CHAPTER 7

Environmental City Diplomacy

Abstract Cities are currently the primary source of climate change. Although they cover less than 2% of the earth’s surface, urban areas account for 50% of the world’s population, between 60 and 80% of energy consumption, and generate 70% of the human-induced greenhouse gas emissions. As a result, climate deregulation is affecting cities of all sizes, and its impact is expected to worsen. The chapter will highlight how local leaders have been addressing these threats by starting broad innovation, engagement, and advocacy campaigns and creating multiple, often overlapping networks of cities. As will be described, this has facilitated the introduction of concrete measures, often enjoying the support and praise of numerous NGOs, nations, and international organizations. Finally, the chapter will discuss the possible evolution of the field as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords City diplomacy · Climate change · Environmentalism · Sustainable development · Resiliency · Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments · ICLEI · C40 · Paris Agreement · Un-Habitat · COVID-19

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CITIES’ MESSAGE TO THE WORLD

On December 2015, while heads of state and government were attending the United Nations’ climate change conference in Paris (COP21), Anne Hidalgo, mayor of the city, convened 1000 of her colleagues from all over the world to the Climate Summit for Local Leaders to show a municipal united front in the fight to climate change (Cities for Climate 2015). In fact, this fight has become the priority of numerous cities’ international action, as shown by the growing relevance of networks such as the C40 or ICLEI, and the multiplication of multilateral projects, declarations, and events cities organize on such a topic.

This positioning is widely based on local leaders’ acknowledgment that climate change originates mainly in urban areas. Although they cover less than 2% of the earth’s surface, urban areas account for 60 to 80% of energy consumption and generate 70% of the human-induced greenhouse gas emissions (UN-Habitat 2016, 16).

Moreover, the rise of global temperatures is affecting cities of all sizes, and its impact is expected to worsen. Extreme temperatures, floods, storms, increased precipitation, and sea levels’ rise are affecting urban areas, their populations, their biodiversity, and their economies. Understandably, informal settlements, home to more than 1 billion citizens worldwide, are the most prone to suffer from these climate hazards.

Confronted with such a harsh reality, many mayors from across the world decided to firmly position their cities as laboratories of innovation and engagement in the fight to climate change. To achieve a sustainable impact on such a global threat, they committed to cooperating with their counterparts in transnational knowledge transfer, co-creation and coordination of activities, and joint advocacy.¹

This trend is so pronounced that such urban action is often presented as the most tangible example of city diplomacy’s impact and of the commitment of municipalities across the world to address transnational challenges. As Teles puts in, “it is no longer possible to analyse the

¹ A small group of mayors from global cities has been standing out for the capacity to use their visibility to contribute to public awareness on the climate change challenge: such as the mentioned Paris’ Anne Hidalgo (2014 onward); New York’s Bill de Blasio (2014 onward); Buenos Aires’ Horacio Rodríguez Larreta (2015 onward); Montreal Valérie Plante (2017 onward); London’s Sadiq Khan (2016 onward); Dakar’s Soham El Wardini (2018 onward); Melbourne’s Sally Capp (2018 onward), Tokyo’s Yuriko Koike (2016 onward).
global politics of the environment without considering its various urbanization(s)” (Teles 2016, 1).

Moreover, the environmental component of city diplomacy often emerges as a perfect example of how municipalities can combine international cooperation and advocacy on values with concrete actions granting a much-needed positive local impact. The accents on urban resilience to climate deregulation, central to a growing number of cities and city coalitions, symbolize it.

**THE RISE OF ENVIRONMENTAL CITY NETWORKS**

It is not rare for cities to cooperate on sustainability and climate change-related issues bilaterally, such action has found in city networks its most powerful expression. The number of city networks whose primary goal is related to climate and the environment has been rising steadily over the years to reach more than 50, which is equivalent to 29% of total city networks (Acuto et al. 2017).

In fact, among thematic city networks, those devoted to such issues rose to the widest visibility, mainly as a result of effective advocacy strategies centered on the assumption that they represent a “viable substitute for ambitious international action under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)” (Bansard et al. 2017).

The action of these networks tends to be twofold:

- on one side, spreading inspired solutions to tackle climate change. The tools to achieve that result mainly lie in sharing best practices among members, the introduction of pilot projects, and support to member cities through diagnostics, research, and capacity building activities (sometimes in cooperation with universities and NGOs);
- on the other side, issuing global or regional advocacy campaigns addressing the international public opinion, national governments, and international organizations.

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2 Examples of bilateral environmental city diplomacy include the cooperation between Paris and Rio de Janeiro, which led to the adoption of bike and car-sharing projects in the latter (*Bike Rio* and *Carro Elétrico Carioca*) based on the former’s experience (*Vélib*’ and *Autolib*) (Mendes and Figueira 2017). Mexico City exchanged with Rotterdam to adapt to its needs the latter’s best practice of “water squares” to temporarily store downpours’ rainwater (Ilgen et al. 2019).
Nevertheless, city networks’ horizontal nature, coupled with cities’ voluntary participation in their initiatives, often leads to a diverse impact of membership in terms of concrete environmental actions on the ground.

Across the environmental networks, two of them stand out for their capacity to enhance cities’ commitment in concrete actions and advocacy for the global recognition of the role of cities in the fight to climate change: ICLEI and C40.

Launched in September 1990 by 200 cities reunited at the United Nations, the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives, now renamed ICLEI—Local Governments for Sustainability, has grown to represent the broadest coalition of local authorities committed to sustainable urban development. With more than 1750 local and regional governments in 100+ countries, ICLEI is headquartered in Bonn and features today a network of 22 offices across the world. ICLEI provides its member cities with numerous capacity building opportunities: in its 30 years of activity, ICLEI realized more than 1000 training activities attended by a total of 50,000 local government officials. Moreover, ICLEI provides the framework for peer exchange and joint projects, with 200 active sustainability initiatives in January 2020 (Roberts 2020). The international stance of ICLEI is testified by its focal point status within the three Rio Conventions (Climate Change, Biodiversity and Desertification)—a unique position that it has committed to using to represent the position of the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments and the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments, of whom ICLEI is a member (Global Taskforce of Local And Regional Governments 2019) (see Chapter 1).

Box 7.1: C40

C40 was launched in 2005 by London’s Mayor Ken Livingstone, who convened large cities with a strong environmentalist commitment under the assumption that their pooled leverage would allow greater international influence than their individual actions (Acuto 2013b, 307). Although it only reunites 96 large cities highly committed to fighting climate change, their sizes and economic weight—collectively accounting for around a quarter of the world’s GDP—speaks of the network’s relevance on the global stage. C40 has risen to represent a key advocate
of the international action of cities against climate change. The chair of C40, an elected, rotating position held in 2020 by Los Angeles’ mayor Eric Garcetti, has risen to represent probably the most vocal representative of environmental city diplomacy, and one of the core supporters of city diplomacy as a tool to tackle main transnational challenges.

In line with the best available science, C40 champions the Paris Agreement’s goal of keeping the average temperature to 1.5 °C above preindustrial levels.

C40’s ongoing focus consists of providing its members with guidance on how to implement their city-wide strategies for carbon neutrality, adaptation, and inclusive and equitable climate action, including the tools to assess their impact. By publication of reports and organization of meetings between political leaders and technical staff of its member cities, C40 aims to empower local administrations with research-backed tools and best-practices sharing to implement quick and effective actions.

Finally, the C40 celebrates the most ambitious and impactful projects by its member cities by the mean of its own annual award (the “C40 Cities Bloomberg Philanthropies Awards,” from the name of the sponsoring charity), launched in 2013 and awarded to 6 innovative projects by member cities in the framework of the annual C40 World Mayors Summit.

Sources Acuto (2013a), Pinault (2020), and C40 (2019)

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THE CITY–STATE RELATIONSHIP

Multilevel partnerships involving both central and local governments are the most effective tools to achieve bolder results in climate action, as clearly stated in the Paris Agreement (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change 2015). However, their deployment has not always been possible, namely for the opposition of a (small) number of national governments with little or no commitment to global environmental agendas. As a result, cities in such countries have increasingly chosen to connect with each other through national coalition, and by enhancing their commitment in the framework of international fora, starting from city networks devoted to the fight to climate change.

The first large-scale city mobilization of that type took place in 2005 and coincided with the decision of the US Federal Government led by
George Bush sr. not to sign the Kyoto Protocol. On February 16, 2005, the day the Protocol came into action for the 141 countries who ratified it, Seattle mayor Greg Nickels launched the Climate Protection Agreement, the first formal engagement of cities to implement an international agreement disregarded by their national government. In four months, 141 mayors signed the Agreement—symbolically reaching the number of ratifying nations. The number continued to rise, reaching 500 signatures in May 2007 and 1066 signatures June 2020 (‘Mayors Climate Protection Center’ 2020).

More recently, the “We Are Still In” Declaration by American mayors has renewed this practice. Launched in June 2016 as a reaction to the Federal Government’s decision to exit the Paris Agreement, it gathers the commitment of mayors (as well as states’ governors and heads of education and cultural institutions, businesses, faith groups, tribes, and health care organization) “to help the United States fulfill its international obligations under the agreement.” The Declaration benefits from the coordination and advocacy support of numerous partners, including city networks (C40, ICLEI, Climate Mayors, and the National League of Cities), NGOs (e.g., the World Wildlife Fund—WWF) and charities (Bloomberg Philanthropies, among others). The initiative received vast praise and support from cities across the world, as well as from nation-states, providing participating cities with vast visibility and raising their mayors (despite being a bi-partisan initiative) to globally recognized opponents to the White House’s environment policy. This notably led to the meeting at the Élysée Palace, symbolically held on June 2, 2017—the day after the withdraw of the United States from the Agreement—between French president Emmanuel Macron, Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo and Michael Bloomberg, in his roles of representative and sponsor of the Declaration and of UN Special Envoy for Cities and Climate Change (Macron et al. 2017).

The Declaration is complemented by “America’s Pledge”, launched in July 2017 by Michael Bloomberg (sponsor of the Declaration) and then California Governor Jerry Brown. The initiative aims to quantify and report progress made toward the US pledge through all non-national climate actions (The America’s Pledge Initiative on Climate Change 2019).
INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

As already mentioned, cities' action to build a more sustainable future is widely recognized by the United Nations, the European Union, the OECD, and other international organizations.

Among them, a key interlocutor is the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), created two years after the 1976 United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat I), held in Vancouver. Headquartered in Nairobi, UN-Habitat has contributed to the international recognition of the link between cities and environmental sustainability, and the need for environmental policies to be both localized and shared between cities. The wish to establish a direct exchange between the UN and cities led to the creation of the First World Assembly of Cities and Local Authorities (WACLA), held just before the Habitat II Conference in Istanbul in 1996.

WACLA’s successor, the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments, had around 400 mayors meeting and discussing the New Urban Agenda ahead of the Habitat III conference (Quito, 2016). The New Urban Agenda has institutionalized the World Assembly’s role in reviewing its dispositions (United Nations 2016a, b). As a result, the Assembly is convened annually by UCLG on behalf of the already mentioned Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments to ensure the local follow-up of the New Urban Agenda, discuss the other global agendas, and defining cities’ contribution in achieving them.

Further international recognition of the role of cities in addressing climate change comes from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change of the United Nations: the Global Research and Action Agenda on Cities and Climate Change Science, primary outcomes of IPCC cosponsored Cities and Climate Change Science Conference (Edmonton, Canada, March 2018), called to that purpose for further financial and political empowerment of cities (Prieur-Richard et al. 2018).

International bodies are also issuing prestigious awards to recognize the leadership of cities in environmental issues. It is the case of the European Commission’s European Green Capital (for cities with a population of over 100,000 inhabitants, launched in 2010) and the European Green Leaf Award (for cities with a population between 20,000 and 100,000 inhabitants, launched in 2015), ISESCO’s Islamic Green City Excellence Award (launched in 2018), or UNEP-supported “Sustainable Cities And
Human Settlements Awards” (launched in 2005 by the Global Forum on Human Settlements).

**THREE SETS OF CHALLENGES**

In its environmental and sustainable dimension, the common city diplomacy’s issue of overlap and duplication between networks’ initiatives is particularly visible. With almost 60 regional and global networks operating on such issues (Acuto et al. 2017), city diplomats have an increasingly hard time choosing what network to join and cooperate with based on their specific situation. Moreover, the overlap complexifies the evaluation of these networks, considering that a city, its county/department, and its region might all be part of different networks.

Second, if the commitment of cities for the environment is undeniable, further effort to integrated it in the framework of multilevel governance is needed. In line with this point, in May 2020 a coalition formed by the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy (GCoM), the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, ICLEI, UCLG, UNDP, UN Environment, and UN-Habitat launched a global campaign advocating national governments to integrate regional and local emissions reduction commitments into COP26 commitments. In parallel, in order to help local governments in quantifying their contributions, the GCoM has launched its common reporting framework (see Box 7.2).

Finally, given the prestige enjoyed by some of the key networks fighting climate change, their membership’s figures are likely to hide a certain amount of opportunistic memberships, as a number of mayors might join them due to the visibility and political gains rising from their networking opportunity, rather than to implement shared goals. This contributes to explain the diverse commitment of cities within some of these networks and might lead city networks to stricter membership management.

**Box 7.2: Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy**

The Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy (GCoM) is the world’s largest city alliance addressing climate change, representing the commitment of more than 10,000 cities across 138 countries, for a
total of over 864 million people, equivalent to more than 10% of the global population.

The GCoM was created in June 2016 by merging two existing initiatives, the Covenant of Mayors (created in 2008 by the European Union after the adoption of the 2020 European Union Climate and Energy Package), and the Compact of Mayors (started in September 2014 at the UN Secretary General’s Climate Summit in New York City by UCLG, C40, and ICLEI). In 2020 the GCoM is co-chaired by European Commission Executive Vice President for the European Green Deal Frans Timmermans and Michael Bloomberg. It features a board of ten mayors and a secretariat based in Brussels.

In January 2019, the GCoM launched its common reporting framework in order to assist its member cities in assessing the local impact of climate change and tracking their progress transparently. The framework is also instrumental in enhancing multilevel governance of climate issues with all other government levels, including integrating local governments’ actions into the nationally determined contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement framework.

The GCoM is one of the city initiatives to have best defined its impact goals. In 2019, the existing GCoM city targets would avoid the emission of 2.3GtCO2, thus delivering a 35% reduction in emissions compared with the business-as-usual (BAU) scenario in 2030. With global urban abatement potential in 2030 estimated at 45% compared with BAU, GCoM cities have the ambition to contribute to the global goal significantly.

*Source* Global Covenant of Mayors (2019, 2020)

## Future Evolution

Across the world, the COVID-19 outbreak led many cities to adopt bolder municipal climate policies. Two factors have likely contributed to such a shift: studies suggesting a correlation between pollution and the spread of COVID-19 (Carrington 2020), and the profound global psychological impact of lockdown on urban residents. In fact, the imposition of lockdowns—especially when limiting access to parks and green areas—coupled with the global spread of images of magnificent mountain views once blocked by pollution, fishes in canals, and wild animals in
city centers, played an important role in awareness-raising on the current economic system’s environmental impact, strengthening bottom-up calls for greener, less polluted cities. Such a trend has empowered bold decisions by mayors across the world, namely in an optic of tactic urbanism involving the creation of new bike lanes and pedestrian zones.

Should this environmental trend reveal to be permanent, it might also lead to more environmentally friendly national governments, at least in democratic countries. This would undoubtedly advance city networks’ and international organizations’ campaigns for strengthened multilevel climate governance.

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