

ANALYSIS

The Climate Emergency Declaration – An Examination



Climate Alliance

The Climate Emergency Declaration – An examination of key and oft forgotten aspects

More and more cities and municipalities are declaring a climate emergency or adopting similar resolutions. It is a step that can make quite a difference:

- It can ensure that climate is a priority in all local-level decisions
- It can show citizens that their city or town is taking climate change seriously
- It can promote climate awareness among the citizens
- It can call on national governments to take action and to provide the local level with the necessary support

Nevertheless, climate emergency declarations don't come without challenges. From the naming of the resolution to its contents and financial issues, a wide variety of obstacles must be overcome. This brief analysis focuses on common contents and points of conflict in climate crisis declarations while also identifying topics often neglected.

CONCERNS ABOUT THE TERM

In many cities and municipalities, especially in the German speaking world, the naming is a significant obstacle that has impeded the adoption of resolutions. Political actors in German-speaking countries often see a connection between the historically charged term “emergency” and a restriction of civil liberties. Others use the term deliberately, noting that it best highlights the pressing need for action: If we don't manage to fundamentally transform the global society within the coming ten years, we'll face climate-induced damages that will, apart from economic losses, cause numerous casualties and massive forced migrations. This outlook certainly seems like an emergency!

Even so, there is a certain leeway regarding the naming – after all, taking action is what is most important. The following alternatives could be taken into consideration in the case of a decision against the term “emergency”:

- Climate manifesto (for example, Perchtoldsdorf)
- Ascertaining a climate emergency (for example, Emsdetten)
- „Climate protection as central future task“ (for example, Nürnberg)
- Avoidance of a particular name (for example, Meerbusch)

What counts in the end is not the name of a resolution, but its content.

*“Even though the declaration of a climate emergency is not legally binding, it is an instrument with an important signaling effect to highlight the critical significance of climate change and its consequences”– **Resolution Erlangen***

*“The term ‘Climate Emergency’ is to be understood symbolically and does not represent a legal basis for emergency measures”– **Resolution Mölln and other cities** in a footnote.*

PRIORITISING CLIMATE

Many cities and municipalities have stated in their declarations that all future proposals must indicate the consequences for climate and environmental protection as well as biodiversity.

*“To this end, from September 2019, a box ‘Impact on climate protection’ with the options ‘Yes, positive’, ‘Yes, negative’ and ‘No’ will be a mandatory component for all policy proposals. If the question is answered with ‘Yes, positive’ or ‘Yes, negative’, the respective impact must be described in the explanatory note.”– **Resolution Bielefeld***

In other resolutions (like in Cologne or Constance) a similar statement is directly linked to the commitment to choose the more sustainable option:

*“[...] now takes climate impacts into account in all decisions and prefers solutions that have a positive impact on climate, environment and species. To this end, the box “Effects on climate protection” with the options “Yes, positive”, “Yes, negative” and “No” will become a mandatory component for all policy proposals from June 2019. If the question is answered with “Yes, positive” or “Yes, negative”, the respective impact must be described in the explanatory memorandum in cooperation with the climate protection officer.”– **Resolution Constance***

Especially when there are set quantitative and qualitative criteria as well as instructions for action in the event of non-compliance, an assessment of draft resolutions with regards to climate protection impacts is sensible. This could be carried out by the respective department and (randomly) checked by the department responsible for climate.

THE (ALMOST) OBLIGATORY APPEAL

Most declarations also appeal to other municipalities as well as to decision makers on a local, national and international level to take action and declare a climate emergency. After all, the global problem of climate change cannot be solved by municipalities alone. Many key aspects are dependent on regional, national and international legislation.

*“The citizens of Lübeck recall that Lübeck is a member of the Climate Alliance since 1993. The state and federal government in particular are to be reminded that it is not yet possible to fully meet climate protection targets at the local and global level under the current framework conditions. Only a complete abolition of existing subsidies for fossil energy sources, a socially just scheme for carbon pricing, a fundamentally changed transport policy and the promotion of social housing in line with climate protection would lay the urgently needed foundation here.”– **Resolution Lübeck***

In some instances, this appeal goes hand in hand with the demand of a national law on climate protection.

"The City of Bühl demands the federal government to adopt a law on climate protection that is in line with the demands of the Paris Agreement" – Resolution Bühl

INCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

Institutions alone cannot tackle climate change: incorporating the citizens is an essential element, not only to strengthen environmental awareness, but also to ensure public collaboration in future projects. Therefore, several municipalities that have declared a climate emergency regularly publish reports on their progress for the public.

"[...] calls on the mayor to report to the local council and the public every six months on progress and difficulties in reducing emissions." – Resolution Konstanz

Appeals to the citizens to behave in a climate-friendly way in their day-to-day lives are also common. Some cities also plan to involve the citizens in the shaping of climate policy.

"[...] appeals to the people of Bielefeld, on the one hand, and to companies and businesses, on the other hand, to actively participate in the achievement of climate protection goals through their own actions, e.g. by significantly reducing car journeys and plastic waste, by making greater use of roadsides and public transport, by saving energy, by developing regenerative energy sources and by protecting urban greenery or by planting trees" – Resolution Bielefeld

"Encourage this Council to establish a Citizens Assembly made up of a representative range of Oxford citizens to establish the facts and make recommendations for our city." – Resolution Oxford

REFERENCES

References to a municipality's own progressive municipal measures are often made in the justification of proposals. This is understandable and good, since the fight against climate change is not just beginning today, especially for climate-conscious municipalities. Memberships in alliances for climate protection such as ours are also frequently mentioned.

"The state capital Kiel sees human-induced climate change as one of the greatest threats of the 21st century. Kiel has been a climate protection city since 1995. In 2016, we began developing the master's programme "100% Climate Protection" and one year later pledged our goal of being climate-neutral by 2050. The gas power plant, ABK's Green IT, the BLUE PORT and the shore power connection for crusaders or the Veloroute 10 are the first strong signs that Kiel is taking things seriously. – Resolution Kiel

Some municipalities, such as Alagna Valsesia, have joined the Climate Alliance along with their declaration of a climate emergency.

DISTRIBUTION OF WORK

The tasks assigned to the administration are very varied and requirements are usually very general.

"The citizens of Lübeck are therefore calling on the administration of the Hanseatic City of Lübeck to further increase its climate protection measures. – Resolution Lübeck

Some municipalities go further with plans to expand the administration due to the increased workload:

"The responsible departments in the community (e.g. environment, traffic, planning) are to be provided with sufficient financial means and, above all, with the necessary human resources and competences to cope with the challenges". – Resolution Ried im Innkreis

In some cases, a city climate council has been convened or a climate commissioner appointed, which brings expertise and resources but also helps pinpoint necessary activities. External expert committees are also an option.

"[...] decides to set up a Climate Advisory Council composed of independent, external experts to monitor and evaluate the measures implemented to achieve climate goals." – Resolution Marburg

CONCRETE DEMANDS AND PLANS

Concrete demands and plans are rather rare in climate emergency declarations; symbolism predominates. If such concrete plans exist, however, it is sensible to name them.

"The building department is requested to examine the costs and possible savings associated with setting up an energy management unit for urban buildings together with the climate protection officer by the end of 2019". – Resolution Constance

Some municipalities commission studies in order to elaborate the concrete possibilities for action, challenges and potentials.

"The City of Erlangen is commissioning an external study to estimate which measures are necessary to achieve the reduction of CO₂ emissions in Erlangen in accordance with the 1.5-degree target". – Resolution Erlangen

TARGETS AND OBJECTIVES

The declarations include targets such as a CO₂ reduction by 95% by 2050 or even climate neutrality by 2030.

"By the end of 2019, a first action plan is to be drawn up which includes concrete steps to cut down energy consumption and reduce CO₂ emissions to net zero by 2030 while promoting energy efficiency and the development of renewable energies in the Marburg urban area." – Resolution Marburg

Likewise, a reference to the Paris Climate Agreement or the IPCC's Special Reports and to the goals mentioned therein is a strong commitment.

"For future measures to combat climate change, the municipality is guided by the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), particularly with regard to investments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. – Resolution Bochum

CLIMATE JUSTICE

The socially just transition should ensure that climate policy and measures do not discriminate against already weak sections of the population. Climate justice, whether within the municipality or on a global level, is an important issue, but one that has rarely been touched upon in resolutions thus far:

"[...] note that poor sections of the population in particular are most affected by long-term environmental injustice and feel the negative economic, environmental and social impacts of the fossil-based economy and the overuse of resources." – Resolution Ried im Innkreis

"[...] note that [...] deforestation of rainforests in the Amazon Basin and elsewhere is an additional driver of climate change that destroys the habitats and cultures of indigenous peoples. Since rainforest protection is also climate protection, we reaffirm the commitment we made through our membership in the Climate Alliance to support indigenous organisations" – Resolution Ried im Innkreis

THE RARE ASPECT OF FUNDING

Funding is a touchy subject. Climate change mitigation (and adaptation) can, however, only be effective with investments in the future and the necessary financial means for climate action measures. While the question is indirectly touched upon in some cases through the commissioning of external studies or the appointment of a climate protection officer, very few resolutions explicitly earmark funding for climate protection (Ried im Innkreis is an exception here).

THE OFTEN FORGOTTEN ASPECT OF ADAPTATION

The consequences of climate change are already being felt. Since pre-industrial times, the earth's temperature has risen by 1°C on average, in continental Europe even by more than 1.7°C. Weather extremes such as heat waves, floods, droughts and water scarcity are the result and occur with increasing frequency. More and more, adapting to these changes is not an option but a necessity. In Austria for example, more people have died in 2018 as a result of the extreme heat than of traffic accidents.

Despite its urgency, this aspect is rarely mentioned.

CONCLUSION

Most declarations are held in rather general terms: They ascertain a state of climate emergency, consider the future effects on the climate, appeal to the local and (inter-) national level, and refer to the inadequacy of current measures. Of-

ten, the administration is commissioned to draw up a climate action concept or to revise the existing one. Although concrete budgets for climate action measures are rarely mentioned, the creation or strengthening of climate protection posts in the administration does occur and, in some cases, external studies are commissioned. Only in exceptional cases are issues such as climate justice or adaptation to climate change taken into account.

Although they can be helpful in providing an impulse for action, climate emergency declarations alone are no solution. In order for them to not remain pure symbolism, they must be filled with life and underpinned with concrete measures. Only in this way can they ultimately fulfil their purpose of supporting effective climate action.

THE CLIMATE ALLIANCE

For more than 25 years, Climate Alliance member municipalities have been acting in partnership with indigenous rainforest peoples for the benefit of the global climate. With some 1,700 members spread across 26 European countries, Climate Alliance is the world's largest city network dedicated to climate action and the only one to set tangible targets: each member city, town and district has committed itself to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 10 percent every 5 years. Recognising the impact our lifestyles can have on the world's most vulnerable people and places, Climate Alliance pairs local action with global responsibility. climatealliance.org