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SHORT ARTICLE



Projects, participation and planning across boundaries in Göttingen

Paul Fenton^a  and Fanny Paschek^b

ABSTRACT

This paper explores efforts to coordinate strategies promoting sustainable development – with specific focus on mobility and transport in climate change mitigation – across administrative boundaries in the city and county of Göttingen, Germany. The paper questions the possibility to develop and align strategic objectives and implementation across administrative boundaries when relying on short-term project funds. The experiences of key stakeholders in Göttingen are presented, with reference to empirical data from a document and interview study. Results indicate that reliance on short-term, project-based funding from external sources offers both opportunities and challenges for locally and regionally integrated strategy formulation and implementation. Five factors shaping the strategy space of actors are used to frame the analysis, with findings suggesting the need for further research on how local authorities overcome capacity and resource limitations, particularly with respect to complex challenges such as climate change.

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KEYWORDS

City and county administrations; capacity; climate change; sustainable mobility; transport; funding; participatory processes

INTRODUCTION

Across Europe, local and regional authorities with limited statutory resources face a diverse range of challenges. A major concern is the need to address complex, trans-boundary issues such as climate change and the pursuit of sustainable development. Cooperation over administrative boundaries may be essential to ensure a transition towards local and regional transportation systems that have reduced climate impacts and support broader sustainability objectives.

This paper fills a gap in the literature by illustrating how local and regional authorities use project funding to support initiatives to mitigate climate change, with a particular focus on the role of mobility and transport. Transport accounts for around 25% of greenhouse gas emissions in the European Union (EU) – almost 73% is caused by road transport, which is also the main cause of air pollution in urban areas (EU, 2017).

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Central to the focus of the study is the question: Does use of project funding enable the coordination of strategies and policies for sustainable mobility and transport across boundaries and scales? To answer it, the paper draws on source material concerning projects addressing sustainable mobility and climate change from the city and county of Göttingen, Germany.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Sustainable development typically refers to the need to balance the interests of current and future generations and address economic, environmental and social concerns (World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), 1987). However, transitions to sustainable development require a vast range of interacting and complementary measures, both within and between territorial units, to address complex, trans-boundary challenges such as climate change (Gibbs & Lintz, 2016; Pereira, Karpouzoglou, Doshi, & Frantzeskaki, 2015).

Successful transitions predicate a need to coordinate strategies and policies across administrative, jurisdictional or political boundaries (Gibbs & Lintz, 2016). However, in many contexts, coordination and integration are complicated by existing institutional arrangements, which may result in divergent approaches to implementation that undermine strategic objectives at the local and regional levels (den Exter, Lenhart, & Kern, 2015).

The choice of governing approach is thus strategically significant, reflecting and influencing the ways in which actors can understand their situation, potential alternative approaches and mobilize their organizations (and other stakeholders) towards collaborative action (Howlett & Ramesh, 2016). Fenton (2016a) claims an actor's ability to translate these values into action is mediated by five factors – capacity, mandate, resources, scope and will – that condition the relative size of an actor's 'strategy space'.

Capacity has been widely discussed in the literature on sustainable development, particularly with regard to municipalities (Aguilar & Santos, 2011; Evans, Joas, Sundback, & Theobald, 2005). The term has multiple connotations and institutional and social characteristics (Evans et al., 2005) that are influenced by competencies and capabilities (Howlett & Ramesh, 2016). The availability of resources plays an important role in determining the capacity of actors (Jänicke & Weidner, 1995), yet so does their level of commitment or will (Evans et al., 2005), their mandate and relationship with other levels of government (Lo, 2014), and the ways in which they define the scope of their processes (Fenton, 2016a).

Efforts to address capacity deficits often involve attempts to engage stakeholders in participatory forms of governing (Healey, 1997). These are frequently seen as a low-cost alternative to other approaches (Howlett & Ramesh, 2016). External financing of projects, e.g., through national or EU funding programmes, provides another opportunity for municipalities to increase the resources and capacity at their disposal.

However, there have been relatively few attempts to assess the relationship between such funding and capacity (e.g., Bachtler, Mendez, & Oraže, 2014; Milio, 2007). There is thus a need to consider the implications of using project-based financing to address capacity deficits, particularly if and when such projects make use of participatory forms of governing. Moreover, it is important to examine the consequences project-based funding arrangements may have on the coordination and alignment of strategic objectives and implementation across administrative boundaries.

CASE SELECTION AND METHODS

With greenhouse gas emissions from road transportation a critical challenge in climate change mitigation, Göttingen was identified following a database search for medium-sized European cities with comparatively low levels of car use (cf. Fenton, 2016b, 2017a; Fenton & Gustafsson,

2015). The shift from fossil-fuelled transportation to more sustainable forms of mobility is often conceived as an urban challenge, in part due to the impacts of such transport on environmental quality, public health and spatial planning (Fenton, 2016b).

However, transport flows within urban areas are also influenced by regional and supra-regional dynamics and the availability of infrastructure that may enable sustainable mobility, or induce transportation using motor vehicles running on fossil fuels (Fenton, 2016b, 2017b). It is thus important to consider urban mobility within its wider regional context.

The city of Göttingen (population 120,000) is the capital of the county of Göttingen (population 250,000) in Lower Saxony, Germany. The county is traversed by national road and rail infrastructure (north–south/south–east/south–west), with county and minor roads servicing conurbations to the west and east of the city (Figure 1). There are significant daily commuter flows into and out of the city from the surrounding region and other parts of Germany.

The city is thus a regional hub reporting high levels of sustainable mobility in transportation, whereas the county population is spread across service towns and villages, many of which are not connected to the rail network and where cars are the predominant mode of transport. This pattern is not unique – in Germany, the modal split of sustainable modes of transport is lower at the county and regional levels than in cities (Infas/DLR, 2010).

Addressing this context, the research project was initially designed to study the coordination of strategies and policies for sustainable mobility between the city and county administrations. This scope was widened to address climate change strategies that were developed previously, and thus informed the development, in terms of both process and content, of mobility strategies (Table 1).

Data was gathered using qualitative research methods. A wide range of documents (Table 2) were studied and used to prepare a semi-structured interview guide for interviews with stakeholders,

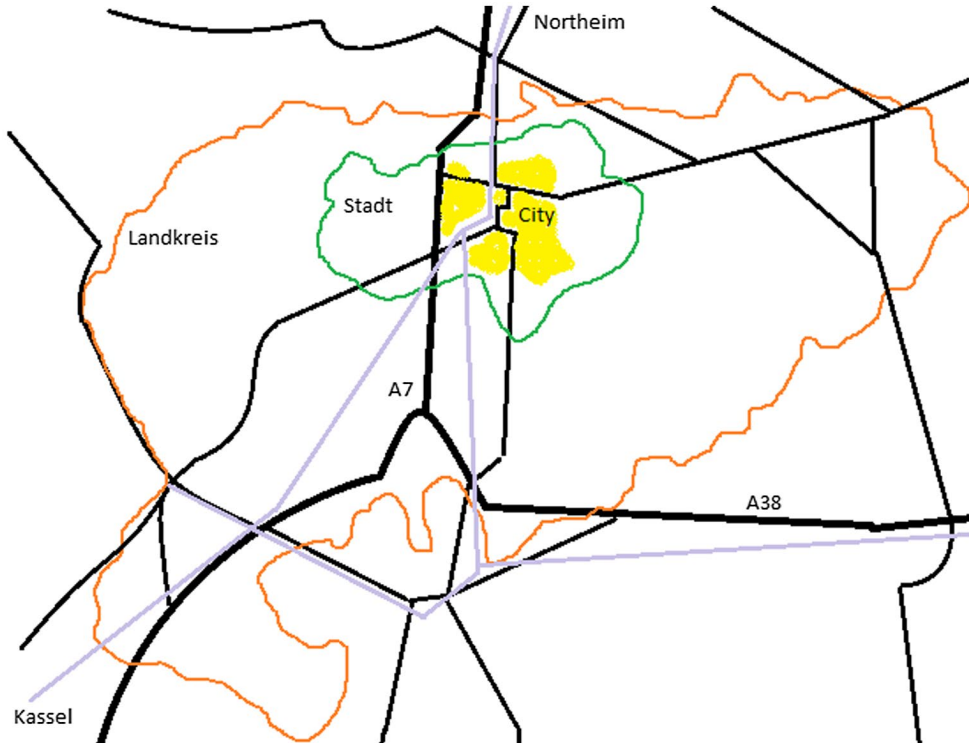


Figure 1. The City of Göttingen: territories of the city (*Stadt*; green) and county (*Landkreis*; red) along with road (black) and rail (purple) infrastructure. Source: Authors.

Table 1. Examples of recent climate change-related projects across the city and county of Göttingen, Germany.

Project	Master plan: 100% Climate Protection	Climate plan: Traffic development	Demonstrating electromobility
Focus	City	City	County
Funding duration	2012–16	2011–16	2013–16
Scope of the project	Development of a municipal zero-emission strategy with specific interest in the required urban–rural cooperation to achieve this	Traffic-development framework detailing the strategic direction and some concrete projects for the next 15 years	Sustainable improvement of rural–urban connectivity via electromobility
Funders	Federal Ministry for Environment (up to 80% of the costs)	State Ministry for Environment, Energy and Climate Change Lower Saxony Federal Ministry for Environment (50% of the costs)	Federal Ministry for Economy and Energy (€2.3 million)
Aspects funded	Development of the master plan Personnel costs for master-plan management Material costs related to public relations efforts and civil society involvement	Plan development costs	Trials of e-mobility in practice including: Installation of 13 charging stations Purchase of 20 electric cars; 13 pedelecs Ten car-sharing stations with charging points 15–20 smart grid-integrated Wallbox EV charging stations 20 cycle charging facilities
Conditions of award	Development of a municipal strategy for the reduction of CO ₂ emissions by 95% by 2050	Plan to contain a climate-protection component: Göttingen committed to a 40% reduction in CO ₂ emissions by 2020	Trials to inform strategy formulation for the long-term economic sustainability of rural–urban regional e-mobility based on the research insights gained and the business models developed via the pilot projects

Source: Authors.

Table 2. Empirical data: examples of the documents studied and an overview of the interviews.

Document study	
Actor	Document
Stadt Göttingen	Climate Protection Göttingen 2008–2020 (Integrated Climate Concept for the Urban Area of Göttingen, 2010)
	Master plan 100% Climate Protection Göttingen Final Report Phase I (2013)
	Göttingen's Climate Workshops – The Projects You Imagine (2013)
	Master plan 100% Climate Protection Göttingen – The Key Results of the Final Report (2015)
Landkreis Göttingen	Integrated Climate Concept for Göttingen County (2013)
	Website and brochures for the 'Emobilität vorleben' (2014, 2015) project
Other, e.g., civil society	
LK Argus Kassel GmbH Difu (German Institute for Urbanism)	Climate Plan Traffic Development (Transport Plan, 2014)
	Epperlein and Holst (2015)
SRL (German Association for Urban, Regional and Rural Planning)	Köss, Leitner, & Volpert (2015)
Interview study	
Interviews	Organizations/entities
Administration (civil servants)	Two municipal departments; one county department
	Form of response
	Three individuals interviews (two from the city, one from the county); one written response (county)
Political party	Green Party
	Written group (four persons) response
Civil society	Researchers (energy and transport)
	Two individual interviews
	Total
	4

Source: Authors.

who were identified as key respondents due to their role and expertise during the document study. A total of five individual interviews were held in May 2015, and two written responses were received (Table 2). All interviewees were granted anonymity. The interviews were transcribed and sorted by theme before the analysis presented in this paper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study confirmed the presence of challenges to the coordination and integration of strategic objectives across administrative boundaries. These included inaction or unclear signals at the state or federal levels; political whims or inconsistency concerning cooperation and strategic objectives (both within and between administrations); contextual factors, such as variations in the provision of and access to services in urban and rural areas; and limitations to financial and human resources. In the following discussion, examples of the results are analysed with reference to the relevant scientific literature.

The coordination of strategies and policies across boundaries and scales is essential when addressing complex problems of sustainable development such as climate change and transport planning (Gibbs & Lintz, 2016). The case of Göttingen illustrates the challenges city and county administrations face when attempting such coordination using project funding. These challenges are influenced by actors operating at multiple levels, that is, within the administrations' territories, horizontally across boundaries and between territories, and vertically in collaboration with state, federal and supranational levels (den Exter et al., 2015).

The following sections provide examples of key themes emerging from the results and are framed with reference to a model conditioned by five factors (Fenton, 2016a) suggesting the ability of municipal or regional administrations to address challenges such as climate change and sustainable transport.

Capacity

Interviewees stated that the institutional capacity of the administrations is constrained due to budget limitations and duplication of tasks (e.g., studies addressing overlapping themes or data, or confusion and uncertainty concerning roles and responsibilities; cf. Milio, 2007). Respondents said there was therefore scope to improve city–county coordination and cooperation in order to reduce capacity deficits in both administrations; such improvement would require institutional learning in both organizations, yet would enhance overall institutional capacity (cf. Evans et al., 2005; den Exter et al., 2015).

Respondents also emphasized that although external funding is used to increase capacity for short periods, there is a risk that projects are not integrated into core operations and budgets, leaving capacity vulnerable to fluctuations (e.g., high personnel turnover, project implementation employees or consultants on short-term contracts) depending on the availability of project funds. This also involves a risk that key individuals become trapped in application cycles, i.e., that the continual search for funding impedes implementation of the tasks the funding is intended to ensure, rather than acquiring and making use of new skills.

Mandate

Local institutional arrangements influence the mandate of the city and council administrations and the extent to which they cooperate. In 1965, the territory of the city was enlarged (enabling urban development) in exchange for the provision of services to the municipalities in the county, which are renegotiated annually. Interviewees suggest these arrangements result in confusion and cooperation, and that departmentalism – e.g., budgetary contests or the ways that cross-cutting themes or topics are exclusively the domain of particular units or individuals – within both

administrations hinders internal and external cooperation (e.g., as such departments or individuals may choose, or may not be allowed to, involve others in strategy development processes) (cf. Fenton & Gustafsson, 2015; Milio, 2007).

Various initiatives, such as annual thematic workshops, aim to improve the coordination between the city and the county and, thereby, clarify questions related to mandate. This suggests that actors within the two administrations are aware that 'cooperation as a particular form of interaction can support finding the best solutions' (Gibbs & Lintz, 2016, p. 926) and to identify 'new opportunities for joint-funding and joint-learning' to enhance capacities (den Exter et al., 2015, p. 1077). The coordination of public transport was said to be particularly complex, dependent on the integration of public transport services between the city-run urban bus network, the regional public transport system, and the national rail and bus providers.

Resources

Interviewees considered external funding as a prerequisite for many processes, as strategies and budgets are not aligned (both within and between administrations), and uncertainty concerning funding inhibits implementation. This risks individualizing and decentralizing governance within organizations (cf. den Exter et al., 2015). Nevertheless, when project funding is secured, it plays a vital role in increasing capacity – in terms of skills or expertise as well as human and financial resources – and facilitating action (at least for the duration of the project). As noted above, 'a focus on regional cooperation may improve capacities to apply for EU funding' or other funds (den Exter et al., 2015, p. 1077).

The projects shown in Table 1 offer examples of actions that interviewees considered unlikely to have occurred without external funding. The form and content of funded projects and their related outputs may reflect not only local needs but also the conditions of funding programmes. However, the development of projects is reliant on individuals proactively taking the initiative to respond to funding calls (cf. Evans et al., 2005; Fenton & Gustafsson, 2015).

Scope

A reliance on external funding means that the impetus for climate change action, and the scope of the planned measures, primarily comes from supra-local levels (cf. den Exter et al., 2015). Many funding programmes advocate the use of participatory forms of governing in strategic planning to widen the scope. The utility of participatory forms of governing demands on the issue at stake (Howlett & Ramesh, 2016). In Göttingen, public participation is evident in both strategic planning and project implementation. For example, a well-structured participatory process involved a wide range of stakeholder groups in the design of the city's climate strategy. In a parallel project, Climate Workshop, local stakeholders were invited to submit ideas on how to address climate change in the city, many of which have been implemented by civil society groups on a voluntary basis (e.g., the establishment of new businesses inspired by the project). At the county level, recent work on electromobility has involved iterative design of business models with one rural community (Table 1). Such examples illustrate the possibility of using project funding to achieve implementation and develop externalized networks or services that may have the potential to be self-sustaining, rather than to finance processes to develop strategies that are themselves dependent on more funding for implementation. Such externalization is observed in other contexts (den Exter et al., 2015).

Will

Political will influences dynamics at both the local and supra-local levels. Interviewees suggested that politicians were sympathetic to the need for coordinated action on climate change

and broadly supportive of sustainable mobility, yet the allocation of resources (and the need for external funding) indicates a low status for these issues (cf. Fenton, 2017b). External funding can and does provide opportunities to increase levels of engagement and will within and between administrations and in the local society. Delegating work to committed individuals and groups in the community provides a complement to city and county actions at no or low additional costs (cf. den Exter et al., 2015). However, such activities may offer limited utility in terms of their strategic impact.

CONCLUSIONS

Analysing the case of Göttingen using the five-factor framework illustrates how limited resources and capacity deficits, along with the duplication of tasks and activities, complicate the governing of transboundary challenges such as sustainable mobility and climate change. In response to the paper's research question – Does use of project funding enable the coordination of strategies and policies for sustainable mobility and transport across boundaries and scales? – project funding may offer local and regional authorities opportunities to develop institutional capacities by fostering collaboration across administrative boundaries and encourage the inclusion of broad stakeholder groups via participatory planning.

The study also finds that project-based funding may impede institutional capacity-building beyond the short-term funding periods. Funding that emphasizes strategy development may not secure the financing of implementation, and funding that secures investments may be disconnected from strategic objectives or respond mainly to the funder's objectives. Capacity and resources are not decisive influences on municipal and regional action to combat climate change and promote sustainable transport, but are supported by the creative use of mandate and the will of participating actors.

The use of participatory processes is often a condition of funding and provides the opportunity to develop a variety of new forms of network and action, both within and across territories. The case of Göttingen provides interesting examples, resulting in networks and businesses that contribute to governing for sustainable mobility and climate change mitigation.

In sum, the use of external funding and participatory approaches to fill capacity deficits has the potential to facilitate the coordination and alignment of strategies across boundaries. However, there is a need for more systematic coordination between administrations and deeper integration of strategic objectives into the core operations of city and county administrations. More comprehensive studies may extend the scope of the current literature and increase the understanding of this important topic.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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