

## Article

# Eco-Social Policies and Climate Justice: Social Work and the Integration of Experiential Knowledge in Local Climate Governance

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## Abstract

Climate change risks deepening social inequalities and poses new challenges for social policy. Drawing on climate justice, this article examines how climate impacts and policies are experienced by people living in poverty situations and by social workers, how their knowledge by experience and professional practice circulates in local climate policy-making, and how social workers understand their role in promoting climate justice. Based on qualitative interviews with people experiencing poverty, social workers, and local policy officials in three Flemish municipalities, the study shows that vulnerable groups experience climate injustice as a combination of disadvantages, misrecognition, and limited influence over policy agendas. While experiential knowledge is widely acknowledged as valuable, it remains weakly integrated in policy processes and is often channelled indirectly or introduced only after key decisions, reflecting persistent epistemic marginalisation. These patterns can be explained by the interaction of dominant policy framings, unequal power relations, and institutional arrangements that privilege technical expertise. Together, these dynamics highlight both the strategic importance and structural constraints of social work as a mediating actor and point to the need for institutional arrangements that enable earlier, more substantive, and more direct integration of experiential or practice-based knowledge.

**Keywords:** eco-social work; eco-social policies; climate change; climate justice; experiential knowledge; social inequalities



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## 1. Introduction

Climate change is increasingly recognised as an urgent and complex social crisis (De Brabander 2023) marked by unequal exposure to eco-social risks (Mandelli et al. 2024), uneven capacities to respond, and unequal influence over policy responses. Although climate mitigation and adaptation have become central policy priorities at European, national, and local levels (Mehl et al. n.d.; New Climate Institute 2025), their social consequences are unevenly distributed (Büchs et al. 2025; IPCC 2023). People living in poverty and other vulnerable situations often contribute the least to climate change yet face disproportionate burdens, including poor housing quality, energy insecurity, and limited adaptive capacity (Breil et al. 2021; Bruckner et al. 2022; Chancel et al. 2021; Ivanova and Wood 2020; Oswald et al. 2020). Climate change thus not only threatens environmental sustainability, but also deepens existing social inequalities.

These dynamics are commonly addressed through the lens of climate justice, which extends environmental justice by emphasising not only the fair distribution of costs and benefits but also the recognition of people in vulnerable situations and meaningful participation in decision-making (Cuadra and Ouis 2023; Newell et al. 2021; Schlosberg and Collins 2014). However, research shows that climate policies may reproduce or intensify inequalities when they rely on technocratic problem definitions and overlook everyday realities. Measures such as subsidy schemes or low-emission zones often assume financial stability, property ownership, and administrative capacity, thereby privileging middle-class households while excluding those in more precarious situations (Büchs et al. 2025; Hosseinzadehtalaei et al. 2025; Laurent 2023).

This points to a fundamental knowledge problem in climate governance. While technical and economic expertise dominate policy design, the experiential knowledge of those most affected by climate impacts and transition measures remains marginal (e.g., De Brabander 2023). From an epistemic justice perspective (Fricker 2007), this marginalisation is not only a democratic deficit but is reinforced by dominant assumptions that portray people experiencing poverty as less engaged with environmental issues (Geerts 2026). Where certain groups are systematically excluded as credible knowers of their own conditions, this also entails a loss of situated knowledge crucial for effective policy-making.

Social work occupies a distinctive position in this context. Grounded in commitments to social justice, human rights, and participation, social work operates at the interface of policy institutions and everyday lifeworlds of people in disadvantaged situations, using practice-based knowledge, for example, to mediate their experiences in policy processes (IFSW 2014; Gilboa and Weiss-Gal 2022). The eco-social paradigm in social work further extends this mandate by explicitly linking social inequalities to ecological crises and challenging approaches that individualise responsibility or detach sustainability from social justice (Coates 2003; Dominelli 2012; Matthies et al. 2020; Matthies and Närhi 2017; Norton 2012; Rambaree et al. 2019). Rather than adding environmental concerns to existing practice, eco-social work calls for recognising diverse forms of knowledge and addressing the structural roots of injustice (Santos et al. 2007).

However, despite growing recognition that social workers encounter climate-related inequalities in daily practice (Boetto 2025; Närhi et al. 2025), and normative calls for their active role in addressing climate injustice (e.g., Boetto 2017), little empirical research has examined how experiential knowledge of people in poverty situations and practice-based knowledge of social workers are recognised and mobilised within climate policy-making, particularly in Europe. This gap also limits insights for local climate governance, where participatory formats have increasingly been adopted but often remain consultative and weakly institutionalised, with limited influence over decision-making and a persistent dominance of better-resourced actors (Evers and Schmid 2025; Faber et al. 2025; Honkonen 2024; Ruiz-Mallén 2020).

Drawing on qualitative interviews with individuals in vulnerable situations, social workers, civil society actors, and local policy officers, this article addresses that gap by examining how experiential knowledge circulates in local climate policy-making in Flemish municipalities and how social work engages with this process. It analyses (1) how people living in poverty situations and social workers experience climate change and climate policies; (2) how experiential knowledge is perceived to influence local eco-social policy-making; and (3) how social workers understand their role in promoting climate justice, with particular attention to epistemic justice. Building on these questions, the study further explores (4) which ideas, interests, and institutional arrangements enable or constrain the integration of experiential knowledge into policy-making. Across the analysis, epistemic

justice functions as a cross-cutting lens within climate justice, while the eco-social work perspective situates social workers as key intermediaries in these dynamics.

## 2. Theoretical Framing

### 2.1. *Climate Justice and Epistemic Justice*

This study is situated within the broader field of environmental and climate justice (Walker 2012), which examines how environmental harms, benefits, and decision-making power are distributed across society. Scholars increasingly argue that ‘just transition’ serves as an umbrella term, connecting debates on climate justice, energy justice, just resilience, and socio-ecological transformation (Büchs et al. 2025). A recurring analytical framework within this literature distinguishes three interrelated dimensions of justice: distributional, recognition, and procedural justice (McCauley et al. 2019). Distributional justice concerns how the costs and benefits of climate impacts and transition measures are allocated. Recognition justice addresses whether diverse experiences and social positions are respected in governance processes rather than marginalised. Procedural justice focuses on meaningful participation and influence in decision-making. These different dimensions align with Fraser’s (2005) conception of justice as parity of participation, which emphasises equal standing in social and political processes beyond material outcomes alone. Importantly, the dimensions are not independent but mutually constitutive. Climate justice can only be realised where distributional, procedural, and recognition dimensions are aligned, as deficits in one dimension tend to reproduce or reinforce injustices in the others.

Epistemic justice adds a crucial layer by drawing attention to who is recognised as a legitimate knower and which forms of knowledge are considered relevant in policy processes (Fricker 2007). In this sense, epistemic justice can be understood as a cross-cutting condition that shapes the realisation of distributional, procedural, and recognition justice, as unequal recognition of knowledge constrains both participation in decision-making and the substantive outcomes it produces.

In climate governance, epistemic injustice arises when experiential and situated knowledge is systematically marginalised in favour of technical or economic expertise, limiting both democratic legitimacy and policy responsiveness. From this perspective, climate injustice is not only a matter of unequal outcomes, but also of unequal influence over how problems are defined, which solutions are deemed legitimate, and how experiential knowledge is recognised, translated, and incorporated into policy-making (Matutini et al. 2025).

### 2.2. *Experiential Knowledge and Social Work*

Experiential knowledge has gained increasing attention within social work, social policy, and environmental justice scholarship as a distinct way of knowing social reality. The concept refers to knowledge that emerges from lived experience through reflection, articulation, and social exchange, combining embodied insight into social realities with a practical understanding of how they are navigated or contested (Wilken and Cabiati 2024). Within social work and related movements, experiential knowledge has long challenged professional and technocratic monopolies over knowledge production (e.g., Askheim et al. 2017; Krumer-Nevo 2009). Its persistent marginalisation reflects dominant positivist assumptions about legitimacy and evidence, and constitutes epistemic injustice when people are denied recognition as knowers of their own lives (Fricker 2007).

In climate governance, experiential knowledge is particularly salient because technocratic indicators and expert models often obscure how climate impacts and transition measures are experienced in everyday life (Schlosberg 2013; Temper and Del Bene 2016). Eco-social work scholarship positions social work as a crucial mediator of experiential knowledge at the interface between social justice and ecological transformation, and calls

for addressing the structural roots of inequality (Boetto 2017; Erickson 2018; Matthies and Närhi 2017; Nagoshi et al. 2025). This is because social workers frequently encounter the social consequences of climate change impacts and transition policies in frontline practice, including energy poverty, housing precarity, and psychosocial stress within locally situated and relational forms of practice (e.g., Dominelli 2024; Närhi et al. 2025; Nöjd et al. 2025). While they do not hold experiential knowledge themselves, social workers develop practice-based knowledge (Samson 2015) that enables them to mediate such experiences in policy processes.

At the same time, critical accounts point to institutional and managerial constraints that limit social workers' capacity to mobilise experiential knowledge beyond implementation-focused roles (Chang et al. 2026; Jhagroe 2022; De Brabander 2023). Similar patterns are observed in participatory research on eco-social work, where transformative ambitions remain concentrated at local and professional practice levels (Boetto et al. 2020), and in environmental governance scholarship, showing that participatory processes often privilege actors with high interest and influence, while impacted but less powerful groups remain underrepresented (Reed et al. 2025). This calls for an empirical analysis of how experiential knowledge is enabled or constrained in practice, and how social work navigates its role within local climate policy-making processes.

### 2.3. The 3-i Framework

To analyse how experiential knowledge enters, or fails to enter, eco-social policy-making, this study draws on the 3-i framework, which conceptualises policy development as the interaction of ideas, interests, and institutions (Hall 1997). Ideas refer to dominant beliefs and problem framings that shape how policy issues are understood and what solutions are considered feasible. Interests capture the agendas and power relations of actors involved, including policymakers, professionals, and affected groups. Institutions encompass formal rules, organisational structures, and informal norms that stabilise particular policy pathways. Combined with insights from climate justice, epistemic justice, and eco-social work, this framework allows analysis of why experiential knowledge may be acknowledged rhetorically yet marginalised in practice, and how social work navigates its role within these dynamics.

## 3. Data and Methods

To address our research questions, we conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders actively engaged in climate and poverty-related issues in 3 Flemish municipalities (Leuven, Mechelen, and Vilvoorde; Belgium) between January and June 2024. The study deliberately focused on the local policy level, as municipalities play a key role in initiating, coordinating, and implementing climate action (Shtjefni et al. 2024) and are often the sites where climate policies most directly intersect with social concerns such as poverty and exclusion. It is also a key governance arena in which social workers predominantly operate and maintain proximity to people in vulnerable situations, enabling sustained engagement with lived experience (Matthies 2025).

The municipalities were selected either because a local climate action plan or 'climate contract' was in place. At the same time, they also represent a deliberate choice for municipalities with a different population size (Leuven: about 105,000; Mechelen: about 90,000; and Vilvoorde: about 49,000) and composition (Leuven: academic, higher middle-class; Mechelen and Vilvoorde: suburban, middle to lower-middle class), and different financial resources (Leuven being the most and Vilvoorde the least affluent city)—aspects which be believed may play a role in policy ambitions, design and governance.

Interview partners were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling based on their involvement with both 'climate' and 'poverty and social exclusion' in a broad sense. For policy officials, the focus was on participants' connection to local policy-making processes at the intersection of climate and social policies, rather than on specific policy domains such as food, energy, or mobility, to capture cross-cutting perspectives. Social workers were selected for their involvement in local climate and social justice policies. People who had experienced poverty were selected based on their interest in reflecting on the intersection of social exclusion and climate-related issues. Recruitment was facilitated by the researchers' long-standing connections with local social work organisations and people living in poverty situations. An overview of all interview partners and the topics discussed is provided in the Supplementary Material.

An important limitation of the sample concerns the relatively small number of participants with lived experience of poverty. This reflects the empirical reality that direct participation of people in poverty situations in local climate policy-making remains very limited, which constrained the pool of potential respondents able to reflect on such processes. At the same time, the sample includes social workers who are institutionally tasked with representing and mediating the experiences of people in vulnerable situations within policy processes. While this does not substitute for direct participation, it provides indirect insight into how such experiential knowledge is articulated, translated, and mobilised in practice. These considerations are taken into account when interpreting the findings.

Interviews lasted approximately 90 min and were conducted face-to-face using a semi-structured format. All interviews were audio recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and pseudonymised. The sample included two individuals with lived experience of poverty, thirteen social workers, and seven local policy officers, with a balanced gender distribution (13 women, 9 men). Participants received written and verbal information about the study and provided informed consent. Ethical approval was granted by the Social and Societal Ethics Committee of the researchers' home institution.

Data were analysed using NVivo (version 15.2.2, Lumivero, Denver, CO, USA) through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). This approach was chosen for its suitability for in-depth, theoretically informed analysis of how participants make sense of climate governance and experiential knowledge. For the first three, more exploratory research questions, coding was primarily inductive, allowing patterns to emerge from the data while being informed by sensitising concepts from climate justice, epistemic justice, and eco-social work. Theme development thus involved an iterative engagement between data and theory.

To address the fourth research question, the data were additionally coded deductively using the 3-i framework to examine how ideas, interests, and institutions shape the integration of experiential knowledge into policy-making. The analysis involved repeated reading of transcripts, systematic coding of meaningful segments, and iterative theme refinement. It was shaped by the researchers' backgrounds in social work and social policy, especially their focus on inequality and poverty, which informed both their interpretation and their sensitivity to epistemic justice. The coding framework and codes are available in the Supplementary Materials.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. *Experiencing Climate Change and Climate Policy*

Our first research question was more exploratory, asking how individuals living in poverty and other vulnerable situations experience climate change and climate policies. Across interviews, respondents describe climate change as an urgent and fundamentally unjust challenge. Social workers, local policy officers, and individuals experiencing poverty

consistently note that climate impacts and transition measures disproportionately affect those with fewer material and social resources. Poor housing quality, lack of insulation, and limited access to green space intensify exposure to heat stress and water-related damage, while adaptive options remain largely out of reach. Comparable to other interview partners, one social worker put it this way:

*“If we experience much longer heatwaves, including here in our country, it is the people living in the least well-insulated homes who will be hardest hit”* (social worker 01)

Continuing on climate change perceptions, some policy officers assume that this is a secondary concern for people experiencing poverty, which is strongly contested by social workers and respondents with lived experience. They emphasise that climate change and the transition weigh heavily on their everyday lives, even though participation often feels inaccessible or futile. One respondent stated bluntly:

*“We’re the first to suffer! If there’s a heatwave and you’re stuck here in these [badly insulated] building blocks, you can forget it, you know. You won’t find any immediate relief from the heat here or in the neighbourhood.”* (person experiencing poverty 02)

Perceptions of climate policy are closely tied to everyday domains such as housing, energy, mobility, and consumption. Respondents with lived experience frequently describe climate measures as socially selective, and perceive regulatory measures such as low-emission zones or renovation obligations as additional burdens. Sensitisation campaigns (e.g., promoting the use of washable diapers or buying organic, local food) are often related to feelings of shame or failure:

*“Most subsidies and benefits that are given, like energy-efficient appliances and electric cars, actually go to the better-off middle class.”* (person experiencing poverty 01)

*“It’s the same with calls [calls or initiatives like] ‘Go and do your groceries at Bioplanet’ [...]’ To me, as someone experiencing poverty, that feels like a slap in the face. Because I do care about the climate, but I can’t make that choice.”* (person experiencing poverty 02)

At the same time, interview partners highlight positive examples where social concerns were integrated from the outset, such as inclusive renovation projects or community-based mobility initiatives, which improved both environmental outcomes and social well-being. Taken together, these findings show that climate injustice is experienced as a combination of unequal exposure, limited adaptive capacity, and misrecognition within policy design. Climate policies are not rejected per se, but are perceived as unjust or intimidating when they fail to account for social inequalities.

#### 4.2. Experiential Knowledge in Policy-Making

To address the second research question, we analysed our interview data to understand how social workers and people in vulnerable situations experience attempts to incorporate their lived or practice-based experiences and knowledge into policies or political decision-making. Interviewees widely acknowledge its potential to shape socially just climate strategies. However, this recognition remains largely rhetorical. Across cases, individuals in vulnerable situations are rarely present in formal decision-making arenas, and their perspectives are largely mediated through professionals or civil society organisations. As one respondent with lived experience stated:

*“There’s already so much being decided over our heads. We’re already kind of a forgotten group. Sure, we’re not the only forgotten group, but we’re increasingly becoming the outcasts. The climate debate is no exception here.”* (person experiencing poverty 02)

Social workers state that the priority in many local climate policies remains limited to achieving CO<sub>2</sub> reduction “because of limited human and financial resources” (social worker 07). They perceive themselves or are formally ascribed the role of intermediaries who translate lived experiences into policy-relevant signals. While this role is considered necessary, it also limits the direct participation of affected groups and risks reducing experiential knowledge to second-hand input. Several social workers emphasise that even when participation occurs, objectives are often predefined and experiential or practice-based insights are used by policy-makers *ex post* to correct or legitimise decisions rather than to shape agendas from the outset:

*“[Instead of inviting them somewhere in between] they should involve people living in poverty from the very beginning [...] because they are still the experts in what they go through and in what the [possible] solutions to that are.”* (social worker 11)

Policy officials confirm that existing governance structures lack the time, mandate, and capacity to meaningfully integrate experiential knowledge. Participation is commonly organised through temporary projects or consultations with limited influence. The mediating role of social workers is appreciated: “I don’t see people [living in poverty situations] coming to consultation meetings or events like that. You need people on the ground who can actually represent their views.” (policy officer 06). However, this approach fuels scepticism among people in poverty, who frequently describe participation as symbolic rather than consequential, a perception echoed by social workers who question the added value of engaging in governance processes they experience as predominantly performative: “this is marketed under the slogan ‘we have organised participation’” (social worker 10). Overall, the findings point to a persistent gap between formal recognition and actual influence of experiential knowledge, reflecting underlying epistemic hierarchies in climate governance.

#### 4.3. Social Workers’ Roles in Promoting Climate Justice

To address our third research question, we examined how social workers view their role and opportunities in promoting climate justice, with particular attention to the integration of experiential knowledge. Across the interviews, social workers do not primarily frame their role in technical or environmental terms. Instead, they articulate their contribution as relational, ethical, and political, rooted in proximity to lived experience. Interviewees emphasise three interconnected roles: psychosocial support, epistemic mediation, and structural advocacy.

First, several social workers describe climate-related measures, such as housing renovation or energy transitions, as emotionally demanding and stressful processes that affect dignity, identity, and family life. This is especially the case for people experiencing scarcity in multiple, complex ways (De Bruijn and Antonides 2022; Mullainathan and Shafir 2013):

*“They often find themselves facing a whole bunch of problems [...]. It’s very complex. So, for people in vulnerable situations, this calls for a special approach.”* (social worker 12)

Providing psychosocial support is therefore seen as a precondition for just implementation. Additionally, psychosocial work is framed as enabling agency and political self-efficacy. Supporting people to experience that their voice matters is described as fostering engagement in governance processes that are otherwise perceived as distant or inaccessible: “If you can feel or see that your voice really matters, you’ll foster a sense of engagement” (social workers 09).

Second, social workers emphasise their role in mediating experiential knowledge across unequal systems. They translate technical information into accessible narratives for households while conveying lived experiences back to policymakers. At the same time, they critically reflect on the limits of proxy representation, noting that participation still relies “too much on us” (social workers 11).

Third, social workers frame climate justice as inseparable from structural change. They describe advocacy as a core professional responsibility, aimed at challenging dominant efficiency-driven narratives and holding policymakers accountable for social consequences. However, many professionals express ambivalence about their epistemic legitimacy in highly technical policy arenas, which constrains their perceived influence. As one social worker critically noted, highly individualised measures, such as symbolic, politically shallow, and public relations-friendly actions, are “commendable” but ultimately insufficient to address structural injustices (social worker 10). Altogether, these findings suggest that social work’s contribution lies in making the transition genuinely social, but that this role depends on institutional recognition and political space.

#### 4.4. Factors Shaping the Integration of Experiential Knowledge

Building on Sections 4.1–4.3, this section applies the 3-i framework to analyse underlying dynamics of the empirical patterns. In particular, we want to know how ideas, interests, and institutions shape the integration of experiential (or practice-based) knowledge in local climate governance. This helps explain why it is often recognised rhetorically but rarely shapes policy agendas in a sustained way. While the municipalities differ in demographic composition and policy context, the analysis focuses on cross-cutting patterns across cases rather than on systematic comparisons.

##### 4.4.1. Ideas: Framing Climate Action and Participation

Across the interviews, the integration of experiential knowledge is strongly shaped by how actors conceptualise the climate transition itself. Climate policy discourses identified in the preceding sections reflect a dominant technocratic framing of climate action, oriented towards emission reduction, efficiency, and compliance with European targets. Within this framing, social inclusion of people in vulnerable situations and social workers is perceived to function primarily as an instrumental condition for implementation, aimed at feasibility, acceptance, or behavioural change, rather than as a normative or epistemic foundation for policy design. Many policy officers explicitly confirmed this logic, framing participation as necessary “so we can reach the [climate] targets” (policy officer 01), because “first and foremost, [...] we must ensure that we get our work done” (policy officer 03). This reveals how policy rationales anchored in performance and compliance implicitly subordinate social justice considerations, positioning social work primarily as a delivery mechanism rather than a co-definer of policy goals. At the same time, a few policy officers criticised this approach because it easily encounters resistance, alienates vulnerable groups from policy processes, and misses out on other opportunities relevant to society:

*“[There is] too much focus on those CO<sub>2</sub> targets. And certainly when it comes to mobility, [...] because mobility is primarily about how we can create greater proximity of different functions in increasingly urbanised environments, enabling us to organise mobility much more sustainably using active modes.”* (policy officer 06)

In contrast to an instrumental framing of the integration of experiential knowledge, many interviewed social workers articulated an explicit eco-social understanding of climate justice whereby climate policy starts from social needs, such as housing quality, affordability, and stability: “we should reverse the order, first the people in poverty” (social workers 09). From this perspective, climate change and social inequality are structurally intertwined, and experiential knowledge is epistemically necessary for defining what climate justice entails in practice, rather than a supplementary input added after policy choices have been made. The implications of overlooking this perspective become apparent in concrete policy design. For instance, in discussions on the ‘inclusive’ rollout of local mobility hubs—intended to facilitate switching between transport modes such as car sharing, bike sharing, and

public transport—a social worker (social worker 10) highlighted a mismatch between policy assumptions and lived realities. Drawing on her daily experience, she pointed to structural barriers such as shift or irregular work schedules, limited financial resources, language and technical constraints, lack of driving or cycling experience, and cultural barriers. In such contexts, mobility hubs are unlikely to address the mobility needs of people in poverty, illustrating how well-intentioned policies may nevertheless fail to produce socially just outcomes when experiential knowledge is not meaningfully integrated.

Thus, competing ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and priorities structure not only how participation is organised but also what counts as legitimate knowledge within decision-making. In instrumental framings, participation primarily serves to legitimise and secure acceptance; in eco-social framings, it functions as an epistemic practice that enables affected groups to shape problem definitions and solutions. The marginalisation of experiential knowledge under dominant framings is therefore experienced as misrecognition and depoliticisation.

#### 4.4.2. Interests: Power, Priorities, and Strategic Alignment

In addition to ideas, the integration of experiential or practice-based knowledge is shaped by competing interests and power asymmetries within local climate governance. Interviewees consistently pointed to tensions between policy agendas: while policy officers tend to prioritise scalability, efficiency, and measurable climate impact, the social agendas articulated by people experiencing poverty and social workers centre on basic needs, affordability, and security.

Within these interest configurations, climate objectives are treated as relatively fixed reference points, whereas their social consequences remain secondary and negotiable. This reflects underlying power asymmetries that shape which interests prevail. Policy institutions and electorally influential constituencies retain control over agenda-setting, funding streams, and evaluation criteria, while social organisations are positioned primarily as implementers or outreach partners. The positional asymmetry limits the capacity of experiential or practice-based knowledge to reshape strategic choices, particularly when it challenges policy direction rather than facilitating implementation. As two social workers note:

*“When it comes to the climate, climate sustainability and the climate transition, it’s a narrative dominated by the highly educated, [...] people with fewer opportunities [...] aren’t heard or aren’t taken into account.”* (social worker 09)

*“It remains too much of a top-down approach, rather than a genuine coalition or collaboration between civil society and policymakers”* (social worker 03)

This perception is echoed by participants with lived experience of poverty, who, in the few instances where they were involved in local climate policy-making, describe how their views, priorities, and knowledge were often sidelined by politicians, technocrats, or “cargo-bike riding middle-class” representatives (person experiencing poverty 02). At most, they saw their experiences incorporated when they aligned with existing policy objectives or supported implementation efforts with testimony.

While most policy officers attribute these dynamics to assumptions about the secondary priority of climate change among people in vulnerable situations, as well as to time, staffing, and budgetary constraints, some express a more critical stance. As one policy officer notes, the focus remains too strongly oriented towards environmental objectives, “whereas it should above all be a challenge that everyone can be part of the transition” (policy officer 06).

At the same time, interviewees identified moments when interests realign, creating openings for experiential knowledge. The energy crisis was frequently cited as a catalyst for broader coalitions among social and environmental actors, as rising energy costs affected

middle-income households and heightened political attention to affordability. In these contexts, experiential knowledge gained strategic weight, particularly when mobilised collectively rather than individually. Such alignments, however, were described as contingent and fragile rather than structurally embedded. These moments illustrate that experiential knowledge gains influence not through institutionalised inclusion, but through contingent political realignments.

#### 4.4.3. Institutions: Mandates, Structures, and Governance Constraints

Finally, institutional arrangements play a decisive role in filtering experiential knowledge. A recurring institutional pattern concerns the functional delegation of responsibility for social inclusion to social-sector actors without corresponding mandates within climate or energy departments. While this delegation acknowledges the relevance of social expertise, it simultaneously removes experiential knowledge from formal decision-making arenas where strategic choices are made.

Respondents further noted the absence of a stable, authoritative participation infrastructure. However, even where such infrastructure formally existed (as in Leuven), participation initiatives were typically project-based, time-limited, and reliant on informal access routes, favouring actors with higher social capital and institutional familiarity. Consequently, people whose experiences deviate most from policy norms face the greatest barriers to epistemic access. This systematically disadvantages these groups and reinforces what interviewees described as a persistent “gap between worlds” (social worker 01).

Institutional fragmentation further undermines integration. Responsibilities are described as being dispersed across the climate, energy, housing, and social policy domains: “that lack of cross-sectoral policy coordination will be one of the biggest obstacles to this climate transition.” (social worker 05). Failure to address these fragmentations may not only create accountability gaps but also contribute to the compartmentalisation of dissent. At the same time, the financial dependence of social organisations on public funding constrains their capacity to act as sustained, critical counter-voices.

Finally, multi-level governance further constrains local action. As discussed in Section 4.1, social workers and people experiencing poverty criticise climate policies, especially in housing and energy, for privileging owner-occupied contexts and individual-level measures, even though people living in poverty are more often renters and require collective solutions. This critique spans local, regional, and federal levels. Local policy officials, however, point to structural misalignments between these levels that restrict their ability to translate experiential knowledge into coherent policy trajectories, even when awareness and goodwill are present.

Importantly, these institutional arrangements are perceived differently by the stakeholder groups interviewed. Policy officers often frame the delegation of social inclusion tasks to social-sector actors as a pragmatic and efficient division of responsibilities, given limited time and resources. In contrast, social workers interpret these same arrangements as structurally limiting, as they confine experiential knowledge to indirect, implementation-oriented roles without granting it influence over strategic decision-making. For people experiencing poverty, these institutional configurations are primarily experienced as distant, difficult to access and offering little scope for meaningful participation, reinforcing their limited presence in formal policy arenas.

Taken together, the analysis shows that experiential knowledge is systematically filtered through the interaction of ideas, interests, and institutions. Dominant technocratic framings of climate action privilege efficiency and emission reduction, structuring interests around feasibility and risk avoidance. These orientations are stabilised by institutional arrangements characterised by fragmented mandates, weak participation infrastructures,

and indirect representation. Although alternative eco-social framings and temporary coalitions emerge, prevailing governance architectures limit their capacity to confer agenda-setting power sustained by experiential knowledge.

## 5. Discussion

This study examined how climate change and climate policies are experienced by people living in poverty, how experiential or professional, practice-based knowledge circulates in local climate policy-making, and how social workers engage with climate justice. Building on the empirically grounded analysis of how ideas, interests, and institutions shape the role of experiential knowledge, this section further interprets them through the lenses of climate justice and epistemic justice, while also revisiting the interactions between ideas, interests, and institutions (Hall 1997) to clarify how climate injustice is produced, maintained, and contested in eco-social practice. The analysis reveals a persistent gap between policy ambitions and lived realities.

Climate injustice operates across interconnected dimensions of unequal exposure and limited adaptive capacity, but also through misrecognition and restricted influence over policy agendas, reflecting Gough's (2013) notion of 'triple injustice'. Climate policies are widely perceived as being designed around middle-class assumptions regarding housing, financial stability, and administrative capacity, confirming earlier research on the socially unequal distributive effects of climate action (Büchs et al. 2025; Hosseinzadehtalaei et al. 2025). These patterns point to shortcomings across distributional, recognitional, and procedural dimensions rather than mere implementation failures (McCauley et al. 2019; Fraser 2005), and they align with the findings that participatory climate governance often remains consultative and uneven in its ability to influence policy decisions, particularly in contexts marked by unequal participation capacities (Evers and Schmid 2025; Ruiz-Mallén 2020).

From an epistemic justice perspective, experiential knowledge of people in poverty situations remains systematically marginalised within climate governance. Although acknowledged in principle, it rarely informs agenda-setting and is often introduced only after key decisions have been taken. This reflects what De Brabander (2023) criticises as 'politics of recognition without epistemic justice', and it aligns with accounts of weakly institutionalised participation for vulnerable groups (Honkonen 2024) and broader theories of epistemic justice (Fricker 2007). At the same time, affected groups have limited epistemic agency (Medina 2013), as they are rarely able to shape the definitions of policy problems, while the dominance of technical and economic expertise produces hermeneutical gaps that obscure lived vulnerability (Centemeri 2013; Schlosberg 2013; Temper and Del Bene 2016). These limitations are not merely procedural, but rooted in interactions between dominant framings, institutional arrangements, and actor interests, echoing recent work on the techno-managerial and politically selective nature of climate policy governance (Teebken 2024).

Within this context, social work emerges as a structurally constrained but strategically significant mediating actor. Comparable to findings in other national contexts (Kuiper et al. 2022; Närhi et al. 2025; Nöjd et al. 2025; Labron and Burke 2025), social workers describe their role as relational, ethical, and political, grounded in proximity to lived experience, while organisational settings simultaneously enable and constrain such practice (Boetto et al. 2022). Positioned at the interface of social justice and ecological transformation (Boetto 2017; Matthies and Närhi 2017), social workers provide psychosocial support, translate policy language, and mobilise experiential knowledge to challenge efficiency-driven narratives. However, their role is shaped by technocratic rationalities, managerialist governance, fragmented mandates, and a reliance on proxy participation, which limit their epistemic and political influence. This reflects broader findings that professionals operating

at the interface between lived experience and institutional systems face structural tensions that confine their role to advisory or implementation roles (Gilboa and Weiss-Gal 2022; Jhagroe 2022; Knevel et al. 2024; Närhi et al. 2025; Närhi and Matthies 2018).

These dynamics highlight the limits of social work as an epistemic mediator. While social workers can mobilise experiential knowledge and challenge dominant narratives, their influence remains constrained by technocratic policy logics and limited agenda-setting power. Consequently, reliance on mediation alone risks reproducing rather than transforming existing power relations (Gilboa and Weiss-Gal 2022; Jhagroe 2022). From a structural eco-social work perspective (Boetto 2017; Närhi et al. 2026), this reflects the limits of incremental measures within existing governance arrangements, as consultative or mediated forms of participation tend to leave underlying power asymmetries largely intact. Addressing these dynamics would require more fundamental institutional shifts that redistribute agenda-setting power and enable sustained integration of experiential knowledge. At the same time, these findings call for a more reflexive understanding of social work's position within such governance systems (Matthies and Närhi 2017), as it may, despite its critical and justice-oriented commitments, contribute to incremental adaptation rather than transformative change.

As demonstrated in the results, the interaction among ideas, interests, and institutions constrains the integration of experiential knowledge. Dominant ideas frame climate action instrumentally, interests prioritise feasibility and risk avoidance, and institutional arrangements stabilise indirect participation and fragmented accountability. Although crises such as the energy crisis may temporarily realign interests, such openings remain fragile and insufficiently institutionalised. This reflects broader findings in EU climate governance, where local authorities are recognised as key actors but remain legally and financially dependent on higher levels of government (Kastelein 2024). In this context, social work occupies a position similar to that of a niche actor whose context-sensitive interventions struggle to influence dominant regimes.

Across the analysis, these findings suggest that advancing climate justice in local governance depends on alignment across three mutually reinforcing dimensions. At the level of ideas, experiential knowledge must be recognised as epistemically valid and policy-relevant; at the level of interests, actors require incentives and sufficient power to prioritise such knowledge; and at the level of institutions, governance arrangements must enable its structural and continuous integration rather than limiting it to one-off consultation. Without such alignment, climate justice risks remaining symbolically acknowledged but practically marginal.

## 6. Conclusions

This article contributes to existing research in three main ways. Empirically, it provides insight into how climate change and climate policy are experienced and negotiated across different actor groups in Flemish local governance contexts. Conceptually, it links climate justice and epistemic justice by showing how the marginalisation of experiential knowledge constitutes a structured form of epistemic exclusion shaped by ideas, interests, and institutions. Professionally, it repositions social work and people facing poverty not as passive actors, but as potential mediators and epistemic agents within the climate transition.

These findings have important implications for local climate policy governance. Advancing climate justice requires moving beyond symbolic or testimonial participation towards institutional arrangements that recognise experiential knowledge as epistemically necessary for defining climate problems, priorities, and solutions. Persistent power asymmetries suggest that without such institutionalisation, participatory initiatives risk reproducing existing inequalities and limiting the influence of marginalised groups. More

broadly, the findings highlight how ideas, interests, and institutions jointly shape the possibilities for inclusive and socially just climate governance.

For social work, the findings reinforce its potential and constrained role not only as a mediator of lived experience in eco-social policy, but also as an actor in agenda-setting, coalition-building, and advocacy (Gilboa and Weiss-Gal 2022; Jhagroe 2022; Matutini et al. 2025). In line with calls for a stronger democratic mandate of social work (Dzur 2019; Lipsky 2023), experiential knowledge can function not only as evidence. It can also serve as a source of moral authority for challenging exclusionary policies and articulating socially just alternatives (Raeymaeckers et al. 2021), connecting lived experiences to structural claims and critically questioning dominant narratives (see Van Bouchaute and Vanderhulst 2022). Comparable to recent research stressing that eco-social work remains difficult to translate into sustained local practices where individual responsibility and short-term project logics prevail (Allegri and Pavani 2026), realising this potential remains, paradoxically, contingent on stronger institutional recognition, political mandates, and durable participatory spaces capable of translating experiential and practice-based knowledge into climate policy.

Notwithstanding these insights, this study is not without limitations. First, it is limited by its focus on Flemish municipalities and the specific institutional arrangements of Belgium's multi-level climate governance context, which constrains the direct transferability of the findings to other settings. At the same time, the patterns identified resonate with broader insights from the literature on climate justice and participatory governance, suggesting that similar dynamics may arise in contexts where experiential knowledge is marginalised in policy processes. A second limitation concerns the relatively small number of participants with direct experience of poverty, mainly reflecting the limited extent to which people in poverty are currently involved in local climate policy-making. This constrains the diversity of directly represented lived experiences in the data, while also underscoring one of the study's central findings: that such exclusion remains structurally embedded in current governance processes. In this sense, the limited presence of these voices in the data not only constitutes a methodological constraint but also reflects the epistemic exclusion this study seeks to analyse. Third, participants were recruited based on their involvement in climate- and poverty-related issues, likely resulting in a sample with relatively high levels of awareness and engagement. Fourth, the study focuses on social workers as key intermediaries, even though they represent only one of several actors involved in translating lived experience into policy-relevant signals. Fifth, while the different municipalities were deliberately selected to capture variation in local governance contexts, the analysis does not systematically compare findings across cases. Future research could build on this design to examine how institutional, socio-demographic, and policy differences between municipalities shape the integration of experiential knowledge. Finally, while the 3-i framework offers a structured analytical lens, it foregrounds particular explanatory dimensions, and alternative theoretical perspectives may yield different interpretations. Future research could expand comparative analyses across governance contexts and further explore participatory approaches that enable collective epistemic agency among vulnerable groups. It could also examine how experiential knowledge circulates across governance levels and how supra-local policy frameworks shape local possibilities for climate justice and eco-social work.

**Supplementary Materials:** The following supporting information can be downloaded at <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/socsci15070466/s1>: Annex SI. Overview of interview partners, Annex SII. Interview guidelines, and Annex SIII. Deductive coding framework for RQ4.

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