



CLIMATE EMERGENCY MOVEMENT: AN INTENSIFIED DIALOGUE ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Conference Ambassador Report by Helia Nazari on:

Dialogue Session 323: Urban Transitions and Transformations Research in the Context of Climate Emergency. (21st of August 2020, 10.15-11.45)

Presenters: Emilia Smeds, Katharina Hölscher, Niki Frantzeskaki, Luise Fischer, Tessa de Geus and Kathryn Davidson

The session focused on the Climate Emergency Movement and the presenters – Emilia Smeds, Katharina Hölscher, Niki Frantzeskaki, Luise Fischer, Tessa de Geus and Kathryn Davidson – discussed their hopes and pessimisms as well as the socio-political opportunities and challenges of the movement. Supporters of the Climate Emergency Campaign aim to “compel governments to adopt an emergency response to climate change and ecological breakdown in order to reclaim [their] future.”ⁱ In 2014, the City of Darebin in Melbourne, Australia was the first to declare a Climate Emergency. By August 2020, more than 1700 jurisdictions and city governments in 30 countries have issued such a declaration. Cities are at the forefront of this movement due to their small size, simpler political structure and their power over local policy. Declaring climate change as an emergency at the city level puts people and communities at the centre. However, it frames climate change negatively as a “crisis” that requires emergent and immediate action while a positive framing would argue that finding innovative solutions and working towards sustainability will be a better and long lasting solution. The discussion in the dialogue session reflected the conflict on how we can best frame the need for a transformation of policies and radical change of our perception of competition and governance. All the speakers of the session agreed that having a mixed approach on positive and negative framing is ultimately the best solution. This means: While it is good to call on activists to follow SDGs and find innovative solutions, it is crucial to note that innovation is a slow and hard process. Therefore, it is necessary to make leaders and individuals aware of the dawning catastrophe of reaching the tipping points and other dangerous consequences of climate change. Considering the current developments and scientific predictions, it becomes clear that we are in fact in the middle of a climate crisis.

While we are witnessing a rise in the number of cities declaring a climate emergency, they have also started including climate policies into their yearly budget plans. Furthermore, commitments to the EU’s Green Deal and dedicating part of the Covid19-pandemic recovery money to sustainable development efforts are examples of this awakening. However, while there is hope for the Climate Emergency Movement to lead to a radical change, leaders still face obstacles in implementing corresponding policies. During the dialogue session, the city of Bristol was discussed as an example. Bristol was the first city to declare a state of climate emergency in 2018 in the UK. Since then it has made an action plan, which includes a target for becoming carbon neutral and has introduced a £1million strategy to bring investments from abroad as a way to bypass the national level. Such policies are good first steps in the direction of a sustainability transition. However, the lack of adequate

infrastructure and the fact that local governments are entering an unexplored territory by inviting foreign investments complicate this process. These challenges can lead to a situation in which the declaration never translates into action and remains as a piece of paper.

Nevertheless, the aim is not only to implement policies on climate change but also to put forward a plan for a more equal and sustainable society. An analysis of the existing climate emergency declarations around the world shows that only between 5 to 10 percent of the declarations include topics such as equity or vulnerabilityⁱⁱ. It is a great shame in my opinion, that this movement is excluding marginalized groups. It is crucial to discuss who has power and who is going to benefit from climate actions. Researchers as well as policy makers need to look at the socio-ecological injustices that are taking place in the cities. To overcome these injustices, they need to put forward policies that include aspects of justice and equity. A solution to the climate crisis must leave no one behind. Equity and justice are not the only concerns that need to be included. Health also needs to be prioritised. The Covid-19 pandemic made people and governments aware of the effects of a crisis and of the circumstance that health has been neglected in the mainstream policies for the last decades. While we are dealing with negative consequences of this current crisis, we need to prepare a multi-level governance that is capable of dealing with multiple crises at the same time.

Declaring a climate emergency opens up research and policy pathways that are focused on radical resilience, i.e. what we want to keep in the face of catastrophe. The climate emergency has further fueled discussions on relinquishments, i.e. what needs to be abandoned and on restoration, i.e. what to restore in order to prevent future catastrophes. Only with having this mind, and understanding public health, biodiversity and equity next to climate change as multiple emergencies, we can transform into a just and sustainable society.

ⁱ The Climate Mobilisation, The Climate Emergency. <https://www.theclimatemobilization.org/climate-emergency/> (Last Accessed 27.08.2020)

ⁱⁱ Kathryn Davidson, Jessie Briggs, Elanna Nolan, Judy Bush, Irene Håkansson, Susie Moloney. (2020) The making of a climate emergency response: Examining the attributes of climate emergency plans. Urban Climate. Volume 33.