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Remunicipalisation and the prospects for more equitable place-based development

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The last two and a half decades have witnessed a remarkable process of global de-privatisation locally: leading to the term remunicipalisation. There is, however, little research on the extent to which remunicipalisation challenges the inequities and injustices associated with privatisation and dominant neoliberal agendas at urban and regional scales. This paper aims to fill this gap with a two-step analysis of remunicipalisation outcomes. First, we use the Public Futures database to assess its global geography and development implications. Second, we develop a comparative analysis of remunicipalisation in Germany and the UK. This demonstrates the potential contribution of remunicipalisation to alternative place-based development strategies but also its limits in tackling broader spatial. Germany's decentralised political economy has provided more opportunities for such strategies, while the UK's overcentralised political economy has been more restrictive. But, even here, determined local agency has used remunicipalisation for progressive ends.

Keywords: remunicipalisation, spatial justice, place-based development, Germany, United Kingdom

JEL Classifications: H41, H75, P41, R58

Introduction

Remunicipalisation has become an important focus of attention in recent years as a global trend for local governments to take formerly privatised and outsourced public services back into forms of municipal ownership and control (Kishimoto and Petitjean, 2017). While there is an increasingly extensive literature on its different aspects, notably on whether it represents a reversal of previous privatisation trends, how it features within an ongoing landscape of austerity and whether it can give rise to a more transformative and progressive democratic politics (e.g. McDonald, 2018; Warner and Aldag, 2019; Cumbers and Paul, 2022; Albalade et al., 2024; Warner, 2023), there is, as yet, little attempt to locate it within broader processes of local and regional economic development.

Yet, as a pushback against neoliberal forms of governance, and particularly its signature policy of privatisation, remunicipalisation suggests a deeper challenge to the dominant neoliberal local and regional develop-

ment agenda since the 1980s. Given the evidence that such an agenda has greatly exacerbated existing patterns of uneven development and inequalities both within and between places (Jessop, 2018; Martin et al., 2018; Hadjimichalis, 2019), an important but, as yet, unaddressed issue is whether remunicipalisation helps to mitigate or even reverse these processes to create more equitable and socially progressive forms of local and regional development.

Given this context, we make two original contributions to the debate in this paper. First, we draw upon the Public Futures (PF) database to present an initial account of the global geography of remunicipalisation, which has not been attempted before. We identify key spatial patterns, evident from the database and reflecting upon its relationship to alternative development agendas. Second, we develop a comparative analysis of remunicipalisation in Germany (the country with the greatest number of remunicipalisations) and the UK (where privatisation has

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been most advanced but has also experienced considerable remunicipalisations). To our knowledge, this is the first comparative study of remunicipalisation at the national level beyond individual cases. The comparison of the two with their very different spatialities of governance is illuminating in understanding the progressive potential but also limits to remunicipalisation. Our findings suggest that Germany's decentralised, federated structure has provided more opportunities for progressive place-based strategies than the UK in both dynamic places but also in previously more economically marginal areas. In the UK's overcentralised political economy, the potential of remunicipalisation has been more limited, but local actors have used it for progressive ends within the constraints of multi-scalar governance.

The remainder of the paper is structured into six parts. In the second section, we summarise the literature on remunicipalisation before exploring how it intersects with recent debates in local and regional development around tackling spatial inequality and constructing place-based alternatives to hegemonic neoliberal competitiveness agendas. The third section details our methodology and some definitional issues around the term remunicipalisation. The fourth section reports on the global geography of remunicipalisation, mapping the trend and exploring its intersection with alternative pro-public development agendas. We then focus in sections five and six on comparing remunicipalisation processes and local development outcomes in Germany and the UK before concluding.

Remunicipalisation, neoliberalism and spatial inequalities

There is now an extensive literature on remunicipalisation (e.g. Clifton et al., 2021; Cumbers and Becker, 2018; Cumbers and Paul, 2022; Hefetz and Warner, 2004; Hall and Lobina, 2001; Hall et al., 2013; Kishimoto and Petitjean, 2017; Kishimoto et al., 2020; Lobina and Hall, 2007; McDonald, 2018, 2024; McDonald and Ruiters, 2012; Paul and Cumbers, 2023; Gasseau, 2024; Paul, 2024) and while there is a broad consensus that the global trend reflects a Polanyi societal pushback against excessive overcommodification processes (e.g. Hall et al., 2013; Warner and Clifton, 2014; Cumbers and Paul, 2022), its deeper political economic significance is more uncertain. Polanyi's warning that movements back against the market can be both regressive and progressive is reflected in the broad spectrum of political actors, from right to left, involved (McDonald, 2018).

The case of Hungary, where remunicipalisation and national level de-privatisation have connected to a right-wing authoritarian project, is a particularly cautionary tale (Sebok and Simons, 2023; Scheiring, 2020). where Viktor Orban has used both local remunicipalisation and national

level de-privatisation for a right wing nationalistic and xenophobic project is a cautionary tale here (Sebok and Simons, 2023). Orban has used disaffection with the country's rapid transition to capitalism in the 1990s — where the economy and society were heavily deregulated and marketised, largely to the benefit of foreign capital while removing social welfare elements of the communist system — for a project of national renewal, but one that has created new social and spatial divisions while scapegoating migrants and poorer sections of society rather than tackling inequalities (Scheiring, 2020).

Elsewhere, remunicipalisation cannot automatically be aligned with progressive or alternative social and spatial justice agendas. Some quantitative studies have suggested that it represents more 'pragmatic' state management than political idealism (e.g. Gradus and Budding, 2020; Warner and Aldag, 2019; Warner, 2023). But we also find in the US water and German energy sectors that pragmatic forms of remunicipalisation co-exist with significant local political mobilisations in opposition to neoliberal governance (Grant, 2015; Cumbers and Becker, 2018; Hanna and McDonald, 2021). It is also the case that many remunicipalisations often revert to top-down corporatist models of governance that do not depart significantly from New Public Management principles (McDonald and Swyngedouw, 2019). Nevertheless, remunicipalisation does also reflect significant local political mobilisations that represent more progressive challenges to neoliberal governance, though still encountering strong elite opposition and structural constraints (Grant, 2015; Cumbers and Becker, 2018; Hanna and McDonald, 2021).

A progressive trans-national pro-public movement has also emerged, advocating remunicipalisation in tackling social, spatial and ecological justice at the local level (Kishimoto et al., 2020). Additionally, it has become a key element in union campaigns by the Public Services International and European Public Services Union. Remunicipalisation has also drawn the attention of supranational governance bodies, notably the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (2022), which acknowledged its potential in tackling urban inequalities. The International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2021) and the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG, 2022) have also highlighted its importance in strengthening employment rights and enhancing integrated local public policy capacities following the COVID-19 pandemic (Cibrario and Cumbers, 2022). The International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA, 2022), typically more aligned to a neoliberal policy approach, presented (re)municipalisation as an important component of rebuilding public capacity.

Given these developments, it is important to situate remunicipalisation within broader urban and regional development processes, particularly relating to renewed debates about spatial uneven development, 'left behind places' and 'levelling up' (MacKinnon et al., 2022; Martin

et al., 2021; Fiorentino et al., 2024). Economic and social grievances at growing inequalities are also linked to the decline in basic service provision in more marginalised urban and rural regions, where austerity, marketisation and privatisation in areas such as housing, transport, energy and water are adding to a broader crisis of affordability and falling living standards and a sense of abandonment by metropolitan elites.

Remunicipalisation also links to related debates around alternative forms of local development, evident particularly in discourses on new municipalism, the foundational economy and community wealth building (Engelen et al., 2017; Calafati et al., 2022; Guinan and O'Neill, 2020), which although consisting of very disparate literatures (see Crisp et al., 2024; Russell et al., 2022a; Thompson, 2023) share attempts to rethink local development beyond narrow economic growth agendas, prioritising social needs, democratic participation and community-based narratives of place-based development. What is common to these debates is a growing interest in public–community partnerships, where local public authorities intentionally collaborate with community members to better fulfil collective needs, especially with regard to tackling climate change and enhancing social provision. This can take various, overlapping forms: from municipalities supporting the creation of a local cooperative to procure essential goods and services from, to joining forces with public sector workers to bringing an essential service in-house (Valentin and Steinfert, 2023). The aim to create more cohesive, autonomously driven and integrated local forms of development chimes with the remunicipalisation narratives of pro-public actors of ‘fuelling the aspiration of communities and local governments to reclaim democratic control over public services and local resources, in order to pursue social and environmental goals and to foster local democracy and participation’ (Kishimoto et al., 2020, p. 28, see also Valentin and Steinfert, 2023). Yet, it is important to begin to understand how much these progressive aspirations are being achieved, and the extent to which the landscape of actually existing remunicipalisation sits within broader processes of spatial uneven development within and between places. As predominantly place-based initiatives aimed at reclaiming ownership and control of key public assets, services and infrastructures, an important issue is whether remunicipalisation benefits more marginal and ‘left behind’ places.

Researching and defining remunicipalisation

Our research behind this paper draws upon two sets of empirical data: firstly, a recently constructed global database, PF, and secondly, interviews undertaken in the UK and Germany over the period 2019–2024. The PF database

(<https://publicfutures.org>), is a crowdsourced qualitative database that represents the first attempt to map de-privatisation in the world. The database collects and maps cases of ‘de-privatisation’, which we understand as a wider trend that incorporates processes of remunicipalisation (in a narrow sense of local de-privatisation), municipalisation (new municipally owned provision) and renationalisation in the sense of national-level de-privatisations (Pearson et al., 2026). PF is a collaborative initiative between the Transnational Institute (TNI), an international research and advocacy organisation based in the Netherlands, and the University of Glasgow alongside 15 global partners from the pro-public movement, including trade unions, local government actors and communities of practice. TNI began collecting cases in the water sector in 2007, gradually broadening out to other sectors as the wider scope of remunicipalisation became clear (Kishimoto and Petitjean, 2017). From this initial dataset, PF was launched in its current, crowdsourced and web-based format in 2021. The database features over 1824 cases across 78 countries, covering more than 90 essential services (data extracted January 2025). Cases are collected through a web form on the PF website which requests details on cases, including location, relevant dates, sectors and services, previous and current ownership and motivations. To ensure robustness, all collected data are reviewed, verified and, in some cases, added to with desk-based research by a core group of TNI researchers using publicly available resources like reports, press releases and credible media sources. Despite this rigorous process, the data reported here, like all data, are socially constructed and inevitably incomplete. A key limitation of PF evidence is that, like all crowdsourced data, it largely relies on highly motivated participants who are geographically unevenly spread to submit cases; as such, it is not suitable for systematic or advanced statistical analysis. On the other hand, a crowdsourced methodology constitutes a strength as the activist networks contributing to the database represent an important epistemic community that is frequently overlooked as a source of expertise in economic research (see Pearson et al., 2026 for details).

For our case studies, 36 interviews were undertaken in Germany, and 24 interviews plus a focus group of union shop stewards in the UK. The cases featured here are not intended to be statistically representative of remunicipalisation as a trend across the two countries but rather a more ‘purposive’ sample (Paton, 2002) to capture its effects across different types of area (urban, rural, more deprived and deindustrialised municipalities). Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key actors, stakeholders and experts, including local politicians, administrators, managers and CEOs of companies and utilities, members of supervisory boards, consultants, trade union representatives, activists and members of community groups. This range of research

Table 1 Number of de-privatisation and new public ownership cases recorded in the Public Futures database.

Type	Number of cases (%)
Local de-privatisation	1105 (61)
Renationalisation	69 (4)
Total de-privatisations	1174 (65)
Municipalisation	605 (33)
Community-run services	45 (2)
Total cases	1824 (100)

Source: Public Futures, data extracted January 2025.

participants reflects not only the diverse array of actors involved in processes of de-privatisation but also allows us to explore the complex and at times contested relationships and experiences of these actors. In this context, we also attended events, meetings and workshops on de-privatisation more generally as well as on specific cases, organised by NGOs, political foundations and trade union groups, which informed our understanding of the relational, contextual and contested nature of de-privatisation (Koch, 2023). Interview and event findings were supplemented by desk-based research and secondary data from local and regional newspapers and municipal reports.

Definitional considerations

The term ‘remunicipalisation’ was first used in the water sector to reflect the growing trend at the sub-national level for local governments to take privatised services back into local forms of municipal public ownership (Lobina, 2015). ‘Municipal’, as a broader term, describes urban contexts, including megacities, city regions and combined authorities, as well as smaller towns and rural districts. While there has also been a trend towards re-nationalisation in recent years, this only accounts for around 4% of cases in the PF database, dwarfed by local level deprivatisations (Table 1). The database also records other categories: newly created public enterprises (‘municipalisations’) and more hybrid forms of ownership with community- and cooperatively-run services. In this paper, we deliberately use ‘remunicipalisation’ here in a broader more expansive analytical sense — including both local deprivatisations and new forms of local municipal ownership or ‘municipalisations’ and more hybrid community led forms. This is because the available evidence demonstrates that these new initiatives are social innovations that are overwhelmingly a response to neoliberal failure, and an absence of private and market provision in sectors as diverse as health care and broadband services, as we illustrate below.

The global geography of remunicipalisation and its local development implications

In quantitative terms, Europe is the dominant continent for remunicipalisation in its entirety — with approximately 60% of cases. One obvious explanation for this is that the continent was at the epicentre of privatisation during the 1990s, with Western Europe in particular accounting for 50% of all privatisation revenues among OECD countries, which in turn accounted for two-thirds of the global total (Cumbers, 2012). While no country went through as extreme an experience of privatisation as the UK, most countries in Western Europe, underwent privatisation in the 1990s. Unsurprisingly, as the problems of privatisation have become evident, Europe has become the world region where push-back has been greatest. North America has seen the second largest number of cases (300), followed by South America (127).

The data reveal interesting sectoral clusters, for example, in the US, the telecommunications sector makes up by far the highest share of recorded cases with 59% followed by the water sector (31%). Whereas the water sector reflects de-privatisation and the expiry of contracts, the majority of cases in telecommunications sector (140 out of 144) are the creation of new public enterprises linked to the growth of community and publicly owned broadband networks in response to the paucity and unevenness of private provision, especially in rural areas and small towns as well as in lower income communities (Hanna and Mitchell, 2020). Many of these have had a positive boost for their local economies. To take one example, the US advocacy group, the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, noted how the city of Chattanooga in the US South created its own high speed broadband network in 2009 serving not just its own residents but surrounding rural districts. It is estimated that the initiative had helped create 2800 new jobs and adding \$1 billion to the local economy between 2011 and 2015 (ibid). In South America, across Bolivia, Argentina, Colombia and Brazil, popular water struggles have resulted in remunicipalisations. Chile has also seen the most significant recent de-privatisation trend on the continent with 44 municipalities setting up community pharmacies between 2015 and 2018 in response to under provision and prohibitive cost of the privatised health care system under the Pinochet dictatorship (Panez Pinto, 2020).

According to the PF database, remunicipalisation increased dramatically between 2007 and 2017 and was dominated by two key epicentres: the German energy sector and the French water sector. This is still reflected in the PF database, where energy accounts for 22% of cases (of which 79% have been in Germany) and water

16% (more than half in France). The decrease in cases after this point also reflects the decline in German energy remunicipalisations; 90% being between 2009 and 2017, which were themselves linked to the expiry of private contracts from the 1990s. In both countries, remunicipalisation trends can be linked to 'pragmatic' cost savings but research suggests that they are linked to broader processes of regaining local autonomy and control of key assets, particularly for sustainable local development initiatives, including creating and strengthening local supply chains (Petitjean, 2017; Paul and Cumbers, 2023). Remunicipalisations are increasingly also recorded in other sectors and countries. Local government services, waste, health and social services, transport and telecommunications have all seen consistent growth, while Spain and the UK (135 and 132 cases, respectively) have become important new epicentres. Spain has seen a doubling of cases since 2017 across a range of sectors, with researchers emphasising the growth as part of an upsurge in radical municipalist politics following the Eurozone crisis and imposition of austerity measures (Planas and Martinez, 2020).

While it is important to situate remunicipalisation within particular local contexts, there are common features that account for the global trends described. For the cases that we have data for, the failure of privatisation to deliver on its promises is to the fore across sector and space: 44% suggest a lack of quality in service provision is a key motivation with the second largest factor being the desire for cost reductions; patterns that are evident across both de-privatised activities and new municipal enterprises.

Such economic motivations both contradict elite neoliberal discourse on the merits of privatisation and, to an extent, chime with arguments made that remunicipalisation is a 'pragmatic' trend by local government managers rather than a 'political' trend (Warner, 2023), although it should be recognised that local government pragmatism itself is not apolitical in the wider sense, as all government action is embedded in social and political relations. It is, however, important to recognise that cost pressures and low-quality service provision impact heavily on the poorest and were to the fore in some of the most celebrated anti-privatisation mobilisations, for example, those seen in the Bolivian 'water wars' of the early 2000s (Cumbers and Paul, 2022). More 'political' motivations are also evident; in the 23% of cases that demand greater democratic or public control, and in the 24 per cent who cite 'policy objectives'. When one digs beneath this rather general heading to individual cases, it becomes clear that remunicipalisation is linked to broader local development objectives that are consonant with community wealth building agendas (Guinan and O'Neill, 2020). This becomes more evident through our two-country analysis below.

From the *Energiewende* to community wealth building in Germany remunicipalisation

German remunicipalisation, particularly in the energy sector, is heavily influenced by the country's green politics (*Energiewende*) and desire to achieve a rapid transition away from fossil fuels as has been highlighted in our interviews across Germany (both in the energy sector and beyond, e.g. in transport and waste management), which we have discussed in more depth in other outputs (Cumbers and Paul, 2022; Cumbers and Becker, 2018; Paul and Cumbers, 2023). It is also a challenge to slow or even obstructive action by large incumbent private utilities with vested interests in coal and gas. Privatisation in Germany during the 1990s was a more limited process than in the UK, where entire sectors were sold off to private actors. A key difference is that in Germany's federal system basic public services and their governance remained constitutionally anchored at the state and municipal levels, and under Germany's constitution, *Daseinsvorsorge* (welfare or (well)being provision), mandates that local government assures basic service provision (see Paul and Cumbers, 2023; Schäfer, 2020). This meant that private franchising rather than wholesale privatisation was pursued. Subsequently, as these private franchises have expired, municipal actors have returned infrastructures and services to public ownership and control (authors interviews).

Energy cases still account for 62% of German remunicipalisation cases in the PF database, with much higher figures in states that have been associated with rural and green grassroots movements, such as Baden Württemberg (which has the greatest number recorded despite being the third largest state by population) (Figure 1). Schleswig Holstein and Hesse are also notable as smaller states with high numbers that reflect grassroots green movements. Within Baden Württemberg, other research has suggested particular hotspots in the Bodensee and Black Forest areas, while the countryside around Munich in Bavaria, the Rhineland and East Westphalia-Münsterland are also the location of other clusters (Wagner and Berlo, 2017). Although climate change politics has been to the fore, for many of the energy remunicipalisations, regaining control over revenue-producing utilities that can contribute to the community and local economy are also paramount, leading one group of researchers to talk of how remunicipalisation has created a 'renaissance of municipal utility companies and the municipal economy' (Wagner et al., 2021, p. 2).

One of our case studies that exemplifies the intertwining of energy transition with local development dynamics is that of Wolfhagen, a small town in Hesse, which became internationally recognised for its ambitious energy transition, achieving 100% local renewable energy to power its grid by 2014 anchored to an innovative ownership model (see also Baasch and Maschke, 2025). The latter



Figure 1 German remunicipalisations (expanded definition) by state (Source: Public Futures database).

combines an earlier remunicipalisation of the town's energy grid and the surrounding rural area in 2005 with community co-ownership (via an energy cooperative) of the local *Stadtwerke*, the municipal utility, from 2012 onwards (Hopman et al., 2021; Wegmann, 2021). Our interviews with key stakeholders in Wolfhagen (including the mayor as well as representatives from the local administration, public utility and citizen cooperative) revealed that this decision was anchored in both taking progressive climate action and supporting the economic development of the town and surrounding region. The potential to link up local citizen initiatives with a broader regional green knowledge economy strategy was highlighted in interviews, with Markus Huntzinger, (then) climate protection manager in Wolfhagen, explaining:

"You can also not underestimate [the role of] the University of Kassel, which is very active in the field of energy transition research, as well as local companies, for example producing inverters for solar panels and solar plants. [...] So there are now also companies that support and drive this transition, alongside the many supportive citizens here" (Interview, March 2022).

Wolfhagen's ambitious plan to produce 100% locally sourced renewable energy was only possible through the support of its residents (authors interviews). Citizen involvement led both to the development of a biomass and biogas plant, which is collectively owned by local farmers, and the creation of a citizen cooperative, *Bürgerenergiegenossenschaft Wolfhagen* (BEG), which owns a quar-

ter of the utility's capital and contributes to its strategic decision-making, with two representatives of the cooperative sitting on the utility's nine-member supervisory board (authors interviews, Hopman et al., 2021). Wolfhagen's utility and the citizens' cooperative now co-own a wind park and a large solar park. Revenues are redistributed to the cooperative members and the municipality, with the latter subsidising the local kindergarten, an electric bike scheme and energy efficiency measures to support lower income users with energy bills. Wolfhagen's strategy not only retained jobs but boosted local employment with the number of utility staff almost doubling (see also: Chakraborty, 2018), alongside additional renewable energy and energy efficiency jobs. An interview with Wolfhagen's (former) energy manager, Manfred Schaub, revealed that these energy activities have attracted more people to move to Wolfhagen, bucking a wider trend of *Landflucht* ('rural exodus', referring to out-migration in rural areas), and the conditions of peripheralisation that impact many small towns in Germany (Lang et al., 2024).

Energy remunicipalisation in Germany thus needs to be placed within the wider policy context of addressing rural and small-town decline, representing a form of local state anchoring (DeFilippis, 1999). But it is also linked to the expansion of the social economy in the way remunicipalisation has also run alongside and even contributed to a growth in renewable energy cooperatives (Klagge and Meister, 2018) and occasionally, as with Wolfhagen, in new hybrid public-commons partnerships (Russell et al., 2022b).

Elsewhere, remunicipalisation has important regional development dynamics. For example, the largest energy remunicipalisation in the eastern state of Thuringen (bought back for a German record fee of €950 million) was motivated by rebuilding a coherent and integrated regional economy — in the wake of the 1990s privatisations following unification — while addressing the *Energiewende* was seen as a logical spillover effect of public ownership in this sector (authors interviews, see also Paul and Cumbers, 2023). Remunicipalisation led to the creation of 200 jobs in the new municipal enterprise, the expansion of local apprenticeship schemes and new initiatives to tackle fuel poverty. Our research has also indicated further remunicipalisations in Thuringen in a range of sectors at the municipal and regional (state) level in waste, transport, housing, street lighting, kindergartens (social care) and swimming pools (Paul, 2024). These have been initiated in large part by Die Linke, the left party leading the state's governing coalition from 2014 through to 2024 and for whom remunicipalisation is part of a concerted attempt to reclaim regional public assets for regional prosperity (authors interviews). Interestingly, one of our interviewees used the term *Marktheruhigung* (literally translating as 'market calming') to speak to the desire to regain local regulation and control beyond market imperatives (see also Wright, 2019).

Remunicipalisations have also helped to address income inequalities by raising the pay and conditions of low paid workers and improving the quality of local public services. Our research illustrates how the city of Düsseldorf insourced its cleaning services for public buildings between 2015 and 2020) to reach 50% (up from 21%), securing existing employment and creating 250 new municipal jobs. The remunicipalisation campaign also improved cleaning standards and reshaped tendering practices, which can act as a blueprint for other works councils and administrations (Herrmann, 2021). Initial plans to (further) outsource these services under the guise of rationalisation were opposed through effective mobilisation of local politicians, the services trade union *ver.di*, as well as the wider public, who had complained about deteriorating quality of cleaning services in public buildings, including schools and kindergartens, while *ver.di* had been concerned about worsening conditions for contractor employees (authors interviews). The city's remunicipalisation process was awarded the 2020 German Works Council Award (Gold) for its success in avoiding outsourcing through an inclusive approach. The process focused on service quality, pay and working conditions rather than profit maximisation. It led to innovations such as new cleaning technologies and a quality management system. Christine Behle, (then) deputy chairperson of *ver.di*, commented that 'the project shows [trade union] assertiveness coupled with a sensitivity to wider societal needs' (*ver.di*, 2020). This signals the widespread positive effects of the Düsseldorf remunicipalisation campaign beyond the immediate workplace improvements, including the key benefit of better cleaning provision in public buildings for all users.

One further critical component to remunicipalisation, which is important to stress here, in contrast to the UK, has been the ability of municipal governments to access patient long-term capital from Germany's state and co-operative banking sector (Sparkassen, Landesbanken and Volksbanken) and its federal development bank (KfW) to both fund remunicipalisation and subsequent investment strategies, particularly with regard to energy transition policies. This has meant facilitated greater local agency and capacity even for smaller towns and cities to use remunicipalisation as a mechanism for modernisation of key public infrastructures and assets at local and regional renewal (authors' interviews).

Remunicipalisation in the UK's hostile climate

UK remunicipalisation experiences need to be framed within what can only be termed a hostile climate for progressive local and regional agency over the past four decades. The vast and comprehensive programme of centrally driven privatisation under the Conservatives was

continued albeit modified under the New Labour administration between 1997 and 2010. It imposed critical structural constraints on local and sub-national devolved nations and regions, despite the setting up of new governance bodies in London, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. A new round of austerity after 2010, resulting in a decade of cuts to local government spending of about 20% per annum, created a fiscal crisis that has seen an increasing number of local government bankruptcies and higher levels of financial risk and borrowing (Hastings et al., 2017; Gray and Barford, 2018; Pike, 2023).

In the context of the global remunicipalisation trends described earlier in this paper, the UK is one of the top five countries but lacks the single-sector wave of France and Germany as well as the social movement-led push that occurred in Spain. In short, there has been no discernible push from below or policy initiative from above but rather an incremental process with different elements evident across sectors. Given continuing preference and indeed enthusiasm by national governments of both Conservative and Labour-led governments for privatised solutions, the growth of local public ownership can be described as something of 'an unexpected guest' (Cumbers, 2012) below the radar. Cases verified from the PF database enables us to discern some patterns in spatial distribution as well as sectoral trends. While it has been a relatively country-wide geographical trend, London has been the main geographical centre (Figure 2) with a disproportionately high (relative to population) number of cases undertaken both at the level of the city region and local government. One obvious reason for this is that it has been a strong Labour-dominated city for the past decade both at the regional and local scale, with some of the more progressive councils such as Hackney, and Southwark pursuing anti-privatisation strategies.

Transport is the largest sector of remunicipalisation cases in the UK with over one quarter of cases, and these have primarily been a response to failed privatisation and often-exorbitant costs. As such, they appear to conform to the pragmatist theme (Warner, 2023); however, the affordability and accessibility of public transport have also been key concerns (authors interviews). Transport de-privatisations have included the return to public ownership of some regional passenger transport franchises, including Scotrail (undertaken by the SNP-led Scottish Government). Although the Scottish Government has sought to distance itself somewhat from UK government austerity and privatisation policies, e.g. through pursuing a community wealth building and wellbeing economy strategy, this alternative economic vision is still in its nascent phases (Scottish Government, 2023). At the local level, transport sector remunicipalisation has also involved taking back into public ownership many failing outsourced contracts, one of the most notorious being a £20 billion contract for the renovation of the London Underground, which was cancelled following the collapse



Figure 2 UK remunicipalisations (expanded definition) by region (Source: Public Futures database).

of a Public–Private Partnership with private companies Metronet (2007) and Tubelines (2010) (authors interviews).

Almost half of the UK cases are examples of insourcing of private contracts by local government administration, local community services, housing agencies and health boards. While some of these reflect poor privatisation experiences rather than overt political agency, there are also significant examples of both council-led initiatives and trade union mobilisation to tackle inequalities and low pay. For example, the Labour group leading Hackney Council has pursued anti-privatisation strategies (authors interviews) to tackle local inequality and generate economic development, specifically designed to ‘turbocharge insourcing as we rebuild a fairer local economy and recover from coronavirus, spending our money in the borough wherever possible and employing more local people’ (Deputy Mayor Rebecca Rennison, available at: <https://news.hackney.gov.uk/insourcing-not-outsourcing--contracts-and-hundreds-of-staff-to-move-from-private-sector-to-council/>). An important recent victory in 2022, following a campaign and strikes by the UNITE union, was the decision by London based Barts Health Trust, one of the largest in the country, to cancel its pri-

vate contract with SERCO, a British multinational operating across government services, defence and transport sectors among others. The campaign led to the insourcing of 1800 cleaners, porters, security staff and domestic workers with an average 17% pay increase, and more secure contracts and collective bargaining agreements (authors interviews and focus group with shop stewards).

One of the best-known municipalisations is Robin Hood Energy (RHE), a not-for-profit municipal energy company established in 2015 by the city of Nottingham to address fuel poverty, which affected more than 21% of the population. By UK standards, Nottingham appeared promising for a municipal energy company; one of the few cities with considerable municipal ownership experience. It is the only city in the UK to have its own district heating system, set up in 1962 to convert waste to energy, and currently supplying around 4500 homes, 100 businesses. Furthermore, the municipal bus company has never been privatised, while the city also successfully introduced a new publicly owned tram network in recent years.

Our research shows that in the first 2 years of operation, RHE achieved considerable success, a turnover of £4.6 million in its first year, rising to £97.6 million in 2017–2018 as the company delivered an operating profit while raising its customer base to 130,000. It successfully achieved its key goal of reducing energy prices, offering the lowest prices in the UK for the poorest consumers on pre-payment meters and helped drive down average energy costs in the East Midlands region to the lowest in the UK (see also Hall and Hobbs, 2017). Additionally, RHE prioritised local wealth building by bringing an out-sourced call centre for customer recruitment and enquiries in-house, creating 200 full-time equivalent jobs within its first 2 years of operation (authors interviews).

RHE’s early success also coincided with the surprising success of the UK Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn at the General Election of 2017, promoting democratic public ownership as intersecting with active industrial and regional strategies. This was a major fillip for remunicipalist projects such as RHE. A former board member said in an interview:

“We were on a bit of a high in summer of 2017, just starting to feel making progress and customer numbers going up. From 2017–18 we made a marginal profit, an operating surplus of £200,000, two years ahead of the advice. We used that money to sign up to 100% green electricity and sign up to the warm homes discount, which we didn’t need to do as a small company. But we did it partly to kickstart us to the next level and also to prove that we were using it for social good, rather than giving it back to the council.”

‘The next level’ would have involved moving from just being an electricity supplier to developing its own renewable energy capacity. Moreover, RHE was committed to

develop broader public-public partnerships for low-cost energy supply with other local authorities and housing associations within and beyond its home region. One such agreement, to supply electricity to 90,000 social housing units in Liverpool, suggests the potential to scale up its non-profit model outside its home region (authors interviews).

However, when prices in wholesale energy markets began to rise, RHE's and other small suppliers' vulnerabilities were exposed as they could not compete with the big five privatised utilities that continue to dominate the UK market (Steinfort et al., 2024). By 2020, RHE was struggling to meet its renewable energy sourcing obligations to the regulator and falling into debt, resulting in it being closed down by the city council with a loss of £38 million (Sandeman, 2023). RHE's case has provided useful ammunition for opponents of public ownership, serving to reinforce neoliberal nostrums around state inefficiencies. But RHE's failure needs to be understood within the constraints of the external neoliberal energy market environment that it was forced to operate in, which also led to the closure of many smaller entities (private as well as public) after 2019.

A more resilient and less risky form of energy remunicipalisation is evident in Plymouth. The city, hit hard by deindustrialisation and the loss of port activity, has been experiencing falling wages and high levels of inequality in recent decades. Austerity-driven cuts to public spending on social services have exacerbated the city's economic problems, with poorer areas like Devonport experiencing child poverty rates of up to 40%, with fuel poverty reaching 35% in parts of the city (authors interviews). To tackle fuel poverty whilst addressing climate change, Plymouth City Council, in collaboration with citizens, established Plymouth Energy Community (PCE) in 2013. PCE, a public-community partnership, received financial and staff support from the municipality while having significant autonomy to develop socially just and participatory energy transition initiatives (authors interviews). PEC turned an old landfill site into a community solar farm prospected to generate £1.5 million over the course of the project's 20-year lifetime. Revenues are reinvested to curb energy poverty and greenhouse gas emissions. By combining energy poverty and mental health support, 67% of the people surveyed and supported by PEC said that they could afford their energy bills better alongside 74% who reported better physical or mental health (see also: PEC, 2025). Our research reveals that such initiatives can also promote further public- and community-based innovation. For example, in 2020, PEC created PEC Homes to develop community owned, net zero affordable housing in the city. In 2023 alone, PEC was able to provide £815,000 in benefits, savings and grants for the local community. By 2025, it has helped over 37,000 residents with energy advice or energy efficiency measures (authors interviews). Partnering with a community development organisation in this way has

allowed the city government to develop its own energy transition infrastructure and services, more independent of wider market forces than RHE, that can contribute to more equitable local development pathways.

Despite the legacy of neoliberalism, privatisation and over-centralised governance in the UK, as the Plymouth example shows, remunicipalisation is linked to locally proliferating, alternative development strategies in more economically marginal regions. The best example of this is the city of Preston in the northwest of England, where remunicipalisation has formed part of a broader community wealth building strategy using municipal public ownership to democratise and revive the local economy, which has been under way since 2011. Alongside using state anchor institutions and public procurement to enhance local supply chains and encourage worker cooperatives — estimated at creating £200 million in local multiplier effects¹ — the city has established a municipal-led broadband scheme for deprived communities. It brought a struggling private care home into public ownership during the Pandemic, with the outcome that staff moved from precarious low-wage contracts to more secure and better-paid conditions, and most recently, is building a municipally owned cinema (authors interviews).

In other cities in the northwest, notably Manchester, Salford and Liverpool, progressive local leadership has also pursued remunicipalisation in sectors such as transport and housing. Together with Preston, there is an ambition to create a regional cooperative bank (authors interviews), inspired by the Mondragon model. However, interviews also highlight continuing challenges, as many higher-level government officials, managers and politicians still adhere to neoliberal principles, resisting changes to established market and outsourcing practices. Additionally, ongoing austerity measures at UK Government level continue to limit the capacity of local governments to implement progressive initiatives in contrast to their German counterparts.

Conclusion

Remunicipalisation is a significant spatial feature of urban and regional governance in the mutating, crisis-prone landscape of neoliberalism (Cumbers and Paul, 2022). Our research here adds to the existing literature by both showing that remunicipalisation at a global level is both a movement that brings together a trans-national network of state and civil society actors, albeit one that remains emergent and patchy (McDonald, 2023), and it is also a significant trend, although one with uneven geographies. In terms of the broader global trend, our argument here, on the basis of the empirical evidence presented, is that while remunicipalisation at one level can be seen as a common and relatively cost-based pushback (Clifton et al., 2021) against privatisation's failures, this cannot be divorced from the spatial, social and political contexts within which

remunicipalisation takes place. After all, it is the poorest and most marginal communities that rely on public services. To varying degrees, municipal actors on different continents are responding to the context of austerity policies being imposed by national and supranational governance bodies — wherever deeper cuts to basic services encourage both the further selling off of public assets and contracting out (Whiteside, 2018). But, in this rolling landscape of mutating neoliberalism, there are also opportunities to reverse, take back local revenue generating assets or cancel exorbitant public-private partnerships and outsourcing when opportunities arise. Whatever the sector and spatial context, tackling inequalities and poverty at the local level, and regaining control and autonomy of local economic development are critical elements of remunicipalisation in otherwise disparate examples from broadband in the USA to pharmacies in Chile to the short-lived experience of municipal energy in the UK.

Our comparative analysis of German and the UK adds to the broader remunicipalisation literature by highlighting the importance of different historical legacies, spatial governance and institutional mechanisms in shaping remunicipalisation outcomes. The evidence suggests that the opportunities to remunicipalise are greatest in federal and decentralised systems such as Germany, where municipal governments retain considerable autonomy and legislative responsibilities to provide certain essential services. Remunicipalisation in the UK by contrast, in a more centralised, privatised and market-driven economy, has been more constrained, characterised on the one hand by local government and public sector in-sourcing but also by failed and costly privatisations in the transport sector, particularly rail.

Our evidence from Germany and the UK points to the very different terrain for municipal agency dependent on the extent of neoliberal hegemony, different state structures and relations between higher and local levels of governance. In Germany local governments benefit from having continued legislative and regulatory control over key activities (in energy, for example, the ability to run and manage local grids being a critical one) and access to low interest loans from state and cooperative banks that can provide resilience through economic fluctuations, compared to the salutary experience of Nottingham's vulnerabilities both to a privatised energy market and lack of access to an equivalent source of patient capital. On the other hand, in both countries, labour unions have been able to mount local campaigns for remunicipalisation, where they have been able to tackle low wages and precarious work to improve the conditions of some of the most marginalised workers.

Despite the differences, in both Germany and the UK, remunicipalisation is also linked to alternative forms of place-based developed in more marginal economic cities and regions. Progressive alternative economic agendas in

Plymouth and Preston in the UK and at a regional scale, Thuringen, in east Germany and the rural small town of Wolfhagen demonstrate the potential for developing forms of local development and renewal beyond a narrow economic competitiveness agenda. In spite of an unfavourable broader multi-scalar governance environment, the Preston case also shows the difference that entrepreneurial local leadership can make, even in a relatively deprived setting. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise the limits to remunicipalisation as a predominantly place-based strategy to tackle wider social and spatial inequalities and injustices.

From a broader policy perspective, the findings both from the global trend analysis and the comparative cases of Germany and the UK suggest that remunicipalisation is more likely to have broader local place-based benefits where local governance actors have properly devolved financial and legal capacities and supportive national regulatory and institutional frameworks. In this sense, it must be realised that on its own remunicipalisation cannot address broader processes of spatial inequality and uneven development. To realise its full benefits as a progressive place-based strategy, it needs to be accompanied by an active and redistributive regional policy agenda at national level (and in the EU context, supranational levels), to tackle the widening spatial inequalities that continue to be a key outcome of neoliberal spatial economic governance agendas (Martin et al., 2021).

Endnotes

- 1 The broader Preston story is written up in Brown and Jones (2021).

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