

Intersectionality and Adaptation Justice in Sweden:

Where are We - and Where Next?

ABSTRACT

Intersectional and justice approaches to climate adaptation are increasingly recognized by scholars and policymakers as essential for understanding the complexities of climate vulnerability and preventing the exacerbation of inequalities. Yet little research to date explores what intersectional adaptation justice entails in Sweden, a country often perceived as highly equal and relatively invulnerable to climate impacts. Drawing on a narrative literature review of research on environmental and climate justice in Sweden, we identify emerging narratives, examine their focal subjects, and explore what they illuminate. We then assess the limitations of these approaches for adaptation justice and explore how intersectionality can broaden justice conceptualizations in affluent contexts. Our review reveals that environmental and climate justice research in Sweden remains geographically and demographically narrow with limited engagement with justice dimensions. Moreover, adaptation is scarcely addressed within these literatures. We argue that applying intersectionality can help adaptation justice research move beyond limited categories of difference, foster more critical understandings of justice, bridge justice concerns across spatial and temporal scales, and enable more nuanced analyses of power and privilege. We conclude that intersectionality offers significant potential to advance adaptation justice research and call for more empirical studies to explore its application in practice.

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INTRODUCTION

The 2025 Los Angeles wildfires exposed the fallacy of the “affluence-as-shield narrative” (Jackson, 2024), which assumes that wealth, modern infrastructure, and technology mastery render affluent societies immune to climate impacts (Weatherill, 2024). These persistent imaginaries of modernity and control sustain a dangerous complacency, suggesting that such societies do not require climate adaptation. Climate adaptation is broadly understood as actions that reduce the negative impacts of climate change on communities and ecosystems (IPCC, 2022). These actions can range from land use change and infrastructure retrofitting to behavioral shifts, education, and nature-based solutions.

In Sweden, climate adaptation as a distinct political agenda is relatively recent, with the country’s first adaptation strategy³ adopted only in 2018. Domestically, climate change is treated as a manageable risk, integrated into existing political and institutional frameworks (Englund & Barquet, 2023), rather than as a threat necessitating extraordinary measures. Adaptation efforts are fragmented, (Rylenius & Hamza, 2024) and responsibilities are devolved to the local level (Knaggård et al., 2025).

Still, this *laissez-faire* approach to climate adaptation does not affect everyone equally. Research shows that Swedish adaptation policies often overlook marginalized groups and differentiated impacts of both climate change and adaptation efforts (Arora-Jonsson & Wahlström, 2023; De Rosa et al., 2022), prioritizing “vulnerable infrastructures rather than vulnerable people” (Jonsson & Lundgren, 2015; p.456). This approach risks reproducing existing systems of power and deepening social inequalities. At the same time, scholars emphasize that justice is critical to the legitimacy of adaptation policies and to avoiding maladaptation (Araos et al., 2021; Schlosberg et al., 2017).

Sweden’s second “National Strategy and the Government’s Action Plan for Climate Change Adaptation”⁴, explicitly states that climate adaptation must not “exacerbate inequalities and alienation”

(own translation), signaling a growing political recognition of adaptation justice. Still, justice is not a singular or static concept. It is inherently place-based, plural, and context-dependent (Walker et al., 2023). As such, understanding how adaptation justice is conceptualized within Sweden is vital to identifying gaps and informing policies that are both effective and perceived as fair.

Justice has long been a central concern in adaptation research (see Tschakert et al., 2013; Schneider & Lane, 2006; Adger et al., 2006), particularly in relation to the majority world or “Global South”. Less explored, however, are questions of adaptation justice within affluent contexts – those perceived as secure or “invulnerable” to climate change. Yet, these contexts may also contain hidden vulnerabilities, intra-group inequalities, and uneven privileges. As the Los Angeles wildfires revealed, affluent residents may hire private firefighters, while already marginalized residents withstand the worst loss and harm (Arango & Kamin, 2025 January 12). This illustrates the need to consider intragroup differences and intersectionality when examining adaptation justice.

Intersectional approaches to environmental justice for adaptation are increasingly recognized (Garcia & Tschakert, 2022; Mikulewicz et al., 2023), yet their application in Sweden remains limited. In this article, we examine Sweden – a country often viewed as affluent, equitable, and resilient – as a case to explore the following research questions:

1. What dominant environmental justice (EJ) and climate justice (CJ) narratives shape adaptation in Sweden?
2. What perspectives and groups are included and excluded from these narratives?
3. Whose lived experiences are rendered visible in current scholarship?

We address these questions through a narrative literature review of EJ and CJ research in Sweden. Our aim is to highlight how intersectional approaches

can enrich the study of adaptation justice in affluent settings – an area of study which remains underdeveloped.

We also acknowledge that this work is shaped by our own positions as white, university-educated women who consider Sweden as home. We approach both justice and intersectionality through epistemological pluralism, recognizing the existence of multiple definitions and understandings. Rather than imposing fixed concepts, we deliberately leave these terms open, inviting further empirical explorations of their meaning in specific contexts. In terms of intersectionality, we view this as the intersection of constructed subjectivities (such as gender, race, and class) and the systems of power (such as racism, sexism, and classism) that shape them (see for example, Collins & Bilge, 2020). This article is not exhaustive. Instead, we offer it as a starting point – and an invitation for deeper engagement with questions of intersectional environmental justice in Sweden and beyond.

SWEDEN: A CASE OF PERCEIVED JUSTICE AND INVULNERABILITY

Sweden, a small country in Northern Europe of approximately ten million people, is internationally known for its socialist history, egalitarian ideals, and strong welfare state. It has long been seen as a leader in equality and environmental politics. However, these reputations are increasingly under scrutiny, with growing inequalities and diminishing environment leadership (Magnusdottir & Widengård, 2025; The Lancet Regional Health-Europe, 2023).

Sweden's political identity is also grounded in a strong social contract, characterized by high mutual trust between citizens and the state. This contract is built on ideals of collective responsibility and universal access to high-quality public services (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2022). Yet, climate adaptation policies increasingly shift responsibility from the collective to the individual (Rylenius & Hamza, 2024). Shaped by dominant narratives of equality and mutual obligation, there is a prevailing risk of assuming that

adaptation burdens are already fairly distributed – an assumption that could obscure underlying tensions and inequities. These include elite capture of resources, the concealment of structural advantages, normative ideas of fairness or protection, concentration of authority, and the maintenance of systems that disproportionately uphold structures benefiting affluent groups.

Sweden's tradition of consensus-driven politics typically integrates environmental, economic, and social concerns, avoiding trade-off framings (Bell, 2014). However, this integrative approach can depoliticize climate policy by minimizing attention to power, conflict, and inequality (Bradley et al., 2008). In adaptation planning, for example, “the messy world of gender, race, class are actively ignored to uphold an order that is considered knowable and possible to act on” (Arora-Jonsson & Wahlström, 2023; p.9). This leads to oversimplified models of the citizen as rational and homogenous, which in turn reinforces the erasure of differentiated and intersectional vulnerabilities (Singleton et al., 2022). Combined with broader cultural imaginaries of safety and resilience, Sweden's adaptation discourse risks naturalizing fantasies of invulnerability and obscuring the justice dimensions of adaptation. Thus, Sweden offers a compelling and underexamined case for exploring how the convergence of perceived invulnerability and strong social contract affects adaptation justice.

ADAPTATION & JUSTICE

In this article, we situate adaptation justice within the broader fields of environmental justice (EJ) and climate justice (CJ). While these fields are closely related, they differ in their genealogies, geographies, and conceptual emphasis.

Environmental Justice emerged from U.S.-based civil rights and grassroots movements in the 1980s, particularly among Black and Indigenous communities, in response to the uneven distribution of environmental bads (Schlosberg, 2013; Pellow, 2023). Since then, EJ has expanded geographically

and conceptually to consider justice issues of different natures in the United States and beyond. The EJ scholarship initially focused on distributional inequities – who bears the burdens of environmental degradation – but has since expanded to include procedural, recognitional, and capabilities justice (Pellow, 2023). An expanded understanding of what these pillars focus on, the type of research questions they ask, and how they relate to climate adaptation is found in Table 1 to demonstrate the distinctions and interconnections between them. Recent research has also expanded towards more critical approaches of EJ that engage with for example intersectionality, the more-than-human, and decoloniality (Schlosberg et al., 2025; Pellow, 2023). EJ defines the environment broadly, not as pristine, or detached nature but as the material and relational spaces where humans “live, work, and play” (Novotny, 2000).

Climate justice (CJ), by contrast, centers on the unequal causes and consequences of climate change,

often at a global or intergenerational scale (Newell et al., 2021). CJ emphasizes the structural roots of climate vulnerability – colonial, economic, racial, and gendered systems – and challenges both historical responsibility and contemporary inequalities in emissions and impacts (Newell et al., 2021; Sultana, 2022). It tends to focus on large-scale questions of justice, including accountability, reparations, and ethical obligations to future generations (Sultana, 2022).

While mitigation (reduction of greenhouse gases) tends to be firmly rooted in CJ frameworks, and local environmental struggles align with EJ, adaptation occupies a hybrid position. Adaptation is influenced by global climate discourses and geopolitical inequalities, while also shaping – and being shaped by – the specific environment in which people live (Amorim-Maia & Olazabal, 2024). As such, *adaptation justice* must be understood as situated at the intersections of both EJ and CJ, drawing attention to lived experiences

Table 1: Summary of Environmental Justice perspectives.
Adapted from: Pellow, 2023; Schlosberg, 2013

Pillar of Justice	Focus	Example of Questions for Adaptation Research	Examples from the literature
<i>Distributional Justice</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Distribution of environmental goods and bads. o Who should pay and for what. o How environmental resources should be allocated. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o How are adaptation strategies distributed? o Who gets the benefits of adaptation? o How are the costs of adaptation distributed? o Does adaptation create new environmental bads and goods, and if so for whom? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Shawoo et al., (2025) explore distributive issues of adaptation financing, finding it important to consider not only the distribution of financial resources but also how financing addresses root causes of vulnerability. They also find that intersectional and restorative approaches to distributive justice are more likely to achieve long-term reduction in vulnerabilities.
<i>Procedural Justice</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Differential access to decision-making o Structural issues that prevent some from participating in decision-making over environmental issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Who is part of adaptation agenda-setting? o How are adaptation decisions made? o Who is included and excluded in adaptation decision-making? o How are actors involved in decision-making? o What information and ideas are adaptation decisions made on? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Juhola et al. (2022) explore justice elements in adaptation policies, finding procedural justice elements to be particularly common, including in Sweden.
<i>Recognitional Justice</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Which values, people, cultures, worldviews, and ways of life are recognized and considered in environmental decision-making o Structural issues leading to the omission, obscurement, or neglect of certain values, people, worldviews, and ways of life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Who and what is recognized in the conceptualization of adaptation? o How does lack of recognition affect adaptation policies effectiveness and outcomes? o Which values and worldviews are adaptation based on, and which get omitted or obscure? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Yazar & York (2022) highlight how recognitional justice, often lacking in adaptation policies, matters for opinions of different adaptation strategies.
<i>Capabilities Justice</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o The ability for people to flourish and thrive in their environment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o How does adaptation, or lack thereof, impact people’s ability to thrive and flourish? o How do different people determine their own capabilities in relation to adaptation? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Schlosberg (2012) argues that a capabilities approach to justice is well suited for adaptation and can allow for stakeholder engagement.

of climate change, systemic patterns of vulnerability, and questions of legitimacy, recognition, and fairness in adaptation policy and practice.

In this sense, Sweden stretches existing EJ and CJ frameworks by offering a case in which justice is undermined not by overt exclusion, but through norms of sameness, procedural neutrality, and institutional trust that obscure intersectional vulnerabilities. In this context, adaptation justice calls for a more reflexive and situated approach to adaptation justice and one that is reconceptualized not only as an issue of distribution or procedure, but as a fundamentally intersectional and political process.

RESEARCH METHOD

This article uses a narrative review methodology (see Bourhis, 2017) to examine dominant narratives within environmental and climate justice research in Sweden and to explore the potential of more intersectional approaches to adaptation justice. The review was designed to map the conceptual and thematic landscape of justice related scholarship relevant to climate adaptation in the Swedish context. Academic articles were identified through Scopus using the search string: “environmental justice” OR “climate justice” AND “Sweden”. Although the review focuses on adaptation justice, a preliminary scan revealed limited scholarship explicitly engaging with this topic (as discussed in the findings). Therefore, we broadened the scope to include all articles addressing environmental or climate justice in Sweden, and examined their relevance for adaptation justice research, either directly or through conceptual extensions.

We limited the search to keywords, abstracts, and titles, of peer reviewed academic articles, yielding 48 results. We also trialed a Swedish version of the search string, but it produced only one article which was a duplicate.

We then screened the articles for relevance, with 23 excluded on the grounds that they did not engage substantively with environmental or climate justice

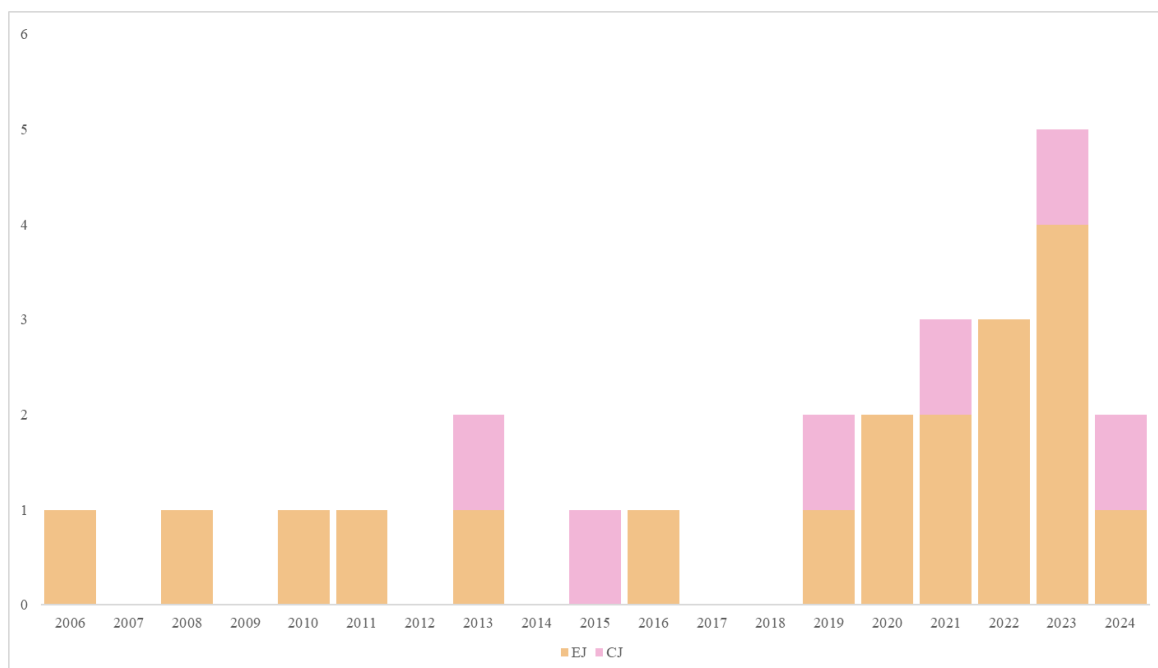
and/or did not focus on Sweden. A total of 25 studies met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed.

The selected articles were read and coded thematically. Coding was conducted through an iterative process during which themes were developed inductively from the material and refined through repeated engagement with the texts. As new patterns and conceptual tension emerged, articles were revisited to further nuance the thematic structure of the review.

FINDINGS

As illustrated in Figure 1, articles on environmental justice (EJ) and climate justice (CJ) in Sweden have gradually increased over time. However, the overall volume of research remains limited. The earliest article on EJ identified in this review was published in 2006, which is late compared to the development of the field in the United States, the EJ scholarship began in the 1980s (Schlosberg, 2013). The first CJ article in the Swedish context appeared in 2013. Given CJ’s global focus, it is likely that additional CJ-related studies authored by Swedish researchers exist but focus on other geographical contexts and were therefore not captured by our criteria or scope. Between 2006 and 2015, only eight articles on EJ and CJ in Sweden were identified. In contrast, between 2016 and 2024, 17 articles were published.

Figure 1: Articles of EJ and CJ in Sweden over time



Our findings indicate that research on EJ and CJ in Sweden has primarily focused on distributional justice. This focus is expected given Sweden's social contract and welfare state, its historical emphasis on redistribution, and the broader disciplinary orientation of EJ and CJ research (Pellow, 2023). The studies reviewed highlight uneven distribution of both environmental goods and bads across Swedish society (e.g., Flanagan et al., 2019; Aamodt et al., 2023; Chaix et al., 2006). However, the *distribuendum*, i.e., what is being distributed (Caney, 2020), varies across the literature, ranging from land, toxins, and emissions to access to environmental goods such as green spaces and national parks. The former categories align with early EJ work in the United States (Pellow, 2023), while the latter reflects culturally specific dimensions of Swedish society, where access to nature is deeply embedded, often uncritically, within national identity (Bell, 2014; Dahlberg et al., 2010; Bradley et al., 2008).

In contrast, procedural and recognitional justice have received comparatively less attention. Where they appear, they are often examined in conjunction with other approaches to justice. The relative neglect of procedural justice may reflect the widespread assumption that citizen consultation and

participation are already embedded within Sweden's social contract (Gunnarsson-Östling & Höjer, 2011). Yet, the few studies that do examine procedural justice raise critical concerns, illustrating that formal mechanisms of participation in environmental decision-making do not guarantee equitable inclusion (e.g., Nchet et al., 2022; MacPhail et al., 2023; Bradley et al., 2008).

Similarly, recognitional justice is underexplored, potentially due to its perceived subsumption under distributional justice in socialist contexts, i.e., recognition is thought to be achieved through redistribution of resources (see Fraser & Honneth, 2003). The limited work that does exist tends to focus on the systemic lack of recognition of Sami⁵ worldviews, values, and livelihoods (Nchet et al., 2022; MacPhail et al., 2023). A small number of studies also engage with substantive justice, which is not seen as one of the main pillars in mainstream EJ, but often incorporated into them, focusing on minimum standard approaches to justice (Bradley et al., 2008; Gunnarsson-Östling & Höjer, 2011; Rambaree et al., 2022). Bradley et al. (2008) position substantive justice as part of Sweden's social contract and, as such, it is perceived as achieved, an assumption they challenge. Nchet et al. (2022) further advance this line

of critique by employing capabilities justice, showing how mining activities are framed by Sami people as impeding both Indigenous and local inhabitants' fundamental capabilities.

Only a few scholars have drawn on more critical EJ frameworks in their research, including Indigenous EJ (Nachet et al., 2022), deep historical geography of EJ (Mels, 2020), and intersectionality (Singleton et al., 2022). Research on climate justice in Sweden tends to apply the concept more broadly, often examining how activists (Schack, 2024; Kaijser & Lövbrand, 2019), individuals (Isenhour, 2013), or municipalities adopt CJ discourses (Andersson & Gyberg, 2024). These applications resonate with the more global and abstract framing of CJ in the wider scholarship.

EJ research in Sweden has also been geographically, demographically, and thematically limited in focus. Most studies are concentrated in a few key locations, either Kiruna/Northern Sweden, Malmö (Sweden's third largest city), or Stockholm (Sweden's capital), leaving much of Sweden unexplored. Demographically, the literature clusters around three

main categories: individuals of lower socio-economic status (SES), immigrants, and Sami people. The emphasis on SES or income is expected, given the foundational role of equality and redistribution in Sweden's social democratic welfare model and the widespread perception of the population as relatively homogeneous (Singleton et al., 2022; Lundåsen, 2022). The focus on immigrants may be due to their demographic significance since approximately 20 percent of Sweden's population are immigrants (Lundåsen, 2022), or it may reflect broader societal debates on immigration intensified after the 2015 "refugee crisis" (*flyktingkrisen*) (Hagelund, 2020). This is noteworthy, however, in contrast to global trends where migrants often remain underrepresented in adaptation (Araos et al., 2021). The focus on Sami people reflects both the disproportionate impacts of climate change on Sami people and environmental conflicts in Sápmi⁶ (Båld, 2025). It may also indicate efforts to decolonize EJ discourses (Schlosberg et al., 2025). Missing from the scholarship is a focus on other axes of difference, such as race, ability, and age, in intersectional combinations. There is little to no consideration of intergenerational justice and limited critical examination of power and privilege. Furthermore,

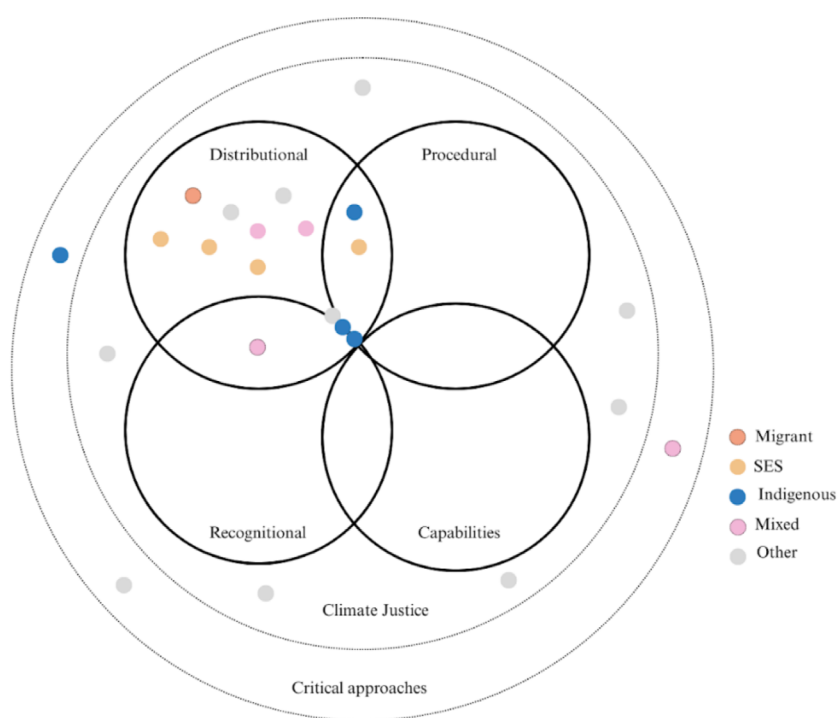


Figure 2: Approaches to EJ & CJ in Sweden

The figure plots 23 of the reviewed articles according to their dominant approach to EJ and CJ. Two articles were excluded from the figure due to their general treatment of EJ or CJ. The category "mixed" refers to studies combining one of the three dominant approaches in Sweden, with another dominant approach or a different perspective altogether. For example, three studies in this category focused on SES and migrants, while one focused on Sami and more-than-human. The "other" category includes articles that engage with EJ or CJ in general terms, without referring to a specific group or framework or articles that focuses on groups other than one of the three main approaches. Articles categorized under the "critical" approach often engage with the core pillars of EJ – distributitional, procedural, recognitional, and capabilities justice – even when not explicitly visualized in the figure. One study focused on capabilities justice and was placed in the critical approach category, as this constituted its main conceptual lens.

climate-focused EJ remains limited, with only two studies addressing climate adaptation and justice. Granberg & Glover (2021) demonstrate how a failure to integrate justice consideration in adaptation planning can lead to green gentrification, while Wamsler & Brink (2015) show that adaptation strategies in Sweden often align with privileged lifestyles, overlooking the differentiated impacts of climate change. These studies, while few, highlight the presence of adaptation justice challenges in Sweden that need to be explored further.

From our review of the EJ and CJ literature in Sweden, we identify three dominant narratives: 1) a socio-economic status (SES) approach, 2) an immigrant approach, and 3) an Indigenous approach (see Fig.2). While not exhaustive and with some studies resisting categorization, these narratives' structure capture much of the current scholarship and offer a useful entry point for examining the topic in the Swedish context and beyond.

THREE MAIN NARRATIVES

The first dominant approach to EJ and CJ in Sweden, especially in studies examining exposure to toxins or access to nature, focus on socio-economic status (SES) (e.g., Chaix et al., 2006; Aamodt et al., 2023; Erixson et al., 2024). These studies primarily look at distributional justice, often overlooking how procedural and recognitional justice shape these outcomes, as well as the historical drivers that lead to unequal environmental burdens. As such, studies tend to diagnose the symptoms of injustice rather than interrogate the root causes that need to be addressed to avoid reinforcing existing systems of inequality and to achieve transformative adaptation (Rice et al., 2022).

Findings across studies are mixed: while some demonstrate that SES is a predictor of environmental injustice (e.g., Flanagan et al., 2019; Chaix et al., 2006), others suggest that SES may not significantly influence outcomes (e.g., Erixson et al., 2024; Dawson et al., 2023). These inconsistencies may stem from variations in how SES interacts with specific

environmental issues. Alternatively, they may also reflect the Swedish welfare state's long-standing efforts to minimize SES-based inequalities. To deepen our understanding, further research is needed that engages other categories of difference and considers how these categories intersect with SES.

A second approach often found in conjunction with the SES approach is a focus on immigrants (e.g., Erixson et al., 2024; Aamodt et al., 2023; Singleton, 2021). In these studies, immigrants are often positioned as the racialized "Other", implicitly contrasted with a presumed white native Swedish subject in need, or not in need, of justice. Notably, race is seldom explicitly addressed in Swedish EJ research, reflecting a broader national tendency to replace race with ethnicity or country of origin (Osanami Törngren, 2022). However, this conceptual shift can obscure white privilege and how people are structurally racialized within Swedish society.

There are, however, important exceptions that take a more critical stance. For example, Bradley et al., (2008) and Singleton (2021) interrogate how understandings of pro-environmental behaviors are socially constructed in ways that align with middle-class, white Swedish norms, effectively excluding immigrants from dominant environmental narratives. These studies offer valuable insights into how privilege shapes definitions of what is considered environmentally friendly and just, pointing to the need for deeper engagements with race, class and belonging in EJ and CJ scholarship in Sweden.

Lastly, a third significant body of environmental justice research in Sweden centers on Sami people, formally recognized as Indigenous peoples in Sweden in 1977, and today numbering around 20,000 individuals (Båld, 2025). These studies examine the procedural, recognitional, capabilities, and distributional dimensions of EJ as they relate to Sami people often framing injustices with the broader context of colonial violence, dispossession, and marginalization (e.g., Rambaree et al., 2022; MacPhail et al., 2023). This research is important for decolonial efforts,

both within academia and in wider society, highlighting how environmental policies and industrial activities can perpetuate systemic oppression and marginalization of Sami people (e.g., Dahlberg et al., 2010; Nachet et al., 2022). Most studies focus on Northern Sweden with a particular emphasis on the environmental injustices of mining or other extractive industries on reindeer husbandry (MacPhail et al., 2023; Nachet et al., 2022; Rambaree et al., 2022). The Swedish state often plays a significant role, either explicitly or implicitly, in perpetuating these injustices (Dahlberg et al., 2010; MacPhail et al., 2023), revealing the ongoing colonial entanglements within the governance of Sápmi.

While this scholarship is essential, it also raises critical methodological and ethical considerations. As noted by Goodman et al., (2018) in the Canadian context, there is risk of “over-researching” Indigenous peoples, wherein repetitive academic attention does not necessarily benefit those studied and may reproduce extractive research practices. In Sweden, there has been limited reflection on how, when, and by whom research in Indigenous contexts should be conducted (Drugge, 2016). Moreover, current approaches often treat indigeneity as a singular identity without sufficient consideration of how gender, age, ability, or other axes of difference intersect to shape experiences of adaptation and justice. This may lead to essentialist portrayals of Sami people. As such, more intersectional approaches to Sami peoples’ experiences of EJ and CJ would also be beneficial. Addressing this gap is essential in the context of climate change adaptation. For example, Buchanan et al. (2016) show that Sami men and women contribute differently to adaptive capacities. Furthermore, Schack (2024) finds that youth climate activists in Sweden frequently invoke the Sami as central to climate justice discourses suggesting that this narrative has resonance beyond academia and needs to be nuanced to avoid essentialization. Future research should look to these complexities to better support transformative, inclusive, and decolonial justice in Sweden.

Combined, these three dominant approaches

construct a prevailing narrative in which EJ and CJ are primarily seen as issues affecting “foreigners” (immigrant approach), the poor (SES approach), or Sami people (Indigenous approach). This implicitly reinforces what might be termed the “affluence-as-shield narrative” (Jackson, 2024) where white, Swedish-born, and affluent individuals are not only perceived as less exposed to environmental harms, but also as embodying environmentally friendly lifestyles, thereby reinforcing their social and environmental privilege. While migrants, people of lower SES, and Indigenous people are disproportionately impacted by climate change (IPCC, 2022), much of the current literature leaves privilege, power, and structural drivers of inequality unexamined. To address this, intersectionality offers a crucial analytic lens, enabling researchers to move beyond single axis, and often reductionist framings of identity. By attending to the ways that multiple systems of power and difference, such as race, gender, age, and ability intersect, future EJ and CJ research in Sweden can more fully account for both marginalization and privilege in climate adaptation approaches.

While the SES, migrant, and Indigenous approaches have contributed valuable insights into environmental and climate justice in Sweden, they have largely treated categories of difference as discrete and rarely addressed how these interact or are shaped by systems of power. Moreover, they have largely overlooked climate adaptation as a key site where justice is negotiated and contested. In the next section, we explore how intersectionality can provide a more nuanced framework for understanding adaptation justice, moving beyond a single-axis or additive logic.

RESEARCHING ADAPTATION AT THE INTERSECTIONS

Discussions of adaptation within environmental and climate justice narratives in Sweden are missing. One way to approach this gap would be to work within existing EJ/CJ frameworks and approaches - focusing on Sami people, SES, and migrants, and simply add adaptation as another dimension, particularly by

looking at the distribution of adaptation benefits and costs. This research is important and much needed. However, considering growing calls for *intersectional adaptation justice* (e.g., Garcia & Tschakert, 2022), we suggest that intersectionality offers a more transformative approach that can expand and deepen understandings of adaptation justice in Sweden.

Intersectionality emerged in the 1980s from the work of Black feminist activists and scholars (Rice et al., 2019). It conceptualized how systems of oppression and privilege intersect to shape different lived experiences of power and vulnerability (Crenshaw, 1989), challenging the single axis focus of earlier identity politics, which often treated gender or race separately (Weldon, 2008). Intersectionality entered the Nordic academic discourse in the early 2000s, becoming widely discussed especially in gender and post-colonial studies (see de los Reyes et al., 2002; Lykke, 2003; Staunæs, 2003).

To date, few intersectionality studies have engaged with environmental issues in Sweden (notable exceptions include Singleton et al., 2022, and Jarnkvist, 2020) and focus on climate adaptation is limited. When intersectionality has been applied to the impacts of climate change in Sweden, it is often in relation to vulnerability or risk reduction (e.g., Jarnkvist, 2020; Kuran et al., 2020). As such, these studies tend to address preconditions of adaptation rather than focus on adaptation processes *per se*. This aligns with broader Swedish adaptation discourses, which frequently focus on risk-reduction and responding to harm rather than preventing it (Englund & Barquet, 2023). Research on intersectional justice issues of climate adaptation is needed to better understand how to adapt in a just and effective manner. Furthermore, it is important if the aim is to shift from equal opportunity (to be protected) to equal outcome (just adaptation).

In the next sections, we explore how intersectionality shapes and strengthens understandings of privilege and power in affluent welfare-state contexts such as Sweden.

MOVING BEYOND SINGLE-AXIS CATEGORIES: EXPANDING ADAPTATION JUSTICE THROUGH INTERSECTIONALITY

EJ and CJ research in Sweden has tended to rely on single-axis categories such as ethnicity, class, or indigeneity, which flatten the complexity of vulnerabilities to climate change (Kaijser & Kronsell, 2014; Jackson, 2024). Yet, vulnerabilities to climate change are neither singular nor static. Intersectionality allows us to move beyond these limited framings by offering more nuanced and contextualized understandings of vulnerability (Tierney, 2019). However, of equal, but less noted, importance to adaptation justice is that intersectionality enables a critique of assumptions around *invulnerability* – such as wealth, whiteness, or citizenship often taken as proxies for adaptive capacity – and can unmask the limitations of these oversimplified indicators (Nielsen et al., 2023; Kuran et al., 2020). Such fixed and reductionist categories risk excluding those who do not fit neatly into vulnerability profiles and obscures how climate change reshapes lived identities and capacities over time (Kaijser & Kronsell, 2014).

Extending beyond these categories could also help illuminate hidden vulnerabilities, important to climate adaptation, and the development of effective adaptation policies. Nielsen et al. (2023) demonstrate through an intersectional analysis how some people in Frederiksberg, an affluent municipality in Denmark, face vulnerability due to factors like mobility limitations or language/technological barriers that prevent access to information. These vulnerabilities remain “hidden” beneath a surface perception of affluence. Similarly, as Wamsler & Brink (2015) highlight with regards to Sweden, individual adaptive capacity does not always lead to adaptation actions, suggesting the need for deeper understanding of intersectional barriers and enablers.

Second, it cannot be assumed that the same intersectional subjectivities apply uniformly across environmental injustices. Subjectivities are not static; they

are context specific and performed differently across issues and places (Garcia & Tschakert, 2022; Kaijser & Kronsell, 2014). Research focusing specifically on adaptation is needed to understand how individuals and groups enact and negotiate their subjectivities in adaptation contexts.

Third, most EJ research in Sweden is scale-bound, either focusing on the community or local level (EJ), and the national/global level (CJ). However, adaptation is inherently multi-scalar and fragmented (Amorim-Maia & Olazabal, 2024), both globally and in Sweden specifically, and cross-scale approaches are needed. Intersectional approaches are well-suited to tracing how “adaptation is enacted, negotiated, and contested across levels and scales” (Garcia & Tschakert, 2022; p.652). Also, the added nuance and contextual understanding of vulnerabilities and adaptation experiences allow for the localizing of global goals on adaptation (Amorim-Maia & Olazabal, 2024), an important aspect in Sweden where adaptation is primarily implemented locally (Knaggård et al., 2025).

Failing to consider how intersectional subjectivities operate across scales risk producing maladaptive outcomes or re-enforcing inequalities. As Wamsler & Brink (2015) highlight, local adaptation efforts may conflict with national strategies, underscoring the need for coherent cross-scale planning. While challenging dominant narratives, researchers must also remain legible to policymakers. Understanding and engaging with the language of current adaptation policy can enhance relevance and update on intersectional insights.

TOWARD CRITICAL AND INTERSECTIONAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF ADAPTATION JUSTICE

Intersectionality is a vital approach for advancing critical understandings of environmental and climate justice, particularly in the Swedish context where such approaches remain limited. It challenges dominant epistemologies and ontologies, enabling more

pluralistic understandings of justice (Schlosberg et al., 2025; Mikulewicz et al., 2023). This is especially important for unsettling masculine, neoliberal, and colonial framings through which adaptation and invulnerability are often constructed (Weatherill, 2024; Garcia & Tschakert, 2022).

Intersectionality deepens our understanding of power by showing how it shapes both the conceptualization and practice of adaptation (Garcia & Tschakert, 2022). It also reveals how subjectivities are constructed and performed in specific ways that maintain or challenge dominant power relations (Kaijser & Kronsell, 2014). In this way, intersectionality helps move the scholarship beyond merely describing injustice toward actively challenging it. Understanding how intersectional differences emerge and persist over time is also essential for addressing the root causes of vulnerabilities and climate change through transformative forms of climate adaptation (Pelling et al., 2015).

Intersectionality also enables us to “come to grips with diverse experiences with inequality that erode or elevate opportunities for adaptation” (Garcia & Tschakert, 2022; p.656; own emphasis). It helps identifying nodes of power and possibility, both where change can be catalyzed for more environmentally just adaptation and where resistance may be needed. This aligns with the emancipatory goals of both intersectionality and EJ: not to view marginalized communities as passive or lacking agency, but to recognize their capabilities and agency (Kaijser & Kronsell, 2014). However, intersectionality is a valuable tool for examining how power is concentrated, as powerful individuals and institutions can shape climate policies in ways that reinforce inequality. Recognizing nodes of influence does not mean accepting systems of power as fixed or inevitable. Given the normative goal of adaptation justice, identifying nodes of change should be combined with critical examinations of questions of who gets to hold power and why and how more just systems can be imagined and built.

CONNECTING THE PILLARS OF EJ AND CJ

Most studies on EJ and CJ in Sweden primarily consider distributional justice, i.e., who gets what. Research that engages multiple pillars of justice are rarer, especially ones exploring tensions and potential contradictions between pillars. Even more limited is scholarship that connects CJ and EJ, particularly regarding potential conflicts between local environmental justice in the present and global climate justice for future generations. Yet, this is precisely where adaptation research can offer new insights. Situated at the intersection of immediate local needs and long-term global responsibility, adaptation raises justice dilemmas that span scales and time.

Intersectionality offers a way to understand and connect these dimensions in nuanced and context-sensitive ways. It reveals how justice claims may shift depending on which pillar is foregrounded, and how social categories interact with these shifts. For example, Kucera & Jenerette (2023) show that while income provides protection from drought in Los Angeles (USA), its effectiveness has declined over time, and race has become a more salient vulnerability factor. However, income may still shape procedural justice, as those with economic resources are more likely to influence adaptation decisions both in the present and future. This suggests that intersectional subjectivities and forms of justice are temporally dynamic and potentially contradictory. Intersectionality allows researchers to trace how power operates across distributional, procedural, recognitional, and capabilities justice, and how they align or diverge. It also helps to connect EJ and CJ debates and explore how justice in present context cannot be fully understood without consideration of responsibilities toward future generations.

Furthermore, as Bradley et al. (2008) argue, procedural justice must include not only who participates in decision-making but also who sets the agenda. This is particularly urgent in Sweden where adaptation debates often privilege dominant knowledge

systems and policy paradigms (Englund & Barquet, 2023). Justice-based adaptation, like climate justice more broadly, is prefigurative (Mikulewicz et al., 2023), meaning that it embodies the values of the future society it aims to build. Thus, it matters not only what adaptation policies are chosen but whose ontologies and epistemologies are recognized in the process of deciding them.

In this way, adaptation justice becomes a question of epistemic and recognitional justice and the inclusion of alternative ways of knowing, values, and ways of being in the world. Nchet et al. (2022) and Mels (2020, 2023) show how different understandings of justice and nature, respectively, can create deep tensions and contestation, reinforcing the need for integrative approaches. Intersectionality offers one such approach: a way to map and connect the pillars of EJ and CJ in ways that are both critical and constructive.

MAKING PRIVILEGE VISIBLE: REFLEXIVITY AND 'COMMON SENSE' IN ADAPTATION RESEARCH

Nader (1972) famously argued that social scientists must not only “study down” toward marginalized communities but also “study up” towards communities of power. This approach allows researchers to “ask many ‘common sense’ questions in reverse. Instead of asking why some people are poor we would ask why other people are so affluent?” (Nader, 1972, p.5-6). Though Nader’s article was published half a century ago, its message remains urgently relevant today, particularly in Sweden where most EJ research tends to focus on studying “down” towards the marginalized and vulnerable.

Applying an intersectional lens to study both forms of marginalization and privilege open space for asking “common sense” questions such as: Why are some groups seen as invulnerable to climate change? and Who gets to be protected from climate change impacts? Rather than focusing solely on those who are vulnerable or unprotected, these questions critically examine the structures that grant privilege and

protection. This is especially important for adaptation that takes place in affluent contexts and disproportionately benefits those who are already privileged (see Granberg & Glover, 2021; Hamza et al., 2024).

Asking these questions also enables critical examination of the Swedish welfare state's color-blind spots and the role of white privilege within the country, and how these dynamics affect climate adaptation. Nordic intersectionality has faced critique for insufficiently addressing whiteness (Lykke, 2020) but "studying up" in adaptation research provides a valuable opportunity to investigate how white privilege and other forms of power materialize as the right to be protected, the capacity to adapt, or the influence over adaptation policies, including how these privileges have developed over time.

Researchers must approach the study of privilege with caution, however, to avoid reinforcing the very systems they seek to critique – a persistent challenge in intersectionality studies of whiteness (Aldrin Salskov, 2020). Combining intersectionality with environmental justice frameworks helps not only to highlight disparities in power but also to analyze their implications for justice, fostering reflexivity and accountability in adaptation scholarship.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

By synthesizing existing literature on environmental justice (EJ) and climate justice (CJ) in Sweden and drawing on intersectionality scholarship, we have identified ways in which intersectionality can expand understandings of adaptation justice. While our analysis focuses on Sweden, which we characterize as an invulnerable country, the discussion may be relevant to other affluent countries sustaining similar narratives of invulnerability. Intersectionality's flexibility allows it to accommodate different intersections depending on the context, making it a valuable framework across diverse historical, political, economic, and cultural settings. Expanding research across these contexts would enhance understanding of how vulnerability and privilege operate differently

worldwide (Garcia & Tschakert, 2022).

In Sweden, EJ and CJ discourses have been focused on illuminating injustices faced by Sami people, migrants, and people with low socioeconomic status. However, this constrained focus, shaped by the country's unique cultural, economic, and social history, leaves several experiences of injustice unrecognized. Intersectionality offers a means to broaden these perspectives and foster more critical examinations of power and privilege.

This article is, like all knowledge, limited. The small number of studies on intersectional adaptation justice in Sweden precluded drawing overarching conclusions; instead, we highlight emerging narratives based on the current state of the scholarship. Moreover, due to scarcity of research specifically addressing climate adaptation and justice, we drew from broader EJ and CJ literature to inform discussion related to adaptation justice. Lastly, our review prioritized academic literature, however, activists have played a significant role in developing EJ and CJ discourses, and their perspectives may differ (Schlosberg et al., 2025). As such, future research should engage with gray literature and activists' narratives to further enrich this field.

We echo calls for research on intersectionality to move beyond theory alone (Bilge, 2013; Lykke, 2020). Empirical studies are urgently needed to explore the relational, contextual, and material impacts of intersectional adaptation justice. Maintaining a critical edge grounded in both the historical movements that shaped environmental justice and intersectionality is essential. Adaptation researchers engaging with intersectional justice must understand these origins and the critiques they entail (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). Continuous reflexivity is also crucial to avoid depoliticizing the concept (Bilge, 2013) or inadvertently reinforcing whiteness in intersectional studies (Aldrin Salskov, 2020). Intersectionality is a praxis that requires ongoing, active engagement from the researcher.

The field of intersectional adaptation justice remains

emergent globally, highlighting the need for expanded research. There is pressing demand for theorizing power and privilege within climate adaptation, including attention to studies on *affluent vulnerability* (e.g., Eriksen et al., 2020). To integrate these dynamics, scholars must deepen their understanding of how power, privilege, and oppression shape adaptation processes. This is critical for unveiling and challenging the privileges and systems of power often reinforced through climate adaptation efforts (Rice et al., 2022). A truly inclusive adaptation agenda must engage with power rather than focus exclusively on the most vulnerable.

Studying intersectionality in Sweden and other affluent regions raises important theoretical and practical questions: How does affluence shape vulnerability? Does an emphasis on affluent vulnerability risk diverting resources away from those most in need? How do historical assumptions that maintain the status quo – such as Gramsci’s concept of hegemony

(see Bates, 1975) – influence adaptation policies? Conversely, affluence might offer opportunities for redistributive adaptation models. Future research should explore whether affluent communities can contribute to reshaping adaptation responses to climate extremes.

Academic interest in intersectional environmental justice is rising alongside policy attention to just and intersectional adaptation. Despite these advances, empirical research on justice and adaptation in Sweden remains scarce. Further research is thus essential for investigating how intersectionality can inform adaptation policy and ensure just adaptation goals are meaningfully realized in practice.

In conclusion, we advocate for a broader, intersectional understanding of vulnerability and adaptation – one that fosters climate justice and collective action across all levels of Swedish society.

[1] Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies (LUCSUS), Lund University, Lund, Sweden.

[2] Swedish Centre for Impacts of Climate Extremes, Lund University, Lund, Sweden

[3] Prop. 2017/18:163. Nationell strategi för klimatanpassning [National Strategy for Climate adaptation]. <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/proposition/2018/03/prop.-201718163>

[4] Skr. 2023/24:97. Nationell strategi och regeringens handlingsplan för klimatanpassning [National strategy and the government’s action-plan for climate change adaptation]. <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/skrivelse/2024/03/skr.-20232497>

[5] Indigenous people of Sweden, Norway, Finland, and parts of Russia

[6] Sami people’s Indigenous territory

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