

4. Mayors' net-zero pledges at COP26

Building momentum and gaining influence in climate politics

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Introduction

At the World Leaders Summit marking the opening of the COP26 conference in Glasgow on 2 November 2021, the mayor of Los Angeles and chair of C40, a worldwide network of megacities cooperating to address climate change, took the stage and addressed an audience of heads of state and government with the following words:

At a time of immense worry, I come here with a message of intense hope. [...] Tonight my friends, I am proud to announce the biggest pledge at COP outside national commitments: that Cities Race to Zero has produced a global coalition of over 1,000 cities and local governments representing 722 million people, more than a quarter of world GDP, committed to reaching net-zero emissions by 2050 and cutting their fair share, our fair share, of global emissions in half by 2030. The UN says that our collective action has the potential to reduce global emissions by at least 1.4 gigatons of CO₂ emissions by 2030, annually.

The mayor's statement was a much-awaited highlight of the summit for the urban community attending COP26. His speech blended the traditional language of state diplomacy with a compelling rhetoric of urgency, aimed at positioning mayors as key leaders in international climate politics, assuming a shared responsibility with national governments to address climate change. His ambitious announcement reflects mayors' long-standing attempts to secure international recognition for their capacity to organize and coordinate across borders, to translate the latest scientific insights into political ambition, and

to mobilize support for climate action. Even more, his performance illustrates how, driven by their increasing visibility on global stages after the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015, thousands of mayors have committed to accelerating urban decarbonization and achieving 'net-zero emissions' by mid-century to maintain hope in climate cooperation.

Figure 1: Keynote speech of the Mayor of Los Angeles and C40 Chair Eric Garcetti, World Leaders Summit Interludes, COP26 plenary session, 2 November 2021.



Source: United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) YouTube channel.

The concept of 'net-zero emissions' has assumed a central role in recent climate policy discussions. This evolution can be attributed to several interconnected factors, encompassing a shifting landscape of international cooperation, deepening scientific consensus, and a growing sense of urgency among decision-makers. The adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015 marked a pivotal moment, with nations collectively agreeing to limit global warming 'well below' 2°C compared to pre-industrial levels, and to pursue efforts to hold it to 1.5°C, by the end of the century (Bodansky, 2016). This ambition was given further impetus following the publication of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C in 2018, which strengthened scientific consensus on the implications of possible emission trajectories for end-of-century temperatures (Schneuit, 2023). The report under-

scored the catastrophic consequences of exceeding a 1.5°C increase in global warming and emphasized the critical need for net-zero emissions around 2050 to achieve this target (IPCC, 2018). Reaching net-zero requires rapidly cutting global greenhouse gas emissions and developing carbon removals to compensate for all residual emissions by 2050 (Fankhauser et al., 2022). In a similar vein, the Summary for Urban Policymakers of the IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report (2022) pinpointed cities as offering the opportunity for systemic responses across the five key systems requiring deep decarbonization by mid-century to achieve the 1.5°C goal, encompassing transitions in urban infrastructures, industry, energy, society, and land and food systems (Babiker et al., 2022: 10).

Decarbonizing cities is one of the most pressing, yet most intricate, challenges to addressing climate change. Globalization and deregulation since the 1970s have entangled cities in complex flows of fossil fuel dependence, stemming from high import levels of electricity, fuels, water, food, and materials, causing chains of extraction, deforestation, and emissions beyond their geographical boundaries and spanning the globe (Sassen, 2005; Sassen and Dotan, 2011; Ramaswami et al., 2021). Currently, the production and consumption of goods and services in urban areas contribute to roughly 70% (~28 GtCO₂-eq) of global CO₂ and CH₄ emissions worldwide, a figure projected to rise with accelerating urbanization throughout the 21st century, often described as the 'urban century' (Ürge-Vorsatz and Seto, 2018; van der Heijden et al., 2019). By 2050, the total urban footprint could vary from 34 to 65 GtCO₂-eq annually, due to population growth and increased demand for urban infrastructures and services (Rosenzweig et al., 2018; van der Heijden, 2019). Effectively addressing this challenge is a complex task, since cities' decarbonization demands high levels of coordination across governance levels and between actors (Fuhr et al., 2018; IPCC, 2022: 863). In fact, urban emissions result from complex interactions of ecological contexts, urban forms, economic activities, and residents' lifestyles (Creutzig et al., 2015; Kennedy et al., 2015; Currie and Musango, 2016). Furthermore, while urban policies directly influence energy consumption in buildings, transportation, and waste management, they are shaped by decisions taken at supranational, regional, national, and various subnational levels (Lamb et al., 2018; Seto et al., 2021; Hsu et al., 2022). Ultimately, deep urban decarbonization requires profound sectoral transformations, which will vary considerably depending on the specific context of each city (Currie and Musango, 2016; Babiker et al., 2022).

Given these challenging, fragmented, and uncertain pathways to urban deep decarbonization, how did over 1,000 cities around the globe come to adopt ambitious net-zero emissions targets in record time following the publication of the IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C? This chapter delves into the dynamics underpinning this achievement to shed light on the evolution of urban climate governance following the adoption of the Paris Agreement. It contends that the 26th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP26), held in Glasgow in November 2021, played an essential role in mobilizing cities and facilitating consensus on the net-zero urban policy goal at such speed and scale. Applying a dramaturgical lens on environmental politics (Hajer, 2009) and climate summits (Aykut et al., 2022b), this chapter analyses COP26 as a carefully orchestrated performance that propelled mayors to the forefront of climate governance to reignite hope in the multilateral process. The analysis reveals that, amidst growing disillusionment and escalating political tensions in international politics, the collective net-zero pledges of over 1,000 cities served as powerful rhetorical devices to strengthen political momentum for enhanced national climate ambitions while supporting mayors' advocacy for multilevel institutions and local empowerment. This dramaturgical perspective offers several contributions to the literature on urban climate governance. First, it expands our understanding of COPs beyond their function as state-centric negotiation forums, highlighting their role as platforms for constructing and disseminating narratives of urban futures. Second, it underscores the agency of multiple actors, including the COP Presidency, the Secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC Secretariat), and transnational city networks' leaders and sponsors, in shaping urban narratives through practices of *scripting*, *staging*, *performing*, and *reframing*. Third, it allows critical reflections on the transformative potential of net-zero framings and, more broadly, on opportunities and tensions stemming from cities' increasing participation in climate summits.

The following section outlines the theoretical framework of this study, grounded in dramaturgical analysis and ethnographic observations, to unpack how COPs function as performative spaces to construct shared beliefs and expectations on climate action. Subsequently, the empirical analysis begins with an examination of the *role scripts* and *stages* provided by UNFCCC leaders for COP26, before delving into the overarching narratives of mayors' *performances*, focusing on the rhetorical strategies employed to position cities as role models in climate action. The final two sections critically discuss the

transformative potential of net-zero pledges. Specifically, while mayors used their commitments to *reframe* multilevel governance as the path forward for strengthening collective responses, they inscribed urban climate action within the prevailing neoliberal paradigm of greener capitalism, thus reinforcing market-driven approaches to urban decarbonization and concealing debates on systemic issues such as high urban consumption, rising inequalities, and the need for economic transformations.

Unpacking mayors' performances at COPs: A dramaturgical perspective

The Paris Agreement, adopted at COP21 in 2015, marked a significant shift in the architecture of global climate governance. The treaty replaced the approach established by the Kyoto Protocol, characterized by binding national targets and top-down compliance mechanisms, with a novel 'catalytic and facilitative' model that rests on two dynamics (Hale, 2016). First, it requires states to submit national action plans, the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), for their regular assessments in multilateral settings at the COP. This mechanism of *pledges and reviews* aims to build trust and encourage the gradual enhancement of countries' ambitions to converge towards the collective temperature goal (Bodansky, 2016; Keohane and Oppenheimer, 2016; Held and Roger, 2018). Secondly, the Agreement enshrined the crucial role of voluntary contributions from non-state actors, especially local governments, in supporting ambitious climate action (Chan et al., 2016; Hale, 2016; Castán Broto, 2017). The recognition of cities' contributions to collective responses followed decades of city advocacy at COPs, coordinated through the transnational networks C40, the EU Covenant of Mayors, and ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability (initially established as the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives) (Acuto, 2013; Bulkeley et al., 2014). Following this landmark recognition, annual climate summits have witnessed a surge in cities' participation. Under the Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action agenda, COPs regularly convene meetings and events dedicated to urban challenges, especially on the annual Human Settlements Day (Chan et al., 2016). In order to ramp up their influence in these settings, transnational city networks have coalesced into a joint initiative, the Global Covenant of Mayors, representing over 10,000 local governments worldwide at climate summits (Gordon, 2018; van der Heijden, 2018).

Scholarly inquiries into global climate governance have progressively evolved from examining multilateral negotiations to exploring the practical unfolding of treaty provisions and specific dynamics for bolstering climate ambition in a *soft* regime. In this context, the concept of *orchestration* has emerged to better understand how to coordinate diverse cities' responses and facilitate polycentric climate action (Abbott, 2017). This approach has primarily emphasized the role of the UNFCCC Secretariat in providing financial, material, and discursive resources, and 'brokering' knowledge to support city-level initiatives (Hale, 2016; Saerbeck et al., 2020). It has also highlighted the intermediary role of transnational networks in diffusing transparency rules and standards to steer cities' climate action in line with climate policy goals (Gordon and Johnson, 2017). While these studies offer valuable insights, they overlook the coordinating function of climate summits for city-level action. This article addresses that gap by adopting a dramaturgical perspective on mayors' performances at COP26. This approach is grounded in the view that public performances are inherent to politics and policy-making in a media-tized age, a key tool of government to act upon actors' beliefs, and on their perceptions of possible futures, and ultimately influence their preferences and action in the present (Hajer, 2009; Oomen et al., 2022). Unpacking this performative dimension of policy-making entails examining not only discursive practices around *what* is being said, but also *how*, *where* and *to whom* these statements are being made, thus capturing the use of visuals, symbols, gestures, and affects to address specific audiences (Hajer, 2009). Already, this dramaturgical perspective has highlighted the key role of climate summits in catalysing momentum for climate action and encouraging multiple actors to engage in low-carbon transitions (Aykut et al., 2022a; 2022b).

Climate summits are privileged sites for observing climate governance in action. Functioning as 'distinct technologies of government', these mega-events gather multiple actors, whose convergence in a delimited time and space facilitates the production of novel discourses and symbols of climate ambition to shape the perceptions and expectations of global audiences (Death, 2011). These performances have become a cornerstone of the 'catalytic and facilitative' climate regime, a dynamic closely orchestrated by UNFCCC leaders. Notably, the COP Presidencies and the UNFCCC Secretariat have *scripted* the overarching narrative and visual symbols of COPs, expanded COP *settings* to encompass a large panel of interactive and highly publicized side events, and deliberately *staged* multiple actors to convey the message of inclusive climate governance (Aykut et al., 2022a).

As these elements suggest, climate conferences are far from being monolithic stages. Instead, they constitute complex spaces encompassing a multitude of events, where diverse actors and interests converge to address specific audiences (Aykut et al., 2022b). In particular, the growing participation of mayors and urban policy-makers points to the significant role of COPs as platforms for constructing and disseminating urban imaginaries and norms at the transnational level. Scholarship on urban policy mobility provides a valuable lens for understanding this phenomenon. Accordingly, international urban events have a central role in mobilizing peers, shaping urban narratives and garnering buy-in for specific urban policies (Pow, 2014). Their performative power consists in providing a stage for pioneering city leaders to showcase their actions and gain public recognition for their achievements, thus effectively bringing desirable urban models to life (Pow, 2014). They also catalyse the production of influential reports and 'best practice' guides, which contribute to the formation of hegemonic urban knowledge and paradigms, ultimately framing the possibility space for policy solutions (Parnreiter, 2011).

This chapter delves deeper into the performative dimension of climate summits to explore their role in shaping paradigms for urban futures. By unpacking how these events function as platforms for disseminating specific visions, we gain valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of polycentric urban climate governance, especially in terms of understanding how cities shape and are shaped by global environmental agendas, but also by emerging tensions arising from top-down framings of urban climate futures. The analysis draws on ethnographic observations of the COP26 summit, organized in Glasgow, Scotland, in November 2021. Following a two-year delay in climate negotiations due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this two-week conference was a central convergence point for over 40,000 participants, including heads of state, climate leaders, practitioners, researchers, lobbyists, and activists. Notably, nearly 400 mayors, decision-makers, and practitioners from national and local administrations, as well as from NGOs and transnational networks, participated in the summit under the banner of the Local Governments and Municipal Authorities Constituency (LGMA), the official stakeholder group for local authorities under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (Acuto et al., 2023). Data was collected on 29 urban-related events, focusing on their format, visual messaging, atmosphere, and lineup of organizers and speakers, while unstructured observation notes and photographs enriched data collection on actors' performances. Following the key components of the dramaturgical approach as delineated above, the analysis consisted of

observing the specific *script* (i.e. the official agenda and expected roles), *settings* (i.e. the physical space and visual symbols), *staging practices* (i.e. the actors brought on scene) and *performances* (i.e. the rhetorical practices and discourses) surrounding mayors' interventions.

The script: A wave of net-zero pledges for the 'Action COP' in Glasgow

The late 2010s witnessed a heightened sense of urgency around climate action, fuelled by mounting evidence of a widening emissions gap to achieve end-of-century temperature goals. The 2018 IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C served as a tipping point, prompting the UNFCCC leadership to frame COP26 as a critical juncture. The summit took place within a tumultuous geopolitical landscape characterized by the growing polarization of global politics and the announced US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. It was also convened in the wake of widespread social unrest that had laid bare the political constraints of stronger climate policies. In fact, while the Fridays for Future movement was gaining ground in several countries, demanding stronger action on climate change, it was juxtaposed with public protests over growing inflation and rising inequalities. In particular, public riots in Chile had forced the last-minute relocation of COP25 from Santiago to Madrid in 2019, while the Yellow Vest movement in France raised awareness of the low social acceptance of climate policies perceived as unfair (Aykut et al., 2020). These challenges were further compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic, which had put climate negotiations on hold in 2020 and cast an additional shadow of uncertainty on states' ambitions, particularly within the G20 countries. As countries were preparing their revised NDCs, the extent to which economic recovery plans would prioritize green investments or lock in additional fossil fuel investments became a primary concern and constituted a first stress test for the *pledges and reviews* regime.

In this context, UNFCCC leaders crafted an ambitious narrative in the lead-up to COP26, emphasizing net-zero pledges as the 'last hope' for bridging the emissions gap. This narrative constituted a *role script* for COP participants, disseminated during multiple global events organized throughout the year-long interruption of the UNFCCC process in 2020. Notably, the June Momentum for

Climate Change event¹ witnessed the UN Secretary-General and UK COP Presidency launch the Race to Zero Campaign, and the Race to Zero Dialogues held in November 2020² served as a platform for assessing progress and catalysing additional announcements. These events provided a stage for UNFCCC leaders to announce the adoption of climate neutrality targets for 2050 by the European Union, the United Kingdom, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and 110 additional countries, including China, which had communicated to aim at carbon neutrality by 2060. They also disseminated urgent calls on national governments to leverage the growing momentum from businesses, financial institutions, and local governments to raise their ambitions in updated NDCs due at COP26.

The Race to Zero campaign also targeted the mobilization of non-state actors. The outgoing and incoming COP Presidencies closely coordinated this objective through appointing two Climate Champions mandated to facilitate the engagement of the business community and civil society with the COP. In response to their call for net-zero pledges, city networks composing the Global Covenant of Mayors attended the Race to Zero Dialogue with the ambitious announcement to recruit 1,000 cities before the Glasgow summit.³ In the following months, through sustained consultations with the UK COP Presidency and internal mobilization efforts through the Cities Race to Zero campaign, this target became the new cornerstone of their advocacy road map. Eventually, the campaign successfully mobilized long-recognized pioneering mayors alongside newcomers from diverse regions, securing significant visibility for mayors at COP26.

The In, the Off, and the Fringe: Stages of mayors' performances

COP26 marked a significant departure from the traditional state-centric model of global climate governance, with a large degree of participation from mayors and other urban leaders. This section analyses their participation in

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- 1 June Momentum for Climate Change observation, Race to Zero Launch, online event, 5 June 2020.
 - 2 Race to Zero Dialogues observation, UN Secretary-General Opening Speech, online event, 9 November 2020.
 - 3 C40, 'Campaign announced to mobilize 1,000 cities for a green and just recovery to address global climate emergency', C40 press release, 9 November 2020.

multiple events across the COP venue, highlighting the strategic use of their collective net-zero pledges in different spaces to target specific audiences and amplify their message.

A first format consisted of mayors' official statements during plenary sessions, the heart of COP negotiations, where states' delegates negotiate specific agenda items and adopt the final COP decision (the 'In'). Here, mayors regularly stressed their leadership and collective mobilization within transnational city networks to formulate claims to the COP. For instance, at the COP26 opening ceremony on 31 October 2021, the mayor of Tegucigalpa emphasized his leading role in the mobilization of hundreds of Honduran and other Latin American local governments before conveying their shared expectation for an ambitious outcome at the COP.⁴

Beyond formal negotiations, a rich program of official side events ('the Off') offered a central platform to elevate urban issues and showcase mayors as front-runners in climate action. Especially the Multilevel Action Pavilion was a space dedicated to discussions on urban topics (Figure 2). Its daily themes mirrored the COP program to signal a strong alignment between city-level and international political agendas. Its spatial design, featuring an open stage, symbolized cities' openness to dialogue and accountability in global climate governance, while background images of wind farms and water infrastructures displayed their forward-looking vision for climate-resilient futures. These side events staged mayors sharing their individual journeys from awareness to commitment and leadership, showcasing successful initiatives and sharing the lessons learned. These success stories often emphasized the assistance provided by city networks in overcoming local challenges, with the aim of inspiring and motivating other city leaders to follow suit.

4 COP26 observation, keynote speech of the Mayor of Tegucigalpa Nasry 'Tito' Asfura, LGMA Opening Statement at the COP Opening Ceremony, plenary session, 31 October 2021.

Figure 2: Multilevel Action Pavilion in Glasgow, COP26.

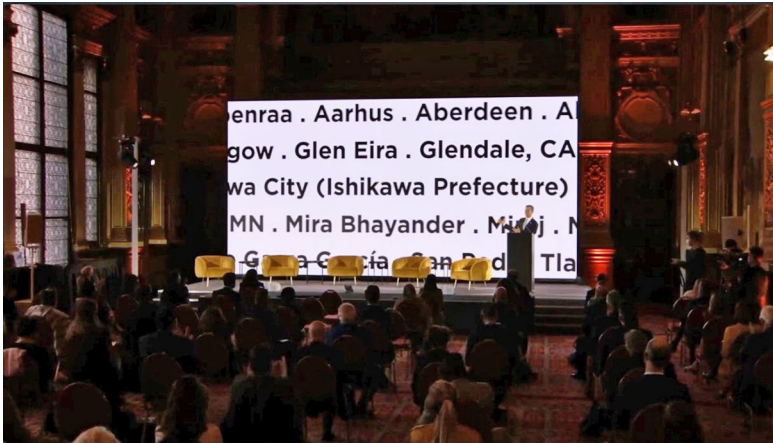


Source: Author.

Mayors have also used the spotlight of climate summits to organize parallel urban events outside of the COP venue ('the Fringe'). In particular, the C40 network regularly holds its annual summit on the opening days of COPs, as a vibrant demonstration of mayors' bottom-up mobilization and critical scrutiny on climate negotiations. At the C40 summit held in the Glasgow City Chambers on 2 November 2021,⁵ the Mayor of Los Angeles and C40 Chair Eric Garcetti celebrated the collective power of 1,000 cities committed to net-zero emissions before an audience of peer mayors, praising cities' collaboration in networks as a promising alternative to multilateral gridlock. Meanwhile, behind him, a scrolling list of cities announcing net-zero pledges reinforced the narrative of an unstoppable wave of local climate action (Figure 3).

5 COP26 observation, World Local Leaders Summit: Our Last, Big Chance: Why Our Future Depends on Action Taken Today in the World's Cities, side event, Glasgow City Chambers, 2 November 2021.

Figure 3: Opening speech of the Mayor of Los Angeles and C40 Chair Eric Garcetti, C40 World Local Leaders Summit, COP26 side event, 2 November 2021.



Source: C40 YouTube channel.

While side events and parallel city summits have been the primary avenues for mayors' advocacy at COPs, the Paris Agreement ushered in a new era for non-state participation at COPs by introducing Global Climate Action events. Coordinated by the COP Presidency and the UNFCCC Secretariat, this format comprises High-Level Presidency Events, UNFCCC official side events, and public happenings in the Climate Action Hub. There, talk shows, movie projections, award ceremonies, and special announcements create a vibrant and enthusiastic narrative on the dynamism of climate action, in sharp contrast with the sober and sometimes tense atmosphere of plenary sessions. In the past years, their central location within the COP venue on the path to negotiation rooms, coupled with extensive media coverage, have contributed to sending the powerful signal of a 'groundswell of climate action' driven by pioneering individuals, companies, and cities (Aykut et al., 2020). Mayors have enjoyed great visibility at these events. At the COP26 Climate Leaders Special Event dedicated to reward ambitious local decision-makers,⁶ representatives from Paris, Samsø, and Guadalajara presented their long-

6 COP26 observation, Climate Leaders Special Event, UN Global Climate Action Awards at COP26, Global Action Hub, 9 November 2021.

term visions and sectoral targets for the deep decarbonization of their respective cities to a cheerful audience gathered to acclaim their leadership (Figure 4). Furthermore, the Cities and Human Settlements Day offers the most concentrated focus on urban climate action at COPs. This day features High-Level Presidency Events, where mayors, ministers, UN officials, and network representatives convene to discuss national experiences related to the revision of NDCs and to showcase pioneering examples of successful national–subnational collaborations in this process.⁷

Figure 4: Climate Leaders Special Event, UN Global Climate Action Awards at COP26, Global Action Hub, 9 November 2021.



Source: Author.

7 For instance, COP26 observation, Ministers and Mayors on Buildings as a Critical Climate Solution, High-Level Presidency Event, 11 November 2021.

Performing a tale of heroic mayors transforming cities at risk into factories of low-carbon futures

Across these stages, mayors have emerged as symbolic figures of political momentum for ambitious climate action. Invariably, they have circulated compelling narratives on the narrowing window for staying under the 1.5°C target and on the urgency of transformations. To this end, their performances have often juxtaposed images of urban decay with those of thriving, sustainable cities whose materialization would depend on the negotiations' outcomes. Further amplifying this narrative, an emotionally charged rhetoric of emergency, hope, and heroism has fostered a discursive momentum for avoiding threats and embracing opportunities. While UNFCCC leaders have directly scripted these storylines for multiple COP participants, mayors have embodied a unique role model figure. In fact, their position as democratically elected leaders directly accountable for citizens' well-being, with practical experience on climate policies and a commitment to achieving climate neutrality, grants significant legitimacy to their claims to the COP.

Forging this figure has entailed mayors positioning themselves as heroic leaders, determined to save their urban population from catastrophic climate impacts by leading the transformation of their cities into core engines of low-carbon industry (van der Heijden, 2019; Johnson, 2018). This narrative was evident in the 2021 keynote address of Mayor Eric Garcetti, who directly challenged heads of state and government with this vision:

Cities are leading the way to save our planet, to invest in our people and to leave no one behind. [...] We are testaments to three facts. One, that we are on the front lines. It is our residents that are fleeing fires, our residents who are fleeing floods, grappling with drought and heat. Two, we know how to fix it. Cities aren't just laboratories of progress, we are the factories of the future, transforming how we heat and cool our buildings, move around our cities and generate our electricity. And third, we are getting it done. Two thirds of C40 cities have set and met targets that meet or exceed the Paris commitments on time or early.⁸

8 COP26 observation, intervention of the Mayor of Los Angeles and C40 Chair Eric Garcetti, World Leaders Summit Interludes, plenary session, 2 November 2021.

Similarly, multiple performances at COP26 articulated visions of dystopian futures marked by a general collapse of modern urban civilization. Mayors conveyed the urgency of acting to avoid this future by highlighting mounting evidence of existential threats to cities posed by rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and heat. This dark picture resonated deeply following the devastating climate events of the 2019 summer, during which megafires, severe droughts, and devastating floods in multiple regions led hundreds of local leaders to declare a situation of climate emergency in their communities.⁹ Furthermore, more recent experiences of deserted cityscapes caused by lockdown measures during the Covid-19 pandemic served as a stark reminder of the vulnerability of urban centres to global crises.

However, mayors also outlined alternative futures of cities' low-carbon transformations. Their performances often highlighted the abundance of local policy tools readily available to propel technological and social innovations in cities, encompassing urban planning, public investments, fiscal incentives, and research partnerships, emphasizing their willingness to spearhead technology shifts and the digitalization of urban services. All together, these performances conveyed a bright vision of post-carbon prosperity shaped by urban transformations into compact, connected, and clean cities.¹⁰ This optimistic outlook was bolstered by the presentation of the 'Summary for Urban Policymakers of the IPCC 6th Assessment Report' at the Science Pavilion on 11 November 2021.¹¹ There, IPCC scientists and local leaders emphasized the strong potential for regenerating urban areas through integrated urban planning to simultaneously address energy consumption, adaptation needs, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as poverty eradication, good health and well-being, peace, justice, and strong institutions. Eventually, city-level action was portrayed as the solution to build 'factories of low-carbon

9 For instance, COP25 observation, intervention of the Mayor of Recife and Chair of ICLEI South America Geraldo Filho, NDCs and the Climate Emergency of Cities – Collaborative Climate Action to Ratchet Up Ambition & Capture Urban Opportunities, side event, 9 December 2019.

10 For instance, COP26 observation, intervention of the Mayor of Pittsburg and Chair of ICLEI North America Bill Peduto, Initiative Launch the Summary for Urban Policymakers (SUP) of the IPCC 6th Assessment Report, side event, Science Pavilion, 11 November 2021.

11 COP26 observation, Initiative Launch the Summary for Urban Policymakers (SUP) of the IPCC 6th Assessment Report, side event, Science Pavilion, 11 November 2021.

futures', capable of implementing national policies at scale and fostering greater national ambitions.

Ultimately, these performances emphasized the image of mayors as heroic leaders, committed to protecting their populations and joining forces to fight for desirable futures. At COP26, the C40 chair highlighted their collaboration within the network to address the Covid-19 pandemic as a concrete example, contrasting with the perceived national reluctance to share information:

At the local level it's frictionless, it's seamless, it's who we are, it's in our nature. [...] I don't overstate this to say that I believe that the work of the mayors here through C40 saved millions of lives. [...] But we never govern alone. Mayors are only as strong as the coalitions we build. [...] If you want to think of yourselves as a movie, this would be *The Avengers*. And we called all the different groups, all the different superheroes together to address this threat, and to launch the Cities Race to Zero.¹²

In Glasgow, the success story of heroic mayors capable of fostering change despite gridlock in a multilateral regime outlined a reason for hope in climate cooperation. Carefully scripted and staged by UNFCCC leaders, this narrative served as powerful rhetorical tool to pressure states into strengthening their own pledges, while offering contingency signals of change coming from the COP, in case of stagnating negotiations. Yet, beyond embodying societal pressure, this role model figure also served mayors' advocacy.

Reframing multilevel action as the last hope for enhanced ambitions

COP26 constituted a decisive moment for the *pledges and reviews* regime, as national governments were required to submit revised climate action plans, whose ambitions would determine the collective capacity to contain global temperature rise below the 1.5°C goal. In this context, mayors strategically reframed the overarching *script* of climate ambition to make a claim for greater local empowerment. Across multiple events, their interventions consistently

12 COP26 observation, intervention of the Mayor of Los Angeles and C40 Chair Eric Garcetti, World Local Leaders Summit: Our Last, Big Chance: Why Our Future Depends on Action Taken Today in the World's Cities, side event, Glasgow City Chambers, 2 November 2021.

emphasized multilevel action as a crucial mechanism to bolster national ambitions and as the last 'beacon of hope' to save the Paris Agreement.¹³

This agenda employed a variety of tactics to address distinct audiences. In particular, during state plenary sessions, official statements explicitly requested text insertions in the final COP decision to elevate multilevel action as the new standard of leadership, in light of the capacity of final agreements to signal consensual expectations on climate action:

The current text of the Preamble creates a silent and invisible constituency and misses a key piece of cooperation and coordination: one that is critical for delivering net zero and for ratcheting up ambition every year: the massive constituency in every country of local and regional governments and municipal authorities. Multilevel coordination across local, regional, national and international government is now the new norm – and, as such, needs to be recognized explicitly in the Preamble to the Glasgow Agreement, providing consistency with Preamble paragraph 15 of the Paris Agreement. The Paris Agreement recognized multilevel collaboration; Glasgow should now ensure that multilevel action is delivered.¹⁴

In addition, side events provided platforms to showcase successful examples of multilevel collaboration for the formulation of revised national plans. Thus, ministers and public officials from Japan,¹⁵ Finland, Chile, and Scotland¹⁶ were invited onstage to share their experiences in consulting with local governments and 'capturing urban opportunities' through institutional and policy reforms. These interventions portrayed decentralization as a key solution to bridge national policy gaps and 'deliver' on net-zero emission targets.

13 For instance, COP26 observation, intervention of the Head of Advocacy Yunus Arikan at ICLEI World Secretariat, 'Constituency Focal Points Dialogue with UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and UN Secretary-General António Guterres', official consultation, 11 November 2021.

14 COP26 observation, intervention of the Spokesperson of the Climate Change Task Group at the UK Local Government Association Pippa Heylings, 'LGMA Statement to UK COP26 Presidency in Plenary on Informal Stock-Take', plenary session, 8 November 2021.

15 COP26 observation, Localizing NDCs: How to Fund and Implement Action at Scale?, side event, EU Pavilion, 9 November 2021.

16 COP26 observation, Ministers and Mayors on Buildings as a Critical Climate Solution, High-Level Presidency Event, 11 November 2021.

Finally, mayors also leveraged their collective net-zero pledges during official consultations with UN leaders and the COP Presidency to advocate for a seat at the table.¹⁷ Their claims included improving cities' access to international climate finance, especially under Article 6.8 on non-market mechanisms, but also participating in UNFCCC decision-making bodies such as the IPCC, the Standing Committee on Finance, and the Santiago Network on Loss and Damage to access best practices, technical expertise, and cutting-edge technologies to achieve their climate goals. These claims also encompassed the launch of Ministerial Meetings on Urbanization and Climate Change as a new process at COPs to coordinate national efforts for multilevel action in cities.

Signalling cities' attractiveness for green markets

Mayors attending COP26 further leveraged their net-zero pledges as powerful communication tools to bolster their cities' public images as attractive environments for clean technology investments. COP26 itself functioned as a platform for mayors to present themselves as trustworthy co-investors to potential partners. Especially the Business Pavilion, rebranded the Climate Pledge Theatre, offered them a stage to pitch their climate plans to clean technology start-ups and corporations. Rather than advocating for enabling policies, they could emphasize how their long-term vision, innovative mindset, and data-driven governance positioned their cities as competitive markets for the emerging low-carbon and digital economy, as evidenced by the address given by the mayor of Phoenix, a member city of C40:

At this COP we have been talking about methane emissions and emissions from land use. In Phoenix, we really want to work on landfill emissions and promote the circular economy, how can we take some things we have been putting in the landfill and put them back into the economy. We have an incubator for these businesses in Phoenix and a bunch of data that we can share on what is now going into our landfill that could be part of future businesses.

17 COP26 observation, Dialogue with the UN Secretary-General and UN-Habitat Executive Director, official consultations, 11 November 2021.

So if there is any company or start-up in this field that considers the US as outpost, please consider us as partners.¹⁸

This focus on market forces and business innovation as drivers of urban decarbonization is a prevailing narrative at Climate Action Events (Aykut et al., 2022b). Philanthropists such as Michael Bloomberg, the main sponsor of the C40 network, actively promote this vision. Accordingly, philanthropies substitute for the lack of national ambitions by supporting the standardization of cities' carbon data for market valuation, allowing the financing of cost-effective projects in cities (Papin and Beauregard, 2023). Similarly, the cities' net-zero movement at COP26 bolstered the EU's leadership in climate negotiations by strengthening the credibility of the EU's European Green Deal. While that deal outlines a new political project for a green, prosperous, fair, and independent continent, the European Union faces significant headwinds. The war in Ukraine, the rise of Eurosceptic parties, and the widening of social inequalities all threaten to erode public support for ambitious climate policies (Gengnagel and Zimmermann, 2022). In this context, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen's launch of the EU Mission for 100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities at COP26 aimed to signal a shift to a bottom-up approach, empowering cities to accelerate the implementation of the EU's climate neutrality goals by shaping innovative low-carbon markets for a sustainable and competitive Europe.¹⁹

Ultimately, cities' net-zero pledges at COP26 sent a signal of rapidly emerging markets for clean and digital technologies. While these commitments forged a renewed discourse on the desirability and economic viability of climate action, they also appeared as a mere 'urban fix', whereby cities' image as clean, digitalized, and green areas become new branding tools for attracting businesses and capital accumulation in a new era of global market competition (While et al., 2004; Long, 2016). This framing risks reinforcing, rather than challenging, the dominant paradigm of 'greener' capitalism. Already, many voices have expressed fierce criticism and distrust of net-zero pledges, accusing them to be greenwashing announcements to pursue intensive growth strategies and comfortable consumerist lifestyles over substantive

18 COP 26 observation, intervention of the Mayor of Phoenix Kate Gallego, Data and Insights That Drive City Climate Action, Climate Pledge Theatre Event, 3 November 2021.

19 COP26 observation, intervention of the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, World Leaders' Summit Day 2, plenary session, 2 November 2021.

decarbonization and fossil fuel divestment.²⁰ Importantly, this market-driven narrative also conceals key barriers for urban transformations, which include limited local capacities, strong inequalities within and between cities, and North–South disparities in addressing climate change. Even more, its technocratic framing further depoliticizes climate action, concealing important debates on implementation challenges. In fact, city authorities face the daunting task of articulating climate agendas with other policy goals, such as affordable housing, socio-economic development, traffic congestion, and poverty reduction, amidst local oppositions and resistance to change. Ultimately, current net-zero framings downplay the imperative of stronger state regulation and fundamental economic restructuring to address the challenges of reducing urban consumption while achieving just transitions.

Conclusion: A new planetary paradigm or marketing brand?

You see, we can inspire national climate action and ambition to show what is possible. If you don't think you can have fully electric bus fleets, go to Shenzhen and see it; or clean up your central district into ultra-low emission zones, go to London and experience it. And if you don't think that a city is on its way to 100% renewable power, I invite you to Los Angeles, where we will be 97% carbon-free by the end of this decade.²¹

This address by Eric Garcetti to a heads of government meeting in Glasgow for COP26 underscores the key role that mayors now play in setting expectations and generating political momentum at COPs. Following the establishment of the *pledges and reviews* system of climate governance in the Paris Agreement, and amid a gradual transition towards policy implementation, annual COPs have increasingly turned into platforms for signalling leadership and articulating narratives of desirable versus unwanted climate futures in order to influence the perceptions and beliefs of multiple audiences. Through an ethnography of the Glasgow summit, this chapter highlighted the central role of mayors' diplomacy in this performative turn. At COP26, the imperative need to signal societal readiness for change, within and beyond the COP venue, prompted

20 COP26 observation, intervention of Vanessa Nakate, Ugandan climate activist, Racing to a Better World, High-Level Presidency Event, 11 November 2021.

21 COP26 observation, intervention of the Mayor of Los Angeles and C40 Chair Eric Garcetti, World Leaders Summit Interludes, plenary session, 2 November 2021.

1,000 city leaders to pledge ambitious net-zero emissions targets for 2050. Announced as new policy goals for the world's megacities of the C40 network, as well as for secondary urban centres from the Global North and South, they constituted a compelling symbol of political momentum for stronger climate ambitions.

Mayors' legitimacy as elected local leaders, their own leadership in climate policies, and their direct accountability for responding to climate hazards have empowered them to embody the role model figure at climate summits. Enacting this role has significantly influenced their diplomacy. Their performances at COP26 displayed an emotionally charged rhetoric of urgency to act, as well as optimism in the endless opportunities of a low-carbon economy, while cultivating an image of being heroic champions, genuinely driven to turn their at-risk cities into core engines of post-carbon prosperity. They also articulated compelling narratives and images of low-carbon urban futures, aimed at translating the collective aspiration of limiting global temperature rise to 1.5°C into concrete, near-term, and scalable interventions while conveying the sense of a low-carbon transformation already unfolding and improving the lives of billions in urban areas.

Such 'diplomacy of hope' (Lacatus and Blanc, 2023) has significantly contributed to the positive signal of change that emanated from the Glasgow summit, thus legitimizing the COP as an important coordination platform in a time of growing uncertainty and disillusionment with states' climate action. Yet, it pursued several strategic communication purposes at COP26. While UNFCCC leaders have carefully scripted mayors' role and provided multiple stages for their performances to create societal pressure on negotiating states, mayors leveraged their net-zero pledges to advocate for greater decentralization and multilevel coordination.²² However, the rhetorical power and broad consensus around cities' net-zero pledges also stems from their inscription within dominant paradigms of uncontained urban growth and neoliberal market competition.

Ultimately, these findings expand current literature on polycentric climate governance. Notably, cities' increasing participation in climate summits has not only become a core aspect of the soft coordination regime established in the Paris Agreement, which pressures states into raising their ambitions. Through offering platforms to enhance the visibility and political capital of

22 UNFCCC, Glasgow Climate Pact, 2021, Decision 1/CMA.3, UN Doc FCCC/PA/CMA/2021/10/Add.1, §10 Preamble.

leading mayors, these conferences have also fostered the local appropriation of net-zero narratives circulating in global climate governance and their ongoing translation into urban policy targets. Transnational city networks have played a central role in facilitating this discursive and symbolic exchange by tightening institutional ties with the UNFCCC, forging large coalitions and broadening their membership, as well as launching mobilization campaigns among and beyond their members. However, these findings also raise a number of uncertainties and concerns.

Whereas, in less than two years following the release of the IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C, the performative turn of climate governance has propelled net-zero pledges ‘from extreme to mainstream’,²³ their ability to catalyse deep decarbonization remains uncertain. Will they remain rhetorical devices for cities to shine and gain influence in climate politics or evolve into climate norms that drive upfront emission reductions across urban sectors? Will they primarily serve as marketing tools to attract clean energy investments, or spur structural change in state–local relations and catalyse bottom-up pathways for reducing consumption and ensuring just urban transitions? To date, their technocratic and market-driven framing reflects the broader challenges of multilateralism, where consensus building often leads to prioritizing incrementalism and comforting paradigms over radical visions (Acuto and Rayner, 2016).

Hence, the overemphasis on green competitiveness also bears the risks of diluting local accountability to citizens’ needs and demands, exacerbating social inequalities in addressing climate change, and widening North–South inequalities in accessing resources. Eventually, as the gap widens between cities’ proclaimed leadership and sobering realities on the ground, the domestic implications of net-zero pledges need further scrutiny if global climate governance is to adequately address implementation challenges. Thus, future research could explore the local reception of net-zero targets, analysing their potential to transform urban governance and policies, as well as the bottom-up emergence and transnational dissemination of counter-narratives and alternative pathways.

23 COP26 observation, intervention of the Chilean Presidency Climate Champion Gonzalo Muñoz, Racing to a Better World, Global Climate Action High-Level Event, 11 November 2021.

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