CHAPTER 8

How Can 'Ordinary' Cities Become Climate Pioneers?

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Highlights We need to highlight the climate approaches of 'ordinary' cities, not just the high-profile leaders. 'Ordinary' cities can catch up with the leaders, even if they have only limited resources.

Keywords Climate adaptation · Climate mitigation · Climate governance · Pioneers · Local governance · 'Ordinary' cities

Introduction

Most academic studies into urban climate policies have focused on large forerunner cities, often highlighting how their ambitious and innovative approaches aim to deliver carbon neutrality by 2050 or earlier. Although such studies can tell a positive and inspiring story, these places often benefit from favourable conditions, such as higher levels of capacity or

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community support for action. In addition, they only represent a small minority of the global population and an even smaller share of the world's cities. There are far more 'ordinary' cities—small and mid-sized municipalities, and places in the Global South as well as the Global North—than forerunners. To raise awareness of innovative practices that such places might wish to adopt, we need more research into how lower-profile cities are seeking to tackle climate change. This is because all local governments need to address climate change, and therefore, approaches have to be developed and shared that are applicable for a wide range of municipalities rather than just a handful of leaders.

Drawing on environmental and climate governance literature, this chapter explores and discusses the pathways such 'ordinary' cities might follow to become climate 'pioneers'. The chapter is sub-divided into four sections. Following this introduction, we introduce the idea of 'ordinary' cities and then explore how such cities might become climate pioneers, with specific reference to two cases from Germany. Finally, we summarise our findings and make some recommendations.

'Ordinary' Cities in a World of Global Cities

In the context of local climate action, we understand 'ordinary' cities as mostly mid-sized or smaller cities that are not high-profile progressive actors in climate governance. Wurzel et al. (2019) define climate *pioneers* as being less externally ambitious than climate *leaders*, and therefore, we might expect this term to be more applicable to ordinary cities than their global counterparts. Although lower-profile places may have pioneered innovative climate policies, they are generally not famous for having done so—perhaps because they have not developed particular city branding strategies or sought to position themselves as climate leaders (Gustavsson & Elander, 2012).

'Ordinary' cities can be best defined by identifying what they may lack: they benefit from neither a particular power of attraction, nor their

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extraordinary size or importance (Robinson 2020; Amin & Graham, 1997; Gerhard, 2017). Robinson (2002, p. 535) would refer to them as cities 'off the map'—at least in the eyes of most Western observers. She argues that scholars should seek to study wealthy and innovative cities alongside poorer cities in the Global South, to identify and exploit the opportunities to learn from a wide array of diverse urban contexts (Robinson, 2006). Given that the vast majority of cities have a much lower profile and are smaller in size than the handful of 'world cities' around the globe, we can see how the experiences of such 'ordinary' places are probably much more relevant for a wider range of urban areas. Therefore, if studies and practitioners focus predominantly on high-profile (often Anglophone) cities in the Global North, they are probably neglecting the innovations adopted elsewhere that may be much easier to apply in other contexts. As mentioned beforehand, all cities need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to the impacts of climate change. We simply can no longer afford to ignore many of the (often very creative) approaches developed by 'ordinary' cities, regardless of their location.

From 'Ordinary' Cities to Climate Pioneers

According to Wurzel et al. (2019), potentially every city can become a pioneer; however, some cities are likely to find it easier than others. Indeed, previous research suggests that climate pioneers are typically characterised by high capacities for action (Haupt, 2020; Haupt et al., 2020; Homsy, 2018; Kern, 2019; Otto et al., 2021; Sharp et al., 2011) and a set of favourable socio-demographic, socio-economic and political conditions. These are: (i) a growing, young and above-average educated and skilled population (Bedsworth & Hanak, 2013; Kern, 2020; Zahran et al., 2008), (ii) favourable economic conditions such as high salaries (Bedsworth & Hanak, 2013; Kern, 2020; Zahran et al., 2008), (iii) support for climate action by city mayors (Bedsworth & Hanak, 2013; Haupt, 2020; Hoppe et al., 2016), (iv) political influence of green or alternative parties (Homsy, 2018; Mann et al., 2014), (v) a strong civil society (Homsy, 2018; Hoppe et al., 2016; Kern, 2019), particularly environmental groups (Sharp et al., 2011; Zahran et al., 2008), and (vi) a supportive local research environment (Eckersley, 2018; Kern, 2020).

Although 'ordinary' cities often lack many of these characteristics, the presence of powerful and committed actors within the municipality can

help them to introduce pioneering initiatives (Pitt & Congreve, 2017). These individuals can be (a group of) policy entrepreneurs (Kingdon, 1984) such as specialised staff within the city government, or important key figures (Gailing & Ibert, 2016) such as city mayors. Climate action does not necessarily need to be initiated by the mayor or a leading politician, but local policy entrepreneurs who wish to introduce ambitious policies will need their political support (Young, 2010). To promote policy innovations, policy entrepreneurs also need to dedicate a significant amount of their own resources (e.g. time, capabilities and reputation) and identify the 'right moment' (a 'policy window') to place their topic on the agenda (Mintrom, 2019).

Chances and Challenges for 'Ordinary' Cities'

This section explores how two 'ordinary' cities in Germany: Göttingen (120.000 inhabitants) and Remscheid (110.000 inhabitants) became climate pioneers. Our discussion of Göttingen draws heavily on Fenton and Paschek's (2018) study, which was based on five expert interviews and an analysis of key strategic documents. We undertook 11 fieldwork interviews in Remscheid ourselves, and also conducted extensive analysis of relevant documentation (see Haupt & Kern, 2020 for a more detailed examination of this case).

Neither city has the characteristics that we would normally associate with climate leaders. Two extensive studies that investigated a broad set of socio-economic, socio-demographic and socio-cultural indicators in all German cities and counties (*Landkreise*) found that Remscheid ranks 360th out of 401 in terms of overall quality of life[1] and 323rd in prospected future opportunities,[2] whereas Göttingen was placed 158th in both studies. Göttingen does exhibit some features of a typical pioneer: it is a university city with a young and well-educated population. Nevertheless, an examination of the city's climate action revealed a high degree of capacity deficits and a severe lack of municipal resources (Fenton & Paschek, 2018). For its part, the shrinking industrial city of Remscheid,

[1] *ZDF-Die große Deutschland-Studie 2019:* the study analysing the overall quality of life (https://deutschland-studie.zdf.de/district/09162/default).

[2] *Prognos Zukunftsatlas 2019:* the study analysing prospected future opportunities *Prognos Zukunftsatlas* (https://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/deutschland/zukunftsatlas-2019/).

with its very high municipal debt and the resulting capacity constraints, is a textbook example of a likely laggard (Haupt & Kern, 2020). Despite these disadvantages, both places took action earlier than most other German cities of comparable size and completed a wide array of climate activities (see Otto et al., 2021). Table 8.1 summarises several key milestones Göttingen's and Remscheid's climate action activities.

To cope with their rather unfavourable environments for pioneering climate policies, both cities needed to look for alternative creative approaches. Most importantly, Göttingen and Remscheid collaborated with local key actors (such as universities) to bid successfully for third-party funding and participate in temporary projects (Fenton & Paschek, 2018; Haupt & Kern, 2020). This has given Remscheid access to crucial knowledge for developing its climate policy (e.g. in the creation of local climate analysis maps and maps for simulating flow pathways and depressions in the case of heavy rainfall). Indeed, all of the city's climate-related strategies (mitigation, adaptation, mobility) were developed as

Table 8.1 Milestones of local climate action (external funding bodies in brackets where applicable)

Göttingen	*Remscheid*
• 1990: energy strategy • 1991: entry into the Climate Alliance • 1997: Local Agenda 21 resolution • 2010: climate mitigation strategy (*national funding*) • 2014: climate strategy aiming at climate neutrality by 2050 (*national funding*) • 2017: climate manager appointed (*national funding*) • 2017: mobility strategy (*national funding)* • 2018: bicycle traffic development strategy	• 1995: entry into the Climate Alliance • 1998: ratification of the Alborg Charta, Local Agenda 21 resolution • 1999: climate mitigation strategy (*federal state funding*) • 2003, 2007, and 2018: European Energy Award certification (*federal state funding*) • Climate manager appointed in the department of building management (*national funding*) • 2013: climate adaptation strategy (*national funding*) • 2014: integrated climate mitigation strategy (*national funding*) • 2017: climate manager appointed (*national funding*) • 2018: mobility strategy (*national funding*)

Source Own table

part of funding programmes (Haupt & Kern, 2020). Similarly, Göttingen's mitigation strategies and climate traffic plan would not have come about without external funding (Fenton & Paschek, 2018). Moreover, the city succeeded in a competitive tender process to participate in the 'Master plan 100% Climate Protection' funding programme that financially supports the development of mitigation plans aiming at climate neutrality by the year 2050.

Nevertheless, dependency on third-party funds can lead to uncertainties in mid-term and long-term planning, because externally-funded initiatives are often difficult to sustain after projects are completed. Conscious of this risk, Göttingen has sought to increase public participation in decision-making and policy formulation, in the hope that this will create capacity within the city to maintain momentum (Fenton & Paschek, 2018). In Remscheid, the reliance on external funding had a detrimental impact on the setting of ambitious long-term climate goals and developing holistic visions for the future (Haupt & Kern, 2020). Although Göttingen had already managed to set very ambitious targets, it still faced the challenge of implementing its strategy and requires ongoing resources to achieve its climate objectives (Fenton & Paschek, 2018). Nevertheless, external funding can also lead to the implementation of concrete measures. As an example, both cities received national grants to fund the (temporary) employment of a climate manager. Further examples from Remscheid include various energy-saving projects in public schools (funded by the German Federal Ministry for the Environment) and building up a green facade at a school building (funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research) (Haupt & Kern, 2020).

Outlook and Recommendations

The previous section highlighted how third-party funding for climate-related projects can help 'ordinary' cities to become pioneers. The German mid-sized cities of Göttingen and Remscheid show that strong key actors that manage to attract external funding from a variety of sources can—to a certain extent—compensate for a lack of capacities and resources. External funding can enable the development of strategies, engagement of temporary staff and also—to a lesser degree—the implementation of mitigation or adaptation measures. However, it is as yet unclear as to whether such an approach provides the only feasible opportunity for 'ordinary' or even 'disadvantaged' cities to become climate

pioneers—and questions remain as to whether reliance on third-party funding is an effective strategy over the longer term, given that projects often cease when the money runs out. It would hardly be desirable if bidding for such funding represents the only creative approach that 'ordinary' cities can pursue to advance local climate policymaking, but the lack of studies into this area means that we do not know enough about the other strategies that they may have adopted to tackle climate change.

As we have discussed, focusing on large leading forerunner cities is problematic: first, because there is only a limited number of such cities, and second because their models and solutions are barely replicable for the vast majority of 'ordinary' cities that operate within very different contexts. Indeed, cities that have pursued approaches that are more likely to be transferable between 'ordinary' cities should receive more attention. Shining a spotlight on their pioneering activities might not make these places *extra*ordinary, but it can help to raise awareness of the types of climate initiatives or place-based approaches that other 'ordinary' cities might consider adopting. More studies into these urban areas should help to highlight and spread the word about innovative practices in under-researched places. In addition, municipal practitioners could involve themselves in city networks and exchanges to learn more about how the pioneering approaches of other places might be applicable to their own contexts.

There is growing evidence that there are numerous undetected and unrecognised 'ordinary' cities out there that, despite a lack of attention, have the potential to develop creative and pioneering approaches, successfully tackle climate change issues within city borders and catch up to the leaders. Many of them have probably developed diverse creative approaches already, but have not received due credit for their efforts and remain largely unacknowledged. Indeed, it is most likely that Göttingen and Remscheid are not the only German examples of such cities. Ideally, their creative approaches could serve as inspiration or even models for the numerous cities that are in a similar situation and thereby help many other 'ordinary' or even 'disadvantaged' cities to develop successful approaches themselves.

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