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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Just transition in the post-pandemic city

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ABSTRACT

This paper asks how the pandemic has affected climate governance, with a specific focus on just transition in cities. We respond to Westman and Castán Broto's (2021) challenge that three assumptions are frequently reproduced in the urban climate governance literature and ask: (1) Are social justice and environmental sustainability separated? (2) Does a sectoral perspective on cities constrain conceptions of climate justice? and (3) Is there action rather than just plans? We address these questions by studying three cities in the South West of England (Bristol, Bath, and Exeter) that have expressed aspirations for rapid and just transition to net zero. There are promising signs of climate action, although the pandemic slowed it down somewhat. Climate justice is not sufficiently embedded in plans or actions. Commitment to just transition is present but partial and often unspecified. Social justice and ecological sustainability are too often treated as separate goals, more likely to come into conflict with each other, than addressed jointly. Too much climate work in cities takes place in silos around energy and transport but separate from other sectors. There is a notable failure to engage with civil society for a just transition. We conclude that for cities to truly implement a just transition, better engagement with grassroots actors from across sectors and parts of society is necessary. The development of tools which support cities to analyse the complex interplay of distributional, recognitional, participatory and restorative aspects of justice could be an important part of delivering this change.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic spurred calls for a "Green Recovery", with national and international political bodies aspiring to "Build Back Better" and putting together plans that bridged the need for a recovery from the global health crisis with the need to address the climate emergency (EC 2020; HM Treasury 2021; UNEP 2021; World Bank, 2021). Researchers from across the social sciences were quick to identify the potential impact that this "double response" had for climate governance (Moglia et al. 2021; Pelling et al. 2021; Ruszczyk, Castán Broto, and McFarlane 2022). Much of the public and academic debate has focused particularly on the potential impact of the pandemic on urban climate governance and the way that "compound urban crises" can catalyse beneficial

interventions across multiple areas (Westman et al. 2022). These early public and academic debates evidence a hope that the pandemic represented an opportunity to reinvigorate urban climate governance to be more radical, inclusive and just (Macedo et al. 2021). Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic, in all its devastation, brought opportunities for positive change. The ready acceptance of radically different lifestyles expanded the horizon of those focused on engaging citizens in necessary transitions. In turn, the way that civil society quickly responded to emerging needs through collective organising filled voids left by the state and showed the potential for transformative agency of citizen action. The pandemic also witnessed national and international attempts to combine the need to recover economically and socially from the pandemic with the need to transform economies and societies towards ecological sustainability (HM Treasury 2021; World Bank, 2021). There was, in other words, a sense in many quarters that the pandemic presented an opportunity not only to transition to a more sustainable society, but to do so in a way that was more just.

The focus on a just transition in post-pandemic cities is the particular conjecture that this study explores. Specifically, the paper asks how the pandemic has affected urban climate governance, and whether approaches to just transitions have changed. In taking a justice-focused approach to urban climate governance, we draw on Westman and Castán Broto's (2021) reflections on three assumptions that are frequently reproduced in the climate governance literature with regard to climate justice in cities and ask: (1) Are social justice and environmental sustainability separated?; (2) does a sectoral perspective on cities constrain conceptions of climate justice?; and (3) is there action rather than merely plans and objectives? We address these questions by looking at three cities in the South West of England (Bristol, Bath, and Exeter) that have all expressed aspirations for a more just climate governance. This approach helps us to capture both a local and a regional scale of climate governance and is in line with calls in academic scholarship to attend to extended case studies that provide empirical evidence for theoretical questions (Westman et al. 2022).

The paper employs three research methods: A narrative analysis of key city strategic documents; a workshop with local government and civil society actors from across the three cities; and semi-structured interviews with policymakers and civil servants from each city. Our findings suggest that the initial hope of a reinvigorated just and inclusive urban climate governance has faded as cities have encountered new challenges in a post-pandemic context. Whilst city governments to some extent maintain their commitment to a just transition, this is often hampered by a limited and fragmented understanding of climate justice. Additionally, renewed pressure on local governments to deliver against challenging net zero targets emphasises the delivery of projects rapidly and at scale, with limited resources and capabilities, constraining the ability of cities to incorporate just transition perspectives.

The integration of justice and inclusion considerations into urban climate action was further hampered by a lack of opportunities for civil society groups to feed into local and regional climate governance in a meaningful way. Many civil society actors played a central role in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and supporting marginalised groups. The lack of integration of these groups into climate governance post-pandemic has been a missed opportunity and a failure to harness what could be a critical catalyst for a just transition. We conclude that for cities to truly implement a just transition, better engagement with grassroot actors from across sectors and parts of society is necessary.

Green recovery and urban climate governance

There is a long-standing interest across the social sciences in the potential of disasters and crises of various forms to spur on societal and political transformations. Daniel Nohrstedt (2022) has categorised approaches to this relationship as prescriptive, descriptive, and explanatory. The focus of the explanatory approach has been to see whether disasters cause transformations and has largely found no such causality (Nohrstedt et al. 2021). The prescriptive approach sees disasters and crises as opportunities to address the underlying issues, such as marginalisation and inequality,

that make the fallout from disasters so devastating (Thomalla et al. 2018). Many of the hopeful accounts about how the COVID-19 pandemic could transform societies for the better fall into this category. This prescriptive approach sees transformations as good and necessary. Meanwhile, the descriptive approach does not see transformations as necessarily preferable, but as one possible outcome that can be both good and bad. Much of the policy studies literature, such as the Multiple Streams Framework and punctuated equilibrium theories, frames crises as providing a window for policy entrepreneurs to achieve their goals. The political economy literature on crises goes deeper in exploring how disasters and crises are used by social and political forces to achieve previously unthinkable reforms (Hall 1993). A key takeaway from this literature has been that neoliberalism has thrived in conditions of crisis and disaster (Klein 2007; Mirowski 2013). However, the further entrenchment of inequality and unjust power relations that neoliberalisation often entails is not seen as an obvious or destined outcome of crises and disasters. Instead, drawing on Gramsci's concept of "organic crisis", others emphasise crises as times of opportunities for counter-hegemonic power struggles (Gill 2016). This paper falls somewhere between the prescriptive and descriptive approaches, seeing the pandemic as an opportunity for positive change whilst simultaneously exploring the extent to which such change has taken place.

With the COVID-19 pandemic unfolding primarily in urban centres (UN 2020), there was a hope that recovery strategies would also provide an opportunity to radically transform urban livelihoods, while attending to social inequalities. This is in line with the idea that urban settlements must be seen "as turnstiles in global challenges and key contexts for multi-level governance" (Acuto et al. 2020, 977). Calls for a "green recovery" that prioritise urban resilience and sustainability emphasised the need to approach the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate emergency as a twin challenge (Boyle et al. 2021), enabling the transformation of urban governance towards a more "anticipatory, reflexive, flexible and sustainable" (Moglia et al. 2021, 2) direction. Based on a scoping review of the literature, Moglia et al. (2021) set out missions and pathways to increasing urban sustainability and resilience and identify the need to develop more place-sensitive policy, as well as multi-level and coordinated governance approaches, as central to developing and delivering these missions. This emphasis on a locally-led green recovery is echoed by the ADEPT (2021) coalition of local government and NGOs, which called for Government to focus on accelerating climate action and a green recovery from coronavirus at the local level through empowering local authorities to work with communities and businesses to deliver at scale via national leadership, policies, powers and funding.

After the shock of the pandemic to cities around the world, most urban centres have now entered a post-pandemic era. It is increasingly clear that this post-pandemic era is rather different from the pre-pandemic era (as predicted by Kleinman 2020). Working from home has become a new normal for many and this is changing social and economic life in cities in ways that are as yet unclear. Cities, it seems, are not going back to normal. Tentatively, the pandemic prompted many to reconsider their relationship with place, from private homes to local community, prompting a dialectic of emplacement-displacement, which changed their sense of locality (Devine-Wright et al. 2020). In some cases this dialectical tension between access and exclusion was unevenly experienced, resulting in the amplification of existing inequalities. Recognising the unequal impacts of the pandemic across communities, Mattar et al. (2021) argue that policymakers need to integrate the principles of climate justice into recovery strategies. The COVID-19 recovery strategies set out by governments and international organisations were all underpinned by the idea that GDP growth is the precondition for promoting environmental protection. Apart from the fact that GDP growth and ecological sustainability are seen as incompatible in much of the literature (Hickel and Kallis 2020), a focus on growth also runs the risk of reproducing the social and racial inequalities prevalent in contemporary capitalist cities and societies. It is likely, therefore, that an actual green recovery would require a departure from established practices that aim to simply address the recession economically and rather favouring an integrated approach that takes greater account of justice (Guerriero, Haines, and Pagano 2020).

Recent scholarship on urban governance and climate change recognises the broader connection to social justice and warns against "holding too narrow a view of the agents, entities, sites, and dynamics through which climate urbanism is being pursued" (Bulkeley 2021, 279). Considerations of social justice therefore require us to question not only whose voices are included in climate governance, but also what the negative consequences of climate policies might be and who they affect. Considering the role of social equity in urban planning, and drawing on the urban climate justice literature (Bulkeley, Edwards, and Fuller 2014) and broader literature on environmental justice (Schlosberg 2007), Meerow, Pajouhesh, and Miller (2019, 796) propose a tripartite account of social equity that includes "distributional, recognitional and procedural equity dimensions". Such an account indicates ensuring that the foundations of equitable approaches to distributing responsibility for mitigation and support for adaptation are a recognition of different needs and equitable participation in policymaking. Inclusive climate governance can therefore be seen as a requisite for a just transition to net zero. Inclusivity, or procedural equity, is not enough on its own, but needs to be accompanied by recognition and actual equitable outcomes. McCauley and Heffron (2018) also bring in the dimension of restorative justice, focusing on the need to compensate groups affected by both climate change and mitigation efforts.

In other words, while the role of cities in addressing climate change is now broadly recognised, recent scholarship has increasingly focused on climate justice within urban climate governance. In 2017, Vanesa Castán Broto (2017, 35) stated that "the idea that a low carbon, climate resilient city should also be a just one may be the greatest contribution of urban governance debates to the politics of climate change". More recently, Linda Westman and Vanesa Castán Broto (2021) have specifically set out three assumptions that frequently underpin scholarship on just urban climate governance and that pose a challenge to research in this area .[1] The first assumption concerns "an imagined separation between social and environmental wellbeing" (537). The inseparability of social justice and environmental sustainability lies at the core of the very concept of climate justice, as evidenced by the struggles of social movements that articulate demands for environmental and climate justice (Chatterton, Featherstone, and Routledge 2013; Schlosberg and Collins 2014). The second assumption refers to the idea that the challenges of urban climate governance can or should be addressed through sector-based interventions . As the authors note, "a sectoral perspective alone is not sufficient to address climate justice in the city" (538) and indeed can have depoliticising effects, removing agency from many collective actors in the city. Lastly, Westman and Castán Broto observe a tendency in scholarship and practice to focus on climate objectives rather than "climate action in practice" (539). The danger of this is that focusing on plans and intentions distracts from the work actually being done in cities; not just by local authorities, but also by grassroots organisations. We see these three assumptions as cardinal challenges, not just for the research of urban climate justice, but also for its practice. In this paper, we therefore use them as a lens to explore how climate governance in our three cities has been shaped by the pandemic and what this means for just urban climate governance.

Studying post-Pandemic climate governance

To understand the constitutive elements of urban climate governance in the South West of England during and immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic, we collated and analysed three different datasets in relation to the three cities studied: strategic documents published by the local authorities during 2020-21; data collected during a workshop with local government and civil society actors in September 2021; and semi-structured interviews with local policymakers and civil officers in early 2022. Ethical approval was obtained through the University of Bath.

Following an initial grey literature search, we conducted a qualitative analysis of local government-led recovery strategies and climate plans for each of the three cities: Bath One Shared Vision (BaNES District Council 2021b), Climate and Ecological Emergency Action Plan (BaNES District Council 2021a), Bristol Economic Renewal and Recovery Strategy (Bristol One City 2020b), Bristol One

City Climate Strategy (Bristol One City 2020a), Building Back Exeter Better (Exeter City Council 2020) and Net Zero Exeter 2030 Plan (Exeter City Futures 2020). The purpose of this analysis was to identify how the case for green recovery was made specifically in these three cities and how this relates to the assumptions of urban climate justice set out above. The documents cannot be read as directly comparable, since they respond to challenges emerging in cities of differing size, economic strength, governance contexts and pre-existing partnership arrangements. Nonetheless, they were all produced over an 18-month period during which local councils published plans in response to their declarations of climate emergency, closely followed by the pandemic and the imperative to set out actions for the renewal of local economies in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

The findings of the grey literature analysis informed the discussion in the workshop, which brought together activists, NGOs, civil servants and policy makers from across the region. During the workshop, participants were split into groups and took part in a World Café style format based on small group conversations on specific questions related to green recovery. We opened the workshop with a presentation of the themes identified arising from the grey literature review and invited participants to reflect on and discuss aspects of green recovery in their respective cities, and the extent to which the pandemic was initiating new approaches to climate action. After two rounds of conversations, there were harvest sessions whereby participants shared insights with the rest of the group. Participants were invited to record their thoughts on posters and post-it notes, and a member of the research team took detailed notes in each of the four groups.

Finally, we contacted key informants involved in climate governance from Bath, Bristol, and Exeter, and conducted interviews with two people from each city. Our interview participants were from local government and comprised a mix of officers and elected representatives. Building from the network established through our workshop, we included councillors and officers directly involved with climate policy. We held semi-structured interviews online between February and April 2022 and made full transcriptions of the audio recordings. We then analysed the interview transcripts and our notes from the workshop thematically, using the three assumptions set out by Westman and Castán Broto: sustainability and justice; sectoralism; and plans and actions. This served to identify local experience relevant to the themes of green recovery and transition to net zero within and across the cities. The next section presents the findings of the three research stages.

Just transition in the post-pandemic city

The first part in this section sets out how the three dimensions of just transition in urban climate governance are reflected in the six policy documents from the three cities of Bath, Bristol and Exeter. The following three parts are based on the interviews and the workshop, dealing in order with the three dimensions.

Plans for socially just and cross-sectoral urban climate governance

It is evident in the city plans that all three of the cities studied do, in part, respond to the challenges set out through the three dimensions. That is, taken holistically, each city's plans do reflect an acknowledgement that social justice and environmental sustainability are connected and ought to be addressed in tandem; Bristol and Exeter's plans are intentionally cross-sectoral whilst Bath's are less so. It is perhaps unsurprising that the kind of documents studied displayed less of a focus on actions than on ambitious aims and targets. In this respect, Exeter's Net Zero Plan stood out in having more detailed actions set out. Table 1 outlines the documents analysed and key themes in relation to the three dimensions.

Whilst the documents taken together do show some concern for connecting social justice and ecological sustainability, there was limited engagement with sustainability in the recovery plans. This raises the prospect of ecological sustainability being relatively side-lined in city efforts to focus on growing their economies. While all of the climate plans made reference to aspects of

Table 1. Key features of climate change and COVID-19 recovery plans in the three cities.

Document	Date	Key features	Are social justice and environmental sustainability separated?	Does a sectoral perspective on cities constrain conceptions of climate justice?	Is there action rather than merely plans and objectives?
Bath and NE Somerset Climate and Ecological Emergency Action Plan	Jan 2021 (updated)	— Carbon neutral by 2030 — Climate Emergency cabinet role	— Commitments made to engagement and inclusion but other climate justice dimensions not articulated	Sector-based structure with few links to climate justice articulated	Goal to extend affordable warmth grant to low income and vulnerable households
Bath One Shared Vision Covid recovery response	June 2021	— Consultation based on scenarios for the future of the area	— Highlights inequalities exposed by the pandemic — Identifies links between social, economic and environmental action as an area of weakness in need of strategic action	— Use of scenarios as a way of discussing the future cuts across functional sectors	Focus is on consultation not delivery
Bristol One City Climate Strategy	March 2020	— Carbon neutral by 2030 — Climate, Ecology, Waste, Energy cabinet role — Produced through Bristol One City multi-sector partnership	— Fairness, justice and inclusion prominent in overarching vision — Recognition of environmental costs from economic success and climate vulnerabilities	— Two-part structure creates the possibility for cross-sector "conditions for change" to be considered alongside delivery themes based on functional sectors	— Strategic plan does not identify detailed actions — Further action to be set out in delivery plans
Bristol Economic Renewal and Recovery Strategy	October 2020	One of a suite of Bristol One City strategies updated to include post-Covid recovery	— Strong links between pandemic impact and inequality, but not connected to sustainability	Structure is based on functional sectors. Each strategic priority is mapped against UN SDGs, enabling read across for justice issues.	Sets out strategic priorities rather than detailed actions
Net Zero Exeter 2030 Plan	June 2020	— Carbon neutral by 2030 — Net Zero 2030 cabinet role — Produced by multi-sector community interest company Exeter City Futures	— Justice, inclusion, inequality recognised in text — The conflict between growth and transition is raised in accounts of engagement exercises but not clearly reflected in action plans	Framework based on twelve goals under four themes	— Justice-oriented housing actions — Procurement practices and development funding linked to just transition — Clear timeline, actions for non-council actors
Building Exeter Back Better	Oct 2020	— Produced by Exeter City Council with council-led partnership Liveable Exeter	— Economic focus — Rhetoric of inclusion, health, wellbeing, sustainability — Justice, fairness, equality are less prominent	— Structured according to functional sectors — Developed by recovery groups drawn from across societal sectors	— Fuel poverty investment for council housing

climate justice, Bath's plan focussed on the idea of public engagement through "a comprehensive community engagement programme" with the aim of "enabling well-informed community dialogue and using input to inform ongoing action planning" (BaNES District Council 2021a, 1). Bristol and Exeter placed more emphasis on justice in their climate plans, making strong rhetorical commitments to "a collaborative, inclusive and citywide approach" (Bristol One City 2020a, 2) to make the transition to net zero fair and to a "just transition to a carbon-neutral future" (Exeter City Futures 2020, 13). Nonetheless, in both cases social and economic inequalities are mentioned as separate concerns; the green recovery and the transition to net zero are consequently presented as opportunities to "bridge" climate-related issues and the eradication of existing inequalities. This approach fails to acknowledge the fact that climate issues are in fact deeply related to the same systemic problems that are the basis of social inequality.

There was also an absence of a cross-sectoral approach in two of the recovery-related documents studied (Bath and Bristol). Whilst the rhetoric of a green recovery was widespread, the focus for city recovery plans was economic; the pandemic's role in exacerbating social and economic inequalities being prominently cited but infrequently linked to environmental issues. These links are stronger in the cities' climate plans, although often at the general level of overarching vision or introductory text. Some links between such statements and intended delivery could be traced where the plans included specific actions, but others did not carry the level of detail needed to identify the type of climate justice goals described elsewhere in the academic literature (Hess and McKane 2021). There are some references in climate plans to systemic challenges including the environmental costs of economic growth, which reflect wider conversations with activist groups including Fridays For Future in the plans' preparation, although their impact on specific actions is unclear.

The documents summarised here represent city responses to the global crises of climate emergency and the COVID-19 pandemic. Their heterogeneity reflects differences between the three cities and the levels of resource available within each council. Bristol was the first city in the UK to declare climate emergency in November 2018, with Bath following in March 2019 and Exeter in July 2019. Each city's climate emergency response was impacted by the pandemic in an immediate sense through the cancellation of launch events in Bath and Exeter and a re-orientation of the Bristol citizen's assembly from climate towards pandemic recovery.

Articulations of climate justice, and commitments to action on it in city plans, are then partial. We should note that climate action and COVID-19 recovery plans cannot be read as, and are not presented as, fixed or complete but are instead elements of ongoing processes. Further, our analysis is limited by the level of detail available in the plans and the scope of this study, which does not include an assessment of their delivery or effectiveness. The plans uniformly use sector-based structures as their organising logic however, raising the question of how this shapes the way they address climate justice and highlighting the point, acknowledged in some of the plans, that council-led responses will inevitably focus on the areas in which they can deliver and that other perspectives and actors are needed to achieve city-wide action. To a significant extent therefore, the prevailing sectoralism in urban climate governance is driven by the type of formal powers councils possess.

Taken together, the city plans show an awareness of climate justice issues. Unfortunately, these tend to fall away the more focus there is on pressing economic issues and the closer the documents get to setting out detailed plans. Just transition and climate justice, it seems, are easier to talk about than to put into action. The following three parts delve into how interview respondents and workshop participants engaged with the three dimensions of urban climate justice.

Sustainability and justice

The assumption that environmental and social justice can or should be pursued separately creates a distinct set of challenges for policymakers and decision makers committed to climate action. As Westman and Castán Broto (2021) observe, and despite its original formulation, very early on the

idea of sustainability became synonymous with economic and environmental outcomes, side-lining issues related to social equity.

Social justice and ecological sustainability were rarely brought together in the local government interviews, in contrast to the cross-sector workshop we held in September 2021. One interviewee reflected that their city was not very diverse, so climate justice issues were less of a concern there: "to be perfectly honest, you know X is not a particularly diverse population" (Int04). When justice did come up in interviews it was primarily around creating local jobs as part of green investments (Int05). An overarching theme that emerged during our workshop was that the pandemic exposed a lack of recognition of the concerns of the wider community in each respective city. Participants reflected that the voices of certain communities, particularly those most affected by the pandemic and climate change, are seldom recognised in public debates. A relevant example that emerged was that funding for electric vehicles and charging points primarily accrues benefits to the relatively wealthy who can buy an electric vehicle, but it is of little benefit to inner city residents who are exposed to the effects of congestion. Furthermore, some participants reflected that despite the existence of some collective decision-making processes, such as consultant-led reports and visioning, these can feel exclusionary.

The difficulty in engaging with a wide range of communities was further supported through the interviews. Although our interviewees reported that public consultation can be effective in engaging with citizens (Int01 and Int04), more than one described how the competitive allocation of government funding, alongside the short-termism that characterises policy planning and implementation, sometimes exposed practical limits to proper local consultation on aspects of green recovery and net zero. This was highlighted during the pandemic, when timescales for funding applications were tight and opportunities for public consultation limited; an example being the Liveable Neighbourhoods transport funding (Int03). These challenges were exacerbated for smaller councils with fewer capabilities to respond to funding calls. Council officers acknowledge that they do not have effective ways of reaching disengaged citizens or those beyond the "usual" suspects, namely groups and citizens who already care about climate change. This is an important point for climate governance, as it speaks directly to the inseparability of social and environmental issues and the challenge identified by Westman and Castán Broto.

A telling example that illustrates this separation is how economic growth is unproblematically presented in both green recovery and net zero plans as a necessary part of the transition to net zero, as well as of the eradication of social inequalities. As our workshop participants noted, "growth narratives" are inadequate for creating a sense of inclusion and inspiring hope. On the contrary, participants interrogated this unproblematic focus on economic growth, which they saw as creating the risk that private profit and industry will take over the green recovery and net zero agendas; whereas social benefits will remain undefined or side-lined. A more nuanced approach would clarify what growth means and to whom, and therefore who is recognised as a legitimate partner in the social dialogue and its outcomes.

Conversations at our workshop revealed a strong appetite for expanding cities' existing frameworks and practices of climate governance, to enable them to respond more directly to demands for climate justice. The four aspects of environmental justice discussed above (McCauley and Heffron 2018; Meerow, Pajouhesh, and Miller 2019) were particularly relevant in these discussions: recognitional (referring to the recognition of the concerns of all parts of the community), procedural (referring to the inclusion of a broad range of social constituents in adaptation, planning, and decision making), distributive (referring to the distribution of climate-induced harms within local communities), and restorative (referring to compensating groups and communities impacted by transitions to net zero).

The separation between social justice and environmental sustainability is woven into the language used by both scholars and practitioners, who advocate "strategic planning" as a way to bridge these seemingly separate concerns or those who warn of the potential negative impacts of pursuing environmental goals on social wellbeing. As Westman and Castán Broto (2021, 538) note, the language of "bridges" used when referring to social justice and environmental wellbeing

entails an imagined division which actually reproduces "a mode of thinking that brings us away from environmental justice". Indeed, in its very conception as a political demand put forward by activists, the idea of climate justice (as well as that of environmental justice) integrates environmental and social concerns as inseparable. A climate justice approach is not about "reconciling" competing environmental and social demands; on the contrary, climate justice by definition considers anthropogenic environmental harm in terms of its implications for social justice, focusing especially upon the effects of such harm on those already disadvantaged. Unless there is recognition across and engagement with wide and diverse constituents in urban areas, the transition to net zero risks being an exclusionary process that will deepen existing social and economic inequalities, despite the local authorities' best intentions.

Beyond sectoralism

The second assumption in the scholarship and practice of urban climate governance that Westman and Castán Broto (2021) critique is the tendency to take sectoral approaches rather than holistic cross-sector ones. Our interviews revealed some positive steps towards more cross-sectoral approaches, but also several obstacles and disconnects between the sectoral functioning of local authorities and more holistic views held amongst civil society actors.

Our interviewees expressed that the declarations of climate emergency did galvanise support for climate-focused activities across sectors. One highlighted a carbon plan designed to have broader application across sectors.

> So the idea is that the actions in the carbon plan are at quite strategic level and the idea is that any organisation can look at that plan and pick the activities that need to happen that are relevant to their area of influence, their operation and say, OK, we'll help with this bit … and put that in their own climate action plan, which is what the district councils are doing. (Int01)

A clear disconnect between the interviews and the workshop was nonetheless that local authorities tend to focus on the areas that they can influence most whereas civil society actors tend to take a broader approach. Much of local authorities' focus is on transport, energy, waste and housing; such a focus is of course logical since these sectors are responsible for a large proportion of cities' carbon emissions.

Yet it is notable that much broader understandings of a just transition emerged from the workshop, which convened local government alongside a wide range of civil society actors, than from the interviews, which only involved the former group. The most prominent example here is around care work. Taking place as pandemic public health measures were being lifted, the workshop emphasised the roles of many kinds of care work in the just and ecologically sustainable city of the future. The recent experience of practising care through local mutual aid groups was talked about as a building block for the future. The role of care in a future green society and economy is often highlighted by proponents of a Green New Deal (Pettifor 2019), Doughnut Economics (Raworth 2017), or Degrowth (Dengler and Lang 2022). This focus on restructuring the role and functioning of the economy and re-centring the role of care was absent from the interviews with elected councillors and local authority officers. Whilst both workshop participants and interviewees emphasised how the pandemic had entrenched existing inequalities, the green recovery and net zero strategies said little about alternative visions of the local economy that might achieve both net zero and address injustices.

An important aspect of sectoralism in urban climate governance is the ways in which citizens are engaged in climate work, and in what capacity. Each of the three councils we studied have actively sought to engage citizens in their climate plans. However, as one respondent states, it is often the same citizens that engage with climate-related consultations.

> We ran webinars as well during that consultation. We used to get about 80–100 people in each webinar. We ran webinars on each topic of the carbon plan. But I noticed it was the same 80–100 people turning up at each. I recognized all the faces, so it was largely the same sort of people. (Int01)

This indicates that climate and environment operate as a distinct sector in some ways; there are elected councillors with a climate brief, council officials working on climate (both of which constituted our respondents), and a set of local residents heavily engaged in climate and environment. One respondent (Int03) expressed that the job of being a council officer working on climate is quite thankless and that it has driven several people in the region out. As budgets are limited and the engaged citizens constantly expect more, there can be something of a negative echo-chamber.

Citizens' assemblies can be seen as one way of breaking out of this climate echo-chamber and involving types of citizens who do not normally partake in the debate. But the accounts given by our interviewees suggest the results of this novel form of engagement can be disappointing. Representatives from two of the three cities expressed that their respective citizens' assemblies generated little that was new or actionable. One reported that "parties were really worried that the assembly was going to be too extreme in what they came up with. But the report … is not particularly ground-breaking at all" (Int01). Another stated that "almost all the recommendations it produced, I could tell you what people are going to say needed to be done. Because we kind of already know that" (Int05). The assemblies did appear to highlight some justice elements of climate policy. Mitigation solutions that were based on changing citizen behaviour through costs and charges, such as congestion charging, were not supported unless viable travel alternatives were provided (Int01). However, this is still quite a negative expression of climate justice and a just transition as it is limited to how costs of mitigation can be more equitably distributed. In contrast, workshop participants engaged with climate justice in a more holistic way. They emphasised job creation through a just transition and put health, care and wellbeing at the centre of both mitigation and adaptation. Whilst energy and transport also figured in the conversations, they were not as central as they were in the interviews.

Westman and Castán Broto (2021) warn against the depoliticising effects of sectoralism and how it tends to remove agency from collective actors and empower external managers. Such depoliticisation can be seen in the major energy project in Bristol that two of the respondents addressed (Int05 and Int06). City Leap is a 20-year £1bn project of green energy infrastructure that is the cornerstone of Bristol's decarbonisation. It is however a public-private partnership with significant external funding being carried out by American Ameresco and Swedish Vattenfall. It will involve a large number of publicly employed staff moving over to the private partners. Whilst there are expectations of local job creation, there are already concerns that workers may need to be brought in from outside Bristol because the necessary skills are not immediately available locally (Int05). The project does have dedicated funds to deliver "social value", but what the social value will consist in is undefined. Getting the project off the ground is widely seen as a great achievement for the city (Int05 and Int06). The need for private finance is driven by the failure of central government to fund projects of this scale, a point made by several of our interviewees. From the perspective of a just transition and climate justice, however, it is less of a solution and more of a battle ground between, on the one hand, collective actors seeking high-quality local green jobs and greater power and influence of local workers and communities and, on the other hand, external managers and funders.

From plans to action

The third theme identified by Westman and Castán Broto (2021) relates to an emphasis on objectives and plans, rather than on actually delivering climate action. There are some clear steps towards actions in the cities studied, although it is likely that the pandemic served to slow these down rather than speed them up.

All three cities have been implementing actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to climate change for many years. However, a new phase of climate planning was evident in the context of net zero targets. This was described by interviewees as an intensive period of evidence gathering

and planning, with climate emergency declarations and ambitious 2030 net zero targets agreed shortly before the pandemic. This renewed emphasis on planning does not necessarily come at the expense of action. In addition to developing objectives and targets the cities had all developed new governance structures to support the delivery of net zero. This included allocating responsibility for net zero and/or climate emergency to a Cabinet member and developing a range of other net zero delivery and partnership boards. The plans, as described in the first part of this section, also contained a range of specific sector-based actions and sub-targets relating to, for example, renewable energy, energy efficiency retrofit, or active travel. Despite this there was wide acknowledgement from officers and Councillors that existing plans are not sufficient to meet 2030 net zero targets, and that this ambition-delivery gap had not yet been widely accepted by decision-makers.

Local authority officer interviewees particularly highlighted how climate emergency declarations had brought significant expectations of action, but that staffing and resourcing were struggling to keep up. Officers in two of the cities suggested that many councils "lost their sustainability resource in austerity back in 2010/2011" (Int01) and are struggling to recruit experienced delivery teams as "you've basically got every organisation trying to find renewable specialists, retrofitting specialists, people to lead climate programmes. There aren't enough people out there who've got any experience" (Int04).

In addition to a lack of capacity, workshop participants and interviewees indicated that the ability of local government to translate their climate ambitions into action is constrained by the complex and short-term structure of central government funding schemes. One interviewee described "22 different funding streams for local authorities to bid into" and how "BEIS [Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy] apologised" for the complexity (Int04). This was reinforced by another interviewee who suggested that "a lot of the time our policy ambition is curtailed by government" (Int01) and emphasised the competition-based nature of much funding. This echoes previous studies which have identified the centralised nature of UK governance as a barrier to greater local and devolved climate action (ADEPT 2021; Kuzemko and Britton 2020; UK100 2021).

In all three cities, there has been considerable positive action on climate, but workshop participants described localities as lacking the power to act on both climate and justice concerns. Local priorities are often forced to align with the national vision and are dependent on centrally allocated policy and funding, which is often short-term and project based.

This renewed emphasis on urgent action, together with fragmented funding and a lack of clear local government roles and responsibilities on climate (Tingey and Webb 2020), was resulting in a focus on individual projects and limiting the ability of local government to critically engage with the structural features and power dynamics which shape the impacts of decarbonisation across their cities.

Whilst climate change strategies in the three cities made some reference to equity and fairness this tended to be high level statements and not to be linked to delivery priorities or detailed analysis of justice dimensions. Overall, the city case studies revealed a lack of frameworks for cities to analyse how the costs and benefits of decarbonisation might be realised across their communities, or to analyse the complex interplay of distributional, recognitional, participatory, and restorative aspects of justice.

In relation to the impact of the pandemic on climate action, there was an initial strong narrative of green and inclusive recovery in city pandemic debates, but interviewees reported that ultimately the pandemic had actually slowed delivery on climate action as resources and personnel were (temporarily) reorientated to address the pandemic (Int01 and Int04). Aligned with this, workshop participants and interviewees indicated that their initial optimism that the pandemic, despite its many hardships, would provide leverage points to accelerate climate action and mainstream justice-based approaches to public policy, had faded. Even during the workshop, which took place during the pandemic in September 2021, there was a sense that the pandemic had "created an opportunity to reimagine how our communities could be … but the window is closing" (workshop attendee).

Workshop attendees and some of the interviewees expressed frustration at a perceived lack of concrete action to connect the lessons from the pandemic with a refreshed approach to climate change. In particular, this related to learning from the pandemic about how inequality was manifesting locally, engagement with communities to understand their aspirations post-pandemic, and capitalising on the third sector and community capacity that was mobilised during the pandemic. Whilst some forms of engagement were evident in the cities' climate plans, civil society actors indicated that this tended not to include the most vulnerable communities with "those not involved in the conversations most affected" (workshop attendee). In addition, while "voluntary and community sector organisations … were very much the first line of response during Covid" existing approaches to decarbonisation do not see "communities, community hub organisations as real leaders in the climate action in cities" (workshop attendee).

Conclusion

This study sought to explore whether the COVID-19 pandemic aided the pursuit of a just transition in cities. There were certainly signs that many actors internationally, nationally, and locally sought to use the pandemic as an opportunity to address the climate emergency and "to build back better". With the significant role of grassroot actors and community organisations in responding to the social and economic effects of the pandemic, there was reason to hope that a focus on climate action could also be a just and inclusive one. To enable this exploration we studied three cities in the South West of England; this incorporated analysing official city plans from 2020 and 2021, a stakeholder workshop in September 2021 and interviews with elected policymakers and council officers in spring 2022.

Despite significant optimism, in academic and policy literatures, that recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic could address both socio-economic inequalities and the climate emergency (e.g. Acuto et al. 2020; HM Treasury 2021; Mattar et al. 2021), our findings indicate that the pandemic actually slowed down urban climate action. All three cities struggled to match rhetorical ambition for a green recovery with meaningful action. Moving in to the "post-pandemic" period, there was some evidence that climate action was beginning to accelerate in the three cities, however climate justice was not well embedded in plans or delivery programmes. Although commitment to some aspects of a just transition was evident in most policy documents and in some interviews with policymakers, these are partial and often unspecified. Social justice and ecological sustainability are too often treated as separate goals that are more likely to come into conflict with each other than to be addressed jointly. In addition, much climate work in cities takes place in its own silo in relation to energy and transport but separate from other sectors, such as community development or social care. In this respect, care stands out as a principle that civil society and holistic approaches to just transition want to centre, but which does not currently enter the conversation in urban climate governance.

There is a lack of frameworks and tools to support city actors to understand and implement just transitions, partly resulting in high level commitments to climate justice but limited operationalisation or detailed analysis. In this regard, Westman and Castán Broto's (2021) framework of three assumptions that underpin climate justice in cities provided an effective means to assess the impact of the pandemic on just climate governance in the three cities, revealing limitations in how environmental and social wellbeing are conceived as co-constituted, an over-reliance on sectoral plans and a lack of justice-related actions. However our findings also revealed limited analysis of different forms of injustice and a lack of attention to different dimensions of justice. The creation of tools, frameworks and processes to support cities to consider the procedural, distributional, recognitional and restorative aspects of justice could therefore play an important role in integrating city-based approaches to environmental and social wellbeing.

The stakeholder workshop provided insight into a deeper understanding of climate justice and how to incorporate it into a just transition in cities in a way that citizens' assemblies and other

forms of public engagement have somewhat failed to do in the cities studied. This is not a coincidence. Workshop participants included activists and NGOs, as well as policymakers and civil servants. These were actors that work with questions of justice and care, and who are well connected to civil society in the cities. Although they are not all generally part of formal urban climate policy, grassroots organisations are often directly involved in informal public policy of a kind that has an evident role in any conception of a just transition (Berglund et al. 2022; Acuto et al. 2020; Levac et al. 2022). Incorporating (perhaps without co-opting) such actors in urban climate governance is likely to better enable cities to embark on a just transition. In doing so, cross-sectoral work that can include actors not automatically engaged with climate policy is essential. Striving for climate justice, after all, does not necessarily start or end with a focus on climate.

Note

1. Although this work originated as a response to an article by Hess and McKane (2021), the observations laid out by Westman and Castán Broto speak to the broader body of literature on just urban climate planning.

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