Co-production in local climate politics: A messy approach to participative policy design

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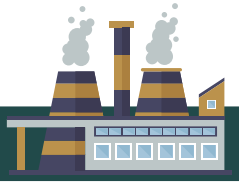
1. Overview

The climate crisis:



Local action is critically important for addressing the climate crisis, where the majority of global carbon emissions are produced and consumed.

Why does co-production matter?

Local governments often have limited legal powers and funding to take climate action on their own and must find ways of engaging urban actors, with divergent perspectives and interests, to convene meaningful local climate actions. Following inaction stimulated through conventional 'consultation' approaches to public participation, some local governments – like Greater Manchester, UK – have begun experimenting with novel methods, including 'co-production.'

What can we learn?

While co-productive climate policy design can mobilise a significant amount of resource from a variety of organisations, it does not necessarily produce radical outcomes, requires an alternative distribution of power and its challenges should be recognised and considered before undertaking action.

2. The climate crisis: A super wicked challenge with contested paths forward

The climate crisis is an enormous challenge with no clear solutions. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recently reported that the impacts of climate change are occurring more quickly than previously modelled and that some of the changes the planet is experiencing may already be irreversible[1].

Although the climate goals of nation-states typically receive the greatest public attention, urban areas are of critical importance if society is to find solutions. Cities are responsible for consuming upwards of 70% of global carbon emissions[2]. They are where the majority of people live, work and spend leisure time – cities are concentrated hives of economic activity and social infrastructures that can serve as both the root causes and potential solutions to climate change.

While the significant role cities have in exacerbating or ameliorating climate change has become increasingly understood by local political leaders, there remains uncertainty about appropriate policy responses. A key barrier cities face is how to navigate between different views across society to identify implementable climate actions.

Conventional local government consultation processes have only produced limited success in mediating across polarised views of different stakeholders. The Yellow Vests protests in France, or growth of Extinction Rebellion, underlines how important it is to ensure that different groups can have a formative role in shaping policy. For cities to achieve inclusive and equitable climate action, decision-makers must utilise public participation approaches that can enable negotiation between distinct perspectives, supporting learning and empowerment.

3. What is co-productive decision-making and why it matters for local climate policy?

Urban action is critical to the success or failure of ameliorating the climate crisis. But many actions cities could take will have distinct effects on different residents and local organisations. How these programmes are designed is therefore critical, especially to ensuring that the impacts of low carbon actions do not negatively impact on poorer, marginalised or minority urban communities.

There are a variety of approaches that can be utilised to support substantive public participation within climate policy decision-making processes. One such approach that has recently gained interest from some cities is *co-production*. There are various forms of co-production – from research to service delivery to policy.

In a policy development context, co-production seeks to enable stakeholders from different backgrounds to share responsibility and power while learning from each other and working together in equal relationships. Co-productive policy development is not defined by specific methods. Rather, it is a set of practices and an evolving culture of decision-making and action. This approach has the potential to synergise forms of knowledge from technical and lay communities, with the aim of reaching mediated policy decisions.

By cultivating a collaborative decision-making culture, co-productive climate policy development may create opportunities to join up responses to climate change with other societal challenges. The promise is that co-produced climate policies may create the potential for achieving equitable and holistic solutions that address the roots of interconnected, systemic challenges. Although co-productive climate policy development is not a panacea, many hope it offers the potential to stimulate urban change and transformation through an innovative approach.

1 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2021). Working Group I, The Physical Science Basis, Summary for Policymakers. See: https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGI_SPM.pdf

2 Wei, T., Wu, J. and Chen, S. (2021). Keeping track of greenhouse gas emissions reduction progress and targets in 167 cities worldwide. See: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frsc.2021.696381/full

Local climate action will impact various local residents differently – potentially in beneficial ways but could also present new challenges

Cities are where the climate battle will be won or lost

Inclusive and equitable climate action can be achieved through participative policy development approaches

4. Co-productive climate policy design in Greater Manchester

Andy Burnham was elected as Mayor of Greater Manchester, UK in May 2017. One of his campaign promises was to lead a public debate to determine an accelerated carbon-neutrality ambition for the city-region that would be declared at a 'Green Summit' within a year of taking office[3]. The Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) – the city-regional government agency Burnham was elected to lead – began the process of scoping the new climate ambition shortly after the election. Early on during the process, the GMCA Environment Team recognised they needed to utilise a participative approach to developing the policy if it were to gain traction and seek impact at scale.

The GMCA determined to adopt a co-productive policy design approach that would be split into two parts — a first that involved experts and a second the engaged diverse city stakeholders. The expert engagement component of the process was two-pronged. The first was led by the University of Manchester's Tyndall Centre for Climate Change research that established a 'carbon budget' for the city-region. The second was led by an environmental consulting group that developed an emissions scenarios projection tool to model how different greenhouse gas reduction interventions might impact the city-region's overall emissions mitigation pathway. These two technical components were combined to create a carbon neutrality target for the city-region based on its fair and equitable contribution to the UK's Paris Agreement commitment and carbon reduction pathway to achieve that target.

The city stakeholder dimension of the process took place through four pathways that each exhibited some co-productive characteristics (see page 5).

These four co-productive pathways created some opportunities for transformative policy alternatives to be identified, such as public ownership of energy production, large-scale retrofit cooperatives and alternative economic paradigms, for example orienting local development towards 'steady state advancement' rather than 'green growth'. However, whilst policies had the greatest potential for enabling a low carbon transition, they were ultimately not enacted. Instead, more conventional policies including integrating ticketing for public transport, procuring renewable energy tariffs for the public sector organisations and using planning permissions to require zero carbon development by 2028 were the ones taken forward.

For co-production to achieve novel outcomes, there must be a deep political and organisational commitment to the approach. GMCA's co-productive policy development pathways were convened and coordinated by one department within the organisation. The co-productive pathways did open up the policy development process to include different forms of expertise and some new interests, however, the most radical, alternative policy outcomes were not adopted. This suggests that the mediation of different through co-production was not ultimately realised.

[3] Our Manifesto for Greater Manchester (2017). Burnham for Mayor. See: https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/andy4mayor/pages/68/attachments/original/1489493923/Andy_Burham_Manifesto_A4_12pp_copy.pdf?1489493923

The Green Summit Steering Group (GSSG) pathway contributed oversight and advisory toward the process. 27 individuals representing voluntary sector organisations, campaign groups, universities, large service providers, SMEs and public sector organisations served on the GSSG. The GSSG facilitated learning between the members, leveraged its position to shape policy decisions and recognised the contributions of individual members to strengthen the cohesion of the group

The 'listening event' pathway was constituted by 42 events that engaged over 1,200 individuals across all of Greater Manchester's Local Authority areas. Practitioners, interested citizens and community stakeholder groups participated in the listening events. These events enabled GMCA to learn from the variety of community interests that participated in the process and established an engagement mechanism for the public to influence the policy design process.

The Green Summit (GS) pathway was initially planned as a single event but expanded into two events across 12-month. About 750 individuals attended the inaugural 2018 GS with over 1,700 attendees participating in the 2019 GS. This pathway diffused emerging policy insights to different key stakeholder groups and was an opportunity to formally recognise the efforts of organisations and individuals that contributed during the process.

The 'practitioners workstream' pathway sought technical knowledge across three thematic areas – energy, buildings, and materials and manufacturing. Around 80 practitioners worked with GMCA over four months to design policy measures that would help realise the climate and environmental ambitions that were captured through the listening events and GS's. The practitioner workstreams enabled a form of collective problem-solving and began to distribute responsibility for action.

5-Year Environment Plan Timeline:

2017
- Winter 2017 – Andy Burnham Environmental Manifesto hustings
- Spring 2017 – Andy Burnham elected Mayor of Greater Manchester
- Fall 2017 – First Green Summit Steering Group meeting
- Fall 2017 – Second Green Summit steering group meeting, emergency of sensitive issues
- Winter 2017 – Fourth Green Summit Steering Group meeting' first attended by Mayor

2018
- Winter/Spring 2018 – 42 listening events
- Spring 2018 – Inaugural Greater Manchester Green Summit
- Spring 2018 – Green Summit Steering Group held to evaluate draft Springboard Report
- Summer 2018 – Springboard Report launched

2018/19
- Fall 2018/Winter 2019 – Seven practitioner workstream meetings

2019
- Spring 2019 – Second Greater Manchester Green Summit
- Spring 2019 – 5-Year Environment Plan launched as a GMCA strategy

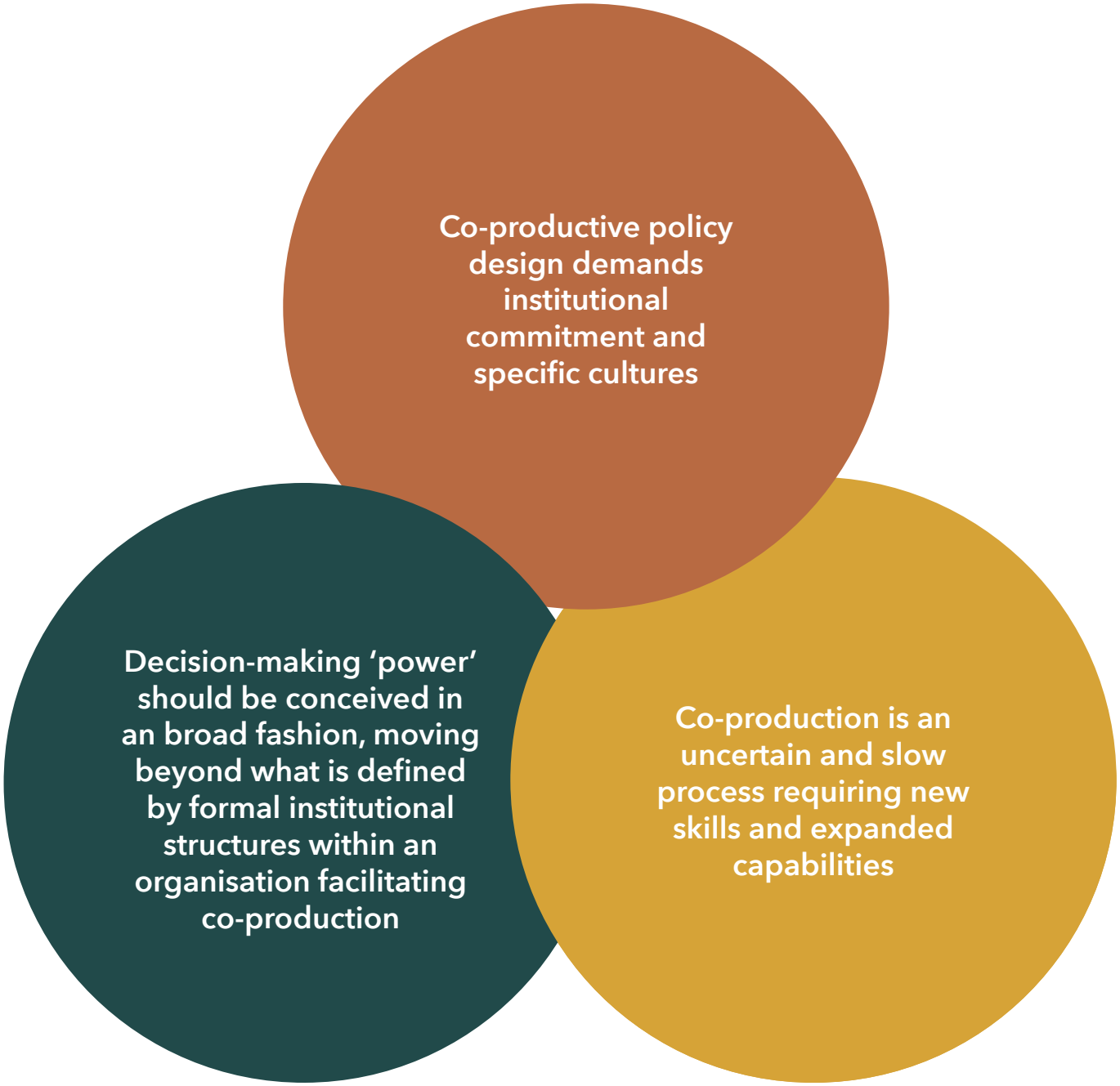
5. What can cities learn from Greater Manchester's experiment with co-productive climate policy?

This case offers three main insights:

- Significant amounts of expertise and capacity can be mobilised across a variety of organisations engaged in a co-productive climate policy development process but those activities are unlikely to produce radical outcomes without deeper organisational cultural change. When a range of organisations share a common sense of commitment, ambition and ownership during a policy development process, different forms of support can be marshalled towards the shared endeavour. However, those collectively produced actions will not reach novel or transformative outcomes on their own. Co-productive climate policy development will only realise its promise of promoting inclusive, holistic and robust outcomes if the convening organisations also adopt a co-productive culture, moving beyond only recognising certain forms of knowledge as valid or simply perceiving a narrow range of interests as legitimate.

- For co-productive climate policy development to mediate between polarised interests and reach transformative policy outcomes, decision-making 'power' should be conceived in a broad fashion, moving beyond what is defined by formal institutional structures. Local government organisations, and the administrative decision-makers working within them, often impact or determine what interests and actors can participate during a climate policy development process and how their views are integrated within that process. Although co-production may support a greater number of actors to participate during a policymaking process, it does not intrinsically enable divergent interests to negotiate between each other. To enable transformative outcomes, administrative decision-makers and political leaders should share their power with the spectrum of actors involved in the co-productive process, providing the full range of interests the opportunity to gain traction, legitimisation and the potentially to shape policy outcomes.

- The transformative aspiration of co-productive climate policy development is slow, messy and its outcomes can be uncertain. Developing the culture needed to support co-production requires building particular capabilities, norms, values and practices. This is a slow undertaking but essential if the potential of co-production is to be realised. Given the hurdles and obstacles involved with this participative approach, local government organisations and the actors engaged in these processes should carefully consider whether co-production is something that can be fully committed to and embrace or avoid due to its challenges. Because of co-production's demands and uncertainty, it is not an approach that is appropriate for every circumstance. In the particular instances where it may offer potential, it should still be carefully considered so that the relevant actors can determine if they are able to commit to the approach in earnest.



6. About

This policy brief has been written by Dr Ryan Bellinson drawing on his PhD thesis, 'Doing things differently? The promise and pitfalls of co-productive urban climate policy development in Greater Manchester, UK'. The research was conducted from 2017-2020 through a collaboration with the GMCA Environment Team and Greater Manchester Low Carbon Hub.

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MISTRA
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