

NYC Climate Week: City Dialogue on Embedded Climate Justice

Summary Report

On September 20th, 2022, the Transatlantic Climate Bridge (TCB) hosted a city dialogue on climate justice as part of Climate Week NYC. The dialogue was a forum for representatives from New York City and Dortmund to speak on city-level initiatives which include a social dimension to ensure uptake, policy acceptance, and to guarantee that the energy transitions work for all.

The event began with remarks from Paul Cronjäger, Policy Officer at the German Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action. He spoke on the urgent need for climate protection to be at the core of city policy and highlighting that the majority of mayors in Germany have outlined climate, energy, and sustainability as the most important issues of the future. But more importantly is the need for socially equitable and affordable climate action which will make our societies more resilient, safe and equal.

Cronjäger emphasized the success of the 9-euro ticket in Germany, which was used by 50 million people across the country. The ticket offered an opportunity for those who could not otherwise afford public transit the option to travel and it saved around 1,8 million tons of carbon dioxide, equivalent to the powering of 350,000 homes and output of 400,000 vehicles. The 9-euro ticket was a perfect example of a measure that showed climate action and just transition go hand in hand.

The first city input came from Fabian Zeuch, Coordinator Global Diplomacy at the City of Dortmund. Zeuch spoke on the success of Dortmund's economic transition, once as a producer of coal, steel, and beer, and after transitioning, now a city driven by IT, logistics, and technology. The just policy presented by Zeuch focused on the importance for a food system change in Dortmund, which would improve the accessibility of sustainable food and create more environmentally methods for waste disposal in the city. He also touched on programs like Gärtnerei Grünfrau, which work with NGOs to train unemployed women in the city to become sustainable farmers and help integrate people in the community

The second input came from Daphne Lundi, Deputy Director for Living Streets and Public Spaces at the NYC Mayor's Office of Climate and Environmental Justice. Lundi emphasized the issue of extreme heat in New York which disproportionately affects lower-income communities in the city. Heat risk is a challenging issue to tackle because it is often invisible however, the connection between heat mortality and poverty is due to heat stresses being exacerbated by poor living conditions, e.g., through a lack of access to air conditioning, or even when it is present, the cost of using it. With 300 yearly heat-related deaths in NYC alone, it was imperative to try innovative policy solutions to address the problem. The city began implementing measures to mitigate this risk through using the Heat Vulnerability Index to see where people are affected the most and creating policies specifically targeting those areas. Measures include investing in tree planting to create canopies to reduce the urban heat island effect and creating buddy programs to help link social services and community organizations and volunteers with at-risk New Yorkers. These social structures proved useful beyond heat responses, with New York's Be-A-Buddy program also assisting during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic to help disseminate information and aid people.

The discussion portion of the event provided a forum for the cities to discuss their policies and also gain insights from one another. Lundi spoke on how New York has taken inspiration from cities such as Phoenix, recognizing that due to climate change, average temperatures in New York will soon look more like the current ones in Arizona. Lundi further emphasized the city's initiatives working with their partners to create coalitions that advocate to the federal government and implement solutions across the country.

After the event's culmination and the end of the online portion, participants of the roundtable stuck around to further discuss policy diffusion of just climate policy and what cities' need to do for successful implementation. What was made clear was that framing of the issues is of the utmost importance. Policy pitches need to be rooted in uplifting rhetoric, moving away from the doom and gloom often associated with climate communication.