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Policy brief: Slow Emergency but Urgent Action?

Exploring the impact of municipal climate emergency statements

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Slow Emergency but Urgent Action? Exploring the impact of municipal climate emergency statements

Snapshot



This study explores the global trend of cities declaring a climate emergency. To do so, it delves into the experiences in Sweden with climate emergency statements and if or how cities are adopting a "climate emergency mode".

Context

In the face of rapidly increasing climate challenges, cities worldwide are taking a bold stance by declaring a climate emergency. This emerging trend has sparked crucial debate.

While over 2,000 jurisdictions globally have embraced climate emergency declarations, Sweden presents a fascinating case – with only three Swedish cities – that have issued climate emergency statements.

Specifically, this study focuses on the political implications of the statements, and the extent to which the climate strategies of the three cities of Lund, Malmö and Kalmar correspond to a "climate emergency mode".



In recent years, more than 2,000 jurisdictions around the world – representing over 1 billion people – have declared a climate emergency.

– Henman, Shabb & McCormick





Key Insights and Messages

This study outlines 3 key lessons on climate emergency statements.

Recognizing the limitations of statements: Political implications of climate emergency statements in Swedish municipalities are largely marginal with limited tangible effects on policy or public discourse.

Building on the nuanced impacts of statements: Climate emergency statements in the studied Swedish municipalities have produced some nuanced impacts in several ways.

- Public engagement remained largely unchanged, with minimal reactions from the public despite some media attention.
- Climate activists were empowered, using the statements as leverage for accountability and as a strategic tool for advocacy and strengthening their arguments.
- Local politicians experienced a slight increase in climate awareness, particularly in Kalmar where internet trolling led to a united political front.
- The statements did not significantly reshape climate discourse, as emergency framing has become mainstream in recent years.
- Municipal institutions and climate work were minimally affected, with most cities continuing their existing climate strategies.

Working with existing climate strategies: Existing municipal climate strategies are implicitly incorporating some of the criteria from the climate emergency response attributes framework.

- Urgency of action is expressed through language emphasizing quick emissions reductions and accelerated fossil fuels phase out.
- Prioritization of action is implicitly implied in some strategies, recognizing potential conflicts with other municipal tasks but there is still a gap between stated goals and concrete action.
- Institutional resource mobilization is addressed, though often integrated into ordinary budget processes.
- Social mobilization is explicitly incorporated, recognizing community engagement as crucial for environmental action.



Policy and Practical Actions

- **Enhance citizen engagement and dialogue:** Municipalities should strengthen their commitment to citizen participation in the transition process. This includes allocating resources to develop innovative strategies for meaningful public engagement and dialogue.
- **Strengthen accountability mechanisms:** Leverage climate emergency statements to hold politicians accountable for climate action commitments.
- **Align emergency framing with action:** Ensure that climate emergency statements are backed by concrete, accelerated climate action plans.
- **Integrate emergency mode into strategies:** Incorporate CERAF criteria into municipal climate strategies, particularly emphasizing urgency and prioritization of climate action .
- **Mobilize resources:** Allocate dedicated funds and resources for climate action, separate from ordinary budget processes.
- **Foster cross-sector collaboration:** Encourage partnerships between local government, activists, scientists, and the private sector to drive climate action.
- **Adapt to evolving discourse:** Recognize that emergency framing is becoming mainstream and adjust strategies accordingly to maintain impact.
- **Appreciate symbolic impact:** While climate emergency statements in Swedish municipalities have had marginal immediate effects, they represent a symbolic step forwards.
- **Emphasize climate action with statements:** To maximize their impact, municipalities should focus on strengthening accountability and aligning statements with concrete action plans and funding.
- **Build relationships between policies:** Emphasize climate action as a priority in the context of municipal policies is crucial for driving and achieving climate targets.

Background

In recent years, more than 2,000 jurisdictions – representing over 1 billion people – worldwide have declared a climate emergency.

While such declarations are suggested to have the potential to spark transformative climate action, there is much disagreement about the merits of climate emergency framings.

Some argue it can catalyse transformative change by fostering urgency and encouraging public engagement.

Others caution that an emergency framing can narrow policy focus and instead overlook or oversimplify the multifaceted and long-term nature of climate change.

As stated, Sweden presents an interesting case – with only three Swedish cities – that have issued climate emergency statements.

Objective

The objective of this study is to investigate the political implications of the climate emergency statements in three Swedish cities, and the extent to which the climate strategies of the cities correspond to a “climate emergency mode”.

To help explore these themes, two recently developed frameworks are applied, including a typology of political effects of emergency framings by Patterson et al. (2021), and the climate emergency response attributes framework by Davidson et al. (2020).

Methods

This study employed mixed methods to analyse climate emergency statements in the Swedish cities of Lund, Malmö and Kalmar. The methodology included document analysis and interviews with key stakeholders. This allowed for a nuanced understanding of both the symbolic and practical aspects of climate emergency statements.

Reference



Henman, J., Shabb, K., & McCormick, K. (2023) Slow Emergency but Urgent Action? Exploring the impact of municipal climate emergency statements in Sweden. *Urban Climate*.

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