

The unlikely geographies of climate governance: what makes ‘left-behind’ areas lead?

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Abstract

This paper opens the panel on *“The ‘unlikely’ geography of climate leadership and innovation”* and presents comparative research on England and Germany. Research on local climate governance is dominated by the epistemologies of large cities and affluent areas, paying less attention to structurally disadvantaged and peripheral localities. This mirrors economic-geography narratives that depict ‘left-behind’ areas as politically regressive and institutionally deficient. However, there are economically disadvantaged places that—though often quiet or even ‘hidden’—sustain ambitious climate agendas. Knowledge about such areas is important for epistemic justice and can enable a new geographical imagination of where leadership and innovation can happen. This also matters for just transitions, since strategies forged under conditions of scarcity are inherently more transferable to other regions navigating decarbonisation under constraints than lessons derived from a handful of wealthy frontrunners.

Drawing on this, the paper reports findings from a comparative analysis of economically disadvantaged municipalities in Germany and local councils in England that lead nationally in climate action despite limited resources and, in many cases, climate scepticism. Even though local government systems in the UK and Germany differ in institutional and fiscal autonomy, our findings reveal convergent factors underpinning sustained leadership.

First, individual champions within local government or civil society play a decisive role in initiating anticipatory governance, mobilising resources (external and internal), and embedding climate priorities into self-sustaining organisational cultures. Second, the more compact administrative structures characteristic of smaller municipalities facilitate cross-sectoral coordination, enabling climate action to function as a central organising strategy rather than as a siloed policy domain. Third, pioneering municipalities frequently practice situational leadership, adapting climate strategies iteratively to shifting constraints, circumstances, and community needs. By aligning decarbonisation efforts with locally meaningful goals and forms of value creation, they make climate action both socially workable and locally acceptable.

Overall, the paper argues that these ‘unlikely pioneers’ are analytically revealing cases. They expose the governance mechanisms through which climate action can become durable despite constraints. Understanding such cases expands the conceptual and practical terrain of just and inclusive climate governance.

Keywords: Just transitions; left-behind places; unlikely pioneers; UK; Germany