

This is why we cannot rely on cities alone to tackle climate change

September 4 2017, by Brendan F.d. Barrett And Andrew Dewit

A lot of faith is vested in cities to tackle climate change, and with good reason. A day after the June 1 declaration that the US would exit the Paris Agreement, 82 American "climate mayors" committed to upholding the accord.

By August 4, when the US gave [formal notice](#) of its withdrawal, there were [372 "climate mayors"](#) representing 67 million Americans.

In Australia, too, national intransigence has led to greater expectations of local actions. The Climate Council's [July report](#) declares that deep cuts in cities' [greenhouse gas emissions](#) can achieve 70% of Australia's Paris goals.

The report notes that a majority of Australian cities have adopted climate policies. Many are committed to 100% renewable energy or zero emissions. One of the report's authors argues that, even without national leadership, Australian cities can "just get on with the job of implementing [climate policies](#)".

Many European cities have ambitious emission-reduction targets. Copenhagen plans to be the world's [first carbon-neutral capital by 2025](#). Stockholm aims to be [fossil-fuel-free by 2040](#).

So, at first glance, cities do appear to be leading the way.

A word of caution

We support local decarbonisation and the desire for cities to be progressive actors. Yet there are ample grounds to be dubious about cities' ability to deliver on their commitments.

Sam Brooks, former director of the District of Columbia's Energy Division, has laid out [sobering evidence](#) on the reality of climate action in US cities.

Brooks supports stronger local action rather than "press releases" and "mindless cheerleading". He shows that most emission cuts in US cities can be attributed to state and federal initiatives such as renewable portfolio standards or national fuel-efficiency rules.

365 [#ClimateMayors](#) are stepping up to [#ActonClimate](#) as Trump turns his back on the [#ParisAgreement](#)
pic.twitter.com/uMHrfAVx25

— The Climate Mayors (@ClimateMayors) [August 5, 2017](#)

America's narrative of climate-friendly cities relies heavily on California's leadership to make it credible.

By May 2015, California had built the [Under2 Coalition](#) of cities, states and countries committed to keeping the global temperature increase below 2°C. California Governor Jerry Brown was prepared for the June 1 White House announcement, quickly [detailing why it was "insane"](#). Days later Brown [signed a deal](#) between China and his state to collaborate on cutting emissions.

California's activism sets a benchmark. But Brooks details how New York, Boston, Washington DC and other "frequently lauded cities" often

do not use the powers they have.

No US [city](#) reports its electricity consumption more than annually. Many do not report it at all. Poor monitoring is a key reason they have not cut consumption, in spite of enormous scope for efficiency.

Cities have not added much to national trends

It isn't just American cities falling short, as Benjamin Barber's new book, [Cool Cities](#) makes clear.

Like Brooks, Barber championed urban action against global warming (he died in April 2017). Yet he looked past the hype to point out shortcomings in the mitigation measures of such exemplary cities as London and Oslo.

London's stated goal is to [cut emissions by 60% by 2040](#). It seems likely to fail, with blame falling on [rapid population growth](#) and inadequate policies [in the building sector](#).

Oslo is committed to a 100% cut in emissions [by 2050](#). But its emissions have risen from 1.2 million tonnes in 1991 to [1.4 million tonnes in 2014](#). One complication is that oil and gas production comprise 22% of the Norwegian economy. The nation's emissions are [up 4.2% since 1990](#).

Even the progress of climate superstar cities such as Copenhagen, Stockholm and Berlin is, on close examination, subject to important caveats.

[Copenhagen](#) makes much of having cut emissions 21% by 2011 [from 2005 levels](#). Yet the city admits that 63% of its goal of becoming carbon-neutral relies on [buying carbon offsets](#) for its emissions.

National policy is a crucial context for urban action. For instance, Copenhagen has benefited greatly from a 27% fall in Denmark's emissions between 1990 and 2015. Unfortunately, Danish emissions are expected to [increase after 2020](#) without new policies.

[Stockholm](#) has cut emissions by [around 37% between 1990 and 2015](#). This is mainly a result of changes to building heating – transport emissions have [barely changed](#).

As in Copenhagen, Stockholm's achievements rely greatly on a national target – [net-zero emissions by 2045](#) – backed by a robust policy framework.

As for Berlin, its goal is an 85% cut in emissions by 2050, compared to 1990. By 2013 the city had [cut emissions by about one-third](#). Yet most recent data indicate that emissions have begun to rise slightly. Berlin is at risk of achieving only [half of its mid-term goal](#) of a 40% cut by 2020.

Berlin is not responsible for a national policy that remains lax on coal and unduly favours automobiles, the source of [18% of German emissions](#). But civic leaders in Berlin [could do more](#) to nudge a car-centred culture towards sustainability.

What must cities do?

The urgency of real action is clear from the [IEA's 2016 report](#) on sustainable urban energy systems. It warns that business as usual in cities could mean emissions increase by 50% by 2050.

The IEA notes that 90% of the growth in primary energy demand is [in non-OECD countries](#). At the same time, climate science tells us deep emissions cuts [must begin by 2020](#). We have to accelerate decarbonisation, which means demanding greater ambition and

transparency from cities. The following steps need to be taken:

1. Every city should have accurate, timely and transparent data on their performance across a range of indicators. These include emissions, electricity consumption, energy efficiency and renewable energy availability.
2. We need more robust comparative frameworks to make sense of the data. The 2014 [Global Protocol for Community-Scale Greenhouse Gas Emission Inventories](#) was a valuable start, but has to be expanded.
3. Cities should be more global when calculating their emissions. At present, they tally up emissions from their own territory and production, leaving out emissions from consumption of traded goods and (often) aviation. The differences can be significant. Were Copenhagen's emissions measured on a consumption basis, the total would be [four to five times higher](#).
4. Cities need to differentiate between [emission](#) cuts resulting directly from their own actions and those derived from state or national programs. We need to see what cities themselves are doing.
5. Cities too often advocate climate neutrality rather than zero emissions. The more a city relies on credits for offsets elsewhere, the greater the risk of failing to cut actual emissions within the city.
6. There should be less cheerleading all around. City mayors need to lobby their state and federal counterparts to ensure coordinated action at all levels. And citizens must throw out mayors - not to mention regional and national leaders - who don't accept the urgency of [climate](#) mitigation.

Sadly, many cities are dangerously complacent about the need for speed in decarbonisation. No press release can obscure the fact that time is not on our side.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: This is why we cannot rely on cities alone to tackle climate change (2017, September 4) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-09-cities-tackle-climate.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.