Individual agency in urban transition towards climate neutrality – an action research case study from Frankfurt (“woman with the sign”)

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– Ongoing action research –

Research context:

Frankfurt’s local parliament decided in 2022 to aim for climate neutrality by 2035. Progress towards this goal appears to be too slow to reach the target. Following the 2026 local elections, the 2035 target was questioned and omitted from the coalition agreement.

Research question:

How can a single citizen influence municipal climate transformation?

Theoretical foundation:

- Pluralistic ignorance among politicians regarding public acceptance of climate action (Andre et al., 2024; Sevincer et al., 2026)
- Evidence-based change management (Rousseau/ten Have 2022)

Action research approach:

Interventions are continuously developed, implemented, evaluated, and adapted based on observations and emerging insights.



Source: Frankfurter Neue Presse, 25.04.2026

Source: Frankfurter Rundschau, 07.08.2026

Methodological reflections:

- ➢ Observations emerged across all roles, making the boundary between action and research increasingly blurred
- ➢ Several outcomes can simultaneously be interpreted as outcomes and new actions

- Acting as activist “woman with the sign” (campaign brand)
- Acting as entrepreneur
- Acting as citizen in city council committee meetings
- 1:1 with municipal stakeholders (politicians, administration, banker)
- 1:1 learning from other cities
- Acting as researcher

Timeline position:

↑ action | ↓ outcome

Emerging insights:

- ➢ Interactions as an activist revealed substantially **more support** and substantially **less opposition** than expected from public discourse
- ➢ Analysis and interactions suggested that **high-impact institutional decisions** may represent more important leverage points than additional public support
- ➢ Role as activist, citizen or entrepreneur provides different access opportunities and grants different forms of **legitimacy and credibility**
- ➢ Strategic **role-switching** might be an important mechanism for enhancing individual agency
- ➢ Visible actions represent only a small part of the effort required to generate impact
- ➢ Direct relation between action and outcome mostly difficult to draw; measurable outcomes likely capture only part of the actual impact

Emerging conceptual framework: Climate Action Triad

Starting hypothesis: Non-climate-friendly behaviour may result from a lack of information, limited imagination of possible solutions, or apparently conflicting personal needs

Further developed into the Climate Action Triad as an **individual climate change readiness framework** consisting of

1. **Climate problem understanding:** understanding the drivers of climate change
2. **Climate solution knowledge:** knowledge about available pathways to climate neutrality
3. **Constraints and action barriers:** factors hindering climate action despite understanding and knowledge

Core proposition: Assess climate problem understanding and climate solution knowledge before talking about conflicting interests!

Questions for discussion

- Can strategic role-switching enhance individual agency?
- Where should the boundary between action and research be drawn?
- Is the sequential logic of the Climate Action Triad plausible?

Selected References:
Andre, P., Boneva, T., Chopra, F., & Falk, A. (2024). Globally representative evidence on the actual and perceived support for climate action. Nature Climate Change, 14(3), 253–259.
Rousseau, D. M., & ten Have, S. (2022). Evidence-based change management. Organizational Dynamics, 51(3), 100899.
Sevincer, A. T., Hostlowsky, L., Styhler, F., & Hofmann, W. (2026). Public support for climate action is underestimated in the German political domain. Communications Earth & Environment, 7(1), 543.

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