

Science for Environment Policy

Public acceptance of restrictive policies influenced by their location

Local context may have more influence over public acceptance of restrictive policies, such as road tolls and parking fees, than factors such as age, gender or education, a new study suggests. The researchers analysed public reaction to Norwegian policies used to reduce car use and found that there were three aspects of local context that were particularly important: local urban development policies, sense of local identity, and public understanding of the problems.

The success or failure of any policy measure can depend on public acceptance, particularly in the case of so-called 'restrictive policies'. These impose additional costs or constraints on certain actions. Until now, little research has focused on how local context affects public acceptance of such policies. 'Local context' refers to conditions specific to an area, from geographic location to sense of identity.

For this study the researchers investigated how local context influenced the public acceptance of restrictive policy measures aimed at [reducing car use](#). Two Norwegian municipalities, Drammen and Bærum, were selected as they are similar in terms of size and both suffer from traffic congestion. However, the two cities have different strategies for urban planning and economic development. The inhabitants' attitudes to the usefulness of transport policy measures were compared using data from interviews and surveys of around 500 people in each municipality. Both restrictive policy measures, such as road tolls and rush hour fees, and 'supply side' policy measures, such as better public transport and new roads, were considered.

The inhabitants of the two cities did not have significantly different views on supply side measures. However, the residents of Bærum were more accepting of restrictive policy measures than Drammen residents. Investigating further, the researchers found that socio-demographic factors, such as age, gender or education, had no direct effect on attitudes to policy measures. However, they did identify three aspects of 'local context' which have historically meant that Drammen residents were more accepting of restrictive policies, but widespread implementation has now resulted in reduced acceptance.

- 'Strategies for municipal development'. Urban development is often accompanied by introduction of restrictive policies. For example, a housing development may entail parking fees for the local area. Such developments have historically been more common in Drammen, possibly leading to reduced acceptance for further restrictive measures.
- 'Local identity', how inhabitants perceive the characteristics of that location. For example, despite their similarities, Drammen is perceived as an urban municipality while Bærum is thought of as more rural. The sense of Drammen as 'urban' may have led people to have higher acceptance for restrictive policies initially. People may feel, for example, that as they live in an urban street, parking fees are expected. However, these restrictive policies became more commonplace as a result, leading to the backlash seen in this study.
- 'Crisis understanding'. For example, 20–40 years ago, the Norwegian Society for the Conservation of Nature was heavily involved in campaigns regarding the polluted nature of the Drammen fjord – the crisis – which may have helped influence people's understanding of the need for action and acceptance of necessary changes. At that time they were more accepting of restrictive measures but, again, this has now led to reduced support for such policies.

These results suggest that implementing policies on a general basis may be less successful than expected, owing to the fundamental importance of local context. Further research on the public acceptability of policy measures should include local context as a primary consideration, the researchers say.



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