The homogenisation of urban climate action discourses

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Abstract

The diversification of actors in global climate governance may entail risks, but it is also linked to enhanced democratic performance and opportunities for innovation. To what extent has this diversification fostered a parallel multiplication of perspectives in urban climate policy? To answer this question, we analyse the evolution of urban narratives based on 463 international policy documents issued between 1946 and 2020. Our analysis shows that, instead of leading to diversification, the proliferation of actors is accompanied by a growing homogenisation of urban narratives. Language appears to become progressively uniform across organisations and over time, with approaches emphasizing multi-actor governance, integrated planning, and co-benefits becoming dominant. Three factors explain this homogenisation. First, actors with a long history of involvement in international development exert a significant amount of influence. Second, there is a tendency toward language harmonisation in international policy. Third, urban climate narratives stabilise through association with broader policy paradigms. In conclusion, the diversification of actors in international climate policy is mediated by processes of narrative alignment, which foreclose possibilities for divergent thinking.

Keywords: Climate change, cities, global governance, policy narratives, diversity

Introduction

Fragmentation, flexibility, and voluntary participation characterise the current phase of international climate politics, including the involvement of multiple groups beyond the state (Bäckstrand et al., 2017; Bodansky, 2010). The diversification of actors in global climate governance has accelerated since the 15th Conference of Parties (COP15) in Copenhagen in 2009, where the collapse of international negotiations highlighted the need for alternative sources of action (Bäckstrand et al., 2017; Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2015; Hoffmann, 2011). The 2015 Paris Agreement further recognised and formalized the role played by nonstate actors in reaching global climate targets (Hale, 2016).

The diversification of actors in global climate governance goes hand in hand with the rise of cities as sites of opportunity (Mi et al., 2019). The 2015 Paris Agreement engages with urban areas concerning vulnerabilities to climate impacts and opportunities for sustainable development (Tollin and Hamhaber, 2017). The IPCC presents cities as vulnerable locations and key sites for mitigation (Dodman et al., 2022; Lwasa, 2022). Formal mechanisms of inclusion, such as the NAZCA platform of subnational action, support local government participation (Hale, 2016). Within and beyond the UNFCCC, cities advance the global climate agenda through transnational municipal climate networks (Kern and Bulkeley, 2009).

How does the diversification of actors shape international climate policy? On one hand, diversification entails risks. Opening global climate governance to new participants may generate uneven access to decision-making, co-optation by vested interests, and reproduction of global systems of domination (Andonova and Levy, 2003; Bulkeley et al., 2014; Fougère and Solitander, 2020). Rather than granting access to all, diversification may cement established patterns of power. On the other hand, diversification is linked to progressive politics and renewal. The contribution of multiple actors may enhance democratic performance, particularly by building inclusive decision-making (Bäckstrand et al., 2017). This can shift policy conversations to address overlooked concerns (Kaleb et al., 2020) and empower marginalised groups (Thew et al., 2020). Pluralism in global governance, in particular forms that enable civil society participation, is associated with similar advantages. This includes opportunities to align policy with social priorities, enhance the quality of negotiations, and support implementation (Kanie et al., 2019; Yeates, 2002). In this vein, local governments frequently highlight their ability to nimbly adopt and implement climate solutions, thus contributing to higher ambition in international climate policy (Coalition for Urban Transitions, 2021).

An increasing number of voices in international climate policy could be expected to generate a parallel diversification of ideas. However, research on the discourses that structure opportunities for action in global climate governance emphasises stability and continuity over dynamism and change. The discourses that permeate the UNFCCC, for instance, not only adhere to a limited set of ideas, but have done so for over a decade (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2006; Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2019). This suggests that an increasingly diverse landscape of actors is not fostering an equally diverse landscape of narratives. This study engages with this apparent contradiction. The key question guiding our analysis is: how does the diversification of actors shape urban narratives in international climate policy?

Our analysis, which mobilises a database of 463 international policy documents, reveals that policy narratives persist despite actors' efforts to challenge them. The analysis also suggests a complex interplay between actors and the narratives they promote, leading to the homogenisation of discourses. We propose three explanations behind this phenomenon. First, the ability of actors to promote narratives is not equal but conditioned by their position in global governance arrangements. Second, narratives are inserted into a discursive field dictated by specific rules of expression. Third, perceptions of legitimacy and normalcy are shaped by reigning policy paradigms, limiting the scope of demands that can be put on the table. All three dynamics prevent the development of diverging narratives within international climate policy, which may constrain the emergence of out-of-the-box ideas.

International Climate Policy: Stories of Diversity and Homogeneity

This study emerges in the boundary between two debates on diversity in climate governance. Studies with a focus on actors emphasise the multiplicity of voices that characterises current climate policy. In contrast, research on discourses tends to highlight uniformity. This paradox inspired this study.

Actor Diversification

The international climate regime consists of "the body of international rules concerning climate change applicable to states and the institutions and procedures states have created to oversee their implementation, enforcement, and further development" (Yamin and Depledge, 2004 p.3). The UNFCCC, a multilateral treaty negotiated and signed in 1992 to prevent dangerous interference with the climate system, articulates the formal regime. The UNFCCC specifies that the parties to the agreement (i.e., nation-states) negotiate agreements through annual Conferences of the Parties (COPs). This means that parties are the main players in the international climate regime. Parties defend national agendas and act through coalitions representing shared interests. Divisions among these coalitions have long dominated climate politics, including questions on the historical responsibility of emissions and international funding (Ringius et al., 2002). Yet, the number and form of organisations participating at the COPs have grown dramatically. Formally, nine constituencies represent nonstate actors in the UNFCCC, one of which acts as the focal point for local government and municipal authorities (LGMA). UN agencies take part of side events at the COPs (e.g., UNEP, UN-Habitat, UNDRR, WHO), as do major funding institutions (e.g., the World Bank, ADB, EIB). International NGOs and other organisations participate as observers, although representation remains contested and unequal (e.g., Kruse, 2014).

Beyond the formal climate region, multiple international organisations and networks shape global climate governance (Bäckstrand et al., 2017). Nonstate actors collaborate on climate issues across national boundaries in emerging forms of transnational climate governance (Bulkeley et al., 2014). Actors that populate transnational networks perform various functions, including advocacy, service provision, capacity building, and provision of funding (Bäckstrand, 2008; Bulkeley et al., 2014). Through transnational municipal networks (TMNs), local government authorities and their representatives attend international policy events, build and share expertise, promote tools, and shape norms (Betsill and Bulkeley, 2004; Gordon, 2020).

The participation of nonstate actors in global climate governance leads to dispersed forms of action (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2015). Without a central structuring force, there may be a lack of coordination to deliver targets (Chan et al., 2015). The proliferation of actors also prompts questions around democratic performance, including representation, access, transparency, and accountability (Bäckstrand, 2008). For instance, the uneven geographical constitution of global governance conditions participation in transnational networks (Andonova and Levy, 2003). Most networks are formed in the global North, while organisations in the Middle East and North Africa, Oceania, and Sub-Saharan Africa are underrepresented (Bulkeley et al., 2014). Businesses can dominate decision-making even in processes originally designed to be collaborative (Fougère and Solitander, 2020).

At the same time, diversification is perceived to bring advantages. The participation of nonstate actors in international events, such as the COPs, can be understood as an indicator of input legitimacy (Bäckstrand et al., 2017; Thew et al., 2021). NGOs have put key themes on the agenda, such as indigenous rights (Kaleb et al., 2020). Gaining political recognition for groups who do not feel represented, such as youth, is often equated to greater justice (Thew et al., 2020). Such an outlook on the democratization of global climate governance draws on pre-existing ideas, such as the concept of a global civil society, which describes a normative commitment to civic participation (Keane, 2003). This commitment implies that state power and corporate control must not proceed unchallenged in a globalised world. Such a normative orientation also aligns with an emphasis on pluralism in creating the institutions that structure global relations (Snyder, 1999). Pluralism in global environmental politics can bring a range of benefits, including delivering more ‘balanced’ outcomes, supporting robust agreements, and enhancing compliance (Kanie et al., 2019). As complex environmental problems are interpreted differently across communities, diversification may also enable locally-appropriate solutions and a movement toward decolonization in international policy (Pascual et al., 2021). In relation to urban perspectives, a stronger representation of local government in climate policy may enable innovation, as climate action in cities is often realized through experimentation (Bulkeley and Castán Broto, 2013). Consideration of urban concerns may create opportunities for marginalized voices to be heard (Olazabal et al., 2021); this includes disadvantaged groups, such as informal settlement dwellers (e.g., Satterthwaite et al., 2020). From this point of view, the inclusion of urban perspectives

in global climate governance is associated with multiple benefits, including enhanced representation, diversity, and the introduction of novelty.

Discourse Homogenisation

An analytical focus on discourses reveals a different picture. Intangible forms of power, operating through discourses, condition repertoires of interventions in all policy domains. In environmental politics, discourses provide simplified problem frames and structure debates into comprehensible narratives (Feindt and Oels, 2005). Environmental discourses represent "a shared way of apprehending the world," which "construct meanings and relationships, helping define common sense and legitimate knowledge" (Dryzek, 2013 p.10). Environmental discourses are entangled with political power, social relations, and coalitions with distinct interests (Hajer, 1995).

Discourses influence possibilities for action in global climate governance. Climate discourses shape how "climate change is construed and enacted as a problem", thereby serving to "delimit the realm of the possible for climate politics" (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2019 pp.520, 521). As the number of organisations participating in the formulation of climate policy has grown, some scholars suggest that discourses have shifted. For instance, Meckling and Allan (2020) argue that international climate policy discourse developed from market-based narratives in the 1990s toward a broad menu of experimental approaches beyond the established policy toolbox. Civil society organisations raised key narratives on justice and human rights in UNFCCC platforms, shifting the terms of the debate (Gach, 2019)

However, close analysis reveals that climate discourses are less dynamic than often assumed. For example, the Nationally Determined Contributions are permeated by surprisingly similar narratives. Concepts such as co-benefits, natural resource management, nonstate participation, and security are prevalent across the NDCs, even though their storylines follow geopolitical concerns (Jernnäs and Linnér, 2019). Bäckstrand and Lövbrand (2019) identify three discourses that dominate the debate in the UNFCCC: green governmentality (administrative rationalism and collective problem solving), eco-modernization (multi-level action and co-benefits), and civic environmentalism (critical narratives and claims on justice). Their analysis is notable for its near-longitudinal quality: already in 2006, their examination pointed to the prevalence of these three discourses (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2006). Their conclusion in 2019 is that the three discourses "converge strongly" with those identified in the previous decade, with green governmentality retaining "a surprisingly strong hold on the political imagination" (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2019 p.528). Underpinning environmental policy rationalities that extend beyond the climate domain help explain this pervasiveness. For instance, discourses of economic liberalization have long constricted the solution space in global environmental governance, limiting narratives to those that align with trade, financial investment, and economic growth (Bernstein, 2002). Beyond global governance, environmental politics are equally characterized by remarkable stability of 'discursive fundamentals' over time (Leipold et al., 2019).

The durability of discourses can be understood by considering the fundamentals of discursive configurations. As Foucault (2010 (1971)) explained, discourses are not 'external' to actors. Discourses are constituted by social relations, meaning that political interventions are shaped by actors' institutional position and situatedness in systems of signification. In global governance, organizations advance narratives within the confines of rules and relations of discursive formations. Civil society groups that strive to promote radical environmental action encounter the boundaries of technical-rational discourse:

> *[S]ocial movements must recognize they are positioned within this hegemonic constellation … that there are structural and discursive forces at play, of which the very framework of global civil society is itself a part, and which social movements themselves may actually be actively reproducing, rather than challenging (Ford, 2003 p.129).*

In a similar analysis, MacLean (2003) argues that the counter-hegemonic agency of civil society groups in global governance is minimal. Any participation in existing structures risks their reproduction, and oppositional groups operate under a constant threat of "appropriation into the formal-technical apparatus of authority and legitimacy" (MacLean, 2003 p186). In addition, groups advocating radical alternatives in global politics seek to challenge the rules of discourses, without any alternative at hand. Such prefiguration is always more strenuous than submitting to conformation (Carroll, 2007). This means that organizations in global governance promote political narratives within the confines of

discursive rules and relations. We focus on urban narratives to explore these mechanisms in practice, focusing especially on the tension between diversification and homogeneity.

Research Method

Discourse analysis aims to identify patterns that reveal recurrent motifs in language, such as those perceived as legitimate or shared across groups and individuals. It is a methodological approach to uncover underlying assumptions, rationales, or codes of action that structure interventions in climate governance (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2019; Jernnäs and Linnér, 2019; Meckling and Allan, 2020). While discourses are constituted by social relations and the rules of conduct that emerge from those relations (Foucault, 2010 (1971)), narratives represent the manifestation of those discourses in patterns of language and forms of expression. In global environmental governance, policy narratives are "interpretive frameworks that both analysts and practitioners develop and use to facilitate thinking in an orderly and coherent fashion" (Young, 2020 p.47). Policy narratives are central to global governance processes as they frame 'problems' and 'solutions', which coalesce in sets of ideas and receive support from coalitions of actors (Young, 2020). This study adopts narratives as its object of analysis. In doing so, we interpret narratives as one expression of discursive configurations, indicative of existing rationalities and relations.

Data Collection

All organizations in global climate governance mobilize climate narratives within the documents and reports that they produce, whether these are explanations of their actions, ambitions for the future, calls to action, or assessments of the availability of resources. The first question in studying this material concerns what counts as 'policy' within the fragmented system of authority that constitutes global climate governance. A conventional approach defines policy as "actions which contain… goal(s) or aims and some means or tools … expected to achieve them" (Capano and Howlett, 2020 p.10). Accordingly, we understand urban climate policy to involve any action or statement that defines goals or aims related to cities in the context of global climate action, as well as instruments or strategies to realize them (Capano and Howlett, 2020). The term encompasses a variety of manifestations, ranging from general goals (e.g., visions issued by UN agencies), to specific means of action (e.g., technical guidelines or provision of funding).

The data collection followed two steps. First, a literature review helped identify organizations active in urban climate policy, including UNFCCC, UN-Habitat, the World Bank, United Nations Disaster Risk Reduction, United Nations Development Program, United Nations Environment Program, ICLEI, and C40. Rather than create an exhaustive list, the analysis aimed to represent organizations perceived to play a central role in shaping climate policy at the global level. As the analysis progressed, organisations represented as producing seminal reports, such as the World Meteorological Organization, were added to the sample. The final list of organizations included in the database is presented in Table 1 (Appendix A).

Second, we compiled reports containing references to cities and climate change for each organisation. The search strategy was tailored to each organization, as explained in Table 2 (Appendix A). The final database included 463 documents issued by 37 organizations, listed in an Excel database, and complied in Nvivo (Appendix B). The analysis tracked changes in discourses over time, but the sample was conditioned by availability. The temporal delimitation (1946-2020) was based on availability of documentation. We examined all documentation available online for the organizations concerned. For each organization we tracked pre-1990 documents systematically through their online presence and any document mentioning urban was included in the sample. While the range of documents available starts in the 1940s, the database comprises a larger number of documents from the 2000s onwards. Since most documents published before 1990 were scanned copies, they were analysed manually and were not included in automatic word searches to illustrate trends over time.

Data Analysis

The analysis proceeded in the following steps. First, we read all documents in Nvivo to code any references to urban content. Short documents (under 20 pages) were analysed in their entirety, but a strategic treatment of longer documents focused on the executive summary, an outline of contents, and

examination of sections containing urban references throughout the document. A comprehensive review of the literature on urban climate governance to date (Castán Broto and Westman, 2020) informed the development of a coding scheme on approaches to the urban and climate change (Appendix A, Table 3). This process revealed a surprising consistency in language across organizations and over time.

Following this, an additional round of coding focused on identifying similarities in narratives through three strategies:

1) Characterisation of the emergence of urban content and the construction of climate change as an urban agenda. This was realized by mapping when and how each significant organization first introduced: a. urban content, b. (urban) environmental content, and c. urban climate content.
2) Identification of similarities in narratives across organizations. Common themes and similarities in the language were tracked across reports (e.g., cities as vulnerable, cities as carbon emitters, 'good' urban climate governance, urban climate planning, and cities as sites of economic development).
3) Identification of continuities in narratives over time. Specific narratives were further analysed by searching for key concepts (e.g., planning, coordination) and their evolution throughout subsequent reports.

Urban Narratives in International Climate Policy

Following the analysis above, the empirical results reveal how organizations 'discovered' urban narratives, the ensuing convergence of narratives across organizations, and continuities in narratives detectable over time.

The Emergence of Narratives

Four events took place between 2000 and 2020, which helped constitute cities as sites for climate protection. First, many international organisations adopted climate change as a strategic concern (e.g., OECD, 2008; UNDP, 2003; UCLG, 2007; WHO, 2008; WB, 2009; UNDRR, 2010; UN-Habitat, 2010). For example, in 2010, the World Bank released *Climate Change and the World Bank Group*, which explained the connection between development and climate action. While climate change was present in action narratives since the 1990s, a significant increase occurred after 2007 (Figure 1).

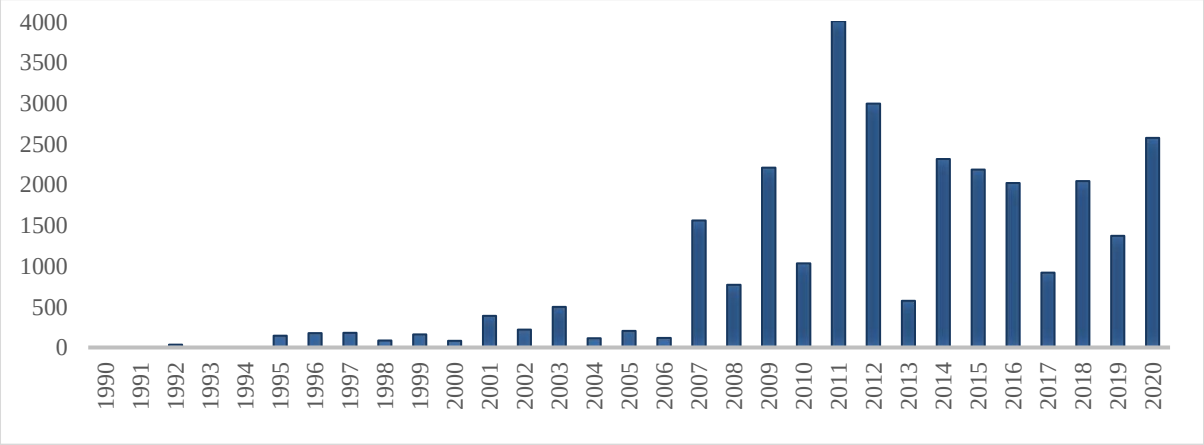

Figure 1. References to 'climate change' in documents published since the 1990s

Second, international organizations working on energy and the environment recognized cities' potential, in particular through their responsibility for a majority of global greenhouse gas emissions (Figure 2). Since 2007, the LGMA constituency became more visible within the UNFCCC, including through the formulation of an *LGMA Roadmap* at COP13 in Bali and by contributing to the World Mayors and Local Governments Climate Protection Agreement (ICLEI, 2007). Cities gained visibility in key reports such as the *IPCC AR5* (2014) and funding was directed towards cities by the Global Climate Fund (GCF) (2019). Several environmental and energy-oriented organisations issued reports on cities and climate change in the years following 2007, including the IEA (2009), the WWF (2010), UNEP (2011), EEA (2012), IRENA (2016), and REN21 (2019).

Third, organisations working on development focused explicitly on climate change in cities (Figure 2). Here, the argument advanced was that cities concentrate people and assets vulnerable to climate impacts. This interest was demonstrated by a series of reports and strategic initiatives. The World Bank published *Building Safer Cities* in 2003, followed by the *Framework for City Climate Risk Assessment* in 2009. In 2008, UNDRR published *Climate Resilient Cities*, followed by the launch of the Making Cities Resilient Campaign (MCR) in 2010. In 2009, UN-Habitat introduced the Cities and Climate Change Initiative, followed by the release of *Cities and Climate Change* in 2011. With a long-standing interest in urban health, the WHO released reports on urban vulnerability at a similar time (WHO, 2007; 2009). Other financial institutions became interested in urban adaptation, including the ADB (2014) and the EIB (2020). Urban adaptation was formally recognised through the Durban Adaptation Charter adopted at COP17 in Durban (UNFCCC, 2011).

Fourth, city networks adopted an explicit interest in climate change (Figure 2). A few organisations had advanced this thinking since the 1990s. For example, the first World Congress of Local Governments in 1990 included a session to mobilise "world-wide local government effort to slow the accumulation of carbon dioxide in the Earth's atmosphere" (ICLEI, 1990). ICLEI has advocated for the recognition of cities in climate politics since then. However, municipal climate networks gained visibility in international reports in the 2000s. The foundation of the municipal climate network C40, created by 18 megacities in 2005, occurred simultaneously with this growing interest. In 2007, UCLG adopted the *Jeju Declaration*, which recognised climate change as a local government concern (UCLG, 2007). In 2008, the Covenant of Mayors was established, affirming the commitment of European local governments to emission reductions.

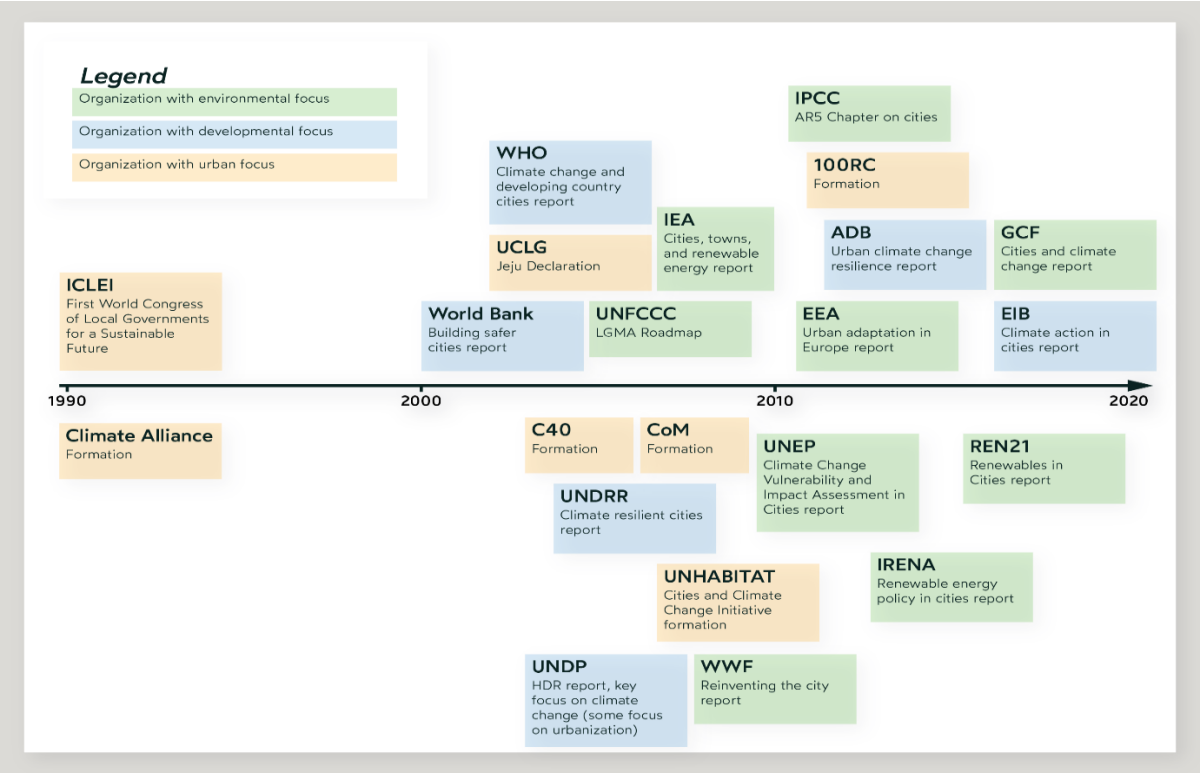

Figure 2. Initial explicit recognition of the cities and climate agenda

Narratives Across Organizations

Figure 3 outlines the concerns around which narratives on cities and climate change have converged since 2010: urban vulnerability, urban greenhouse emissions, urban governance, urban climate planning, and the importance of co-benefits. Each of these themes is discussed in turn.

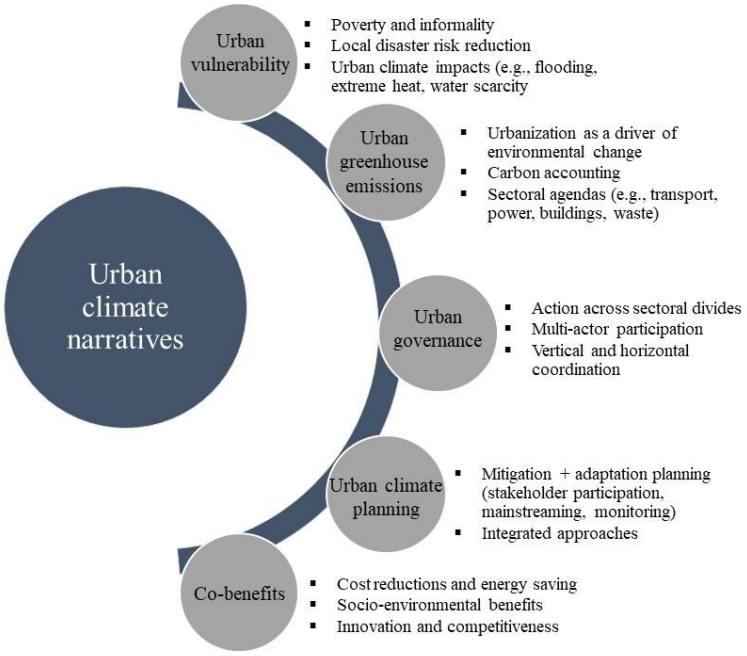

Figure 3. Dominant themes in international urban climate narratives

The view of cities as vulnerable to climate impacts consolidated between 2010 and 2020. The *IPCC 5th Assessment Report* released in 2014 highlighted vulnerability as a key concern. In our sample, topics raised in relation to urban vulnerability were very similar across organizations, including risks of flooding (C40, 2016; EEA, 2020; GCF, 2019; GEF, 2012; IRENA, 2020; OECD, 2014; UNEP, 2013; UN-Habitat, 2011; UNDP, 2016; UNDRR, 2012), extreme heat (GCF, 2019; EEA, 2020 UNFCCC, 2014; WHO, 2016) and water scarcity (C40, 2016; GEF; EEA, 2020; UN-Habitat, 2011; UNDRR, 2012). Debates initiated in the early 2000s continued, such as risks brought by urbanisation (UN-Habitat, 2011; WB, 2010) and impacts on the urban poor and informal settlements (ICLEI, 2019; UCLG, 2013; UN-Habitat, 2011; UNDP, 2016; UNDRR, 2012; World Bank, 2010). While the emphasis differs across organisations (e.g., the disaster risk angle is strongest within UNDRR), there is strong agreement on the central problem.

Over the same years, several organisations adopted the problem frame of urban greenhouse emissions. In many cases, urban carbon emissions are linked with urbanization (e.g., GCF, 2019; IEA, 2016; ICLEI, 2019; UNEP, 2013; UNFCCC, 2014; WB, 2010), or connected to global emission trajectories and the imperative of cities to act (e.g., C40; IEA, 2016; UN-Habitat, 2011; WB, 2010). This argument is often presented in relation to sectors responsible for energy use and emissions, including transport, power, buildings, and waste (e.g., C40, 2017; C40, 2020; GCF, 2019; IEA, 2016; IRENA, 2020; UNDP, 2016; UNEP, 2013; UNFCCC, 2014; UN-Habitat, 2011; WB, 2010; WHO, 2016). Sector-based trends are also linked with options for decarbonisation, including technologies and solutions adopted in best practice case studies.

Interest in institutional arrangements that support urban climate interventions is also standard across reports. A concern with coordinating action across sectoral divides of government departments follows the assumption that climate change is a cross-cutting problem. The idea applies to vulnerability and disaster resilience (UNDDR, 2012) and to climate mitigation (GCF, 2019). There is a general search for strategies of collaboration with actors beyond government to realise effective urban climate action. Stakeholder involvement, partnerships, and coordination between public and private actors are all central to such "horizontal and vertical coordination efforts" (ICLEI, 2019). The division of authority between government levels exacerbates a long-standing tension between centralised control and local decision-making. Some organisations propose national urban policy to realise coordination (ICLEI, 2019; OECD, 2014; UNDP, 2016; UN-Habitat, 2016), while others advocate for local autonomy (e.g., LGMA, 2011; UCLG Gold Report I, II, III, IV, V)

Most reports identify planning as a compelling entry point for urban climate action. For mitigation, the emphasis is on land use planning (e.g., master planning and zoning) (OECD, 2014; UN-Habitat, 2011) or on carbon inventories (C40, 2016; ICLEI, 2019). For adaptation, the focus is on incorporating risk assessments into policy frameworks, such as building regulations and zoning (EEA, 2020; UNDP, 2016; UNDRR, 2012). In recent years, the focus has shifted towards broader notions of 'climate planning' that incorporate adaptation and mitigation. Climate plans build on long-term visions, participation, evaluation (UNFCCC, 2014; UN-Habitat, 2011) and, increasingly, 'integrated' approaches (C40, 2020; GCF, 2019; OECD, 2014). The emphasis on planning is especially pronounced in handbooks and guidelines, which highlight risk assessments, stakeholder consultations, mainstreaming, and strategies for implementation and monitoring (UN-Habitat, 2012; 2014; 2015; 2015; UNDRR, 2012; 2012; 2017).

Finally, there is a shared concern about the socio-economic benefits of urban climate action. In recent years, many organizations use the concept of co-benefits to symbolize synergies between climate action and socio-economic progress (GCF, 2019; GEF, 2012; EEA, 2020; ICLEI, 2019; IRENA, 2020; OECD, 2014; UNEP, 2013; UNFCCC, 2014; WB, 2010; WHO, 2016). As stated by the World Bank (2010), co-benefits of urban climate action include public health improvements, cost savings, and energy security. Similarly, there are explicit efforts to link urban climate agendas with opportunities for economic advancement. For example, the C40 (2018) report *Climate Opportunity* provides "evidence on how climate policies are interrelated with, and deliver outcomes for, health, wealth and other development agendas." The related narrative of climate finance in cities has also become an important topic (UNEP, 2014; ODI, 2015; EEA, 2017; NCE, 2018; OECD, 2019; EIB, 2019; UNDP, 2020).

Narratives over Time

These five dominant narratives have extended histories in international urban policy. Take, for example, urban climate vulnerability. As explained above, ideas that define this debate include risks associated with urbanisation, such as poverty and homelessness. The link between urbanisation, housing, and poverty was the first entry point to city-related policy in UN debates. In 1946, the UN General Assembly expressed concern over "the magnitude and gravity of housing problems" (UN, 1946). In 1952, it proclaimed the lack of adequate housing as "one of the most serious deficiencies in the standard of living of large sections of the population of the world" (UN, 1952). These concerns were carried forward within the Commission for Human Settlements, eventually institutionalised as UN-Habitat (UN, 1977). Alongside UN-Habitat, the World Bank has a long-standing interest in poverty alleviation and urban investment. When urban vulnerability emerged as a climate agenda it was framed by these organizations as a development concern, supporting the connection to long-standing issues of urbanisation, homelessness, and poverty.

Likewise, there is an established tradition of portraying cities as drivers of socio-environmental degradation. In 1961, a UN Ad Hoc Group of experts declared that urbanisation was "rapidly assuming the proportions of a full-fledged crisis" (UN, 1962, p.1). The President of the World Bank proclaimed in 1969 that the "phenomenon of urban decay is a plague creeping over every continent" (WB, 1969). Since then, international organisations have routinely depicted urbanisation as a force that brings socio-environmental deterioration, especially in the context of 'slums'. The concern with urbanisation reached a watershed moment when the global urban population overtook the size of the rural in the early 2000s. Since then, the idea of urbanisation as a driver of global climate change has gained resonance in international policy, revived through the argument of cities as leading greenhouse gas emitters.

The question of establishing appropriate divisions of responsibility has also long permeated urban debates. In the 1980-1990s, the principle of local autonomy gained influence through the diffusion of ideologies of democratisation and privatization. As shown in Figure 4, the concepts of democratisation and privatization lost appeal after the 1990s, but other terms representing democratic ideals remain influential. For example, references to 'stakeholders' and 'partnerships', which reflect an interest in working in collaboration across groups of actors, have grown with time. References to community, public participation, and coordination follow a similar trend. This suggests that while the terminology of participation shifted, underlying assumptions about how action can be achieved (through interaction across scales, jurisdictions, and boundaries) remained influential.

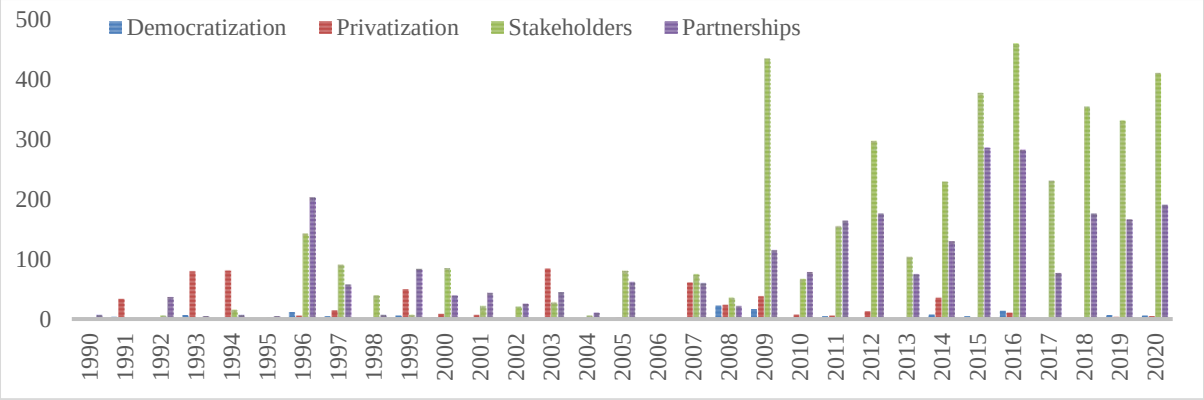

Figure 4. References to 'democratisation', 'privatisation, 'stakeholders', and 'partnerships' in documents published since the 1990s

A similar pattern emerges concerning planning, long representing a chief solution to problems in cities. Ideas on managing urbanisation in the 1950s were intertwined with theories of centralised population control. The World Bank 1979 *Development Report* proposed to "curb the growth of the urban labour supply through family planning programs " (WB, 1979, p.79). Population control was flaunted as an approach to deal with homelessness, resource depletion, and urban sprawl. In the late 1980s to early 1990s, cities emerged as ideal locations for environmental planning. UN-Habitat, for example, portrayed local planning as a practical entry point to natural resource management (UN-Habitat, 1984; 1987; 1987; 1989; 1989; 1991; 1993; 1997). This ideal was amplified through the diffusion of sustainable development agendas in the 1990s, primarily Local Agenda21. In our sample, references to integrated planning have grown in recent years. Whether embracing a rational-formalist model or a view that welcomes the informal exchange of perspectives, planning consistently appears as a strategy to change the future of cities.

Finally, the arguments for co-beneficial urban climate action reflect an established view of cities as engines of economic advance. As stated in the 1952 UN *Demographic Yearbook*, urbanisation "is important … because it is integrally associated with industrial and economic development". This thinking appears as a search for solutions to uncontrolled urbanisation through economic stimulus. Throughout the 1950-60s, state-led investment was the dominant approach (UN, 1952, 1960; 1962; 1966), alongside ideas on managing national economies and industrial structures. For example, the World Bank 1979 *Development Report* proposed distribution of development across regions and stimulus in intermediate cities to tackle uncontrolled urbanisation. The profound connection between urban policy and economic strategy never vanished– it simply re-appeared in different forms. Thus, while the emphasis on economic co-benefits in contemporary urban climate policy is recent and not overwhelmingly influential (Figure 5), economic growth and innovation represent pervasive narratives that can be tied to emergent policy domains, such as climate change.

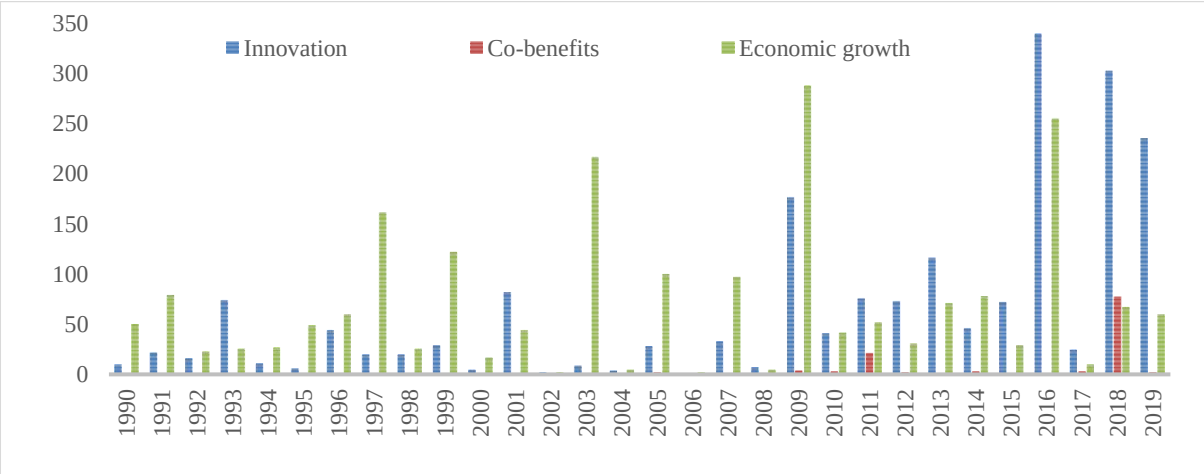

Figure 5. References to 'innovation', 'co-benefits', 'economic growth', in documents published since the 1990s

Problematising Diversity

Explaining the coupling of actors' diversification with narrative homogenisation is not straightforward. However, in the context of urban climate policy, three hypotheses emerge. First, the idea of diversity needs to be approached from the perspective of the highly uneven grounds for shaping the conversation. In particular, 'traditional' players exercise a disproportionately strong influence. The global climate governance landscape is sometimes imagined as a novel political terrain, with relevant actors newly arrived on the scene. Such analyses treat climate politics as an autonomous sphere populated by discrete scientific debates, in which organisations are highly specialised. Our analysis suggests that this is not the case. Instead, intergovernmental organisations with a generalist approach and decades of experience appear as authoritative voices. For instance, since its inception, UN-Habitat has worked for decent living conditions, with homelessness and poverty always a strong focus. The World Bank has engaged with urbanisation and infrastructure investment as a poverty alleviation strategy since the 1960s. As climate vulnerability became a challenge for cities, it underscored homelessness, poverty, and development challenges. The leading voices in these conversations were organisations driving the debate on urban climate vulnerability: UN-Habitat and the World Bank. Other intergovernmental organisations promoted narratives linked with their expertise. For instance, UNDRR and WHO successfully aligned their interests in disaster risk and health with urban climate vulnerability. While the narrative of urbanisation as a driver of global environmental change is widespread, it is most heavily referenced by organisations with expertise in environmental science, including UNEP.

Nongovernmental organisations need to carve out a space for demands within these accepted storylines. For instance, ICLEI was instrumental in claiming questions of local environmental planning and has, until today, maintained that position. C40 promotes narratives on the importance of urban areas in global emissions and co-benefits. The narratives of both networks fit neatly with other proponents of planning (e.g., UN-Habitat) and economic development (e.g., the World Bank, OECD). The success of these networks depends on many factors, including their ability to access funders and to sustain flows of financial resources (Acuto and Leffel, 2021), even as these flows generate complicated form of dependence (Chu, 2018). Yet, their perceived success also appears to depend on matching the discursive landscape of global climate governance. Other networks whose demands did not fit pre-existing narratives had limited influence. For example, UCLG's proposals for decentralisation and local democracy come across as radical in contrast with calls for harmonisation and coordination across scales. C40 initially advocated for increasing cities' autonomy but have put this argument on the backburner (Gordon, 2020). While these ideals are partly supported by allies (e.g., LGMA), they never reach mainstream appeal. Similarly, the Climate Alliance has consistently advanced a system-critical view, fixed in alternative notions of growth and solidarity with indigenous peoples. These perspectives also remain at the fringe of debates.

Second, narratives are formulated within an environment conducive to standardising expression. In international policy, standardisation ensures that guidelines apply around the world. For example, the first UN document that engages with urban concerns identifies the need to develop common principles and standards for housing and town planning (1946). The pursuit of standardisation supports a search for universal practices to share workable knowledge. International management studies have long recognised that this ambition obscures parochialism and ethnocentrism (Boyacigiller and Adler, 1991). There may even be a direct contradiction between recognising local concerns and creating 'objective', codified, transferrable solutions (Martello, 2001). Nevertheless, adopting common frameworks and sharing universal solutions remain central objectives in international policy. In addition, the harmonisation of language may be a feature of international policy making. Gosovic (2000) observes that the global circulation of information since the 1990s has contributed to consolidating ideas. Gosovic (2000 p.448) refers to this harmonisation as a global intellectual hegemony, characterised by "standardisation and uniformity of thinking and analysis" and the "frequent and widespread use of a limited number of buzz words and clichés including 'correct' phraseology". Through our analysis, we distinguish such features, including standardised vocabularies, catchwords, and common phrases. As an example, we can consider resilience. We first identified this term in a UNFCCC document issued in 2007. This is followed by engagement with climate-resilient cities in a UNDRR report published in 2008 and through the World Bank's concept of climate-resilient development in 2010. Between 2010

and 2020, most organisations in our sample refer to climate resilience as a desirable objective. In their narratives, resilience is mobilised in an ambiguous, non-contradictable form, which does not have any actual practical application – much like other buzzwords (Cornwall, 2007). Actors with diverging profiles promote their aims through similar wordings, resulting in the same lists of adjectives and catch-phrases (inclusive, liveable, low-carbon, eco, smart, equitable, resilient, safe) being reproduced across policy documents.

A third perspective is ideas on periodicity. At any given moment in time, political narratives match dominant assumptions in international policy. Literatures that explain synchronicity in international policy include the scholarship on policy doctrines and orthodoxies (Harriss, 2005; Kothari, 2005). Policy doctrines represent "clearly bounded, successive periods characterized by specific theoretical hegemonies" (Kothari, 2005 p.66). Studies on historical patterns in international policy have revealed such doctrinal thinking. For example, the 1940-50s represent an era of positivist orthodoxy, characterized by economic planning and state-led development, followed by investment-led poverty alleviation in the 1970s (Harriss, 2005). The 1980s brought faith in economic liberalism that eventually peaked with the Washington consensus, followed in the 1990s by a renewed interest in the state and good governance (Harriss, 2005). Current trends include a revival of neoliberal principles (Carroll and Jarvis, 2015) and technology-led development (Taylor and Schroeder, 2015). According to Carroll and Jarvis (2015 p.285, 295), the contemporary international policy paradigm takes the form of deep marketization, residing in "an extreme pro-private sector agenda" geared towards business enabling.

Revisiting urban narratives reveals patterns along these lines. Ideas on urbanization in the 1950s and 1960s embraced state-led development and investment-driven growth. Principles of local government autonomy that materialized in the 1980s followed global waves of liberalization and democratization. If the current international policy paradigm is inclined towards business enabling, we find resonance in urban narratives on co-benefits, green growth, competitiveness, and innovation. These patterns suggest that urban narratives are formulated within international policy paradigms, which dictate ideas on normalcy. For example, this explains why narratives reflecting 'good governance' that became paradigmatic in the 1990s continue to permeate urban debates in the 2000s. Analysis of such patterns can also bring clarity to the meaning of narratives at different points in time. Some concepts in our analysis were influential throughout multiple paradigms, but their associated practices have changed radically. Planning is one example. Planning has been a chief entry point to address urbanization since the 1950s. When planning first emerged in relation to urban policy it was linked with proposals for national population control. Today, such arguments are nearly unthinkable, and ideas are instead characterized by an interest in participation, foresight, and integrated management. Actors on the global stage need to position their narratives within ideas on what is legitimate and plausible, which limits the available range of tools and objectives.

Conclusions

The diversification of actors in global climate governance has not challenged the dominance of certain narratives. What are the consequences in terms of supporting effective and just urban climate action? First, homogenisation has implications for the delivery of innovation. Transformative action is a common theme in current policy debate, as shown in the most recent IPCC report (Dodman et al., 2022; Lwasa, 2022). Transformative action calls for new, radical alternatives and far-reaching interventions to prevent ecological breakdown. Our analysis shows that urban climate narratives extend into multiple policy domains (e.g., disaster risk reduction, health, ecosystem protection) and encompass a diverse repertoire of responses (e.g., a range of policy instruments, technologies, and organizational arrangements). Nevertheless, responses fit within the established norms of international policy and do not signify a radical departure from existing narratives. Off-the-road answers appear to be beyond the confines of urban climate narratives, questioning the actual possibilities of transformative or radical action.

Second, homogenisation impedes place-based action. All urban solutions were once developed within the contextual capabilities of a given city. Paradoxically, translating urban practices into the standardised format of international policy erases the particularities that make them work in a given context. While international policy documents contain case studies and local accounts, contextual

dimensions are removed from generalized guidelines and policy recommendations. The urban enters into global policy not as a force that generates interest in local struggles, but through the universal adoption of particular lessons. Homogenisation implies the construction of consensus among diverse actors, suggesting a risk that it will lead to the depoliticization of climate debates (Swyngedouw, 2009). If the city is the ground for homogenised forms of rationality that enrol diverse actors in a remarkably uniform urbanism (Magnusson, 2013), its operation is reflected in standardised narratives of the urban in international policy. Place-based demands can still be brought by local groups to international platforms, especially as an advocacy strategy to gain leverage vis-à-vis their own central governments. These struggles can potentially co-exist with 'universalized' narratives; yet, if local claims are brought to international climate debates, they face the risk of being integrated in unintended ways into the harmonized vocabulary of international policy.

Third, homogenisation forecloses opportunities to consider new perspectives, especially those already marginalised. Current climate policy embraces the pressing concern with participation (e.g., of youth, indigenous groups, movements from the global south) and a politics of recognition (Dodman et al., 2022). Yet, we find that these voices have a minimal impact on international climate debates. While claims that may be associated with civil society groups do appear, they are soaked in dominant narratives (e.g., on stakeholders, effectiveness, coordination). The embeddedness of radical demands into mainstream discourse in this case implies their absorption into an accepted terminology, without being accompanied by any concrete change. For example, this enables UN agencies and development banks to speak of climate justice without engaging with any of the conditions that enable an extractive, grossly unequal global economy or oppression based in patriarchy and racism. The enrolment of vocabularies of insurgent groups into a homogenised policy discourse effectively displaces struggle in favour of putative good governance arrangements and workable technological solutions.

Discourse homogeneity constitutes a policy environment containing no departure from the expected, no particularity, no conflict. We find resonance in this narrative uniformity with what Escobar (2016) describes as the 'One World World', a shorthand for hegemonic discourses that represent "the dominant form of Euro-modernity (capitalist, rationalist, liberal, secular, patriarchal, white, or what have you)". Such language disguises the imposition of dominant knowledge systems that make multiple forms of thinking and living invisible. There is a need to map the 'sociologies of absence' in international climate policy, tracking the accounts erased through harmonising narratives. Sameness implies the obliteration of difference (deliberate or not), and there are limits to delivering change from within discursive homogeneity.

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