

# THE STATE OF LOCAL CLIMATE PLANNING

OBSERVATIONS BY LOCAL CLIMATE ACTION  
PRACTITIONERS

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# PREFACE

This statement was drafted in fall 2019—prior to the emergence of COVID-19, prior to the renewed reckoning with structural racism following the murder of George Floyd, prior to the deeply unequal economic impacts of the pandemic, and prior to the 2020 elections and their aftermath that laid bare the fragility of democratic norms. As of March 2021, signs of light are appearing at the end of the pandemic tunnel, but even a relatively rapid economic recovery is unlikely to lead to a resumption of business as usual. Personal and community priorities have shifted, a new federal administration is vigorously linking climate change with economic justice, municipal and state budgets are upended, and the global geopolitical order is evolving rapidly. This is a moment to re-assess, consider where we have been as a local climate movement, what we have learned, and how we might proceed in the new circumstances ahead. Over the last 18 months, we have heard increasing awareness and discussion around many of the observations outlined below, but we have seen only fragments of these sentiments in action and in writing. In the spirit of collective learning, we share this statement as an expression of the state of the local government climate field in 2019, and we welcome dialogue about what no longer resonates and what may be more true than ever.

# INTRODUCTION

## WHO WE ARE

We are current and former local government practitioners who work on local climate action planning from a variety of roles and organizational positions, both within and outside of local government. We share the point of view that local governments have critical roles to play in addressing climate change. We also agree that the status quo approach to local climate work needs to shift and that open dialogue within the community of practice is necessary. We have been directly involved in creating the prevailing model of local climate action, and we see an obligation and an opportunity to co-create a next framework, in collaboration with known and new partners.

*We are practitioners who seek open dialogue within and beyond the current community of local climate practice.*

## WHAT WE BELIEVE

The local climate action movement has plateaued, in part because the current model is not sufficient to drive change as far and as quickly as necessary. The current paradigm is not centering community values, it is not changing systems, and it is getting communities neither to their climate targets nor to a host of community goals.

*The prevailing approach to local climate planning is not sufficient to drive change as far and as quickly as necessary.*

We believe that climate change is an extreme expression of failing systems. The untenable growth in fossil fuel use is the result of an extractive economic model that relies on concentrating power and money among a few and shifting the negative impacts to those with the least. The widening gap between rich and poor reflects this dynamic, as does the profound injustice that climate impacts fall hardest on those who did the least to cause them. We believe that the next generation of local climate action must be a collective effort, centered around people and values and focused on opportunities for dramatic systems change.

Local governments deserve credit for engaging seriously on climate change at a time when few institutions cared. The work that has been done to date has created the basis for understanding the potential contributions of local communities to the causes and solutions for

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climate change. We've also learned much about what approaches are useful while attempting to understand complex systems with best available data. These achievements are significant and can help to move the practice forward. We now have the opportunity to learn from the work to date and evolve the practice of local climate work.

## **OUR INVITATION**

While we see a clear need and have a vision for the shifts ahead in local climate work, we do not have all the answers for how to get there. We seek to invite open, reflective, and inclusive conversations on where we have been, what we have learned, and how we might evolve our collective work. We hope to spark discussions with others to explore questions such as:

- What have we learned from a decade plus of local climate planning and implementation? What do we know? What do we not know?
- What course correction is required? What needs to be let go of, carried forward, and built new?
- Who have we been engaging, both in our professions and in our communities? What people and institutions will be needed for the work ahead?
- What capacities are necessary at the field level in order to function adaptively?
- What skills, knowledge, and tools will local governments need going forward? If it is data, what is the data in service to?
- How do we rethink our governance models to better support planning and implementation of the work we can now see needs to be done?
- What are the next frameworks for this work? What is the process for building, testing, and scaling new approaches?

The following observations and provocations are intended to spark dialogue. We welcome discussions with others to identify areas of alignment and divergence, and we encourage insights, objections, and proposals for better organizing approaches.

# HOW WE GOT HERE

**Since its origins in the 1990s, the mainstream practice of local climate planning has been built upon local GHG emissions targets, inventories and tracking**—a practice that mirrored the approach taken by nation-states and has been repeatedly cemented in international agreements. Taking cues from the Kyoto Protocol, this model came into use among a few dozen U.S. cities by the early 2000s, spread slowly over the next handful of years, and then spread rapidly and widely as a result of the 2009 ARRA funding for the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grants, which specified that municipalities have an “energy plan” and identified energy savings, carbon emissions reduction, and job creation as key metrics. Organizing climate work around technical analysis of GHGs has contributed to establishing the legitimacy of the local government role in addressing climate change, but we are finding that it has also distorted the landscape of opportunity and distracted local government leaders and practitioners.

**In an era that emphasized metrics and equated good management with good measurement, constructing local climate action on a foundation of GHG inventories, local targets, technical analysis, and tracking helped establish local communities as credible actors on climate change.**

The first generation of local climate plans and GHG inventories clarified the significance of energy supply, buildings, transportation systems, and land use patterns as key systems that strongly shape local GHG emissions. These plans, coupled with mayoral commitment platforms and the erosion of momentum for federal climate policy in the U.S., led to a gradual recognition among nations of the opportunity for local action on climate to advance their goals. This manifested in international climate diplomacy in the Paris Agreement, which recognizes the role of “non-Party stakeholders,” for the first time specifically acknowledging cities and other subnational authorities as essential contributors. This change also marked the point where the role of voluntary reporting and disclosure changed from a good-faith exercise that informed local policy development to an expectation of frequent reporting of detailed inventory data to support international standardization.

Despite this deserved recognition, the past decade plus of mayoral commitments, local climate plans, and intensive city-to-city sharing of best practices has not yet led to rapid transformational GHG reductions.

Over the same span of time that recognition of the role of local governments has grown, even the best resourced, most ambitious, and longest-active cities have struggled to get on track to achieve their long-term GHG goals. Networks of local government climate practitioners enable fast, candid information exchange, and for more than a decade, mayors in increasing numbers have articulated compelling commitments to take aggressive climate action. Nonetheless, with rare exceptions, virtually no communities are on track for their GHG goals. The incremental reductions that have been gained in some places are often attributable to factors independent of local government actions and cannot be relied upon to deliver deeper reductions.

Why this is the case deserves wide reflection and discussion, as do questions of the opportunity cost of time spent on inventories and analysis and whether local GHG targets are a helpful metric in the first place. As a starting point, we hypothesize that the current landscape results from a combination of:

1. **Focusing on effects, rather than on causes;**
2. **Taking siloed, technology-oriented approaches;**
3. **Inadequate governance structures and equitable community partnerships; and**
4. **Limited practice of learning from our collective experience and course correcting.**

The following observations explore these challenges in more detail, focusing on the role of GHG analysis and inventories while also recognizing connections to the broader paradigm of which they are a part.

## 1. FOCUSING ON EFFECTS, RATHER THAN CAUSES

Local government climate work has centered local GHG goals and made it difficult to see connections to the issues that local communities prioritize. This work has also focused on the legal authorities of local governments, yet these authorities have limited influence over the most important systems that need to change.

- **The root causes of most local GHG emissions are embedded in systems that are larger than an individual jurisdiction.**  
Despite the fundamental mismatch between local government authorities and the scale of systems that largely determine GHGs, local governments have adopted local GHG goals and scrupulously tracked and reported on local emissions.

- **Local governments increasingly acknowledge that they cannot achieve their GHG goals by using their own authorities alone**, and they are wrestling with ways to influence decisions by other policymakers, the private sector, and other major institutions. Practitioners experience tension between the obligation to use the levers that they do control and the need to contribute to larger changes that they do not control, though in some cases can influence. The emergence of multi-jurisdictional regional collaboratives has started to address the lack of regional governance to support collaborative action, but these nascent efforts are not yet adequate to address the scale of the problem.
- **At a programmatic level, getting cities out of frequent GHG inventory work frees up staff time for more consequential activities.** This may include engagement across local government agencies to embed climate work into their initiatives around affordable housing, public health, community development, and economic development. It could also free up resources to engage with community leaders to build relationships and collaboratively define problems, develop and implement solutions, and build capacity to grow the climate movement beyond sustainability offices.
- **Local governments are uniquely positioned to foster social cohesion and strengthen democratic institutions that are essential to addressing the extractive systems that are the root causes of climate change, not just the end GHG emissions.** Many of the root causes are hidden from a traditional GHG inventory. Other lenses and a broadened view, like Consumption-Based Emissions Inventory and systems analysis, provide more visibility into economic and social systems that are responsible for the underlying drivers of GHG-emitting activities.

## 2. TAKING TECHNOCRATIC AND SILOED APPROACHES

- **The major barriers to climate action are political and socio-cultural, but current practice emphasizes technical analysis and solutions, positions GHG inventories as foundational, and centers the work around GHG reductions.** The local government climate field has overemphasized emissions inventorying and reporting. Initially, emissions inventories were important to reveal the sources and drivers of GHG emissions. Communities still have an interest in understanding their footprint as a starting point, including understanding their consumption-

based emissions. However, focus on this singular metric can result in the exclusion of more granular, up-to-date, and actionable metrics and information, and it has served to discourage practitioners from even looking for other metrics. GHG inventories are a resource-intensive yet invariably low-quality exercise that generates a badly lagging indicator of progress. (By low-quality we don't mean poorly done or shoddy—simply that inventories are inherently inaccurate, with many estimations and complex causal factors that rarely produce insights beyond broad strokes.)

Requirements around inventories imply that accuracy and adherence to process steps add value, but there is no evidence that “better” GHG inventories lead to more effective climate work, and there is abundant evidence that the focus on inventories and reporting takes nontrivial resources away from other priority work.

Another unavoidable byproduct of focusing on local GHG inventories is the practice of comparing cities, which reveals a lot about variability in inventory methodology and existing conditions—electricity supply, building stock, historic land use patterns, climate, and weather—but very little about the effectiveness of climate action. Moreover, focusing on local GHGs diverts attention from the ultimate need to address global GHGs and each community's role in reducing global GHGs.

- **Working against a baseline inventory has led cities to work incrementally and in technical silos.**

The focus on incremental goals against a baseline inventory (X% reduction below year Y by year Z) seemed appropriate for short-term climate action goals (i.e., for a 2020 horizon). However, it results in seeking low-hanging fruit and reaching for convenient levers, rather than assessing the fuller system and mapping a strategy to accomplish the transformational change that is required to get to sustainable GHG levels. It has led to a climate action framework that focuses on change within systems as they currently exist rather than developing systems change thinking and strategies. A contrasting approach would be to envision a local community in a carbon neutral world and set milestones to achieving that vision.

- **Climate efforts have often been siloed exercises that are rarely integrated with existing strategies and often lack contextualization with mayoral and community priorities such as jobs, affordability, and housing.**

Climate planning has typically been led by sustainability staff and issue experts with varying degrees of linkage to other citywide plans and agencies, despite widespread intention and efforts to recognize those connections. Building shared



ownership across local governments will change the function of sustainability staff and will expand the focus to the underlying challenges: how to allocate the benefits and burdens of the needed investments, including who pays for what. Billions of dollars are at stake, even for mid-size communities, and addressing the financial implications will require an integrated, multi-department effort.

- **The communities and professional fields involved to date are relatively homogeneous, making it more difficult to achieve widespread action.**

The local governments that are currently engaged are politically homogeneous and less likely to build a groundswell of momentum nationally. Influencing higher-level policy will require the involvement of more and different communities, particularly if it is to be centered on people and the range of circumstances they face, from high-tech boomtowns to coal-mining communities. Similarly, influencing major local government policies and investments will require more and different professional disciplines beyond sustainability offices. Climate plans have typically been developed by sustainability offices with a range of involvement and ownership from other local agencies. While adopting standalone climate plans has strongly signaled elected official support for addressing climate, it has also sometimes left climate isolated from other core local government functions and disciplines as well as from community-based organizations focused on justice, affordability, health, and jobs. Changing systems will require the involvement of community groups, businesses, and institutions, not just policy change by local governments.

### **3. INADEQUATE GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES AND EQUITABLE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS**

- **Practitioners express a growing determination to center climate work around people and equity but are wrestling with what this looks like in practice.**

While public process is a standard component of local climate plan development, community members have typically been consulted—asked to review and comment—rather than invited to be at the table to co-design the solutions and determine how those solutions are implemented. For policy to respond to the needs of frontline communities, the communities themselves need to be involved in naming their needs and setting the course of action in collaboration with practitioners. Moreover, the prevailing approach centers around GHG emissions, a limited metric that does not capture the disproportionate impacts of the climate crisis on frontline communities. Other indicators and frameworks to evaluate

climate equity are emerging, some more comprehensively than others. Fortunately, practices are emerging from collaborations with climate justice communities, with lessons learned about the new sorts of capacities that are needed to reinvent climate work in partnership with community. Multi-jurisdictional regional collaboratives are also emerging to start addressing the scale of the issue through peer learning, resource sharing, joint planning, and approaches to integrate emissions reductions with climate change adaptation and resilience planning.

## 4. LIMITED PRACTICE OF LEARNING FROM OUR COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE AND COURSE CORRECTING

- ***The field of local government climate work has not yet established a practice and mechanism for collective learning from experience and course correction.***

Climate action is still a relatively young field, with few veteran practitioners. As new people enter the field, they look to established methodologies. The assumptions and processes established over a decade ago have not changed significantly, even as cities discover their limitations. The field has mostly stayed on the same course, with minimal mechanisms in place for adaptive management, course correction, field scale review and open dialogue. Sustainability staff struggle with the dilemma between continuing a methodology that elected officials have accepted in the past, even while recognizing its shortcomings, versus risking introducing new methodologies or frameworks that require re-justifying their work and potentially appearing to contradict or undermine their previous work. Researchers and non-governmental organizations have not felt encouraged to explore the hypotheses and findings at which they are arriving, such as to what extent cities are on track to achieve climate goals, what emissions reductions might be attributed to, what degree of city-to-city replication is taking place, and what scaling model(s) we are observing. As a young field, this lack of established learning practice is perhaps not surprising, and we can benefit from comparing our course-correction practices with those of mature fields such as public health.

# WHAT IS IT TIME FOR?

**The local climate field has reached a point in its growth and maturation that calls for an evolution of its foundational assumptions and practices. With more than a decade of learning and experience to call on, we envision an intensive multi-stakeholder assessment process to inform a next generation of local climate work.**

Fortunately, the level of political and personal engagement has never been higher. Veteran practitioners are starting to explore new approaches, and newcomers are open-minded about new norms. We are entering a period of transition, and alternative approaches to track and report progress are beginning to emerge that move beyond city-by-city annual GHG inventories. These approaches are not yet in widespread use, but examples are surfacing of communities that are shifting how they track progress, such as:

- From focusing singularly on GHGs to centering people and equity and from reporting top-line GHG numbers to reporting leading indicators and activity metrics;
- From individual jurisdiction GHG inventories and plans to regional or metro-scale data and action;
- From costly, time-consuming bespoke inventories to utilizing new tools that simplify the process to get to a first-order inventory;
- From responsibility held by disparate, individual local governments to state and federal support for climate services and capacity building programs; and
- From frameworks originally designed for national and international policy to ones designed to support local processes, regional activation, and opportunities for new governance models to address climate change.

To be clear, tracking GHGs is not without value. It provides a periodic opportunity—and obligation—to call attention to progress and challenges in addressing climate change. It also sheds light on the scope and scale of the challenges and the trends over time. But the deeper value of an emissions inventory is as an engagement and accountability tool for leadership and the community.

Moreover, while many of the observations and recommendations shared here are about GHG inventories, it's not only about inventories. If we manage what we measure, changing the metrics means changing how we do climate action.

*It is time to support a paradigm shift around climate work and engage in dialogue around what we have learned*

It is time to support a paradigm shift around climate work and engage in dialogue around what we have learned; what it would look like to center climate work around community priorities; how decision-making can be shared with frontline communities; what the unique and essential roles of local government are in contributing to change; and how we can move from incremental progress to transformational change.

Our experience is that these conversations have begun to happen sporadically, but there is not currently an open dialogue among and between practitioners and organizations in the field. It is urgent that we create this space, and we are interested in doing so. These conversations will allow us to align around a shared re-norming effort that spans organizations, sectors, scales, and points of entry—including a range of people and perspectives across the local climate system—in order to collaboratively generate new approaches.

## WE WELCOME DIALOGUE

The work ahead does not live with a single organization or small group of people: We hope these observations support reflection, spark dialogue, and fuel an appetite to work in new directions with new partners. We are eager to engage with longstanding colleagues and new collaborators to co-create new models for local climate work, and all authors welcome further dialogue on the observations shared here and opportunities to evolve local and regional climate work.

For general information on the discussions that resulted in this document, contact City Scale at [info@cityscale.org](mailto:info@cityscale.org).