



Do Climate Targets Matter? The Accountability of Target-setting in Urban Climate and Energy Policy

Håvard Haarstad

Abstract Climate-related targets abound, but are they important drivers of policy action? Given the apparent gap between ambitious targets and concrete actions to reach them, climate-related targets can easily be seen as representative of a crisis of accountability. At the same time, this chapter argues, there are practices of legitimation at work that can help overcome this crisis, and translate abstract and arbitrary targets into concrete policy implementation. Norway’s Zero Growth Objective in transport policy represents a case of this. From its first formulation as a target around 2006 and until 2019, it has materialised as a “hard” target shaping funding streams and concrete policy interventions, and most likely, emission levels. Under certain conditions, abstract targets play important roles in legitimating transition policy.

Keywords Climate targets • Metrics • Implementation • Transport • Accountability

H. Haarstad (✉)
Department of Geography, Centre for Climate and Energy Transformation,
University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway
e-mail: Havard.Haarstad@uib.no

6.1 INTRODUCTION

A casual observer of the official fight against climate change may get the impression that it is primarily about setting quantitative *targets* for emissions reduction. Who has committed to the 2 °C target? How did the world's leaders discuss the 1.5 °C target at the latest high-level meeting? Who has the most ambitious target for cuts in CO₂-emissions, or for growth of renewables? It may seem that setting targets is what climate policy *consists of*.

Cities have certainly entered this game. Since the city council of Freiburg in 1996 decided to cut 25% of its CO₂-emissions by 2010 (Leal and Azevedo 2016), cities all over the world have set ambitious and celebrated targets for a range of climate-related challenges such as emission cuts, renewable energy use, energy efficiency, electric vehicle uptake and growth of bicycle use and infrastructure. More than 7700 local and regional authorities have signed up to the Covenant of Mayors and thereby committed themselves to achieving and exceeding the EU climate and energy targets. The Covenant of Mayors initiative is one of many examples of how governance entities are organising themselves in networks rallying around particular targets.

The key question is, of course, what all this targeting and goal-setting means for actual climate policy. From a bird's-eye view of urban climate policy, it is tempting to conclude that these targets are not followed by policies that may realistically ensure that they are met.

It is not that cities are ignoring the climate challenge—on the contrary, many commentators view cities as leading the fight against climate change (Rosenzweig et al. 2010). Yet, considering the drastic transformations that many of these targets involve—for example, 72 cities have committed to the C40 network's Deadline 2020 programme of cutting CO₂ emissions in line with the Paris Agreement—one might suspect that the current practices of target-setting are unconnected to any realistic programme of delivering on what they promise. It would follow that the ambitious target-setting are exercises of vanity, wherein cities compete for the most ambitious targets but not the most transformative policies. And thereby that targets help politicians appear to be doing something when they are actually not. In this sense, we are faced with a *crisis of accountability* in which politicians can capitalise on climate-sensitive rhetoric but escape being held to account for that same rhetoric.

At the same time, the question of what all this targeting and goal-setting means for actual climate policy may also generate a different set of answers. What if target-setting is more important and substantive than it looks? Even if not all the rhetoric is translated into substantive policy, could there be ways in which target-setting actually percolates into substantive policy-making practices?

This chapter reflects on the nature of target-setting, focusing in particular on climate and energy policy in cities. I recognise that target-setting is a political-rhetorical practice, and therefore not necessarily representative of actual processes of transformation—we should expect a lot of hot air. But I aim to go beyond the readily-at-hand analysis that suggests targets are simply vanity exercises without practical implications, and to look deeper at the ways in which target-setting may in fact “trickle” up and down in governance systems and—in a gradual way—facilitate transitions.

6.2 CLIMATE GOVERNANCE AS POLITICAL-RHETORICAL PRACTICE

Scholars have often taken a sceptical view of official climate discourses, including their ambitious targets. It is common to see this discourse as evading or purposely obfuscating the conflicts of interest and difficult choices involved in meeting the climate challenge. Swyngedouw (2010), for example, holds that the policy discourse on climate change is characteristic of the “post-political condition.” He has argued that reduction of CO₂ emissions is inserted into a vast techno-managerial apparatus, “ranging from new eco-technologies of a variety of kinds to unruly complex managerial and institutional configurations, with a view to producing a socio-ecological fix *to make sure nothing really changes*” (p. 220, italics mine).

In other words, instead of addressing the underlying substantive political challenges, conflicts of interests and difficult trade-offs of climate-friendly transformation, official climate discourse manages to produce a set of interventions that harmonise with economic growth, the fossil economy, and so on, thus perpetuating business-as-usual practices. This is why climate governance is, in the words of Methmann, an “empty signifier”—it serves to integrate climate protection into the global hegemonic order “without changing the basic social structures of the world economy” (Methmann 2010: 348). Hegemonic governmental agents have been able

to remake almost any policy—free trade, continued oil exploration, economic growth—into being part of the solution.

A similar critique has been levelled against the entire sustainable development discourse, in a debate too vast to enter into here (but see While et al. 2010).

At the urban scale, these trade-offs and conflicts of interests may be harder to conceal. Yet even here, scholars have pointed to the contrast between rhetorical aspects of governance and substantive transformative interventions. In terms of rhetoric, cities generate and circulate high-profile stories and “best practice” narratives that highlight claims about achievements and successes (Bulkeley 2006; McCann 2011). In terms of substantive change, however, real effects may be more elusive. Grandin and Sareen (forthcoming) describe urban governance arrangements as “often characterised by voluntary action, weak institutions, non-binding commitments and uncoordinated efforts,” and argue that it can be difficult to determine the substantive and enduring transformative impact of their interventions.

More concretely, researchers have also criticised the targets that cities are operating with. Leal and Azevedo (2016) reviewed the targets for local energy planning for a number of case cities, and found them to show a lack of standardisation of methodologies, “leading to a diversity that may not only hamper the comparison between different municipalities’ action but also prevent a consistent assessment of their global impact.” In similar vein, Kramers et al. (2013) found a wide variety of accounting methodologies, system boundaries, time frames and source of emissions included behind relatively similar targets. There is moreover limited awareness of these methodological limitations among city administrators.

In short, one can find grounds for deep scepticism against the practice of target-setting in the climate governance literature. In an abstract sense, these targets are often part of a post-political and techno-managerial climate governance discourse that simultaneously appears climate-friendly *without* addressing the underlying contradictions that produce the climate problem in the first place. At the urban level, target-setting can be seen as a part of the circulation of “best practice” and rhetorical competition to be *the most sustainable city*, while the actual commitments remain largely non-binding and voluntary.

In this sense, target-setting registers on several of the types of legitimation Sareen outlines in Chap. 2 of this book, but perhaps particularly *discursive* legitimation. These are legitimation practices that normalise

particular ways of seeing, stabilising them in the public imaginary. In the worst-case scenario, targets are stabilising the idea that our decision-makers are tackling the climate challenge in an ambitious way, while actually, very little gets done.

However, what if we put aside the worst-case scenario for a moment, and consider the flip side of the coin? Is it possible that targets, even seemingly overly ambitious ones, may have real and substantive effects that contribute to a sustainable transition? Could there be mechanisms through which targets—even unrealistic ones—influence, push or nudge urban politics and processes of change? This is not to cast aside the critical perspectives outlined above, but to suggest that analogous mechanisms of legitimation may also work in the opposite direction.

6.3 METRICS THAT CAN LEGITIMATE THE SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITION

My starting point for thinking about ways targets may legitimate transitions is to consider the carrying power of numbers (or “metrics”). It is widely recognised that quantifying a phenomenon impregnates it with a particular type of force, transforming it from the particular and provincial into the language of the universal. Foucault, for instance, showed how scientific knowledge—where metrics play a central role—is the foundation for the birth of the modern state (Foucault 1991). Metrics is what we use to make the unknown *knowable*, and thereby, *governable*. Foucault’s work showed how scientific knowledge advanced our ability to govern society and its individuals. Now, we are progressively using scientific knowledge to govern *nature* as well. As Jasanoff (2010) puts it, “Increasingly, however, the politics of nature occurs under the rubric of ‘environment’—a domain of ideas and entities accessible only with the aid of science and technology.”

In this sense, it is quite conceivable that climate targets take on a similar type of carrying power as other metrics have done in our governance of nature. Climate change is knowable and measurable in precise ways, through global aggregate temperatures traced far back in time, parts per million of CO₂ in the atmosphere, and carbon budgets, among many others. Measures to deal with climate change are also knowable and measurable in detailed ways, through percentage of rise in renewable energy uptake, energy efficiency measures, numbers of electric vehicles sold and

so on. This means that policies can be assessed, scenarios can be crafted, decision-makers can—in principle—be held to account. And in the seductive ways that metrics work in governance, targets may work themselves into mind sets and documents even after they have been shed of their methodological and substantive attire.

It has been argued that due to this metrical legibility of carbon, climate change is actually more open to politicisation than the sustainable development discourse was. Sustainable development has of course also been subject to quantification (Miller 2005), but has lent itself too easily to being incorporated in the growth paradigm and neoliberal modes of governance. By contrast, argue While and co-authors (2010), the discourse of carbon control represents “a harder edge to state environmental regulation via non-negotiable target setting...”. Shifting focus from the ambiguous and co-optable idea of sustainability towards the more measurable problem of carbon control, they argue, opens up for a harder type of regulation.

Carbon control may introduce a new set of values into state regulation, which could open possibilities for challenging mainstream modes of urban development in ways not possible under the sustainable development discourse (While et al. 2010). Jonas et al. (2011) suggest that the ranking of cities on the basis of carbon emissions is becoming part of the competition between cities for investment capital, headquarter locations and attraction of educated workers. In other words, carbon control and its target are becoming part of the calculus behind “rational” urban governance.

We are probably not quite there yet. But at least target-setting is becoming normalised, which in turn legitimates a whole set of practices that may advance sustainable energy transitions. The next section examines a concrete chain of events to illustrate how this may occur. Given the scope of a short chapter, this case study is cursory. Yet it seeks to identify certain *mechanisms* for how climate targets are legitimated.

The concrete case I look at traces the 2 °C target through the Norwegian Zero Growth Objective for urban transport. Within this, I am interested in how the climate problem, which has been distilled into a universal object of knowledge (as in the 2 °C target), cascades downwards in scale from the national to the local level.

6.4 FOLLOWING THE TARGET—NORWAY’S ZERO GROWTH OBJECTIVE

Norway’s *Zero Growth Objective* for transport in urban areas is a useful illustration of how climate-related targets work their way into concrete policy-making. The goal itself states that *all growth in personal traffic in the largest cities will be covered by public transport, walking and cycling*. The “zero growth” aspect implied in this is of course that there will be no growth in private car traffic.

The legitimation of the target has been incremental, and involves multiple actors with divergent interests. Still, the progression from abstract target formulation towards a tangible foundation for concrete policy implementation is traceable by examining a series of key documents over time.

The contours of the Zero Growth Objective can be traced back at least to the 2006 White Paper on Norwegian Climate Policy [Meld. St. 34, 2006–2007]. There the government put forward some initial goals for climate-related policy in the transport sector, writing that there is a “need to shift the use of transport modes towards public transport, walking and cycling.” The overarching reference for this White Paper was the international 2 °C target, adopted by the Norwegian government a year prior. While the 2 °C target is somewhat arbitrary and has been a source of controversy (Randalls 2010), it is referred to here and in most climate-related Norwegian national policy documents in a way that sets the level of ambition and points to the global urgency. The 2 °C target, notwithstanding the controversy over its origins and usefulness, is providing the framing for Norwegian policy, including the Zero Growth Objective back in 2006.

That formulation—“shift the use of transport modes towards public transport, walking and cycling”—can be found in all the key national climate policy documents from then on. The 2008 Climate Accord between all parties in Parliament minus one, the 2012 White Paper on Norwegian Climate Policy, and the 2012 Climate Accord, all use that same formulation with miniscule variations. Notably, however, the context in which that formulation is placed gets increasingly concrete and binding. In the 2012 White Paper, it is actually formulated as a target (“The Government has the goal that...”). Around the same time, the National Transport Plan Working Group put forward a proposition as an official goal of Norwegian transport policy, that the large cities should have zero growth except in “public transport, walking and cycling,” and simultaneously coined the

“Nullvekstmålet”—Zero Growth Objective. The leader of the Working Group has been quoted as saying “*We wanted to find a target that was easy to measure, that would be ambitious and not least reachable*” (quoted in Strand 2016).

Since then, the Zero Growth Objective has been mentioned, integrated and discussed in innumerable briefs, policy documents, talks and newspaper articles on transport policy in Norway. The way the target is formulated—with its simple quantification: “zero”—may account for some of its carrying power. And as a climate-related target, it has attained enormous success. It is an important element of the structural conditions for transport and mobility planning (Tennøy and Øksenholt 2018). We can quite concretely follow the process through which this occurs, through budget documents and funding agreements between the government and cities.

From 2014 onwards, the National Transport Plan adopted the Zero Growth Objective as the key target for transport policy in cities. The government, in launching the Urban Environment Agreements, also it was translated to a concrete agreement framework tied to a funding scheme for cities. It then transpired that the Government would negotiate with the largest cities in Norway and other regional authorities with responsibility for transport, to create “greater coherence in urban policy” by having these authorities collectively “commit to common goals written into the Urban Environment Agreements.” Now, all relevant authorities are to sign a binding agreement on how to meet the Zero Growth Objective, and this agreement will be the basis for government funding for local transport.

From this point onwards, the amount of funding cities received for local transport infrastructure became tied to how well they worked towards meeting the Zero Growth Objective. This includes specific indicators that measure whether or not car traffic decreases. In 2016 and 2017, such Agreements were signed with Oslo, Trondheim, Bergen and Stavanger (Jæren); in short, the largest Norwegian cities.

Subsequently, the Zero Growth Objective has been mainstreamed and absorbed into the planning and land use regulation of the cities themselves. It is a ubiquitous condition for decision-making within the wide range of issues that affect the abilities of cities to reach the goal, such as location of housing, retail, transport infrastructure, congestion charging and much more. It introduces a simple calculus for decision-makers in cities: failure to meet the target will affect the amount of government money available in the next round of negotiations. Even beyond this, the

effectiveness of the target transcends this simple calculus. It has become a standard reference point for ambitions in the climate field, and percolated into the urban policy discourse at many levels. Trends in actual traffic patterns are following suit—all cities mentioned above underwent a reduction in private car traffic in 2018 (Miljødirektoratet). Arguably, the target has contributed to normalising and routinising a way of thinking about transitions in cities that was considered highly ambitious only a few years ago.

6.5 LEGITIMATING SUSTAINABLE TRANSITIONS

Are climate-related targets representative of a crisis of accountability, as pillars in a bureaucratic apparatus of governance that gives the appearance of climate action while little substantive change happens? Or are there mechanisms at work that translate abstract and arbitrary targets into concrete policy implementation? Most likely, a mix of these outcomes is at play. But the case of Norway's Zero Growth Objective illustrates some of the processes that legitimate and normalise an ambitious climate-related target. This involved soft mechanisms—inserting itself in the discourse on urban policy and moving its goal posts—and hard mechanisms—the conditioning of funding flows from national to local levels. To enable a sustainable energy transition, we need practices to legitimate the interventions that advance this transition. Under certain conditions, metrics and targets can play a constructive role in this.

REFERENCES

- Bulkeley, H. (2006). Urban sustainability: Learning from best practice? *Environment and Planning A*, 38, 1029–1044.
- Foucault, M. (1991). Governmentality. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon, & P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality* (pp. 87–104). London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Grandin, J., & Sareen, S. (forthcoming). What sticks? Ephemerality, permanence and urban transformation pathways. *In review*.
- Jasanoff, S. (2010). A new climate for society. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 27, 233–253.
- Jonas, A. E. G., Gibbs, D., & While, A. (2011). The new urban politics as a politics of carbon control. *Urban Studies*, 48, 2537–2554.
- Kramers, A., Wangel, J., Johansson, S., Höjer, M., Finnveden, G., & Brandt, N. (2013). Towards a comprehensive system of methodological considerations for cities' climate targets. *Energy Policy*, 62, 1276–1287.

- Leal, V., & Azevedo, I. (2016). Setting targets for local energy planning: Critical assessment and a new approach. *Sustainable Cities and Society*, 26, 421–428.
- McCann, E. (2011). Urban policy mobilities and global circuits of knowledge: Towards a research agenda. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 101, 107–130.
- Methmann, C. P. (2010). ‘Climate protection’ as empty signifier: A discourse theoretical perspective on climate mainstreaming in world politics. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 39, 345–372.
- Miller, C. (2005). New civic epistemologies of quantification: Making sense of indicators of local and global sustainability. *Science, Technology and Human Values*, 30, 403–432.
- Randalls, S. (2010). History of the 2°C climate target. *WIREs Climate Change*, 1, 598–605.
- Rosenzweig, C, Solecki, W, Hammer, S. A., & Mehrotra, S. (2010) Cities lead the way in climate-change action [Comment]. *Nature*, 467, 909–911.
- Strand, A. (2016, August 24). Nullvekstmålet—tiljublet, men mangelfullt utredet. *Samferdsel*.
- Swyngedouw, E. (2010). Apocalypse forever? Post-political populism and the spectre of climate change. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 27, 213–232.
- Tennøy, A., & Øksenholt, K. V. (2018). The impact of changed structural conditions on regional sustainable mobility planning in Norway. *Planning Theory & Practice*, 19, 93–113.
- While, A., Jonas, A., & Gibbs, D. (2010). From sustainable development to carbon control: Eco-state restructuring and the politics of urban and regional development. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 35, 76–93.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter’s Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter’s Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

