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## COP29: The engagement of cities amidst multilateral gridlocks

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*Over 66,000 participants attended COP29 on November 11-22, 2024, in Baku (Azerbaijan). Representatives of city governments, their networks and partners travelled to Azerbaijan to bring the urban voice to the official conversations, in a gathering that convened less participants than COP28 and ahead of COP30 in Belém (Brazil) next year, which is expected to be a pivotal moment for the global climate agenda.*

*Cities are increasingly devoting their efforts to climate adaptation, complementing their traditionally broader engagement with mitigation. COP29's chief objective focused on increasing climate finance, a key requirement to face the climate emergency where cities are still far from being recognised as essential partners.*



### 1. Climate conversations within the global warming overshoot

As in previous editions, the conversations at COP29 took place in the increasingly narrow space between escalating geopolitical tensions and criticism over multilateral cooperation, on the one side, and the growing impacts of climate change, on the other. The year 2023 went down as the warmest on record and 2024 may be **the first year** in which the safety threshold of 1.5°C global warming above preindustrial levels is temporarily exceeded. This is even more concerning as temporarily overshooting the targeted temperature limit of the Paris Agreement may still bring about irreversible consequences, even if followed by temperature decline (Schleussner et al., 2024).

In this context, cities are compelled to play a substantial role, since they account for **67-72%** of global greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) and are projected to be home to **68%** of the world's population in 2050. As hubs of economic productivity and dense concentrations of population, infrastructure and assets, cities have a keen interest in tackling the climate emergency.

Yet the global climate arena is an institutional landscape which is still firmly rooted in the prerogatives of nation-states. Against this backdrop, city governments are joining forces with each other, seeking synergies with

diverse partners, and pressing national counterparts and intergovernmental fora to bring about change at the local level, showcase their engagement and expand their contribution to global policy objectives. In the COP29 discussions – and climate conversations more broadly, both in policy and academia – the climate actions carried out by city governments chiefly revolved around three interrelated areas of joint work and advocacy: mitigation, adaptation and financing.

### 2. The role of cities in raising mitigation ambition

According to the latest emissions report by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), current climate commitments may lead our planet to global warming of **2.6°C-3.1°C** over the course of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As the next round of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) – that is, the emissions reduction targets laid out by countries to reach the Paris Agreement's goal – are to be submitted by early 2025, the report warns that emissions should fall 42% by 2030 and 57% by 2035 relative to 2019 levels to be on track to hold global warming to 1.5°C.

In an increasingly urbanised world where city governments hold substantial responsibilities in key policy areas such as urban planning, infrastructure management and mobility, the **NDCs** should marshal the engagement and potential

of cities when defining and operationalising their climate plans. This is the conclusion drawn from a review of the 194 NDCs submitted by late June 2023, which found that 27% of them incorporated a strong level of urban content, identifying the urban sector as a priority in their climate policy. This is far from triggering a systematic involvement of city governments in the design, implementation and evaluation of national climate strategies.

In this context, the Coalition for High Ambition Multilevel Partnerships (CHAMP) for Climate Action launched at COP28 is aimed precisely at boosting the contribution of subnational governments to the development of the next round of NDCs. Signed so far by over 70 countries from across the world, CHAMP is a pledge undertaken by national governments committing to strengthen multilevel climate governance, and which has the support of Bloomberg Philanthropies and a coalition of city networks such as C40, the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy (GCoM) and ICLEI-Local

3,000 cities and 170 regions covered in their study have reported adequate data, and over 60% are not meeting their climate goals, which reveals a considerable gap between aspirations and realisation.

### 3. Urban climate adaptation goes global

From floods, rising sea levels and heatwaves to drought, wildfires and airborne diseases, cities are particularly exposed to the growing effects of global warming. The increased frequency, severity and duration of extreme weather events, as well as slow-onset events, are leading city governments to embrace the imperative for adaptation. For instance, local communities and ecosystems of low-lying coastal cities will be particularly exposed to the consequences of sea level rise. In 2020, 896 million people, that is, almost 11% of the world's population, lived in low elevation coastal zones and this figure is expected to increase beyond 1 billion people by 2050.

## COP29 took place in the increasingly narrow space between escalating geopolitical tensions and criticism over multilateral cooperation

Governments for Sustainability. This initiative dovetails with convergent efforts, such as the third Ministerial Meeting on Urbanization and Climate Change co-hosted by UN-Habitat at COP29 to promote multilevel and multisectoral dialogues geared towards bolstering local climate action.

Unfortunately, though, despite substantial urban engagement in scaling up mitigation efforts, the official negotiations in Baku disappointed by not carrying forward the COP28's historic call to transition away from fossil fuels. This is a vivid reminder of the vested interests of fossil fuel producers and their unwavering defence of the prerogatives of national sovereignty in an era urgently requiring global collaborative efforts.

While much is to be achieved with regard to the potential of city governments relative to global and national mitigation targets, a last cautious remark is in order. Central to the discourse of city networks and partners active in climate mitigation is the claim that city governments are more ambitious than their national counterparts when defining emissions reduction targets (Amat & Martinez, 2023). While this is certainly the case in overall terms, a higher number of independent scientific assessments could help enhance the accountability of the relevant city governments and their networks. This would further contribute to broadening the understanding of the strengths and weaknesses at play. Song et al. (2024), for instance, have identified a surge in the number of mitigation commitments by cities and regions across the G20 nations. However, fewer than 40% of the more than

Nevertheless, for decades urban climate action has prioritised mitigation over adaptation efforts, particularly because of the dynamism of large cities from the Global North. Faced with the deepening of the climate emergency, the call for adaptation is gaining increasing relevance globally, and not only among the cities of the Global South that have traditionally advocated for its centrality in the broader domain of urban climate action. As most of the current wave of global urbanisation is taking place in cities in Africa and Asia, their call for urban climate adaptation is imperative. It is in the informal settlements of the Global South in particular, which currently house approximately 1 billion inhabitants, where the people most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change are concentrated (Satterthwaite et al., 2020).

In this context, COP29 addressed thorny issues that will have to be unpicked at COP30 – in line with the UAE-Belém Work Programme – around the definition of quantifiable targets to measure the progress towards the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA), a collective commitment established under the Paris Agreement and whose development has proved to be challenging from the outset. In addition to the abovementioned considerations on the urban dimension of climate change impacts, the global agenda on adaptation is troublesome for cities due to its very nature. While still insufficient, the engagement of cities across the world in climate mitigation rests on the possibility of defining ambitious local emissions reduction targets that contribute to the overarching global goal of staying under the threshold

of 1.5°C global warming. Yet, while **city governments drive local adaptation** as they are on the frontline when experiencing climate change impacts, the highly contextual nature of the challenges and solutions ahead hinders the possibility of identifying simple metrics to monitor adaptation globally. This, in turn, weakens city governments' capacity to showcase and advocate for their essential contribution to what is ultimately a planetary challenge.

This deadlock could be resolved in the coming years by moving beyond the ingrained mitigation-adaptation dichotomy and embracing a more nuanced understanding of the way cities cope with a changing climate. In this regard, the concept of (urban) climate resilience posits that adaptation in the short term and mitigation as a way of adapting in the long term are two sides of the same coin (Chelleri, 2024).

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### 4. A new financial target for global climate policy

Despite all the logjams encountered so far, financing is certainly the most critical element to unlock transformative global climate action. For **adaptation**, the UNEP estimates that the annual finance gap sways between \$187bn and \$359bn. For **mitigation**, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) estimates that current investments should multiply by a factor of 3 to 6 to increasingly reduce GHG emissions. The finance gap is equally stark at the city level. According to the **2024 State of Cities Climate Finance** report produced by the Cities Climate Finance Leadership Alliance (CCFLA), urban climate finance flows averaged \$831bn globally in 2021/2022. While climate finance in cities more than doubled between 2017/2018 and 2021/2022, the report notes, annual investments should increase more than fivefold to remain within the 1.5°C global warming scenario.

As the CCFLA shows, urban climate finance is both clearly insufficient and unevenly allocated. Financial flows for climate action within cities disproportionately prioritise mitigation over adaptation; are concentrated in China and advanced economies; and tend to be raised and allocated domestically. Particularly in the case of adaptation measures, which rely heavily on the mobilisation of public sector resources, this scenario is especially troublesome in the least developed countries (LDCs), which require international assistance given their increased vulnerability to the adverse effects of global warming. The responsibility to protect their communities

is a Gordian knot for many city governments in the Global South. Their depleted budgets face the overwhelming task of investing vast resources to adapt to a changing climate while simultaneously addressing their current and future infrastructure and service gaps. Key to this challenge is the increment of funding on the part of national governments and development finance institutions, which are the first and second largest sources of public investment in urban climate action, accounting for **36%** and **30%** of public funding, respectively.

Dubbed the "Finance COP", the main official outcome of COP29 revolved precisely around the adoption of the New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG), the new financial target for global climate policy replacing the previous commitment by developed countries to provide, by 2020, \$100bn annually to support climate action in developing countries. Reached two years behind schedule in 2022 and

considered insufficient from the outset, the \$100bn target paled in comparison with the mounting demands for climate mitigation and adaptation.

The official negotiations in Baku agreed to scale up all sources of finance to \$1.3tn per year for developing countries by 2035, matching the estimates presented by the **Independent High-Level Expert Group on Climate Finance**. However, developed countries fell short of expectations, committing only to lead the mobilisation of \$300bn per year for developing countries by 2035, hinting to the role that the private sector should play in bridging the finance gap and welcoming voluntary contributions by emerging wealthy and high-emitting countries besides the traditional group of climate donors (e.g. China). In addition to falling short of the trillions needed for transformative climate action in developing countries and not including specific sub-targets on adaptation and **loss and damage** finance, the NCQG did not make progress on the long-dated request to ensure direct access to climate finance for city governments.

### 5. Cities redoubling their efforts from Baku to Belém

COP29 took place one week after Donald Trump's electoral victory in the United States, issuing a dangerous signal for international climate policy as he announced his decision to withdraw once again from the Paris Agreement and expand domestic production of oil and gas, precisely when the adverse effects of global warming are increasingly

tangible (Morillas et al., 2024). As happened the first time that President Trump announced **this same decision** in 2017, we can expect **US subnational governments** will still maintain their engagement with global affairs, including climate policy, despite the positioning of their federal government. After all, city governments' long-standing commitment to global climate action is one of the drivers behind their call for the formal recognition of their contribution and role in the institutional architecture of climate governance (Acuto et al., 2024).

The commitment of cities to climate action, however, is heavily reliant on synergies with and support from multiple key actors. As COP29 initiates a key phase of the climate agenda in 2025, with a new round of necessarily far more ambitious NDCs to be submitted and Brazil aiming to play a leading role as COP30 host, the outcomes of Baku are not as compelling as they should be. City governments, their networks and partners will have to redouble efforts to expand their urban contribution to a

the COP process and the institutional architecture of global governance more broadly.

In parallel to the politics of multilevel governance and the enabling environment (or lack thereof) conducive to transformative urban climate action, there are specific dimensions at the intersection of policy and academia that will be worth monitoring as they gain relevance in the coming years. First, as climate change impacts intensify, the call for finance for adaptation by cities in vulnerable countries will grow considerably, which, in turn, dovetails with the need to include subnational governments in the operationalisation of the Loss and Damage Fund, as advocated by the city network United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). Second, the wealth of knowledge on innovative climate mitigation accumulated by pioneering large cities in the Global North is not easily transferrable to the expanding smaller and medium-sized cities in the Global South, which are at the centre of both the current wave of global urbanisation and the growing

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global climate arena that is still firmly rooted in nation-states, their vested interests, geopolitical tensions and multilateral gridlocks. Faced with the deepening of the climate emergency, adaptation is gaining relevance within urban climate action, while mitigation remains the primary focus of attention. However, and despite the centrality afforded it on the agenda at COP29, financing persists as the most critical element to unlock transformative climate mitigation and adaptation in cities.

With **Brazil** representing the second largest delegation in Baku and the Brazilian President (and G20 Chair) Lula acknowledging the role of cities in the climate emergency during the **U20 Summit** in Rio de Janeiro, the expectations around the COP30 to be hosted in the rainforest city of Belém are high for global climate policy and the essential role of city governments in it. There are, however, deep-seated bottlenecks that go beyond the rotating presidency of COPs. Through the Local Governments and Municipal Authorities (LGMA) Constituency, subnational governments have brought their voice to the policy processes under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) since the first climate COP in 1995. The commitment of cities and regions to shaping an efficient multilevel governance framework for addressing climate change has grown over the years, demonstrating a globalist commitment that is above many of the nation-states that are reluctant to rethink their sovereign prerogatives (Martinez, 2023a). These structural constraints should be addressed by **reforming**

impacts of climate change, which therefore signals the vast potential of transnational city networks for knowledge sharing and resource pooling (Mokhles & Acuto, 2024). Third, with environmental conversations increasingly discussing the contribution of nature to climate adaptation and mitigation, the intersection of climate action and biodiversity goals should receive further attention in the years ahead (Boran et al., 2024). Fourth, despite the widespread perception of positive feedback between the green and digital transitions, digitalisation generates increasing carbon emissions and environmental impacts that cities, as hubs of ever-growing consumption of energy-intensive digital services, should monitor if they mean to stay true to their climate mitigation goals (Martinez, 2023b).

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