



Can local policies relieve climate activism fatigue? Germany's case (Episode 26)

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Climate advocates face many barriers to progress: activism fatigue, misinformation, and a growing skepticism about global cooperation. Can countries get the public more engaged? Host Monica de Bolle is joined by Clemens Helbach (German Embassy, Washington) to discuss how Germany is pursuing local community actions, such as wetland protection and drone-assisted forest rehabilitation. The goal? To reawaken public interest by improving health, safety, and lives across the country.

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MONICA DE BOLLE: In the wake of the 10th anniversary of the Paris agreements, climate advocacy has fallen by the wayside. Activism fatigue, misinformation, and indifference has weakened the conversation around the urgency of climate change. Countries are wondering how to get the public engaged again.

Germany, in an effort to capture its citizens' attention, is turning its focus inward to local policy, such as stopping soil erosion near an annual music festival and drone-assisted forest rehabilitation.

You're listening to an episode of Policy for the Planet, a podcast exploring the global response to the climate crisis. I'm your host Monica de Bolle, a senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics.

To help us dive in deeper into Germany's local climate policies, I'm joined by:

CLEMENS HELBACH: Clemens Helbach, counselor for environment, climate and urban development at the German Embassy in Washington, D.C.



MONICA DE BOLLE: Clemens and his team focus on how local legislation can have bigger and better benefits by restarting conversations about climate change in a sustainable way.

Hi, Clemens. It's a pleasure to have you on Policy for the Planet. Thank you so much for accepting our invitation to do this episode. And I'm going to jump right in and ask you sort of as a kind of overarching question about the current state of climate discussions or the perceived lack of engagement that there seems to be amongst the public at large.

Do you see that in the same way? Do you think that there is some disengagement happening? And if there is, what is your sense of what's causing it?

CLEMENS HELBACH: First of all, thank you for having me on this podcast and for the invitation. I think to answer your question, it's worth taking a look back. And since we're celebrating the 10 year anniversary of the Paris Agreement this year, maybe we take a look back at 2015 when the Paris Agreement was adopted. So back then there was at least a perceived up for climate action and the climate debate as a whole.

And in the aftermath of the Paris Agreement, this movement grew even stronger with Fridays for Future and other movements basically taking on the streets and becoming stronger, becoming louder and pressuring governments around the globe on doing more on the planet. So I believe this is one of the reasons why at least the perceived lack of engagement of public engagement these days on climate issues is happening. In addition to COVID-19, there's of course the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and other conflicts such as in the Middle East. So that led to a shift in the focus of the public, but also of politics. And it's interesting to observe also private sector sort of shifted their policies and their attitudes.

With the current administration in the US, the focus on climate has basically vanished, at least in terms of the administration. Of course, there's a lot going on on state and local level, which is fantastic. In Germany, we did have a lot of coverage, news coverage in newspapers, also on television on the just concluded climate cop in Brazil. So there's still public attention around climate. But when you take a look at the small island states, for example, for them, the climate discussion is a matter of survival. So I guess there's no lack of attention or focus on the climate question when you take a look at these countries.

MONICA DE BOLLE: I appreciate the fact that you've taken us back 10 years to 2015 because indeed this is the year of the 10th anniversary of the Paris Agreement. And it's



kind of unfortunate in a way that we've seen this kind of dying down of interest in the climate agenda. But you mentioned Germany and Germany of course has been doing a lot of really interesting things. Can you tell us a little bit about these recent approaches that Germany has undertaken towards climate change, how things have evolved?

And can you also give us some of these concrete examples or initiatives that the German government and local governments have been involved in?

CLEMENS HELBACH: Sure. I mean, there's of course this whole picture. would call it the bigger picture of climate policy in Germany and also in Europe because lots of climate policies in Germany are Europe and EU driven, as you know. Take the emission trading system or CBAM as an example. But I mean, the overall situation in Germany is not that bad as it may seem these days, since we're talking about a lack of attention that doesn't necessarily translate into bad results.

We're right now at 60% renewable energies, for example, in our energy-electricity mix, and we do not have any blackouts other than some people might suggest. But I believe it's worth taking a look at the local level.

So in order to get people back to being engaged on climate action and climate policies as a whole, it's worth localized climate action and making it more tangible. So a few weeks back, I took part in an event at Carnegie and one person said that the Inflation Reduction Act in the US was kind of dismantled or rolled back in large parts because there was no one there to defend it. And I believe that's a very true point. You do have the necessity of communication, of good communication when you pursue client policies. And I think that is one lesson learned. You need to communicate well.

We know the politics around it, but at the same time, you have a higher demand for or a higher need for good communication. And to get back to your question, of course, leaving aside those bigger picture policies, I would like to put a focus on a, yeah, let's call it local climate action policy, the so-called Federal Action Plan on nature-based solutions for climate and biodiversity. That's a very long title. In German, it's the Aktionprogramm Natürlicher Klimaschutz or ANK. I will stick with this acronym, ANK, for now.

So the ANK is a program that's basically focusing on climate action on a local level, especially concerning forests, wetlands, river sheds, and green spaces in urban areas as well. So it was adopted in 2023 by the former traffic light coalition and now the current German government and the German federal minister Schneider decided to



continue this program throughout this legislature and beyond. it has a budget of roughly 3.5 billion euros for the next three to four years, which is a lot. mean, of course, it started in 2023, but it's sort of planned to continue through 2028, 2029 currently.

And it takes, as I said, a focus on local climate action. And I would just name three very concrete projects in order to do the storytelling which helps getting people engaged or keeping people engaged in climate action. So the first one being, has a connection with the Wacken Open Air. For those of you who don't know the Wacken Open Air, it's a big thing in Germany. It's a large open air music festival that's taking place in Northern Germany every year in summer.

And since it's taking place on green spaces and open air, it's very prone to rain and mud. So normally it's a very muddy experience. And that's also part of the fun. I haven't been there. I've been to other music festivals, but that's also part of the fun, but most of the time it's annoying. So there's this one project funded by the ANK that's focusing on restoring wetlands and wetlands in Germany have been drained for decades in order to enable agriculture, agricultural practices. So now in order to get them back rewetted, we need the farmers to be our allies. And the farmers, of course, need to have another avenue of income in order to compensate for that area that has been rewetted.

With the program, Klimafarm, we are sort of exchanging with farmers on solutions to grow reeds and weeds and grass on wetlands and have this sort of converted into construction material. So long story short, they crafted construction material out of reeds and grasses from wetlands and made mats out of it. And those mats had been placed at this year's Wacken Open Air on a path of, I don't know, 200 meters in order to prevent erosion. And this pilot project was really well received, both from participants in the festival, but also from the media and local people. I mean, it's a fun story to tell, right? And in the end, it's climate action happening on the ground.

MONICA DE BOLLE: Yeah, it's a very fun story.

CLEMENS HELBACH: So the minister himself was there to witness this and he got convinced that it's a good solution. So this might be the starting point of something bigger in the future. This is just one concrete example. If you'll let me mention the second one, I'm happy to do so, but please go ahead with your question.

MONICA DE BOLLE: One question here.



Yeah, I just have one question for you. So the whole idea of recuperating or recovering the wetlands is that as wetlands, they function as a carbon sink, as opposed to when they've been dried out for farming, then they have the opposite effect. So rather than being something that sucks carbon out of the air, it basically starts emitting carbon. And so this solution here, which marries the farmers, the wetlands, the production of these materials to protect the ground for these music festivals. All of it connected together is just really interesting because you're doing something for the environment on both fronts, right? You're protecting the ground for festival growers with things that are sustainable. And at the same time, you're helping the farmers in recuperating the wetlands. So it's a fascinating story. Yes, please tell us your next one.

CLEMENS HELBACH: No, not just in addition to that. No, thank you for making this connection because I took this for as a given. Of course, wetlands have an essential function in our climate and not only for biodiversity and providing habitat for many species, but it is an important carbon sink. And when you keep draining wetlands, you basically promote CO₂ emission and other greenhouse gases that are emitted from drained wetlands. So making nature our ally and climate action.

This is the overarching theme, so to speak, of the ANK. So this is very important point. Thank you for raising that. So, but getting back to another pillar of ANK, it's like our forests. The forests have become a source of CO₂ emissions as well, not only wetlands, but forests as well in Germany due to severe droughts, for example. So we need them to become carbon sinks again.

And there's one very exciting project I would like to mention that sort of on the intersection between climate and AI, because it's being implemented by a university in south of Germany, University Kempton, and they are developing a type of drones that will be able to go out and provided with lasers and cameras and of course AI technology to identify spots in the mountains where reforestation needs to take place or would be ideal spots for reforestation, sending those drones in these areas that are difficult to access. And those drones identify those areas. And this is the fun part. They get back and all the data is used to eventually send another set of drones there with robots that are able to sort of put in the ceilings of those newly planted trees into the ground.

So this is like really something that's super exciting, also funded by the ANK. And I find it especially interesting because it's sort of connecting climate action that is a little bit not on vogue right now with the topic of AI, which is a lot of super on vogue right now. So this is an exciting intersection here. Yeah.



MONICA DE BOLLE: Very, very interesting. Yeah, makes tech, tech, not green technology or technology for, you know, recovering forest. Yeah, it becomes very catchy from both ends.

CLEMENS HELBACH: Exactly. Maybe one last project I would like to raise. And that's something that's also very important because it involves students and pupils because it takes place at a school in the south of Germany that is very prone to droughts and heat. There's parts of Germany, even if you don't believe it, that are very hot and dry.

Hard to believe, even for Germans. But it's a school campus that's being focused here with this project funded by AMK that is pretty much sealed everywhere. It's a little concrete jungle, if you will. So there's extreme heat that's being fortified by this concrete. There's no space for water to be absorbed. So this project aims at creating those spaces, more green spaces, in order to make the outdoor areas of this campus more attractive, not only for the students and teachers, but also for the general public, and to enable water to absorb, to be drained, and thus helping the soils being sort of rewetted and a little more greener.

So I believe this is of importance as well because it brings climate action to the young people, right? Which is also very important. Also people in this village, in this little city will see what's happening actually. They will see the change. Whereas they might not see trees being planted in inaccessible areas in Southern Germany or wetlands being restored, but this they will see this. They will even be able to touch. This is something we need to keep telling, we need to keep doing in order to keep people engaged with climate action or get them back to being engaged.

MONICA DE BOLLE: These cases are fascinating and they're so interesting because they connect so many things. So I think the natural question that I have for you from this is, do you see other initiatives like Germany's ANK and these local climate policy issues being dealt with in other European countries? Do you see that as something that is gaining ground in other places too?

CLEMENS HELBACH: That's a good question, Monica. I do not have a comprehensive overview of climate action policies happening in other European countries. What I do know though is, and I'm zooming out a little bit right now, that there's many sort of front runners within Europe and within the EU in terms of climate action. So there's this ranking that's being published, I don't know, every year. It was just being published after



COP. CCPI, the Climate Change Performance Index. I don't know if you've heard of that.

So it's basically a ranking of the countries being at the forefront of climate action with the first three ranks or spots being left blank in order to send the message that none of the countries is doing sufficient right now. But I just took a look at the first 10 spots of that ranking and eight out of 10 spots are being covered by European countries. So Germany dropped a little down to, I don't know, rank 22 or something. But there's, for example, Denmark, who are really champions, especially on offshore wind energy. So that's what they are promoting a lot. So they do not have this level of emissions and... Yeah, putting a focus on renewable energies and also transport wise, they are really, really good. That makes them sort of the leaders of this table.

Then there's the UK, I'm aware of UK does not belong to the EU any longer, but they are still part of Europe. And they have really ambitious NDCs or nationally determined contribution under the Paris agreement. And they do promote heat pumps, something that we were aiming for, we are still aiming for, actually the current German government are promoting heat pumps again and hopefully they will be ramping up soon. My brother already installed a heat pump, so that's a good first step. But yeah, so many other people will be convinced that heat pumps are good choice.

Those are just two examples within Europe. Other than that, as I mentioned before, a lot of climate action within Europe is being Brussels led. So the European climate goal that was just adopted shortly before COP is of course a huge coordination effort. From that European goal, nationally based goals are being derived.

Yeah, with Germany having the goal of climate neutrality 2045, so five years earlier than the EU. And yeah, of course, we are looking forward to meeting that goal.

MONICA DE BOLLE: This is all extremely interesting and it kind of, can't help but want to ask you, know, in light of these different initiatives and the way by which, you know, they touch on people's lives directly, how optimistic do you think we should be with respect to, you know, our ability to engage more people back in the climate adaptation slash mitigation agenda?

CLEMENS HELBACH: Well, I think we can be fairly optimistic. I don't know if I have mentioned that before, but there was a study just coming out this year, like a poll, basically poll exercise, that revealed that globally, and I repeat globally, 80 to 89% of the people are in favor of stronger climate action. So regardless of their current



administrations, policies, affiliations, income level, whatever, it's like 80 to 89% are in favor of stronger climate policies. So there's still attention, interest and concern that something has to be done about it. So this is a promising starting point, I would say. Then climate action has always been a little bit up and down from actually acknowledging that the emission of fossil fuels leads to global warming in the 60s, 70s, last decade.

Up until now, it has always been an up and down and with highlights, with low lights. So believe as long as we keep our objectives or overall objectives in mind and use them as an orientation, we will manage to become carbon neutral by the middle of this century. And I think we need to keep telling those success stories that make climate action tangible and actually enable people to identify with climate action and making them willing to defend what is happening actually. So this is something really, really important. And there are positive examples even in these difficult times.

Take the recently conducted referendum in Hamburg. So Hamburg decided to become climate neutral even earlier than anticipated before. This was an initiative that was really risky because in the current, so to speak, atmosphere, this could have been a failure, which would have meant like a bad signal for climate action in general, but it became a success. So this is something really really promising. Then we do have electricity production in the first semester of this year of 2025 for the first time electricity produced from renewable sources surpassing electricity produced from fossil fuels, from coal.

So this is another huge success. And 90% of every energy or electricity production that's being added to the system right now globally, 90% are renewables. This is also a very good story to tell and to keep telling. So the renewables, they are a success story. cannot be stopped. They won't be stopped. And then of course we have developments like the International Court of Justice delivering this advisory opinion and stating that states do have an obligation to protect the climate and the environment. So there's promising developments even in these difficult days and that give me optimism for the future.

MONICA DE BOLLE: Thank you so much, Clemens. This was a fascinating conversation. think you brought so much to it with these stories and the overarching view. So thank you so much for coming on the show. was a pleasure to have you.

CLEMENS HELBACH: Thank you so much, Monica. It was a pleasure to be here.



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