CIDOB notes
internacionals

273
MAY
2022

BECOMING GLOBAL CLIMATE GOVERNORS: How cities are moving from climate ambition to coordinated action and delivery

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Global policy increasingly acknowledges city-level action as vital to keeping the Paris Agreement's 1.5°C goal within reach. While responsible for around two-thirds of global emissions, cities are also leaders in policy innovation to tackle the climate emergency.

This local innovation has been accompanied by a surge in transnational collaboration around urban climate governance, making it one of the most prominent areas of city diplomacy.

However, for cities to gain their rightful place in the international climate regime, city-level climate diplomacy must be further professionalised and oriented towards clear and measurable goals.

Cities must also deepen and expand collaboration with each other, the private sector, civil society organisations, national governments and the international organisations that set the global climate agenda.

More intense multi-stakeholder and multi-level collaboration will be particularly needed to better engage smaller and Global South cities; to upscale high-impact urban climate solutions; to unlock public and private finance; to improve cities' climate accountability; and to leverage the city as an actor and scale for achieving climate justice.

Over the past decade, global policy discourses have increasingly recognised city-level action as vital to keeping the 1.5°C goal of the 2015 Paris Agreement within reach. The Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action launched at COP22 in 2016 was the first formal framework to engage cities in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process. In 2021, COP26 further consolidated the partnership with cities by highlighting the central role of local communities for mitigation and adaptation in the Glasgow Climate Pact.

While responsible for around two-thirds of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, cities are also leaders in policy innovation to tackle the climate emergency. Over the past decade, many local authorities have invested in strategic mitigation actions such as renewable energy infrastructure, energy efficient building and retrofitting, public and shared transport, circular waste management and digitalisation. At the same time, adaptation actions to build up urban resilience to climate risks, ranging from flooding to extreme heat, are on the rise.

Local innovation has been accompanied by a surge in transnational collaboration around urban climate governance, making it one of the most prominent areas of city diplomacy. Much of this momentum has come from global city networks that tackle environmental challenges, such as C40 Cities, ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability and the Global Covenant of Mayors for Energy and Climate (GCoM). Operating as informal multilateral organisations, these networks support and coordinate local responses to the global climate emergency: they provide platforms for peer learning, standardised reporting systems

and set joint targets; they help with the design and implementation of local climate plans; and advocate for more support for cities while promoting local input to countries' Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and to global climate targets.

City-level political willingness for collective climate action has reached unprecedented intensity. This became particularly visible in the Cities Race to Zero (CRZ) campaign in the runup to last year's COP26. Signed by over 1,000 cities, which pledged to become climate neutral by mid-century, this collective action has the potential to reduce global emissions by at least 1.4 gigatons annually by 2030, equivalent to the current yearly emissions of the fifth-highest emitting country: Japan.

Efforts to connect local ambition with national and international climate policy have so far been most successful in regions like Europe.

However, in order to realise this potential cities and their networks need to move from promising coordinated global climate action to delivering it. Until recently, the assertion that cities can cooperate effectively to address global climate change was often viewed as overly optimistic. Critics pointed to the multiple barriers to sustained and impactful collective urban action, ranging from the voluntary nature of city networks to their limited ability to enforce compliance with nominal commitments (Kern & Bulkeley, 2009; Betsill & Bulkeley, 2003). But the rapid evolution of networked urban climate governance has given cause to reassess this diagnostic. Initiatives like the CRZ, which was jointly launched by, among others, C40, ICLEI and GCoM, and backed by the secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) as part of its broader Race to Zero Campaign, signal the growing capacity of cities for effective transnational coordination, and cooperation with the international climate regime.

For these new mechanisms of coordinated urban climate governance to be consolidated and upscaled, it will be vital to further professionalise city-level climate diplomacy over the next decade and orient it towards clear and measurable goals. To live up to their newly acquired image of "global climate governors" (Gordon, 2020), cities and their networks must deepen and expand collaboration with each other, the private sector, civil society organisations, national governments and the international organisations (IOs) that set the global climate agenda. This article maps some of the defining trends in contemporary city climate diplomacy and identifies where collective urban action and multi-stakeholder and multi-level cooperation need to be strengthened further.

1. Positioning cities as global climate governors

Cities and city networks are becoming ever better organised in representing their interests in international climate policy forums. C40 and other networks have spearheaded efforts to position cities as actors leading the global response to climate change. Using slogans like "cities act, while nations talk", they have pitched the immediacy and pragmatism of urban climate action against the geopolitical and ideological tensions that often impede intergovernmental climate negotiations, portraying cities as the more effective global climate governors. With 93% of cities being directly affected by climate risks, municipal governments – so the story goes – have adopted a problem-solving attitude that prioritises solutions over political and ideological differences.

This narrative has been successful in part because it resonates with a broader shift in the perception of cities in international policy debates. From being viewed as trouble spots in the 1980s and strategic sites for intervention in the 1990s, cities have come to be seen as active drivers of positive and sustainable transformations (Parnell, 2016; Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2020). In line with this shift, most national governments and IOs today subscribe to the idea that many effective climate solutions can be forged at city level.

The UNFCCC's backing of the above-mentioned CRZ in the framework of its Race to Zero Campaign is a prominent recent example of this shift in cities' international standing. What is new about the CRZ, in contrast to earlier collective climate action agreements between cities, is that it is embedded in a UNFCCC initiative and has been designed in close dialogue with upper levels of government. In 2019 alone, C40 and Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti (then C40 Chair) launched the Global Green New Deal (GGND), a pact by and for cities to ensure a just transition and carbon neutrality by 2050. However, although the GGND is committed to the 1.5°C goal and makes clear reference to the US Democrats' (failed) proposal for a Green New Deal, it is not formally linked with any national or international policy framework.

Efforts to connect local ambition with national and international climate policy have so far been most successful in regions like Europe. Following intense advocacy by European city networks and the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), the European Union (EU) has made urban climate action a cross-cutting aspect of the European Green Deal (EGD) launched in December 2019 (Abdullah, 2021). While a majority of the EGD's action plans – from the Circular Economy

to the Farm to Fork and Sustainable Mobility strategies – contain an urban dimension, the EU also prioritises collaboration with cities in research and innovation. In particular, the recently created Mission Area for Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities will support 100 European cities to become net-zero by 2030, two decades before the EU's 2050 goal. Receiving €360 million in funding in the period 2022–23 in order to kick-start the cities' transformation pathways in areas ranging from clean mobility to energy efficiency, the initiative aims to make cities innovation hubs that lead on EU climate targets.

What is needed now is to turn these isolated initiatives into a more coherent approach. While the urban dimension of the EGD is a major achievement, to be effective it must be accompanied by appropriate channels for multi-level cooperation and systematic engagement of local governments in decision-making and policy processes. European city networks and the CoR are actively lobbying for such change, but so far their calls have remained largely unanswered.

2. An uneven geography

Large, wealthy cities from the Global North continue to dominate city-led climate diplomacy. The member cities of the most powerful climate city networks, such as C40 and CNCA, are still overwhelmingly capital or second cities located in OECD countries. This uneven geography is a major obstacle to networked urban climate governance. The exclusion of smaller cities and cities in developing economies dramatically reduces both reach and global impact in terms of emissions reduction.

That said, cities from the Global South are becoming increasingly active and vocal climate governors, especially when it comes to adaptation. Often more vulnerable to the climate hazards of extreme hot temperatures, floods, sea level rise, water scarcity and/ or drought than their Northern counterparts, Southern cities tend to prioritise adaption over mitigation actions. For example, Freetown (Sierra Leone) is at the forefront of efforts to raise awareness around the heat emergency faced by African cities and to connect local leaders in order to jointly formulate adaptation strategies; meanwhile Chinese cities are leading experimentation with nature-based solutions to increase resilience to urban flooding as part of the national government's Sponge City Programme.

Similarly, some small and medium-sized cities are stepping up their game and moving into the

transnational climate governance limelight. In Europe, this includes Mannheim (Germany), which –in collaboration with ICLEI – has spearheaded the advocacy campaign of European local leaders to better engage city governments in the design and implementation of the EGD. Another example from the Middle East is the town of Byblos (Lebanon), renowned for being the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world, which has developed a widely acknowledged resilience strategy with support from the Resilient Cities Network.

If cities are to consolidate themselves as legitimate and effective global climate governors, networked urban climate action urgently needs to become more inclusive of southern and smaller cities. Actively supporting

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mitigation and adaptation efforts in such cities is a first step, and recent developments indicate that change is underway, at least with regard to Southern cities . At COP26 the new Chair and Vice Chair of C40 – London Mayor Sadiq Khan and Barcelona Mayor Ada Colau – announced that they plan to commit two-thirds of C40's budget to supporting climate action in Global South cities. Better engagement of small and medium-sized cities remains a pending task. In the coming years, this issue must move to the top of city climate networks' agendas if the gap between leading and lagging cities is to become no wider.

3. Upscaling innovative and high-impact solutions

The growing recognition of cities as climate leaders acknowledges their capacity for innovative climate action. Cities are large enough to test and pilot new socio-technical and governance solutions, and small enough to be able to abandon failing initiatives without prohibitive losses. This makes them ideal laboratories for climate governance by experiment (Bulkeley & Castán Broto, 2012). Urban living labs the size of a neighbourhood or block can try out new solutions to reduce emissions and increase resilience in real-life.

However, the upscaling and mainstreaming of successful pilots remains a major challenge that undermines the reach and effectiveness of urban climate action. To meet this challenge, city networks have focused their work on building increasingly professionalised platforms for regional and global knowledge and experience sharing, and supporting the transfer of solutions from one city to another. Yet, with local governments suffering from a persistent lack

of finance and capacity, most networked urban climate action has focused on low-hanging fruit: low-cost and low-tech mitigation and adaptation strategies that can easily be replicated.

The 15-minute city model is one example. Its first large-scale implementation began in Paris during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it has since informed urban planning in cities around the world. By creating a polycentric city of short distances, in which residents can meet their essential needs within the radius of a short walk or bike ride, the model aims to reduce mobility-related emissions and air pollution through simple, low-cost urban interventions, such as the creation of new bike lanes, pedestrian zones or neighbourhood-level services.

Even leading cities with strong capacities often run up against regulatory and legal limitations that lie beyond their competencies when trying to upscale solutions across their territory.

Yet, despite the popularity of the 15-minute city model and other low-traffic neighbourhood schemes, their capacity for reducing emissions remains limited.[1] To fully unlock the potential of cities to contribute to the 1.5°C goal, networked urban climate governance needs to move beyond its current focus on supporting knowledge sharing primarily of low-cost and low-tech solutions. More efforts need to be channelled towards strengthening cooperation with regional and national governments, IOs, international financial institutions, the private sector and research organisations on higher-impact solutions that depend on greater technical knowhow, financial investment and legal reforms.

For example, to develop deep urban decarbonisation pathways that work towards long-term climate targets, digital modelling and the creation of "digital twins" (3-D representations of a city) can make a difference. However, few cities have the expertise and resources for such digital forecasting exercises. Similarly, to fully tackle the urban energy transition, cities need to build effective private-public partnerships that can generate sizeable investments to build large-scale solar and wind energy infrastructure with the capacity to power an entire district or city.[2] While smaller-scale initiatives such as the creation of renewable energy communities are important, they are hard to mainstream and as such have little impact in terms of a city's total emissions reductions.

Until now the implementation of high-impact climate solutions that require high-tech and large investments is mostly limited to pioneer cities from the Global North. These include the 22 member cities of the Carbon Neutral Cities Alliance, which are implementing the most ambitious GHG reduction targets undertaken by cities anywhere. But to deliver on the promise of global urban climate pacts like the CRZ, a small minority of leading cities meeting the targets is not enough.

Further, even leading cities with strong capacities often run up against regulatory and legal limitations that lie beyond their competencies when trying to upscale solutions across their territory. Many innovative municipal policies and regulations to reduce emissions from transport, buildings or energy – such as the introduction of congestion charges in cities like Milan; a joint initiative by the South African cities of Tshwane, Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban to develop more stringent building energy requirements than those demanded by national regulations; and Krakow's ban on the burning of solid fossil fuels for heating – require the navigation of complex legal hurdles and are sometimes challenged in the courts.

A 2021 report by C40 and Columbia University's Sabon Centre for Climate Change Law has shown how several cities have begun to make the law their ally and use legal interventions – ranging from pioneering city-level legislation to legal reform initiatives and litigation – to remove barriers to their climate ambitions. The engagement with regional and national government authorities to clarify city powers, alter laws to enable city-level action, or tackle emission sources beyond the city's remit is key to these interventions. Equally important is the building of coalitions with other cities, civil society organisations and other stakeholders to strengthen cases and increase impact.

4. Mobilising finance for transformational action

Another major obstacle for cities in moving from collective climate ambition to delivery is the unlocking of public and private investment for low-carbon urban infrastructure and services. While rapidly urbanising countries in the Global South are under pressure to raise immense investments to build new public infrastructure and expand services like transport and waste management, cities in the Global North with slow growth rates face the challenge of updating existing infrastructure and services to low-emission requirements, which demands specific types of financing (Negreiros & Falconer, 2021). These pressures

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1. For a case study of Barcelona's superblock programme, see Rodriguez-Rey et al. 2022.
2. See for example the Melbourne Renewable Energy Project and the project Mes Barcelona.

are amplified by the facts that cities usually have among the lowest percentage of national tax resources and are generally underfunded – a situation that has worsened since the COVID-19 crisis left city budgets with gaping revenue losses and unexpected expenses. On top, city authorities often lack the necessary capacities and knowledge to access national and regional climate funds and private investment.

Improving cities' access to both public and private finance is a growing concern for city diplomacy. In Europe, where EU funds represent one of the key sources of climate finance for cities, this trend has become particularly pronounced since the launch of the EGD in 2019. In February 2020, with the support of the city network Eurocities, over 35 mayors from across Europe signed a letter to the EU institutions asking for direct access to forthcoming EGD funds under the 2021–2027 Multiannual Financial Framework, as well as for more funds to be tailored to the needs of cities. Direct access to EU climate funds has become a major concern for European cities, particularly because few national governments engaged local authorities in the drafting of their post-COVID National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs), through which most EU green-transition financing will be channelled in the upcoming years.

At global level, city diplomacy has paid greater attention to supporting cities in accessing private finance. For example, the World Bank, in cooperation with C40 and UN Habitat, has set up a City Creditworthiness Initiative that helps cities in developing countries (where less than 20% of the largest 500 cities are deemed creditworthy) improve their financial performance and secure the private investment they need to become climate-friendly. To boost public–private partnerships C40, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) and the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP) launched the City-Business Climate Alliance (CBCA) in 2020, a platform to convene the most ambitious cities and business leaders to set joint climate targets and co-create projects that help cities deliver on their climate plans. The aim of the platform is to support cities in creating active partnerships with private sector operators and investors that can drive the business and technological solutions cities depend on in reaching their targets.

The work city networks and other stakeholders are doing to support the capacity of municipal governments to access climate finance is still in the early stages. In the upcoming decade stepping up initiatives in this area will be key. Further, efforts need to concentrate on channelling more climate investment towards urban areas in the Global South. As the *2021 State of Cities Climate Finance Report* highlights, urban climate finance

flows are heavily concentrated in OECD countries and China and directed mainly towards mitigation action. Adaptation and resilience finance, which is urgently needed in rapidly urbanising countries of the South that tend to be exposed to higher climate risks, only accounts for 10% of climate finance directed towards cities.

5. Building local credibility through data

With the growing professionalisation and financialisation of urban climate action, ad hoc knowledge and experience sharing is no longer enough to upscale solutions at sufficient scale and speed. Following the maxim "you can't manage what you

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don't measure", city networks are placing increasing emphasis on measurable, reportable and verifiable (MRV) local climate action that can inform long-term policymaking and render cities accountable climate governors to IOs, financial institutions and private sector actors (Gordon, 2016).

Moving beyond their obligation to provide transparency to their local constituencies, cities are increasingly engaging in global emission monitoring systems. Since the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015, the number of cities disclosing their emissions to the CDP, one of the largest global reporting platforms, has more than doubled. In 2019, to streamline local measurement and reporting procedures and to pool data, CDP and ICLEI merged their respective reporting platforms and made them compatible with the GCoM's reporting framework. Since 2021, the new CDP-ICLEI platform has also been a data partner of the UNFCCC's Global Climate Action Portal, which was relaunched at COP26 to include progress tracking of subnational and non-state actors.

The new commitment to quantification and standardisation in networked urban climate governance is part of a broader trend towards data-driven governance. However, it is also about providing both internal and external accountability (ibid.). Internal accountability that enables meaningful comparison and aggregation of data, allowing cities to hold themselves and each other accountable for meeting targets; and external accountability that provides a clear picture of the scope and impact of subnational climate action to establish cities' rightful place in the international climate regime and to attract assistance and investment.

External accountability circles back to the question of finance and to attracting investment. Chronically

underfinanced, cities are under pressure to demonstrate the extent to which they are effective climate governors worthy of public and private investment and lending. More robust data can help identify opportunities for cost savings and for maximising return on investment. Further, the analytics generated by the new reporting platforms benchmark the performance of local governments against those of their peers in the competition for financing (ibid.). However, while the quantification and financialisaton of urban climate action is an important part of its professionalisation, it carries the danger of profitability becoming more important than climate impact and social equity. To avoid this trap, urban climate investments need to be systematically linked with science-based targets and social equity policies.

Networked urban climate governance is drawing global attention to and addressing the uneven distribution of the costs and benefits of climate action across societies and communities.

6. Promoting climate justice *within* and *between* cities

Concerns around climate justice have moved to the centre of transnational urban climate action in recent years. Many city climate plans place a strategic focus on environmental justice and citizen co-production, fostering equitable and inclusive solutions. In particular, since the COVID-19 pandemic, city leaders have highlighted the importance of a recovery that is both green and just. The C40 Global Mayors COVID-19 Recovery Task Force, launched in April 2020 with the aim of promoting inclusive, low-carbon urban economic recovery, exemplifies this trend.

Global climate justice as an urban concern moves beyond the international climate regime debates around the rights and responsibilities of nation-states to either be protected from the effects of climate change, or to take action to reduce emissions, support adaptation and provide compensation for loss and damage in countries on the frontline of the climate emergency (Bulkeley et al., 2014). The problem with this approach has been that it establishes the nation-state as the only relevant actor, causing structural inequalities within nations to be overlooked (ibid.). By highlighting the socioeconomic complexity of climate change interventions within cities and communities, the urban scale brings the issue of social equity outcomes into focus.

Networked urban climate governance is drawing global attention to and addressing the uneven

distribution of the costs and benefits of climate action across societies and communities. Through boosting equitable local climate action – for example, by improving air quality in low-income neighbourhoods, creating green jobs for women and young people, and increasing access to sustainable transportation in urban peripheries – cities and their networks are mainstreaming the just transition approach and expanding it from workers and regions reliant on carbon-intensive industries to all vulnerable communities, including women, the working class and minority racial or ethnic groups.

What is more, cities are giving new importance to procedural climate justice. As the level of government closest to the people, cities have extensive experience in deliberative and participatory processes and are in a strong position to launch climate dialogues, informing about options and facilitating co-creation. To reach vulnerable and marginalised groups that have historically been left out of decision-making processes while suffering disproportionately from climate risks many cities are experimenting with new engagement tools that move beyond traditional town-hall style meetings.

With estimates suggesting that by 2050 more than two-thirds of the world's population will live in urban areas, the city is becoming increasingly relevant as both a *scale* and *actor* for achieving climate justice. It is now up to city-led climate diplomacy to leverage this relevance and demand that cities are given more consideration and a greater role in intergovernmental climate justice debates in the framework of the UNFCCC process and beyond.

This would help broaden the climate justice agenda in two fundamental ways. Firstly, it would allow for greater emphasis on the equitability of global climate policies at the societal level, and it would connect the UNFCCC process with local strategies for implementing a just transition. Secondly, it would broaden the debate on rights and responsibilities beyond the nation-state to include new actors, such as cities. This is particularly important when it comes to establishing the different responsibilities and rights of cities vis-à-vis those of the nation-states within which they are located, as well as the relatively low per capita emissions of some cities compared to others (ibid.). City diplomacy should call for national and international climate policies to take these differences – between the national and city scale and between cities themselves – into account to ensure a fair division of responsibilities and rights between urban and rural populations and between leading and lagging cities.

Conclusion

Transnational collaboration around urban climate governance has become one of the most important areas of city diplomacy, while the ecosystem of climate city networks has become increasingly crowded (Fernández de Losada & Abdullah, 2019). Better coordination between the major networks working on climate-related issues will be critical to further consolidate the achievements of urban climate action and its emerging role in the global climate regime. To deliver on cities' collective climate ambitions, networks need to step-up coordination on strategic engagement with the higher levels of government, as they have the power to support cities on, for example, legal reform initiatives, as well as providing platforms for urgently needed multi-level action. Multi-stakeholder partnerships are another area that will require more coordination between the major networks. More targeted engagement with the private sector and financial institutions is needed when it comes to raising investment; and more partnerships with research organisations and technology companies are needed to drive high-impact urban climate solutions.

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