



# Disrupt and unlock? The role of actors in urban adaptation path-breaking

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the growing demands in what urban adaptation (policy) is expected to address (e.g. systemic injustices), incremental responses are the norm. The role of different actors is investigated for maintaining and breaking path-dependencies in Atlanta, Georgia, US: (1) the Mayor's Office of Sustainability and Resilience (MOSR), (2) the Atlanta Beltline Partnership (ABP), and (3) the Stop COP-City/Defend the Atlanta Forest Movement (SCCM). A mixed-method research approach consists of participant observation, document analysis, and interviews. The findings contribute to a better understanding of different forms of disruption and the role actors play in maintaining, reinforcing, and unlocking transformative adaptation pathways. The study shows how the MOSR serves to maintain status quo adaptation pathways. The ABP reinforces status quo interests by disrupting 'from the middle.' The SCCM disrupts urban (adaptation) governance 'from below' with potential for unlocking new pathways through exposing 'the Atlanta Way,' developing new organizational structures and imaginaries that reconcile different struggles of oppression. Whereas actors who disrupt from 'the middle' are perceived as a legitimate part of politics, actors who disrupt 'from below' are impeded by incumbent actors and their use of disproportionate repression strategies.

## PRACTICE RELEVANCE

The goals, organization, and strategies used by different actors in urban adaptation governance reveal how disruption may be identified and whether this leads to unlocking transformative adaptation pathways. All cases are representative of different urban adaptation governance practices, some of which (initially) actively challenged dominant status quo imaginaries of human-nature relationships and associated power relations. Three terrains of disruption are introduced: 'disruption from above,' 'disruption from the middle,' and 'disruption from below.' This differentiation challenges common assumptions of social movements as the only 'disruptors' by hinting at the embeddedness of political status in different variants of disruption. The use of force against 'disruption from below' unveils a problematic understanding and practices of politics that undermine democratic processes. There is a need to politically (re)engage a different understanding of politics that may as well be 'disruptive from below' in the sense of introducing something new and interrupting the established.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The persistence of incremental responses will not suffice to address the interlinked challenges of our time. Consensus is growing on the need for more fundamental changes within and across systems (e.g. Kates *et al.* 2012; Colloff *et al.* 2021). Evidence is growing regarding the lack of transformative adaptation (Berrang-Ford *et al.* 2021; IPCC 2022) and maladaptation (adaptation gone wrong) which disproportionately affects marginalized populations by reproducing vulnerability and producing inequality (Anguelovski *et al.* 2019; Eriksen *et al.* 2021). Adaptation efforts are often techno-managerial, occur in a top-down way, and obscure the causal factors of vulnerability, seeking responses in local adjustments rather than addressing social struggles (Eriksen *et al.* 2015, 2021). As a result, discourses on transformative adaptation argue for the need to address the root causes of vulnerability and making vulnerable populations a front and center concern in adaptation interventions (e.g. Taylor *et al.* 2022) besides operationalizing an intersectional thinking in urban climate adaptation (Amorim-Maia *et al.* 2022).

Research on adaptation lock-ins seeks to explain the persistence of governmental incrementalism to better understand policy inertia and explain adaptation deficits. The main assumption is that governance and policy processes lag behind climate change impacts with the status quo appearing as a lock-in (Siebenhüner *et al.* 2021). Within lock-ins and path-dependency research, notions of path-breaking, unlocking, and transitional ruptures developed (Wilson 2014; Siebenhüner *et al.* 2021; Goldstein *et al.* 2023). However, understanding is limited regarding the role actors play in perpetuating lock-ins and enabling path-breaking (Siebenhüner *et al.* 2021).

The notion of path-breaking is congruent with emerging discourses on disruption to shift towards transformation (see also Goldstein *et al.* 2023). Disruption is increasingly discussed as a quality and characteristic of governance that can help to transition out of path dependency and break structural lock-in effects (e.g. Wilson 2014). The (often implicit) understanding is disruptions are more radical, and therefore more significant than linear and predictable pathways to trigger transformations (Wilson 2014; Oels 2019; Schipper *et al.* 2020; Eriksen *et al.* 2021).<sup>1</sup> Although disruption has become a buzzword in governance discourses, the understanding is relatively limited of what it means and which political stakes are embedded in the deployment of disruption (Chua 2023). More research is needed to examine, conceptually and empirically, the role actors play in disruption and what implications this has for adaptation processes.

The aims of the article are twofold. First, to contribute theoretically to current discourses on disruptive adaptation governance by reviewing the role of actors in research on adaptation lock-ins, path-breaking, and theories of governance. Second, to investigate the role of different actor constellations in Atlanta, Georgia, US: (1) the Mayor's Office of Sustainability and Resilience (MOSR), (2) the Atlanta Beltline Partnership (ABP), and (3) the Stop COP-City/Defend the Atlanta Forest Movement (SCCM). Adaptation commonly is a multi-actor setting with uncertain roles and responsibilities (Petzold *et al.* 2023). Different actors play different roles and often act in combination. Therefore, the term 'actor constellations' is used to reflect the spectrum of possible relationship constellations and responsibilities within and across different actor spheres (governmental, nongovernmental, public-private). All cases are representative of different governance practices related to urban adaptation, some of which have actively reframed human-nature relationships and used processes of empowerment to challenge dominant power structures in Atlanta.

## 2. THEORY

### 2.1 PATH DEPENDENCE AND LOCK-INS

Given the persistence of various socio-environmental problems, the lock-in concept is argued to have potential for identifying, analyzing, and finding solutions for path-breaking (Goldstein *et al.* 2023). In the context of adaptation policymaking, the lock-in concept is emerging as a response to adaptation barrier research, which is criticized for its limited explanatory value due to the focus on 'if' and 'which' questions, rather than asking 'how' and 'why' barriers emerge and persist (Biesbroek *et al.* 2013: 1128). Lock-ins reflect upon the underlying causal mechanisms by

examining interdependent developments and/or paths that are difficult to change (Oels *et al.* 2017). Lock-ins are conceptualized to originate ‘in cognitive, political, infrastructure-related, and other historical paths creating specific dependencies,’ at multiple scales (Siebenhüner *et al.* 2021). Vergne & Durand (2010) interlink path dependence and lock-ins, by arguing path dependence as a property of a stochastic process that ‘causes lock-ins in the absence of exogenous shocks’ (p. 737). Though exiting lock-in is not the central focus under study, Vergne and Durand identify two conditions of organizations, which impact path dependence: contingency and re-enforcement. ‘Lock-ins’ in turn describe:

a state of equilibrium with a very low potential for endogenous change—put simply, lock-in is a hard-to-escape situation.

(p. 743)

Path dependence is a process with lock-in as a path outcome and a state of a system that cannot be escaped endogenously.

## 2.2 LOCK-INS AND ACTORS

Although Siebenhüner *et al.* (2021) focus on the nature of lock-ins by investigating a set of interdependent factors (actors, knowledge, infrastructure, policy tools, and institutions), how they emerged and interrelate, the empirical application of the framework offers preliminary insights on the role of actors in path dependence. Groen *et al.* (2022) illustrate self-reinforcing forces that interact across institutions, through which actors and infrastructures collectively hinder adaptation efforts. The importance of considering agency in self-reinforcing dynamics is pointed out and attention must be drawn to the central role of actors in forging, reinforcing, and stabilizing dynamics. Certain actors can be reluctant to embrace problem ownership and may:

employ avoidance tactics, to justify inaction in relation to resource constraints, statutory duties and remits.

(p. 499)

Jager *et al.*'s (2022) comparative governance analysis of coastal risks and water scarcity shows how infrastructures, institutions, actors, and cognitive framing shape policy landscapes. Together they constitute dynamics of policy stability and change in the face of long-term climate impacts. Drawing from previous research, ‘actors, their interests, networks, and power are of particular relevance for understanding lock-in’ (p. 398). Power disparities between actors are considered a significant driver for institutional lock-in dynamics. Incumbent actors with vested interests can hamper change by re-enforcing current trajectories and/or reinforce existing cognitive frames through coalescing in networks. Networks among policymakers, bureaucracies, and interest groups are potentially sedimenting a particular policy trajectory, ‘even if that trajectory is considered suboptimal from other perspectives’ (p. 398). In that sense, certain actors are seen as a barrier to change. Jager *et al.* also offer insights into the context-bound nature of actors, with regional and local organizations often embodying certain practical and social values and certain knowledge systems, such as hydrological and coastal engineering, being more prominent in coastal environmental governance. To examine the role actors play in maintaining or breaking path dependencies, the following three aspects were synthesized from the above literature for the empirical analysis: (1) interests and motivations (goals), (2) embeddedness in networks (organization of actors), and (3) actions that actors employ (strategies).

## 2.3 ACTORS, PATH-BREAKING, AND DISRUPTION

Siebenhüner *et al.* (2021) imply that path-breaking can be conceptualized along the lock-in dimensions of their framework. Whereas the analysis of lock-ins explores more strongly where actors act as constraining forces to change processes (a foundation upon which targeted efforts to ‘unlock’ can be based), discussions on path-breaking put a stronger emphasis on actors as an enabling factor. For instance, Hölscher *et al.* (2019) develop an agent-based framework of select capacities by which actors create new conditions for transformative climate governance. These

include abilities for decentralized self-organization and context-specific rule-making to flexibly respond to disturbances and uncertainty. Another unlocking potential lies in actors' abilities to recognize and dismantle drivers of unsustainability and path dependencies (Hölscher *et al.* 2019). These aspects are relevant for the discussion of how actors are organized. More knowledge is needed on the role actors play for path-breaking and/or path departure at the nexus of disruption.

Chua (2023) differentiates three forms of disruption in which different actor constellations are embedded: 'disruption from above,' 'disruption from the middle,' and 'disruption from below.' Each form of disruption differs regarding ethos, actors, and goals. The first connotes an elite-driven disruption by removing 'social functions from the sphere of democratic deliberation or political control,' by placing them 'under the impersonal laws of the market' (p. 38). The second refers to a distributed form of authority and assetization of public infrastructure into private goods that is realized by complex governance regimes. These are rooted in localities but financed from afar, as is often the case for private-public partnerships where public and private actors have vested interests and capital (Chua 2023). Lastly, 'disruption from below' evolves around caretaking and relationships of kinship, committed to solidarity, putting forward an alternative vision of the future and renunciation of neoliberal capitalism. Importantly, the understanding of disruption put forward here does not equate disruption with path-breaking, but rather, disruption is exercised differently in relation to different configurations of power. Based upon Chua, who argues the three forms constitute different modes of governance, a closer look at the actors, goals, and ethos embedded in them can enhance our understanding of their function in the adaptation context.

### 3. METHODS

To better understand the role different actors can play for path-breaking and maintenance, a multiple, holistic case study design was adopted (Yin 2018). The cases are holistic in that they all examine actor constellations in Atlanta, regarding their main goals, organization, and strategies. Atlanta is exemplary for rapidly intensifying climate change (e.g. Kc *et al.* 2015), while being one of the most unequal cities in the United States (e.g. Immergluck 2022). Atlanta is confronted by anomalies in temperature and precipitation, and an increase in extreme climatic hazards such as floods, heatwaves, and droughts (Kc *et al.* 2015). Simultaneously, income inequality is severe in Atlanta, besides deeply locked-in patterns of racially segregated policies with effects that endure today. Access to basic public services such as education, healthy food, healthcare, housing, and transportation is highly uneven and corresponds with heightened vulnerability to climate change. This makes the need for integrated approaches that can address multiple and intersecting social-environmental inequities especially visible (Amorim-Maia *et al.* 2022).

MOSR and ABP were chosen based on the power they wield in the governance of public space that mitigates intensifying climate impacts. MOSR is the key actor in charge of resilience planning in Atlanta. The Atlanta Beltline (AB) has been frequently highlighted to increase the city's adaptive capacity, e.g. based on its contributions to lowering the heat island effect due to increased green cover (see also Teebken 2022a). The SCCM was chosen as it aims to address intersecting socio-environmental inequities front and center of the movement.

Different types of data were collected: participant observation during three Georgia Climate Conferences (2016, 2019, 2023), on-site observations during events (e.g. meetings on the Beltline Implementation Progress, City Council hearings), document analysis and interviews. The questions posed in interviews are shown in File 1: Interview template questions in the supplemental data online. Document analysis consisted of publications pertinent to each of the cases (e.g. gray literature such as governmental strategies, budget overviews, annual progress reports and an analysis of public hearings, social media, and news reports). A total of 26 semi-structured expert interviews (SSEI) were conducted in Atlanta between 2016 and 2019 and 10 problem-centered interviews (PCI) between May and July 2023. The expert interviewees either worked as government officials, academics, or in professions related to climate adaptation policymaking (e.g. emergency management city planning). Those targeted for the PCIs were persons who could speak to more than one case, and actors who were well familiar with change processes in Atlanta regarding climate change and social justice.

The data were processed using an iterative grounded theory approach (Strübing 2014). The SSEIs were transcribed and thematically organized for previous research on adaptation lock-ins (Teebken 2022a). The data offer insights into the role of actors and their organization and were taken as a baseline upon which the targeted study and PCIs were grounded (see the Interview guideline in the supplemental data online).

One data limitation is that SCCM did not exist during the earlier rounds of data collection, which was compensated for with extensive collection of primary data in 2023. The limited willingness of actors from MOSR and ABP to commit to an interview in 2023 marks another limitation. This limitation was compensated through participant observation during events to obtain more difficult to access data. As SCCM continues to evolve rapidly and is a decentralized movement, any assessment of the movement's impact and generalization must be considered preliminary.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 MOSR

#### 4.1.1 Organization

The MOSR is an overarching division that supports the mayor and city government in their efforts to advance sustainability and climate resilience. Other municipal agencies working on climate-related matters include the Department of Watershed Management (DWM) and the Department of Planning and Community Development. MOSR is an outcome of a long process of institutional restructuring that started under former mayor Kasim Reed. Since then, the organization in charge of sustainability and resilience planning experienced many changes in terms of personnel, institutional set-up, funding, and expertise. Whereas the office is seen to have grown in size and scope under Reed, it appeared to be largely defunct under the next mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms (2018–22), who 'had other priorities' (Bethea 2023: para. 5). Bottoms became known for her attempts to address corruption by asking the entire municipal government to hand in resignation letters, of which most were accepted, including those handed in by the then Mayor's Office of Resilience staff.

In August 2022, Mayor Andre Dickens (2022–26) announced the enhancement of the MOSR in an effort to address the 'climate crisis,' and 'expanding Atlanta's role in building a smart, sustainable future for generations of Atlantans' (CoA 2022: para. 2). By reestablishing the MOSR as an executive office, the new sustainability officer, Chandra Farley, appointed by Dickens in 2022, views the Dickens administration as a "'new day" for climate action' (Bethea 2023: para. 9).

Farley suggests that positive pressure from outside government—in other words, from you and me—will help hold the city accountable for measurable, not simply incremental, progress in the coming years.

(para. 9)

#### 4.1.2 Goals

The municipal government aims to provide a resilient and sustainable future for future generations (CoA 2022). Leadership narratives have been centrally embedded in MOSR and DWM policy efforts. For instance, MOSR aims to 'build a top-tier sustainability city and optimize investments in multiple types of infrastructure' (CoA 2015) or 'become a leader in intersectional resilience' (CoA n.d.) without specifying what this means. Resilience efforts are motivated by the desire for positioning the city as a 'leader in Green Infrastructure for a resilient, sustainable and equitable future' (CoA Green Infrastructure Program n.d.). Economic development is another key driver in Atlanta's implementation of green infrastructure (GI) (CoA 2018).

The historic Old Fourth Ward (O4W) is one example where GI was implemented in a historically black neighborhood to address extreme rain (Figure 1). Adjacent to the AB, the detention basin is one out of several neighborhood revitalization efforts, and redevelopment projects, which aim to address neighborhoods disproportionately affected by stormwater and flooding issues

(CoA 2018). The re-landscaping resulted in a relocation and rapid decline of predominantly African American residents due to rising property values and the lack of adequate policy instruments to safeguard populations from displacement (see also Immergluck 2022: ch. 2). Development projects skyrocketed around the O4W, spiraling into further landscape changes, and raising property values and taxes for residents.



**Figure 1:** Old Fourth Ward flood park and surrounding landscape development.

Source: Thomas Elliot.

It is against this background and growing public pressure that equity is becoming ‘an emerging goal in City Design’ (CoA 2018: 7). The continued success of clean energy issues, as second pillar of Atlanta’s continued policy efforts, is explained in a similar rationale with ‘cost effectiveness and economic development’ (Farley 2023). Interviewees were highly critical of the power interests embedded in municipal resilience efforts, as signified in this statement:

Business has a lot of power in politics here [...] citizens don’t count at all. As a community organizer, they will never listen to you, but if you say you work for Delta [Airlines], they will listen to you. [...] They don’t talk about climate change seriously; they charge citizens while making profits. The city of Atlanta really does not care, especially politicians there don’t care. We have water, we have electricity, we have a heat problem and a couple of cool centers. That is the solution for heat waves.

(I-03-2023)

### 4.1.3 Strategies

Aside from sectoral policymaking, different policy instruments (planning, regulatory, organization) are employed (see File 2: Overview of MOSR policy efforts in the supplemental data online). The MOSR acts as an intermediary by pooling resources from previous plans and various partners within and outside city government, who are also in charge of implementation. Regulatory efforts appear to be limited and serving the function of building public support. The post-development stormwater management ordinance (2013) is an exception and was initially heralded for its progressive nature. Amendments adopted in 2020 weakened its power to make the ordinance as development friendly as possible. Despite acknowledgement in existing plans that:

property values may likely increase with more installation of green infrastructure; [and that] managing that increase for vulnerable populations must be considered[,]

(CoA 2018: 7)

actual plans remain vague. The same can be observed regarding municipal aspirations to focus GI implementation on ‘low-income communities of color’ (p. 9). With no mention of concrete policy instruments to address marginalized populations, commitment appears toothless.

Due to the politically contested nature of climate policymaking and limited financial resources, actors within the municipal government have developed a variety of coping mechanisms

to advance the climate agenda for Atlanta (Teebken 2022b). Coalescing with Atlanta-based universities, nongovernmental organizations, and extra-local actors such as the ICLEI network, and philanthropies, such as the Rockefeller Foundation, are key components of Atlanta's approach. These together provide the necessary funding and expert-driven knowledge to inform and develop policy. Atlanta's Climate Action Plan focused predominantly on mitigation, sidelining adaptation concerns. The unchanged power structures were reflected upon by this interviewee:

In order for it to be transformative, you have to change the status quo, you have to change social power. Right now, the social power is concentrated in the hands of traditionally rich wealthy people. When you talk about transformation, you are calling for a revolution and changing the dynamics of power.

(I-02-2023)

Planning efforts are often project-bound: In 2016, the city government received a Rockefeller Grant of the 100 Resilient Cities program, which also provided funding for a resilience manager. In 2017, the Resilient Atlanta plan was published, focusing on five working groups for key priority areas of civic engagement and transparent governance, housing and neighborhood development, economic and social mobility, transit accessibility, and resilient infrastructure (CoA 2017). Interviewed actors from within the municipal government implied that the grant was initially planned to be used for the formulation of a climate adaptation strategy and voiced their frustration of the outcome: a broader resilience strategy, that watered down specific climate adaptation efforts. No evaluation mechanisms were put in place as part of the policy process, and many adaptation experts throughout Atlanta voiced their disappointment with the result, due to vague language, the almost complete disappearance of climate change-related content and prioritization away from key climate vulnerabilities such as extreme heat. Although the plan theoretically incorporates aspirations to address social equity concerns in the formulation of resilience visions, targets, and action, most of the targets are discontinued policy efforts and were not implemented (Teebken 2022a).

## 4.2 ABP

### 4.2.1 Organization

The ABP was established in 2005 and is one of two organizations that manages the AB. The ABP is a public-private partnership and its board mainly comprised of business actors and chief executive officers, in form of representatives from banks, banking, and financial advisory services (e.g. Bank of America, Blackbird Strategy Group, Federal Reserve Bank), profit-oriented companies (e.g. Coca Cola, HD Supply), property management companies, larger business conglomerates such as Cox Enterprises, and Georgia's electricity monopoly, Georgia Power. This organizational structure has been described to be:

largely made up of folks that represent the donor community, that represent corporate interests, who can raise money to support the Beltline, not necessarily who support the ideas, policies, and solutions.

(I-05-2023)

Two key figures, Ryan Gravel and Nathaniel Smith, left the board in 2016 over inclusivity and affordability concerns. Frustration became apparent regarding the shifting of ABP's priorities when the former executive director, Chuck Meadows, who was known for his background in community advocacy, was let go, as Gravel expressed:

You know, my resignation from the board had more to do with the board of the Beltline Partnership, [it was] not really about the project. [...] I was disappointed in the departure of the executive director, and it just became clear that the organization was not going to focus on the kinds of things, what they should.

(interview with Ryan Gravel, 2017)

The other organization that manages the AB is Atlanta Beltline Inc. (ABI), an economic development agency that works closely with ABP, the municipal government and partner organizations to implement the AB vision. There is a partial overlap of members of the ABP board and the ABI board. Select governmental actors, such as the mayor and city council members, are represented on the ABI board, in addition to a Fulton County commissioner. Both boards include a significant number of incumbent actors who are in support of and/or have voted in favor of the police training facility known as ‘Cop City.’

#### 4.2.2 Goals

The AB is an urban redevelopment project, first outlined in the master’s thesis of then Georgia Tech student Ryan Gravel in 1999, whose vision was to refurbish 22 miles of an abandoned railway corridor into a multi-use loop trail, connecting downtown and midtown Atlanta neighborhoods.<sup>2</sup> The initial plan was to redefine redevelopment patterns:

in ways that create more livable communities with economic and social diversity and an awareness of a broader regional role in transportation and ecological systems.

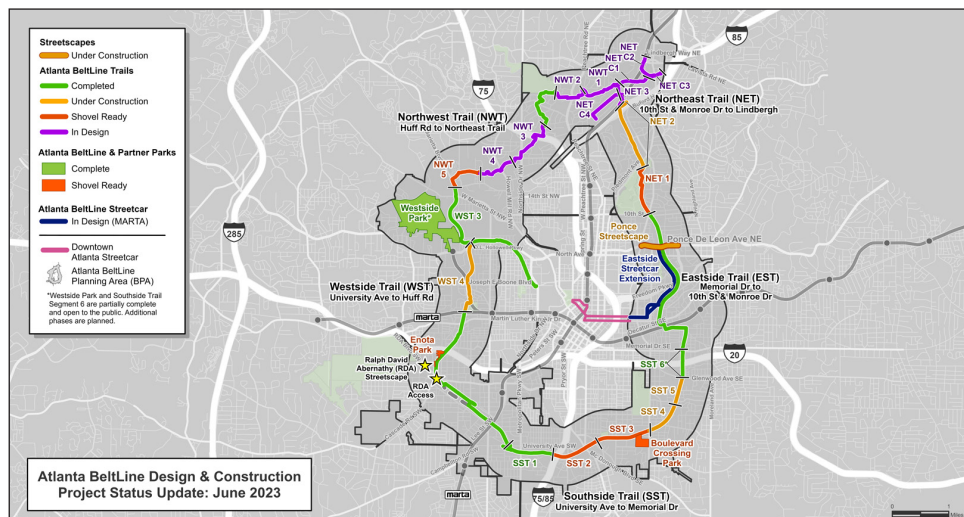
(Gravel 1999: 108)

Creating inclusive neighborhoods in addition to light rail transit were central components of the plan. The latter is especially important, as access to public transportation is a precondition to move out of poverty in Atlanta, where major jobs are found in the city’s north, and major public transportation routes continues to be racially segregated, such as interstate highways and the public transit system (PSE 2017).

Gravel implied that the initial days of the AB were a grassroots story, which managed to gain support from the Atlanta City Council and broader public. In 2005, the ABP was formed to raise funds and awareness for and across the 45 concerned neighborhoods. As of 2023, the AB is expected to be complete by 2030 (estimated cost of US\$4.8 billion, up from US\$2.8 billion projected in 2005). Today, AB is funded through a mix of private and public sources with the aim to:

transforming neighborhoods and residents’ lives with new green space, mobility, and affordable housing options and opportunities.<sup>3</sup>

Implementation of the AB began in 2005 with the first part being opened in 2008. Since then, different parts have been consecutively built and opened (Figure 2). Today, the AB is well-established in the fabric of the city. It is the most transformative redevelopment project across the country and likewise a public-private gentrification project, with speculators scooping up nearby properties early on, rapidly increasing property values, attracting more affluent residents while displacing lower-income ones (Immergluck 2022). In the adaptation context, skepticism was expressed by a heat adaptation expert regarding the intention and implemented design of the AB and ‘all the new parks, [... which] are helpful they are just not intentionally helpful’ (Teebken 2022a: 177).



**Figure 2:** Overview of implemented and planned portions of the Atlanta Beltline (AB).

Source: AB (2023): para. 6.



Gravel's initially holistic vision was to revitalize Atlanta based upon central social justice and environmental concerns. Interviewees expressed their frustration over how the initial goals had changed:

'The Beltline you have to take with a grain of salt,' that is what they say.

(I-02-2023)

Another interviewee speaks to the organization of the ABP:

Based on outcomes, the [AB] partnership is not doing what it should, what I think the designers and founders meant to do. They [the ABP] are not exercising near the power of influence they could have towards the goal of resolving inequity. The majority of the project, the 22-mile loop, passes through neighborhoods, which have suffered from disinvestment at least for 20 years and are mostly black. Initially, the Beltline was benefiting the people who were there. Now, it benefits future residents.

(I-05-2023)

Further interviewees implied their disappointed hopes that the Beltline could help 'to slide beyond economic segregation,' but that this was not the primary concern of the ABP nowadays (I-09-2023).

### 4.2.3 Strategies

The ABP has focused on attracting funding through a mix of public and private sources, thereby developing an elaborate form of financial engineering characterized by pooling resources from disaggregated structures by including extra-local private capital, thereby disguising sources of authority (see also Chua 2023). This includes funding from the Atlanta Beltline Tax Allocation District, the City of Atlanta, private investment, and county, regional, state, and federal grants. ABP has been successful in shifting public attention towards property housing and away from rental and mixed housing. The ABP prioritizes high-income development and a deregulation of top-end prices. Though different narratives are used, in practice, the ABP has paid limited attention to those with lower resources by setting price points deliberately high, against which affordable housing units will be measured.

Due to the widely known shortfalls of the AB, major public protest, and resistance from affordable housing advocates, both organizations have come under increasing pressure to implement their initially proposed affordable housing targets. A recent plan update mentions that it is the:

Beltline's goal to assist in the creation and/or preservation of 5,600 affordable housing units by 2030.

(AB 2023: para. 2)

It has been widely emphasized how the AB economically gentrified neighborhoods, with the lowest income and historically black neighborhoods not being addressed (I-09-2023) (Immergluck 2022).

The potential role of the Atlanta Beltline Partnership to mitigate some of the negative impacts has failed because of its low priority.

(I-09-2023)

In addition to limited success in addressing social equity concerns, residents have only limited authority in the existing neighborhood planning system, which lacks legal authority. This interviewee elucidates:

There has been little structural input for the vulnerable and marginalized, [...] I was among the groups that was very excited about the Beltline and the Beltline Partnership to protect the vulnerable. There were funding mechanisms, but the developers have no interest in developing affordable housing because it cuts into their profit margins. It's the

market forces in part that simply don't play into affordable or mixed housing. We tried to have inclusionary zoning—but they set the price points so high [...] that it excluded the poor neighborhoods.

(I-09-2023)

Though inclusionary zoning was put onto the agenda in the construction of the remainder of the AB by affordable housing advocates, 'when we got into the details, the affordable housing advocates lost' (I-09-2023). When asked how it was rationalized, the interviewee said that the narrative was strongly geared towards serving families working as schoolteachers or policy officers and not working-class workers (I-09-2023).

## 4.3 SSCM

### 4.3.1 Organization

SSCM is comprised of a plethora of different actors, movements, organizations, and individual actors. The movement is decentralized and autonomous with no official figure setting rules or deciding over membership. Instead, it consists of different members 'doing their own thing, and everyone speaking for themselves' (I-01-2023). SSCM is the response to a police militarization training facility known as 'Cop-City,' or the 'Atlanta Public Safety Training Center.' The project first became public in early 2021 when then Mayor Bottoms released the strategy One Atlanta Police Department Action Plan to 'advance public safety concerns' through a new public safety training academy. This activist speaks to the diverse range of actors:

There is radical abolitionists, criminal justice reform activists, who describe themselves as abolitionists, we've got environmentalists, particularly those concerned with environmental racism, there are not people who are purely concerned with trees, but lot of people highlight the connection to the destruction of environmental space. We've got local residents of the area where destruction is about to happen, we have got student activists from 5 to 6 different schools in Atlanta, focused on divestment campaigns [against the police]. We have got black power activists, who come from radical black traditions, [they] probably refer back to the black panthers, as well as more broadly, more radical black activists, black life matters, which carried over from previous struggles against police violence. There are faith leaders, from kind of all over the map, in terms of faith traditions, there are jews, Baptists, various protestants, Christians, including the Quaker. Labor is not significantly present, which is kind of interesting, labor is kind of weak in Atlanta, but it is kind of notable that they haven't said much. There are neighborhood associations, that have done statements, kind of these hyper local community bodies. And then there is earth first style activists, the type of activist that travels around the country, does workshops how to climb in a forest, how to do direct action.

(I-01-2023)

When asked about the dynamics of the movement and how different actors are connected, the broad nature of the movement was pointed out again:

some groups haven't even heard of each other, let alone interact, lots of groups are working together, it's also a lot of individuals doing actions, different groups planning different activities.

(I-07-2023)

Despite regional actors, the movement has received support from people across the country, who are:

trying to figure out how to pitch in. We ran into someone at the punk flea market, who had a cop city shirt, [...] he had printed that shirt, no one asked him to. But apparently, Stop Cop City resonated with him.

(I-07-2023)

The size of the movement is difficult to estimate due to the absence of clear boundaries and:

what makes you part of the movement [...] in terms of people who have a position on COP City, and have done something about it, I would say it is 10.000/20.000 people [as of May 2023]. In terms of political organizers, who issue calls for action, talk to media, probably 600 to 700 people, in terms of co-organizers, I would guess 50 to 100 people.

(I-01-2023)

The private nonprofit Atlanta Police Foundation (APF) has played a key role in the construction of Cop City and, like other police foundations across the country, is closely entangled with corporate actors such as Amazon, Bank of America, Coca Cola, Delta Airlines, Home Depot, and Uber, in addition to the Robert W. Woodruff Foundation and Cox Enterprises. The James Cox Foundation belongs to Cox Enterprises, the largest private company in Atlanta and owner of the Atlanta Journal Constitution, the only major daily metropolitan newspaper in Atlanta. Cox Enterprises has vested interests in different urban projects that reshape the landscape of Atlanta, such as the AB for which it also is a major funder by donating US\$30 million. Together with other philanthropic funding from the Robert W. Woodruff Foundation, their funding is considered central for the completion of the full 22-mile corridor by 2030. Both stakeholders have been central advocates for the construction of the police training center. Despite growing protest movement, Mayor Andre Dickes continues to advocate for the training facility as a:

national model for police reform with the most progressive training and curriculum in the country.

(Alcorn 2023)

#### 4.3.2 Goals

The decentralized nature of SCCM has resulted in different goals within the movement. Overall, the movement shares consensus, that funding and militarizing the police will not be the solution to safety problems and that natural space is inherently valuable and should be protected. There also is consensus that the training center will exacerbate existing injustices, such as racialized police violence, environmental racism, and social injustice. The movement is bound together by their general distrust of the city government. Despite the explicit primary goal of stopping Cop City from being built, climate change adaptation, protecting the forest and biodiversity, and exposing environmental racism are core goals. One interviewee mentioned that:

climate change is projected to be disproportionately affecting black communities in Atlanta, especially flooding and extreme heat islands which are directly affected by the lack of tree canopy.

(I-01-2023)

Another interviewee mentioned that the SCCM is 'one of the best examples of intersectionality in activism' they had ever seen. They indicated that the repression against the movement is ultimately a sign:

of having so many good arguments against something, environmental issues, impact the inequality issues, impact the racial issues, it is all so well connected.

(I-06-2023)

As a result of repression against the movement, subordinate goals were created and constantly adjusted. This includes asking for an independent investigation into the killing of a protester, Tortugita, and informing people about the rising costs and making the lack of transparency explicit through information campaigns or exerting greater power in the formal political process by asking the City Council to not fund the project.

The facility is planned to be built in the Weelaunee Forest, or South River Forest, which would result in the destruction of 85 acres of forest despite the forest's historical significance. Until their displacement through the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the forest was inhabited by the

Muscogee Creek people, a self-governed Native American tribe, who have been vocal opponents of the project. Thus, stopping the destruction of the forest and indigenous land has been an important explicit goal. Today, the forest is located in a majority black area. Against the background of racialized police violence and the Black Lives Matter movement, which began in response to the murder and killing of George Floyd and Rayshard Brooks in 2020, protesters and urban planners have pointed at the socio-political significance of the location and fears that the construction would further environmental racism and police violence against impoverished black communities.

Despite its historical and contemporary significance, former Mayor Bottoms chose the forest as the site for building the training center, which is in southeastern, unincorporated Dekalb County. One interviewee spoke to the legal aspects of this location:

It is a city owned land—that is not within the city [...] it is adjacent by the city but in Dekalb county, that is an important legal definition. [...] The city knew this but sidestepped all zoning rules, they do not have to adhere to any zoning rules. They just have to have a handshake with Dekalb County, and they got it.

(I-10-2023)

Despite criticizing the lack of transparency, with which the decision was made, and the persistence of the decision, which many fail to comprehend, the procedural injustice that Dekalb residents are facing, who live in the neighborhood and are not able to vote against it, was widely articulated.

#### 4.3.3 Strategies

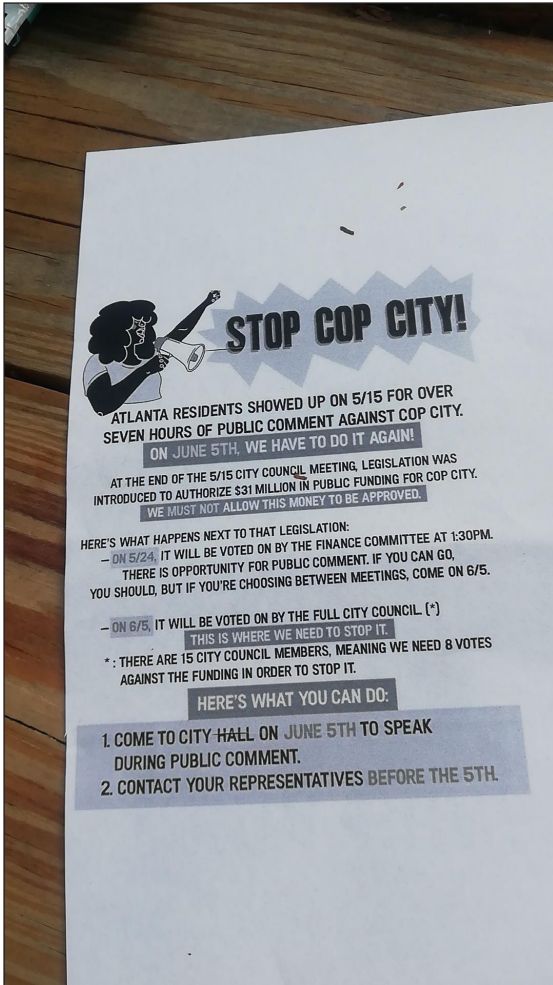
The strategies employed by the movement range from the attendance of public city council hearings and pressuring elected officials to voting against (the funding of) the project (Figure 3), litigative strategies and bringing lawsuits which obstruct or prevent proponents of Cop City to get permits or lack the environmental approval to do the project. The movement has developed a strong presence on social media and resulted in new media outlets (such as the Atlanta News Collective, the Atlanta Newsroom, Capital-B Atlanta), to challenge dominant narratives produced by main Atlanta news sources, such as the Atlanta Journal Constitution:

who never issued a conflict of interest' but was core in leading private fundraising for the training facility.

(I-10-2023)

Political and media targeting campaigns involve tactics like press releases, 'bird-dogging' (showing up at a public official hearing, interrupting speeches), and raising the issue of the movement in local and regional media.

Additionally, the movement has made use of direct action by activists occupying forests, doing tree sits, and sabotaging machinery to interfere with the construction process. There have been economic campaigns to discourage contractor businesses from working on the project by threatening involved businesses to get boycotted or to get them negative attention. Activists have also developed public calls for circulating information on contractors, calling them directly, or showing up at their offices to discourage them funding the project. Activism has spread to other cities in the form of autonomous weeks of solidarity, protests, sit-ins, informative events, and talks. Protests in Atlanta and other cities have also engaged in pressuring corporate funders such as AT&T and Coca Cola or insurers such as AXA. The movement has been using a variety of creative channels, such as canvassing, graffiti, flyers, hosting music events, theater plays, or flea markets to raise awareness about the project (Figure 4). Because of not feeling heard, especially not through formal political channels, the movement has continuously adjusted its strategies and recently launched a petition campaign to open a federal lawsuit.



**Figure 3:** Flyer calling for participation in city council public hearing and announcing neighborhood rallies.

Source: Author.



**Figure 4:** Mural against Cop City.

Source: Author.

Although the impact is difficult to estimate, due to the ongoing nature of the movement and project, an urban planner emphasized:

[the movement] definitely disrupted. They got a correspondent from the daily show coming down, that is big. They delayed construction by months and months, which is another way, a smart and calculated way to pressure the banks and the construction companies, because those are harder to impact directly.

(I-06-2023)

Further signifiers of the movement's impact are the widespread international and national news coverage, the development of new organizations, as well as talks and protests across the US, in addition to successful defunding campaigns. The array of support from different types of organizations, citizens, and people outside the younger crowd was frequently mentioned to be an indicator of change. Unveiling arbitrary techniques employed against the movement in addition to generating majorities around the issues are further impacts. The unprecedented nature of the referendum but also the difficult and partially undemocratic conditions set by the municipal government were mentioned:

They need 75,000 signatures, but those need to be residents in Atlanta for at least 2,5 years. This is disenfranchising those who do not have the right to vote and are more likely to be black, undocumented, poor people. [...] Those who are directly impacted by it have the least to say. This exposes how power is conducted in Atlanta. He [the mayor] was voted by 45,000 votes. The last mayor to ever get 70,000 votes was the first black mayor in the 1960s. You are requiring residents of Atlanta to get a mandate that no Atlanta politicians has ever gotten, that is a hard board to bear. [...] I am curious to see how many legal signatures are collected and whether that is turning city council upside down, most of whom gotten elected with a few thousand votes. That will fundamentally reshape how politics is done in Atlanta, not even Coca Cola is going to put a candidate in place.

(I-10-2023)

The biggest impact the movement had was the unveiling of the 'Atlanta Way' the manner in which the political process and urban development interact in Atlanta. The movement has:

revealed the 'Atlanta Way,' that a lot of people did not know before. Everyone can say that now, what is the 'Atlanta Way,' the Atlanta Way reacts to the Stop Cop City Movement in a big and scary way.

(I-06-2023)

The movement has been facing serious repression and violence, best exemplified in the political assassination of activist Tortugita in January 2023, which erupted in public protests and a series of subsequent arrests. Five days before the second city council hearing, three members of the Atlanta Bail Fund, a non-profit that supports people who were arrested for protest or activism, were arrested by a SWAT team and charged with 'money laundering' and 'charity fraud.' Judges have voiced that the evidence of warrants against protesters is paper-thin and charges 'not very impressive' (Riley 2023: para. 13). In addition to facing domestic terrorism charges, the preparation of a Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (Rico) indictment (organized crime charges) against 61 people marks the most recent escalation and resulted in the DeKalb County District Attorney Sherry Boston quitting 'Cop City' cases over disagreements with Georgia attorney general and 'different prosecution philosophies' (Rico 2023: para. 3). At the 5 June public hearing, one activist commented on the disproportionate nature of the violence used against the movement:

If I had 57 bullets, I could assassinate every member in this chamber with three shots each and still have nine bullets left over. I dare any single one of you to tell me that you believe that is justified, reasonable, or acceptable, a standard operating procedure. Wars have been fought over much less. [...] The May 31<sup>st</sup> deployment of militarized police units

on a residential street to raid a bail fund on suspicion of white-collar crimes is tyrannical, tyrannical entities must be demolished by all means necessary. [...] For those who make peaceful revolution impossible, make violent resolution inevitable. If you build it, we will burn it.

(Activist at public hearing, see CoA 2023)

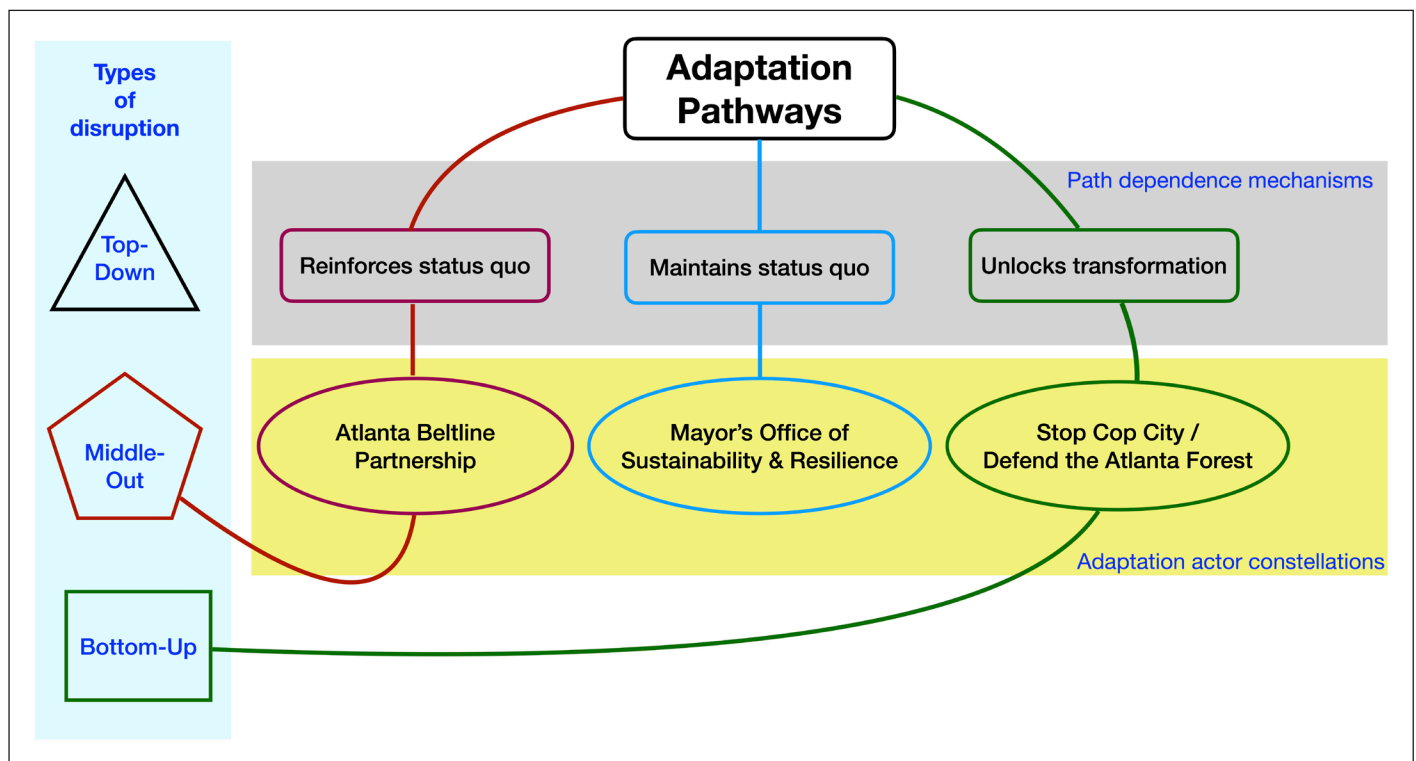
## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

### 5.1 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The theoretical contributions of the study are twofold. First, the study offers insights into the role actors play for lock-ins and path-breaking. Existing research on lock-ins, path-dependence, and path-breaking was revisited. This considers actors as enabling and disabling factors, which can stabilize, reinforce, or break status quo pathways (Figure 5). For path-breaking, capacities by which actors create new conditions were revisited, such as actors' abilities to dismantle drivers of unsustainability, decentralized forms of self-organization, and context-specific rule-making (Hölscher *et al.* 2019). Actors that stabilize or reinforce pathways are signified by the reluctance to embrace problem ownership, have relatively more power and can hamper change through coalescing in networks (Groen *et al.* 2022; Jager *et al.* 2022). The different roles actor configurations and relations of power can play for path-breaking are also reflected in governance discourses on disruption.

Second, an enhanced understanding is provided for the different forms of disruption which challenge mainstream and overly narrow conceptualizations of disruption as path-breaking. This is revealed by how actor constellations are embedded in different types of disruption. Existing adaptation discourses appear to normatively embrace disruption as something that is needed for unlocking path dependence (e.g. Schipper *et al.* 2020). Drawing from Chua (2023), who introduces three dimensions of disruption ('disruption from above,' 'disruption from the middle,' 'disruption from below'), the article shows how disruption may as well stabilize or reinforce existing pathways. A look at actor constellations, their organization, goals, and changes thereof, as well as strategies, enhances the understanding of the political stakes embedded in the deployment of disruption. Taken together, these factors help to understand the mode at which actors disrupt and which function they undertake for path dependence and path-breaking. If path dependence is accepted

**Figure 5:** Summary of how key adaptation pathways relate to different types of disruption.  
Source: Author.



as a stochastic premise that causes lock-ins and has low probability for endogenous change (Vergne & Durand 2010), and that governmental entities are especially prone to particular policy trajectories and in that sense organizational lock-in (see also Jager *et al.* 2022), then pressure from outside government becomes necessary for unlocking alternative adaptation pathways. Disruption from the middle and private sector interests demands caution that it is not just any kind of disruption, but disruption from below which has unlocking potential.

## 5.2 EMPIRICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The empirical cases reveal different functions of actors (see also File 3: Overview across cases in the supplementary data online). The MOSR does not engage in disruption and serves to stabilize the status quo with no reframing of human–nature relationships or actual change in power constellations. The MOSR acts as an intermediary that pools external resources (financial, expert-driven knowledge, and support) to reach its goals. Renewable energy and green infrastructure are the two central pillars in reaching its goal of becoming a ‘top-tier sustainable city.’ The city’s sustainability and resilience efforts unveil rationales deeply embedded in a capitalist imperative and related policy efforts as means for achieving investment-driven growth. The DWM is entangled in MOSR efforts and presents an interesting case study for further research due to its growing financial resources and role in the city. The role of conventional governmental actors and public policies in steering complex systems appears to be limited. This is in line with previous research, that views policy actors as constraining forces to change processes (Jager *et al.* 2022).

The ABP ‘disrupts from the middle’ and reinforces the status quo through an elaborate public–private partnership organized in a top-down manner with little representation of community advocates and an elaborate form of financial engineering that sources resources from afar. The ABP is exemplary of responsibility avoidance, characterized by not taking proactive ownership over a problem they were a key contributor to: the growing displacement of local populations as a result of neighborhood revitalization efforts. Instead, the ABP engages in reactive window-dressing—without opportunities for actual citizen control or at least partial but actual delegation of power to local residents. Instead, ABP has systematically excluded the most marginalized through sophisticated strategies, presented above. It has radically departed from its initial visions of inclusive neighborhoods and has only produced ‘accidental adaptation’ by not designing the Beltline in a deliberately helpful way to, for example, mitigate heat stress. It is nowadays tailored towards property ownership, high-end development, and making money through private investments of extra-local companies such as Bank of America.

The SCCM is actively ‘disrupting from below’ by dismantling drivers of unsustainability and injustice related to the construction of the police training facility. Through its decentralized organization, the movement has been able to flexibly respond to repression from above and engage in context-specific rule-making. The movement has evolved around environmental and social caretaking and relationships of kinship. It has actively challenged the capitalist imperative by reconciling various actors and highlighting intersecting social–environmental inequities. The establishment of new institutions has enabled a strengthened agency over new narratives, that are not being produced by incumbent actors. The widespread reframing of ideas, and awareness about a more justice-oriented vision of the future and creating public awareness about the ‘Atlanta Way,’ hints at the impacts of the movement. The movement has disrupted urban (adaptation) governance to such an extent that it has experienced drastic suppression from the municipal government. The latter is entangled with corporate entities and interests across various projects (ABP, O4W, Cop City). The repression of SCCM is emblematic of how incumbent actors feel threatened and is concerning, as it marks a shrinking political space for activism. The SCCM is an actor that disrupts and may be the exogenous shock the government and governance system need for unlocking alternative adaptation pathways.

Whereas actors who disrupt from ‘the middle’ are perceived as a legitimate part of politics, actors who disrupt ‘from below’ are impeded by incumbent actors, defined as those that wield disproportionate power, and their use of disproportionate repression. There is a need to politically (re)engage a different understanding of politics that may as well be ‘disruptive from below’



in the sense of introducing something new and interrupting the established. This is especially relevant due to the limited probability of endogenous change and incremental adjustments as core characteristics of public institutions. Avenues for further research could assess more systematically: (1) the role and interrelation of different actors within the municipal government and (2) the entanglement of incumbent actors across the cases as well as (3) streamline how path-dependence mechanisms and variants of disruption contribute to transformative adaptation pathways.

## NOTES

- 1 This article does not discuss transformative adaptation pathways in detail, but bases its understanding on Colloff *et al.* (2021), who conceptualize intentional transformative adaptation pathways across four aspects: (1) reframing human–nature relationships; (2) dealing with uncertainty; (3) engendering empowerment and agency; and (4) addressing conflicting values and interests.
- 2 For a comprehensive review of the development of the AB, see Immergluck 2022: ch. 2).
- 3 For more information on different funding resources and how they can be used, see Beltline (2023).

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## DATA ACCESSIBILITY

The data that supports the findings were collected by the author through an analysis of primary documents (gray literature and reports), secondary resources, participant observation and interviews as part of the research project. The data from primary documents and secondary resources are available from the author upon reasonable request.

## ETHICAL APPROVAL

The privacy of the research participants is protected using the guidelines of the European Union General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The university where this research was undertaken does not require an ethical approval or ethical review for research. Informed consent was obtained from research participants along with their right to rectify, and the right to object. Unless asked for explicit consent, the interviewees were ensured that the use of personal data is safeguarded so that profiling is impossible.

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## SUPPLEMENTAL DATA

Three supplemental data files for this manuscript can be accessed at: <https://doi.org/10.5334/bc.383.s1>

File 1: Interview template questions.

File 2: Overview of key policy efforts, aims, instruments and actors.

File 3: Overview of actors, their goals organization and impact.

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