

# Rachel Carson Center

## Perspectives

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Sabine Barthold

## Branding the Green City

### Introduction

Since the 2000s, powerful political and economic elites have popularized the pursuit of eco-modernization, a market-oriented version of sustainability, to achieve broader goals of urban economic growth. Eco-modernization schemes, with their emphasis on energy and resource efficiency, suggest that environmental degradation can be decoupled from economic growth and resolved through technological innovation and the marketization of green products and technologies. In the last decade, urban sustainability has increasingly been aligned with the “smart” city discourse. This promotes the idea that economic expansion and increasingly dense urbanization—provided they are based on green technologies and sustainable designs—will eventually reduce ecological harm without any sacrifices or significant shifts in contemporary lifestyles or existing sociopolitical structures (Isenhour 2015).

Today, coalitions of local governments, urban planners and architects, entrepreneurs, technocrats, global consultancy firms, and multinationals, as well as “Big Green Groups” (Klein 2013) are promoting “natural capitalism” and largely market-based or techno-managerial strategies for tackling environmental issues in cities. The call for cities and local governments to become “sustainability leaders” or “climate champions” has resonated widely across multiple scales of governance and in both the private and public sectors. Urban governments are developing “innovative” environmental and climate protection programs, and cities often serve in this process as laboratories for “pioneering technologies” and policies (Bulkeley, Castán Broto, and Edwards). Anxious not to fall behind on the latest trends, municipalities are developing new governance structures and urban planners are, as Eugene McCann and Kevin Ward (2011) have shown, “scanning the globe” for increasingly mobile policy strategies that will help them embrace (often competing) economic, social, and ecologic demands.

In this essay, using the example of the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, I illustrate how city networks are powerful actors in the global dissemination of eco-modernization. C40 has achieved great success by bringing together a variety of powerful economic, cul-

tural, and political elites around a globally circulating concept of sustainability that idealizes technological innovation, economic growth, and modernity. Its systematic production, transfer, and mobilization of policy models allows the organization to set technical and political norms that push the global environmental discourse in a direction where dissenting voices and differing socioenvironmental imaginaries become systematically excluded.

### **C40 Cities: The Rollout of Bright Green Urban Sustainability**

Once deemed the epitome of ecological degradation, urbanization is increasingly being framed as a beacon of hope—a viable way out of global ecological crises. City networks like C40 have gained enormous symbolic power in the global discourse on sustainability, which resonates widely with cities worldwide who are anxious to join the global hierarchy of climate leader cities. In joint efforts to brand cities as “green,” collaboration between players of the globalized economy and moderate environmental organizations is an increasingly common practice. The C40 network collaborates with global marketing and consulting firms, multinational corporations, media and PR agencies, and environmental “think tanks” to set norms and standards for urban sustainability and green cities. Membership of the network is exclusive, based on invitation by other members, and limited to big cities.<sup>1</sup>

The C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group was initially founded as the “C20” in 2005 on the initiative of London’s then mayor Ken Livingstone. Livingstone’s initial aim was to bring together the mayors of 20 of the world’s largest megacities to address climate change in a parallel event to the G8 summit in Gleneagles. He wanted to form a “buyers’ club” of major cities that could collectively negotiate lower prices for the procurement of green technologies from global manufacturers, like LED street lighting or hybrid buses. Under the organization’s second chair, former Toronto mayor David Miller, C40 Cities formed a partnership with the Clinton Foundation’s Clinton Climate Initiative (CCI). This crucial cooperation not only brought major resources to the network but also provided access to a range of global organizations and institutions like the World Bank and UNDP.

1 Cities must either have a population over 3 million or be one of the top 25 global cities ranked by GDP output to qualify for membership. C40 explicitly networks with global cities at the top of the global urban hierarchy, because “large cities have sizeable economies that are ideal markets to incubate, develop, and commercialize greenhouse gas reducing and adaptation technologies, including those to improve energy efficiency, waste management, water conservation, and renewable energy” (<http://www.c40.org/cities>). Currently, 86 global cities are members.

C40 provides a number of regional directors and program experts to serve as a link between the network and individual member cities. These experts offer consultation on diverse subjects including waste, transportation, and renewable energies, among others. They are also instrumental in connecting city governments with private sector companies who offer technologies and services in public-private partnerships (PPPs). For example, C40 partners with private corporations like Volvo, and with nonprofit organizations like EMBARQ, to promote the extension of Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) systems in their member cities. Other programs involve PPPs with Philips for LED street lighting, and with Siemens for Smart Urban Grids. C40 experts also support cities in getting access to international sources of funding for local policy programs. The main platforms for city-to-city cooperation include the biennial C40 Mayors Summit, which allows local officials and urban experts to meet for the purposes of policy learning and “best practice” exchange; it further provides important opportunities for corporations and investors to present their “cutting-edge” products and technological innovations to urban decision makers.

Sustainability discourses have, in the process, been cleverly integrated into cities’ branding and marketing strategies. When Michael Bloomberg took over as the network chair in 2010, he hired McKinsey to refashion the relatively loose network of cities into a fully functioning organization with full-time staff, an executive team, and a board of investors. He also invested heavily in marketing, creating a PR division to promote the network’s activities. In an interview, C40’s communications director explained to me that many of the member cities take advantage of the professional marketing opportunities C40 offers to assist them with branding their city as green to both the international media and their own constituents.

In the face of global financial crises and ecological disasters, the promotion of sustainability and of clean, green lifestyles adds symbolic value to places. It helps brand cities as modern, future-oriented, and attractive destinations for flows of capital and people. In the urban context, this “bright green” version of sustainability (Steffen 2004) aligns with preexisting economic and marketing goals. Green or sustainable urbanism here is more than just an environmental program—it is a branding strategy for the “entrepreneurial city” (Harvey 1989), promoting cities with high living standards and good public services as desirable. These “soft” urban qualities—in which cultural and environmental features of urban spaces and lifestyles play a major role—are key if cities wish to become more appealing to global businesses and investors, the high-skilled workforce

that forms the basis of the “new economy,” and the tourists who spend large amounts of the surplus value generated elsewhere in the cities they visit (Gibbs and Krueger 2007).

### **Setting Global Sustainability Standards**

Intercity cooperation and member support are certainly central to the network’s functioning. But, since local environmental and sustainability programs are increasingly perceived as a key factor for global interurban competitiveness (see, for example, Dual Citizen LLC 2014; Siemens /EIU 2012; Kamal-Chaoui and Robert 2009), C40 also creates a competitive space in which cities are ranked and measured according to their performance as climate champions. This “greening by numbers and indicators” (Kaika 2017, 90)—translating social-ecological issues into technical-scientific monitoring and “intelligent” infrastructure technologies—allows the C40 network to direct the conversation on how best to pursue sustainable urban development goals and who is best suited to do so. Before potential C40 members can enjoy the many benefits of belonging to an elite organization, cities first have to be “smart” enough to be able to collect and report data and indicators.

In 2011, the network partnered with Arup, a global architecture and planning consultancy firm, to help collect data on member cities’ climate actions and establish a baseline to measure cities’ progress in reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. However, implementing these sustainable “solutions” has in turn created undesirable problems: indicators and “smart” monitoring in green development agendas have been driving new forms of displacement and green gentrification in cities around the world (Checker 2011). Furthermore, the production of the technologies on which smart cities rely is directly dependent upon the destruction of environment and livelihoods in other parts of the world.<sup>2</sup>

C40 is not only setting norms for GHG accounting in member cities—they have globalized their sustainability metrics as the international standard. In 2014, at the COP 20 in Lima, C40, together with the World Resources Institute (WRI) and ICLEI, launched the Global Protocol for Community-Scale Greenhouse Gas Emissions Inventories (GPC) as a common standard for developing GHG inventories in cities around the globe. This establishes

2 Many information and communications technologies rely on minerals like coltan, which is mined in countries like Congo, where it finances war economies that systematically commit human rights violations, exploit workers, and destroy local environments.

guidelines for how cities measure and report their GHG emissions, and how they account for their reductions in carbon emissions to international organizations and governance mechanisms like the UNFCCC (WRI, C40 Cities, and ICLEI 2014). Adopting the GPC standard has even become the requirement for cities to join the *Compact of Mayors*,<sup>3</sup> launched by former UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon at the UN Climate Change Summit in New York in September 2014. However, the current method of accounting for climate responsibility favors already-developed nations: today, “affluent nations continue to drive significant demand for global production and benefit from imported products that contribute to net global emissions growth, but production-based emissions accounting methods assign responsibility . . . to producer nations” (Isenhour, O’Reilly, and Yocum 2016, 649).

This market-oriented discourse on urban sustainability that C40 and others are (successfully) promoting in cities around the world is based on a number of presumptions that appear beyond dispute: these include unquestioning faith in Western-style institutions, the tacit endorsement of expert knowledge, assumptions about technological feasibility and the manageability of social processes, and the non-thematization of alternative economic and social models (Keil 2007). These “sustainability” standards obfuscate the powerful social interests hiding behind “objective” measurements, benchmarks, and indicators. Therefore, it is important to be aware of the big picture of capitalist urbanization dynamics and to be critical of sustainability standards that—despite using a rhetoric of fundamental change—do not really change anything.

### **Conclusion: The Future of Urban Sustainability**

Policies promoting energy efficiency and the proliferation of green technologies are not per se a bad thing. However, framing sustainability as the injection of green-economy and “smart” technologies into local economies—as C40 Cities does—is problematic if it prohibits critical engagement with more fundamental problems of unsustainable urban lifestyles. By exclusively focusing on issues that can be improved with a green technol-

3 The *Compact* is a global agreement on measuring, documenting, and reporting standards for urban climate programs between cities, major city networks, and a number of “partners.” These include international organizations like UNHabitat and the World Bank Group, standardization organizations like Carbons and the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP), environmental think tanks and consultancy firms like The Climate Group<sup>o</sup> and the WRI, multinationals like Veolia, and global “Big Green” organizations like the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF).

"Flood Wall Street."  
The People's Climate  
March, New York City,  
21 September 2014.  
Photo by Elizabeth  
Stilwell [CC BY-SA 2.0],  
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ogy fix, C40 is framing urban sustainability mainly as a technical and marketing matter, rather than as a structural problem with multiple social, economic, ecological, and cultural dimensions.

Portraying sustainability and green urbanism as consensus-based, technocratic, and modern concepts increasingly denies room for political debate and alternative visions. After all, there is no consensus on what, exactly, we are trying to sustain: Is it nature, the human species, our current way of life, or capitalism?

"Challenger environmentalisms" (Keil 2007) call into question the alleged win-win situation of economy and ecology presented in dominant discourses on sustainable development today. Citizens and communities around the world are resisting existing policy frameworks that seek to "include" them into monitoring practices. They resist being "integrated" into pre-arranged sustainability programs that limit stakeholder participation to a menu of equally unacceptable options to choose from. As alternative practices and methods proliferate, this is an "opportune moment to pay attention to socio-environmental innovations and methods forged not out of social consensus, but out of social dissensus" (Kaika 2017, 99). It is not the consensus-building exercises of technocrats, political leaders, and business elites, but rather the disruptions and

practices of dissent by citizens and communities, that can potentially serve as living indicators of what urgently needs to be addressed and where.

Throughout history, cities have been places of fundamental change and social empowerment. By bringing struggles over social and environmental justice back into the urban arena, progressive urban movements can create new spaces where dominant socioenvironmental trajectories are contested and can help create alternative imaginaries for our common future.

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