

Unpacking climate justice rhetoric: a comparative content analysis of international city networks

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Abstract

Purpose – The rising membership and influence of international city networks have positioned cities as important actors in global policy debates on climate change and sustainability. This study aims to clarify how these networks frame and incorporate justice in their climate actions.

Design/methodology/approach – The study selected four prominent city networks (C40, CityNet, ICLEI and UCLG) and applied a content analysis method to examine how they interpret justice in 64 documents published by them between 2016 and 2022. The documents were analysed from three perspectives: 1) usage of justice terminology, 2) justice dimensions (distributive, participatory or recognition justice); and 3) the contexts.

Findings – The study found that the framing of justice varied according to the missions and worldviews of the networks. However, except for CityNet, an increased consideration of justice was observed across the networks since the late 2010s. Notably, C40 increasingly emphasised climate justice in its documentation, despite being criticised for its neoliberal orientation towards urban climate policy. Conversely, CityNet, a regional city network of the Asia-Pacific, showed limited usage of justice terminology.

Originality/value – The findings suggest that justice framings in international city networks carry important implications for urban climate governance by shaping how justice is interpreted and prioritised in climate actions. However, concerns also arise that city networks may promote their own justice interpretations that risk overlooking locally grounded understandings of justice. Furthermore, CityNet's limited use of justice terminology may reflect different approaches to articulating justice in response to local policy priorities and contexts.

Keywords Urban sustainability, International city network, Transnational municipal network (TMN), Climate justice, Content analysis

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The climate crisis poses a significant threat to well-being and sustainable development on a global scale. In urban settings, cities are becoming significant players in confronting climate



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change and protecting citizens and communities. Proactive cities in climate action are often horizontally connected in networks. International city networks with a focus on global issues such as climate change, often described as transnational municipal networks (TMNs), are increasing in number and membership. Such networks have also successfully established cities as important actors in international policy arenas.

On the other hand, climate change is deeply connected to justice issues. As the urban population increases globally, social inequalities in cities have grown and expanded. Justice plays an important role in shaping climate change responses at the local level, and has been recognised as an urban issue by environmental justice scholars and practitioners (Bulkeley *et al.*, 2013; Schlosberg, 2007; McKendry, 2018). Consideration of justice in urban climate policy is increasingly vital as marginalised communities are the most vulnerable to climate hazards. Besides the varied distribution of climate impacts, urban climate justice is also connected to issues such as spatial justice, the poor representation of minorities such as ethnic minorities, women, youth, and immigrants within the urban development plans as well as the poor recognition of their culture and/or values (Shi *et al.*, 2016).

Existing studies have examined the role of city networks in urban climate governance and highlighted their growing influence in global climate politics (Bulkeley and Betsill, 2013; Bulkeley, 2021). However, limited attention has been paid to how these networks frame climate justice across different organisational contexts and how their understanding of justice can be systematically analysed across networks. This study therefore addresses this gap by providing a comparative analysis of justice-related discourse across multiple city networks. It also contributes by developing an analytical framework for systematically examining how justice is framed and articulated within city network discourse, which may also be useful for future justice-related studies. It raises the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1. How do international city networks frame and incorporate notions of justice?

RQ2. What implications do these justice framings have for urban climate governance?

To answer these questions, this paper analyses how narratives of justice are articulated and promoted by four international city networks: C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group (C40), CityNet, ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI), and World Organisation of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). All four represent major city networks with large memberships, substantial experience, and considerable influence on climate and broader sustainability debates at the global and regional levels (de Losada, 2019; Haupt and Coppola, 2019).

This study first reviews the background and literature on international city networks and urban climate justice. It then outlines the methodology, followed by the results, to examine how justice is framed by the four selected networks by analysing:

- usage of justice-related terms;
- justice dimensions; and
- the contexts in which justice is articulated.

A content analysis was applied using the software MAXQDA2022. The findings and their implications for urban climate governance are then discussed before the conclusions are presented in the final section.

2. Contextualising city networks and climate justice

2.1 International city networks and urban climate governance

International city networks or TMNs have existed for many years to cooperate and achieve the common goals of the member cities. While a broad variety of the networks has developed, those focusing on global environmental issues and climate change have gradually emerged since the 1980s and these issues have become one of the prominent areas addressed by city networks (Lecavalier and Gordon, 2020).

CityNet and ICLEI are among the promoters of this trend. While CityNet and ICLEI have emerged during such a trend, CityNet, having developed as the largest environmental network of cities in the region (CityNet, 2026), is characterised as technology-driven (de Losada, 2019, pp. 22–23). ICLEI, on the other hand, is a global network of cities, aiming to achieve sustainable urban development (ICLEI, 2026). It has become a major player in creating and promoting Local Agenda 21 since the Earth Summit in 1992 (Mehta, 1996; Rok and Kuhn, 2012).

Among the selected networks, UCLG is one of the oldest city networks, aiming to empower subnational governments by sending their voices to the international community in various fields including democracy, gender equality and climate change (UCLG, 2026). UCLG promotes the “right to the city” concept as one of its core values (UCLG, 2021). Originally proposed by Henri Lefebvre as a call for radical transformation and spatial justice, UCLG later incorporated the concept into its policy agenda and played a significant role in including it in the New Urban Agenda at Habitat III in 2016.

Conventionally, such city networks were voluntary and publicly owned by their member cities (Bulkeley and Betsill, 2013). Like UCLG and ICLEI, those funded (albeit not exclusively) through membership fees and governed by public authorities, such as mayors, are considered as public membership networks (de Losada, 2019). Since the 2000s, however, privately-led networks like C40 have emerged supported by philanthropic organisations and strong individuals (de Losada, 2019). Greater financial and human resources grant such networks a competitive advantage over conventional public networks (de Losada, 2019).

C40 is a privately supported network of megacities that initiates climate change mitigation. The network initially advocated the economic significance of urban climate action (C40 Cities and ARUP, 2016). Unlike public membership networks, C40 does not require membership fees but has established strict membership requirements and compliance mechanisms. If member cities cannot achieve the requirements including the GHG emission target, their access to technical support by C40 will be limited and their membership can be annulled (Pinault, 2019).

The selected networks differ in their size, governance structure, funding source and geographical scope. Table 1 summarises their key characteristics. While various city networks exist, they often cooperate to issue statements or implement projects in various settings. For instance, they align and collaborate within the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy (GCoM), the largest initiative for combating the climate crisis at the regional and local levels.

As the city networks developed, subnational governments enjoyed the benefits as members through mutual learning and information sharing as well as influencing the international community. Especially for the urban climate policies, member cities can efficiently promote their climate actions while reducing their financial burdens by receiving support such as various tools from the networks (Lecavalier and Gordon, 2020).

While such advantages have long been recognised, especially private city networks are criticised due to their focus on private investments, causing them to disproportionately benefit the Global North elites (Gordon, 2016). They are considered to safeguard prosperity,

Table 1. Characteristics of selected city networks

City network	Founding year	Membership size (approx.)	Type	Geographic scope	Funding source	Governance structure
C40	2005	100	Private	Global	Philanthropic contributions, funding partners, grants	Privately supported; compliance-based membership
CityNet	1987	160	Public membership (multilevel)	Regional (Asia-Pacific)	Grants	Public, multi-level network
ICLEI	1990	2,500	Public membership (specialised)	Global	Fees, funding partners, grants	Public membership network
UCLG	1913	240,000	Public membership (generalist)	Global	Fees, funding partners, grants	Public membership network

Source(s): Authors' own elaboration based on [de Losada \(2019\)](#) and the websites of city networks

resources and lifestyles based on existing power relations (Davidson and Gleeson, 2015). Several scholars have thus criticised C40 for triggering a shift towards more neoliberal and strategic urbanism centred primarily on economic growth in climate policy (Bulkeley and Betsill, 2013; Bulkeley, 2021; Davidson and Gleeson, 2015). Its growing influence within climate governance has also raised concerns (Davidson *et al.*, 2019).

Governance of the city networks is also questioned, especially about the transparency of their decision-making processes (Davidson *et al.*, 2019; Bulkeley *et al.*, 2013). It is also criticised that cities of the Global North remain dominant in terms of the financing and coordination of city networks, despite the rising membership of Global South cities especially in C40 and UCLG (Davidson *et al.*, 2019; de Losada, 2019). Moreover, the strong influence of philanthropic organisations (especially private ones), as in the case of C40, has been indicated to hinder transparent decision-making and governance (Davidson *et al.*, 2019).

Private networks have grown rapidly by involving cities and mobilising resources to establish themselves as powerful players in the international policy arena (de Losada, 2019; Lecavalier and Gordon, 2020). This development has transformed the networks into the “most effective channel for promoting the political interests and influence of cities” (de Losada, 2019, p. 20). Moreover, as the influence of the network organisations themselves emerges, they are becoming agenda-setters in international platforms such as the UNFCCC and other global sustainability forums, where they advocate urban climate agendas (Lecavalier and Gordon, 2020; Acuto *et al.*, 2021). As their expertise and capacities increase, they themselves act as diplomatic agents within global climate change governance (Lecavalier and Gordon, 2020; Acuto *et al.*, 2021). The growing presence of international city networks in the global climate debate has attracted increased attention, especially from scholars of urban climate policy and governance. In that sense, investigating their framings towards climate justice reveals their potential influence on both the international community and cities.

2.2 Climate justice in urban contexts

Climate justice has been widely discussed in the literature as a framework for understanding how climate change disproportionately affects vulnerable communities and intersects with broader social issues (Jafry *et al.*, 2019). While different interventions are required at the global, national and local levels, there is a basic understanding that justice issues are closely related to the causes and impacts of climate change, and that decarbonisation needs to be achieved in a just and equitable manner (Jafry *et al.*, 2019; Sultana, 2022).

Initially, the concept of climate justice emerged from grass-roots environmental justice movements in the 1990s and was mobilised by social and environmental justice initiatives (Jafry *et al.*, 2019, p. 2; Newell *et al.*, 2021). Since then, it has been widely conceptualised in different contexts and settings such as grass-roots movements, academia and policymaking (for instance, Schlosberg and Collins, 2014; Newell *et al.*, 2021). It has also been interpreted differently across contexts, including climate finance, just transition, gender and urban development (Jafry *et al.*, 2019, p. 4).

At the global scale, climate justice has long been recognised as an issue of unfair distribution of climate impacts between the Global North and South. Along with the multilateral international negotiations, the cooperation with non-state actors as well as private investments has been strongly promoted to redress the Global North-South inequalities. From a justice perspective, however, scholars have raised concerns about introducing the market mechanism into climate policy. For instance, Okereke (2007) criticised a neoliberal view of justice. In the context of global climate governance, he

mentioned that neoliberal distributive justice seeks protection of private property rights and mutual advantage limited among the parties in the Global North (Okereke, 2007). A neoliberal perception of justice functions to accelerate “asymmetries of power and resources” between the Global North and South countries rather than mitigating them (Ciplet and Roberts, 2017, p. 150).

Furthermore, it also resonates with the conceptualisation of climate justice in a Western-centric way. Western-centric conceptualisation faces a risk of being ineffective and even producing additional injustices in the Global South contexts (Álvarez and Coolsaet, 2020). Recent scholarship thus stresses the need to decolonise the concept and co-produce knowledge with local communities. Scholars emphasise the decolonisation of climate justice, highlighting the need to recognise context-specific understandings and to move beyond normative frameworks (Sultana, 2022; Wilkens and Datchoua-Tirvaudey, 2022). At the urban scale, this also highlights the importance of co-production, where knowledge and policy are shaped collaboratively with local communities (Wilkens and Datchoua-Tirvaudey, 2022).

Besides climate change, cities have confronted multiple, overlapping crises and many urban residents experience intersecting injustices because of structural discrimination based on gender and race (see Crenshaw, 1991 on intersectionality). Intersectionality highlights how multiple forms of inequality interact to shape uneven experiences in urban climate governance. The issue of justice in local policymaking, particularly in urban settings, has recently regained attention because of intersecting and entrenched inequalities and the mobilisation of environmental justice organisations (OECD, 2024). Recent global phenomena, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and social justice movements, have further brought attention to issues of inequality, reinforcing the relevance of climate justice in contemporary debates.

Such injustices associated with urban climate issues can be interpreted based on the tenets of justice: *distributive justice*, *participatory (procedural) justice* and *recognition justice*. Schlosberg (2007) provides the foundational framework linking these dimensions, while subsequent studies further elaborate their application in environmental and climate contexts (e.g. Jenkins *et al.*, 2016; Evans and Phelan, 2016; Healy and Barry, 2017; Newell and Mulvaney, 2013; Walker, 2012). From the *distributive justice* perspective, climate policy concerns the fair distribution and allocation of public goods among individuals. It entails not only a distribution of positive resources, i.e. built environment and public services, but also negative outcomes such as pollution and allocation of pollutant industries. Moreover, distributive justice can be expanded to other aspects such as capacity building or education on climate change (McCauley and Heffron, 2018).

The *participatory justice* perspective, on the other hand, connotes the “fair and equitable institutional process of a state”, which is considered a key component of environmental justice (Schlosberg, 2007, p. 25). It includes the processes of participation, decision-making and information sharing, while marginalised communities often lack opportunities to be involved. Finally, the *recognition justice* perspective is another significant factor in climate policymaking. It draws attention to the recognition of all individuals regardless of race, gender, age as well as the dignity, values, lifestyles, cultures and whether they are respected and valued (Bulkeley *et al.*, 2013; Walker, 2012). Climate justice in cities thus consists of multidimensional components which require policymakers to address intersecting issues in an integrated manner.

Although such conceptual frameworks have been developed, assessing justice in urban governance is not an easy task. It may risk simplifying and depoliticising the complex and

context-specific nature of urban sustainability challenges, thereby making underlying justice concerns less visible (Joss and Rydin, 2018).

3. Method

3.1 Research design and document selection

This study employs content analysis. The selected documents were coded using the software MAXQDA2022. Content analysis has been widely used in social sciences, including environmental justice studies (for instance, Khanal *et al.*, 2024). It enables the understanding of phenomena in context (Weber, 1990; Elo and Kyngäs, 2008) and drawing inferences from the data (Prasad, 2008, p. 17). This study adopts content analysis using both inductive and deductive approaches, including document selection, category construction, defining units of analysis, sampling of content, and checking reliability of coding (Stempel, 1989), cited in Prasad, 2008).

Documents were selected from four city networks: C40, CityNet, ICLEI and UCLG to capture variation in governance structure, geographical scope and organisational missions. Details of the search hits and screening process are provided in Appendix 2. Documents were included if they contained one or more justice-related terms (e.g. justice, equity, equality, fairness or inclusion). Although this search strategy may underrepresent alternative vocabularies or implicit expressions of justice, it was adopted to maintain comparability across networks. While this study focuses on justice-related terms, not all instances were explicitly linked to climate change; some were situated within broader sustainability discourse.

To ensure the quality and suitability of the selected documents, document selection was guided by Scott's (1990) four criteria: *authenticity*, *credibility*, *representativeness* and *meaning*. *Authenticity* was ensured by selecting documents published on the official websites of the selected networks. *Credibility* was addressed by eliminating co-publications where the network was not the leading publisher. *Representativeness* was considered by selecting documents that reflect the city networks' main activities across the study period (2016–2022). Documents from regional offices and specific case studies were excluded to ensure comparability across networks. Co-published documents by the selected networks were also excluded to enable independent analysis of each network's position. To address *meaning*, documents containing sufficient contextual information were selected to allow interpretation of justice-related concepts, rather than documents such as short announcements or databases. Only documents available in English were analysed, and audiovisual materials were excluded.

As a result, 64 documents were selected: C40 (17 documents), CityNet (15 documents), ICLEI (16 documents) and UCLG (16 documents) (see Appendix 1). The selected documents comprise a diverse range of document types such as vision documents (e.g. strategic documents), guiding documents (e.g. toolkits), justice-oriented documents and activity documents (e.g. annual reports). The data set is designed to cover key justice-related discourse across the selected networks, rather than to provide a comprehensive account of all publications of city networks (see Appendix 2).

3.2 Category construction, units of analysis and coding reliability

A framework of categories for coding was developed based on the three analytical dimensions: *justice-related terms*, *justice dimensions* and *contexts*, and their corresponding subcategories as shown in Table 2. This approach combined deductive and inductive elements. The category of *justice dimensions* was developed deductively based on three widely accepted tenets of environmental justice (distributive, participatory and recognition)

Table 2. Analytical framework with definitions and examples

Categories	Subcategories	Definitions	Examples
<i>Justice-related terms</i>	1. Just, justice	Explicit use of the term “justice” or related forms in the text	Climate justice
	2. Inclus* (inclusive, inclusion, inclusivity)	Explicit use of the term “inclusion” or related forms in the text	Inclusive planning
	3. Equit* (equitable, equity)	Explicit use of the term “equity” or related forms in the text	Equitable outcome
	4. Equal* [equal, equality (-ies)]	Explicit use of the term “equality” or related forms in the text	Gender equality
	5. Fair, fairness	Explicit use of the term “fairness” or related forms in the text	Fair distribution
<i>Justice dimensions</i>	1. Distributive justice	Justice linked to the (mal)distribution/delivery of common goods such as mobility system, energy, funding, carbon budget or climate impacts	Fair distribution of climate funds, unfair distribution of climate impacts
	2. Participatory justice	Justice linked to participative processes including public participation, transparency, information sharing, etc.	Inclusive planning
	3. Recognition justice	Justice linked to recognition of vulnerable groups and identities including women, gender minorities, people of colour, youth, future generations, elderly, poor, ethnic minorities, etc.	Gender equality, just transition for youth
<i>Contexts</i>	4. Unspecified	Justice terms are used without specifying justice dimensions	Inclusive development for all
	1. Space	Justice linked to any kinds of geographical space such as urban space, city, community, and region	Inclusive city, spatial justice
	2. Economy	Justice linked to any activities related to economic issues such as finance, jobs, budget, etc.	Fair allocation of carbon budgets, inclusive economy
	3. Governance, policy, system	Justice references to policies, governance and political system of cities using terms such as governance, policy, politics and multilateral systems	A just recovery policy, inclusive planning process
	4. Pandemic	Justice linked to COVID-19 impacts and recovery	A just recovery policy, fair distribution of vaccines, inequitable impact of the pandemic
	5. Future	Justice linked to future, opportunities, outcomes, etc.	Creating cities’ future in a just and inclusive way

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Categories	Subcategories	Definitions	Examples
	6. Just transition	Justice linked to a just transition	Just transition, just and equitable transition for all
	7. Gender	Justice linked to any texts mentioning gender	Gender equality
	8. SDGs	Justice terms used in relation to SDGs and sustainable development agendas	SDG11 (Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable)
	9. Unspecified	Justice terms used without a clearly identifiable contextual category	The city innovates and starts taking inclusive action to address emissions and climate risk beyond...
	10. Others	Other contexts not captured by the above categories (e.g. resilience, culture, digital technology, mobility, migrant, specific projects by city networks not related to other contexts)	Digital transformation for inclusive city, an inclusive transportation
Source(s): Authors' own work			

while the categories of *justice terms* and *contexts* were developed inductively in the preliminary coding process.

The first category, *justice-related terms*, includes *justice*, *inclusion*, *equity*, *equality* and *fairness*. These terms are not conceptually interchangeable; however, they are grouped as “justice-related terms” for analytical purposes to capture how justice is articulated through a range of related vocabularies. This study does not aim to analyse the differences among these terms. Rather, it seeks to capture the broader patterns of a justice-related discourse by considering the terms collectively. The second category, *justice dimensions*, was based on the three tenets widely accepted in environmental justice. The third category, *contexts*, is divided into ten themes identified during initial coding. When justice-related terms were not explicitly linked to a specific justice dimension and/or context, they were coded as *unspecified*.

The primary unit of analysis was the paragraph, allowing the analysis to capture justice dimensions and the contextual meaning in which justice-related terms are embedded. In addition, individual sentences were coded when they represented key messages or statements. Overlapping coding was permitted where a passage corresponded to more than one category.

The coding process was conducted in two stages. Firstly, several documents were selected as samples for coding to refine and adjust the coding framework and subcategories. The coding framework was then revised based on the initial coding. Secondly, the revised framework was applied across the data set. Coding interpretations were reviewed and discussed among the authors to improve consistency in the application of the coding framework. A formal intercoder reliability test was not conducted; however, the coding framework was refined through multiple rounds of revision and discussion among the authors. The final coding was conducted using the revised coding framework across the data set.

4. Results

4.1 Use of justice-related terms

This section examines the frequency of justice-related terms by counting the number of coded paragraphs in the documents and then analyses chronological trends using occurrences per 1,000 words. In total, justice terms were coded 1,172 times across all the analysed documents. Differences in term use were observed across networks. Overall, C40 (507 times) and UCLG (365 times) used justice terms most frequently, followed by ICLEI (225 times) and CityNet (75 times). In C40, *inclusion* (175 times) and *equity* (164 times) were the most frequently used terms, followed by *justice* (79 times), *equality* (47 times) and *fairness* (42 times). Similarly, *inclusion* was the most frequently used term in CityNet (43 times) and ICLEI (101 times), with *equity* being the second most frequently used term (14 times and 67 times, respectively). UCLG, in contrast, employed *equality* the most (168 times), followed by *inclusion* (145 times). Across the four networks, *justice* (131 times in total) and *fairness* (65 times in total) were generally used less frequently than *inclusion*, *equality* and *equity*.

Although such differences among the terms were observed, chronological trends in the overall use of justice-related terminology were captured by analysing the terms collectively (Figure 1). The documents were classified by publication year, and justice-related term occurrences per 1,000 words were calculated between 2016 and 2022. The number of documents and total word counts by network and year are provided in the Supplementary Table to support interpretation of these trends. No documents met the selection criteria for ICLEI in 2020, resulting in missing values for that year. This gap should be considered when

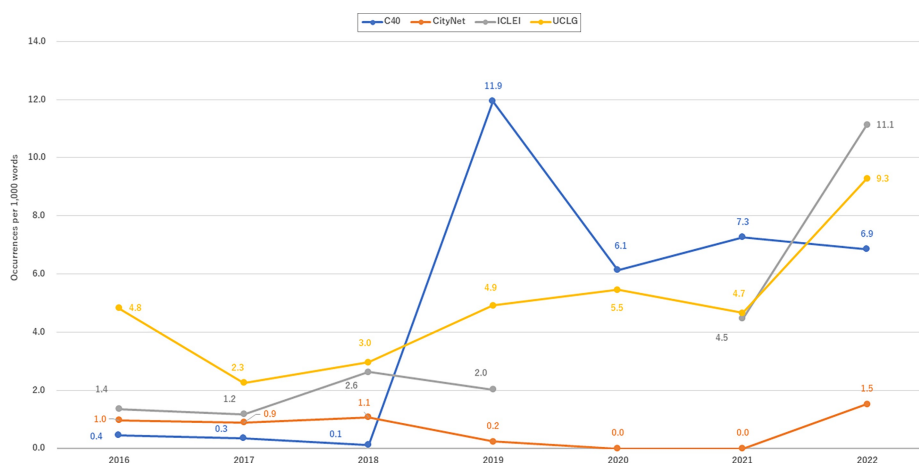


Figure 1. Trends in the usage of justice-related terms by city networks (2016–2022)

Note(s): Values represent justice-related term occurrences per 1,000 words for each publication year

Source: Authors' own work. Software: MAXQDA2022

interpreting longitudinal trends, as year-to-year changes may partly reflect document availability rather than shifts in justice discourse.

All networks except CityNet show an increasing trend in the use of justice-related terms, albeit with varying degrees of consistency. Most notably, C40 demonstrates a sharp increase after 2019, which may reflect increased attention to inequalities following the COVID-19 pandemic and racial justice movements (2019). C40 notes that “the pandemic revealed stark systemic inequalities” (C40 Cities, 2021a, p. 3) within cities, reflecting a shift towards integrating justice concerns into climate action narratives. In 2019, C40 also launched the Equity Pledge, which encouraged the member cities to sign and promote inclusive climate actions by caring for the vulnerable communities. Moreover, the membership standard of C40 was renewed in 2021, asking member cities to build an inclusive climate plan and deliver equitable outcomes (C40 Cities, 2021b).

ICLEI similarly shows increased justice term usage in 2021 and 2022, particularly through its Malmö Commitment on Inclusive and Equitable Communities launched in 2021. Although the significance of inclusion had been embedded in its broader sustainability discourse (Rok and Kuhn, 2012), ICLEI promotes inclusiveness and social equity as the core of urban sustainability as “sustainable development [...] is a right of all and not a privilege of a few” (ICLEI, 2021, p. 22).

Conversely, UCLG demonstrates a more consistent use of justice terminology over time, advocating for local democracy and human rights (UCLG, 2017). UCLG also links justice to the “right to the city” concept, which associates with inclusive and equitable access to urban space and sustainability (UCLG, 2019; UCLG, 2021). Besides, UCLG adopted the Pact for the Future of Humanity in 2022, highlighting the role of local governments to lead nature-positive pathways addressing inequalities and climate hazards (UCLG, 2022, p.14). CityNet documents showed the least frequent use of justice-related terms, with relatively few publications explicitly focusing on justice-related issues.

These patterns suggest that justice terminology has been widely mobilised across city networks. They also show varied patterns of articulation, including a more recent

intensification of equity and inclusion discourse in C40 and more established justice-oriented traditions in UCLG and ICLEI.

4.2 Dimensions of justice in city network discourse

How is justice conceived by these city networks? Figure 2 indicates the frequency of appearance of justice dimensions (*distributive*, *participatory* and *recognition justice*) identified within the documents. Some differences can be observed across the networks. *Distributive justice* appears more frequently in C40 documents than in the other networks. For instance, C40 refers to the equitable distribution of healthcare services and job opportunities. Conversely, *recognition justice* was most prominently employed by UCLG, emphasising gender equality issues.

Although such differences were observed, approximately half of the justice terminology was used without specifying what was meant by justice in the documents. This suggests that justice is often mobilised as a broad normative term without explicitly clarifying what makes a policy or intervention “just” in concrete terms. For example, ICLEI refers to the pursuit of “inclusive development for all” that safeguards natural support systems for human life (ICLEI, 2018, p. 13) in its commitment document, while C40 states that “climate, social and

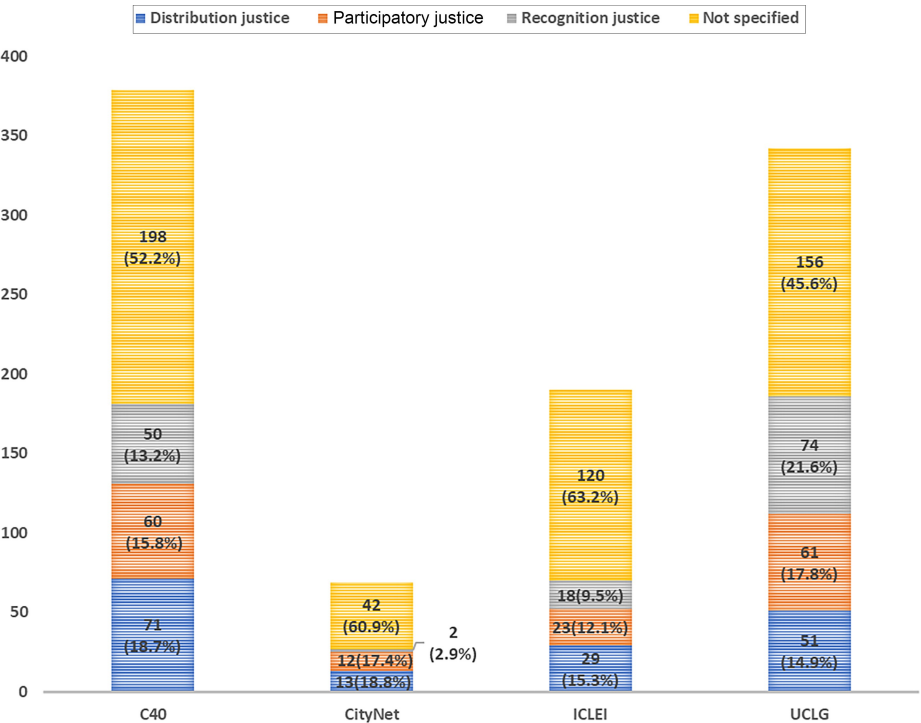


Figure 2. Frequency of justice dimensions identified in the selected city network documents

Scale: Number of coded terms

Source: Authors’ own work. Software: MAXQDA2022

economic justice can only be achieved together” (C40 Cities, 2019). In both cases, justice is invoked as a broad normative concept, yet the specific dimensions of justice being addressed remain open to interpretation. These patterns suggest that, although justice is frequently referred to across city networks, the explicit articulation of its dimensions remains inconsistent and often unspecified.

4.3 Contexts of justice framing

In what contexts do city networks refer to justice? This section examines the relationships between justice-related terms and contexts in which they are used by the respective networks (see Figure 3). Although the category of *others* accounted for the largest number of coded segments, it includes references to specific city network projects as well as contexts not captured by the thematic categories, such as resilience, culture, mobility and digital technology. Apart from the *others* category, C40 employed justice-related terms most frequently in the contexts of *pandemic* (59 times) and *governance, policy and system* (57 times). CityNet used them most in the context of *space* (22 times), while ICLEI used them most in *governance, policy and system* (33 times) (28 times). UCLG referred to justice largely in the contexts of *governance, policy and system* (83 times) and *gender* (76 times). Clear differences were observed: C40 accounted for more than half of the contexts of *economy, pandemic* and *just transition*. UCLG focused on *gender* far more than others. It is also notable that a substantial number of justice terms appeared without a clearly identifiable context, especially in C40 (53 times) and ICLEI (31 times). For example, C40 states that “The city innovates and starts taking inclusive action to address emissions and climate risk beyond the direct control of the city government [...]” (C40 Cities, 2021a, p. 19) without indicating a specific context. Similarly, ICLEI states “Cities and communities can be part of the solution to today’s challenges, encouraging sustainable approaches, innovation,

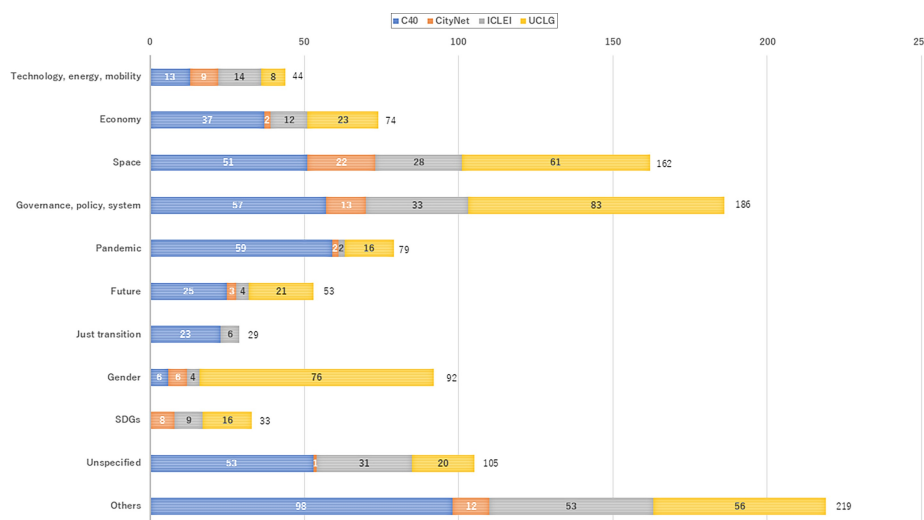


Figure 3. Frequency of justice contexts in city network documents

Scale: Number of coded terms

Note(s): See Table 2 for the definitions and representative examples of the contextual categories

Source: Authors' own work. Software: MAXQDA2022

adaptability, participation, and inclusiveness” (ICLEI, 2022, p. 1). Although that paragraph was coded as participatory justice, no specific context could be identified.

Relations between justice-related terms and contexts are presented in Figure 4. C40 makes a strong connection between *justice* and the *pandemic*, alongside intersections of *inclusion*, *equity* and *others*. This indicates that justice terminology in C40 is strongly associated with pandemic-related discourse. As previously discussed, C40 highlights the unequal impacts of COVID-19 and frames just recovery as a transition towards a more equitable society supported by economic investment for marginalised communities (C40 Cities, 2020). Economic perspectives are also prominent in C40’s framing of just transition.

UCLG demonstrates a strong relationship between *equality* and *gender*, while *inclusion* is clustered in the contexts of *space*, *governance*, *policy* and *system* contexts. Its documents frequently link justice to gender equality and the “right to the city” as their core priorities. Besides the climate crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic and global security issues are

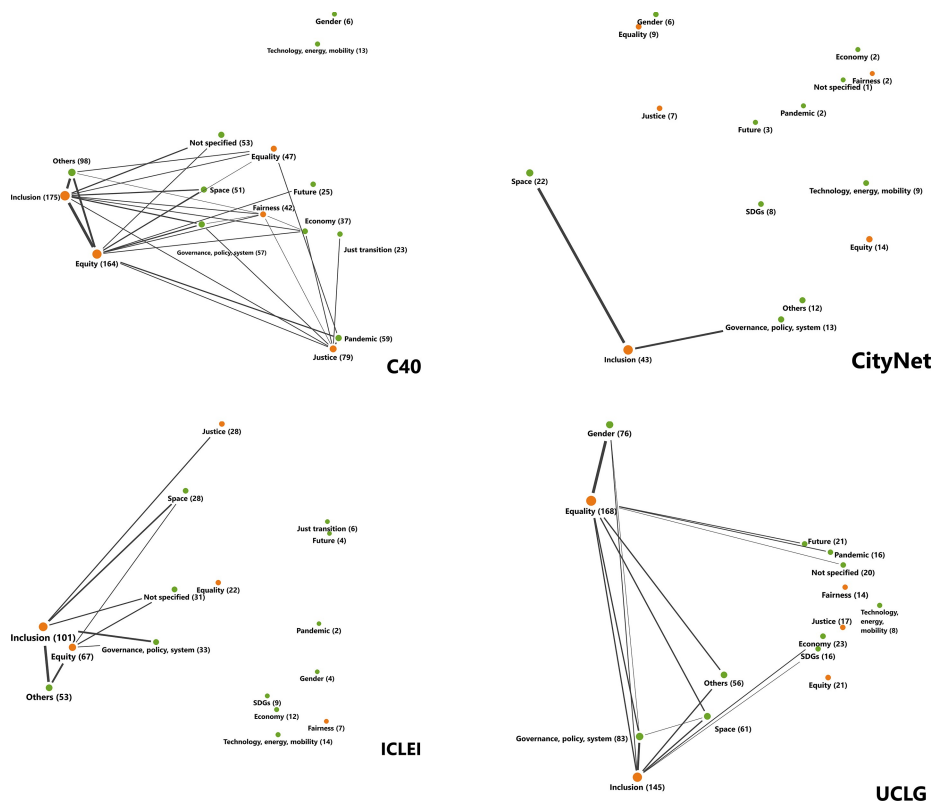


Figure 4. Co-occurrence of justice-related terms and contextual categories

Note(s): The figure shows the intersection of the passages containing justice-related terms (orange) and contextual categories (green). Dot size and number reflect coding frequency, while line widths indicate code co-occurrence (not shown for less than ten co-occurrences). Dots are not displayed if the terms are never coded

Source: Authors’ own work. Software: MAXQDA2022

highlighted as serious causes of a “dramatic setback for peace and democracy” and increasing inequality and injustice at the regional and local levels (UCLG, 2022, p. 5).

Compared to C40 and UCLG, ICLEI displays weaker clustering between justice-related terms and contexts, suggesting that justice is embedded in a broader sustainability discourse. Therefore, its documents exhibit a large proportion of content coded as *others*, and its usage of justice concepts is spread across various contexts. CityNet documents show limited clustering, mainly around the contexts of *space*, *governance*, *policy* and *system*. Overall, the studied CityNet documents contained fewer explicit justice-based terms, limiting a more detailed analysis of their justice framing.

4.4 Summary

The results of the content analysis are summarised in Table 3. Several commonalities were identified among the networks. *Inclusion* was employed most frequently, while *justice* and *fairness* appeared less often across the networks. Many of these terms were employed in a general sense, often without clearly identifiable contexts and/or specified justice dimensions. Differences were observed in how justice-related terms were mobilised across the networks. UCLG consistently framed justice through human rights, spatial justice and gender equality. Meanwhile, C40 showed an increase in justice terminology after 2019, with strong emphasis on the pandemic, just recovery and economic perspectives linked to just transition. ICLEI embedded justice within a broader sustainability discourse, without a strong concentration on particular contexts. CityNet used justice-related terms least frequently, limiting a more detailed analysis of its justice framing.

5. Discussion

5.1 Framing justice in international city networks

The findings reveal that justice is framed in distinct ways by these city networks, with differences rooted in their organisational priorities, dominant worldviews and missions. Justice framing is not merely a matter of terminology, but reflects the underlying perspectives through which city networks interpret justice. In this sense, justice functions as a lens that shapes how urban issues are understood and addressed.

As the findings indicate, C40 increasingly incorporates justice considerations into its documentation particularly after the pandemic. C40 documents also frequently underscore the importance of transitioning away from business as usual (C40 Cities, 2020). At the same time, justice-related terms are more frequently associated with economic contexts compared to other networks, suggesting a business-oriented framing.

This framing reflects tensions identified in the literature regarding the neoliberal orientation of urban climate governance. A neoliberal view of justice has been associated with the pursuit of private gains and the exclusion of vulnerable communities in climate governance (Ciplet and Roberts, 2017; Okereke, 2007). C40 has similarly been critiqued for emphasising the economic benefits of urban climate action (Davidson and Gleeson, 2015; Bulkeley, 2021). While the findings may suggest shifts in how C40 frames climate justice, further investigation is required to understand whether these shifts reflect substantive changes in governance approaches and practice.

On the other hand, UCLG frames justice explicitly in relation to human rights and spatial justice, often drawing on the concept of the “right to the city” in its documents. As previously discussed, UCLG has been one of the key actors to advocate the concept globally. However, the institutionalisation of the “right to the city” concept has also attracted criticism from academia and civil society, as its original aspiration for radical transformation has been diluted and reinterpreted as a policy framework compatible with capitalism (de Souza, 2010;

Table 3. Summary of justice framing across selected city networks

Categories/ city network	Justice-related terms	Justice dimensions	Contexts	Key characteristics
C40	• <i>Inclusion</i> is used most frequently (175 times) • <i>Justice, equity, fairness</i> are used more than other networks • Usage increased since 2019 due to the pandemic, racial justice movements • Introduction of the “equity pledge” and renewal of membership standard, emphasising inclusiveness and equity in climate actions	• Most of the justice-related terms are used without specifying justice dimensions • <i>Distribution</i> is coded more than others (e.g. equitable access to health care service in the pandemic, equitable distribution of carbon budgets)	• <i>Pandemic</i> (59 times) and <i>governance, policy and system</i> (57 times) appeared most frequently • <i>Justice terms</i> are used in the contexts of <i>pandemic</i> (59 times) and <i>just transition</i> (23 times) more than other networks. • Strong connotation of <i>justice</i> and <i>pandemic</i> (e.g. just recovery)	• Justice increasingly linked to just recovery and economic framing
CityNet	• Justice-related terms are used least frequently • <i>Inclusion</i> is used most frequently (43 times) • No chronological increase in the use of justice terms is observed in 2016–2022	• Most of the justice-related terms are used without specifying justice dimensions	• <i>Space</i> (22 times) is used the most • <i>Inclusion</i> is used most frequently in the context of <i>space</i> (22 times), but correlations with other contexts and justice-related terms remain weak	• Limited explicit justice-related terms
ICLEI	• <i>Inclusion</i> is used most frequently (101 times) • Increase in usage in 2021 and 2022 due to the justice terms used in the vision documents “Malmö Commitment”	• Most of the justice-related terms are used without specifying justice dimensions	• <i>Governance, policy and system</i> (33 times) and <i>space</i> (28 times) are used the most • The context of <i>space</i> (28 times) appeared frequently with <i>justice</i> (e.g. spatial justice)	• Justice embedded in broader sustainability discourse

(continued)

Table 3. Continued

Categories/ city network	Justice-related terms	Justice dimensions	Contexts	Key characteristics
UCLG	• <i>Equality</i> is used most frequently (168 times) • Consistent use of justice terms in 2016–2022	• Most of the justice-related terms are used without specifying justice dimensions • <i>Recognition</i> is coded more than other networks	• <i>Governance, policy and system</i> (83 times) and <i>gender</i> (76 times) are used the most • Greater focus on the context of <i>gender</i> (76 times) more than other networks	• Justice explicitly framed through human rights, gender equality, and spatial justice
Source(s): Authors' own work				

Kuymulu, 2013). The findings suggest that UCLG's conceptualisation reflects its framing of justice, wherein the original concept is incorporated yet diluted in the process of institutionalisation.

As illustrated in the Results (4.2 and 4.3), the findings also reveal that all city networks often articulate justice without specifying in what sense it is "just" or in what contexts. This lack of clarity suggests that justice may be used as tokenistic rhetoric. Recent literature and social movements have criticised the rhetorical use of justice as "justice-washing", arguing that it may hinder a truly just transition (Titifanue, 2025). Against this backdrop, it is necessary to assess whether justice has become merely a buzzword and whether "justice-washing" is taking place. This raises the question of whether the increasing use of justice-related terminology by city networks necessarily reflects a stronger commitment to justice in practice.

Justice washing also resonates with debates on decolonisation. The study encountered difficulties in capturing how CityNet frames justice due to its limited use of justice-related terms. CityNet comprises numerous member cities, including small and medium-sized cities from the Asia-Pacific region that are severely affected by climate impacts. The limited use of justice terms would not necessarily mean that they do not care about justice. This could be the result of CityNet's technology-driven character (de Losada, 2019) and/or the socio-political situations of the region.

Instead, this may suggest alternative ways of framing justice. From a decolonial perspective, justice may not always be articulated through dominant or standardised vocabularies but instead may be embedded in context-specific practices and priorities. This highlights the importance of co-production and conceptualisations of justice that are aligned with local contexts and priorities. As climate justice has often been conceptualised through a Western-centric perspective (Álvarez and Coolsaet, 2020), the limited use of explicit justice terminology may reflect different ways of understanding and operationalising justice.

These findings indicate that justice is framed differently across city networks, reflecting variations in organisational priorities and governance approaches. They further suggest that justice is not a unified concept commonly recognised across city networks. Rather, it is continuously reinterpreted and mobilised into more policy-relevant and actionable forms within their discourse. The findings also point to tensions between more technocratic or neoliberal framings of justice and more transformative approaches, where justice may either accommodate existing structures or seek to challenge them.

5.2 *Climate justice for whom? implications for urban climate governance*

Whilst some differences in justice framing were observed, these framings also carry broader implications for urban climate governance because they may shape power relations over how justice is promoted and represented in climate policies. This section examines how these different justice framings may influence the ways justice is interpreted and prioritised across city networks.

The findings show an increase in the use of justice-related terms across networks, indicating growing awareness of justice issues in urban climate policies. City networks have long been partners for member cities by providing practical information in the form of seminars, guidebooks or toolkits, and facilitating mutual learning and knowledge sharing to implement better climate policies. For instance, C40 published a series of guidebooks in 2019 such as Inclusive Planning Executive Guide, targeting a wide range of readers including city officials, community groups and youth. Through such support activities, city networks' ideas of justice could be introduced and mobilised in climate governance at the local level.

However, the extent of this support varies across networks. C40 publishes useful toolkits, yet its relationship with member cities is asymmetric, requiring strict compliance with C40's standards. To receive technical assistance from C40, member cities need to meet standards including an equity and inclusive perspective. In this context, there is a possibility that member cities may align with C40's idea of justice to achieve the targeted policy outcomes. This can be understood as a form of norm diffusion through which city networks disseminate particular understandings of justice.

On the other hand, city networks also foster common understandings of climate justice among member cities through declarations, pledges and commitment statements, such as the Malmö Commitment on Inclusive and Equitable Communities of ICLEI or Pact for the Future of Humanity of UCLG. They invite cities to sign these documents to disseminate the voices of cities globally. While these activities support urban climate policymaking and strengthen collective commitments, they may also reinforce particular normative understandings of justice across member cities. These tensions are also linked to broader power asymmetries within urban climate governance. City networks have been critiqued for their Northern-centric character and opaque governance (Davidson *et al.*, 2019). The increased use of justice-related terms may also reflect broader institutional responses to such criticism. Yet, the asymmetric relationship between a city network and its member cities raises concerns that a city network might interfere with locally developed perspectives and priorities on climate justice.

Furthermore, the power relations between the member cities, particularly between large cities and smaller cities, must also be considered. Large cities have greater financial and human resources and are therefore more capable of engaging in international affairs than smaller cities. City networks represent cities, but this representation is biased (Garcia-Chueca, 2019). C40, in particular, consists of megacities and is considered as an "exclusive club" (Garcia-Chueca, 2019, p. 106). When influence is concentrated in larger and better-resourced cities, this asymmetry might reinforce Northern-centric perceptions of justice, particularly among small and medium-sized cities in the Global South. City networks would thus be expected to mediate such power relations among the cities, leading to a common understanding of justice in climate crises. This also highlights the importance of co-production in urban climate governance, ensuring that justice is shaped collaboratively with local actors rather than predominantly through externally defined frameworks.

These power relations also shape whose perspectives are represented in the articulation of justice. From the perspective of intersectionality, urban justice cannot be understood as a single, universal category; rather it is constituted by overlapping layers of inequalities such as gender, race and economic status (Sultana, 2022). Several networks highlight intersecting forms of inequality in their documentation. For instance, C40 refers to racial justice and unfair impacts of the pandemic as an important factor for working on climate justice. ICLEI highlights justice and inclusiveness as a pillar of sustainable development, while UCLG emphasises gender equality and spatial justice in cities. Although city networks increasingly refer to justice, it remains unclear whether such framings address deeper structural and intersectional injustices in practice.

City networks have also played an external role *vis-à-vis* the international community and successfully championed the significance of cities. Given their growing influence within the international climate debate, they could advocate for climate justice effectively. For networks such as UCLG, where justice has long been a core part of their mission, urban climate justice is likely to gain greater visibility. Criticism against private networks like C40 also stems from the threat of its growing impact globally. Yet more than as an agent of cities, there is also a fear that their own influence in international climate debates is growing

stronger (Lecavalier and Gordon, 2020; Acuto *et al.*, 2021). This raises issues about whose perspectives are represented when justice is articulated in both global and local climate governance. In this sense, city networks may need to strengthen participatory and representative governance frameworks and clarify how justice commitments are translated into their activities. To realise a truly just climate policy in cities, the question of *climate justice for whom* should be repeatedly asked both externally and internally.

Overall, these findings suggest that justice framings within city networks have important implications for urban climate governance. While city networks can promote greater attention to inclusion and inequality, they also shape how justice is interpreted and prioritised. These dynamics highlight the importance of critically examining whose perspectives are represented in climate justice discourse and how more locally grounded and co-produced approaches can be incorporated into urban climate governance.

6. Conclusion

This study examined city networks and their framing of climate justice in urban settings. It compared documents published by C40, CityNet, ICLEI and UCLG to ascertain how they articulate their views on justice within climate policy. Overall, an increase in the use of justice-related language was noted in their documentation, although these were often narrated without specific implications or contexts. This suggests that justice is not a fixed, commonly recognised concept among city networks, but is continuously interpreted and mobilised in different ways within urban climate governance. The original mandate and *raison d'être* of each network influenced the way justice was employed in its documents. The usage of justice-related terms ranged from economic perspectives on urban climate action to concerns with gender, space, and other intersecting urban inequalities.

These findings indicate that justice framings have broader implications for urban climate governance. They may shape which justice concerns are prioritised, how justice is interpreted and whose perspectives are represented within climate action agendas. Furthermore, justice framings reflect power relations over who has the power to define and operationalise justice in climate action. As global climate governance becomes increasingly fragmented, understanding how city networks frame justice will remain important for assessing their role in shaping more just and sustainable urban futures.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the study focused on documentation issued by the headquarters of the selected city networks, excluding their regional activities. Secondly, the analysis was limited to published online documents. Thirdly, only documents published by each city network were considered, and co-published documents were excluded. The relationships between different city networks could be investigated further. Fourthly, the study examined justice-related discourse broadly rather than isolating climate justice strictly. Finally, the study focuses on discourse and does not assess how justice is implemented in practice, which may differ from its rhetorical articulation. Future studies could examine how justice framings are translated into urban climate governance and policy processes.

The increasing attention to justice across city networks presents an opportunity to advance urban climate justice globally. However, it remains unclear whether this growing rhetoric is reflected in actual implementation. This raises concerns about the risk of justice-washing, where justice is rhetorically mobilised without meaningful structural change. Further research is therefore required to assess how city networks influence the mobilisation of climate justice by cities and whether they contribute to more locally grounded climate justice initiatives for just urban futures.

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Appendix 1

Table A1. List of selected documents

No.	City network	Document type	Document name	Publication year
1	C40	Vision	Deadline 2020	2016
2	C40	Vision	10 Years of Results	2016
3	C40	Vision	Focused acceleration – A strategic approach to climate action in cities to 2030	2017
4	C40	Vision	Global green new deal	2019
5	C40	Vision	C40 Mayors Agenda for a Green and Just Recovery	2020
6	C40	Vision	C40 Strategic Recommendations Guidelines	2020
7	C40	Vision	Climate action planning framework	2020
8	C40	Vision	About C40	2021
9	C40	Vision	Statement by the C40 Cities Steering Committee on the organisation's new Leadership Standards – C40 Cities	2021
10	C40	Guide	Inclusive planning executive guide	2019
11	C40	Guide	Inclusive community engagement executive guide	2019
12	C40	Guide	Playbook inclusive community engagement	2019
13	C40	Guide	Equitable impacts executive guide	2019
14	C40	Activity	C40 Cities and ARUP, 2016	2018
15	C40	Activity	C40 Cities, 2019	2020
16	C40	Activity	C40 Cities, 2020	2021
17	C40	Activity	C40 Cities, 2021a, 2021b	2022
18	CityNet	Vision	Who We are	Unknown
19	CityNet	Vision	Leaflet	2021
20	CityNet	Activity	CityVoices Vol.07 No.01 Spring/Summer 2016	2016
21	CityNet	Activity	CityVoices Vol.07 No.02 Autumn/Winter 2016	2016
22	CityNet	Activity	CityVoices Vol.08 No.01 Spring/Summer 2017	2017
23	CityNet	Activity	CityVoices Vol.08 No.02 Autumn/Winter 2017	2017
24	CityNet	Activity	CityVoices Vol.09 No.01 Spring/Summer 2018	2018
25	CityNet	Activity	CityVoices Vol.09 No.02 Autumn/Winter 2018	2018
26	CityNet	Activity	CityVoices Vol.10 2019	2019
27	CityNet	Activity	CityNet Annual Report 2016	2017
28	CityNet	Activity	CityNet Annual Report 2017 Our City, Our Future	2018
29	CityNet	Activity	CityNet Annual Report 2018 Investing in Sustainable Urbanisation	2019
30	CityNet	Activity	CityNet Annual Report 2019 Making Headway on Sustainable Development through Local Solutions	2020
31	CityNet	Activity	CityNet Annual Report 2020 Building Back Better: Sustainable Recovery for Urban Development	2021
32	CityNet	Activity	CityNet Annual Report 2021 Resilience in a Changing World	2022
33	ICLEI	Vision	ICLEI – Local governments for sustainability	2016
34	ICLEI	Vision	The ICLEI Montréal Commitment and Strategic Vision 2018–2024	2018
35	ICLEI	Vision	How ICLEI advances global framework	2018
36	ICLEI	Vision	Cities and regions talanoa dialogues: Leveraging subnational action to raise climate ambition	2018
37	ICLEI	Vision	Charter	2021
38	ICLEI	Vision	Our approach	2021
39	ICLEI	Vision	Core values of ICLEI e.V.	2021

(continued)

Table A1. Continued

No.	City network	Document type	Document name	Publication year
40	ICLEI	Vision	ICLEI in the urban era: Our vision for a sustainable urban world	2021
41	ICLEI	Justice-oriented	The malmö commitment on inclusive & equitable communities	2022
42	ICLEI	Justice-oriented	Equitable and people-centered development	2022
43	ICLEI	Activity	ICLEI Corporate Report 2015–2016	2017
44	ICLEI	Activity	ICLEI Corporate Report 2016–2017	2018
45	ICLEI	Activity	ICLEI World Congress 2018 – Our Vision for Sustainable Urban Development in Action	2019
46	ICLEI	Activity	ICLEI Corporate Report 2018–2019	2019
47	ICLEI	Activity	Resilient cities, thriving cities: the evolution of urban resilience	2019
48	ICLEI	Activity	ICLEI World Congress 2021–2022	2022
49	UCLG	Vision	The bogotá commitment and action agenda	2016
50	UCLG	Vision	Strategic Priorities 2016–2022	2017
51	UCLG	Vision	Welcome to the centenary movement of local and regional governments	2019
52	UCLG	Vision	The durban political declation	2019
53	UCLG	Vision	The tangier declration local and regional governments have joined the conversation	2020
54	UCLG	Vision	UCLG pact for the future of humanity the Daejeon Political Declaration	2022
55	UCLG	Justice-oriented	Manifesto The Future of Equality: Beyond Beijing + 25	2019
56	UCLG	Justice-oriented	Inclusive and accessible cities	2019
57	UCLG	Justice-oriented	Right to the city	2019
58	UCLG	Justice-oriented	Decalogue for the Post COVID-19 Era	2020
59	UCLG	Activity	2016 Annual Rreport Renewed Leadership Committed to Sustainability, Equality and Justice	2017
60	UCLG	Activity	Annual Rreport 2017 Supporting Local and Regional Governments to Drive the Implementation of the Global Agendas	2018
61	UCLG	Activity	Annual Rreport 2018	2019
62	UCLG	Activity	Report of the Presidency 2017–2019	2019
63	UCLG	Activity	Report UCLG Retreat 2020	2020
64	UCLG	Activity	Retreat & Campus Report 2021	2021

Note(s): C40 Annual Report 2018 is not available on their website

Appendix 2. Search and screening process for document selection

C40:

- (1) Search the “Knowledge Hub” on the website published in 2016–2022: 439 documents identified (www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/?language_US).
- (2) Additional search of the C40 website to capture relevant materials not retrieved through the first step (www.c40.org/).
- (3) Retrieved materials were screened and selected according to the four document types and Scott’s (1990) criteria described in Section 3.2. Materials not meeting the document selection criteria (e.g. blogs, events, videos, and press releases) were excluded.

- (4) Selected documents: 17 documents.

CityNet:

- (1) Search the “Publication” and “News” on the website published in 2016–2022: 312 documents identified (<https://citynet-ap.org/front/design/newsroom>).
- (2) Additional search of the website of CityNet to capture relevant materials not retrieved through the first step (<https://citynet-ap.org/>).
- (3) Retrieved materials were screened and selected according to the four document types and Scott’s (1990) criteria described in Section 3.2. Materials not meeting the document selection criteria (e.g. blogs, events, videos, and press releases) were excluded.
- (4) Selected documents: 15 documents.

ICLEI:

- (1) Search the “ICLEI e-library” (<https://iclei.org/iclei-e-library/>) and “News” (<https://iclei.org/latest/?ptypeews>) on the website published in 2016–2022 by ICLEI World Secretariat: 790 documents identified.
- (2) Search the entire website of ICLEI to capture relevant materials not retrieved through the first step (<https://iclei.org/>).
- (3) Retrieved materials were screened and selected according to the four document types and Scott’s (1990) criteria described in Section 3.2. Materials not meeting the document selection criteria (e.g. blogs, events, videos, and press releases) were excluded.
- (4) Selected documents: 16 documents.

UCLG:

- (1) Search the “Publications” and “Policy Statement” published in 2016–2022: 236 documents identified (<https://uclg.org/resources-page/>).
- (2) Search the entire website of UCLG to capture relevant materials not retrieved through the first step (www.uclg.org/en).
- (3) Retrieved materials were screened and selected according to the four document types and Scott’s (1990) criteria described in Section 3.2. Materials not meeting the document selection criteria (e.g. blogs, events, videos, and press releases) were excluded.
- (4) Selected documents: 16 documents.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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