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Snow delay and economic decay

Fighting climate change requires a redistribution of resources from rich to poor. Save your moral indignation — pay your taxes instead

In a groundbreaking study, sociologist Kari Norgaard described life in a Norwegian coastal town, given the fictional name of Bygdaby, which experienced a particularly warm winter in 2000-01. The snow came two months later than usual, the local ski resort had to close all slopes but one (covered with expensive artificial snow) and the ice did not settle on the lake, making skating and ice-fishing impossible. What used to be a tourist destination – 'completely black with people out on the ice every winter', a man told Norgaard – turned into a death trap: a woman drowned when the usually thick ice cracked.

Yet, while the local newspapers and residents linked the unusual weather to global warming, and although businesses dependent on winter tourism were badly hit, inertia remained. 'What perplexed me', Norgaard wrote, summarising her study *Living in Denial*, 'was that despite the fact that people were clearly aware of global warming as a phenomenon, everyday life in Bygdaby went on as though it did not exist.'

So, what does it take to stimulate action, change habits and live differently? It's not so much awareness as possibilities, I conclude in a new study (in Swedish but with a summary in English) with Marika Palmér Rivera, a researcher on climate issues at the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO).

Immediate problems

Last year, we set out to do doorstep interviews in four socio-economically disadvantaged rural communities affected by climate-related disasters: forest fires, floods or droughts. We did not find people living in denial. On the contrary, the residents of these communities seemed acutely aware of climate change.

It was all around them: the bumble bees missing from the meadows, the

fishing lake not freezing in winter, the fear of yet another summer with uncontrollable wildfires. It was all too apparent that the weather was becoming more and more extreme. 'There have been winters when there was only rain and sleet in January. Then there were winters when we literally had two metres of snow, up to the top of the apple tree', one woman told us.

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In the semi-detached houses of Sollefteå, in the rented flats in Ljusdal, in the neat family bungalows in Fagersta, people were living not in denial but in despair. They did, indeed, worry more about the end of the month than the end of the world. The cost-of-living crisis has hit hard in rural communities where the margins were already small before prices started soaring.

'Everything is getting more expensive. Electricity and food is getting more expensive, everything, everything', a 29-year-old woman in Målilla told us. 'They raise everything but the salary', said a 38-year-old man in Ljusdal. 'I'd love to serve my kids organic food, but who could afford to do that? It's always a question of money', said a woman in her 40s.

Inflation has taken its toll on welfare, schools, childcare and social care — rising costs have led to cutbacks and layoffs everywhere. An assistant nurse told us she was afraid of growing old: shifts at the retirement home where she worked were understaffed and there was never time for anything beyond the 'warehousing' of the clients.

An individual burden

In Sweden, as in the United Kingdom – if last week's election is anything to go by – there is a sense that society, the state, has withdrawn. Just as the British fear what has become of the underfunded National Health Service, worries about healthcare came up again and again in our conversations. In Sollefteå, the maternity ward has been closed. Pregnant women are forced to travel for hours on badly maintained roads to deliver, babies are born on the roadside and demographers have already noted a dramatic dip in winter births.

People are supposed to act in the face of climate change. But how can someone who can barely afford a used petrol car cover the cost of an electric vehicle? And for already pressed rural communities, public transport is not an alternative. In Sollefteå, trains no longer stop at the railway station. Stepping onto the platform is like walking into an apocalyptic scene from *The Last of Us*: shrubs grow high between the

rusting rails, while the benches are occupied not by passengers but by junkies going nowhere — the opioid crisis has arrived here, even if the trains now do not.

More than personal virtue, we need collective action.

Fear of climate change is everywhere. But so is the notion that stopping it is somehow up to individuals: most of our respondents answered 'I do' or 'we all do' when asked who bears the most responsibility for stemming climate change. BP has been staggeringly successful in making us focus on our own carbon footprint. Yet, if residents in the rural communities we visited were to stop driving petrol cars, the municipality would still not be able to afford a train service and EVs would still be no more affordable. Rebecca Solnit is right: more than personal virtue, we need collective action.

We conducted more than 200 interviews, grateful that so many gave their time so generously, although we interrupted everyday chores, dinner being prepared or school work getting done. We were invited into living rooms, sat on the porch or joined a walk with the dog. Yet, one question did not elicit a ready response.

People had no words for the prospective impact of the green transition on the place where they lived — no narrative of what their village or town would look like. It seems they had not reflected much on how it would affect their community. A 73-year-old man in Järvsö was ready to change his food habits, even to eat insects: 'If you don't think about what you eat, you should be fine.' But when it came to imagining how the locality would be affected by the transition to a carbon-neutral society, he – like most – was lost for words. Maybe it is indeed easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism.

Living in denial of what it really takes to set a green transition in motion, the mega-polluting global elite intends to continue paying its way out of any responsibility to change destructive lifestyles, while the middle classes seduce themselves with the notion that they can save the world by becoming vegetarians and riding bikes. From that morally superior position, they can direct their anger and contempt not upwards – where it belongs – but towards the struggling classes below, with their carnivore eating habits and unwillingness to forgo their fossil-fuelled cars.

More than the capabilities

Our study confirms that the problem is not awareness: people know the climate is changing

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and they are worried. But they lack the capacity to cope — and to change. Amartya Sen reminds us that enhancing people's capabilities is essential to human development.

These would include the capability to cope with the inevitable consequences of climate change, such as through the building of embankments against floods and cutting firebreaks in forests. But they would also embrace the capability to meet the costs of transition: that new electric car, the fossil-free heating and organic food from the local grocer. All this will require a redistribution of resources, from urban to rural areas, from rich to poor. Save your moral indignation — pay your taxes instead.

More than the capabilities to cope, people also deserve the capabilities to contribute to the green transition, to find the words to imagine it. The planet may impose its boundaries on us, but the transition must not be imposed — rather it should be co-created, anchored in the priorities of people locally, in the lives they live where they are.

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