

Constructing Urban Climate Governance: Discourse, Power, and Priorities in the C40 Network

Case Study of the C-40 Network

Master Thesis

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"C40's mission is to halve the collective carbon emissions of our member cities within a decade, while improving resilience and equity and creating the conditions for everyone, everywhere to thrive"
(C40 Cities, 2021; p.4)

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how C40 shapes urban climate governance, and the values that guide it. Through a critical discourse analysis of six annual reports (2017–2023), the study demonstrates how C40 presents cities as global climate leaders. There is an emphasis on technocratic and market-based solutions, focusing on innovation, measurability and profitability. Philanthropic organisations such as Bloomberg Philanthropies play a leading role in this, providing funding and board participation. While C40 is committed to social justice and inclusion, these themes are frequently embedded within a dominant logic of efficiency and scalability. The study concludes that C40's discourse primarily perpetuates existing growth paradigms, raising questions about the feasibility of achieving genuinely transformative and structurally equitable climate change within this policy framework.

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1/ PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTION

1.1. Problem Statement

As climate change accelerates, its consequences are increasingly concentrated in urban areas. Cities have emerged as both major contributors to global emissions and frontline sites of climate vulnerability (Gordon, 2013; Riffat et al., 2016; Lee & Jung, 2018; Lee & Jung, 2018). Home to over half of the global population and responsible for approximately 75% of global CO₂ emissions (Riffat et al., 2016; *SDG 11 - Verenigde Naties - Nederlands*, 2020), urban areas face escalating climate risks, from deadly heatwaves and flooding to infrastructure collapse (Gordon, 2013; Riffat et al., 2016; Lee & Jung, 2018). Recent extreme weather events, such as the 2019 European heatwaves affecting cities like Paris (BBC News, 2019), the 2022 Pakistan floods (Weisheimer et al., 2025) and the 2018 Cape Town water crisis (Akatz, 2021), highlight the urgent need to strengthen urban resilience and decarbonisation strategies. These events show that climate change is not an abstract concept, but a concrete and direct threat to urban areas worldwide. However, the way we talk about climate change, through stories, reports and the language we use, is not neutral. This discourse actively constructs what is seen as important, which voices are prioritised, and which solutions are legitimised, shaping both policy agendas and practical responses (Van Dijk, 1989; Pettenger, 2016).

Acknowledging the pivotal role of cities in both causing and solving environmental issues, Sustainable Development Goal 11 advocates for inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable urban environments (Przywojska et al., 2019). Despite international climate treaties, effective national action is often limited, with countries tending to delegate this responsibility to cities (Yazdani & Dola, 2013; Gordon, 2013; Lee & Jung, 2018; Przywojska et al., 2019). In response, cities are taking an increasingly prominent place in climate policy, becoming crucial players (Acuto et al., 2017; McGuirk et al., 2022). In this context, transnational urban networks, systems in which cities are connected, are increasingly emerging. These networks promote mutual learning and provide space for experimentation, including by testing innovative solutions in sustainable mobility and energy supply (Davidson et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2020). Over the past two decades, at least nine urban climate networks have been established worldwide, demonstrating a growing focus on collaboration among cities to jointly address climate issues (Davidson et al., 2019). Within these urban networks, private and philanthropic actors are playing an increasing role (Montero, 2020).

C40 is a good example of an urban climate network. This network provides technical expertise, shares best practices and policy advice, giving funding, and conducting research to help cities implement climate policies and take climate action (Gordon, 2013; Lee & Jung, 2018; Acuto & Ghojeh, 2019; Davidson et al., 2019). C40 operates as a public-private-philanthropic partnership (PPPP), collaborating with city governments, private actors, and philanthropic foundations (About C40 - C40 Cities, 2024). Within these urban climate networks philanthropic foundations have evolved from complementary donors to influential actors with steering, executive, and policy-making roles (Montero, 2020; Fuentenebro & Acuto, 2022; Puttick, 2023). Their involvement in networks like C40 not only provides financial support but actively constructs which themes and principles dominate urban climate governance, determining which interests and voices are included or excluded and shapes the discourse on what matters in urban climate action (Rogers, 2011; McGoey, 2012; Jung & Harrow, 2014; Betsill et al., 2021; Von Schnurbein et al., 2021).

Despite their growing influence, there is a notable lack of systematic insight into the concrete strategies and actions implemented by philanthropic engagement, as well as the need for broader geographical perspectives outside the US-focused literature (Fuentenebro & Acuto, 2021; Betsill et al., 2021). In parallel, scholars highlight the lack of understanding of networks, particularly regarding the specific strategies and activities of cities within climate networks (Gordon, 2013; Lee & Jung, 2018). In general, it is unclear who has influence, how actions are realised, around which themes and principles and how this constructs the urban climate agenda (Acuto & Ghojeh, 2019; Betsill et al., 2021). A deeper understanding of these dynamics is essential to uncover the power relations that underpin urban climate agendas (Román, 2010). Without clear visibility into the concrete actions and thematic focus of C40, it remains difficult to analyse how C40 is actively constructing the priorities and norms that define urban climate governance.

1.2. Research Question

In response to these gaps, this study examines the priorities set by C40 around climate and the underlying social, economic and political principles. The aim is to provide insights into C40 as influential network and how they construct urban policy. Given the growing involvement of networks in climate governance, it is necessary to explore the types of actions they find relevant and the underlying principles within them.

Research question: How does C40 construct urban climate governance, and what underlying values guide its agenda?

Subquestions:

1. Which urban sustainability themes and policy areas are featured in C40's agenda?
2. In what ways do philanthropic and private actors contribute to shaping C40's agenda?
3. What governance ideologies (e.g., market-based, technocratic) and socio-economic principles underpin C40's discourse on sustainable urban development?

2/ THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework focuses on the role of cities in global sustainability and climate issues, going from the importance of cities to sustainability in cities and strategies for climate mitigation and adaptation. It then examines governance mechanisms driving urban climate transition, including the influence of neoliberalism, the emergence of new urban governance models and the development of public-private-philanthropic partnerships (PPPPs). In doing so, the growing, complex role of philanthropy in urban climate policy receives close attention.

2.1. Constructing Reality

In modern societies, stories, written reports and language usage have a strong influence on how we think about societal challenges such as climate change (Pettenger, 2016). Discourses are not mere neutral means of communication, but powerful social processes that produce and spread norms, knowledge and power. Discourses determine what is considered important, who is considered an expert, and which solutions are considered legitimate (Van Dijk, 1989; Pettenger, 2016). Discourses thus shape reality, they not only influence our perception of the climate problem, but also guide the actions of policymakers, cities and social actors (Stehrl et al., 1995; Pettenger, 2016). This means that the way climate change is framed in language and policy directly influences the solutions that are selected and who benefits from them. Studying this discursive construction is therefore essential to understand power relations, dominant norms and the space for alternative voices within urban climate policy (Pettenger, 2016).

2.2. The city

2.2.1. Importance of the city

The 21st century has been described as the 'century of the city' (Gordon, 2013), reflecting the rapid growth of urban populations worldwide (Fyfe, 2002; Gordon, 2013; Riffat et al., 2016). In 2020, 50% of the global population lived in urban areas, which is expected to rise to 60% by 2030 (Riffat et al., 2016; SDG 11 – United Nations – Dutch, 2020). This concentration makes cities not only hubs of economic activity, consumption and innovation, but also key actors in global governance processes (Gordon, 2013; Lee & Jung, 2018). On the one hand, cities contribute significantly to climate change. They consume 60–80% of global energy and are responsible for around 75% of global carbon emissions (SDG 11 – United Nations – Dutch, 2020). However, the high concentration of people, buildings and economic activities in cities also makes them particularly vulnerable to climate-related risks such as floods, heatwaves and air pollution (Gordon, 2013;

Riffat et al., 2016; Lee & Jung, 2018). Accordingly, they play an increasingly prominent role in climate policy discussions (Gordon, 2013; Lee & Jung, 2018; Przywojska et al., 2019).

Given the critical impact of urban developments on global sustainability, effective urban climate action is essential (Rosenzweig et al., 2018). There are two broad strategies to address climate change challenges: mitigation and adaptation. Mitigation refers to efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and address the cause of climate change (Rosenzweig et al., 2018). Adaptation focuses on strengthening cities' resilience to climate impacts, for example through heat plans, flood management or water reuse (Rosenzweig et al., 2018). To realise effective climate action, there is a need for transformation of urban systems, which means not only focusing on actions related to mitigation and adaptation but drawing the broader picture towards sustainable and resilient development paths (Rosenzweig et al., 2018).

2.2.2. Sustainability in the city

Although the concept of sustainability has gained global acceptance, there is no universally shared definition of the sustainable city. Sustainability is usually approached through four overlapping dimensions: ecological, social, economic and spatial (Yazdani & Dola, 2013). In essence, it refers to a city that respects ecological carrying capacity, enhances quality of life, combats inequality and ensures long-term prosperity (Bokolo, 2023). Ecological sustainability is often considered fundamental. It includes the protection of air and water quality, biodiversity, and the transition to renewable energy resources or circular economy (Fyfe, 2002; Riffat et al., 2016). Social sustainability focuses on equitable access to basic services such as housing, education, and healthcare (Fyfe, 2002; Przywojska et al., 2019). Economic sustainability relates to innovative technologies and economic models to future-proof cities (Riffat et al., 2016; Bokolo, 2023). Within this context, there is growing interest in 'smart cities', in which digitisation and data analytics are combined with sustainability (Bokolo, 2023). Spatial sustainability lastly concerns the future-oriented design of cities, with a focus on space use and infrastructure (Riffat et al., 2016). Urban sustainability is multidimensional, to be an ecologically, socially, economically and spatially sustainable city, a city must implement mitigation and adaptation strategies.

2.2.3. Strategies towards sustainable cities

Translating mitigation and adaptation strategies into concrete action requires specific forms of governance. There are three dominant approaches that are commonly used nowadays. First, co-creation emphasises collaboration between governments, citizens, academics, and businesses, which integrates local needs through participatory planning and encourages democratic involvement (Riffat et al., 2016; Przywojska et al., 2019; Bokolo, 2023). Second, technological innovation plays a key role, with solutions such as smart grids and sensors improving energy efficiency and reducing emissions (Riffat et al., 2016). However, critics warn that technology should not overshadow structural social and economic causes of environmental degradation, such as inequality and overconsumption (Sætra, 2023). Moreover, technology itself has historically contributed to environmental degradation (Fyfe, 2002), making it important to critically examine these innovations as “the” solution. Third, multilevel governance and strategic planning are crucial for coherent and long-term goals (Riffat et al., 2016).

2.3. Urban climate governance

2.3.1. Neoliberalism

Despite a broad scientific consensus on necessary emission reductions, there is a lack of obligatory and effective international agreements and actions (Gordon, 2013). This context of limited international climate action created space for cities to develop their own climate agendas (Yazdani & Dola, 2013; Gordon, 2013; Lee & Jung, 2018; Przywojska et al., 2019). As a result, cities are increasingly recognised as innovative governance actors, able to link climate challenges to locally relevant issues such as public health, mobility or disaster resilience (Gordon, 2013; Przywojska et al., 2019). In light of the urgent need for climate action, the lack of funding, and the shortage of skills, governments have created an environment in which private actors and philanthropic foundations can realise innovations through private contributions and help address societal issues (Jung & Harrow, 2014; von Schnurbein et al., 2021; Fuentenebro & Acuto, 2022; World Economic Forum & McKinsey Sustainability, 2023). Policies such as the New Urban Agenda (2016) highlight this shift by identifying key sustainability issues that are best addressed at a local level, including resilience, inclusion, and spatial planning (Przywojska et al., 2019). The neoliberal form of governance ensures that by collaborating with private actors, such as philanthropic foundations, high-risk innovations can be realised. These exceed government budgets, which encourages experimentation and international policy exchange (McCann & Ward, 2009; Puttick,

2023). As a result, philanthropic foundations gained unprecedented influence in contexts where government capacity is declining (Montero, 2020; Betsill et al., 2021; Von Schnurbein et al., 2021).

2.3.2. New urban governance

Since the 1990s, the new urban governance, influenced by neoliberal reforms, supported public-private-philanthropic partnerships (PPPPs) and network governance, with the aim of promoting efficiency and innovation (Hohn, 2005; Rogers, 2011; da Cruz et al., 2018 Snel et al., 2018; Wang & Ma, 2020). This means that where cities used to focus on internal municipal policies and actions (Gordon, 2013), there has been a shift within these policies where cities are becoming active players in networks with private and philanthropic actors (Lee & Jung, 2018; Montero, 2020). New urban governance is characterised by a shift from top-down policies to horizontal cooperation between local authorities, businesses, civil society organisations and citizens (Hohn & Neuer, 2006; da Cruz et al., 2018). This creates new financing models and hybrid institutional forms (Pill, 2018; Puttick, 2023). Within this new model, cities act as laboratories for policy innovation, where technology, participation and experimentation are central (da Cruz et al., 2018). While these new collaborations offer opportunities, there are challenges around coordination, safeguarding public interests and democratic legitimacy (Hohn & Neuer, 2006; da Cruz et al., 2018).

2.3.3. Networks/ Public-Private-Philanthropic partnerships (PPPPs)

The rise of urban climate networks reflects a broader transformation within urban governance. Cities are evolving from passive recipients of policy to proactive actors within networked, transnational climate governance (Pattberg, 2010; Gordon, 2013; Lee & Jung, 2018). These networks, such as C40 or ICLEI, have emerged as central control mechanisms within environmental management and operate based on voluntary participation and shared benefits (Pattberg, 2010). They enhance governance capacity by facilitating knowledge exchange, disseminating innovations and coordinating joint policymaking, in an experimental way (Gordon, 2013; Lee & Jung, 2018). In doing so, they took over functions that traditionally belonged to government, such as monitoring, advocacy and research, thereby reinforcing the active participation of cities and the sustainability of networks (Lee & Jung, 2018). Although these networks are becoming increasingly central, there is still relatively little research on their performance and wider implications for global climate management and beyond (Pattberg, 2010). A specific form of these network structures is the Public-Private-Philanthropic Partnership (PPPP). These partnerships embody an advanced form of hybrid governance in which

governments, businesses and philanthropic foundations jointly address issues, such as urban challenges. These partnerships enable private and philanthropic actors to co-shape urban policy, increasing the influence of market logic in urban governance (Acuto & Ghoejeh, 2019; Davidson et al., 2019). Examples such as C40, Initiative 20x20 and the Global Energy Alliance for People and Planet show how such networks mobilise billions of funding worldwide for climate-related goals such as land restoration, emission reduction and energy access (World Economic Forum & McKinsey Sustainability, 2023).

The intertwining of private and philanthropic actors with urban climate networks implies not only financial but also ideological influence on public decision-making (Montero, 2020; Jung & Harrow, 2014). Through PPPs, these actors actively co-construct climate realities by shaping which solutions are seen as desirable, scalable, and fundable (Gordon, 2013; Kapsali, 2024). These networks often prioritize classical climate strategies, economic growth, cost-efficiency and technological innovation, while more systemic transformation or deep-rooted social inequalities receive less attention (Mitchell, 2006; Gordon, 2013; Jung & Harrow, 2014). This technocratic model, where technical expertise and efficiency take precedence over democratic deliberation or societal preferences, can undermine democratic processes and shift public accountability from government institutions to the private donors (Rogers, 2011; McGoey, 2012; McGoey, 2021; Kapsali, 2024; Von Schnurbein et al., 2021). While urban climate networks are often hailed as innovative models of governance, they also function as new power structures pursuing specific, often neoliberal, climate agendas. Their growing influence makes it critical to examine how they frame climate issues and which interests they prioritise, especially given the lack of understanding of their internal operations, power dynamics, and real-world impact (Lee & Jung, 2018).

2.3.4. Philanthropy

Within the discourse on networked governance, philanthropy plays an increasingly but under-researched role in urban governance by funding policy innovation, complementing public functions and helping shape urban agendas (Jung & Harrow, 2014; Montero, 2020; Fuentenebro and Acuto, 2021; McGuirk et al., 2022; Puttick, 2023; Kapsali, 2024). Due to their room for experimentation, limited national regulations and managerial flexibility, cities are strategic partners for philanthropic foundations (Gordon, 2013; Lee & Jung, 2018; McGuirk et al., 2022; Puttick, 2023). The relationship is reciprocal: foundations are also of interest to cities, offering substantial investment in urban issues (Fuentenebro & Acuto, 2021; Puttick, 2023). This financial

contribution is valuable because approximately 25% of cities report a lack of a climate adaptation plan due to budgetary constraints. Even though more than 90% of the cities report severe climate risks. This highlights the importance of philanthropists within urban networks such as C40, which enable collaboration and funding (Appleby & CDP, 2021).

Philanthropic foundations, such as the Rockefeller Foundation and Bloomberg Philanthropies, are not only financial donors, but also play an active role in steering, executing and making policy decisions within urban climate networks. This shapes policy priorities and thematic agendas (Montero, 2020; Fuentenebro & Acuto, 2022; Puttick, 2023). These foundations operate with private assets at the same scale as states and influence policy priorities through knowledge sharing, programme development and partnerships (Rogers, 2011; Jung & Harrow, 2014; Montero, 2020). Philanthropy is often presented as a neutral and efficient solution to policy challenges. However, this masks the underlying power relations and ideological influences (Jung & Harrow, 2014). These influences are important to understand as, through their extensive networks and considerable capital, philanthropic foundations help determine which themes become central to urban climate management and which principles and values are considered guiding principles. This construction process not only determines the direction of policy, but also which interests and voices are included or excluded (Rogers, 2011; McGoey, 2012; Jung & Harrow, 2014; Betsill et al., 2021; Von Schnurbein et al., 2021).

This influence is accompanied by several critical concerns that can be linked to foundations and their influence. The influence of philanthropic foundations on urban climate policy can lead to the suppression of public interests and the reinforcement of inequality as they push through their own priorities (McGoey, 2012; Betsill et al., 2021; Von Schnurbein et al., 2021). Moreover, these foundations are relatively immune to external pressures because they are not accountable within political frameworks (Jung & Harrow, 2014). Another critical issue is their conditionality, it is often forgotten that these foundations operate on the principle of reciprocity ("one good deed deserves another"), which combined with "punctuated generosity" raises questions about their reliability and consistency (Jung & Harrow, 2014). It is therefore essential to consider philanthropy not only as a complementary resource in governance, but also as an autonomous actor with its own interests, conditions and agendas. Given the growing position of philanthropy within the changing governance landscape, a deep reflection on its role, increasing power, ideological drivers and real impact is necessary (Jung & Harrow, 2014).

3/ METHODOLOGY

3.1. Case Study

This research uses a case study approach. The primary focus is the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, a global network of cities committed to climate action (Davidson et al., 2019; Acuto & Ghojeh, 2019). A case study is defined as an in-depth investigation of an individual, group, or organisation, utilising qualitative or quantitative methods to gain a deeper understanding of the subject of the study (Heale & Twycross, 2017). The case study method is used to gain an in-depth understanding of the complex dynamics of the C40 organisation. While the findings cannot easily be generalised to other contexts, this method provides an opportunity to explore the development of urban climate management and the underlying values of C40 in depth.

3.1.1.C40 as case

C40 is an international global network of cities addressing climate change and sustainable urban policies (Davidson et al., 2019; Acuto & Ghojeh, 2019). Founded in 2005, C40 includes 97 cities (see appendix 1), which are globally dispersed (Figure 1, C40 Cities, 2024) and has facilitated over 14,000 climate-related actions. It connects major cities to collectively tackle the climate crisis (Lee & Jung, 2018; Davidson et al., 2019; *About C40 - C40 Cities, 2024; Cities Archive - C40 Cities, s.d*). The C40 network is one of the most prominent transnational city networks, with a significant global impact on local populations, economies and greenhouse gas emissions, and is crucial for translating global climate goals into concrete urban policies (Gordon, 2013; Lee & Jung, 2018; Acuto & Ghojeh, 2019). They focus on making change, which is reflected in their popular mantra; 'countries talk while cities act' (Gordon, 2013).



Figure 1: Yellow points: steering committee members & Blue points: other members/

Unlike slow regulation-driven local urban planning, C40 prioritizes rapid, flexible and solution-oriented climate actions (Román, 2010; Davidson et al., 2019). They do so by working horizontal (between cities globally) and vertical (with higher levels of governance) (Román, 2010). Originally, C40 aimed to facilitate communication between cities, through networking and information exchange (Gordon, 2013; Lee & Jung, 2018; Acuto & Ghojeh, 2019). Currently, C40 attempts to increase international political cooperation among mayors to accelerate climate action at the local level, as collaboration promotes shared ambition (Acuto & Ghojeh, 2019; C40 Cities, 2024). C40 facilitates the exchange of best practices between cities and provides cities with technical assistance, strategic policy advice, and research to enable effective climate action (Gordon, 2013; Lee & Jung, 2018; Acuto & Ghojeh, 2019; Davidson et al., 2019). Within this network cities are funded through grants and partnerships with public and private funders (Davidson et al., 2019; C40 Cities, 2024). By carrying out these activities, C40 is actively setting priorities and shaping the discourse on what constitutes urban climate action (Gordon, 2013; Davidson et al., 2019).

3.2. Data Collection

This study uses internal documents to collect data. These documents are obtained from the official C40 website and consist of publicly available materials. The documents analysed are the six annual reports from 2017 to 2023 (excluding 2018 because it was not made public; see Appendix 2). The focus is on these documents because they represent the C40 vision, the achievements realised that year and the various actions taken.

3.3. Critical Discourse Analysis

To analyse the priorities of C40 and the principles present, six different annual reports are examined using critical discourse analysis. CDA examines how language reflects and shapes social realities, paying particular attention to embedded power structures and ideologies (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Wodak, 2014). This methodology establishes a social and critical link between text and the social context. This means that, when using this methodology, ideologies become explicit, as does the way in which these ideologies help to construct and influence reality, social practices and social structures (Van Dijk, 1989). Analysing how climate change is discussed in reports and policy documents, such as those produced by C40, reveals which themes and values are considered important and which interests may be overlooked (Pettenger, 2016).

3.4. Coding

In this study, data is analysed using coding techniques based on a semi-deductive approach. This involves continuous interaction between inductive and deductive reasoning. At the start of the analysis, several analytical focal points were formulated based on relevant literature (Gilgun, 2019; Pearse, 2019). These function as *sensitising concepts*, ideas that guide the researcher's focus without rigidly determining it (Gilgun, 2019). During the analysis, these initial concepts can be refined, expanded, or discarded based on empirical observations. This method is particularly suitable for case study research combined with critical discourse analysis. It allows researchers to compare emerging patterns from the data with existing theoretical frameworks, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the subject (Gilgun, 2019; Pearse, 2019). It enables a better understanding of the specific ways in which C40 contributes to the vision of urban climate change through language and discourse. As there is already a wealth of knowledge on urban climate and philanthropy, using predefined codes is a valuable way of achieving specific depth around C40.

The analysis slightly follows the structure of the sub-questions. The codebook is not fixed; it is adjusted throughout the research process, see appendix 3. The first part of the analysis looked at what priorities and themes are emphasised by C40. For this, predefined codes were used, namely eight specific themes that C40 itself indicates on their website. The second part of the analysis looked at which actors play a role and in what ways. Around this, three codes were created beforehand based on scientific literature. The third part focused on the broader ideological and social structures that shape the discourse. This examined which governance principles and values emerge implicitly or explicitly. In this method, it is important to consider that pre-established codes may override unexpected patterns or guide the analysis, even when an attempt has been made to analyse systematically and substantively using literature-driven codes. At the same time, my positionality as a Belgian woman with a background in social work and sociology influences how I interpret the data. Critical reflexivity is therefore essential to recognise this influence and avoid losing sight of alternative, potentially different and novel perspectives (Gilgun, 2019; Pearse, 2019).

4/ ANALYSIS

4.1. Themes and policy areas in C40's agenda

This chapter examines the themes of urban sustainability in the C40 agenda. It starts by looking at how C40 conceptualises its own role in urban climate management. It looks at which themes are present and how climate solutions are realised. It then examines how actors like foundations and other organisations influence and involve others. Finally, it considers the underlying principles present throughout these processes.

4.1.1. The Vision of C40: Cities as Drivers of Climate Action

C40 consistently frames cities as key actors in the fight against climate change, positioning them not merely as participants but as leaders who set the pace for global climate action. In C40's reports, cities are depicted as *"genuine global leaders on the issue of climate change, committing to the boldest climate action and most ambitious targets of the Paris Agreement"* (C40 Cities, 2018, p.8). This is accompanied by the shared narrative that cities must act with urgency, ambition, boldness and inclusiveness; 'we must act faster and with more urgency to prevent climate collapse' (C40 Cities, 2020, p.2). In general, C40's core mission is to halve emissions, address the climate crisis and promote a 'just transition'.

C40's communications strongly emphasise the need for 'transformational and innovative actions'. This reflects an underlying ideology that positions technological advances and large-scale structural reforms as the primary responses to urban climate challenges. As emphasised in their reports, 'the world has never needed transformative change as much as it does now' (C40 Cities, 2021, p.3). Examples of such actions include transitioning from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources and redesigning urban mobility and infrastructure (C40 Cities, 2018, p.18). Innovation is another core theme in C40's agenda. The organisation promotes the establishment of climate innovation hubs, such as Climate Connect Aotearoa, and the integration of climate goals into municipal finance through tools like climate budgeting. The latter is described as 'a highly successful and innovative approach' (C40 Cities, 2022, p.11). Lastly, C40 emphasises high-impact, scalable actions. The organisation supports groups of cities in implementing programmes combining technical expertise, political engagement and peer collaboration. These initiatives aim to deliver rapid, high-impact results that can be scaled up across regions (C40 Cities, 2021, p.9).

4.1.2. Themes and actions of C40

4.1.2.1 Water, heat and nature

In the theme “Water, Heat and Nature”, C40 consistently portrays cities as simultaneously “vulnerable” to and “resilient” against increasing climate-related hazards such as heatwaves, droughts, and floods. This framing positions cities both as victims of climate change and as capable agents of adaptation. The primary focus in the reports is explicitly on adaptation and building urban resilience. The reports emphasize adaptation measures such as “urban cooling”, “heat shelter sites”, “adapted water management” and the “protection of vulnerable communities”. The concept of “multi-benefit solutions”, is prominent, suggesting that adaptation measures not only address climate risks but also produce social co-benefits such as improved air quality, public health, local employment, and energy cost reductions:

“...has tripled the number of climate shelters used during extreme climate events to 203, ... Expansion focused on the city’s most vulnerable neighbourhoods; 95% of residents are now a 10-minute walk from a climate shelter” (C40 Cities, 2023; p10).

4.1.2.2. Air Quality

Air quality constitutes another central pillar within C40’s climate discourse. The reports frequently highlight the public health consequences of air pollution, referencing “millions of premature deaths” and “high healthcare costs.”. This framing emphasizes the tangible and immediate human and economic costs of air pollution, thereby constructing it as an urgent social hazard that necessitates immediate mitigation efforts. Central interventions include “low-emission zones” and the “electrification of transport.” Furthermore, C40 integrates a social justice lens by addressing inequalities in bad air exposure: *“In many cities, low-income neighbourhoods have worse pollution”* (C40 Cities, 2021; p.8)

Economic arguments are closely intertwined with the health framing, as reports provide data on “preventable early deaths” and potential “annual savings” resulting from air quality improvements (C40 Cities, 2022; p.12). This suggests that C40 largely presents climate action as economically beneficial to win others over with concrete financial incentives.

4.1.2.3. Energy & building

C40 consistently frames the built environment as a crucial area for urban climate policy, noting that: "Buildings account on average for over 50% of city emissions in C40 cities" (C40 Cities, 2020; p.15). The discourse combines both energy supply and building efficiency measures. Energy strategies focus on "phasing out fossil fuels" and transitioning to renewable energy, while building policies targets "energy efficiency," "clean construction," and "emission reduction" during construction and usage. A notable shift is the growing focus on "net-zero buildings," which reflects the ambition of achieving carbon-neutral building sectors. Examples of cities adopting stricter building codes and renovation programmes illustrate the progress being made (C40 Cities, 2021; p. 9). These largely focus on technological innovations, including retrofitting existing buildings to reduce emissions. Importantly, C40's discourse highlights public infrastructure, such as schools, hospitals, and government buildings, as priority areas, often linking these choices to social justice goals (C40 Cities, 2021, p.9; C40 Cities, 2018, p.17).

"... the mayors of Oslo, Los Angeles, Mexico City and Budapest pledged to halve emissions from construction activities by 2030 in a drive to net zero embodied emissions from buildings and infrastructure." (C40 Cities, 2021; p.12)

4.1.2.4. Food systems

Food systems are increasingly positioned as a key area in C40's reports, framed around reducing food-related emissions, combating food waste and promoting healthy sustainable diets. The mitigation is explicitly grounded in the claim that food production contributes "up to 30% of global emissions" (C40 Cities, 2018; p.24). Initiatives like the 'food hubs' in Milan, which redistribute food surpluses (C40 Cities, 2022; p.13), are examples of projects with 'ecological and social goals'. The discourse emphasizes "multi-benefit solutions," where climate action yields co-benefits such as public health improvements and food waste. Programs such as New York's "Meatless Mondays" are cited to demonstrate how behavioural changes in consumption patterns can contribute to both climate mitigation and public health promotion (C40 Cities, 2020; p.15). In doing so, C40 constructs consumer behaviour as an integral site of climate governance, promoting individual responsibility within the context of broader structural interventions.

4.1.2.5. Transportation

Transportation is a feature of the C40 urban climate agenda, with a particular focus on its potential for reducing emissions (C40 Cities, 2018, p. 20). The discourse prioritizes "zero-emission mobility" as a dominant solution pathway, heavily emphasizing technological innovation and decarbonisation. Frequent references to "electric vehicles," "zero-emission buses," and "Ultra Low Emission Zones (ULEZ)" reflect this technologically optimistic framing.

However, the reports also acknowledge behavioural and spatial interventions, referencing actions that promote walking, cycling, and public transport. The inclusion of the "15-minute city" concept (C40 Cities, 2021; p.10) suggests a more multidimensional view of urban mobility, linking accessibility and affordability to climate action. Social justice concerns are also integrated, with references to subsidised public transport or shared bicycle programs designed to ensure equitable access to sustainable mobility; *"... bikes are accessible to wheelchair users and there is a 20% discount for low-income populations"* (C40 Cities, 2022; p.10).

4.1.2.6. Ports & Shipping

Although "shipping and ports" are part of C40's agenda, they receive discursively "limited attention" in the annual reports. The sparseness of mentions, with brief references to terms like "green shipping corridor" and "decarbonised" in the 2020 and 2022 reports, suggests that this theme is still at its beginning stage. The focus on "making global trade routes sustainable" and "adaptation in coastal and port areas" does suggest a recognition of the impact of this sector.

4.1.2.7. Urban planning & Design

Urban planning occupies a central role within C40's discourse, positioned as both a mitigation and adaptation strategy. The emphasis is on "rethinking spatial organisation", "improving accessibility", "expanding green spaces" and creating "liveable environments". Adaptation features prominently in "large-scale greening efforts", such as planting trees in heat-sensitive areas and access to green/blue spaces (C40 Cities, 2024; p.14). Innovative urban models such as Buenos Aires' "second skin" programme and the "15-minute city" (C40 Cities, 2021; p.10) exemplify C40's integrated approach combining proximity, resilience, and low-carbon mobility (C40 Cities, 2021; p.10). The reports stress that urban planning not only mitigates emissions but also enhances public health, social cohesion, and overall quality of life.

4.1.2.8. Waste management

Waste management represents another area where C40 promotes an integrated climate and social policy approach. Key policy priorities include “reducing methane emissions”, “diverting waste” and “banning disposable and non-recyclable materials”. The growing number of cities implementing such bans is presented as evidence of global progress (C40 Cities, 2022; p.6). C40 frames circular economy activities, such as recycling, reuse, and repair, not only as environmental strategies but also as economic opportunities, highlighting their potential to create jobs and build service sector capacity (C40 Cities, 2021; p.10). The reports frequently cite financial savings achieved through improved waste collection and recycling, thereby reinforcing the narrative that climate measures deliver both environmental and economic returns (C40 Cities, 2020; p.14).

4.1.2.9. Social sustainability

C40's annual reports show a multidimensional focus, with social sustainability being a core part of their urban climate policy. Back in 2019, then-president Eric Garcetti emphasised that *“inclusive climate action must be at the centre of all urban decision-making to secure a just transition and improve equity for those disproportionately impacted by the climate crisis, people living in the Global South generally, and the poorest communities everywhere”* (C40 Cities, 2020; p.12). This position is reinforced by the statement that *“there is no climate justice without social justice”* (C40 Cities, 2022, p. 7). C40 therefore views the climate crisis as both an ecological and a social challenge, closely linked to inequality. Consequently, they frequently employ terms such as 'equality', 'inclusion', 'equitable transition', 'resilient communities' and 'social justice'. This is more than just policy language; it is a clear normative stance that is directly linked to the principles of social sustainability.

C40 has many initiatives that highlight this principle. These initiatives cover actions within the organisation itself and in the cities. The Diversity, Inclusion and Anti-Racism Board, for example, are presented as mechanisms to 'embed' equality and equity within the organisation and in policy development. C40 consistently emphasises the importance of giving women, young people, and specific communities a voice in climate decision-making processes. The Women4Climate initiative, for instance, empowers women to accelerate local climate solutions (C40 Cities, 2021, p. 14). Mentioning projects such as improving working conditions for informal workers in Accra (C40 Cities, 2024, p. 13) and expanding climate shelters in Barcelona (C40 Cities, 2023, p. 10) provides a narrative of concrete action, anchoring the abstract discourse of justice in initiatives

that promote social welfare and equality. This discourse emphasises how C40 demonstrates its commitment to social justice and inclusion through practical urban initiatives that engage with and empower diverse and vulnerable communities.

4.2. Shaping C40's Actions: The Collaborative Influence of Philanthropic and Private Actors

4.2.1. Co-creation/ collaboration

C40's annual reports emphasise the importance of collaboration in urban climate policy. Mayors are encouraged to establish alliances with other cities, civil society organisations, businesses, and national governments (C40 Cities, 2022, p. 12), thereby contributing to a multi-stakeholder model centred on collective action. These partnerships are said to be powerful enough to influence climate discourse, public opinion, market dynamics, and national and international policy frameworks.

The reports showcase a diverse array of public, private, and civil society stakeholders. Initiatives such as the City Solutions Platform demonstrate how collaboration with businesses and the scientific community is recognised as a driver of innovation (C40 Cities, 2020, p. 19). Their expertise and resources are presented as indispensable: *"The change we need..."* (C40 Cities, 2022, p. 4). Collaborative projects extend beyond emission reduction to encompass financing, technological tools, scientific research, citizen participation and social resilience. Examples such as Mumbai's climate plan prepared with input from *"governments, experts and residents"* (C40 Cities, 2023; p.7), and Freetown's tree-planting project by teams of youth and women (C40 Cities, 2022; p.11), demonstrate a narrative of shared responsibility and inclusivity. Terms such as 'coalition', 'inclusive' and 'equitable' emphasise C40's commitment to linking climate action with social justice.

4.2.2. Support by philanthropic foundations

C40's operational framework is notably dependent on the support of three strategic philanthropic partners: Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Children's Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF), and Realdania. These entities provide not only 'critical core funding', but also secure key representation and oversight on the C40 Inc. board (C40 Cities, 2024; p.17). The fact that five of the ten board members originate from these organisations, including Michael R. Bloomberg who chairs the board (C40 Cities, 2023, p.13; C40 Cities, 2022, p.4), suggests that their role transcends mere financial provision. Their participation in board governance, alongside their ability to co-set

strategic goals and provide “operational oversight” (C40 Cities, 2022; p.4), positions these foundations as active shapers of C40's agenda. Bloomberg's influence, for instance, is discursively linked to fostering a “data-driven, results-oriented culture” (C40 Cities, 2022; p.4) thereby framing a specific approach to urban climate governance as central: *“C40 has been a data-driven organization since its infancy, inspired by the approach of then-Chair Michael R. Bloomberg”* (C40 Cities, 2022; p.4)

Each of these core foundations is discursively associated with a distinct thematic focus, aligning their philanthropic priorities with C40's programmatic areas. Bloomberg Philanthropies, for example, concentrates on 'environment, public health and government innovation'. CIFF's focus on children manifests in projects like improving air quality in developing countries. Realdania's expertise in the built environment is reflected in its investment specifically targeting ‘building for present and future generation and heritage’. Indeed, C40's priority themes, such as climate action, quality of life, and social inclusion, closely align with the interests of its strategic funding foundations. This suggests that actors probably prioritise investment in areas they deem most important, as evidenced by Bloomberg Philanthropies' focus on data-driven innovation, which has inspired C40's operational approach since its inception. However, it cannot be said with absolute certainty that C40's themes derive solely from this, since the Steering Committee formally sets the organisation's mission. Beyond these three core partners, other philanthropic partners, such as the Oak Foundation and Open Society Foundations, provide financial support for specific programs. For example, the Zero Emission Freight Academy, where cities like Rio and Seattle developed zero-emission pilots (C40 Cities, 2020; p.16). These smaller foundations often support more innovative programmes that are in their starting blocks (C40 Cities, 2023; p.14).

4.2.3. Support by other private actors beyond foundations

C40's reports construct a discourse of broad climate accountability. They emphasise that businesses, citizens and other levels of government control the vast majority (96%) of urban carbon emissions (C40 Cities, 2024; p. 15). This positions the private sector as a dominant player in emissions and legitimises their involvement. The reports state that “city leaders need to work in partnership with local communities and businesses to accelerate climate action” (C40 Cities, 2020, p. 8) and portray businesses as vital partners in achieving 'transformative climate action' and addressing 'harmful consumption and production patterns' (C40 Cities, 2020, p. 8).

Although C40 is primarily funded by philanthropy, reports emphasise the increasing importance of public-private partnerships in urban climate initiatives. Various private actors, ranging from banks to large corporations such as Tesco and Google, contribute funding and technical expertise (C40 Cities, 2020, p. 20). This funding is linked to innovative climate solutions. Private companies can accelerate the implementation of such solutions through procurement agreements with solar energy suppliers, for example (C40 Cities, 2021; p.14). There are also knowledge partners, such as AXA, who contribute research and frameworks for monitoring progress. For example:

“The ... report, in partnership with Ramboll, provided a framework for measuring and tracking progress and impacts of cities’ adaptation actions, piloted with Austin, Johannesburg and Quito” (C40 Cities, 2020; p.11).

Despite the clear increase in these collaborations, the C40 reports acknowledge that collaboration with the private sector remains a major challenge. Nevertheless, such partnerships are seen as essential to making a real impact in urban climate action, as they give cities access to resources, expertise and innovation that are otherwise difficult to mobilise.

4.2.4. Support by public services (e.g. national governments)

The C40 annual reports emphasize the central role of public actors, national governments, international organizations (like the UN and UNICEF), and specialized agencies (such as GIZ and FCDO), in supporting climate initiatives. The main financial providers are the UK, Germany, Denmark, and the US, who focus much of their support on cities in the Global South, including Jakarta, Medellín, and Freetown. These contributions are typically unilateral, with little evidence of reciprocal cooperation. Moreover, support often comes with conditions: for example:

“...15 cities in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. The 15 cities are to deliver at least two priority high-impact actions from their climate action plans (CAPs) and mainstream the CAPs into city governance, planning and decision-making structures” (C40 Cities, 2023; p.10).

Specialized agencies, such as Germany’s GIZ, play a key role by managing programs like the Cities Finance Facility (CFF), which aims to make financing available for climate-resilient infrastructure. This facility is funded by Germany, the UK, and the US. Reports frequently refer to this as “generous

support” (C40 Cities, 2022; p.9), but provide few details about the actions beyond mentioning technical assistance. Overall, C40’s reports highlight that, thanks to the financial and technical backing of governments and strategic funders (including Bloomberg Philanthropies and the Children’s Investment Fund Foundation), C40 can deliver in-depth technical support to over 37 cities, mainly in the Global South (C40 Cities, 2020; p.6). However, details on the specific nature of this support are often limited.

4.2.5. Inclusive partnership

In addition to philanthropic and private collaborations, the annual reports highlight the importance of collaboration with various actors, who jointly define themes and thus strengthen the direction of C40's climate action.

4.2.5.1. Collaboration cities

Within the C40 network, cooperation and co-creation between cities with similar characteristics is central. Through thematic networking and peer-to-peer exchange, knowledge, best practices and innovative solutions are shared. The reports stress several times that by working this way, more effective, faster and cheaper solutions can be realised. Moreover, the peer-to-peer nature creates positive competition and accelerates the spread of best practices between cities (C40 Cities, 2021; p.4); *“This information sharing means action on the ground in cities is better informed, more effective, faster and costs less”*. (C40 Cities, 2018; p.9)

4.2.5.2. Communities

C40's annual reports consistently underscore the importance of co-creation and collaboration with local communities. The examples show cities actively working with residents and local groups, such as in Accra, where participatory work is done with informal waste workers to support their capacities and formulate policies that improve their protection (C40 Cities, 2024; p.13). This example positions local communities as active agents in policy development, moving beyond a mere recipient role. In Durban, community involvement is linked to the "rehabilitation of 400 km of rivers and the creation of green jobs, including for youth and women" (C40 Cities, 2022; p.10). These examples construct community engagement as a multi-benefit strategy, yielding not only environmental improvements but also direct social and economic gains, particularly for vulnerable groups.

4.2.5.3. Youth

C40's annual reports, particularly from 2020 onwards, acknowledge the importance of youth engagement. This coincides with the global youth climate protests. The assertion that *"young people demand action ... as the youngest generation, their lives are most at stake"* (C40 Cities, 2021; p.14) lends legitimacy to young people's demands and involvement. The reports describe programmes that provide young people with platforms to make their voices heard, such as workshops and competitions, where their involvement is seen as a form of empowerment. C40's support for the 'Youth Playbook' reinforces the idea of institutional integration, whereby young climate activists provide policy recommendations to mayors on how to structurally embed youth engagement.

4.3. The underlying ideologies and principles of C40's discourse

C40's discourse on sustainable urban development reveals a complex interplay of governance ideologies and socio-economic principles that shape its narrative and strategies. The organization positions cities as central actors in addressing global climate challenges, deploying a blend of neoliberal, technocratic, and market-based rationalities, interwoven with normative commitments to equity and inclusion.

4.3.1. Urban Leadership (Neoliberal urban governance)

C40's annual reports provide a clear contrast between the inaction of nation-states and the dynamism of urban actors. This narrative shift responds to inadequacies of intergovernmental examples, illustrated, for example, by the claim that *"COP27 ended without meaningful progress on the necessary rapid phase out of fossil fuels"* (C40 Cities, 2023; p.3). In this framing, cities emerge as proactive agents of change, with mayors described as *"doers, not delayers"* (C40 Cities, 2023; p.3), reinforcing an image of decisive leadership.

Through such language, cities are elevated to *"global leaders"* (C40 Cities, 2020; p.2), described as *"at the centre of international efforts"* (C40 Cities, 2018; p.33). This urban-centric discourse emphasizes cities' comparative advantages; flexibility, cross-border collaboration, and freedom from the geopolitical constraints that hamper national governments. The 2017 report explicitly highlights this, stating that cities are *"unburdened with the issues of borders and sovereignty which hobble the capacity of nation-states to work with one another"* (C40 Cities, 2018; p.8). While cities are portrayed as climate leaders, C40 simultaneously acknowledges the necessity of multi-level

cooperation with national governments, civil society, the private sector, and local communities (C40 Cities, 2023; p.12). This dual framework reflects a pragmatic model of governance that combines urban autonomy with networks, in line with post-national and multilevel governance frameworks.

4.3.2 Legitimation; Science and data

C40 consistently frames the urgency of climate action through scientific evidence and measurability. Cities adopt 'science-based targets', and rely on data-driven processes, captured in the principle: *"You can't manage what you don't measure"* (C40 Cities, 4; p.8). Data supports goal setting, project evaluation, and informs decisions for investors and policymakers. Reports such as *Deadline 2020* guide cities in tracking progress towards quantifiable targets (C40 Cities, 2020; p.4,6). This ensures that resources are allocated to areas with the greatest gains *"...using a data driven approach ensures that C40 can target resources on the areas where there is greatest potential for emissions avoidance and improving resilience"* (C40 Cities, 2018; p.9).

Data also evaluate the effectiveness of projects. Cities like Santiago, Johannesburg, and Salvador, initiatives have *"been assessed against a robust and practically viable tool to measure their effects on emissions, public health and air quality. The findings help cities to make the case for these policies and for the investment needed to scale them up across the city"* (C40 Cities, 2018; p. 30). Tools like the Global Protocol for Community-Scale Greenhouse Gas Emission Inventories (GPC) enable standardization, knowledge exchange, and rapid implementation of effective actions. Sharing knowledge from data is transnational, as illustrated by the fact that Paris adopted Athens' heat mobile application to inform citizens about heat risks and available cooling centres (C40 Cities, 2018; p.25). Data also enhances accountability towards investors and policymakers by emphasizing quantifiable returns, such as *"resulting in US \$9.4 billion in annual savings from averted deaths and hospitalisations"* (C40 Cities, 2023; p.12). C40's membership system reinforces this focus on measurable results, requiring cities to develop *"comprehensive, measurable climate action plans"* (C40 Cities, 2018; p.12) and share best practices (C40 Cities, 2018; p.9). As stated, *"By setting tough participation standards, C40 ensures consistent and robust participation from its member cities. We do not ask for fees, we ask for action"* (C40 Cities, 2020; p.3).

4.3.3. Solution logic: market principles & innovation

C40 cities adopt a solution-oriented approach that heavily relies on technological innovation and market mechanisms, manifested in two interconnected dimensions:

4.3.3.1. Technology as a Catalyst for Climate Action

C40 cities actively implement technological advancements to support climate adaptation and mitigation. Examples include the deployment of electric buses, installation of solar energy systems on buildings, and utilization of smart water management meters. Digital technologies, such as tree-tracking systems and air quality monitoring, are also employed. These innovations are facilitated through collaborations with private companies and national governments (C40 Cities, 2020; p.22). Beyond technical applications, technology is leveraged for social innovation; for instance, Freetown uses digital tools to create employment opportunities for women and youth (C40 Cities, 2022; p.11), while initiatives like the Women4Climate Tech Challenge promote female leadership in climate innovation (C40 Cities, 2021; p.14).

4.3.3.2 Market Logic and Economic Value

C40's climate strategy is imbued with market logic, characterized by words such as bold, innovative, high-impact and faster and scalable solutions. Through "market-shifting actions," cities aim to induce structural changes in markets (C40 Cities, 2023; p.5; p.27). A notable example is the collective procurement of 66,000 electric buses by 55 cities, demonstrating the power of municipal demand to influence market dynamics (C40 Cities, 2023; p.27). Underlying this approach is the principle of generating economic and societal value. Cities highlight the financial and social returns of green investments, such as job creation and reduced healthcare costs (C40 Cities, 2021; p.13). This emphasis aligns with the concept of impact investing, which aims to generate financial and social returns simultaneously. A Report, for example, indicated that investments in green infrastructure not only yield cost savings but also contribute to public health improvements and economic resilience.

"...This shift is already being met by a strong response from the market. Bloomberg New Energy Finance analysis for C40 cities found that, over the typical lifetime, it is cheaper to own an electric rather than a diesel bus" (C40 Cities, 2020; p.13).

The reports underscore a strong focus on efficiency, aiming for significant climate impact through cost-effective and measurable actions. Climate measures are presented as investments that pay off through economic and social benefits, reinforcing the narrative that environmental sustainability and economic prosperity are mutually reinforcing goals.

5/ DISCUSSION

Within this study, six annual reports are analysed to identify how C40 as an organisation constructs urban climate management and what underlying values are present. Critical discourse analysis was used to obtain important patterns in the annual reports. This discussion explores how C40 shapes urban climate policy through discourse, actorhood and network governance, and how underlying values such as market logic, technocracy and just transition permeate it.

5.1. Which urban sustainability themes and policy areas are featured in C40's agenda?

Analysis of C40's annual reports indicates that cities are consistently positioned as leading actors in global climate action. The organisation takes an integrated approach to ecological, social and economic sustainability, with a strong emphasis on both adaptation and mitigation. Both mitigation and adaptation measures are used in C40's actions. While some areas, such as air quality and energy, are primarily mitigation-driven, adaptation is explicitly emphasised in contexts of climate risks such as heat and floods, often integrated with social and economic co-benefits. In other words, a balanced, multi-benefit approach is sought in which climate actions both reduce emissions and make cities more resilient.

Mitigation and adaptation incorporate the three forms of sustainability. Ecologically, C40 focuses primarily on emission reduction, including through the phasing out of fossil fuels and the transition to renewable energy, and the decarbonisation of key sectors such as transport and buildings. As Riffat et al. (2016) and Bokolo (2023) pointed out, economic sustainability also emerges in different ways. First, there is a focus on innovative technology, as discussed later. In addition, however, the focus is also on an economically beneficial model that generates value through 'market-shifting actions' and investments that contribute to employment and public health, resulting in tangible savings. A crucial overarching theme is social sustainability. C40 states that 'there is no climate justice without social justice'. This is reflected in a consistent focus on equality and inclusion, as well as a just transition. Initiatives such as Women4Climate and community-

based projects are examples of this approach. C40's approach does extend beyond the original definition of social sustainability, which is limited to equitable access to basic services (Fyfe, 2002; Przywojska et al., 2019). It creates a reality in which climate policy is perceived as a broad concept, achieved through transformative, inclusive and technocratic actions.

Technology and innovation are consistently presented as central pillars in C40's annual reports. Within this discourse there is a focus on technocratic advances and structural reforms to address urban climate challenges. Across thematic areas, ranging from energy and transport to waste and buildings, the discourse emphasizes "scalable," "measurable," and "economically beneficial" solutions, often driven by digital tools, electrification, and infrastructure upgrades. This dominant framing suggests that technological innovation is not just a means, but a normative and desirable vision of climate governance. It reflects a technocratic logic, where expert-led, technical solutions are prioritised. In doing so, the reports contribute to constructing a reality in which climate progress should be achieved primarily through innovation and technical interventions.

The current focus on innovation and technology within technocracy is not a new phenomenon in climate policy. The C40 case study is therefore more likely to confirm existing trends in this area. However, the link made with the socially just transition does provide new insights. Scholars warn that technocratic climate solutions often marginalize social justice concerns, reinforcing what Basseches et al. (2022) call "climate isolationism." Efficiency-centered and technocratic logics may overshadow democratic processes and fail to address structural inequalities (Rogers, 2011; McGoey, 2012, 2021; Kapsali, 2024; Von Schnurbein et al., 2021). Furthermore, vulnerable groups would have less access to this type of climate action, while bearing a disproportionate share of the costs (Bouyé et al., 2021). This tension is evident in C40's discourse. On the one hand, the network prioritises scalable, measurable and economically beneficial interventions, characteristics of a technocratic policy framework. On the other hand, C40 has increasingly incorporated themes of climate justice, equity, diversity and inclusion into its strategic vision since the launch of the Global Green New Deal in 2019. They will, among other things, draw up projects that facilitate the participation of young people, women, informal waste workers, and people living in vulnerable communities. This shift is not without limitations. While many initiatives include references to justice and equality, such considerations often seem to go hand in hand with innovative and technological solutions. In line with suggestions from the literature (Basseches et al.; 2022), C40 seems to bridge the gap between technological innovation and social justice by

creating 'green jobs' that connect the two domains. However, there is still tension: social goals are often embedded in a technocratic discourse, which risks prioritising economic efficiency and measurable outcomes over social justice. This can result in the exclusion of vulnerable groups, for example. Whether social goals are truly central or merely instrumentally deployed in practice is an issue that would be interesting to explore further.

5.2. In what ways do philanthropic and private actors contribute to shaping C40's agenda?

The C40 agenda is shaped by various stakeholders, who are divided into three main groups: philanthropic foundations, private companies, and governments. These parties provide financial support and exercise influence in various ways, such as participating in boards or supporting innovative projects. Other important contributors to the agenda include young people and collaborations with cities and communities. C40 reports demonstrate neoliberal urban governance, portraying cities as 'global leaders' in climate action. The focus in the reports is on networked actors that attract capital and cooperation, as emphasised by Swyngedouw (2005), Gordon (2013) and McGuirk et al. (2020). Therefore, a critical reflection on these collaborations is essential.

This analysis of the C40 coalition is consistent with wider academic research indicating that private and philanthropic organisations, through public-private-philanthropic partnerships (PPPPs), exert financial and ideological influence over urban climate policy (Montero, 2020; Gordon, 2013). Research by Acuto and Ghojeh (2019) and Davidson et al. (2019) shows that these partnerships frequently set the agenda, determining which solutions are prioritised and how climate action is conceptualised. For example, philanthropic organisations such as Bloomberg Philanthropies, CIFF and Realdania have secured influential positions within the C40, with foundation representatives occupying half of its board seats. This structure enables these organisations to influence agenda-setting and funding allocations, often through thematic priorities or pre-set conditions. The Climate Finance Facility is an example of how foundations, often from the Global North, can determine project focus, which is largely geographical in nature. As Jung and Harrow (2014) observe, while this engagement brings valuable resources and innovation capacity, it also risks limiting the scope of climate action to align with the interests of donors. Although cities officially retain decision-making power, philanthropic priorities can dominate in practice, raising concerns about local autonomy and public accountability (McGoey, 2015).

Within this discourse, there is a clear focus on achieving high-impact, measurable outcomes, such as planting a certain number of trees, reducing emissions, or creating green jobs. This approach reflects a philanthrocapitalist model in which philanthropic engagement is closely tied to business logic, cost-benefit analyses and the pursuit of maximum social returns through impact investing and technocratic efficiency (McGoey, 2012; Ravazzi, 2016; Harvey et al., 2020). As a result, climate governance is shaped by what is visible, quantifiable, and fundable, which often takes precedence over slower, systemic, or community-driven approaches. Research shows that this discourse carries a risk of narrowing the policy space, favouring projects that align with donor priorities and deliver easily measurable results (Davidson et al., 2019; Kapsali, 2024). This selective focus reinforces a results-oriented logic, shaping a climate reality in which success is determined primarily by scalability, quantification, and reporting (McGoey, 2015; Kapsali, 2024).

In addition to collaborating with large private and philanthropic actors, C40 also emphasises working with social groups, such as young people and informal workers. While such collaborations offer opportunities for inclusion and innovation, they also pose risks to local autonomy and political diversity, according to Acuto and Ghoejeh (2019). While projects that actively involve young people or informal workers encourage social embedding and co-creation, it often remains unclear to what extent cities can set their own priorities and have local authority. Thus, the symbiotic relationship between C40 and its partners is a double-edged sword: while private resources and expertise accelerate climate action, they also create dependencies and the risk of fragmentation due to donor interests (Smeds, 2019).

5.3. What governance ideologies (e.g., market-based, technocratic) and socio-economic principles underpin C40's discourse on sustainable urban development?

Analysis of the C40's annual reports reveals that the network's discourse on sustainable urban development is underpinned by technocratic and market-based governance ideologies. Three core principles emerge: a strong belief in technological innovation, an instrumental focus on efficiency and measurability and the economic framing of climate action as an investment opportunity.

Firstly, C40's technocratic approach is evident through its reliance on data-driven decision-making processes, scientific expertise and the promotion of scalable technological solutions. The network positions technical innovation as a key driver of urban climate transitions, reflecting a

technocratic governance model in which expertise, objectivity and efficiency are central. This approach aligns with broader global urban climate governance trends, where scientific rationality and technological progress are viewed as pathways to sustainability (Acuto & Rayner; 2016). However, as Sætra (2023) points out, such a technocratic focus can lead to the neglect of the deeper structural causes of environmental degradation, such as social inequality and unsustainable consumption patterns. By prioritising technical solutions, C40 may overlook the need for transformative systemic change that addresses the root causes of environmental degradation rather than just the symptoms.

Secondly, C40's discourse is permeated by a logic of efficiency, measurability and scalability. Policies are presented as 'high-impact' and 'scalable', and success is defined by quantifiable outcomes such as reduced emissions, green jobs created, and cost savings. This results-oriented approach aligns with market-based governance logics, in which accountability is frequently tied to performances and demonstrable results. While this can enhance legitimacy and attract investment, it also risks limiting the policy agenda to what is easily measurable and fundable (Pattberg, 2010; Rogers, 2011). Consequently, slower initiatives with less clear results may be sidelined, and democratic legitimacy may be compromised if decision-making is driven more by data and donor expectations than local priorities. Thirdly, the C40 explicitly links climate action to economic benefits, emphasising cost-effectiveness, health improvements and job creation. This 'return on investment' framing is characteristic of philanthrocapitalist approaches, in which social value is closely tied to economic returns (Von Schnurbein et al., 2021). While this can mobilise broad support, concerns have been raised about the subordination of social justice and inclusion to economic efficiency (Bouyé et al., 2020).

Although C40 presents itself as a network committed to innovation and transformative change, its approach remains strongly technocratic, market-oriented and results-driven. This raises the question of the extent to which true social transformation is possible within such frameworks. The tension between economic efficiency and social inclusion remains significant. Consequently, despite its focus on social justice, C40's approach risks offering mostly 'more of the same'. In line with broader findings (Pattberg, 2010; Rogers, 2011), the network largely reproduces classical growth logics, casting doubt on the possibility of transformative change.

6/ CONCLUSION

C40 develops urban climate policies by incorporating a wide range of sustainability themes, such as energy, mobility, waste, air quality, climate adaptation and social justice, into a primarily technocratic and market-oriented discourse. It positions cities as global leaders, taking an integrated approach to environmental, economic and social sustainability. Technological innovation, data-driven decision-making and measurable impact are central to this approach. This logic closely aligns with philanthrocapitalist principles, whereby private and philanthropic organisations, such as Bloomberg Philanthropies, provide funding and influence thematic priorities and project selection.

Although notions of equity, inclusion and social transition have become more prominent since the Global Green New Deal, these are often encapsulated within a dominant logic of innovation, efficiency and profitability. This risks reducing climate policy to what is visible, fundable and measurable, potentially marginalising slower, structural or community-based approaches. C40's discourse thus constructs a reality in which technocratic expertise, market logic and performance orientation dominate urban climate policy, while social change, though recognised, is often embedded in existing efficiency- and innovation-based logics. This raises the fundamental question of whether the organisation can implement the deep structural changes required for an equitable and inclusive climate transition or if it is merely perpetuating existing paradigms under the guise of innovation and partnership.

A key limitation of this study is its reliance on six publicly available annual reports from C40, which reflect the organisation's internal narrative. This poses the risk of an overly favourable and one-sided portrayal that may overlook local experiences and the practical implementation of policies. Consequently, the analysis may only offer a partial view of actual decision-making processes and outcomes. The study highlights C40's strong emphasis on technological innovation and market logic, as well as its growing focus on social justice. However, the interplay between these elements requires critical reflection. Future research should examine how policies are implemented locally, and whether they reflect or challenge the underlying technocratic and social principles in practice.

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Appendix 1: List of C40 cities

Africa		25	Shenzhen, China
1	Abidjan, Ivory Coast	26	Wuhan, China
2	Accra, Ghana	27	Zhenjiang, China
3	Addis Abeba, Ethiopia	East, Southeast asia and Oceania	
4	Kaapstad, South Africa	28	Auckland, New Zealand
5	Casablanca, Morocco	29	Bangkok, Thailand
6	Dakar, Senegal	30	Hanoi, Vietnam
7	Dar es Salaam, Tanzania	31	Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
8	Durban (eThekweni), South Africa	32	Jakarta, Indonesia
9	Ekurhuleni, South Africa	33	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
10	Freetown, Sierra Leone	34	Melbourne, Australia
11	Johannesburg, South Africa	35	Quezon City, the Philippines
12	Lagos, Nigeria	36	Seoul, Republic of Korea
13	Nairobi, Kenia	37	Singapore, Singapore
14	Tshwane, South Africa	38	Sydney, Australia
Central East-Asia		39	Tokyo, Japan
15	Beijing, China	40	Yokohama, Japan
16	Chengdu, China	Europe	
17	Dalian, China	41	Amsterdam, Netherlands
18	Fuzhou, China	42	Athens, Greece
19	Guangzhou, China	43	Barcelona, Spain
20	Hangzhou, China	44	Berlin, Germany
21	Hong Kong, China	45	Kopenhagen, Denmark
22	Nanjing, China	46	Heidelberg, Germany
23	Qingdao, China	47	Istanbul, Turkey
24	Shanghai, China	48	Lissabon, Portugal

49	London, United Kingdom	74	Austin, United States
50	Madrid, Spain	75	Boston, United States
51	Milan, Italy	76	Chicago, United States
52	Oslo, Norway	77	Houston, United States
53	Paris, France	78	Los Angeles, United States
54	Rome, Italy	79	Miami, United States
55	Rotterdam, Netherlands	80	Montreal, Canada
56	Stockholm, Sweden	81	New Orleans, United States
57	Tel Aviv - Yafo, Israel	82	New York City, United States
58	Warschau, Poland	83	Philadelphia, United States
Latin America		84	Phoenix, United States 
59	Bogota, Colombia	85	Portland, United States
60	Buenos Aires, Argentina	86	San Francisco, United States
61	Curitiba, Brazil	87	Seattle, United States
62	Fortaleza, Brazil	88	Toronto, Canada
63	Guadalajara, Mexico	South & West Asia	
64	Lima, Peru	89	Ahmedabad, India
65	Medellín, Colombia	90	Amman, Jordan
66	Mexico City, Mexico	91	Bengaluru, India
67	Quito, Ecuador	92	Chennai, India
68	Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	93	Delhi NCT, India
69	Salvador, Brazil	94	Dhaka (Noord & Zuid), Bangladesh
70	Santiago, Chile	95	Dubai, United Arab Emirates
71	São Paulo, Brazil	96	Karachi, Pakistan
North-america		97	Mumbai, India
72	Vancouver, Canada		
73	Washington, DC, United States		

Appendix 2: References annual reports

	Publication	Author or institute + Publication date	Link
1	C40 Cities Annual Report 2023	C40 Cities (2024)	https://www.c40.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/C40_annual_report_2023_V10.pdf
2	C40 Cities Annual Report 2022	C40 Cities (2023)	https://www.c40.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/C40-Cities-Annual-Report-2022_Published-Online-31-Mar-2023.pdf
3	C40 Cities Annual Report 2021	C40 Cities (2022)	https://www.c40.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/C40_annual_report_2021_V10.pdf
4	C40 Cities Annual Report 2020	C40 Cities (2021)	https://www.c40.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/C40_Annual_Report_2020_vMay2021_lightfile.pdf
5	C40 Cities Annual Report 2019	C40 Cities (2020)	https://www.c40.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/C40-2019-Annual-Report.pdf
6	C40 Cities Annual Report 2017	C40 Cities (2018)	https://www.c40.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/C40-2017-Annual-Report-ORIGINAL_compressed.pdf

Appendix 3: Predefined deductive codes

CODEBOOK
Phase 1; Textanalysis (Micro): What does the text literally say?
General climate change/ action
1/ Water, heat and nature
2/ Air quality
3/ Energy and building
4/ Foodsystems
5/ Transportation
6/ Ports & shipping
7/ Urban planning & Design
8/ Waste management
Phase 2; Discursive practice (Meso) Who produces the projects, who gets involved, and how do other cities get involved?
Initiatives funded by philanthropic organisations
Initiatives funded by private actors
Initiatives funded by public services (e.g. national government)
Co-creation/ collaboration
Phase 3; Social practice (Macro) Underlying principles + What wider (social and ideological) context has an impact ?
Technocratic governance
Market-based approach
Business principles
Neoliberal empowerment
Social aspects



CHECKLIST ETHICAL AND PRIVACY ASPECTS OF RESEARCH

INSTRUCTION

This checklist should be completed for every research study that is conducted at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology (DPAS). This checklist should be completed *before* commencing with data collection or approaching participants. Students can complete this checklist with help of their supervisor.

This checklist is a mandatory part of the empirical master's thesis and has to be uploaded along with the research proposal.

The guideline for ethical aspects of research of the Dutch Sociological Association (NSV) can be found on their website (http://www.nsv-sociologie.nl/?page_id=17). If you have doubts about ethical or privacy aspects of your research study, discuss and resolve the matter with your EUR supervisor. If needed and if advised to do so by your supervisor, you can also consult Dr. Bonnie French, coordinator of the Sociology Master's Thesis program.

PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

Project title: Philanthrocapitalism in The City, Case-Study of the C-40 Network

Name, email of student: Kato Defloo, 745881kd@eur.nl

Name, email of supervisor: Agni Kalfagianni, kalfagianni@essb.eur.nl

Start date and duration: Januari 2025-June 2025

Is the research study conducted within DPAS **YES** - NO

If 'NO': at or for what institute or organization will the study be conducted?
(e.g. internship organization)

PART II: HUMAN SUBJECTS

1. Does your research involve human participants. YES - NO

If 'NO': skip to part V.

If 'YES': does the study involve medical or physical research? YES - NO

Research that falls under the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act ([WMO](#)) must first be submitted to [an accredited medical research ethics committee](#) or the Central Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects ([CCMO](#)).

2. Does your research involve field observations without manipulations that will not involve identification of participants. YES - NO

If 'YES': skip to part IV.

3. Research involving completely anonymous data files (secondary data that has been anonymized by someone else). YES - NO

If 'YES': skip to part IV.

PART III: PARTICIPANTS

1. Will information about the nature of the study and about what participants can expect during the study be withheld from them? YES - NO
2. Will any of the participants not be asked for verbal or written 'informed consent,' whereby they agree to participate in the study? YES - NO
3. Will information about the possibility to discontinue the participation at any time be withheld from participants? YES - NO
4. Will the study involve actively deceiving the participants? YES - NO
Note: almost all research studies involve some kind of deception of participants. Try to think about what types of deception are ethical or non-ethical (e.g. purpose of the study is not told, coercion is exerted on participants, giving participants the feeling that they harm other people by making certain decisions, etc.).
5. Does the study involve the risk of causing psychological stress or negative emotions beyond those normally encountered by participants? YES - NO
6. Will information be collected about special categories of data, as defined by the GDPR (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a person, data concerning mental or physical health, data concerning a person's sex life or sexual orientation)?

Y

ES - NO
7. Will the study involve the participation of minors (<18 years old) or other groups that cannot give consent? YES - NO
8. Is the health and/or safety of participants at risk during the study? YES - NO
9. Can participants be identified by the study results or can the confidentiality of the participants' identity not be ensured? YES - NO
10. Are there any other possible ethical issues with regard to this study? YES - NO

If you have answered 'YES' to any of the previous questions, please indicate below why this issue is unavoidable in this study.

What safeguards are taken to relieve possible adverse consequences of these issues (e.g., informing participants about the study afterwards, extra safety regulations, etc.).

Are there any unintended circumstances in the study that can cause harm or have negative (emotional) consequences to the participants? Indicate what possible circumstances this could be.

Please attach your informed consent form in Appendix I, if applicable.

Continue to part IV.

PART IV: SAMPLE

Where will you collect or obtain your data?

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the (anticipated) size of your sample?

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the size of the population from which you will sample?

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

Continue to part V.

Part V: Data storage and backup

Where and when will you store your data in the short term, after acquisition?

The data will be stored on my computer in a separate file. For analysis, I will possibly copy the data and thus physically keep it. My intention is to store the data through the process. So the data will probably be on my computer from the beginning of April until the end of my thesis and then it will be deleted.

Note: indicate for separate data sources, for instance for paper-and pencil test data, and for digital data files.

Who is responsible for the immediate day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from your research?

Myself (Kato Defloo)

How (frequently) will you back-up your research data for short-term data security?

I will only keep it once, as the data I will be working with are publicly available. If I were to lose them, this will allow me to collect them again.

In case of collecting personal data how will you anonymize the data?

I am researching the network C40, so the organisation itself will not be anonymous. When it comes to specific people, they will be kept anonymous. If relevant to discuss, they will be discussed according to relevant characteristics, such as their position in the organisation. This is also public data, which is accessible to everyone.

Note: It is advisable to keep directly identifying personal details separated from the rest of the data. Personal details are then replaced by a key/ code. Only the code is part of the database with data and the list of respondents/research subjects is kept separate.

PART VI: SIGNATURE

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the ethical guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing information to participants about the study and ensuring confidentiality in storage and use of personal data. Treat participants respectfully, be on time at appointments, call participants when they have signed up for your study and fulfil promises made to participants.

Furthermore, it is your responsibility that data are authentic, of high quality and properly stored. The principle is always that the supervisor (or strictly speaking the Erasmus University Rotterdam) remains owner of the data, and that the student should therefore hand over all data to the supervisor.

Hereby I declare that the study will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I have answered the questions truthfully.

Name student: Kato Defloo

Name (EUR) supervisor:

Date: 22/03/2025

Date:

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.