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The discursive construction of urban climate policy

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ABSTRACT

Recently, a change in the international climate policy debate elevated cities as integral to achieving global climate targets. How did this shift occur? This paper mobilizes the concept of discourse coalitions to showcase how cities were framed as an arena of intervention in the context of international climate policy, placing emphasis on three dimensions. First, a focus on new alliances reveals how the urban, which emerged as a fringe topic, was promoted by forerunners who came together in formal and informal networks. These groups contributed to the formulation of strategic frames, which helped operationalize urban climate policy. Second, these frames were institutionalized within international organizations, contributing to their stabilization. Third, urban narratives gained structuration through their diffusion across a growing number of organizations and embedding into systems of knowledge. A discursive perspective highlights that the rise of cities was not a neutral development, but a process of argumentative struggle in which certain views on urban climate action were foregrounded. The analysis draws attention to the growing self-evidence of urban narratives, which raises concerns related to the reiteration and invisibilization of underlying political-economic interests.

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Cities as climate champions

While not everybody agrees that cities have achieved the recognition they deserve in international climate policy, references to urban areas as “a ‘cause of and solution to’ climate change” are, today, familiar (UN, 2019). While the inclusion of an urban chapter in the 5th Assessment Report (AR) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was questioned by national governments in 2014, the urban perspective had reached a relatively accepted status by the release of the IPCC AR6 in 2022 (Seto, 2022). This interest is further consolidated through the upcoming IPCC Special Report focused on cities and climate change (IPCC, 2022).

This recognition did not emerge in isolation. Rather, it was located within a growing engagement with urban areas – a period of “urban optimism” (Parnell, 2016) – taking

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place in international sustainability policy. Two processes unfolding in the early 2000s helped generate this interest. First, the consolidation of urban research in global environmental science portrayed urbanization as a trend placing earth systems under pressure (Steffen et al., 2004). Cities, long recognized as sites of economic opportunity, became understood as drivers of global resource consumption and ecosystem deterioration (Parnell, 2016). Second, cities came to represent strategic sites where the challenges and opportunities of the new millennium intersect (Sassen, 2000). Troubling dimensions of urbanization, including urban sprawl and growing informal settlements, portrayed cities as prioritized sites of intervention (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2020). Simultaneously, cities gained recognition as arenas for sustainable development, to the degree that “cities saving the planet” narratives grew widespread (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2020). In this spirit, the UN Secretary-General proclaimed in 2001 that the world had entered the “urban millennium” (UN General Assembly, 2001). This recognition was soon reflected in influential documents. For instance, the New Urban Agenda portrayed urbanization as “one of the twenty-first century’s most transformative trends” (UN-Habitat, 2016, p. 3).

A pivot toward cities in climate policy followed, manifest through heightened attention to urban areas in reports and events (e.g. Prieur-Richard et al., 2018; Revi et al., 2014). A popular narrative consolidated: since 2008, most people live in cities. With most economic activities taking place in urban areas, cities generate a significant share of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (UNEP, 2019). Urban areas must, by extension, constitute strategic sites of mitigation. Accordingly, the IPCC AR6 concluded that “[u]rban areas can create opportunities to increase resource efficiency and significantly reduce GHG emissions” (Shukla et al., 2022, p. 39). Cities also gained visibility due to their vulnerability to climate impacts. In 2003, the World Bank observed that the “location of many urban areas with large populations and critical economic assets in high-risk zones contributes to the increased attention given to impacts in urban areas of disasters induced or enhanced by climate change” (Kreimer et al., 2003, pp. 91–92). The interest in urban adaptation grew in the following years (Castán Broto & Westman, 2020; Meerow & Newell, 2019). The IPCC AR5 and AR6 highlighted cities as vulnerable to climate hazards, including flooding, extreme temperatures, and water scarcity (Dodman et al., 2022; Revi et al., 2014).

These arguments – on urbanization, emissions, vulnerability – created new optimism surrounding cities (Rosenzweig et al., 2010; Van der Heijden, 2019). The scholarship on global climate governance documented this shift by demonstrating the expanding participation of local authorities in global climate action (Chan et al., 2015; Kousky & Schneider, 2003). Yet, questions remain regarding how cities were constructed as a discursive terrain in these debates. How was the urban configured as an actionable policy issue? Who built urban narratives and what interests were advanced? Engaging with such questions, the objective of this study is to apply the conceptual lens of discourse coalitions to examine how cities were framed as an arena of intervention in international climate policy. To do so, the study employs a discursive methodology, which approaches policy discourse as shared ways of apprehending the world, which condition perceptions of environmental problems and solutions (Dryzek, 1998). The concept of discourse coalitions (Hajer, 1993) is mobilized to examine the formulation of urban climate narratives, tracing their deployment through two organizational case studies. The analysis

emphasizes the evolution and consolidation of these narratives over the past two decades, but also maps continuities in frames since their earliest deployment in the 1970s. What emerges is an account of the movements involved in elevating the topic of cities from niche, to mainstream, to a structured discursive devise.

The argument of this paper is that the discursive structuration of urban climate narratives enables the reiteration of dominant logics of action, including those fixed in GHG emission accounting and infrastructure investment. This observation raises theoretical and practical implications. In terms of conceptual debates, the analysis challenges assumptions on the ascent of cities in international climate policy as a natural outcome of the growing impact of urbanization on the climate change challenge. Rather than assuming a self-evident rise into prominence, cities were packaged into a site of climate intervention through the formulation of strategic frames, which until today remain bundled with specific political-economic interests. This situation raises policy implications in terms of the ongoing promotion of narratives linked with these preferences, while other potential avenues of action remain comparatively marginalized.

Toward a discursive perspective on the “rise of cities”

This paper is situated in the scholarship on global climate governance, which describes the structures and processes that enable the management of climate concerns at the international level (Jagers & Striiple, 2003). This literature has documented engagement with an ever-greater diversity of organizations involved in global climate action (Chan et al., 2015), including a shift toward cities. The UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (COP) in Copenhagen (2009) heralded a phase of politics characterized by non-state actor participation (Bodansky, 2010), followed by a growing interest in how local authorities exercise global authority (Andonova et al., 2009). The academic focus on the urban in global climate governance grew in two waves mirroring these shifts (Westman & Castan Broto, 2020). A first expansion occurred in the years following 2011, possibly in response to the collapse of faith in the global climate regime. A second growth period followed the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2016, which recognized the importance of local authorities (United Nations, 2015).

Bulkeley and Betsill (2005, 2013), adopting a longer perspective, describe two phases of research on urban climate action. The first, municipal voluntarism, took place in the 1990s and was grounded in Local Agenda 21, which portrayed the “local” as the ideal level for sustainability action. A body of literature on climate agendas in municipalities emerged, focusing on drivers of adoption (e.g. coupling emission reduction with local concerns (Betsill, 2001) or cost-saving interventions (Kousky & Schneider, 2003)), barriers to action (Robinson & Gore, 2005), and sectors of particular interest (e.g. transport and land use (Collier & Löfstedt, 1997)). At this stage, the main link between local action and global governance was the integration of local authorities into transnational networks (Bulkeley et al., 2003).

A second phase, strategic urbanism, emerged in the mid-2000s, when climate policy became embedded in broader municipal programs (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2013). Since then, research on urban climate action expanded rapidly (Westman & Castan Broto, 2020). Studies on drivers of action moved from exploratory cases to quantitative testing (Bery & Haddad, 2023; Krause, 2012). The sectoral focus expanded into new

domains, such as nature-based solutions (Pellerey & Moghadam, 2025) and waste management (Onyanta, 2016). Research on how climate action in cities interacts with global governance grew more nuanced, including how municipal networks shape global learning and policy diffusion (Hakelberg, 2014; Haupt et al., 2020). However, these insights were paralleled by critical analyses on how global networks fail to deliver change (Bansard et al., 2017) or even maintain global inequality (Chu, 2018). Optimism surrounding cities was tempered by the realization that urban climate policy tends to reproduce dominant global discourse, often with the effect of perpetuating exclusion and injustice in urban environments (Long & Rice, 2019; Shi et al., 2016).

This scholarship has created a complex image of the interaction between urban and global politics, including the co-constitution of international and urban climate policy discourse (Castán Broto, 2017). Yet, missing from these accounts is an understanding of how cities were framed as a site of intervention in international climate debates. In international policy, discourses are structured by systems of symbolic meaning, visible in articulations such as storylines, jargon, and institutionalized praxes (Koleth & Temenos, 2022; Westman et al., 2023). This is particularly the case with complex and contested environmental issues, which are always simplified and represented through specific frames, shaped by knowledge and relations of authority (Dryzek, 1998). In international climate policy, discourse determines how “climate change is construed and enacted as a problem” (Bäckstrand & Lövbrand, 2019, p. 520), which dictates available courses of action. In this study, I assume that processes of framing were necessary to render the urban governable in international climate policy. Hence, the analysis focuses on how cities were packaged into a policy issue, enabling the mobilization of specific knowledge and formulation of actionable solutions.

This approach to international policy is based in discourse theory, which views policy as socially constructed through historically situated processes. The emergence of rules of conduct results from contingent conditions, always accompanied by institutional and epistemic alignments (Foucault, 2010 (1971)). I adopt discourse coalitions as a tool to explore discursive construction. Discourse coalitions emerged as a field of interest amidst the “argumentative turn” in environmental policy analysis in the 1990s, which drew attention to sense-making as central to politics (Fischer & Forester, 1995). Interest grew in how discourse structures environmental interventions (Dryzek, 1998), accepting all environmental problems as socially constructed (Feindt & Oels, 2005). The theory was advanced by Hajer (1995, p. 15), who viewed environmental politics as a “conflict of interpretation” over “the meaning of the environmental problem itself”. A discourse coalition is “basically a group of actors who share a social construct... [that] give meaning to ambiguous social circumstances” (Hajer, 1993, p. 45).

In this paper, the analysis centers on three dimensions of discourse coalitions: actor networks/framing, institutionalization, and discursive structuration, as summarized in Table 1 and explained in detail below.

First, actor networks/framing explains how groups of actors come together to support a shared narrative. Hajer (1995, p. 13) describes how coalitions form as alliances of politicians, scientists, activists, media and other organizations coalesce around specific ways of “talking and thinking about environmental politics”. Discourse coalitions are held together by shared story lines but remain constantly evolving, indicating mutually constitutive yet unfixed relationships between narratives and networks (Hajer, 1995).

Table 1. Summary of analytical framework based on discourse coalitions.

Analytical dimension	Definition	Application to international policy
Actor network/ Framing	Alliances that coalesce around specific ways of “talking and thinking about environmental politics” (Hajer, 1995, p. 13).	Coalitions form around frames, which can consolidate or shift the debate (Alexandrova et al., 2012; Nash, 2019; Princen, 2007).
Institutionalization	The embedding of frames into institutional structures of organizations active in a discursive coalition (Hajer, 1995).	“Stickiness” is produced when policy is embedded into the fabric of international institutions (Alexandrova et al., 2012; Lundgren et al., 2018).
Discursive structuration	A frame dominates a policy community’s world view (Hajer, 1993), becoming embedded in systems of knowledge and authority.	A frame becomes common sense/taken for granted, with strong ordering effects (Holscheiter, 2014; Milliken, 1999).

In international policy, coalition formation plays an important role in the formulation of policy (Alexandrova et al., 2012). For instance, Nash (2019) has chronicled the insertion of migration into international climate policy, highlighting how coalitions working on refugees and border control produced new frames in this debate. New coalitions can be consolidated through shared frames (Princen, 2007). For example, the coupling of fishing policy with ecosystem protection in EU policy cemented the issue as an environmental concern (Princen, 2013). The relationship between frames and actors is dynamic, as groups constantly appropriate narratives to serve their interests.

The second dimension of interest is institutionalization. Hajer (1995, p. 15) argued that long-term establishment of a discourse coalition requires the embedding of frames into institutions. Once institutionalization occurs, a frame becomes integrated into the fabric of an organization, producing a higher likelihood of enduring presence. This insight is well established in research on policy change. As argued by Jones and Baumgartner (1993, p. 25):

Stability may be maintained over long periods of time by two major devices: the existing structure of political institutions and the definition of the issues processed by those institutions.

These arguments also appear to hold true in international policy. As argued by Alexandrova et al. (2012), institutional “stickiness” varies across international organizations, with organizations structured by a higher degree of binding rules exhibiting higher resistance to change. Lundgren et al. (2018) demonstrated that patterns of change of international organizations are related to their degree of institutional friction, with higher institutional friction associated with policy stability. These observations suggest that the embedding of frames into the institutional arrangement of international organizations will contribute to their obduracy.

The final dimension is discourse structuration. According to Hajer (1993), coalitions are held together by “affinity” – a similar way of conceptualizing the world that creates coherence. Discourse structuration occurs when a narrative begins to dominate how a policy community understands the world (Hajer, 1993). In international policy, discourse makes intelligent and possible “ways of being in the world”, render interventions logical, and stabilize meanings (Milliken, 1999). “[D]iscourses produce (reproduce) the common sense(s) of societies”, by normalizing particular ways of thinking (Milliken, 1999, p. 237). Common sense-ness is highlighted here; a discourse combines elements

and repeats them, until they seem “inherently or necessarily connected” (Milliken, 1999, p. 239). Studies on international relations have documented such “effective ordering functions” through the “social and political effects that result from using a particular vocabulary on the one hand and the productive effects of particular constructions of reality” (Holzscheiter, 2014, p. 144, 149). For example, analysis of migration debates in climate policy reveals “the historical construction of often taken-for-granted phenomena” through “the formation of particular problematizations or rationales” (Nash, 2019, p. 14). This perspective centers on language, but also a deeper, collective, other-than-intentional acceptance of ways of thinking of a societal challenge. In this paper, I examine the embedding of narratives into systems of knowledge, alongside their normalization, as discursive structuration.

In the analysis below, I use the discourse coalition lens to capture the emergence and consolidation of urban climate narratives. I employ it as a processual perspective that explores how themes move from fragile and disputed to relatively stable and accepted. The analysis of new networks, as a starting point for building new narratives, focuses on embryonic alliances, individual leadership, and conflict surrounding new frames. Institutionalization and discourse structuration take place as narratives take hold, involving the enrolment of a greater number of organizations and embedding within systems of knowledge. This does not represent a deterministic, sequential view, as narratives are dynamic. Rather, the heuristic captures movement toward relative structuration, perpetually contested through ongoing argumentative struggle.

Method and materials

This study centers on documenting in-depth perspectives on the insertion of an urban focus into international climate policy. A priority was to develop a rich, process-based approach capable of capturing the “inside story” of this process, whilst encompassing a diversity of dynamics. Qualitative methodological triangulation was adopted to build a comprehensive understanding (Abdalla et al., 2018; Flick, 2004), involving the combination of multiple methodological tools (participant observation, document reviews, and interviews). The analytical strategy is based on a logic of organizational cases, which illustrates the formation of discursive coalitions.

Data collection

Following my previous work on this topic (Westman et al., 2023) and the definition of policy provided by Capano and Howlett (2020), I interpret international climate policy as actions or statements that define aims related to climate change, and instruments to realize those objectives, in the context of global climate governance. Departing from an understanding of global climate governance as “purposeful mechanisms and measures aimed at steering social systems toward preventing, mitigating, or adapting to the risks posed by climate change” (Jagers & Striiple, 2003, p. 385), these aims and instruments are articulated by a range of different actors. This includes visions and agreements issued by UN agencies, reports and programs of action shared by international NGOs, and streams of funding and technical support issued by international financial institutions. As explained below, the identification of actors built on participant observation

and a document review, resulting in a list of institutions core to global climate governance, intergovernmental organizations in adjacent policy domains, and international institutions with particular influence in this area.

The data collection was delivered within a large project¹, which documented the evolution of international urban climate policy. First, urban climate policy was studied through participant observation at two UNFCCC COPs: COP25 in Madrid (2019) and COP26 in Glasgow (2021). This allowed for initial mapping of policy themes, identification of organizations that shape urban climate policy, and contact with interview respondents. The data collection at the COPs was conducted through the following steps: 1. Reviewing the program to identify sessions delivered by/focused on cities/urban areas/local government; 2. Documentation of organizations/frames/topics shaping these events; 3. Identification of organizations/individuals targeted for interviews.

In parallel, actor networks and urban narratives were mapped through a systematic document review (overview in [Figure 1](#)), involving analysis of 463 documents (see methodological detail in (Westman et al., 2023)). Departing from this analysis, a list of organizations targeted for interviews was produced. Beyond the UNFCCC (an organization not particularly active in urban policy), dominant organizations included UN bodies (e.g. UN-Habitat, UNDRR, UNEP), international financial institutions (e.g. the World Bank, ADB), municipal networks (e.g. ICLEI, C40, UCLG), selected NGOs and think tanks (e.g. the Rockefeller Foundation, IIED), local governments, and private companies. Throughout the interviews, a snowball sampling strategy identified additional individuals, prioritizing professionals with a long history of engagement in urban environmental policy. The final sample comprised 100 individuals working in 90 organizations (Appendix A). The interview questions were designed to capture each respondent's experience

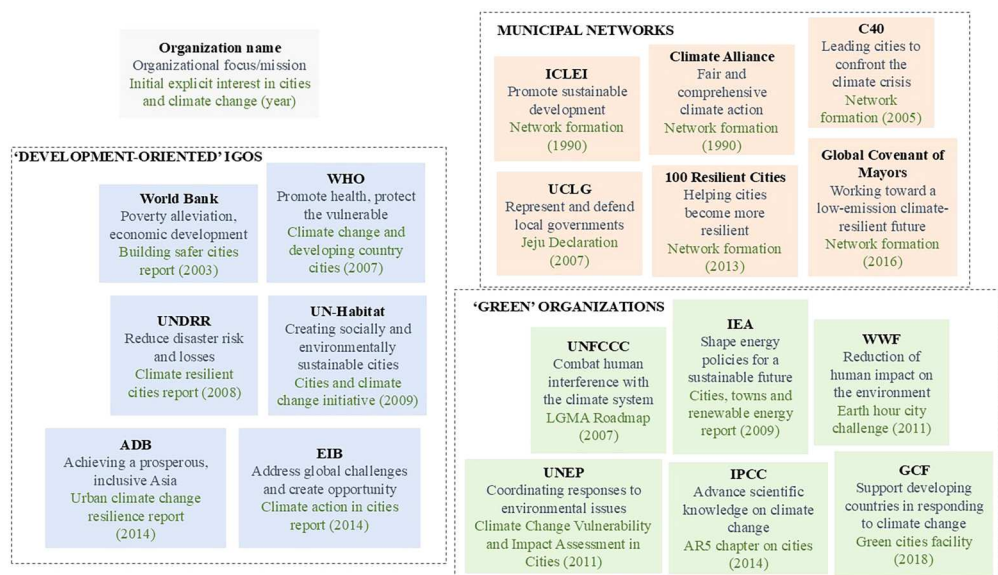


Figure 1: "Moments of discovery" of urban climate issues among international organizations (non-exhaustive).

and the emergence of urban narratives. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, uploaded into Nvivo, and coded. The data collection gained ethical approval from review panels at both the ERC and the University of Sheffield and each respondent provided written consent of participation. All responses were anonymized, in accordance with the ethical approval.

Data analysis

The analysis centered on identifying the formation and evolution of discursive coalitions focused on cities. The initial analysis focused on the interview data, examined through a coding scheme. This scheme originally included codes based on climate governance literature (e.g. the role of international events, transnational networks), which were refined iteratively in dialogue with scholarship on policy discourse. As patterns emerged, they were compared with insights from the participant observation and the document review, linking testimonies with further evidence. Following this corroboration, the final set of themes revolved around dimensions of discourse coalitions, including network formation (e.g. alliances, individual leadership, internal conflict), framing (e.g. actionable narratives, associated tools), institutionalization (e.g. formal requirements, organizational restructuring) and policy discourse (e.g. knowledge formalization, features of “taken for grantedness”).

Selection of organizational “cases”

Two organizational cases were developed to illustrate the formation of discourse coalitions. The logic follows the rationale of case study research, understood as the “in-depth” exploration of a “relatively bounded phenomenon” with an objective to “elucidate features of a larger class of similar phenomena” (Gerring, 2004, p. 341). Here, the larger class of phenomena is discourse coalitions, representing multi-faceted forms of social change. Organizational cases offer the possibility to elucidate details of mechanisms that constitute the broader process of discursive formation. Following the logic of case study design, the cases explain how discourse coalitions were formed, with a focus on experiential accounts (Yin, 2009). By mapping these according to individual narratives, the approach draws inspiration from organizational ethnographic case studies (Côté-Boileau et al., 2020), which examines how individual experiences shape organizational cultures and practices.

While the data collection involved multiple organizational analyses, which displayed comparative patterns (of IGOs, development banks, municipal networks, think tanks, NGOs), the empirical section concentrates on two organizations: a municipal network and a development bank. The selection is justified as follows. First, they are two organizations with special significance to urban climate policy. They are frequently and consistently mentioned by other respondents (the city network was mentioned in two-thirds of the interviews) and regularly mentioned at events and in policy documents. Second, they have especially long histories in the field, acting as pioneers in the development of urban climate narratives. Third, extensive networking behind this study produced unique access to prominent individuals, including founding members with privileged insight. Hence, their stories form the centerpiece of the empirical material presented below.

Two discursive coalitions on urban climate policy

The section below traces the establishment of two discursive coalitions that supported distinct urban narratives. This begins with relatively small alliances coalescing around individual leadership, followed by the articulation of frames for action, institutionalization, and diffusion among other actors.

Municipal network

Since its formation, the municipal network has played a central role in the promotion of local governments on the global stage. This includes participation in multiple discursive coalitions and crucial input into an influential narrative on emission accounting.

Looking first at the establishment of the network, its formation illustrates the impact of successful coalition building. Several respondents described the formation of this network in the early 1990s, which revolutionized the possibility of bringing municipal representatives to UN negotiations. As an individual at the center of the initiative explains, the launch constituted a deliberate attempt to build a platform for local government participation in international environmental politics:

The UN Environment Program gave me a call ... He said, "What can I do for you?" And I said, "I want a week at the United Nations, where I can organize Mayors and city governments around the world to take on global environmental problems'. And the rest is history. That was the event in September, 1990, where we established X ... It was the first meeting of city leaders ever hosted by the United Nations (I.35).

Since then, the network has conducted painstaking advocacy on climate action in cities, including by acting as a focal point for the local government and municipal authorities (LGMA) constituency within the UNFCCC. The same respondent chronicles the expansion of the network throughout the 1990s, from near-sole promoter of city leadership to a network of around 500 cities a decade later. The formation of this network is, in a way, a textbook example of a coalition that brought a new dimension into a previously monopolized domain. The advent of a local government advocacy group within the UNFCCC negotiations shifted attention to cities as an arena for action. At the same time, the case is mirrored and amplified through the establishment of other municipal networks. Many respondents referred to the formation of C40, a climate coalition launched by political leaders of megacities over a decade later, as essential to building visibility for cities. Likewise, the establishment of 100 Resilient Cities, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, played a key role in building an agenda on urban adaptation. It is not surprising that these networks have drawn significant scholarly attention, especially concerning their ability to reconfigure global governance (Andonova et al., 2009; Okereke et al., 2009). While their effectiveness is increasingly scrutinized (e.g. Heikkinen et al., 2019) their ability to draw attention to cities in global debates is confirmed through many testimonies in this study.

Turning to the construction of frames of action, a key dynamic that contributed to the network's success was the widespread uptake of their approach to municipal climate intervention. The network's first program was an action research project on GHG emission analyses. As explained by a founding member:

I had already conceptualized and pulled together an initial group of city leaders to start ... an action research project ... It was the first project of X ... we developed the methodologies for how to do greenhouse gas baseline emission analysis (I.35).

Through the development of GHG emission baselines and accounting tools, climate change moved from an intangible global threat to a concrete arena of intervention for local authorities. In multiple interviews, local officials identified the network as a primary source of inspiration for climate engagement in the 1990s. Accounts from individuals working in cities during these years testify to GHG inventories constituting their entry point to climate action. As a local official described: “a lot of it, I would say, was looking at inventories, for example, understanding our GHG emissions was an important piece” (I.96). Support from the network at this time was crucial, as few other sources of knowledge sharing existed. As explained by the same local official, climate change was at the time a “niche” domain led by tiny offices:

In the early 90s ... it was a little bit leading edge on that side of things. At the time, we joined X as a member city ... it was probably under a hundred cities that were involved ... we had a very small office, an office of one, and that was me ... there were a number of cities that were working on this and, you know, sharing our successes and our sob stories (I.96).

Regarding institutionalization, the uptake of narratives on urban GHG emission accounting may be linked to the formulation of formalized climate action tools that were integrated into urban planning. The network was founded amidst the mobilization surrounding Local Agenda 21, focused on participatory action for sustainability and environmental planning. The network’s tools on GHG emission accounting were rapidly linked with emission reduction target setting and municipal climate plans, with the network supporting capacity building and learning. To date, the organization maintains this logic, visible in their current City Climate Planner Program, which supports knowledge building around greenhouse gas emission inventories and low-emission development planning in low-resource cities.

There are differences in nuance in how the network frames urban GHG accounting in relation to municipal governments and international policy. For local authorities, the emphasis is on providing a practical toolbox and strengthening administrative skills. On the global stage, urban GHG emission accounting is promoted to visibilize efforts of local governments and recognize their contributions to global targets. The network argues that global change starts at the local level, maintaining continuity in this logic since their formation. This narrative is institutionalized in global programs, for example through the promotion of the carbon Climate Registry as a mechanism within the UNFCCC for boosting subnational climate action. At the same time, the network always embraced a diverse set of narratives, and their sustainability programs include a holistic package of interventions. At recent UNFCCC COPs, the network placed strong emphasis on nature and biodiversity, equity, systemic action, local financing, and sectoral agendas (e.g. transport), showcasing their participation in multiple discursive constellations. Yet, GHG emission accounting remains a central way to promote the climate contribution of cities.

The discursive coalition that formed around the shared promotion of urban emission accounting is broad, as many international organizations present GHG monitoring and reporting in cities as central to their global advocacy. Organizations that align with this

storyline include actors that work directly with the network and actors promoting the narrative in parallel. For example, the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP) collaborates with the network on a unified GHG reporting system for local and regional governments. CDP has created their existence around emission monitoring and disclosure for a range of actors, under the tagline “you can’t manage what you don’t measure” (Carbon Disclosure Project, 2024). Similarly, the climate network C40 argues that a “recent GHG emissions baseline inventory is key for prioritizing actions, setting goals and targets, and measuring progress” (C40, n.d.). The approach is institutionalized within this network as well, with their program “1.5°C Climate Action Plans” presenting “step-by-step guide to developing a city-wide Paris Agreement-aligned climate action plan” (C40, 2024). Statements across the interviews reflected the influence of this rationale. For instance, an individual with a prominent role in the UNFCCC negotiations presented emission accounting as vital to visibilize local authorities: “it would also allow them to take part in initiatives like these international networks ... its actually being able to see these numbers” (I.83).

Reflecting on discursive structuration and the persuasive power of this narrative, early proponents had not necessarily intended for emission accounting to become a pivotal framing device. A founding member commented: “unfortunately, decades hence, by the late noughts, the sort of main metric of sustainability became GHG, molecule accounting” (I.25). This statement illustrates how discursive structuration implies the escape of narratives beyond the strategic intent of founding organizations and their unpredictable life within supply chains, policy reports, and consultant jargon. This expansion was enabled by the neat alignment of the narrative with the interests of various international players. In particular, it supports the status of international organizations as providers of specialized knowledge. For instance, organizations with a consolidated position in environmental science (e.g. United Nations Environment Program (UNEP)) or sector-based agendas (e.g. International Energy Agency (IEA) in the energy sector) gain credibility as actors with knowledge on urban emission planning (IEA, 2021; UNEP, 2021). UNEP advances the narrative to highlight the contributions of urban areas to climate change, while IEA draws attention to the energy agenda in cities. Various benchmarking organizations benefit from the narrative, as they play a role providing accounting tools and certifications. For instance, the City Climate Planner program mentioned above is spearheaded by GBCI, an American organization that develops third-party credentials for rating systems in the built environment. Organizations with previously limited interest in cities have also adopted the narrative. For instance, the WWF, through their One Planet City Challenge, seeks to raise the global profile of cities by reviewing urban emission targets (WWF, 2023). The embedding of the storyline in systems of knowledge across organizations points toward discursive structuration throughout the landscape of global climate governance.

One way to interpret this embedding is as the elevation of a logic of urban carbon control into the international policy arena. As explained in the scholarship on urban climate governance, climate change was rendered governable in cities through articulations of carbon control (Rutland & Aylett, 2008). Over a decade ago, Rice (2010) described the operation of municipal GHG emission inventories as structuring devices for the management of infrastructural development and other economic activities. This “carbonization” of urban governance captured how emission control came to

shape urban decision-making, including in the domains of electricity supply, land use, and transport planning (Rice, 2010). Around the same time, While et al. (2010) pointed to a shift from sustainable development to carbon management as a central logic shaping urban environmental governance. Carbon control began to inform calculative practices of local investment and spatial regulation, manifest in agendas of low-carbon economic planning and restructuring (While et al., 2010). With emission accounting already established as an effective logic of urban environmental decision-making, carbon control could be easily absorbed into international policy as a device organizing the expertise and influence of international organizations.

Multilateral bank

Looking at the evolution of urban narratives from the perspective of a multilateral bank, a similar image emerges. First, by documenting the early interest in urban climate issues, it is possible to trace the formation of informal alliances that helped establish cities as a site of concern. A group of actors linked to the bank collaborated on urban challenges in the years following 2010:

[W]e were part of a group, the 100RC, UNISDR, UN-Habitat had something going of their own at the time. So, we were part of a very informal group ... we had our first meeting at the World Urban Forum ... Approximately, 2013, 14, or 15. And that was critical because we all had similar ideas, slightly different orientation given our institutional needs or goals. But we were all playing in a similar space (I.61).

Other respondents provided similar evidence of pioneering individuals in a handful of organizations (e.g. the World Bank, UN-Habitat, the Rockefeller Foundation, IIED) coming together to articulate urban issues in this shared “space”. The formation of such informal alliances occurred through various means, including meetings (e.g. international conferences, workshops, side-lines of events) and shared outputs (policy reports, working documents, collaborative initiatives). Around this time, these alliances were small enough for advocates to know each other personally:

I guess once we started to get this coalition of partners ... people who were interested in human settlements, like us, then it got stronger and stronger ... there was quite a lively coalition, an informal coalition ... that was the right size to get the issue taken seriously, but also to know each other and to know what each other was doing (I.3).

The nascent character of these formations is reflected in the strong focus on individual leadership, often described as heroic forerunners. Across the interviews, many respondents name-drop individuals involved in these groupings, who have acquired near-mythical status. Another indicator of the emergent character of urban issues at the time was their contested nature. Decades earlier, a respondent within the bank describes how the suggestion to adopt an urban focus in the 1970s was met with resistance:

[T]here was tremendous opposition to that, because in 1973, when the president of X ... gave a very important speech ... he said that poverty is in the rural areas. It's not in cities ... he called me in ... and basically said, “Well, if you're so clear about this, I'm going to give you a year. We're going to set up something called the urban poverty task force and you're in charge” ... Basically we won ... In 1975, when he [the President] gave the annual meeting speech, he said, “We can't ignore the cities” (I.24).

A similar dynamic was repeated decades later when the same organization was confronted with the imperative to deliver climate action in cities. An individual in charge of the urban climate division described themselves as a lone wolf, promoting an agenda perceived as marginal or irrelevant (“Oh, go talk to X. He is the guy who works on this” (I.61)). Comparable stories of confrontation, conflict, and identity crisis emerged in accounts of individuals seeking to introduce an urban climate focus in other organizations. These were particularly striking in organizations known for wild-life protection, where the engagement was perceived as incompatible with their profile (“this is as far away from X that you can get” (I.30)).

Moving into the decade following 2010, this situation changed drastically following the establishment of a popular frame of action. As mentioned, the bank “discovered” urban areas as a development problem in the 1970s, with an agenda tied to infrastructure improvement. When climate change arrived on the scene in the 2000s, the bank had consolidated their urban profile, yet these programs were not understood as climate projects. As explained by a respondent: “X did a lot on climate change. We just didn’t call it climate change. We worked on renewables and cities, and we worked on more energy efficient technologies ... but the climate argument wasn’t a strong narrative (I.61)”. In 2010, the organization adopted climate change as a strategic objective and climate action was defined as co-benefits delivered from development projects. As described by an official: “X had a lot of involvement with cities in low-income countries ... our work on cities and climate change was just sort of an easy extension of the regular programming we were doing” (I.27). This statement illustrates how the bank continued their work on infrastructure investment (sanitation, waste management, transport, etc.), but under a new label of co-beneficial climate outcomes.

This frame of action gained enduring impact through institutionalization. A respondent explained that climate targets were mainstreamed throughout all branches of the organization, allowing related practices to become completely embedded within their operations:

[T]wo and a half years later ... it was unbelievable, the transition that had occurred ... And that was because there had been a major push to mainstream climate into the institution ... all of a sudden, it became everybody’s, every technical specialist’s, responsibility to know about these issues ... it got so mundane that you had to tick a box within the data entry portal, that said “Yes, I have taken account of climate change” (I.61).

The establishment of strategic climate change targets, as well as an urban division with a mandate to pursue climate objectives, produced stickiness of the urban climate agenda. This was not an isolated event, but a dynamic reflected in other international financial institutions. A respondent from another multilateral lender described the development of urban programs in the 1990s, the adoption of a strategic climate focus, and its formalization:

So, this was in response to Paris, and the climate agenda raised from sustainable energy to being fully fledged climate focused. And in 2015, we put a target of 40% of the bank’s business has to be climate or green investment (I.67).

Such institutionalization can be witnessed across organizations on the global arena. Between the years 2010 and 2020, a raft of international organizations set up programs

or divisions focused on urban climate issues. This includes IGOs long active in development (e.g. UN-Habitat, UNDRR, Oxfam), financial institutions (e.g. the World Bank, ADB, EIB, GEF), municipal networks (e.g. UCLG), and green NGOs (e.g. WWF, TNC, the Earthwatch Institute) (Westman et al., 2023). This allowed urban orientations to be embedded in organizations through restructuring or training and hiring of staff, often individuals with “urban” degrees. This embedding was accompanied by an explosion of expertise through the production of frameworks, roadmaps, handbooks, and investment guidelines on urban climate action (Westman et al., 2023). As in the case of constructing migration as a climate issue, this implied a silent transfer of procedures into the climate domain (Nash, 2019). Here, ideas on urban planning and governance, approaches to urban development, local government capacity building, and cognate management tools were imported into international climate policy.

Returning to the narrative of urban climate action as investment with co-benefits, this approach resonated strongly with actors beyond financial institutions, contributing to the establishment of a vibrant discursive coalition. The interviews showcase how a multiplicity of organizations – development organizations, private actors, some local governments – depend on the funding of international banks. These diverse actors engaged in parallel adjustment to align with this frame of action. For example, a development organization described restructuring their programs to better access funding for urban climate investment:

There’s been a lot more funding opportunities to fund work within urban spaces, which I think has also helped us develop a portfolio ... It’s a foreign funded agenda and it’s not really a local need. And it’s been something that’s been pushed by external factors rather than internal vulnerabilities and risks that cities face (I.34).

Similarly, a representative of a municipal office in Sub-Saharan Africa testified to the pressure of re-orienting programs according to climate change, resulting in recognized priorities being overridden: “if you look at the X city council strategy of 2010-2015 ... there were other priorities that we ignored. So, yeah, it’s about who is bringing in the money, what are they focusing on?” (I.69). Two private firms explained a practice of attracting donor funds by sticking a climate change label on urban infrastructure investment projects. This can be interpreted as a form of “climate-washing”, or, at least, a re-branding of urban investment projects with the purpose of attracting international climate funds:

I’ve done a lot of work with cities directly and everything is described as climate change strategy ... They couldn’t be further from the truth ... they are actually virtue signaling to attract donor funds (Consultancy, I49).

They can access more donor money if it’s done through a climate lens ... they’re thinking, how can I leverage more investment ... The answer is: stick a label on it that says climate change. But they’re not wrong about that (Consultancy, I.94).

In all these cases, we witness how the urban narrative becomes linked with material benefits, hence enrolling a growing number of organizations into this discursive configuration. International financial institutions are bound up with complex networks of consultancy firms, investment groups, and manufacturers (Rizzo, 2015), which allows frames to integrate into a global consultocracy-supply chain. The manifestations of the

storyline of urban climate investment with co-benefits are, today, exceedingly diverse, ranging from investment into transport, green infrastructure, smart technology, to circular economy hubs. Again, structuration of the discourse is enabled by the embedding of the narrative into heterogeneous networks of capital and knowledge.

Another example of a strong narrative promoted by a discursive coalition that included the multilateral bank is that of urban resilience. Resilience, a concept with roots in systems theory, gained popularity in climate conversations as a measurement of the ability of urban systems to maintain functionality, adapt, and transform in response to climate disturbances (Meerow et al., 2016). Since around 2010, informal alliances began to develop around this frame. This focus was supported by other major funders, notably Rockefeller's 100 Resilient Cities project, and, later, Oxfam and the Asian Development Bank. It was effectively operationalized into tools for intervention, including through frameworks developed by ARUP and ISET, and, later, by UNDRR through vulnerability assessments and capacity building frameworks. Initially, the resilience frame was distinct from the investment narrative, through its focus on participatory action, informality, "social" dimensions of capacity building, and adaptation rather than mitigation (e.g. Interviews 3, 26, 34, 35, 73). However, later iterations exhibit strong overlaps with the investment-oriented agenda. As Long and Rice (2019) capture in the concept of climate urbanism, much of the focus of climate risk in cities emphasizes protection of capital assets, especially through investment into infrastructure. Climate-resilient infrastructure investment has hereby become a popular manifestation of the urban neoliberal growth agenda (Long & Rice, 2019). Municipal authorities become configured as actors on the international credit market, enrolling global infrastructure firms into (technically complex and expert-driven) urban resilience projects (Bigger & Webber, 2021). The merging of the frames on investment and resilience reflects a mechanism that produces flexibility and durability of urban narratives, illustrating at the same time the dynamic nature of the interpretative struggles surrounding urban climate narratives.

Conclusions

The contribution of adopting a discursive lens on the rise of cities in global climate governance lies in identifying how urban climate narratives have emerged, diffused, and consolidated. The analysis has both theoretical and practical implications. Conceptually, the analysis advances the literature on international policy discourse, showcasing how narratives on urban climate action reinforce dominant developmental logics on the global arena. In terms of policy implications, the study suggests that the cementation of a limited set of urban narratives may constrain the international debate on urban climate policy.

The first of these points relates to the mobilization of bias (Hajer, 1993), which captures how dominant frames legitimize certain forms of action. As discourse theory explains, the reproduction of discourse obscures the political dynamics of its own construction (Holzscheiter, 2014; Milliken, 1999); associated approaches are cast as established "ways of doing things", whilst underlying political interests are invisibilized. In the case of this study, this refers to the reiteration and embedding of urban narratives in organizational praxes, which contribute to their normalization. While it is difficult to assess the rhetorical dominance of any given narrative, references to urban GHG emission accounting and co-

beneficial urban climate investment are, today, widespread and often used without question. Both frames frequently appear in climate policy documents (Westman et al., 2023), as justification for the benefits of urban climate intervention or as a recommended course forward. Exacerbating this tendency is the increasing common-sense-ness of references to cities in climate debates (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2020), which cloaks urban narratives in a guise of self-evidence. This situation raises concerns in relation to well-known critiques of interests associated with narratives on emission accounting and investment. Regarding emission accounting, this is linked with planning expertise, often of a technical nature, supported by international organizations. Expert-led, external planning is, however, known for its tendency to misalign with priorities of urban residents, or even exacerbate existing vulnerabilities (Rahman et al., 2024; Watson, 2014). Here, the analysis demonstrates parallels with the broader literature on international urban sustainability policy debates, which underlines tendencies to favor technocratic, expert-led solutions, often at the expense of local priorities (Caprotti et al., 2017). At the same time, urban climate policy fixed in investment logics often cements urban enclosures, patterns of dispossession, and socio-economic divides (Castán Broto & Robin, 2021; Long & Rice, 2019). In this case, the study confirms previous literature that affirms the dominance of neoliberal logics in international policy making (Carroll & Jarvis, 2015; Riedy, 2020), as well as their pervasive influence on urban policy discourse (Davidson & Gleeson, 2015).

This situation has implications for the formulation of effective and just urban climate policy. While the delivery of sustainable and inclusive urban climate action depends on the ability to consider diverse and context-dependent solutions (e.g. Olazabal et al., 2021; Shi et al., 2016), this form of bias may instead limit the debate. This tendency is especially problematic if dominant narratives remain influential in the long term, possibly at the expense of alternative frames of action. The evidence on the restructuring of international organizations demonstrates how urban narratives gained stability by integration into organizational arrangements, suggesting their tendency toward “stickiness”. The enduring influence of these frames may help explain the constricted character of this discursive domain (Westman et al., 2023). Of course, the two frames considered in this study have not fully dominated the discursive environment. Narratives that gained popularity in recent years include those on urban nature and biodiversity, system-led design, and justice and inclusion. Some organizations promote agendas specific to their organizational identity, such as narratives on decentralization or self-determination led by UCLG and the Climate Alliance. The analysis does not portray a monolithic debate but showcases how two rationales gained early credibility and enjoyed sustained influence over time. Actors that promote alternative narratives may require long-term advocacy to gain the type of common-sense status enjoyed by these storylines. In conclusion, urban climate policy is, at the moment, deeply shaped by the techno-economic rationalities that dominate the current international policy landscape, which control imaginations and may limit the search for alternatives for decades to come.

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Informed consent was provided by each research subject who participated in this study, either by providing written consent or by stating their consent in their recorded interview.

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