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## Perspectives

How to cite:

Sturm, Cindy. "A Tale of Two Cities: Climate Policy in Münster and Dresden." In: "Green City: Explorations and Visions of Urban Sustainability," edited by Simone M. Müller and Annika Mattissek, *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society* 2018, no. 1, 39–46. doi.org/10.5282/rcc/8465.

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Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN (print) 2190-5088  
ISSN (online) 2190-8087

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Cindy Sturm

## A Tale of Two Cities: Climate Policy in Münster and Dresden

### Introduction

Countries are rallying in the war against global climate change. The time for talk alone has passed, and we all seem to agree (for the most part) that something concrete needs to be done. But what action should be taken, and by whom? Increasingly, cities are becoming “engines of change,” as we find ourselves turning for answers to urban actors, such as planning agencies, city councils, and mayors. But what happens when different cities’ perceptions of climate issues differ? How do divergent understandings of climate change in different discursive settings affect the implementation of urban development policy?

The growing significance of climate policies for urban development has prompted the German government to set ambitious green city aims, most notably: saving primary energy, increasing the amount of renewable energy, and extending energy efficiency. Germany has established a number of instruments to guide the behavior of urban development decision makers and citizens in accordance with these aims. Laws and regulations (such as the German Renewable Energy Act) provide a framework for defining minimum climate policy standards. Guidelines (such as those for climate-efficient construction), financial incentives, and best-practice guides attempt to standardize the behavior of urban actors by presenting certain perspectives and actions as “right” and “desirable.”

Despite this national framework, urban actors across Germany have not taken uniform approaches to making and implementing climate policy. Using the case studies of Münster and Dresden, I show how different local and historical contexts affect the ways in which urban actors assess the relevance and priority of national climate aims when making climate policy. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s understanding of discourse, I analyze urban development documents, city council rulings, and interviews with decision makers and city administrators, in order to understand how certain perspectives on climate issues and decisions about the “right” urban development strategy become hegemonic, while others are sidelined.

### **Local Discourses, Local Practices**

How do rationalities and logics of thinking differ in local contexts? How do actors perceive their scope for action with regard to global climate change? And how do urban decision makers position themselves vis-à-vis different policy instruments in their attempts to meet national climate objectives?

A discourse-theoretical perspective can be extremely useful in addressing these questions, by helping us focus on social negotiation processes around climate change and foregrounding the conflicts and struggles that shape how actors approach this issue. Foucault understands discourses as systems of representations that produce a specific social imaginary and perspective on various issues—in the case looked at here, climate policy. In this sense, discourses are not just linguistic features; rather, they are “tightly intertwined with the notions of knowledge, power and truth” (Foucault 2001; McIlvenny, Zhukova Klausen, and Bang Lindegaard 2016, 10). Foucault goes on to argue that certain meanings become “hegemonic”—that is, they are generally regarded as “truth” and are (re)produced and consolidated at an institutional level—while other perspectives are marginalized. Consequently, particular ways of thinking can enable or hinder specific sets of practices. In Germany, for instance, it is widely acknowledged that human activities have influenced climate change—a perspective that legitimizes actions such as public spending on bicycle lanes or renewable energy plants. At the same time, such a line of thinking discourages other activities, like the building of coal-fired power plants or the development of land that would contribute to urban sprawl.

Importantly, discourses cannot be divorced from their particular contexts. This point is particularly salient when looking at the postwar histories of the two German cities whose climate policy is studied here. Münster’s location in North Rhine-Westphalia, which was a state of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) before German reunification in 1990, and Dresden’s in Saxony, formerly part of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), a Soviet satellite state, point to different historical trajectories. In the West German FRG, an engaged environmental movement began in the 1980s and continues to this day, while in the GDR, environmental politics did not play as large a role. Moreover, policymakers and citizens in Münster have been a part of a democratic system since the end of World War II, whereas—as interviews with politicians revealed—skepticism

towards current political structures can still be seen in large parts of the former GDR<sup>1</sup> (Rehberg, Kunz, and Schlinzig 2016, 32).

### **Polarized Attitudes in Münster and Dresden**

Comparing the discursive settings (such as city councils) of Münster and Dresden reveals some interesting observations: first, the number of energy and climate-change policy proposals in Münster is significantly higher than in Dresden; from 2009 to 2013, there were 42 submissions in Münster compared to 25 in Dresden. Second, political actors in Münster are more likely than their Dresden counterparts to approve proposals in accordance with national climate strategies. Several proposals have been approved unanimously in Münster, including requests for an urban nuclear-free energy supply, the construction of wind-energy plants within urban spaces, and participation in the European Energy Award, an international certification process for municipalities engaged in climate politics. In Dresden, however, urban development decision makers rejected these same proposals. As summed up by the head of Dresden's Environmental Agency, "There is no real political force seriously pushing these topics forward."<sup>2</sup>

Climate change mitigation and adaptation may be a part of urban development discourses in both Münster and Dresden, but interviews I conducted revealed that decision makers certainly do not value the relevance of these issues uniformly. In Dresden, although an energy- and climate-protection strategy ("Integriertes Energie- und Klimaschutzkonzept") has been in place since 2013, "the concept of climate protection has not made its way into the realm of urban development and planning."<sup>3</sup> Conversely, councilors across parliamentary groups in Münster emphasize that debates around energy and climate issues "are, of course, very well represented."<sup>4</sup> They assert that "there was not only awareness, but also the will to take initiative right from the outset."<sup>5</sup> In short, although climate issues "also belong to urban politics,"<sup>6</sup> they are not at the forefront in Dresden, while in Münster, addressing these topics is a matter of course.

1 Interview, SPD Dresden, 18 October 2016.

2 Interview, Environmental Center Dresden (Umweltzentrum) 1 December 2016.

3 Interview, Umweltzentrum, 18 October 2016.

4 Interview, FDP Münster (Free Democratic Party), 10 November 2016.

5 Interview, CDU Münster (Christian Democratic Party), 3 November 2016.

6 Interview, Environmental Agency Dresden (Umweltamt), 1 December 2016.

The German federal government has emphasized the importance of establishing municipal organizational structures to advance the implementation of energy and climate policy objectives (BMU 2012, 2; Deutsche Energie-Agentur 2011, 6). In Münster, a Climate and Energy Coordination Office (Klenko) has been in place for several years; it is responsible for planning, coordinating, and initiating energy and climate protection measures for the entire urban area. In Dresden, a Climate Protection Office (Klimaschutzbüro) does exist, but interviews with local decision makers indicate that it yields little influence on decisions related to local urban development policies. In fact, while this office is meant to be in charge of developing climate protection measures, it has thus far failed to implement its ideas within the city administration, or to translate ideas into political practices. The office was renamed “Climate Protection Staff” (Klimaschutzstab) in 2016. The rebranding has not yet resulted in practical changes, but it nonetheless points to ongoing shifts in policy prioritization.

### **Discourses and Decision Making**

These contrasting contexts and perspectives do not only influence the types of climate policy decisions that are enforced in each city. They also affect people’s views on the decision-making process: both the public’s perceptions on what the role of decision makers should be, but also the degree to which decision makers consider themselves able to act. In Dresden, perceptions of climate issues are heterogeneous. However, actors who have dominated municipal politics in the last few years seem to be of the opinion that “it is delusional to think that we could have a really significant impact on the climate.”<sup>7</sup> As a result, these actors also see themselves as having very little scope for action. In Münster, on the other hand, the image prevails of the “city as an engine” and a driving force that can provide “support and initiative” (Stadt Münster 2009, 9). The interviewees of all parliamentary groups perceive the commitment of a city towards climate policy as very important. Particularly in Münster, actors feel a sense of responsibility in terms of the financial stability of the city: “If we do not step up and say, ‘Come on, we can do it,’ who else will take the initiative?”<sup>8</sup> Urban documents often highlight the historical continuity of climate policy activities. As far as climate policy has been established as a political agenda since the 1990s, urban actors in Münster

7 Interview, CDU Dresden, 19 October 2016.

8 Interview, CDU Münster, 3 November 2016.

often emphasize the long tradition of political engagement with climate change, which has become part of the city's identity. This seems to compel continuous action and legitimize further measures (CDU Münster 2014; Stadt Münster 2009).

These divergent perceptions of responsibility and scope for action are also apparent in the ways in which urban actors position themselves with regard to different policy instruments. The German federal government emphasizes that a stronger engagement with climate protection beyond national laws and regulations is important. Although urban development actors in Dresden do adhere to these laws—such as when new houses are built—skeptical and distancing language dominates the discourse. Urban development actors more often highlight potential problems with federal policy than positive aspects. For instance, the CDU and FDP, who were in power at the municipal level until 2016, have called for a restrained and rather moderate implementation of energy and climate programs (CDU Dresden 2014, 6). They warn that the overambitious aims of the federal government “cannot just be forced through at will without running the risk of overstraining the market participants financially and mentally” (Landeshauptstadt Dresden 2013, 19). When urban decision makers discuss the implementation of climate measures in accordance with national strategies, they emphasize potential problems, such as the need for “extensive investments” and “a lot of time and money” (Landeshauptstadt Dresden 2013). The CDU and FDP have been especially vocal in calling for Dresden to follow its own path, which appears to include, for example, demands to stop rather than support the extension of renewable energy. By contrast, in Münster, additional policy instruments have been established at the local level, which actually go beyond national requirements. Decision makers have introduced local heat-insulation standards and a list of ecological construction criteria, which have been enforced by urban development agreements despite going against the interests of investors. They also participate in competitions and certification processes, which has made strong climate policymaking an important part of the city's image.

Additionally, the German federal government requires urban development decision makers to guide and motivate “their” civil society towards the “right” conduct and to strengthen “general acceptance towards the need to adapt to climate change” (BMVBS 2010, 8). People in Dresden perceive such ambitions negatively, however. Here, the extent of urban development actors' attempts to guide their citizens to take up further climate-friendly measures is the distribution of information brochures. Instead, deci-

sion makers in Dresden prioritize protecting citizens' general freedom of choice: "[W]e shouldn't control the citizens so excessively . . . when there is no need for it."<sup>9</sup> In Münster, on the other hand, actors believe that real improvement in terms of climate protection necessitates "action from the whole population of Münster" (see, e.g., Stadt Münster 2009).

## Conclusion

These brief insights into the different discourses and practices related to the implementation of climate policies in Münster and Dresden reveal two important aspects. First, climate policy discourses cannot be divorced from their particular contexts. Although federal laws and guidelines provide a framework for policymaking, local and historical forces shape how actors in different cities perceive and take action against climate change.

Second, perceptions regarding climate policies and the role of urban development actors create a specific scope for action, which influences how ideas and policies are implemented. In other words: "Just as a discourse 'rules in' certain ways of talking about a topic, defining an acceptable and intelligible way to talk, write, or conduct oneself, so also, by definition, it 'rules out,' limits and restricts other ways of talking, of conducting ourselves" (Hall 2006, 72).

Climate policymaking in Dresden and Münster demonstrates the interplay between discourses and practices. Decision makers in Dresden see their scope for action as very limited with regard to global climate protection, and assess national objectives as well as instruments for the implementation of climate policies as "overly ambitious" or "dirigiste." They therefore ascribe neither high significance nor priority to the political realm of "climate" compared to other issues within urban development politics. This is apparent, for example, by the limited institutional basis for climate issues in Dresden. Münster, by contrast, is characterized by long-standing environmental activities and has established a wide spectrum of local instruments to embed climate policies within urban development politics. At the same time, urban development actors in Münster use the successful results of competitions and certification processes to enhance the image of the city.

9 Interview, CDU Dresden, 19 October 2016.

The examples of Dresden and Münster illustrate that climate policies are not just directly transposed into implementation; rather, they are renegotiated, altered, and sometimes even rejected. A discourse-theoretical perspective sheds light on how different notions and perspectives are produced with regard to climate change, the role of urban development actors, and ways of dealing with policy instruments. It thus points to the contested and contradictory nature of climate policy aims.

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