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How justice shapes transition governance – a discourse analysis of Swedish policy debates

Anke Fischer[a]* ⓘ, Sofie Joosse[a] ⓘ, Jacob Strandell[a,c] ⓘ, Nora Söderberg[a,d] ⓘ, Kornelia Johansson[a] and Wiebren Johannes Boonstra[b] ⓘ

[a]*Division of Environmental Communication, Department of Urban and Rural Development, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Uppsala, Sweden;* [b]*Department of Earth Sciences, Uppsala University, Sweden;* [c]*Ungdomsbarometern AB, Stockholm, Sweden;* [d]*Department of Political and Social Sciences, European University Institute, Florence, Italy*

In both policy-making and academia, the realisation is growing that transitions striving for sustainability have to be *just* to be socially accepted. This insight has given rise to institutionalised approaches to a "just transition" – but also beyond these, justice is a key challenge in the governance of sustainability transitions. In this paper, we examine how justice arguments are being used in national-level discourses of transition governance in Sweden. Analysing 121 policy-related documents from 2019 to 2021, we found that justice was discursively treated in a way that essentially stifled change. Political actors attempted to trump each other's justice claims rather than to genuinely engage with them. Justice concerns that would not serve re-election, such as solidarity across social boundaries, were almost absent from the material. Based on these findings, we critically explore how justice arguments contribute to politicizing transition governance in particular ways, rendering some policy options impossible.

Keywords: just transition; contributive justice; procedural justice; recognition justice; depoliticisation

1. Introduction

In both policymaking and academia, the realisation is growing that sustainability transitions have to be *just* to be socially accepted and long-lasting – for normative as well as instrumental reasons (Williams and Doyon 2019). In response to such concerns, the term "just transition" has become widely used. Countries with high fossil-fuel dependency, such as Canada, Germany and Scotland, have established "just transition" processes and commissions (Pinker 2020; Kalt 2021), and the European Union has launched a Just Transition Mechanism as part of its Green Deal (Fleming and Mauger 2021) to support those regions that will be impacted the most by the need to reduce GHG-emissions.

However, justice is also an important consideration for broader transition processes, beyond the changes required from specific industries, as the ubiquity of resistance

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movements and large-scale protests against interventions that aim to cut GHG-emissions suggests. Movements such as the 2018 French Yellow Vests show that transition processes are easily stalled where they are regarded as unjust (Martin and Islar 2021). Seen in this wider context, justice is an *important condition for* a societal transformation towards more sustainability, but at the same time, such large-scale transformation processes also *open up opportunities to rethink justice* and redress current injustices by making justice concerns an integral part of the transformation (Aygeman 2008).

But what does "justice" in such large-scale processes of change mean? How can it be understood and implemented – and perhaps rethought? And what is, and might potentially be, its role in the governance of change? As will be argued in more depth below, in this paper, we examine the ways in which justice is being conceptualised in discourses of transition governance, understanding transition governance here as the ways in which processes of change towards a more sustainable society are (or could be) coordinated. We focus on discourses at the national level; specifically, on the discursive use of justice arguments in national-level policy debate in Sweden, drawing on publicly accessible policy documents and transcripts of parliamentary debate as material. Sweden is an interesting case due to its ambition to decarbonise electricity production and, at the same time, maintain welfare and competitiveness. As an envelope for our analysis, we combine a grounded perspective on political actors' own use of explicit justice terminology (through words such as "just," "unjust," "equitable," "inequitable") with a broad, theory-led one that understands justice as "the elimination of institutionalised domination and oppression" that systematically constrain people's opportunities for self-development and self-determination (Young [1990] 2011, 15). The analysis thus considers the respective speakers' own conceptualisations and their discursive use of justice-related terminology, but also conceptualisations that are not labelled as justice, but that do express concerns of institutionalised oppression or domination. As we will see, such a comprehensive approach allows for the inclusion of a wide range of perspectives across the entire political spectrum, and provides insights into both the rhetoric of justice arguments and more subtle, implicit uses of justice concerns in political discourse.

2.   Justice in sustainability transitions

A wealth of social scientific literature exists that describes, classifies and examines different approaches to transition governance, i.e. approaches that attempt to steer and coordinate societal change towards carbon neutrality and, more generally, sustainability through both formal, i.e. codified, and informal means (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand 2019; Fischer *et al.* 2018). Justice – as a principle that should ideally shape such processes of change – is increasingly featuring in the transition literature (Williams and Doyon 2019; Pinker 2020), but has also been extensively applied in other contexts of environmental governance, e.g. related to nature conservation (Martin *et al.* 2016). Excellent overview articles exist (e.g. McDermott, Mahanty, and Schreckenberg 2013; Williams and Doyon 2019), so we constrain ourselves here to a succinct summary of those perspectives and dimensions directly relevant to our analysis.

We construct our conceptual framework from three overlapping bodies of literature: (i) the, by comparison, relatively narrow literature on "just transitions" that tends to focus on the justice implications of larger-scale industrial change, moving away from fossil fuel use (e.g. Eisenberg 2019; Pinker 2020; Kalt 2021), (ii)

conceptualisations of environmental and climate justice that build on the distinction of different dimensions of justice emerging from critical analyses of environmental issues and the impacts of climate change (e.g. Walker 2012; Williams and Doyon 2019) and (iii) selected approaches within the wider justice literature that offer broader conceptual embedding and possibilities for interpretation, notably Young's ([1990] 2011, 2006) theorisations of justice in contexts of political negotiation and decision-making. As we will see, particularly the latter two types of literature (ii and iii) will be helpful in informing our iterative analytical process that aims to explore the ways in which justice arguments are used in debates around transition governance.

2.1. Dimensions of justice

Justice is often understood in distributive terms, as "the morally proper distribution of benefits and burdens among society's members" (Young [1990] 2011, 15). However, while there is wide consensus that distribution is an essential part of justice, there are strong arguments for a concept of justice that does not squeeze all justice concerns into a distributive paradigm, thereby reducing "non-material social goods such as rights, opportunity, power, and self-respect" to possessions, while they, as Young (16) contends, could be more usefully conceived as social and institutional relations. In addition to distribution, our analysis, thus, also explores other aspects of justice. Young's conceptualisation of justice (see also Section 1), while extremely useful for our purposes as it allows for a nuanced consideration of justice-related material and non-material concerns across the entire political spectrum, remains relatively abstract. To move beyond justice as distributional, we therefore combine her approach with more specific concepts from the environmental and climate justice literature, and examine procedural (i.e. who is involved in decision-making and has influence, and access to the formal justice system) as well as recognition dimensions (who is given respect and who is and is not valued; Walker 2012; Williams and Doyon 2019) of justice. The analysis also considers the concept of contributive justice, understood as people's "obligation to be active and productive participants in the life of society and that society has a duty to enable them to participate in this way" (US Catholic Bishops 1986, 17; Sayer 2009); a concept that we believe might be relevant not only in the labour and employment contexts where it tends to be applied (Timmermans 2018), but also in relation to wider transition governance. Finally, contextual justice has been proposed as a way to conceptualise the "pre-existing" social and structural background conditions within which other justice questions over distribution, procedure, recognition and contributions might emerge (McDermott, Mahanty, and Schreckenberg 2013) – a concept that, as we will see, links to Young's (2006) discussion of structural social injustices that emerge from global social connection (Section 6). We will explore to what extent these concepts are useful to examine the use of justice arguments in debates over transition governance. Rather than to evaluate justice claims normatively, we examine how these are being used discursively in different argumentative contexts.

2.2. Subjects of justice: who is included in justice considerations?

Cutting across academic debates over dimensions of justice, the question of who it is that is the subject of justice considerations underpins another part of the environmental and climate justice literature. While the "just transition" literature has traditionally

tended to focus on workers affected by the closing down of coalmines or other types of fossil-fuel dependent industries (Eisenberg 2019), attention to other social groups and perspectives on the "subjects" of justice has been growing, including intergenerational, inter-species, intersectional and international perspectives (Puaschunder 2020; Tschakert 2022).

If we consider justice as a guiding principle that can be used to evaluate transition governance in planning and practice, we imply that people care about this principle, about justice *per se*, and that they are not simply concerned about *their own* shares of benefits and burdens, recognition, opportunities to contribute and to participate in decision-making. The idea that justice, as a principle, should be applied to others than one's own social group connects justice tightly to concepts such as solidarity, or, as Young (2006) calls it, responsibility. As we will see, empirically, these concerns can be difficult to differentiate. However, an understanding of justice as normatively positive also points at its potential discursive uses – as a marker for something that is assumed to be consensually seen as morally right and desirable.

Our study examines such discursive uses, and offers an empirical perspective on justice in wider processes of transition governance, beyond relatively narrow "just transitions" that focus on specific industries. Intrigued by the claim that hegemonic ideas of a climate crisis have de-politicised policy-making, i.e. rendered it consensual and a purely administrative matter (Swyngedouw 2011), we explore how climate politics are being "made" through discourse, and to what extent a normative principle such as justice with its different dimensions plays a role in the discursive negotiation and, where applicable, contestation of concrete governance measures that aim to address the climate crisis.

3. The present study: justice in discourses of transition governance

Our study of discursive uses of justice builds on ideas of argumentative discourse analysis (Hajer 1993). We understand discourse as "an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to phenomena" (Hajer 1993, 45), and we are particularly interested in how discursive elements are used in their argumentative contexts. We focus on policy debates, crystallised in policy papers and party political position statements as well as performed in parliamentary debates. These allow us to gain insights into how the governance of a national-level transition process is being conceptualised and negotiated by those who are, in a democratic system, responsible for a large part of governance in practice – as they issue laws and regulations, frame conditions for both market-based interactions and grassroots initiatives, and shape societal change in many other, direct as well as indirect, ways.

Such policy debates can be regarded as the frontstage performance of political discourses (Wodak 2009) with both performers and audience present (Goffman [1959] 1990). However, the question of who the audiences (including of written statements) are is not a straightforward one, as Ilie (2010, 890) highlights in her analyses of Swedish and British parliamentary debates: "A characteristic feature of parliamentary discursive interaction is that the political power struggle is on display for a very diverse onlooking and overhearing audience" consisting of fellow Members of Parliament (MPs) but also members of the public who, in the case of parliamentary discussions, might attend in person, watch the debate on television, read about it in the news, or read a publicly accessible transcript afterwards – although the actual size and

the perspectives of the audience for any single statement will be difficult to know. We examine how justice is conceptualised and discursively used in front of these audiences through policies, policy-related documents and discussions that address the governance of societal change towards lower greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (or short: transition governance). We explore what kinds of understandings of justice are enabled by these discourses, and how these understandings interact with ideas of the transition process and its governance. By contrast, we are *not* systematically examining other steps of the policy cycle, such as policy implementation or evaluation.

Our study focuses on national-level policy debates in Sweden. Sweden's goal is to achieve carbon neutrality by 2045, and the country aspires to be a leader and a role model in the global endeavour to achieve the goals set by the Paris Agreement (Swedish Government 2017). Sweden is not directly involved in the production of energy from fossil fuels and thus lacks the "catalyst industries" that have spurred the just transition debate in countries such as Germany, Canada and Scotland with their dependence on coal mining and oil/gas extraction, respectively (Pinker 2020). However, to maintain (or even increase) its high levels of industrial production, Sweden will also require vast amounts of energy in the future – in the current scenarios in the form of fossil-free electricity. To provide these amounts of low-carbon electricity while maintaining welfare and competitiveness – Sweden's declared ambition (Swedish Government 2017) – is an enormous challenge faced also by many other countries (Sovacool 2017). We argue that Sweden can be seen as a "critical case" (Flyvbjerg 2006) in relation to this challenge, not least because of its deeply ingrained self-identification as a welfare state that cares about equality (Bergh 2011) – a value orientation that is particularly relevant for our interest in justice arguments, as we might (maybe naively) ask where justice considerations would come to the fore, if not in a self-declared transition forerunner and welfare state such as Sweden.

Our analysis of policy debates provides insights into the "making" of transition governance at the national level – and thus a better understanding of how societal change, as well as its potential failure or absence, is being instigated and coordinated through national level policies. By making the role of justice arguments in the negotiation of transition policies visible, our study also provides an important counterpart to research on citizen protests against decarbonisation interventions, movements which tend to mobilise justice arguments themselves (Martin and Islar 2021). As a contribution to this Special Issue on environmental communication, it highlights the instrumental, purposeful use of justice arguments in political debate. At the same time, our analysis also shows the ways in which justice arguments collectively constitute a certain understanding of not only justice, but also of the low-carbon transition, and ultimately shape the character of transition policies and governance.

4. Methods

4.1. Data collection

To capture political debate on justice in transition governance, we combined a systematic with a more purposive approach to the selection of documents to be analysed (Table 1). First, we searched the Swedish parliament's database of transcripts from parliamentary discussions, minutes of meetings, proposals and decisions (https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/) for documents from the period 1 January 2019 to 24 March 2021 that included the term "rättvis omställning" ("just transition"). After

Table 1. Overview of documents included in the analysis.

Type of document	Number
Committee meetings: minutes, considerations, statements	34
Summaries of EU policies including the Swedish position on these policies	21
Parliamentary motions	12
Minutes of parliamentary debates	22
Position papers and political parties' statements	12
Other (reports commissioned by government, policy documents, etc.)	20
Total	**121**

deletion of simple lists (e.g. of funding instruments), this search yielded 85 documents. While the search term "rättvis omställning" might seem to privilege documents that addressed the EU Just Transition Mechanism, including the Just Transition Fund, as their Swedish names include the search term, a large number of documents were transcripts of national-level debate, and had no, or only peripheral, links to the EU funding mechanism. This dataset did indeed provide insight into a range of contexts in which justice in transition governance was discussed, but as initial exploration of the discussion suggested that speakers from the parties in government might be more likely than the opposition to use the term "just transition," we decided to broaden our search further, to allow inclusion of other documents within the parliamentary database that addressed cognate issues. We identified these by following references in the discussion, and by varying the search terms to include words such as "jämlik" ("equal") and "grön omställning" ("green transition"). This approach yielded another 14 documents, most of them single-party motions but also including the Swedish government's climate action plan of December 2019. The majority of these documents were from the same period as those that included the original search term "just transition," although we also considered three more recent documents from June to October 2021. This part of the dataset – overall 99 files – thus included a wide variety of documents, of varying length, ranging from transcripts of parliamentary discussions to summaries of discussions of specific committees (e.g. on transport, industry, or environment and agriculture) and parliamentary motions.

Second, over and above these official transcripts of parliamentary proceedings, we trawled the internet for additional documents of relevance to contextualise our analysis of parliamentary debate. The main purpose of this step was to ensure that we did not systematically exclude perspectives on, and manifestations of, justice discourses related to questions of transition governance. Again, we exclusively focused on documents in Swedish. Here, we conducted a google scholar search combining the terms "styrning" and "styrmedel" ("governance" and "governance instruments," respectively) with "rättvis omställning" ("just transition") (5 documents), searched the internet for combinations between the word "klimat" and the names of the political parties represented in Swedish parliament (11 documents), and snowballed from these searches to identify other relevant documents (6 documents). The most recent of these documents were dated November 2021. This second step thus allowed us to include a further 22 documents by national level public actors, among them three annual reports of the Swedish advisory council for climate policy (an institution created by the government as part of the Swedish climate policy framework adopted in 2017), party-political position papers and online statements, and national-level evaluation reports on transition governance. We did not include newspaper articles, or documents authored by private individuals,

companies or labour unions. Further searches suggested that we had, indeed, reached saturation, and the inclusion of more documents would not have added new perspectives to the analysis.

4.2. Data analysis

Our qualitative data analysis followed an iterative approach. All 121 documents (Table 1) were uploaded in NVivo software and initially coded to high-level categories that captured explicit, as well as implicit, references to ideas of justice, governance and transition.

After an in-depth, grounded exploration of the data coded under "justice" and a revisit of the literature, we made our approach more specific and recoded all content under this category, which included (a) explicit references to justice or injustice, using words such as "rättvis," "orättvis" or "ojämlik," as well as (b) other references to "institutionalised domination and oppression" (Young [1990] 2011, see Section 1) in the context of transition governance that addressed justice concerns in implicit ways. Using Young's definition of justice as guidance allowed us to include a much wider, yet clearly bounded, range of expressions and descriptions of (in-)justice, even where the speakers did not use any terms such as "rättvis" or "jämlik."

Finer-grained conceptual categories were then introduced that allowed coding of justice references according to the dimensions expressed (e.g. distributive, procedural, recognition, etc.) as well as to the social groups that were addressed in justice-related statements (e.g. urban vs rural residents, men vs women, etc.). We also coded the roles and affiliations of the individuals or organisations speaking – depending on the type of documents, these could vary across a text. While a qualitative analysis such as ours cannot (and does not aim to) provide a systematic categorisation of justice arguments by political actor, we do draw on the respective speakers' roles to contextualise and interpret the findings. Section 5 therefore refers to the speakers, their affiliation and role wherever meaningful.

Our dataset consisted of a very specific genre of text (Ilie 2006; Wodak 2009), namely utterances of political actors in the context of national-level policy debate around transition governance. Within this overarching genre, we could distinguish, chiefly, between three types of text: (a) transcripts of parliamentary debate, where speakers draw on pre-formulated scripts but also react spontaneously to each other, generally constrained by strict speaking rules and maximum speaking time, (b) written statements such as position papers and motions that articulate political views, unconstrained by space limitations and (c) descriptive texts, such as reports, or summaries of EU policies including the Swedish position on these policies. As our analysis straddled policy debates across all sectors and deliberately included discussions within sector-specific parliamentary committees (e.g. for transport, finance, or environment and agriculture) as well as of the entire parliament, our material covers a large range of topics, most prominently among them possibly transport, agriculture, energy, industry and labour issues. All types of documents were included in the same analysis, but as we will see, these different formats implied different ways of using justice-related arguments.

The focal period of our analysis – January 2019 to March 2021, chosen to be long enough to allow for inclusion of a sufficiently large body of material – was a relatively eventful period in Swedish politics. After the national-level elections in autumn 2018, it took the largest party, the Social Democrats, until January 2019 to form a government consisting of the Social Democrat and Green parties, supported by the Liberal

and Centre parties, and tolerated by the Left Party. The parliamentary opposition consisted of the Moderate, Christian Democrat and Sweden Democrat parties. All of these are represented in our data. In summer 2021, the government resigned, and a new minority government, installed in November 2021, involved only representatives of the Social Democrat party. Our study period also includes the Covid 19 pandemic, which hit Sweden in March 2020. As a consequence, some of the discussions in the later part of the investigated period addressed suggestions for a "green recovery" of the Swedish economy from the impacts of the pandemic, which opened up new opportunities to raise justice questions – but, as we will see, these were not translated into policy proposals.

In our presentation of the findings, we begin by unpacking how *explicit* justice arguments were used in debates around transition governance (Sections 5.1, 5.2). We then move on to include *implicit* justice arguments and their implications for the discursive negotiation of transition policies in our analysis (Section 5.3) and explore discursive competition as a particularly striking feature of the debate (Section 5.4). Finally, we reflect on the embedding of justice arguments in different conceptualisations of sustainability and transition (Section 5.5) and on their wider role in the construction of a political playing field, also identifying notions of justice that appeared to be missing from the debate (Section 5.6).

5.   Findings

Within the material analysed, the discussion of justice aspects – whether explicit or implicit – took up only a relatively small part, as much of the debate around transition governance addressed other dimensions, such as emission reduction goals, technologies, GHG emissions or climate models. However, both the conceptualisation and the discursive function of justice arguments varied depending on the type of text (e.g. whether part of a parliamentary discussion or a single-party statement) and the role and background of the speaker (including their party affiliation and whether their party was part of the government). While some documents, such as the government's Climate Action Plan (2019) of 197 pages did not use the term "just transition" at all and addressed justice issues only in passing, others – such as several parliamentary motions, and the minutes of a parliamentary discussion in February 2021– extensively discussed justice concerns, both implicitly and explicitly. All of these will be explored in the next sections.

5.1.   *Explicit references to justice in the context of the EU Just transition Fund*

Not surprisingly, given the choice of the main search terms, where justice was explicitly mentioned, it was often referred to in the context of the EU Just Transition Fund and related EU policies, such as the Green New Deal and the European Pillar of Social Rights. "Justice" and "just" tended to be either used as labels of the respective EU policy, or the conceptualisations coming from the European Commission (EC) were simply repeated, and not queried or unpacked. Those documents that specifically dealt with an application of the Just Transition Fund to Sweden described – in line with the EC's conceptualisation – justice as the geographically focused financial support of selected industries to enable their decarbonisation, with arguments coming from both a labour/employment and an industry/competition perspective. Here, the

focal subject of justice were the industries affected by the transition process; more specifically, a selection of large companies that participated in the EU Emission Trading Scheme, who were targeted to simultaneously reduce their emissions radically through technological change and maintain (or even increase) employment opportunities in the geographical areas selected. The survival of the company was equated to regional employment and thus public welfare, in other words, "justice" towards the companies seemed to imply justice towards regions and individual citizens. Where this was broken down to the individual level, justice meant the provision of opportunities for lifelong learning, for the individual employee's sake but also to meet the industry's requirements for new skills. This understanding of transition justice was hardly challenged in parliament. Only the Social Democrat subgroup "The Reformists" position paper expanded on this concept by proposing a "job guarantee for individuals, societies and sectors that may be negatively affected by a green transition."

Interestingly, discussions after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic increasingly referred to justice in the context of a "digital and green transition," where the tagline that "nobody should be left outside" (the literal translation of the Swedish version of the UN Agenda 2030s "leave no one behind") seemed to apply equally to both transition processes, and justice ideas thus served as a common denominator. At the same time, the conflation of "digital" and "green" appeared to take importance away from the decarbonisation argument that originally underpinned the idea of a green transition and shifted it towards the need to source skilled workers to maintain the competitiveness of the affected industries.

5.2. Explicit recognition of the importance of justice in Sweden's transition process?

Also beyond the discussion of EU policies, there was general recognition that justice and social acceptance were important aspects of the Swedish transition process. However, this recognition was expressed in hugely diverging terms, and was heavily dependent on the speaker's party affiliation and the context in which the discussion took place. The Left party had, in line with their general focus on justice and equality ("jämlikhet"), in both written documents and speeches by far the most explicit and detailed political view on transition justice, which they applied to argue for stronger consideration of equality in a wide range of sectoral contexts (e.g. trade, transport, employment and energy). They referred not only to the unequal distribution of wealth between high and low income groups within the Swedish society, but also to structural inequality between genders, urban and rural parts of the Swedish population, and richer and poorer countries, deeply ingrained into the capitalist system:

> The green deal, necessarily, has to include strategies and measures to reduce both inequality and climate emissions. This requires measures for climate justice, in line with the scientific basis. In essence, our production, consumption and distribution of goods and services has to change so that we can leave the fossil-dependent society behind. (Left party MP)

The two parties in government, the Social Democrats and the Green party, varied in their discursive treatment of justice. In formal government speeches and writings, transition justice tended to be mentioned but not elaborated upon, which also implied

that concrete goals and guidelines for how to address justice questions in practice were lacking. By contrast, in parliamentary debate and written motions, individual MPs from both parties repeatedly drew on both explicit and implicit justice arguments, at times supported with quite some detail. Often, however, the propositions that were based on such justice arguments, such as the Reformists' detailed proposal for a Green New Deal for Sweden and a motion by two Green MPs to establish a citizen council for just transition governance, were a long way from the majority view in parliament and, thus, from implementation.

The remaining parties on the more conservative part of the spectrum only rarely referred explicitly to either justice or equality. However, as we will see, they did use justice arguments in implicit ways.

5.3. The diversity of justice arguments

Overall, justice seemed to be negotiated in a somewhat paradoxical way. Where it was mentioned explicitly in government documents and speeches, it tended to remain unspecific and unexplained. Where it was elaborated on, such as in contributions by the Left, and by groups and individuals within the Social Democrat and Green parties, it appeared to have only limited bearing on actual policies as their propositions were turned down by the majority in parliament, seemingly without any deliberation of the underlying justice arguments.

However, justice concerns were also discussed *without* using terms such as "just" or "equal." Prominent contexts for such discussions were the decarbonisation of the transport sector, specifically taxation issues related to private households' use of transport, often framed as debates on the government budget. In these discussions, arguments were expressed that mobilised a variety of justice dimensions. While distributive aspects were ubiquitous, most prominent and obvious, a closer look at the data also revealed a widespread, implicit use of arguments that seemed to reflect considerations of recognition justice:

> The government does this [investing into transport infrastructure] so that we can live and work in our entire country, and so that we can transport the riches which we have across the country and that are so important for the Swedish economy. The government does this so that one can get safely, securely and in time to work or to school. (…) The transition also has to be just. Nobody should be left on their own because of their class, gender or place of residence. (Social Democrat MP)

Statements such as this one appeared to express that the speaker recognised, understood and respected the needs, concerns and worries that their citizens might have.

Procedural aspects of justice were rarely alluded to, and often intertwined with implicit references to recognition justice. The most elaborate argument was formulated by two MPs from the Green party, motioning for the creation of a "just transition" citizen council that would develop policy proposals, and actively engage those groups in society that, at present, did not feel well-represented by the parliamentary democratic system.

Discussions around the question of who should contribute to the transition also included strong undertones of justice concerns, and combined distributive notions (who should bear the costs of transition?) with attributions of responsibility: " … nations

whose emissions are the highest should take their responsibility" (Sweden Democrat MP), and, somewhat more pro-actively:

> … the responsibility for the big question of our time, the climate, should never lie with the mum in inland Norrland who has to drive her son 50 km to his football training. We take this responsibility together. (Swedish Government)

By contrast, statements that alluded to ideas of contributive justice, as described in the literature, i.e. as an expression of the value of different contributions (Section 2.1), were rather rare.

Where justice-related statements consisted of more than single words, both explicit and implicit justice considerations tended to be formulated in relation to groups of concern, usually juxtaposing two groups such as men vs women, richer vs poorer parts of the population, rich vs poor countries, current vs future generations, and, as the most prominent distinction, city dwellers vs people living in the countryside. We could also see the urban/rural juxtaposition in debates that addressed governance issues beyond the fossil-free transition, e.g. rural development and growth more generally, but the context of transition governance appeared to be a setting where these tensions were amplified. Urban/rural differences were referred to in many contexts and discussions by all parties and made up an important part of the discourse around transition justice. They could be conceptualised in distributive, recognition or contributive terms. Some discussions painted a picture of Sweden as a torn and deeply divided country, with irreconcilable rifts between urban and rural parts of the population. Rhetorical shorthands such as "hela landet" ("the entire country") and "i vårt avlånga land" (literally: "in our oblong country") were employed to express recognition of the differences in needs, conditions, resources and possibilities across Sweden, referring also to the long distances that people in sparsely populated areas had to cover, usually by car or domestic flights, as public transport options available to the city regions were virtually non-existent.

Rural/urban differences were, thus, predominantly represented as differences in infrastructure, notably in relation to transport and mobility, resulting in the conclusion that it was unjust to penalise people living in the countryside for their car dependency. While speakers from all parts of the political spectrum – not only those who could be seen as the traditional representatives of the countryside – concurred on this, their conclusions for concrete policies, e.g. fuel taxes, diverged.

5.4. *Justice claims – a discursive competition*

Interestingly, in parliamentary debate, the categories rural/urban were generally not explicitly connected to specific worldviews, attitudes or education. But even though the focus was almost exclusively on infrastructure, the overall, implicit picture painted of the countryside was one of disadvantage and deprivation, an image that was only rarely explicitly challenged:

> I want to reflect a bit on the view that we have of people and businesses in the countryside. Generally, the debate makes them often appear as almost socially deprived, poor and living under precarious economic conditions. That's not quite how it is. (Centre party MP)

In some instances, however, the categories "rich" and "urban" were conflated, usually by using examples pointing at injustices that referred to specific parts of Stockholm (Sweden's largest city, and the capital), which were known to be comparatively well-off. Such rhetorical tools were very prominent in some of the parliamentary debates, where the speakers, representing different parties, seemed to compete over expressing the greatest recognition of, and care for, the needs of rural people, for example, in relation to a governmental bonus/malus scheme aiming to promote the purchase of electric cars. Particularly striking here was the rhetorical pattern of using individualised examples that appeared to aim at making injustices concrete and tangible. These could refer to the mum in the countryside as in the quote above, or, in what appeared to be a discursive battle to find new and more extreme examples, to cases such as this:

> I mentioned the situation for families where someone sits in a wheelchair and really needs a mobility scooter. There are families where two family members need power wheelchairs. These don't fit in a normal car. You need a minibus to be able to have a similar standard of living as others. The new bonus-malus penalises this family in an inappropriately hard and unjust way. (Moderate party MP)

It was striking that none of the MPs ever challenged other MPs' justice arguments, as if calling such personalised justice claims into question was seen as unacceptable practice. Instead, MPs raised alternative justice arguments, based on different examples and drawing different conclusions, aiming to discursively trump the preceding ones:

> We want the transition. Fuel taxes are actually a way to reduce carbon emissions. But we also want justice across the entire country. That's why we reduce taxes for those citizens that live where distances are long. But the Moderates say no to that. If we want transition, we can't do it by, as [Moderate MP] suggests, reducing fuel taxes by 7 billion kronor and at the same time increasing VAT on food by 10 billion – how does this affect the single mum in the countryside (…)? (Social Democrat MP)

Such statements mobilised notions of both distributive and recognition justice. Speakers appeared to be aiming to show that they, with their politics, were best able to recognise the problems that "normal" people, people in the countryside, and other groups of concern were facing. While explicit references to distributive aspects of justice were quite widespread, these were much rarer in relation to recognition justice, which all parties expressed largely indirectly, by showing consideration of specific groups' concerns.

The main discursive conclusion from justice arguments, whether implicit or explicit, was that transition policies had to work for everyone, across the entire country. And while the parties in government used justice arguments to legitimise existing policies, the opposition seemed to mobilise such claims largely to undermine existing policies, block the approval of new policies and thus prevent further change. Overall, thus, justice arguments served to cement the status quo, rather than being used to proactively and collectively work towards a more just society.

However, given the ubiquity of references to urban/rural injustices and concerns of a range of groups within society, it was surprising that only two documents in our dataset touched on justice implications of Sweden's fossil-free transition for reindeer herding in the rural north, considering that reindeer herding is a crucial cultural and economic part

of Sami indigenous livelihoods, and that justice concerns related to these are salient at least in parts of the public debate. Both climate change itself, as well as several of the key mitigation interventions, such as the development of onshore wind energy and the transition of the mining and steel industry in the north, are seen as likely to impact on reindeer herding, but such concerns were absent from the discussions we analysed – implying that they were not seen as relevant arguments in the discursive competition over recognition justice that we found elsewhere in the debate.

5.5. *Alignment with ideas of sustainability and transition?*

Speakers and parties differed with respect to the extent to which they explicitly talked about a "transition" process and "sustainability" as a goal. For the parties in government, as well as for the Left party, such terms and concepts were an integral part of their discourse, whereas the conservative parties, the Christian Democrats, Moderates and Sweden Democrats, reacted to this discourse, aiming to stop, redirect or change proposals from the governing parties. Typical arguments from the latter parties highlighted the importance of nuclear energy for achieving Sweden's climate goals, the need to also count carbon sequestration in forests – and the need to keep the EU at arm's length in the face of an increasing number of EU policies related to social and environmental sustainability that could potentially infringe on Sweden's ability to make decisions on its own.

However, generally, and regardless of the terminology used, the visions of most speakers in parliamentary debate remained within existing systems and structures, e.g. emphasising that all modes of transport – including cars and domestic flights – were important and would therefore be maintained. Discussions mainly revolved around budget allocations and taxation to facilitate technological innovation, such as the electrification of Sweden's car fleet. Legislative approaches to transition governance or other, further reaching visions for fossil-free futures, seemed to be absent from the debate.

5.6. *Summary: justice and the role of the welfare state – a need for solidarity?*

While in overarching policy documents and the overall transition debate, justice concerns thus only played a relatively minor role, a closer look at party-political documents and parliamentary debates revealed a more complex picture. Distributive arguments seemed particularly salient, possibly tightly connected to the framing of much of the discussions as negotiations of the state budget; an essentially distributive issue. At the same time, distributive arguments were closely intertwined with notions of recognition, as many statements of the type "it would not be fair if (this group of people/individual) had to pay the price for decarbonisation" did not only make claims about distributive justice, but can also be interpreted as calls for a stronger recognition of the needs of a specific group of citizens. Most prominently, this sort of statement was used to express recognition of the situation of people living in rural and remote rural areas. Justice arguments did not allude to the different dimensions of justice (Section 2.1) in mutually exclusive ways; to the contrary, the same statement could mobilise two or more dimensions simultaneously.

Interestingly, justice as such was not contested. Where justice was discussed, speakers concurred that these considerations were important, and neither the subject

nor the conceptualisation of justice was openly challenged. Instead, speakers tried to claim justice arguments for themselves and their own party, and to make speakers from other parties appear less just than themselves. In this way, justice was discursively constructed as an (often implicit) evaluation criterion that was used to argue for or against different policy options.

Regardless of party-political orientation, speakers thus created an overarching political ideal of a welfare state where all options (e.g. in terms of people's choices of place of residence, leisure activities or consumption) should be open to all citizens, without exception. Justice arguments in support of different groups within the population were not necessarily reflective of party-political orientation – for example, all parties expressed the need to support rural residents as well as low-income groups. Prioritisations, or potential costs or disadvantages for certain groups, were not discussed – at least not in parliamentary debates, even though some position papers and motions, especially those of the Left party, did highlight the need for a redistribution of resources. The realism of the resulting expectations was not queried: Transition governance had to take place within the political space that such an idealised concept of the welfare state, whose task it was to facilitate maximum freedom of choice for all citizens, delineated. As a consequence, justice arguments that claimed that a (proposed or existing) policy constrained individual citizens' freedom of choice could be mobilised to stop any political intervention.

The strong discursive weight of this idea of a welfare state without limits seemed to lead to a marginalisation of a conceptualisation of justice as solidarity, or as a responsibility to contribute to the undoing of injustices (see Sections 2.2, 6.4). Only very rarely, solidarity and the idea that different groups in society should stand up for each other – also across national boundaries, and even if this entailed constraining or reducing one's own opportunities – were brought up:

> I think it's incredibly important to see the entire work with changing behavioural patterns not as something that is imposed on individual people but as something that is about what we do together. (…) we from the Green party see solidarity as an important concept. I see it as important that if I, who live in the city, can contribute, somebody else who lives in the countryside can continue to use their car. (Green party MP)

Overall, justice appeared to be reduced to expressions of interest by groups within society. MPs represented and argued for these interests. Offers to *contribute* to change, maybe even at one's own (or one's constituency's) expense – such as the one formulated in the previous quote – were scarce.

6. Discussion and conclusions

Our analysis included uses of both explicit and implicit justice arguments. While explicit references to justice were particularly prominent in the left part of Sweden's political spectrum, implicit justice arguments were mobilised by members of parties across the entire political field. Our approach, thus, allowed inclusion of all parties' discursive use of justice concerns and did not, a priori, exclude parts of the spectrum (see Haidt 2012), as a focus on only explicit justice statements would have done. This is important for two reasons. First, it shows that explicit justice terminology, in the way in which it is currently used in contexts of transition and climate change, does not seem

to find resonance among the more conservative and right-wing parties in Sweden. Future research could explore to what extent other value-based arguments, e.g. references to freedom as a moral value, might instead be used in *explicit* argumentation, and what the implications of these different value-based argumentations are for transition governance. Second, our analysis highlights that justice as a value – not as a word – is also of high currency among the conservative parties, and is actively used by MPs to speak to, and be understood by, the entire parliamentary spectrum.

Much of the discursive engagement with justice focused on distributive concerns, notably the question of who would be disadvantaged by the decisions taken in parliament. All parties seemed to concur, at least in direct interaction, that justice meant to not make anyone worse off than before. Unlike in less formalised discussion formats (Kalt 2021), in parliamentary debate, justice claims on behalf of specific groups, or claims drawing on individual cases such as the countryside mum or the family with two wheelchair users (see above), were not criticised or delegitimised.

This discursive treatment of justice had two main implications, in simplified terms (i) the suppression of change and (ii) the neglect of justice concerns that would not serve re-election, such as solidarity. We explore and unpack their complexities in the remainder of this section.

6.1. Justice arguments and their implications for change

First, our findings suggest that the use of justice arguments *stifled change*, rather than – as one might naively have expected – to *improve transition governance*. The low-carbon transition has often been regarded as an opportunity to rethink and renegotiate current structures, including their inherent injustices (Aygeman 2008). Indeed, a small number of parliamentary motions and position papers – notably by the Left party, but also by subgroups within the Social Democrat and the Green parties – outlined alternative visions of transition governance based on justice considerations. However, these visions seemed inconsequential when it came to direct parliamentary debate and decision-making, where such alternatives did not garner majority support. Instead, justice arguments seemed to gain more traction where they were used to back up existing policies, such as the bonus-malus approach for electric vehicles, or, conversely, to stop or dilute these. Our analysis, therefore, contributes to this Special Issue by showing how communication over key ideas of sustainability transformations, such as justice, shapes processes of change – and might, as in this case, be connected to stagnation rather than fostering constructive engagement with these processes. By focusing on discourse, our study complements Kanarp and Westberg (2023), which adopts a social practice perspective on transition governance, but similarly highlights mechanisms of communication that appear to result in the stifling of change.

6.2. Which justice concerns are addressed?

Possibly underpinning this phenomenon, in some discussions, actors across the entire political spectrum seemed to compete over who had the strongest "ethos," i.e. moral profile (Ilie 2006), by claiming justice for groups affected by what was portrayed as structural disadvantage. Indeed, their argumentation expressed an understanding of injustice as institutionalised domination and oppression, systematically constraining opportunities for self-development and self-determination (Young [1990] 2011), for example, related to

people's choices of where in the country to live or work and how to spend their leisure time. A key concern were the disadvantages that rural residents were said to face, which were argued to be further amplified by changes in taxation or subsidies that aimed to promote the low-carbon transition. However, rather than using justice considerations to address such potential imbalances at their core, justice arguments were discursively employed to fend against relatively small and specific concerns.

Apart from a handful of documents that engaged with justice in more depth (see above), it seemed that references to justice were reduced to talk about distribution of costs and benefits. This also applied to contributive and recognition justice arguments, as both included notions of distributive justice – with non-material dimensions such as responsibility and the recognition of needs superimposed, but often not explicitly articulated. Looking at this from Young's ([1990] 2011) perspective, this is not surprising, as she argues that in a welfare capitalist society, even conflict is predominantly cast in distributive terms. More comprehensive considerations of justice have little space in public policy making as "… interest group pluralism makes no distinction between the assertion of selfish interests and normative claims to justice …" (Young [1990] 2011, 72). This could be taken to mean that justice arguments are just a façade: "those who make claims of (…) justice are only saying what they want in clever rhetoric" (72), but it also implies that even where actors genuinely want to articulate justice concerns, they are confined to formats of bargaining over the distribution of resources.

6.3.   *The (de)politicisation of climate politics?*

Such observations are reflected in the diagnosis that public policy formation in general (Young [1990] 2011) and climate politics in particular (Swyngedouw 2011) have become depoliticised or "post-political." What, then, would a more political debate about transition governance look like? For Young ([1990] 2011, 73), this would involve public deliberation where a "politicized public resolves disagreement and makes decisions by listening to one another's claims and reasons" – a vision that is quite far away from contemporary parliamentary debate where, as in our data, MPs seem to listen, but not to seriously engage with each other's justice arguments, possibly because they "are fully aware of the fact that they cannot realistically hope to persuade political opponents of the justifiability of their ideas and beliefs" anyway (Ilie 2006, 193). By contrast, for Swyngedouw (2011), climate politics have become post-political, as they have been rendered consensual across the political spectrum. While the policy debates we analysed bore the veneer of such a post-political consensus, where fundamental questions and choices are being avoided and political action is confined to the technical and administrative realm, agreement on the urgency of the low carbon transition was rather superficial and discussions rife with disagreement that revealed deep-seated divergences in worldviews. Such worldviews were, at times, articulated in parliamentary motions and concept papers, but not seriously engaged with in direct debate – which instead limited itself largely to the negotiation of technicalities and smaller distributive concerns.

6.4.   *Justice for whom?*

Much of the material we analysed, thus, seemed to serve the "assertion of self-interest" – not for the MPs themselves but on behalf of their voters. We can speculate that individualised examples, such as references to the countryside mum or wheelchair users, were not

designed to refer directly to specific groups (such as wheelchair users or rural mothers) but intended as expressions of more general concerns (e.g. increasing fuel prices) with which target groups could identify. Seen in this light, we can ask whether the absence of reindeer herding concerns in the debate can be explained precisely because too few voters would reward such arguments with their support. And indeed, while speakers occasionally referred to future generations, people in other countries, and, very rarely, to non-human species – i.e. groups that are only very indirectly represented by Swedish voters –, such statements tended to be either confined to motions and position papers that had little bearing on actual policies, or to be framed in a way that did not require voters to pay or forego own opportunities for the sake of others. This discursive practice reduced justice arguments even further, stripping justice from the moral weight that it might have as a general principle that holds for everyone, and not only as a matter of protecting one's own benefits. It seemed difficult, if not impossible, for MPs to escape the need to tread carefully in justice argumentations that implied costs or disadvantages to voters. However, some did mention the term "solidarity," pointing at an understanding of justice that went beyond benefits and the absence of costs for one's own interest group. In some instances (e.g. in the case of the Left party, see above), actors even highlighted contextual injustices (McDermott, Mahanty, and Schreckenberg 2013), thereby echoing Young's (2006) idea of responsibility for redressing structurally ingrained injustices. Such responsibility does not arise from direct causality or formal liability, but from the social connections within a globalised system that build up to structural injustices (Young 2006). Together, diagnoses such as the ones by Young ([1990] 2011) and Ilie (2006) that characterise contemporary policy debate as heavily constrained by political structures and social norms of political communication suggest that the stifling effects of justice arguments are difficult, if not impossible to overcome. However, future research could focus on the ways in which less commonly used justice-related notions, such as solidarity and responsibility, are able to push the envelope in which justice concerns are being considered across the entire political spectrum, and to what extent such arguments would, in fact, be appreciated, rather than rejected, by voters. Such studies could include quantitative questionnaire-based approaches such as the one by Fritz *et al.* (2021), which identified different clusters of welfare-related and environmental attitudes among Swedish residents, as well as in-depth qualitative explorations of citizens' views on similar factors.

6.5. *Looking ahead*

Looking beyond the timeframe of our analysis, it seems, strikingly, that our material has already been superseded by more recent developments in Swedish climate policy. In autumn 2021, the Green party left the government. In her declaration of government intention (Swedish Government 2021, 4), the new prime minister stated as her second of three goals "to drive the green industrial revolution with investments across the entire country. This way, emissions will be reduced and future jobs will end up in Sweden" – a statement that, also in its full version, emphasizes employment and competitiveness of Swedish industry even more than the "just transition" idea has been doing. Compared to the debates we analysed, it discursively deprioritizes climate change as well as justice concerns further, rendering them obsolete by co-opting them into a version of transition that seems to be even more strongly characterised by neoliberal perspectives (Hatzisavvidou 2020). Thereby, it closes down options for a genuine consideration of justice in transition governance, possibly making the political discourse even more depoliticised at the surface,

but exacerbating the underlying divergences in worldviews. Following this interpretation of the transition idea and investigating whether and how it might possibly provoke a re-politicisation of the debate, will be an important research task for the future.

ORCID

Anke Fischer ⓘ http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0034-3690
Sofie Joosse ⓘ http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8724-0183
Jacob Strandell ⓘ http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2984-9967
Nora Söderberg ⓘ http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5510-4224
Wiebren Johannes Boonstra ⓘ http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1191-0574

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