Thinking Like a Climate

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This book has been very much focused on the way that climate change was addressed at a city level, but this begs the questions of why the city was understood to be a meaningful scale at which to tackle a global problem, and how city politics relates to climate politics at other scales. One of the officers at the council told me that he thought that cities were actually a more “natural” site for tackling climate change than nations or transnational organizations. He saw cities as often having had a longer history of coherent identity than nations. With city residents also sharing geographical proximity, he also felt that this gave cities an advantage in already knowing how to respond to the pragmatic requirement to work together.

One of the instances in which the potential of the city scale, as opposed to the national scale, was articulated as successful was in published and personal recollections of the fifteenth COP to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Copenhagen in December 2009. This is surprising given that this event is widely regarded as a failure in climate policy making. As one article on the conference put it, “rarely had an event generated so much anticipation and rarely had there been such a strong disappointment afterwards” (Rudolph et al. 2010, 201). The hope had been that the Copenhagen conference, attended by over a hundred heads of state, would result in an international agreement outlining how
to tackle climate change. What emerged was not a signed commitment to tackle climate change but instead the Copenhagen Accord, a weak political declaration that was not even supported by all countries attending. In spite of a strengthening scientific consensus that climate change was both human-made and of great urgency, national leaders had failed to come to any legally binding agreement on climate change mitigation.

However, as the main summit was failing, another fringe conference, a “Mayors Summit” that focused on city authorities rather than national leaders, was taking place. This was organized by the c40 cities group and the municipality of Copenhagen and was attended by “c40 mayors and deputy mayors, city delegates, climate experts, influencers, business leaders committed to take climate actions, innovators, change makers, citizens.” A delegation from Manchester attended this Mayors Summit. While the failure of the national conference was widely reported in the national and international press, some of the people I spoke to who went to the Mayors Summit talked enthusiastically about this much less reported conference, where the work that was being done by cities from North and South America, Asia, and Europe was shared. In a blog post published just after the conference, Richard Sharland, the head of the Manchester City Council’s strategy team, who attended the conference, told the activist journalist Marc Hudson, “I did get something I wasn’t really expecting: to meet personally so many leaders of cities who were wholly committed to tackling this agenda substantially, who were keen to exchange ideas and information, who understood the need for mitigation, adaptation and opportunity and who are committed to action and cultural change regardless of what did or did not happen at COP15. And there was something else: none of the cities we encountered have written a stakeholder plan like we have, and it aroused a fair bit of interest!”

While not part of the c40 climate leaders group, Manchester officials were involved in this and other international networks and were both learning from these cities and sharing Manchester’s approach with them. At the time Manchester did not have a mayor, but the head of the council, Richard Leese, attended the Mayors Summit and was a signatory to an EU network of municipalities called the Covenant of Mayors. Moreover, the city of Manchester, and the regional administrative area of which it is a part, Greater Manchester, was networked with other UK cities through organizations like the UK Core Cities group and with other European cities through EU projects such as the Green Digital Charter project, described in this chapter.
Interaction with these other cities made it clear that Manchester was far from alone in trying to tackle climate change at a city scale. But what it also made clear was that the nature of the success being indexed by these cities talking to one another focused largely on the production of strategies and plans. What had failed at COP15 was the achievement of a strategic direction that countries could sign on to. In contrast, the United Kingdom was being celebrated as a leader in climate change policy because it had produced a legally binding plan for tackling climate change in the form of the 2008 Climate Change Act, and at these city conferences what was celebrated as a success at the city level was the production of strategies and plans that signaled agreement to tackle climate change at a municipal level.

But strategies were only the first step, and by the time I was doing research, the focus of many discussions was not on how to get strategies and plans in place but on how to move beyond strategy into action. Indeed, what became very clear to me is that success at the level of strategic planning was a very limited version of success. It is to the limitations of the strategy and the problem of moving into action that this chapter turns.