



Impulse

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Building cities for people The role and responsibility of cities in social-ecological transformations

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Policy Paper of Managerkreis of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the Department for Economic and Social Policy

Introduction

Global peace, freedom, and prosperity depend increasingly on respecting ecological limits. Our planet is heading into a climate catastrophe, but not everyone is affected equally. Political decision-makers must consider the social dimensions of every ecological transformation, to avoid exacerbating inequalities and prevent social unrest. Their high population density and their ability to address the effects on the ground make cities vital actors in the global fight against climate change. What roles do cities play in the social-ecological transformation, what vision do they share?

The Building Cities for People laboratory set out to answer this question. The laboratory was conducted within the broader framework of the Global Green Deal forum, which was held on 1 October 2020 and organised by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the German Trade Union Federation (DGB), the Climate

Alliance Germany, and the Olof Palme International Center.¹ Dagmar Köhler, German Institute of Urban Affairs, chaired the session.² Dr Éloi Laurent, Senior Research Fellow at Science Po Centre for Economic Research³, and Prof. Dr Elisabeth Merk, City of Munich's Planning Director⁴, joined the discussion as expert contributors.

Social-ecological policies: The prerequisite for fighting climate change

"For sustainable transformations, you need to acknowledge that in each environmental challenge there is a social question. The policy of the twenty-first century is socio-ecological. We need to combine social aspects with ecological aspects. Otherwise, we won't be able to do environmental policy. If you are blind to social issues, you will not be able to implement environmental policies. ...

We need a better understanding of sustainability and climate justice if we want to move forward with the sustainable transition. Justice and equality are the solutions to the ecological crisis.”

Dr Éloi Laurent

Considering the city from different angles enables us to understand how vulnerable groups are affected by architectural and regulatory frameworks. From a geographical perspective, a city is a dense and interconnected space where people live together and share infrastructures. The topic of mobility highlights inequalities: How affordable is public transportation, how well is the periphery connected to the centre? A city is a place of efficient economic agglomeration – which may be inefficient from a social or ecological point of view. The sociological perspective defines the city as a place of social cooperation. To what extent does it provide areas for social interaction between groups, such as parks?

Lastly, a city can be considered in terms of sustainability, as a vulnerable place that is subject to shocks as well as a space that impacts its environment, both on a local and global scale. For instance, air and noise pollution tend to be worst in areas where incomes are lower. The perspectives outlined above show that policies always have social effects. The question is not whether policies influence inequality, but whether they increase or decrease it.

The Yellow Vests protests – triggered by rising energy prices – were the first socio-ecological revolts in French history. In France, millions of people use fossil fuels to satisfy basic necessities, such as heating their homes or for their daily commute. To disincentivise the use of fossil fuels, the national government increased the federal carbon tax from €44/tonne to €55/tonne without any form of compensation based on income or location.

While the demands of the Yellow Vests movement have evolved over time, it essentially – and correctly – insisted that a carbon tax without social compensation would increase social inequalities. Notably, a socially progressive carbon tax would have been possible. A proposal intended to reduce social inequalities by using the carbon tax for social redistribution measures was considered in 2009, but ultimately rejected by the French Constitutional Council.

Radical shifts to social ecology: Paris since the 2000s

Social-ecological policy is gaining momentum at the municipal level in France. Candidates running on social-ecological platforms have scored significant victories in Bordeaux, Grenoble, Marseille, Paris and Strasbourg. Paris in particular has become a flagship of the possibilities of social-ecological transition. This is especially remarkable because the city had no government of its own until the late 1970s and environmental issues were sidestepped until the twenty-first century. In the 2000s Paris made a radical ecological turn, concentrating in particular on air pollution.

Anne Hidalgo, mayor of Paris since 2014 and reelected in 2020, implemented ambitious plans to improve the city's air quality, increasing the proportion of days with high air quality from 45 percent to 75 percent. Now she is pursuing a massive cycling infrastructure project, *Plan Vélo*. Implementation is proceeding unexpectedly quickly after the city effected short-term measures to encourage cycling during the Covid-19 pandemic to prevent the spread of the virus. Combined with a public transport strike, this significantly accelerated the shift to a climate-friendlier city. The 60 percent increase in bicycle purchases in Paris is an indicator of the project's strong public support.

Hidalgo aims to safeguard social equity during the city's sustainable transformation. Various forms of financial assistance are available for switching from diesel to an electric car or buying an electric bike. Three years ago, Paris adopted its first-ever environmental health plan, which includes definitions of environmental justice and inequality. Hidalgo's *Plan Vélo* and other measures positively impact air quality, mobility, environmental health and environmental justice in the city.

A brief aside: Older people, heatwaves and housing

The social isolation of older people is a significant problem faced by all European cities, and exacerbated by their disproportionate vulnerability to ecological shocks. The people worst affected by heatwaves (and most likely to die) are socially isolated older individuals. Seventy thousand people died in Europe during the August 2003 heatwave. The death toll in France was fifteen thousand, 90 percent of whom were aged 65 or older. Both France and Germany broke historical temperature records in 2019, and the French meteorological institute predicts that heatwaves will increase in frequency and intensity. The question facing cities is how to protect older people. French municipalities are required to set up systems to contact and warn older people when a certain heat threshold is crossed, but research shows they are not yet functioning optimally. The main prob-

lems are a lack of registrations, and failure to contact those registered when a heatwave occurs.

“Perspective Munich” as integrated master plan

“We need a movement for social justice. Like water, land must be a common good that cannot be given to the free market.”

Prof. Dr. Elisabeth Merk

Munich has instituted measures to promote long-term social integration of older people and prevent isolation. It was one of the first cities in Germany to establish a social land policy (1990) and affordable housing policies. Since 2019 the city of Munich has been governed by a coalition of social democrats and greens. The ‘Perspektive München’ is an integrated master plan designed to create synergies between land resources, economic development, mobility and environmental issues, social justice, local quality of life, and climate change. For example, the city government is currently working on a new policy that requires 50 percent of the land to be publicly owned to ensure that all social groups, including older people, have access to housing across Munich. The city also contracts building companies to provide affordable housing and runs programmes that assist older people in need of daily care or support to remain in their home or neighbourhood.

Though German federalism has many advantages, it can also hinder social-ecological transitions. For example, climate issues involving transport and commuting between states can only be resolved can only be resolved jointly by the states and the national level. Another problem, which requires government intervention, is the increasing gentrification in Germany’s largest cities. Ecological policies such as traffic-calming are set out to benefit the most vulnerable, but making a neighbourhood quieter increases its property values and accelerates gentrification processes.

Munich’s social land policy (Sozialgerechte Bodennutzung, So-bon) has been counteracting gentrification since the 1990s. For instance, every area currently under (re)development must dedicate 30 to 40 percent of the space for affordable housing. As former Munich mayor Dr. Hans-Jochen Vogel pointed out fifty years ago, and reiterated in 2019, the ongoing challenges of gentrification require the federal government to provide substantially more support to the states.

Citizen participation in transformation processes

Gathering opinions and preferences from city residents is vital as interests vary according to the different contexts residents are living in. The significant differences become apparent if we compare Munich’s population with the participants in the ‘Building Cities for People’ laboratory. During the event the participants were asked in a short poll what made their city worth living in. While none of the participants said that having sufficient parking spaces was important (see Annex), this is in fact a highly contentious political and public issue in in Munich’s city council and the city’s districts. Politicians who propose reducing the number of parking spaces risk a serious backlash.

Elections are general in nature and cannot assess public preferences concerning urban development as specifically as surveys can. Cities sometimes initiate in-depth studies asking what citizens want from their city (Geneva being one example), but most city governments do not conduct regular surveys. The mayor of Paris currently outsources surveys to consultancies operating with sample sizes of not more than one thousand and focussing on single issues such as waste or water management. Dr. Laurent pointed out that such issue-specific surveys can be politically motivated, aiming to advance or hinder particular developments.

Some of the largest urban wellbeing surveys – including the Mercer Quality of Living Index and the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Quality of Life Index– are based on a methodology which does not consider the interests of the city’s residents, e.g. the attractiveness of the city is measured by its appeal to investors and tourists. Laurent underlined that cities need to conduct surveys based on the concerns of their residents in order to understand urban priorities and tap policymaking synergies. Advancing digitalisation makes large, frequent public surveys feasible.

Two surveys: cities worth living in and successful participation processes

How can we ensure that citizens’ interests and concerns are represented in city-planning processes? The second poll in the Building Cities for People laboratory asked: “Which factors for successful participation and planning processes should be given more attention?” Three of the four top responses related to the common good, transparency, and targeted participation. On the top of the list is **defining the common good** and use it as a mission statement. The political will of those responsible seems to be central. Furthermore, the participants opted for **transparent participation processes with external**

process management as well as **early targeted participation**.

The City of Munich recognises that public participation in sustainable transformation processes is vital for the neighbourhoods and for democracy itself. Prof. Dr. Merck noted that citizen surveys are conducted regularly in the various city districts. Neighbourhood walks are also organised, where local officials show residents potential areas of improvement and listen to their concerns.

When asked “What makes a city worth living in?” most of the participants named **nearby shops, medical care and schools**. Next on the list are **attractive public spaces and parks**. Aesthetics, architecture, design, and high-quality materials matter. Architects must be involved in decision-making processes to support the construction of attractive, liveable cities. Studies from various Munich districts show that their citizens prefer structures from the 1970s because of the many green spaces, social infrastructure and well-organised transport.

In Munich, there are strong synergies between mobility concepts such as the extension of pedestrian zones, new bicycle lanes and green infrastructure. Munich’s redevelopment areas in the city centre and its housing projects focus on green energy, energy justice, mobility changes, and the quality of public space. One very good example is the ecological Prinz-Eugen-Kaserne development with 600 apartments. It was built by the municipal government using timber as the main construction material and employs renewable energy in the buildings. The project is a cooperative, promoting an interactive, socially integrated neighbourhood with a social management component.

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- 1 The Building Cities for People laboratory was organised by Marei John-Ohnesorg, executive director of the Managerkreis, Mareike Le Pelley, Division for Economic and Social Policy (both Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung).
 - 2 Dagmar Köhler is head of the Local Mobility team and the Bicycle Academy in the Research Field Mobility at the German Institute of Urban Affairs (difu). She is an expert in European transport policy and international networking of cities and regions.
 - 3 Dr. Éloi Laurent’s current work concentrates on the relationship between sustainability and wellbeing, focusing on the sustainability-justice nexus. He is a senior research fellow at OFCE (Sciences Po Centre for Economic Research, Paris), a professor at the School of Management and Innovation at Sciences Po and at Pontois ParisTech and a visiting professor at Stanford University (Paris and Stanford).
 - 4 Prof. Dr. Elisabeth Merk has served as the City of Munich’s Planning Director since 2007, has been the President of the German Academy for Urban Construction and Regional Planning (DASL) since 2015, and in 2020 received an honorary professorship at the Technical University of Munich (TUM).

Annex

Survey questions

Question 1: What makes my city worth living in?

shops, medical care, schools nearby	90 % (19/21)
attractive public spaces and parks	81 % (17/21)
affordable housing	67 % (14/21)
bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly	52 % (11/21)
low air and noise pollution	43 % (9/21)
community rooms and sports facilities	33 % (7/21)
enough parking spaces	0 % (0/21)

Source: Survey 1 in laboratory.

Question 2: Which factors for successful participation and planning processes should get more attention?

common good defined and used as a mission statement	73 % (16/22)
political will of those responsible	68 % (15/22)
early targeted participation	64 % (14/22)
transparent process with external process management	64 % (14/22)
Motivated and competent administration	50 % (11/22)
Clarification and balance of interests	50 % (11/22)
digital participation platforms	23 % (5/22)

Source: Survey 2 in the laboratory.

Further literature in German

Kommunen und sozial-ökologische Wende, Dr. Éloi Laurent, Wirtschaftswissenschaftler, Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris und University of Stanford), <https://www.fes.de>

Mobilitätsdienstleistungen gestalten. Beschäftigung, Verteilungsgerechtigkeit, Zugangschancen sichern, WISO Diskurs, <https://www.fes.de>

Sozialdemokratische Verkehrspolitik - Gestalten, Entscheiden, Umsetzen, WISO Direkt, <https://www.fes.de>

Städte für Menschen bauen - Best Practice Beispiele aus Deutschland und Europa, Impulspapier Managerkreis und WISO, <https://www.fes.de>

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The video of the laboratory 'Building Cities for People' is available here in the original English version:
<https://www.fes.de/en/global-green-deals/articles/building-people-centered-cities>

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