

CLIMATE CHANGE, ENERGY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

# THE LIFE WE LIVE HERE

Conversations about climate change and the green transition

**Marika Palmér Rivera**  
**Lisa Pelling**  
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This report translates and summarises the findings of the study *Livet som pågår här* by Marika Palmer River and Lisa Pelling (Atlas 2024). The study was carried out by the progressive think tank Arena Idé with support from the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, LO.



The report was produced by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (Nordic Office) and was inspired by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's work in Germany on similar topics, not least the study *Disregarded: structurally weak but rich in experience* from 2021.

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This study builds on more than 200 doorstep interviews in structurally challenged rural communities in Sweden. It provides a unique illustration of people's views on climate change and the green transition.



People lack opportunities to adapt their lives to the demands of rapid climate transition, not least since the communities in which they live struggle with structural challenges such as demographic decline, the withdrawal of commercial and social services, and lack of investment in infrastructure.



Our interviews confirm findings in other studies that there is a lack of spaces for dialogue on how the climate transition should take place at the local level. People want to be part of conversations about the future. This involves making room for uncomfortable stories of grief and loss, as well as creating space for dreams about the future and faith in people's ability to reshape their lives. In this way, climate policy can gain support from the grassroots level.

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## Preface

What works well in Sweden today? A man in his 70s, living in a rented apartment in Fagersta—a former industrial town in the Swedish region of Bergslagen, sometimes referred to as the Swedish rust belt—answers quickly: “As a pensioner, I often have the impression that nothing works at all. I mean, you have to queue for everything, there’s unemployment, and there are shootings. You name it.”<sup>1</sup>

We have knocked on the man’s door in a three-story rental apartment building in central Fagersta. The June afternoon sun shines through the windows. It’s warm outside but cool in the stairwell where we stand, asking our questions. Fagersta is undergoing depopulation; the population has shrunk every year since the early 1970s.

“I’m used to how it was in the 1960s when everything worked,” says the man, who takes his time to talk to us. “There were 19,000 of us in Fagersta, but then they closed the steelworks, and everything stopped. So, it’s a bit bitter. Fagersta is dying, there is nothing here! Fagersta will be dead by 2050, there’ll just be a sign saying ‘Fagersta once lay here’.

We talk about what is important in Sweden, in Fagersta, in everyday life.

“I don’t think there will be a war,” he says. “I think they should spend more money on things other than war. They should invest in schools and care for the elderly. They’re cutting back on everything.”

What do you think will be Sweden’s biggest challenges in the future?

“I’m probably in the last stretch now, entering my last decade,” he notes and laughs. “Maybe you don’t have to worry so much after 2030.”

Then he gets serious. “It’s probably the climate.”

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<sup>1</sup> In recent years, Sweden has seen record-high numbers of shootings related to organised crime. (Reuters 2024).

### MARIKA PALMÉR RIVERA

has a Master of Science in Environmental Engineering. She is a research officer focusing on Just Transition Policy at the Swedish Trade Union Confederation LO.

### DR LISA PELLING

is a Swedish political scientist and the head of the Stockholm-based independent progressive think tank Arena Idé.

## Summary

This study builds on more than 200 doorstep interviews in structurally challenged rural communities in Sweden. It provides a unique illustration of people's views on climate change and the green transition.

The differences in climate attitudes between rural and urban areas are often exaggerated: this study confirms that people in rural areas are indeed worried about climate change and are keen to be part of the green transition. The problem is above all that many people lack the means to reduce their emissions on their own and to participate in the political discussion about how the climate transition should take place.

People lack opportunities to adapt their lives to the demands of rapid climate transition, not least since the communities in which they live struggle with structural challenges such as demographic decline, the withdrawal of commercial and social services, and lack of investment in infrastructure.

Right now, structural challenges are exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis, which puts further strain on both households and local communities. People worry about rising grocery prices and the next electricity bill, and the local authorities have to lay off welfare workers and postpone crucial investments. The margins left to enable them to shoulder the costs connected to climate change adaptation and mitigation are shrinking.

Climate policy that does not consider people's livelihoods, and therefore fails to create conditions enabling them to change their way of life, is easily perceived as unfair. This perception influences people's attitudes toward climate policy. The stable support for reducing climate impact that exists among Swedes in general, as well as among those we interviewed for this study, therefore does not automatically translate into support for specific climate policy measures.

The need to secure mobility and transportation needs stand out as an important concern for people in small towns and rural areas.

Our interviews confirm findings in other studies that there is a lack of spaces for dialogue on how the climate transition should take place at the local level. People want to be part of conversations about the future. This involves making room for uncomfortable stories of grief and loss, as well as creating space for dreams about the future and faith in people's ability to reshape their lives. In this way, climate policy can gain support from the grassroots level.

When there's a lack of local dialogue about the transition, and no local transition narrative, people feel that the conditions for climate action are being determined elsewhere. This perception reinforces the divide between urban and rural areas, and between large cities and smaller towns.

When individuals feel responsible but have little opportunity to act, it creates a breeding ground for climate scepticism and denial. The cognitive dissonance of feeling a strong responsibility for something that cannot be influenced is hard to live with, leading many to change their attitude instead, downplaying the climate issue.

Discontent with unjust climate policies can be exploited by the radical right. With political leadership, the discontent that people feel can be mobilised for positive change instead of polarisation.

This study concludes that there's hope in the local: in the richness of people's local experiences of fundamental change, in people's pride and confidence in their local communities.

The conversation must continue.

## 1

## INTRODUCTION

“They don’t listen to the people! Do they only see money?”  
72-year-old man in Hultsfred

Climate change urgently needs to be addressed, and the green transition means that a lot has to change. But who has change, and how? Do we have to stop eating meat balls? And who should stop driving cars?

It is clear that climate change will affect people in different ways. Some will find it harder than others to adapt their lives and daily routines, and the transition will place different demands on different countries, and, indeed, different demands on different regions within each country.

This is a short version of a book published in Swedish and based on two hundred interviews with people in four socio-economically disadvantaged rural municipalities in Sweden: Hultsfred, Fagersta, Ljusdal, and Sollefteå. These municipalities lack financial resources but are rich in other ways: in natural resources and in experiences. Not least, they are rich in concrete experience of transformative change: the transition from heavy industry to small-scale entrepreneurs, from a garrison town to a tourist resort, from the rapid growth of the golden years to the slow decline of today.

Now the inhabitants of these communities are facing another transition. How can their experiences be used to address the green transition? What is needed for people to see the climate transition as fair and desirable? What other problems need to be solved for the climate transition to be accepted and implemented?

Our survey is inspired by a study conducted in four structurally vulnerable regions in Germany in 2021 by the German non-partisan think tank “Das Progressive Zentrum” and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. The aim of the German study, which was also conducted door-to-door, was to get a picture of what matters most to people in deprived regions: their personal priorities, perspectives and opinions. The starting point was the enormous challenge facing Germany in terms of climate transition.<sup>2</sup>

We all know the context: The world is getting warmer, and the consequences of climate change are becoming increasingly clear. 2023 was the warmest year on global record so far. With the Paris Agreement in 2015, the world’s countries agreed to work together to keep global warming below 2 degrees, with the aim of limiting it to 1.5 degrees. To address the climate threat and fulfil Sweden’s part of the Paris Agreement, the Swedish Riksdag (Parliament) has set a goal for Sweden to achieve net zero emissions of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere by 2045, and negative emissions thereafter. Achieving these goals will require major changes in all parts of society and throughout the country.

Either we transform society profoundly to avoid the worst impacts of climate change or climate change will change society for us—unrecognizably. “A smooth transition to a fossil-free society is no longer possible,” as Professor Staffan Laestadius has put it<sup>3</sup>.

We all face huge challenges. But how are people in small towns and rural areas responding to these changes? What do they think about the transition, and what does it mean for them, their lives, and their communities?

For this project we chose to talk to people who rarely have a voice, despite living in places that will be affected both by climate change and by efforts to restructure society to reduce our impact on the climate. People living in smaller towns and rural areas are often used as pawns in political debates, especially those related to climate change, but are rarely given the space to voice their own concerns.

<sup>2</sup> Fröhlich, Mannewitz & Ranft (2022).

<sup>3</sup> Laestadius (2023), p. 65.

## 2

## DOORSTEP INTERVIEWS AS A METHOD

We have conducted interviews in the main towns as well as in smaller communities and villages within the four rural municipalities studied. These include Hultsfred and Målilla; Ljusdal, Järvsö and Färila; Fagersta and Hedkärna; and Sollefteå and Långsele. The selection of places and people interviewed does not allow general conclusions to be drawn from the interviews alone. Our conclusions are therefore based on research and expert knowledge, but they are illustrated with the voices of the people we have interviewed. To avoid cluttering the text with lengthy references, we have used footnotes. A list of sources is provided at the end of the report.

The interviews were conducted in May and June 2023. We used a straightforward method: we knocked on doors, introduced ourselves, and asked if we could discuss a few questions.<sup>4</sup> The first questions were broad: What do you think works well in Sweden? What do you think is working poorly in Sweden? What do you think will be Sweden's biggest challenges in the future? We also asked about the town: When you think of Fagersta, what do you think will be the town's biggest challenges in the future? Then we looked at individual concerns and challenges: What are you personally worried about for the future? Following that, we asked about issues that move and upset people: What political issue would make you get politically involved? Only after these introductory questions did we specifically address climate change and its impacts. We asked whether people notice that the climate is changing in their everyday lives, and whether they think the place where they live will be affected by climate change. We also asked if they thought their everyday life and their community would be affected by measures to reduce climate change. Then we asked our interviewees to tell us what they think needs to be done to reduce our impact on the climate, in their locality and in Sweden. Finally, we posed a question about responsibility: Who bears the most responsibility for reducing our impact on the climate? All questions were open-ended, with no predetermined answer options. In total, we conducted 202 interviews. The interviews often took place in doorways or stairwells, but many times we were invited to sit down at the kitchen table or on the living-room couch. Some interviews were conducted in the driveway, others in the garden, and a few times we joined people out walking their dogs. Even though we arrived unannounced in the middle of everyday life, many people took the time to talk to us. We were treated to tea and coffee, got to try freshly made kombucha and home-made chocolate toffee. Some interviews lasted just ten minutes, while others extended more than an hour.

Figure 1  
Map of Sweden with the four locations



<sup>4</sup> In total, eight people helped conduct the interviews. Lisa Pelling and Simon Karlsson, who are employed at Arena Idé; Rebecca Svarvar and Johan Ekegren, who did an internship at Arena Idé in the spring semester of 2023; Marika Palmér Rivera, Joa Bergold and Eric Sundström, who are all employed at LO's unit for welfare policy; and Josefin Fürst, who works at the Nordic office of the German think tank Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Stockholm. The study was designed and the material analysed by Marika Palmér Rivera and Lisa Pelling: when the word "we" is used in this text, it refers to the two of us.



Figure 2  
Data on the surveyed municipalities

### Population

Municipality	Population size	Residents per km <sup>2</sup>	Population growth (number)	Percentage men	Average age	Percentage born abroad	Percentage living in the countryside
<b>Average for Sweden</b>		<b>25.7</b>	<b>238.7</b>	<b>50.4</b>	<b>41.6</b>	<b>20.4</b>	<b>12.4</b>
Sollefteå	18 667	3.5	-147	50.7	46.7	12.1	35.5
Ljusdal	18 771	3.6	-33	50.6	46	10	38.7
Fagersta	13 341	49.6	22	50.8	43.4	27.4	10.9
Hultsfred	14 064	12.52	8	51.5	45.6	21.5	18.2

### Income and occupation

Municipality	Average monthly income before tax	Percentage gainful employment by region and year	Average price of single-family house (SEK '000)	Percentage of individuals with low economic standard	Percentage unemployed longer than 6 months
<b>Average for Sweden</b>	<b>30 842</b>	<b>79.6</b>	<b>3 793</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>7%</b>
Sollefteå	26 667	80.4	756	19%	2%
Ljusdal	26 992	80.8	1 470	17%	2%
Fagersta	27 492	75.7	1 547	21%	2%
Hultsfred	25 825	75.9	871	24%	2%

### Education

Municipality	Percentage highly educated among population (25-64 yrs)*	Educational level: Post-secondary at least two years	Percentage of students completing upper-secondary school in 3-5 yrs	Grade point average from compulsory school
<b>Average for Sweden</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>74%</b>	<b>220</b>
Sollefteå	16.41	15%	67%	200
Ljusdal	14.68	14%	71%	202
Fagersta	14.61	13%	64%	202
Hultsfred	12.66	12%	69%	199

\*) 'Highly educated' means individuals with at least three years of post-secondary education (including post-graduate education). Information taken from SCB's register Education of Population version 2023-01-01.

## 3

## PEOPLE HAVE NOTICED THAT THE CLIMATE IS CHANGING AND ARE WORRIED

“When I was a child, when you cut birch twigs for the midsummer pole... back then, the leaves were so tiny. Now everything is in full bloom, before midsummer. We used to decorate the cars with lilacs when we drove to Näsåker, now they have finished flowering by midsummer. So you certainly see a difference, you do.”

78-year-old man in Långsele, Sollefteå

It is true that there is a geographical dimension to attitudes to climate change. But the differences are much smaller than is often assumed. In the Swedish case, around 80 per cent of people living in rural areas worry about climate change.<sup>5</sup> (See chart below).

Percentage who are very or somewhat concerned about changes in the Earth's climate	
Rural areas	80
Towns	83
Cities	86
Large cities	89

Source: SOM Institute (Axelsson & Jönsson 2024, p. 11).

The people we spoke to had countless examples of how the climate is changing. Like this 79-year-old man from Fagersta: – I don't have any bumblebees in my flowers this year, and I didn't last year either. The fact that there are so few insects means they hardly exist anymore. You think about it all the time.

Or this 45-year-old woman in Sollefteå:

– There have been winters when there was only rain and sleet in January. Then there were winters when we literally had two metres of snow, all the way up to the top of the apple tree. So it wasn't the same at all, but extremes.

Most are concerned, but there are exceptions. Some say they have noticed that the climate has changed, but add, like one 76-year-old man in Fagersta, that “it's quite natural”.

“Now it has been a very cold winter, but maybe it will be a warm summer?”, said a 79-year-old woman in Färila, outside Ljusdal. The view that climate change is a natural variation recurs in several conversations.

“I believe more in cycles,” says a 49-year-old woman, also from Färila in Ljusdal Municipality.

An 82-year-old woman in Rösta, outside Sollefteå, says she has noticed climate change.

– Yes, but God, yes. I was just thinking last night that it's been 15–20 years since people wore fur hats in winter. Just one of those things. We used to have thick leather boots as kids, now most kids wear sneakers all winter. It's a big difference. But she is sceptical about the possibility of influencing climate change.

“I don't think people can do anything about it. Nature takes its course.”

Others are sceptical about climate action as such. A man in his 40s in Sollefteå says that his daily life will be affected by measures to reduce climate change.

“Yes, of course they will raise the taxes.”

He explains that there is “another plan” behind the 2030 Agenda.

“If you read through the whole thing and read between the lines, you will understand that it is about controlling the population.”

<sup>5</sup> Axelsson & Jönsson, 2024.

# 4

## CHALLENGES OF THE PLACE: FEAR OF DISAPPEARING FROM THE MAP

“People my age are moving out. The whole village is becoming a retirement home.”

19-year-old man in Färila in Ljusdal Municipality

Our study focuses on places where the population is declining and ageing. It discusses how people perceive the conditions for tackling climate change in areas that already face resource shortages: a lack of people and a lack of tax revenue. The fact that many rural communities are under pressure is nothing new. In the places we visited, the population has been declining for the past half-century, the population is ageing, and there are fewer and fewer people of working age to support a growing proportion of retired people.

But so far, no one seems to be listening to cries for help from local communities. Recent investments in “growth” are just part of a series of failed attempts to reverse the trend without showing any significant consideration of local preferences. According to an analysis by researchers at the Research Institute for Regional and Urban Development (ILS) for Arena Idé and the German Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, An Unequal Sweden – Regional Socioeconomic Differences in Sweden, Sweden can be divided into four distinct regions with different living conditions, different economic opportunities and different access to welfare.<sup>6</sup> What the researchers call “the four Swedens” consist of 1) rich commuting areas and mining towns in the north, 2) prosperous urban regions (with

a high risk of social marginalization), 3) Sweden’s stable middle, and 4) the periphery.

The population is not evenly distributed across these different areas. While the vast majority live in relatively affluent urban areas and in Sweden’s “stable middle”, one in ten Swedes live in areas categorized as peripheral.

All the municipalities we visited for this book are located in what researchers refer to as the periphery: areas characterized by low population density, high unemployment and high income-poverty rates, high dependency ratios and low income levels, and poor access to public services.

The researchers behind the report ‘An Unequal Sweden’ note that the urban-rural disparities continue to widen: “The place where you are born, grow up and live has an increasingly decisive impact on the prospects for your life and well-being in Sweden.”

People are so desperate that they imagine their home village being replaced by a sign, marking the site of an ancient monument: ‘Fagersta once lay here’. It is important to keep this context in mind when discussing the conditions for local climate transition. Finding themselves in this difficult situation, the municipalities must try to mobilise resources to counteract climate change and, figuratively and sometimes literally, build protective dikes against the floods that climate change will inevitably bring.

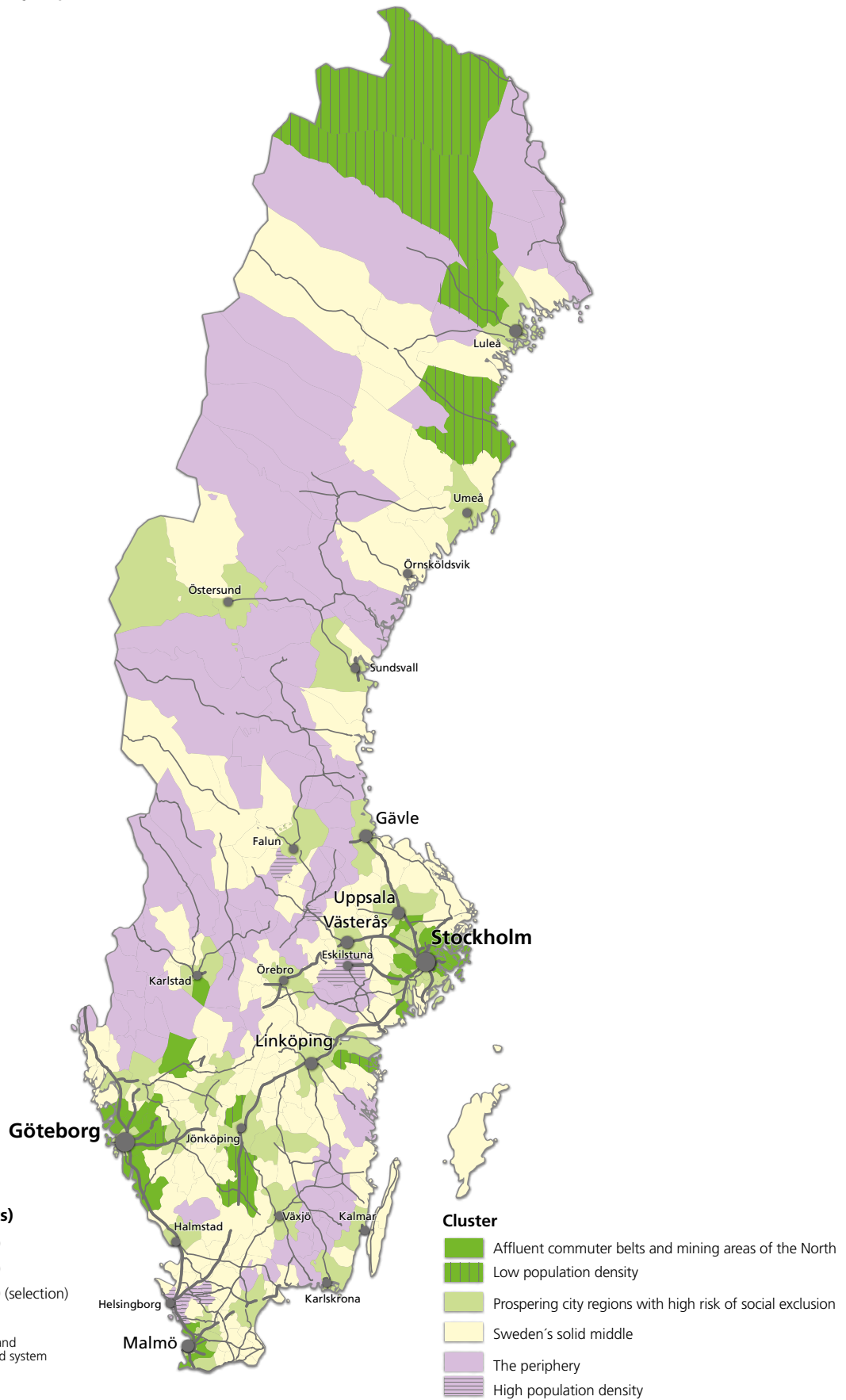
How is this supposed to happen?

6 Andersson et al. (2021).

Indicator	Sweden	Affluent commuter belts and mining areas in the North	Prospering city regions with high risk of exclusion	Sweden's solid middle	The periphery
Employment rate	80.6	85.1	79.1	81.6	77.4
Demographic dependency ratio	70.1	65.6	57.8	73.2	74.3
Highly qualified workforce	25	34.1	34.1	22.3	19.2
Risk of poverty rate (age 0-19)	21	9.7	19.7	20.1	29
Gender pay gap	79	74.5	81.2	77.9	81.7
Monthly gross salary	30936.6	32588.6	31553.5	30666.1	30125.6
Medical and health related employment	35.1	36.6	46.2	32.9	31.6
House prices	2264.4	4366.8	3633	1754.3	1171.2
Municipal total assets	5942	8267	6494.9	5563.4	4963
Voter turnout	87.2	90	86.8	87.7	85.1

Source: Andersson et al. (2021).

Figure 3  
The Swedish disparity map



Source: Andersson et al. (2021).

Geodata: Geofabrik GmbH, OpenStreetMap Contributors 2018



# 5

## CURRENT SITUATION: COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS AND ESCALATING CRIME

“I think everything is getting more expensive. Electricity and groceries are getting more expensive. Everything, everything.”  
29-year-old woman in Målilla, Hultsfred

As if the challenges facing these demographically shrinking municipalities weren't enough, the situation is about to get even tougher. In recent years, these places have suffered from high rates of inflation. The current dire times, expensive times affect individuals – those we spoke to worried about more expensive groceries and skyrocketing electricity bills – as well as the municipalities as a whole. Local authorities are finding it increasingly difficult to secure enough funds for care, education, and services.

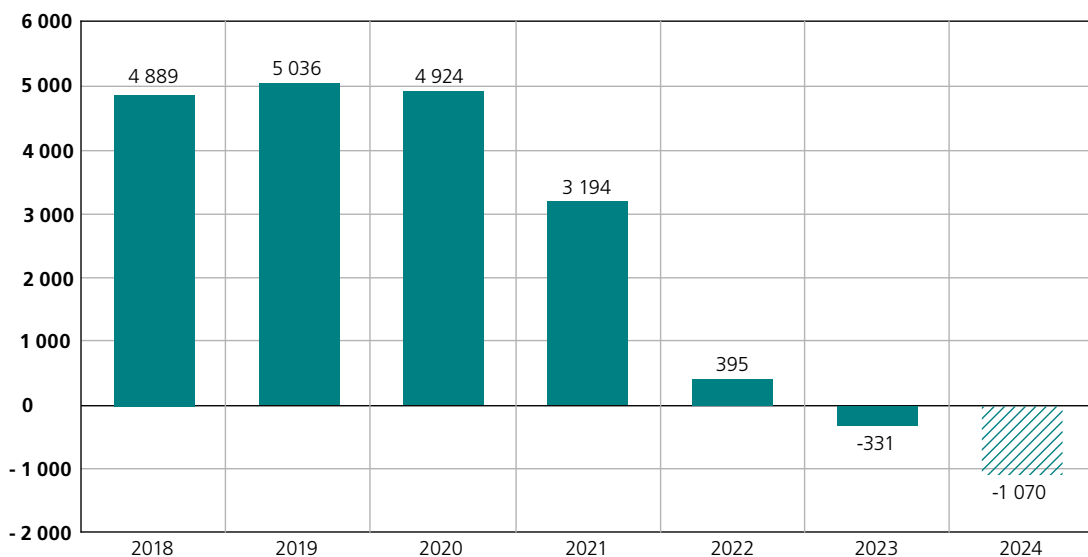
Financially strained municipalities cannot handle inflation on their own, and the available state subsidies are not large enough to compensate. The government's austerity policies exacerbate the situation.

When we conducted our survey, working class people in Sweden were going through tough economic times. As inflation reached record levels, household costs were rising while wages and incomes were not keeping pace.

As this report is written, in May 2024, the turnaround has not yet been achieved, despite a slowdown in the rate of price increases. On the contrary, according to a report written by the two economists Peter Gerlach and Anna Almqvist at the Swedish trade union confederation LO, the typical household margins at the end of the month for all our typical households identified by LO are smaller in 2024 than they were in 2023.

They remind us that the slowdown in inflation does not mean that the overall price level has fallen back. The costs of large and important items of expenditure such as food and interest payments remain high. Part of the explanation for why 2024 may be even tougher than 2023 is that house-

Figure 4  
**The margin (income-expenditure) for a typical working class household in Alvesta, Sweden**  
(two adults and two children, 4 and 7 years old)  
SEK/month, annual average



Source: LO (Gerlach & Almqvist 2024, p. 13).

holds, during both the pandemic and the inflation crisis, took advantage of various forms of crisis support.

Although most people in Sweden have seen their finances weakened as a result of price increases, working-class households have been hit harder than white-collar households, because they do not have the same initial margins. White-collar employees have also experienced stronger income growth in recent years (in per cent and in SEK).

There would have been more resources with a different fiscal framework, and if the government had not chosen to lower taxes for high-income earners and to benefit them with a series of tax deductions. The injustices of the current economic system create bitterness among our interviewees. When we visited the municipalities, significant cuts to welfare provisions and services were imminent, again. Just a couple of years ago, Ljusdal Municipality ended the contracts of one hundred employees at local schools, and now more layoffs may follow. And the police, who should be available 24 hours a day in places where there are now “drugs everywhere”, are at least an hour’s drive away.

## 6

## CURRENT SITUATION: REDUCED COMMERCIAL AND WELFARE SERVICES

“The police have far too little resources. You can see how many drugs there are now, and a lot of them come here. To Järvsö and Ljusdal. Crystals, it looks like coarse salt. There is a lot here.”  
Woman in her 70s in Järvsö, Ljusdal Municipality

“Explain to me how it is safer for women to give birth on highway 331 than to give birth at Sollefteå hospital! Driving on those lousy roads! There was a health-care politician who refused to come here because the road was so bad, but heavily pregnant women should go down to Sundsvall?”  
59-year-old man from Sollefteå

How far should it be to the nearest maternity ward? How can we live here if there is no healthcare? This is what people in Sollefteå ask themselves, an illustration of how deeply reliant people are on their welfare facilities; it is vital to the locality.

In Sollefteå, the regional politicians in charge of health care closed the maternity ward – despite the fact that desperate Sollefteå residents started an occupation of the hospital entrance – in February 2017. At the same time, the emergency surgery and the emergency orthopaedic units at Sollefteå Hospital also disappeared. From now on, the people living in inland Sollefteå have to travel to the coastal town of Sundsvall. This is an hour and a half away for people living in central Sollefteå, when roads are in good condition, but here the roads are covered with snow during half of the year. For people living in the surrounding villages, it is much further.

Our interviewees are frustrated with the way provisions for the general welfare have been organised like a market, with for-profit private actors competing for the resources of the municipalities.<sup>7</sup> People are worried that the services are understaffed. We also record the sadness and anger that public workers express, feeling that their efforts are undervalued. “It’s mad how underpaid we are,” as one assistant nurse puts it.

We conclude that the deterioration of public services risks eroding the trust in society and in collective solutions, precisely what is required to reduce emissions and slow down climate change.

Deteriorations in general welfare also result in poorer conditions for local development. Our study illustrates the importance of public spending for tackling climate change: both in building trust in the necessary collective work, and in creating the concrete conditions for change.

“No one who wants to work in this, health care and home care. I’m worried. Who will take care of me when I get old? There is no one.”  
78-year-old woman in Målilla, Hultsfred

“We are one of the most important energy providers in Sweden. But then we hardly get road lighting and street lights in winter.”  
32-year-old man in Sollefteå

“What works well? Shit, that’s hard. Uh, nothing. I work in the schools, they are not working well. Health care is not working well. The Migration Board is a disaster. Politics is chaos. The economy is chaos. The problems we have with schools and health care take precedence over [climate transition].”

“The things that are close to people’s hearts and are urgent will take precedence over any of those things [related to climate transition] are dealt with.”  
Woman in her 40s in Sollefteå

<sup>7</sup> In Sweden, many central provisions for general welfare are fully tax financed, but run by for-profit private companies, with no restrictions on the profits they can extract, resulting in large differences in quality and access.

## 7

## NEEDED: A NEW WAY OF SECURING OUR MOBILITY NEEDS

“They fixed the rails a couple of years ago, and I thought: Great, how nice, now the trains will stop here again. But no, they fixed the rails so that the trains could pass through Målilla even faster.”  
35-year-old man in Målilla, Hultsfred Municipality

Reducing emissions from transportation is crucial to achieving the Swedish climate targets. Transports account for almost a third of greenhouse gas emissions in Sweden (industry accounts for roughly one third and the final third consists of emissions from agriculture, electricity and heating, mobile machinery, solvents and waste management). Of the emissions from transportation, about two thirds are from private transportation and about one third from freight transport.<sup>8</sup> The importance of transforming the transportation sector to address climate change is underlined by the fact that transportation was prioritised when the Swedish climate goals were established, resulting in a specific target for transport.

Transportation/mobility is also an issue that engages the people we talk to. When we ask people if they think that action to reduce climate change will affect their daily lives, mobility is the most common issue that comes up. Many are concerned about increased costs, but many also expressed a willingness to change their daily travel routines if there are alternatives to fossil-fuel cars. The fact that issues related to mobility and the difficulty of switching from fossil-fuel cars came up in almost all of our interviews, despite our not asking specific questions about it, indicates that many people in towns and rural areas are worried that climate change measures will lead to restricted mobility.

Perhaps this is not so strange: in rural communities, most people are dependent on their private cars. Our society is adapted to the car, especially in smaller towns and in the countryside. The creation of the “car society” required a gigantic transformation of society as a whole, and now we stand at the beginning of a transformation that must be equally extensive. We find that people are sceptical about electric cars and public transit; it doesn’t work today. People want more public transit but have little confidence that it will improve. On the contrary, outside of the larger cities, public

transit has been reduced in the last decades. In the towns of Målilla, Långsele and Sollefteå that we visited, the passenger trains no longer stop. The bus schedules are not adapted to working hours, and at the same time bus fares have become much more expensive. Car dependence has also increased as services have disappeared. Many people we talk to highlight the reduction of services as a major challenge for their local area. Data from the Swedish government agency Transport Analysis shows that this problem is increasing: Swedish regions with good access to service keep getting better access, while parts of the country with less service access keep getting poorer access.<sup>9</sup>

Electric cars can be a solution to rural mobility needs, but the people we talk to find it hard to believe that electric cars will be accessible to them. People with below-average incomes don’t buy new cars, and a new electric car is far beyond many people’s price range. Electric cars are also perceived as a “big city” thing, not something for small towns and rural areas.

8 Swedish Climate Policy Council et al. (2024).

9 Trafikanalys (2023).



## 8

## PEOPLE DO WANT TO CHANGE, BUT LACK POSSIBILITIES

If you've got to, you've got to, I think it's better for the world to exist than for you to get to drive a car.  
Female, 22 years old, Sollefteå

"I would love to feed my children organic food all the time, but who can afford it? It's always about the money. I would love to have an environmentally friendly car, but I can't afford to buy a new car. So it's always that, in a way, that's the key. We talk about sugar tax and stuff like that when we really should be subsidizing environmentally friendly food. It's a backward way of thinking."  
45-year-old woman in Sollefteå

Our interviews confirm what the research says: many people care about the climate and have noticed climate change. Even though there are those who do not want to change, they are few in number. It is not primarily about will but rather about conditions, especially financial ones. Economic conditions are more and more unequally distributed. The gaps in Sweden are widening – between those who earn the most and the rest of us, between the highly educated and the less educated, across different occupational groups, and between urban and rural areas. Inequality, we find, is the elephant in the room. The wealthy have greater opportunities to bear the cost of the transition. How should we organise our society in a future where climate change becomes increasingly acute and demands more from us as a society?

In order to mitigate climate change, we have to change how we produce goods and services, transport ourselves, heat our homes, choose our food, and purchase items. Some changes can be made without spending money, but many will have financial implications. To reduce emissions from transport, we must drive less, which, to bring about, will necessitate increasing the price of petrol and diesel. At the same time, people must still be able to commute to work, go shopping, and participate in leisure activities. While individuals need to invest in things like fossil-free cars or electric bicycles, municipalities and regions must invest in infrastructure such as charging stations, public transport, and pedestrian and cycling paths. Large public investments can reduce the need for private investments; for example, expanding public transit can diminish the necessity of owning an electric car. Conversely, if public investments are too small or non-existent, individuals will have to bear a larger share of the transi-

tion costs. Since public investments to facilitate the transition are lagging, many of the people we speak with are concerned about their finances during the transition.

Climate policy that does not take people's circumstances into account, and therefore fails to create conditions enabling them to change, can easily be perceived as unfair. This perception influences people's attitudes toward climate policy. The stable support for reducing climate impact that exists among Swedes in general, as well as among those we interviewed for this study, does not automatically translate into support for specific climate-policy measures. For instance, a national survey shows that 52 per cent of respondents view an increase in the carbon dioxide tax on gasoline to be a very bad or rather bad proposal<sup>10</sup>. However, scientific studies on the acceptance of climate policy conducted at the University of Gothenburg indicate that the most important factors for climate policy measures to gain broad support are their perceived effectiveness and fairness.<sup>11</sup>

Finding a path to a just distribution of the costs and benefits of the transition requires us to address the elephant in the climate policy room: inequality.<sup>12</sup> Growing income disparities mean that different groups have different capacities to adapt to the changes that climate action entails. This increasing income inequality has heightened the need for political measures to facilitate the transition. Increased inequality complicates the implementation of fair climate policy. In a review of various research studies on how democracy affects climate policy, researchers Daniel Lindvall and Mikael Karlsson at Uppsala University find that countries with higher economic inequality face greater challenges in pursuing ambitious climate policies.<sup>13</sup> Despite the strong connection between inequality and climate change, inequality remains invisible in the climate-policy debate. It is also not a topic that the people we interviewed discussed. However, the consequences of inequality were evident in our interviews.

<sup>10</sup> Axelsson & Jönsson (2023).

<sup>11</sup> Bergquist et al. (2022).

<sup>12</sup> See for instance Earth4All by Sandrine Dixon-Declève, Owen Gaffney, Jayati Ghosh, Jorgen Randers, Johan Rockström and Per Espen Stoknes (Dixon-Declève et al. 2022).

<sup>13</sup> Lindvall & Karlsson (2023)

When society changes, such as through climate action, there are always benefits and costs, winners and losers. Therefore, all discussions about how the transition should be made are fundamentally about distribution policy. The future always has a distributional political dimension.

“Of course, there will be conflict if you can’t afford to go somewhere or go on vacation. Then there will be a conflict, and the danger is that people will choose a party that sounds good, but then things will just get worse.”

Man, 64 years old, Hultsfred

## 9

## WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT THE LOCAL TRANSITION

The redistribution of resources must be effected now, as the local climate crisis is already here. Nevertheless, we get the impression that it is difficult for people to talk about what climate change will entail for the local community, as well as what climate transition will look like. There's a lack of language, and a missing narrative.

For many people, climate change seems to be a private concern rather than a shared issue for their town or local community. When we ask our interviewees if they think climate change will affect their locality in the future, we get the impression that most people have not thought much about it before and have not talked about it.

Our interviews confirm findings of other studies that there is a lack of forums for dialogue about how the climate transition should take place at the local level.<sup>14</sup> People want to be part of conversations about the future. This involves making room for uncomfortable stories of grief and loss, as well as creating space for dreams about the future and faith in people's ability to reshape their lives. In this way, climate policy can gain support from the grassroots level.

When local dialogue and stories are absent, people feel that the conditions for climate action are being determined elsewhere. This perception reinforces the divide between urban and rural areas, and between large cities and smaller towns.

There is a need for conversation and political discussion at both local and national levels about how we want society to develop. A fossil-free society can take many forms, and there are various paths to achieve it. Everyone must have the opportunity to participate in designing the climate-adapted society of the future. This means that climate action cannot be driven solely by a top-down narrative. We need a shared story about climate change and climate action, along with a political debate that accommodates multiple ideological perspectives. Otherwise, we risk depoliticizing the climate issue. That change is necessary is clear, but how it should be accomplished requires prioritization and ideological consideration.

An important question for local democratic discussions is how communities should develop in the future. When the entire society needs to change, conflicts of interests are inevitable. A clear example is energy supply. Renewable energy, such as wind power, needs to be greatly expanded to address climate change and enable Swedish industry to transition to fossil-free production while remaining in Sweden. The ability to expand wind power quickly enough is crucial for maintaining industrial jobs in the country. However, this expansion requires large areas of land and alters the landscape for nearby residents. Since rural areas offer the necessary space, expansion will take place primarily there.

In municipalities that already produce a significant amount of electricity, such as those with many hydroelectric plants, there is often a strong sense that they have already taken on a substantial share of the responsibility for Sweden's electricity supply. Many residents feel that their municipality's natural resources are being utilized without receiving anything in return. To mitigate resistance to the necessary expansion of wind power, discussions are underway about introducing financial compensation for nearby residents and municipalities. However, compensation alone may not suffice. To reduce resistance to wind power, people need to be more involved in discussions about how their locality and the country as a whole should develop.

How the community should develop in response to climate change must also be connected to how people will live their lives, both during and after the transition. There is a fear of what the climate transition means for the quality of life in general, a fear that is likely exacerbated by the lack of concrete details about what the transition will entail. Climate change mitigation means that some things will disappear, but it also provides opportunities, even at the local level. As we now face the need for significant changes, it is important to seize the opportunity to discuss the changes we want to make. If people have a concrete picture of what the transition can mean, it will be easier to embrace changes and to discuss different pathways for the transition.

Facts need a story to become actionable knowledge. Forums are needed to discuss the future and shape a common narrative, which is one of the most important conclusions of this study. When there is a lack of forums for dialogue and local

14 Lövbrand et al. (2023).

stories, then challenges related to climate change are not seen as shared problems. The climate transition becomes individualised, making it overwhelmingly difficult to realise, even impossible. That is one reason why the climate transition must be democratised.

Another reason is that the transition will be more effective if people are allowed to participate and influence it. It involves how the costs and benefits of the transition are to be distributed, between people and between urban and rural areas. It is about nothing less than how we should live our lives, and we cannot leave those questions to experts or bureaucrats. We must tackle the climate crisis as a common problem.

“I think Långsele will flourish again. It declined in the 90s, but it feels like it’s on its way back to what it once was. Even if the only train that stops here is the two a.m. train to Kiruna. I believe in Långsele!”

60-year-old man in Långsele, Sollefteå

## 10

## DISCONTENT IS BEING EXPLOITED

There is widespread dissatisfaction in the smaller towns and rural municipalities we have visited. This dissatisfaction stems from concrete challenges and problems in people's everyday lives: it's too noisy at school, grandma isn't doing well in the nursing home, and the bus runs too infrequently. Many people find it difficult to make ends meet each month. There is also a sense of longing for how things used to be—when the factory was still running, before the maternity ward was shut down, or when the train still stopped in town. Moreover, many are worried about the future, feeling that development is heading in the wrong direction. Discontent is a powerful political force. It can be mobilised for social change, but it can also be exploited to create further discontent, mistrust, and polarisation.

It is not obvious that those who live in smaller towns and in rural areas would be more hostile to climate policy than others. On the contrary, the rural population has a lot to gain from the climate transition. After all, this is where biofuel is produced, here are places that benefit from green industrialization, here there is local, sustainable food production.

When we conducted our interviews, we also did not meet very many climate deniers. On the contrary, most of the people we spoke to were both aware of and worried about climate change. Many have also expressed that they feel a personal responsibility for the climate and want to be involved in the transition. The problem is above all that many people lack the means to reduce their emissions on their own and to participate in the political discussion about how the climate transition should take place. This contributes to the fact that many in smaller towns and in rural areas feel that the decisions about how the climate transition should be effected are made elsewhere. This is exploited by forces that use the contradiction between city and country as an excuse to slow down climate action. Recently, we have seen many examples of this.

There are forces that seek to delay or prevent the phasing out of fossil fuels, that mobilise climate sceptics, and that exploit concerns about the consequences of climate change. Some want to politicise the gap between urban and rural areas, or between the "Swedish heartland" and the "politically correct elite" in the cities, as it is sometimes framed in the Swedish debate by conservatives and other forces to the political

right. The Facebook group The Fuel Uprising ("Bränsleupproret"), which received financial support from the Moderates, the Christian Democrats, and not least the Sweden Democrats, is an example of how dissatisfaction with a specific climate measure—more expensive fuel—is being exploited by political parties. The Sweden Democrats have the clearest profile here. But it is important to remember that there are fundamental economic forces working in the same direction. Fossil capitalism will not abolish itself.

Several of the people we interviewed are calling for stronger political leadership on climate-change mitigation. When politicians refrain from taking responsibility, they let down those who feel a strong obligation to reduce their impact on the climate. Many people tell us how difficult it is to fulfil this responsibility without political decisions on investments in public transit and charging infrastructure, for example. When individuals feel responsible but have little opportunity to act, it creates a breeding ground for climate scepticism and denial. The cognitive dissonance of feeling a strong responsibility for something that cannot be influenced is hard to live with, leading many to change their attitude instead. For instance, they may start to regard the climate issue as less important.

With political leadership, the discontent that people feel can be mobilised for positive change instead of polarisation.

## 11

## HOPE IS IN THE LOCAL

We have met and spoken to roughly two hundred people. We carefully noted what they said, and we compiled, analysed, and compared our findings with other studies, surveys, and mappings. We also referred to research both in Sweden and internationally to understand how to interpret our extensive material. We visited places where people are disadvantaged in many ways—by geography, economic structures, and the state’s lack of any redistribution policy—where the situation is about to get even worse. In our survey, people express dissatisfaction with the way society is developing. We have recorded not only nostalgia, but also bitterness and anger. Despite this, we choose to end this text with a few sentences about hope. Because there is hope: many of those we met are proud of their place and region and are hopeful about the future. There is, after all, so much that works well, and many feel confident. People have faith in the future, also in Långsele.

We believe in Långsele too! We believe there is strength in the pride that people convey to us about their localities and communities. Hope is a powerful driving force. It creates confidence and a belief that solutions are possible, laying the foundation for the commitment needed to address challenges such as climate change.

Both living with climate change and the measures to try to slow down global warming will require significant societal change. Through our survey, we assert that Swedish society is ill-equipped for this transformation, particularly because we have long reduced and weakened society’s collective capacity for change. Society has retreated. In many places, it is both more expensive and more difficult to travel by public transit than before: bus schedules are less frequent, and trains no longer stop where they used to. For those at risk of losing their job due to the green transition, it is more difficult to get help from the employment agency: the local office has closed, and the case manager does not have time to answer the phone. Those who become unemployed are compensated with a smaller portion of their income than before, and for a shorter period. Similarly, the safety net for those who fall ill or have an accident is not as fine-meshed as it used to be. The common resources are more limited, and the focus has shifted from collective care to individual responsibility. This is evident both in what people say and in what they do not say.

Perhaps most clearly, this is reflected in the answer to the question we asked at the end of each of our more than 200 interviews: Who has the greatest responsibility for reducing our impact on the climate? Even though climate change requires extensive changes to society’s infrastructure and functioning, from energy systems to food supply, many of our interviewees answered that they themselves bear the greatest responsibility. Not the municipality or the state, not politicians or companies, nor world organisations or international agreements. There is a risk there will be a gap between what people perceive—that they themselves have the greatest responsibility for reducing climate change—and what they can actually do. This could lead to cognitive dissonance: feeling that you have great responsibility for something you cannot influence is a difficult situation to live with. It may then be easier to change your attitude toward climate change itself and convince yourself that it is not so important, after all. This is an important rationale for both climate denial and resistance to climate change.<sup>15</sup>

This report explores how we can achieve popular acceptance for climate-change measures. It also delves into public dissatisfaction. We observe that the dissatisfaction highlighted in the book *Swedish discontent* (Det svenska missnöjet, Lindell & Pelling 2021) – also the result of an extensive interview survey – continues to grow, and that there are forces willing to exploit this dissatisfaction in ways that delay and complicate climate action.

Often, exploiting dissatisfaction means dismissing it, but the dissatisfaction that we met doing the interviews was often justified. When people describe what is not working well in Sweden, they speak from personal experiences with poorly functioning public systems: long waiting times in healthcare, inadequate elderly care, and disarray in schools. People are also concerned about increasing crime, which, like drug abuse, affects even small towns. Some are frustrated by the inadequate integration of new arrivals, such as when a caregiver for an elderly parent does not speak Swedish well enough. These welfare shortcomings lead to a mistrust of society itself and doubts about the possibility of achieving anything through collective power and effort.

<sup>15</sup> Wullenkord (2021).

# 12

## THE CONVERSATION MUST CONTINUE

“Do you want more coffee?”  
75-year-old man in Fagersta

People have a lot to say. This is a clear conclusion of our study. When we knock on doors, in the midst of everyday life, people take the time to talk. Welfare issues engage them deeply, but they also have much to say about climate change and how it will affect their daily lives.

Climate change fundamentally means, to paraphrase Kajsa Borgnäs, that a lot will have to change significantly so that what we truly value can remain largely the same.<sup>16</sup> We interpret the responses to our questions to mean that people are aware of this, but many struggle to articulate what both climate change and climate action will entail and how this will affect them and their local areas.

A coherent narrative is needed about how the necessary climate transition will take place and how it can lead to a future worth anticipating. Perhaps even a future to look forward to.

Our strongest conclusion is this: The conversation must continue. Would you like some more coffee?

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16 Borgnäs (2021), p. 11.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Lisa Pelling** holds a doctorate in political science from the University of Vienna and is Head of Arena Idé, a progressive non-partisan think tank funded by the Swedish trade union movement.

[lisa.pelling@arenagruppen.se](mailto:lisa.pelling@arenagruppen.se)

**Marika Palmér Rivera** has a Master of Science in Environmental Engineering. She is a research officer focusing on Just Transition Policy at the Swedish Trade Union Confederation LO.

[marika.palmer-rivera@lo.se](mailto:marika.palmer-rivera@lo.se)

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung  
Barnhusgatan 10  
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Sweden

Responsible for content:  
Kristina Birke Daniels | Head of FES Nordic Countries  
Phone: +46 768 486 705  
<https://nordics.fes.de>

Contact/Orders: [josefin.fuerst@fes.de](mailto:josefin.fuerst@fes.de)

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