

Cities in Transition?

On the Transformative Potential of Governing Climate Change in Municipalities through Best Practices

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Abstract Ph.D. Project

Climate policy has for decades been primarily an international and a national concern. But in the past decade more and more municipalities explicitly become involved in climate change governance and are establishing themselves as independent actors. In European and nationally funded programs as well as in international, national or regional city networks a particular focus on the promotion of knowledge transfer and exchange of experiences can be observed. But in spite of the enormous popularity of policy instruments such as *best practices* and *case studies*, little is known about the reasons for and mechanism of the ample dissemination of these technologies of government. Even more important, the broader implications of the focus on the transfer of "best practices" for the political problematization of climate change and for appropriate ways of governing it remain opaque. The project "**Cities in (Climate-)Change? Municipal Climate Governance: Governing by Best Practices**" is addressing this research gap. It looks at how climate change is made governable in municipalities by the use and dissemination of purportedly "best climate practices". The program "Masterplan 100% climate protection" of the German Federal Ministry for the Environment and the Climate-KIC Innovation Project "Transition Cities" serve as case studies.

1 Re-Scaling Climate Governance

Climate change as such is a *glocal* phenomenon that gives special meaning to the relation between the global and the local scale (Andonova & Mitchell 2010: 264; Bulkeley 2005; Swyngedouw 2004). This is because climate change in its "globalness" has its roots in local activities and unfolds its effects often locally, e.g. in form of extreme weather events. In so doing the locations of cause and effect do not coincide, what underlines the *glocal* character of climate change.

Nevertheless climate policy has for decades been primarily an international and a national concern. Only recently have municipalities explicitly become involved in climate change governance and are establishing themselves as independent actors. Currently, global climate governance is a setting under significant reorganisation. Especially the so called "Copenhagen-Disaster" (COP 15) in 2009 led to a reevaluation of subnational actors because the UNFCCC-process with its international negotiations seemed to have failed (Blok 2014: 53). As a result an enduring reassessment of the regional and local scale, where climate actions takes place on the ground, can be observed. The catalysing effect of the failed COP 15 becomes materialised one year later. In

Cancun, Mexico local and subnational governments became officially accepted in the final declaration as “governmental stakeholders” in the UNFCCC-process – a milestone. Because even if some pioneer cities are already climate active since the mid-1990s, an intensification of the re-scaling process is only recognisable since the mid-2000s (Bulkeley 2013: 77ff.). These developments lead to the fact that the local implementation of concrete actions becomes upgraded in regard to the global negotiations and national commitments in order to save the climate. At the same time the problematization of climate change as a municipal task can be understood as an attempt of subnational actors to redefine a policy problem that is framed up to now as a global problem in order to regain power and political influence (Bulkeley 2005).

This “change of scale” (Braun 2014: 50) or “rescaling” (Andonova & Mitchell 2010) generates new modes of governance that are increasingly focused on the urban scale. McGuirk et al (2014: 2717) therefore identify cities as “key scale of climate governance”. In addition to that, cities are globally considered as “frontrunners” or “living labs” (McGuirk et al. 2014: 2723; Bulkeley & Castan Broto 2013; Heeg & Rosol 2007: 491) where new policies and innovative actions are tested on the ground. According to Blok (2014: 52) “[...] the city itself becomes a site of civic experimentation with new forms of climate governance” that are much more ambitious than nation states can or want to be. That is why the transformation to a sustainable and low-carbon society is today increasingly seen as to be decided in cities as primary places of socio-technical innovation.”

2 The Urban Transition

According to Barnett (2013) urban activities are increasingly identified both as cause of various, prevailing problems – from climate change to obeseness and from the financial crisis to social exclusion – and as key to solve these problems. On the one hand urban processes are described as source of risks, crisis and threats; for example in arguments on the urban roots of the global financial crisis of 2008 or in discourses on the negative environmental impacts of the worldwide ongoing urbanisation. On the other hand municipal institutions, infrastructures and interest groups are viewed as especially qualified to creatively come up against these multiple challenges; for example through experimental urban planning, Transition Town movements, local climate actions or technological Smart City solutions. In short, there is a great many of arguments that refer specific problems to urban roots and regard urban practices at the same time as suitable to develop adequate solutions. Nevens and colleagues (2013: 111) summarise:

“As such, cities are the locations where most of the (un)sustainability issues find their origin. At the same time, cities are the basic units for policies that have significant environmentally beneficial consequences (both local and global) [...]”

In the climate discourse the following argument is used quasi ubiquitous (e.g. Voytenko et al. 2015; Bulkeley 2013) and has been taken in this case from a speech of the president of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker (2015) on the state of the EU:

„With cities accounting for 70 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions caused by human activities, and 75 per cent of the world's population living in urban environments by 2050 – the potential for climate action by cities is huge.“

Cities are attributed to a high “carbon impact” and hence classified as profoundly climate relevant. Simultaneously the potential for emission reductions becomes obvious easily in cities. This can accelerate the implementation of concrete measures – often with national or international financial support (Bulkeley et al. 2012). Moreover, many local governments have the authority over land use planning and disposal; many municipalities also play a crucial role in questions of mobility as well as energy production and supply. These are central levers for mitigation actions, meaning greenhouse gas emissions reductions (Bestsill & Bulkeley 2006: 141).

In conclusion, cities are therefore, first, perceived as the roots of climate change's causes, second, they are the most vulnerable places to its effects and third - and perhaps most importantly - they are also identified as the sites for finding and implementing effective solutions to climate change. One popular method to make this theoretically enormous potential in cities happen is the production, use and dissemination of so-called best practices on a large scale:

“To the extent that best practices diffuse among them [cities], there is considerable potential for rapid improvements to be made in energy efficiency, public transport, use of renewables, greening of cities, and the like.” (Schreurs 2008: 346)

The fear of a fast approaching climate ‘apocalypse’ led to the common belief that local climate action can be made more ‘efficient’ by disseminating best practices. It is expected that by locally experimenting with various, concrete actions and projects the most successful and most innovative practices establish and spread themselves. And as a result the national or regional climate target can be reached. Therefore in European and nationally funded programs as well as in multi-level city networks a particular focus on the promotion of knowledge transfer and exchange of experiences can be observed. But in spite of the enormous popularity of policy instruments such as best practices and case studies, little is known about the reasons for and mechanism of the ample dissemination of these technologies of government. Even more important, the broader implications of the focus on the transfer of “best practices” for the political problematization of climate change and for appropriate ways of governing it remain opaque. As a result governing by best practices became increasingly naturalized and unquestioned. With this input I am therefore aiming at uncovering how and if best climate practices really contribute to transformative governance.

Conceptually governmentality studies provide “[...] a means through which to engage with how governing climate change operates through both the strategic and the prosaic, and to offer an explanation for how and why particular forms of authority, knowledge and practice have come to dominate the climate change field” (Stripple & Bulkeley 2014: 14). Especially useful for analysing the transformative capacity of best practices in municipal climate governance are the categories of

rationalities and technologies of government which are going to be introduced in the following sections.

3 The Rationale: With Ideas and Examples to Success

According to Foucault (1997: 73) problems – like climate change – “could not be dissociated from the framework of political rationality within which they appeared and developed their urgency”. This concept refers to “the collective and taken for granted body of knowledge and styles of thinking that render aspects of reality thinkable and governable” (Lövbrand & Stripple 2014: 32f.). As Stripple and Bulkeley (2014: 14) point out, “the notion of rationalities enables us to engage with the ways particular logics are produced and serve to structure and orchestrate the social order and the continual process of positioning that takes place across the climate change field.”

The rationale of how climate change is governed in municipalities is in many cases strongly determined by international, national or regional support schemes, because local climate action is a voluntary task and often reliant on external funding. The German Federal Government for example has a strong interest in lighthouse measures undertaken by municipalities that not only lead to energy savings and greenhouse gas emission reductions, but which clearly show that the ambitious German mitigation targets are attainable. One programme to reach this is the Masterplan 100% climate protection directive: As an excellence initiative with currently 19 participating municipalities¹. It aims at creating public attention and stimulating reproduction of exemplar solutions to reach 95% of emission reduction and cutting energy consumption by 50% till 2050. Precondition for funding is a majority resolution of the municipal body (this means a political consensus), the implementation of a management process with controlling and monitoring schemes as well as existing intra and inter municipal networking activities (BMUB 2015). The objective of the programme is defined as follows:

“With the Masterplan directive the best examples for local climate action should be supported. Masterplan municipalities should be established as lighthouses of national climate action in order to give examples for imitation to all municipalities.”(BMUB 2015: 3)

This directive sets the scene of what has to be attained to stop climate change – cut the greenhouse gas emissions radically by 95% and half the energy consumption – and by the design of the Masterplan programme it structures also the way of how to reach these goals: by showcasing exemplar solutions from different geographical and structural contexts that should then be transferred to as many municipalities as possible. But for this analysis more important than the policy program itself, are the technologies that make this rationality happen. Best climate practices are therefore an example of how national or regional climate targets are going to be made operable.

¹ Supported municipalities are: Bensheim, Burbach, Enkenbach-Alsenborn, Flensburg, Frankfurt/M., Göttingen, Hannover (region and city), Heidelberg, Herten, Kempten, Marburg-Biedenkopf, Nalbach, Neumarkt i. d. Oberpfalz, Osnabrück (region and city), Rheine, Rostock, Sankt Ingbert, Steinfurt.

4 The Technology: Making Climate Targets Happen

If political rationalities render reality into the domain of thought technologies of seek to translate thought into the domain of reality (Miller & Rose 1990: 8). In other words: Technologies of Government refer “[...] to the vast assemblage of techniques, devices, tools, instruments, materials and apparatuses that render rationalities operable [...]” (Lövbrand & Stripple 2014: 33). Miller and Rose (1992: 175) therefore advocate for an analysis that both takes rationalities and technologies of governing into account if problematics of government are in the focus of research:

“Modes of government may be analyzed, first of all, in terms of their political rationalities, the changing discursive fields within which the exercise of power is conceptualised, the moral justifications for particular ways of exercising power by diverse authorities, notions of the appropriate forms, objects and limits of politics, and conceptions of the proper distribution of such tasks among secular, spiritual, military and familial sectors. But, we suggest, modes of government should also be analyzed in terms of their governmental technologies, the complex of mundane programmes, calculations, techniques, apparatuses, documents and procedures through which authorities seek to embody and give effect to governmental ambitions.”

4.1 Governing Climate Change in Municipalities

It is true that for municipal climate change governance several modes of governing have already been identified in the literature. Due to own working experiences as Climate-KIC project manager and through 26 qualitative interviews, two additional internships and by attending several conferences and workshops on local climate action it was found out that experimenting with and dissemination of best practice examples can be understood as a mainstream and unquestioned way of governing climate change on the local scale that cannot simply be subsumed under one of the modes of governing mentioned in table 1. This is because best practices provide and disseminate good examples of self-governing, governing by authority, provision or enabling but cannot themselves be analysed as a specific way of managing climate change in municipalities through one of these governing modes.

Measurability and quantification is central to the production of best practice, because examples that are easy to measure and quantify (especially in terms of CO₂ emissions and value-for-money) are more likely to become a best practice than others. Governing by numbers is therefore an important feature of municipal climate management but the governmental technology “best practice” is not reducible to calculative practices alone. As the analysis of the rationality of government showed lighthouse measures and demonstration projects are centrepieces of the policy programme 100% Climate Protection:

“Even if Germany as a nation makes only a small contribution, the Masterplan-Municipalities pioneer as laboratories for other municipalities, also beyond the national borders. The general principle is 100% climate protection, for this Masterplan-Municipalities are the pilots and good approaches should be supported.” (Knoblauch & Schock 2012: 1)

Where governing by experiments can be properly identified as a governmental rationality this mode of governing becomes controversial as a technology rendering climate action operable. Being seen as a laboratory and experimenting with innovative solutions may be attractive to receive funding and to do place marketing, but it is not the mode of how climate change is governed on the ground. Rather than experimenting with single solutions municipalities aim at mainstreaming and integration of their climate actions. Therefore best practices should not be understood as a form of experimentation but as a technology that contrariwise tend to normalisation and standardisation of existing projects that are proved as successful.

The initial idea behind a best practice approach is to accelerate the local low-carbon transition by replicating and up-scaling successful demonstration projects. But interestingly best climate practices are not as mobile as we could expect from their central purpose. In fact Bulkeley (2006: 1029; see also Webber 2015) is rather speaking of a “local stickiness” of best practices. Therefore governing by diffusion cannot be the key element for analysing the role of best practices in local climate action. As a result it is worth to investigate best practices as a discrete mode of governing in municipal climate governance.

Table 1: Overview of Governing Modes in Municipal Climate Governance.

Number	Mode of Governing	Explanation	Example	Literature
1	Self-Governing	The capacity of local government to govern its own activities	e.g. Green Public Procurement	Bulkeley & Kern 2006; Bulkeley 2013
2	Governing by Authority	The use of traditional forms of authority such as regulation and direction	e.g. Frankfurt resolution on Passive House Standard	Bulkeley & Kern 2006; Bulkeley 2013
3	Governing by Provision	The shaping of practice through the delivery of particular forms of service and resource	Influencing infrastructure development, programme administration and service delivery (transportation, water, energy, public housing etc.)	Bulkeley & Kern 2006; Bulkeley 2013
4	Governing by Enabling	Facilitating, co-ordinating and encouraging action through partnership with private- and voluntary-sector agencies, and to various forms of community engagement	“Frankfurt spart Strom”: information, consulting and financial incentives for private households to save energy	Bulkeley & Kern 2006; Bulkeley 2013
5	Governing by Numbers	Knowing and governing cities through (urban) indicators	Carbon accounting, climate scenarios, benchmarking activities	Miller 2001; Kitchin et al. 2015
6	Governing by Experiments	Cities as living labs, demonstration projects, lighthouse measures, support	“Ideenwettbewerb Klimaschutz” (Frankfurt): Financial support for creative	Bulkeley & Castan Broto 2013;

		for start-ups	and innovative ideas and solutions from entrepreneurs	Bulkeley et al. 2015
7	Governing by Diffusion	Governing through (transnational) municipal networks by facilitating learning and assisting in the diffusion of knowledge	Networks and networking, e.g. Climate Alliance, C40, Energy-Cities, ICLEI	Hakelberg 2011, 2014

4.2 What is a Best Climate Practice?

To learn more about the transformative potential of best practices in municipal climate governance it, first, has to be clear what climate professionals mean when they talk about best practices. A common answer is that a best climate practice has to be easy, cost-efficient, well transferable and broadly applicable.² But asking about the details of how and in which contexts best practices are used for in the daily governing of climate change in municipalities the picture is changing. Not the techniques or materialised solutions as such are in the centre of interest, but the practices behind, as this quote exemplarily shows:

“Best Practice stands for learning from each other. Hands on: Here is the project; I can look it up online or in a project description. But much more important than this technical knowledge is the information on personal level: What went wrong? Think about that, do that in no case! Or in our case the context is different, that has to be adapted. Very practical: How did you do this? How did you calculate? Whatever, it is very complex. I think it is normal work, if you do something new that is not standard.”(Interview 14, 2015)

It can be concluded that learning - based on personal, trustful network-relations - about the practices behind the so-called best practices that make the (innovative) solutions happen, are what climate change managers perceive as the *real* best practice. An interviewee (Interview 12, 2015) explains:

“For me best practice is a story. Because it is not helpful for me to know that technology X in building Y works especially well. But for me it is rather helpful to know that I can convince with a certain approach the building owner or operator to become active themselves. Or how I can support these actors e.g. with some kind of standard or any activity to implement this technology X in building Y; and then how I can convince as many additional building owners as possible to do the same. I guess this is best practice in local climate action for me. Because with anything else you always have all these barriers. It is about to overcome all these obstacles, e.g. psychological barriers, low financing, inertia or lacking expertise. Exactly, how to overcome these obstacles, this is the best practice for me; practically speaking, a beautiful story, which is told from person to person.”

² E.g. conversion of municipal street lightning to LED or City Cycling campaign of Climate Alliance.

4.3 Governing through Best Practices

If neither the technology or solution as such nor the transfer of a best practice is what best practices are used for to govern climate change in municipalities, there have to be other functions that make this governing mode attractive to climate change managers. By studying more than 20 local climate action plans, attending 14 conferences and workshops as well as conducting 26 qualitative interviews with climate change managers, network representatives and policy consultants the following four main functions of best climate practices could be identified (see table 2).

Table 2: Core Functions of Best Practices in Municipal Climate Change Governance.

Function	Explanation	Quote
Facilitator	The most obvious function is that of inspiration, motivation and mobilisation. By learning from others what is possible, climate change managers get motivated and inspired for own adapted projects. Moreover Best Practices are very important for climate change managers as an argumentation aid towards their political leaders.	<i>"Many proposals for climate actions are often dismissed as nonsense, but if I am able to argue that a similar project is already implemented successfully in a similar city, I can show that it works."</i> (Interview 5, 2015)
Currency	Several interviewees described Best Practices as the "currency" of municipalities. Local authorities cannot earn money by creating innovative and effective "products", but by receiving the label Best Practice for some of their actions they get recognition and visibility and can enter new political arena and access funding more easily.	<i>"Best Practices are a bit like our alternative currency – well – like the recognition we do not receive otherwise".</i> (Interview 7, 2015)
Legitimation	Many interviewees described the Best Practice approach as a specific style of working in local climate action – either enacted by themselves or by external consultants. In this sense Best Practices often serve as a tool for reporting, monitoring and controlling in local climate action.	<i>"According to my own experiences Best Practices are a means to accelerate the work or to get any result – just to do something. If you have a project then you include in the report a Best Practice chapter and then it's fine."</i> (Interview 7, 2015)
Agenda-Setting	Best Practices serve as tool for agenda-setting and lobbying. This is especially important for pioneer cities and city networks that spread through Best Practices their ideas and visions of what means good climate protection to them.	<i>"Strategic Pillar: Gain political support by the Federal State as a Best Practice City. Political influence on state decisions can earn especially such municipalities that are active themselves and that can showcase good examples in local climate action."</i> (ifeu 2014: 121)

5 Making the Transition Happen through Best Practices?

Bulkeley (2006: 1030) again underlines “that the dissemination of best practice can lead to policy change has become an accepted wisdom within national policies and programmes, as well as in international arenas and networks”. The original logic behind the best practice approach is to accelerate the transition to a low-carbon society by transferring solutions that proved to be successful in a certain location to as many other places as possible. It is argued that it is not necessary to reinvent the wheel, because the technology and adequate solutions are already in the market and are working. They only need to be up-scaled and diffused broadly. By saving personal and financial resources the transition becomes more efficient and less expensive. But the research showed that best practices are neither very mobile – contrarily they are identified as to be sticky or place-bound – nor do they contribute to significant renewal or transformation of structures, processes or technologies. An interviewee (Interview 16, 2015) states more precisely:

“Well, I think you have certain standards and best practice examples are chosen in such a way that they come as close as possible to these standards. I do not think that best practices have such an impact that they can significantly influence or shape these standards; they are not strong enough. You always try to come close with your examples to existing standards. [...] Therefore I am not convinced that the impact of best practice exchange is as high as we might desire.”

According to Vettoretto (2009: 1070) the popularity of best practices has complex roots and reasons. Firstly, this mode of governing can provide answers to the uncertainties of climate change. Such radical uncertainty demands for cognitive, symbolic as well as material resources. Secondly, this particular mode of governing even stays operational in the complex multi-level climate governance system, because it does not question existing political and economic structures. Since a pluralist and non-hierarchical policy-making situation like climate governance requires consensual soft regulation and planning. Another reason is the variety of divergent policy frames for politically sensitive issues like climate change and the increasingly widespread acknowledgement of the significance of contextual and experiential knowledge in policymaking. Fourthly, best practices are often used as strategic and symbolic resources for local strategies of political legitimization, fundraising and place-marketing. Last but not least best practices are a means for comparison and evaluation in times of a wide variety of experiences associated with the many governmental rationalities and the will to find some shared principles for more coherent policy-making. Veselý (2011: 113) can add to these explanations:

*“First, “good practice” exemplars often do not solve things systemically. **They represent an incremental and conservative way of policy making.** They are useful wherever systemic and complex solutions are impossible (for example, politically unfeasible). However, problems sometimes need to be addressed in a very complex way. **Exemplars of good practice are always good within a given system.** But what if the entire system at hand is*

designed suboptimally or in conflict with the principle of social justice?" (own accentuations).

A by-product of the creation and dissemination of specific measures labelled as best practice, aiming at raising efficiency and acceleration of the transition process, is the retrenchment of (political) discussions because "best" or "good" practices are usually taken for granted and are perceived as good in themselves. As a result of this kind of de-politisation best practices can become unquestioned. This can also lead to the fact that reasonable developments and innovations do not occur and instead establish compromise solutions (Moore 2013; Veselý 2011).

In conclusion, best practices combine some paradoxical characteristics in themselves. On the one hand best practices clearly show some transformative – or better mobilising – potentials as they are able to overcome (mental) barriers and show that also "visionary" solutions are already working in some places. But on the other hand best practices reveal also system-stabilising – or even reactionary – potentials as described above. Therefore, it should not be invested too much hope, time and money in the development and dissemination of best practices. Instead more emphasis should be placed on "classical" governing modes like self-governing, governing by authority or governing by provision where a lot of potential still can be unlocked. For sure many actions undertaken through these governing modes are informed by best practices but in the end:

"Best practices can only be thought-provoking impulses; we have developed everything else by ourselves. Sure we exchanged experiences with others, but I would say everything that originated here was grown entirely on our own soil!" (Interview 17, 2016)

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