the least popular policy proposals. Only a quarter of urban residents support the two policies, while two thirds are sceptical. Potential explanations for the higher support levels of working time reduction and wealth tax policies include the fact that both are well known and have been on the Swedish political agenda for a long time. The lower support levels of a basic income can be understood as a general reluctance among the Swedish population to replace the current comprehensive welfare system with something completely different (Khan et al, 2023).

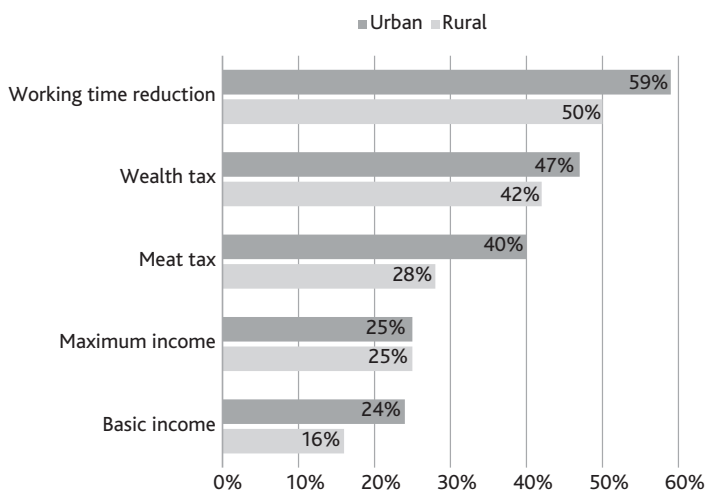
When it comes to the characteristics of the individuals expressing support, previous research indicates, for example, that individuals with lower income levels tend to express support for working time reduction, wealth tax and income caps, whereas individuals with higher levels of education tend to support meat taxation (Grimsrud et al, 2020; Rowlingson et al, 2021; Khan et al, 2023). One previous study, which again was based on the same cross-sectional survey as in this chapter but focused on the whole sample, demonstrated that only one explanatory factor was associated with all five policies: political ideology. Self-placement to the left on the left–right scale was significantly related to eco-social policy support (Khan et al, 2023). Regarding the urban–rural divide, results from previous research are mixed. For example, whereas income cap and wealth tax policies seemed to attract support among rural residents, the basic income policy and meat tax had more support among urban residents (Grimsrud et al, 2020; Khan et al, 2023). What does the urban–rural divide look

like when specifically analysing and comparing the support of urban residents in Sweden's three largest cities vis-à-vis the rest of the country?

Urban residents are, in most cases, more supportive of eco-social policies than rural residents (Figure 5.4). Some policies yield more significant differences in support, particularly the meat tax policy, whereas in others, the support is relatively even, such as the maximum income policy.

Figure 5.4 indicates the same general support pattern for the five eco-social policies for rural and urban residents (Figure 5.3): working time reduction is the most popular policy, followed by wealth taxation, meat taxation, maximum income and, lastly, basic income. In general, though, the support for the policies tends to be lower among rural than urban residents. For example, regarding working time reduction, 59 per cent of the urban residents consider it to be a very or somewhat good policy proposal, compared to 50 per cent of rural residents. In particular, the meat tax policy is much more popular among

Figure 5.4: Support for eco-social policies among urban and rural residents



urban residents than among rural residents. Only the maximum income policy attracts the same amount of support, that is, 25 per cent, among urban and rural residents.

The differences in supporting eco-social policies between urban and rural respondents are statistically highly significant in the case of the meat tax and slightly less for working time reduction and basic income.³ Basic income and meat taxation feature the most important differences in expressing low or no support: 66 per cent and 43 per cent of the urban residents consider the basic income and meat tax proposals bad policy proposals. The numbers were even higher for the non-urban residents. The higher acceptance rate among urban residents for eco-social policies targeting food consumption, as in the case of meat taxation, may be seen as an expression of the ‘progressiveness’ and tolerance of urban residents (Huijsmans et al, 2021; Luca et al, 2023) to change their way of living for environmental reasons. No statistically significant differences exist between urban and rural respondents regarding wealth taxation and maximum income. Maximum income does not exist as a policy, and no Swedish political party currently promotes it. As a result, urban and rural residents are equally uninformed and indifferent about this suggestion.

A more complex picture arises when comparing these results to previous research. In the study by Khan et al (2023), two policies seemed to be more favoured by rural residents, that is, the maximum income and wealth tax policies. In contrast, the present results suggest that urban residents are more supportive than their rural counterparts, or there are no differences between the two groups. It should be noted, however, that Khan et al (2023) applied a different urban/rural categorisation where the urban category included residents living in densely populated areas and thus also cities other than Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö, and medium-sized cities such as Linköping, Uppsala and Umeå. These differences can be an indication that urban residents’ attitudes in larger cities (that is, Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö in this case) are somewhat

different from residents' attitudes in smaller cities and that the former ones are even more progressive compared to the latter (McGrane et al, 2017; Huijsmans et al, 2021).

Again, it seems as though urban residents are the ones pushing for change towards sustainable welfare. They are more supportive in the cases of four out of five eco-social policies – that is, the policies of working time reduction, basic income, meat and wealth taxation – even though there are only statistically significant differences between the urban and rural residents concerning the three last-mentioned policies. Urban residents' attitudes can thus be seen as expressions of 'emergence' with some potential of 'transformation'. By contrast, the attitudes expressed by rural residents are best understood as being in line with 'inertia'. Overall, however, when considering the urban sample in isolation but also when contrasting the urban sample with the rural sample, there are large shares that are reluctant towards all five policies, indicating that these results point to stability (that is, 'inertia') with some glimpses of change towards sustainable welfare (that is, 'transformation' or 'emergence'). To arrive at a deeper understanding of these attitude expressions, the following section addresses the fundamental and often unconscious traits of people's dispositions, which strongly shape and determine their position on the eco-social spectrum.

Eco-social dispositions within the Swedish population

Attitudes are the 'front end' of what people think and feel. Their answers and reactions to survey questions and statements make their inner dispositions visible to us. Because expressing inner beliefs and dispositions to the outside world is context-sensitive, attitudes are often variable and short term. For example, a person generally favouring environmental regulation (the person's disposition) may, in one situation, oppose a carbon tax (attitude), for example if it is regressive, and in another situation, support it, for example during an economic boom.

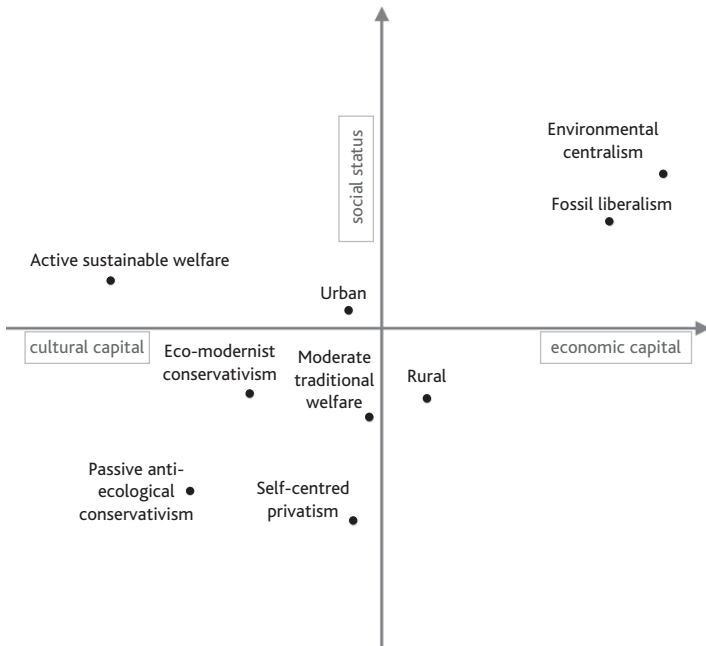
Hence, when studying a population's stances towards a broad and long-term project such as sustainable welfare, it makes sense also to consider the 'back end': people's more fundamental and stable dispositions and their typical patterns – in Bourdieu's terminology, their habitus (Bourdieu, 1993).

Bourdieu understands the habitus as a system of structured and, at the same time, structuring dispositions in terms of thoughts, perceptions, expressions, beliefs and actions. Social agents can make a difference, but their actions are limited by their historical periods and social conditions (Bourdieu, 1993; Koch, 2020). The habitus's traits (or dispositions) are acquired during socialisation in the family and the education system and are presumed to be relatively durable. They thus outlast political or economic conjunctures and constitute an objective limitation to capabilities and possibilities of creating societal alternatives. As an internalised product of the social structures that conditioned it, habitus provides us with a sensibility towards these structures and the options these include and exclude. The result is a sort of social orientation, by which the occupants of a given position in social space are guided towards sociocultural and political practices that suit them (Fritz et al, 2021).

Though the capacity of people to act and initiate social change is more or less limited due to different positions in social space and corresponding dispositions, the habitus always involves an element of spontaneity. According to Bourdieu (2000), the chance that the customary correspondence between structure, habitus and practice breaks depends upon the existence of a crisis of the very social structures the habitus originated from. We consider the current climate emergency a situation in which society's economic, political, cultural and symbolic structures are undergoing a transition process. Thus, transformational change becomes a possibility (Koch, 2020b). More than 60 survey items measure attitudes towards climate change, energy preferences and ecological consciousness, opinions on social policy, benefits and services, redistribution and basic human values. On this empirical basis, we empirically

identified seven habitus types in Sweden about eco-social topics. To reflect that habitus types are socially embedded and specific for social positions (see [Chapter 2](#)), we constructed a model of social space following Bourdieu's conception of economic and cultural capital as determinants of the two axes of this space: the vertical axis reflects power, privileges and social status as the amount of economic and cultural capital combined, and the horizontal axis represents the foundation on which this social status is based. On the left this foundation is cultural capital in the first place; on the right it is rather economic capital (for all details of this analysis, see [Fritz et al, 2021](#)). The study was based on the whole sample, which allowed us to compare urban and rural residents.

Figure 5.5: Habitus in the space of social positions (urban and rural residents plotted)



Source: Calculations based on own research

In summary, the habitus can be regarded as the incorporated practices of actors that reproduce existing norms and values. As such, it is shaped by and in concurrence with people's social position and contributes to stabilising the unsustainable and socially unfair status quo (inertia). Yet habitus can also facilitate the questioning of the established material and symbolic order – be it gradually by demanding reforms in specific sectors (emergence) or fundamentally by calling for profound and fundamental change of societal institutions and modes of living (transformation) – if and when this order is caught up in a crisis and previously developed future aspirations are starting to be perceived as unrealistic.

Three habitus groups of 'inertia'

In our empirical material, the three habitus groups – *passive anti-ecological conservatism*, *self-centred privatism* and *fossil liberalism* – either uphold the status quo or favour a societal change in a direction other than towards sustainable welfare. Beyond the mostly negative attitudes that these groups feature concerning the selected eco-social policies described earlier, we now turn to deeper-lying and specific traits of inertia, which further help us understand their political position takings towards and against sustainable welfare.

Passive anti-ecological conservatism (n = 143, 10 per cent of the sample (S) of which 69.9 per cent live in urban areas (U))

A rejection of ecological and social justice concerns characterises this habitus. Respondents with this habitus often live in rural spaces and do not feel affected by climate change. They refuse climate policies and are oriented towards the short term and against state interventions. The position of passive anti-ecological conservatism in social space (Figure 5.5) indicates a disadvantaged position with low incomes and low to medium educational degrees. Moreover, persons with this habitus are

older and more religious than the average population. Their political preferences reflect a reluctance towards societal change: support for socially and/or ecologically progressive parties (Greens, Social Democrats, Left Party, Liberal) is rare, while voting for the Sweden Democrats (a right-wing party) and political disinterest is widespread. There is generally low involvement and interest in public affairs and civil society (low incidence of organisation memberships and lack of willingness for political action).

Self-centred privatism (n = 108, S: 8 per cent/U: 68.5 per cent)

Similar to the first habitus, there is a low interest in broader political and societal issues, with concern instead of focusing on personal and private matters. Self-centred privatism is characterised by a general lack of universalism: ecological as care for nature and the environment, and social as being helpful to others and flying the flag of fairness and equality. Persons with this habitus hold the lowest educational degrees, earn low to average incomes and often live in rural areas. Older persons, men and skilled and unskilled workers are over-represented. Politically, there is a clear preference for the right and a reluctance towards personal political engagement, such as joining a demonstration.

Fossil liberalism (n = 146, S: 10 per cent/U: 79.5 per cent)

This habitus rejects renewable energy and prefers to stick to fossilism. It combines a liberal market orientation, animosity towards climate and welfare policies and a lack of trust in societal institutions. Fossil liberalism is a predominantly male habitus (over 70 per cent), with persons living in urban areas and with higher incomes likewise being over-represented. Small business owners are more widespread, as are 'independent' and 'technical' work logics. Politically, this cluster holds views closest to the right and party preferences for the Christian Democrats, Moderates and Sweden Democrats.

In summary, the habitus that stands for the option of ‘inertia’ in Sweden makes up 28 per cent of the respondents in the sample and illustrates different aspects of rejecting socio-ecological change: a disinterest in societal matters in general, a more self-centred disposition, which does not care so much about others and nature as well as a somewhat reckless and unsocial understanding of individual freedom (libertarian). While they all share a clear political right orientation – perhaps unsurprisingly given that maintaining the current mode of living is the goal – the three variants differ in their average positions in social space: the first two habitus types are located in the most disadvantaged regions of social space and also in rural areas. The reaction is not rebellion or innovation but a retreat or an alienation from society (Merton, 1938). Fossil liberalism, in contrast, is located in the upper-right social space, indicating decent amounts of capital primarily based on income. Since transformation involving improvements in social justice and ecological care threatens established business models and corresponding lifestyles typical of this habitus, the status quo is actively defended.

Three habitus varieties of ‘emergence’

Three further habitus groups – *environmental centralism*, *eco-modernist conservatism* and *moderate traditional welfare* – all support some degree of change, either to an environmental or welfare agenda, but not combined. In what follows, we provide more profound knowledge on the groups previously categorised under the ‘red’ or ‘green’ crowding out labels. Their habitus types are somewhat contradictory as they constitute mixes of social-ecological continuity and change.

Environmental centralism (n = 306, S: 21 per cent/U: 76.8 per cent)

While this habitus rejects public welfare policies, there is also some awareness of climate change, and state action in this policy area is appreciated. Persons with this habitus actively

support the capitalist economic order and social structure. This is, however, not understood in the sense of individualised market liberalism but accompanied by a very high trust in societal institutions such as the government, political parties and trade unions. Environmental centralism is widespread among people of average age, those born in Sweden and those living in cities. Incomes are very high, and work positions in the higher service class are common. The combination of market liberal and somewhat traditional welfare leanings makes this habitus a centralist one, reflected in party preferences for the Centre and Liberal parties. Political extremes (Left Party and Sweden Democrats) are rejected. Environmental centralism supports environment-friendly lifestyles such as reducing eating meat, stopping flying and investing in environmental measures such as solar panels.

Eco-modernist conservatism (n = 234, S: 16 per cent/U: 64.5 per cent)

This habitus features moderate support for universalism and sustainable welfare. More distinct characteristics are a strong liberal market orientation, distrust in institutions and support for ecological modernisation regarding a transition to renewable energy. Education, income and socioeconomic status are about average. Persons with an eco-modernist conservative habitus are slightly older than average. They are often born in Sweden and usually live in rural areas. This habitus further consists of nearly 60 per cent women and slightly more religious persons than average. Politically, it is located on the right, with voting preferences for the Christian Democrats, Moderates and Sweden Democrats. Their support for climate policies is average regarding personal contributions like increased taxes but rather high concerning renewable energy and green electricity – measures that do not directly hurt financially. Support for welfare policies is average. Overall, the eco-modernist conservative habitus approves of environmental protection – so long as one's own lifestyle can remain the same.

Moderate traditional welfare (n = 227, S: 16 per cent/U: 70 per cent)

This habitus is only ostensibly characterised by a disposition of ‘red crowding out’ (Jakobsson et al, 2018; see earlier), where environmental concerns are less important than welfare issues. Though this reflects a difference in the relative importance of both goals, it does not imply that environmental concerns are low in absolute terms. Actually, moderate traditional welfare supports eco-social concerns instead. It includes a disposition of responsibility and care and universalist values. Support for climate policies is above average. Moreover, this habitus reflects a traditional social democratic mindset in which caring and solidarity are as crucial as the submission to hierarchical structures and the notion that welfare is not ‘for free’ – individuals (instead of the state or companies) are held responsible for welfare and climate change action. Moderate traditional welfare features the highest share of persons not born in Sweden (25 per cent), and over 80 per cent of people with this habitus belong to some official religion. It is spread equally over urban and rural parts of the country. Politically, there is a preference for the Social Democrats and a dislike of the Christian Democrats and the Left, taking positions somewhat left (in a traditional sense) from environmental centralism.

The habitus types of ‘emergence’ are widespread among the majority of respondents (and therefore probably also in Sweden, given that the data is almost representative). 53 per cent favour a partial, incremental change in specific fields or areas of society. All three manifestations of ‘emergence’ described earlier support some gradual shift towards ecological sustainability but are hesitant about more profound structural transformations. The first wants the state, markets and consumers to work together for ecological modernisation but is against improvements in social justice. The second focuses on renewable energy and rejects any other possible changes. The third is actually close to supporting a transformation but somewhat hampered by hierarchical thinking and power orientation, which conflicts

with participative democratic ideas prominent in most approaches to ideas of social-ecological transformations. Politically, the three ‘emergence’ habitus share a middle position, sometimes shifting a bit to the right and sometimes to the left. This makes sense, as the political middle ground should be broad enough to sustain niches for developments that slowly replace old ideas with new ones. Concerning their positions in social space, two of the ‘emergence’ habitus can be considered parts of the lower middle class: eco-modernist conservatism and moderate traditional welfare. Environmental centralism, by contrast, is a habitus of the dominating class in the upper-right social space with preferences for technological modernisation and ideas of green capitalist growth.

One habitus of ‘transformation’

Finally, we identified one habitus oriented towards social-ecological ‘transformation’: active sustainable welfare. Future hopes and aspirations are no longer associated with the continuance of the ancien régime, and they should be overcome via active support of a social-ecological agenda.

Active sustainable welfare (n = 265, S: 19 per cent/U: 79.2 per cent)

This habitus combines high support for social welfare and redistributive policies, universalism, long-term orientations, dispositions of care and responsibility and a high ecological consciousness. Moreover, it is characterised by high political activism, whether political consumer behaviour, membership in organisations or non-institutionalised actions such as joining a demonstration. It assembles the highly educated, young people and persons living in urban areas. There is an over-representation of women (over 57 per cent) and the highest share of non-religious persons (42 per cent). Incomes are somewhat below the average. Bourdieu may have located this habitus in the ‘dominated-dominant’ class characterised

by a maximum of cultural but merely average amounts of economic capital. Politically, it takes a clear left position at the opposite pole from fossil liberalism and passive anti-ecological conservatism with clear preferences for the Greens and the Left Party.

The only transformative habitus occurs more frequently among politically left-oriented persons and in the position of the educated middle class in social space (Figure 5.5). This is unsurprising as new and radical ideas often develop in intellectual circles first. A comparison of the prevalence of the seven habitus types along urban and rural spaces helps to go some way in answering the issue of whether such intellectual and progressive centres are, at the same time, urban hubs. In descending order, the three most common urban habitus types are fossil liberalism, active sustainable welfare and environmental centralism. Since we find a representative for 'inertia', 'emergence' and 'transformation' in urban contexts, these may be understood as hotspots of society where all kinds of dispositions, lifestyles and political actions can be found and sometimes clash. The fact that cities serve as innovation labs indicates that the only habitus of transformation – active sustainable welfare – is distinctively urban: four in five respondents with this habitus live in urban areas.

Conversely, the most frequent rural habitus is that of eco-modernist conservatism. Although people are generally more conservative and have less trust in societal institutions in rural areas, they are not against pursuing ecological goals, as the relatively high approval rates for renewable energies indicate. While the two most common urban habitus types are environmental centralism and active sustainable welfare, eco-modernist conservatism, environmental centralism and moderate traditional welfare are most prevalent in rural surroundings. The likelihood of forming political alliances thus differs between urban and rural parts of the country. In cities, the proponents of green growth and environmental modernisation, as well as post-growth and social-ecological

transformation, are the two most prominent groups and would be the structurally most likely candidates for an electoral reform coalition. In rural areas, a broader compromise seems more likely as positions are generally less radical and, in principle, reconcilable in a somewhat socially balanced ecological modernisation strategy. Though this may be insufficient to address the ecological crisis, it could be a structural base for political moves in this direction.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored public attitudes regarding the sustainable welfare of urban and rural residents in Sweden. We first studied general discourses and ideas about sustainable welfare and then the support for selected eco-social policies such as working time reduction, maximum and basic incomes, wealth taxation and basic income. The attitude perspective was finally supplemented by a more in-depth analysis of dispositions relative to sustainable welfare in the Bourdieusean tradition and a discussion about how these are linked to political practices.

Those parts of the population most prone to social-ecological transformations ('transformation') display support for values and policies on welfare and the environment simultaneously. Within this 'avant-garde' group, urban residents dominate while rural residents are more likely to reject welfare and environmental policies and display a somewhat conservative unwillingness to change the status quo; in other words, 'inertia' in combination with sometimes romanticising views of the past. Attitudes related to either preferences of welfare over the environment ('red crowding out') or the opposite ('green crowding out') can be understood as representations of a societal silo-based logic and thus holding on to the status quo ('inertia') whereby urban residents give precedence to the environment and rural ones to welfare. The generally more significant popularity of sustainable welfare ideas among the urban population is also reflected in the support for particular

eco-social policies. Except for a maximum income (where the support is the same) and wealth taxation, all suggested policies enjoy higher support from urban residents than rural residents. Yet, at the same time, large shares – both among the rural and the urban population – are sceptical towards all five policies. Hence, though we have found (especially in cities) some indications for gradual and transformational change (‘emergence’ and ‘transformation’), ‘inertia’ is likewise a common structural feature (especially but not only in rural areas).

The relational in-depth analysis of over 60 survey items comprising attitudes towards climate change, welfare and social policy, and basic human values generated seven habitus types that occupy the eco-social space in Sweden. One of these (active sustainable welfare) displays dispositions inclined to a broad and deep social-ecological ‘transformation’. Three habitus types (environmental centralism, eco-modernist conservatism and moderate traditional welfare) can be understood as combinations of ‘conservative’ and ‘reformative’ traits concerning sustainable welfare but display hallmarks of ‘emergence’. The last three habitus types (passive-ecological conservatism, self-centred privatism and fossil liberalism) are located furthest from any transformational mood and feature a range of social-ecological ‘inertia’ characteristics.

Again, urban space is an arena (or hotspot) where different groups struggle for other meanings and principles of societal influence and domination on relatively small amounts of space. Swedish cities assemble habitus representatives of ‘inertia’, ‘emergence’ and ‘transformation’, while the transformational habitus type is under-represented in the more rural parts of the country. Though a political alliance for social-ecological change between environmental centralism and active sustainable welfare is structurally possible, it will most likely emerge in urban settings.

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Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, we return to this book's main aims and questions: whether Swedish cities have overcome the separation between environmental and welfare concerns that have shaped public administration, civil society organising and public debates and entered pathways towards sustainable welfare in urban governance. Theories of inertia, emergence and transformation shed light on factors that drive or hamper the development towards sustainable welfare at the urban level. The chapter addresses the interaction effects across the sites of local government, civil society and public attitudes to explore patterns of stability and change within urban governance systems. The analysis enables us to determine if current practices and activities are temporary or indicate emerging or enduring changes towards sustainable welfare in urban governance systems.

Inertia and path protection

The challenges posed by climate change represent the type of external shock that theories of inertia anticipate will be transformative. Hirvilammi et al (2023) aptly state: 'Whereas 20th-century social policies were designed to meet the

challenges of industrialisation, urbanisation and globalisation, 21st-century social policies need to counter the inequalities and conflicts emerging from climate and other environmental policies' (p 1). Although social policy scholars tend to focus on the risks of the past (Johansson et al, 2016), sustainability analysts have looked more into the risks to come, such as climate change, biodiversity losses and access to fresh water (Rockström et al, 2023). Terms like 'climate crisis' (Ripple et al, 2020) and 'climate emergency' (Gills et al, 2020) underscore the urgency of the current situation, necessitating immediate and drastic action. Once a planetary boundary has been crossed, an uncertain and potentially catastrophic path lies ahead. Despite the need for emerging and transformative changes, what is sometimes forgotten is that these must be implemented within existing social systems. This is why institutionalists often say that history matters and that previous institutional solutions enable and constrain societies' abilities to enter a new path (for example, Pierson, 2004). An interesting reflection relates to how societies handled the recent COVID-19 crisis. For instance, Hogan et al (2022) found that the pandemic served as a catalyst for change in areas where policy change had already begun, yet not in others. This suggests that external shocks, like a pandemic, do not cause a change in themselves.

Welfare and environmental concerns are highly institutionalised policy domains and have enjoyed extensive public support. Sweden has, for instance, a long history of redistributive social policies (Johansson and Panican, 2016; Blomqvist and Palme, 2020). Aside from its history and tradition of a social democratic type of welfare state regime, the country also has a tradition of environmental ambitions. In 1972, it hosted the first UN Conference on the Human Environment, and the resulting Stockholm Declaration placed environmental issues at the forefront of international concerns. These activities paved the way for the current sustainability discourse, as the conference linked economic growth and pollution of the air, water and oceans to the well-being of

people worldwide. This was later followed by the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987) and the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and Agenda 2030 (UNGA, 2015). Though one may imagine that these historical conditions could have facilitated a smooth transition towards sustainable welfare, our study shows that Swedish cities have difficulty shaking themselves free of history (David, 2001). Although local actors support change, inertia appears to be the dominant pattern, albeit with glimpses of emergence.

Inertia is evident in how local governments handle environmental and welfare concerns, and actors tend to reproduce institutions. A possible reason for this is that the imagined costs of path reproduction outweigh the potential benefits of transformation (Mahoney, 2000). Of course, such calculations are rather shortsighted, underestimating the actual costs associated with climate change further down the line. Though local governments have, in principle, extensive mandate and capacity to act alongside central state or regional authorities, civil servants tend to stick to their domains. As a form of utilitarian practice, they protect their professional investments and benefit from knowledge specialisation. Our research finds the SDGs a source of inspiration but have not yet led to integration across policy domains. Instead, central political (and legal) regulation constitutes a barrier to policy integration and fosters continued silo thinking – and silo doing – in local policy making and urban planning. Civil servants moreover lack the proper language and terms to think and act outside established policies and programmes. Although local governments installed cross-cutting sustainability offices, their ephemeral nature indicates implementation deficits and stability of established solutions. Patterns of inertia thus prevail despite local governments being led by red-green political majorities at the point of investigation.

Inertia can likewise be observed in civil society sites. Civil society actors embraced the discourse on sustainability and

the SDGs, encouraging them to act across environmental and welfare domains. However, our research demonstrates that frame integration is risky since organisations benefit from organising on particularistic claims. A unique and clear-cut cause is central to rallying members and gaining public attention and support. Staying within established frame distinctions enhances resource hoarding and the potential for political influence. Practices of path protection appear particularly present among established organisations as they have invested the most into the present path and, thus, are keen to maintain existing distinctions between organisations and movements to a greater extent than newcomers into the field. A key concern for civil society organisations is to engage in advocacy work and influence policy processes and outcomes. Due to the separation of policy domains, organisations are, thus, valued for the ability to represent ‘their’ question or group. Legitimacy comes from staying with their cause rather than engaging in frame alignment or cooperation with a different segment of local civil society.

Patterns of inertia finally dominate public attitudes. Attitudes linked to ‘green’ and ‘red crowding out’ follow the fault lines of environmental and welfare divides, well recognised in previous literature. In that sense, green and red crowding out are expressions of the silo-based logic of keeping environmental and welfare concerns separate and holding on to the status quo. People with a low capacity to handle social risks prefer welfare concerns, whereas people who already have their basic human needs satisfied rather favour climate and environmental concerns. While socioeconomic divides explain support for (or against) environmental and welfare concerns, the urban–rural divide has a more decisive bearing on those who do not support either. Rural residents are, in that respect, even more in favour of the status quo, as there is a tendency to express support for neither environmental nor welfare concerns. The combined and widespread support for ‘red crowding out’, ‘green crowding out’ and ‘rejection’ indicates limited support

for a sustainable welfare path, especially among groups outside the urban realm.

Emergence and path advocacy

Emergence stands in contrast to inertia and core differences are summarised in [Table 6.1](#). Instead of continuing with what is already there, new ideas and emerging practices point to the seeds of change and patterns of experimentation outside established institutional orders. Emergence can occur inside or outside established systems – theories of incremental change stress change from within linked to concepts like displacement, layering or conversion. Emergence is, in this respect, considered on top of rules and norms already in place ([Mahoney and Thelen, 2010](#)). Murphy (2023) stresses that emergence should not be considered an element of the future, but is embedded into the present and emerges from current activities and tensions. Similarly, concepts like path advocates and path entrepreneurs stress change as taking place inside, alongside or outside existing institutional orders ([Djelic and Quack, 2007](#)). Although emergence thus marks the start of something new, due to its contingent nature the road to change is not evident, as emerging ideas and practices might fade away and soon be forgotten.

Emergence in local government takes place inside public agencies through a paradoxical combination of grand visions and specific practices. Ideas of sustainability are explicit in cities' visionary documents, master plans and long-term planning documents. Such grand ideas have become an institutionalised part of urban visionary practices, and the combined challenge of ecological and social concerns has found its way into strategic urban planning documents. This implies that integrating environmental and social sustainability is central to how planners imagine cities as attractive places for future residents. The cities investigated in this book have even further ambitions as they signed up to become climate-neutral

Table 6.1: Drivers of stability or change at the urban level

	Stability (inertia)	Change (emergence and transformation)
Local government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy processes and instruments follow silo logics • Politics matters (national versus local political factors) • Absence of terms for policy integration • Domain protection on expertise and discourses • Inability to use local capacity and red-green local majorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SDG goals and discourses • Urban vision • Specialised practices in local projects and urban experimentation • Embedded path advocates and entrepreneurs inside government administrations • Size of administrations
Civil society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rewards (policy influence) from acting within silos • Frame distinctions justify organisation as unique • Established CSOs as path guardians • Organisational closure: resources lock-in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Climate justice discourse • Justice frame of climate change • Urban size (more manageable in smaller cities)
Public attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socioeconomic factors matter • Reluctance to change, low interest in societal issues, privatism • Low trust (in institutions), low membership in CSOs (feedback effect) • Retreat from society, alienation, status quo defended 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value-based factors • Urban–rural divide

cities before 2030. The European Commission selected them as part of the European Mission for Climate Neutral and Smart Cities (European Commission, 2022), acting as role models for an urban pathway towards sustainable welfare.

Visions of these kinds have, however, not been fully implemented and remain, for the time being, layered on top of existing rules and regulations (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). At the same time, we find sustainable welfare experimentation in well-defined policy strategies such as urban greening strategies or in specific projects. These experiments serve as niches for introducing new ideas, practices and scripts that otherwise would fall short. However, while ideas and practices on sustainable welfare appear plausible when expressed in grand urban visions *or* within a specific project and strategy, it is a much more complex and challenging endeavour to implement these visions into the formal steering and administration of environmental and welfare agencies. However, one of the cities studied in this book (Lund) has managed to fully implement a sustainable welfare strategy across levels of local administration. These policies are in their first phase, and it remains to be seen whether they will fade away, as in the other three cities, or potentially provide an integrated solution across policy domains.

Civil society is often considered a site where new ideas emerge, which is also true regarding sustainable welfare. We find claims of social justice a core element in civil society actors' attempts to align environmental and welfare frames. Social justice issues have long been a cornerstone in welfare organisations' framing of their concerns. Environmental organisations and movements have adopted this view, increasingly expressing concern over environmental justice and who will bear the burden of climate change mitigation. Radical actors like Extinction Rebellion (XR) fill the role of path entrepreneurs as they manage to find allies among welfare civil society organisations that likewise mobilise on social justice. Framing sustainable welfare as a social justice issue serves as a

new master frame, but also contradicts other justice frames, such as ‘jobs vs environment’ (Räthzel and Uzzel, 2011). For instance, ‘Whose social justice?’ and ‘On what grounds?’ is particularly relevant for large parts of the labour movement, making integration with the environmental movement difficult. Established environmental organisations have similar concerns. They focus on environmental protection and react against the emerging ideas of a broader justice movement. Individuals, however, act across organisational divides as some engage in both environmental *and* welfare organisations, for instance, through dual membership or participation in welfare *and* environmental protests. Hence, these individuals acted simultaneously as supporters and bearers of emerging ideas of sustainable welfare.

This emerging justice frame fills the same function as expressions of visions in urban planning documents. It mobilises people and allows them to think (and act) differently. We find a similar pattern concerning emerging practices linked to sustainable welfare, mainly taking place in a specialised and small-scale format (for example urban gardening, repair shops or cafés, with the attempt to foster social and environmental goods). Urban residents and activists seek new ways of doing things through these practices. However, an inherent scale problem is embedded in sustainable welfare experimentation (Clark and Johansson, 2016). Like most civic organisations, emerging practices rely on the volunteering efforts of activists and committed citizens and contingent funding arrangements. There is an evident risk that emerging practices will not translate into long-term solutions, for instance, due to a lack of mechanisms for upscaling and integrating successful experiments into broader urban planning and policy frameworks.

Urban residents are often an avant-garde, willing to embrace change and holders of more tolerant stances concerning other social groups, with less climate scepticism and stronger environmental beliefs (Gimpel et al, 2020; Huijsmans et al, 2021; Weckroth and Ala-Mantila, 2022). This is partly due

to urban residents generally being more educated than their counterparts in suburbs, smaller cities or rural areas and partly to the place effects linked to living in places with mixed social groups (Kearns et al, 2014). Our research demonstrates that urban residents dominate among those who simultaneously express support for welfare and the environment. Moreover, they display dispositions inclined to a broad and deep social-ecological ‘transformation’, including high ecological consciousness and support for social welfare and redistributive policies.

While these individuals form an urban avant-garde promoting transformative change, also other groups express support for change, yet more in the style of emerging attitudes. Across categories like synergy/reject and green/red crowding out, we find support patterns for gradual change towards more ecological sustainability in general, but more hesitant about profound structural transformations. Among the habitus groups explored in previous chapters, we identified three positions promoting ecological modernisation without improvements in social justice, support for energy transitions without additional changes and support for authority-driven expert change without including the participation of citizens. These groups have moderate support for welfare policies and the environment in common without directly pushing for change in both.

Paths and counter-paths

Emergence is contingent, and the lasting qualities of ideas and practices linked to sustainable welfare remain to be observed. Much of the empirical findings in this book suggest that changes are merely ephemeral, that inertia dominates and aside from some emerging ideas and practices, the silo logic prevails. However, theories of inertia, emergence and transformation mainly address changes within one system and less about how patterns of stability and change relate to other transformation processes. Polanyi’s theory of transformation and the distinction

between movement and counter-movement takes a different approach (Polanyi, 2001). Although his example concerned establishing a free market, he observed how market construction caused parallel reactions among socialist and social democratic parties, trade unions and social movements attempting to de-commodify and (re-)socialise the market.

Movements and counter-movements are inseparable entities of the same process of transformation, clearly seen in contemporary politicisation of environmental and climate policies. Since the Brundtland Report, policy makers have expressed the need to transform economic, social and cultural systems to handle the risks and challenges associated with climate and environmental change. The full institutionalisation of such an approach occurred with the United Nations' SDGs and, more recently, a range of reforms taken by national governments and the European Union. The European Green Deal, for example, prioritises the climate crisis and sets 2050 as the target for decarbonising European economies (Sabato et al, 2023; Sabato and Mandelli, 2024). Throughout Europe, and especially in Sweden, we can however observe a political counter-mobilisation against sustainability and sustainable welfare arrangements. Progressive climate change policies have become an area of extensive conflict, significantly as nationalist and populist parties mobilise voters against the changes that scientists consider necessary.

The current Swedish conservative government has de-prioritised strategies linked to sustainable development and implemented legislations and political reforms that will increase carbon emissions, primarily by reducing taxes on fossil fuels and implementing changes in the required composition of biofuels in petrol and diesel. Consequently, Sweden risks not living up to its EU commitments for 2030 and, thus, being fined according to the Effort Sharing Regulation. While political reforms as initiated by the Swedish government illustrate a political denial of what scientists consider necessary (for example, Dunlap and Brulle, 2020), these changes can

be interpreted as attempts to explore a counter-path, be it of a new kind, or as a return to the ‘tried and tested’ path before sustainability came on the agenda. For instance, the term ‘Petro populism’ suggests using natural resources to gain popular support, instilling doubts about climate change as a crisis (Matsen et al, 2012). While sceptical interlocutors may regard such policies as acts of deterrence, we tend to interpret them as expressions of support for continuing the fossil-based path and a form of sustainable welfare denialism (Brulle, 2020).

Polanyi’s movement and counter-movement approach follows the urban–rural divide. Patterns of emergence have a distinct urban dimension, at least concerning the sites of civil society and public opinion. We find a striking correlation between the emergence of the – now international – Fridays for Futures movement and large mobilisations against increasing fuel prices. The story of Greta Thunberg is well known as she decided to demand forcible climate action from the politicians through a school strike outside of the Swedish parliament (Emilsson et al, 2020). At the same time, the French yellow vest movement started to emerge as a protest against social injustices and, among other things, contained manifestations against climate change measures, often linked to gas and energy prices (Clifton and de la Broise, 2020; Guerra et al, 2020; Shultziner and Kornblit, 2020). In the Swedish context the so-called Petrol Uprising (Bränsleupproret 2.0) took off alongside the Fridays for Futures movement (Johansson and Scaramuzzino, 2023; Hylander et al, 2024). Organised in smaller cities, and on parking lots for shops selling car supplies it mobilised public discontent against environmentally friendly sustainability policies supposedly benefitting those in cities. Like Fridays for Futures, the Petrol Uprising gained public support and attention. Whereas the former managed to mobilise people to enter the streets, the latter gained 630,000 members on Facebook – a membership exceeding that of national political parties and most trade unions in Sweden.

Public scepticism of climate change is a well-observed phenomenon (Krange et al, 2019). Dijkstra et al (2019) suggest the need to consider the geographies of discontent to capture present social and political cleavages. Our research strongly underscores such an approach, as urban residents support sustainable welfare more than people in smaller cities or rural areas. In that respect, urban residents can be interpreted as advocates for and bearers of a sustainable welfare path. In contrast, people living in rural residences are more inclined to express support for the status quo. Hence, both groups can be interpreted as path advocates, but for different paths. As the GAL-TAN scale predicted (Inglehart, 1997), urban residents hold more Green, Alternative and Libertarian values. They are better positioned to embrace change processes such as globalisation, migration or sustainable welfare. On the contrary, semi-urban and rural residents tend to hold more Traditional, Authoritarian and Nationalist values. Our result of a strong correlation between rejecting sustainable welfare and rural residence supports this characterisation. Support for a sustainable welfare path can rather be found among people with high education and socioeconomic positions who want to embrace change. Our study also finds widespread political passivity tied to groups rejecting environmental and welfare concerns (Emilsson et al, 2024). Rejectors feature a general reluctance to societal change and disinterest in politics, including personal political action – an attitude that is particularly prevalent among men.

The term ‘rejection’ thus has a double meaning. It may first be applied to consider people’s position taking against sustainable welfare. However, it can also express support for a different path that avoids or denies the cultural trauma that climate change is likely associated with (Brulle and Norgaard, 2019, p 887). Although our research finds some support for a sustainable welfare agenda, its rejection is also part of the puzzle. In a Polanyian sense, we can interpret rejection and synergy as two paths on how societies can handle the climate

crisis. Today, they both constitute viable options in contrast to inertia. However, it is essential to remember that counter-movements are highly context-specific. Hence, we need more research into how the social, cultural, political and economic structures shape counter-mobilisations outside a Social Democratic welfare state.

Conclusion

Climate and environmental change on the one hand and social inclusion and individual welfare on the other present significant challenges to societies and their modes of governance. Given the established role of human activity as a crucial driver of climate change, the reform of economic, social, political and cultural systems is imperative to ensure welfare within planetary boundaries (Persson et al, 2022). The concept of sustainable welfare points to a visionary state where societies will have found solutions to such challenges and where ecological and social issues are mutually resolved. However, the ability to embark on a sustainable welfare trajectory occurs within existing social systems and is correspondingly enhanced and hampered by previous institutional solutions.

Terms like climate emergence (Hirvilammi et al, 2023) and the widespread evidence on the need for societies to change (Rockström et al, 2023) serve as the ground for simultaneously interpreting our results as signs of ‘hope’ (emergence and transformation) and ‘despair’ (inertia) concerning Swedish cities’ ability to handle the social-ecological challenges and transform urban governance systems. Signs of hope are primarily associated with the role of cities in societal transformation processes. As epicentres of human activity, cities are catalysts for exploring and developing new ideas, practices and innovative ways of addressing climate change. The comparative approach explored in this book finds that, despite differences, Swedish cities similarly adapt and mitigate environmental and welfare-related challenges. Local governments explore sustainable

CONCLUSION

welfare linked to urban visions and urban experimentation. Residents and civil society actors pressure decision makers to lead the way towards sustainable welfare policies as a sort of 'progressive avant-garde'. However, the extent to which this will turn into a new model of sustainable urban governance remains to be seen. In any case, there are strong forces inside local city governments and among urban civil society actors and urban residents willing and pushing for pathways to sustainable welfare.

Signs of hope exist, however, in conjunction with signs of despair. The emerging changes we find mainly build on existing institutions as a form of incremental rather than transformative change. Processes of emergence and transformation are hampered by practices of path protection or even rejection. While cities function as sites for change, rural areas serve as places for stability and status quo. Most empirical evidence across the cities of Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö points to patterns of inertia across urban sites. Our research identifies factors that hamper the turn towards emergence, and, even more so, transformation, which is crucial for urban researchers and planners. Urban actors with vested interests in the established path tend to oppose emerging ideas and practices, challenging the views of institutional entrepreneurs, movements and progressive citizens. Despite, or possibly due to, Sweden's extensive policy ambitions about environmental and welfare concerns, actors have difficulty and sometimes display unwillingness to break with history.

It would, however, be a mistake to consider stability and change as mutually exclusive processes. Our book indicates the relevance of combining theories of inertia, emergence and transformation and, hence, the importance of going beyond the theoretical divide that has kept welfare state and sustainability scholarship apart. From this perspective, sustainable welfare appears as a messy, open and highly contingent transformation process without an established direction. At the same time, its contested nature has somewhat paradoxically clarified

its contours. While counter-mobilisation practices can be interpreted as a sign of transformation failure, in a Polanyian sense, they also function as path clarification. Expressions of denial, rejection and opposition towards environmental and/or welfare concerns can be read to constitute explorations of an alternative vision of societal development. Societies in general, and cities in particular, find themselves at the crossroads of either entering a path that embraces climate, environmental and ecological challenges, including the social, cultural and political risks that come with it, or another path that misrecognises these challenges and the corresponding risks. This however lies beyond the scope of this book and the future will reveal which path societies choose to take.

Notes

Chapter 5

- ¹ In these studies, somewhat different urban/rural variables were used: either self-defined residency or where the urban category also includes actual residency in medium-sized cities in addition to larger cities like Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö.
- ² $X^2(3, n = 1471) = 36.48, p < .001$.
- ³ The meat tax policy: $X^2(2, n = 1422) = 19.73, p < .001$; the working time reduction policy: $X^2(2, n = 1391) = 9.47, p < .05$; and the basic income policy: $X^2(2, n = 1336) = 9.30, p < .05$.

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Index

A

- active sustainable welfare 94–96
- Agenda 21, 35
 - see also* local government
- Agenda 2030 36, 39–40, 50, 59
- Arbetarnas bildningsförbund* (ABF, the Workers' Educational Association) 61–63
- attitudes, public 13, 73–75, 86, 96–97, 101, 103, 106, 109
- eco-social agenda 76–81
 - towards eco-social policies *see* eco-social policies
- environmental attitude 79, 96
- green crowding-out pattern 76–80, 91, 96, 101, 106
- and political ideology 79
- red crowding-out pattern 76–80, 91, 93, 96, 101, 106
- rejection pattern 74–76, 78–80, 89, 101–102, 106, 109, 111
- rural residents 12, 74, 76–77, 78, 79–80, 81, 83–86, 96, 97, 101, 109
- and sustainable welfare 75–76
- synergy pattern 11, 39, 43, 48, 50, 51, 76–78, 80, 106, 109
- urban residents 7, 11, 12, 14, 74–77, 79–86, 96–97, 105–106, 109
- as urban transformation
 - site 11–12
- welfare attitude 79, 96
- see also* dispositions, public

B

- basic income policy 81–82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 96
- Brundtland Report 107

C

- Centre Party 15
- change theories 21–22, 27, 102
- Christian Democratic Party 15
- cities
 - administrations 33, 41, 48, 50
 - councils 15, 32–34, 40
 - as experimentation sites 7–8
 - governors 32, 33
 - see also* emergence, concept of; inertia, concept of; transformation, concept of
- civil society 24, 52–54, 98, 100–101, 103, 104, 108, 111
- and environmental organisations 56–61
- and practices of sustainable welfare 68–70
- silos of 54–56
- and urban protests 64–68
- as urban transformation site 10–11
- and welfarists' on environmental issue 61–64
- climate change 2–4, 6, 7, 10, 12, 13, 28
- and civil society framings 52, 53, 56–65, 72
- and counter-paths 108–110

- and eco-social integration 33, 35, 36, 44–46
 - and path advocacy 104
 - and path protection 98–100
 - policies, progressive 107
 - and public attitudes and dispositions 87, 89, 91, 93, 97
 - public scepticism of 109
 - urban mobilisation on 64–66
 - Conservative Party 15
 - corporatist model of interest intermediation 55
 - counter-movement approach 22, 107, 108, 110
 - COVID-19 crisis 99
 - critical realism 25
 - cultural capital 88
- D**
- decarbonisation 3, 76, 107
 - degrowth transformation 25
 - dispositions 20, 73, 96, 97
 - and active sustainable welfare 94, 95
 - eco-social 86–89
 - and moderate traditional welfare 93
 - patterns of 74–75
 - self-centred 91
 - and urban residents 106
 - see also* attitude, public; habitus
 - doughnut economics 2–3
- E**
- ecological sustainability *see* eco-social integration
 - eco-modernist conservatism 92, 94, 95
 - economic capital 88, 95
 - eco-social agenda, policy goal support for 76–81
 - eco-social attitudes, typology of 74, 76–79
 - eco-social enterprises 69
 - eco-social integration 10, 33, 49–51
 - emerging, in projects and policy areas 41–43
 - local, case of 40–41
 - in policy strategies and municipal organisation 36–39
 - and synergies and localised issues 44–46
 - eco-social policies 6, 73–76, 89, 96–97
 - basic income 81–82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 96
 - maximum income 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 97
 - meat tax 81, 83, 84–85, 86
 - wealth tax 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 96, 97
 - working time reduction 81, 82–83, 84, 85, 86, 96
 - eco-social risks 4
 - Effort Sharing Regulation 107
 - emergence, concept of 26, 29, 71–72, 110, 111
 - and actors 22–24, 30, 100
 - and change 21–22, 27, 29–30
 - and civil society 24, 59, 60, 68–71, 102, 103, 108
 - and counter-paths 106–110
 - discourses and ideas 30
 - and eco-modernist conservatism 92, 97
 - and eco-social integration 33, 49, 73–74, 75, 97
 - environmental centralism 91–92, 97
 - habitus varieties of 91–94, 97
 - and local government 102, 103
 - moderate traditional welfare 93–94, 97
 - and niche construction 23
 - and path 22, 23–24, 106–110, 111
 - and path advocates 23–24, 71, 102–106
 - and path entrepreneurs 23–24
 - practices 30
 - and public attitudes 11, 73–75, 81, 95, 97, 103, 108
 - and public dispositions 86, 87, 89
 - theories 20–25, 27, 98
 - see also* inertia, concept of; transformation, concept of
 - entrepreneurs 23, 111
 - see also* path entrepreneurs

environmental centralism 91–92,
94, 97
European Green Deal 107
European Mission for Climate
Neutral and Smart Cities 104
expansory economic
model 3, 5
Extinction Rebellion 53,
59–60, 104

F

fossil liberalism 90–91, 95
Fridays for Future 14, 59, 108
Friends of the Earth 53, 56

G

GAL–TAN scale 109
GDP growth and environmental
resource use 3–4
glass ceiling, of environmental
states 12
Gothenburg 15, 34, 37, 39, 43,
46, 48, 50, 53, 65, 85
green crowding out pattern
76–80, 91, 96, 101, 106
green growth 3, 95
Green Party 15, 95
Green Strategy 43

H

habitus
concept of 87–89
groups, of inertia 89–91
habitual models, of
stability 19–20
in space of social positions 88
of transformation 94–96
varieties, of emergence 91–94
see also dispositions, public

I

incremental change, theory of
21–22, 27, 102
inertia, concept of 6, 29, 31, 106,
110, 111
and actors 18–19, 30, 100

and city administration 33
and civil society 70, 71,
100–101, 103
and discourses and ideas 29, 30
and eco-social integration 49,
50, 74, 97
and fossil liberalism 90, 91
habitus groups of 89–91, 97
and local government 100, 103
and passive anti-ecological
conservatism 89–90
and path dependency 17–19
and path protection 98–102
and policy drift 21
and practices 29, 30, 71
and public attitudes 11, 74–75,
81, 86, 95–97, 101, 103
and self-centred privatism 90, 91, 97
theories 17–20
and welfare states 18
see also emergence, concept of;
incremental change, theory
of; transformation, concept of
institutional approaches,
significance of 17–18
institutional entrepreneurs 30, 111
International Panel on Climate
Change (IPCC) 2

L

Left Party 15, 95
Liberal Party 15
local government 32–34, 43–48
and Agenda 2030 39–40
and eco-social integration
36–39, 40–43
and emergence 102, 103
and environmental
policies 34–36
and inertia 100, 103
and local social welfare 34–36
and transformation 9–10, 14, 103
as urban transformation site 9–10
Lund 34, 40, 41, 47, 48, 50, 104

M

Malmö 15, 34, 37–39, 41, 42, 46,
47, 48, 50, 53, 65, 69, 85

managers 23
 maximum income policy 81, 82,
 83, 84, 85, 97
 meat tax policy 81, 83, 84–85, 86
 mindful deviation 25, 29
 mitigation measures 4
 moderate traditional welfare 93–94
 movement approach 22, 107, 108, 110
 municipalities, significance of 35, 36

N

niches, phenomenon of 23
 non-linear transformation 27
 normative models 19

P

passive anti-ecological
 conservatism 89–90
 path
 path advocates 23–24, 30
 path entrepreneurs 23–24, 25,
 30, 71, 102, 104
 path dependence theories 6, 17,
 18, 20
 path emergence theories 6, 24, 29
Pensionärernas Riksorganisation
 (PRO, Swedish
 National Pensioners'
 Organisation) 63–64
 Petro populism 108
 Petrol Uprising 108
 planes of social being 25, 28
 policy drift 21, 22
 polluter elite 3
 progressive incrementalism 22, 27
 protracted transformation 27

R

rapid transformation 26–27, 28
 rationality of actors, assumptions
 on 24
 red crowding out pattern 76–80,
 93, 96, 101, 106
 rejection attitude 74–76, 78–80,
 89, 101–102, 106, 109, 111
see also attitudes, public;
 synergy attitude

reproduction 19, 55, 89, 100
 rural residents' attitudes *see*
 attitudes, public

S

Save the Children 53, 64
 self-centred privatisation 90, 91, 97
 Social Democratic Party 14, 15
 social justice 37, 104–105, 106
 and civil society framings 66, 70
 and public attitudes 76, 89, 91, 93
 social policy officers 46–47, 49
 social sustainability 34, 37–38,
 40–41, 47, 50, 58, 102
 social tipping point 26, 28
 stability models 18–20
 Stockholm 14–15, 34, 37, 39, 47,
 53, 65, 85
 Stockholm Environment
 Institute 48
Studieförbundet 58–59
 sustainable development goals 36,
 39, 50, 100, 107
 Swedish Society for Nature
 Conservation 53, 56, 57–58,
 60–61, 70
 synergy attitude 11, 39, 80,
 106, 109
 and eco-social agenda 50, 51,
 76–78
 and localised issues 43–48
see also attitudes, public;
 rejection attitude

T

Thunberg, G. 14, 44, 108
 transformation, concept of 1, 5,
 6–7, 30–31, 33, 110
 and active sustainable
 welfare 94–96
 and actors 27, 30
 and civil society 10–11, 30, 70, 103
 climate change 52, 60
 counter-mobilisation and 107, 112
 definition of 25–26
 and discourse and ideas 30
 eco-social 20, 50, 70, 93–94, 96,
 97, 106

PATHWAYS TO SUSTAINABLE WELFARE

factors affecting 78
habitus of 94–96
and local government 9–10, 14, 103
and movements 107
path protection and 98–100, 111
paths and counter-paths
106–107, 111–112
planes of social being 25
progressive incrementalism 27
and public attitudes 11–12, 81,
86, 87, 91, 93–94, 103
rapid 26–27, 28
theories 25–29
transport systems 43
urban residents and 106
see also emergence, concept of;
inertia, concept of

U

universal basic income policy
81–82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 96

urban climate governance 10
urban experimentation 8, 24, 33,
49, 111
urban planning 14, 100,
102, 105
and eco-social integration 32,
38–39, 43, 44, 47, 48
urban residents' attitudes *see*
attitudes, public
utilitarian models, of stability
18–19

W

wealth tax policy 81, 82, 83, 84,
85, 86, 96, 97
welfare state 2–4, 6, 13, 14, 35,
99, 111
civil society actors in 61
as stable entity 18
working time reduction policy 81,
82–83, 84, 85, 86, 96