



CITIES GOVERNING THE CLIMATE TRANSITION

THE IMPACT OF WWF'S ONE PLANET CITY CHALLENGE
IN URBAN CLIMATE GOVERNANCE



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The One Planet City Challenge emerged at a time when cities were becoming increasingly visible in global climate debates, but their role was still not fully institutionalized. Climate governance remained largely organized around national commitments, international negotiations and state-led implementation. Cities were often seen as implementation sites rather than climate actors in their own right.

The OPCC contributed to changing that perception by defining what credible urban climate leadership should look like: evidence-based, transparent, comparable, science-aligned, locally grounded and globally connected. Through reporting, assessment, feedback, peer learning and public recognition, the OPCC helped cities understand their climate strategies not as isolated municipal initiatives, but as part of a broader global effort to limit warming, accelerate resilience and improve urban quality of life.

Fifteen years after its creation, the legacy of the OPCC can be celebrated through four main contributions:

- Legitimizing cities as global climate actors capable of shaping the climate transition.
- Creating a shared language for urban climate action through reporting, metrics, transparency and comparability.
- Turning ambition into action by encouraging cities to align their emissions reduction commitments and strategies with a 1.5 °C pathway.
- Democratizing climate leadership by showing that world-class urban climate action can emerge from any region, including the broader Global South.

Taken together, these contributions suggest a broader way of understanding the impact of initiatives like OPCC. Their value is not only found in direct outcomes, but in the norms, capacities, relationships and accountability practices they leave behind that influence a system at different levels.

Level	OPCC’s legacy
City level	Strengthened local climate planning, data use, institutional capacity, peer learning and implementation readiness.
Network level	Helped build shared methodologies, communities of practice, transparency norms, comparability and diffusion of urban climate innovation.
Global level	Contributed to the broader recognition of cities as climate actors, strengthened urban climate governance and supported global accountability for local climate action.

1. LEGITIMIZING CITIES AS GLOBAL CLIMATE ACTORS

The rise of cities in climate governance is one of the most significant institutional shifts of the past two decades. Urban governments have moved from the margins of climate policy to the center of global implementation debates. They are now recognized not only as places where emissions are produced and climate impacts are felt, but as political, technical and institutional actors capable of shaping the climate transition.

At its core, the OPCC treated urban governments as agents of transformation. It invited them to report their emissions, define targets, assess risks, improve plans, compare progress and communicate their ambition to a global audience. In doing so, it helped normalize the expectation that cities should set their own direction, mobilize local institutions, and contribute meaningfully to global goals.

As part of a broader ecosystem that included city networks, reporting platforms, international organizations, scientific institutions and national governments, the OPCC helped to provide that infrastructure, while also taking a distinctive approach. The OPCC combined public recognition with technical assessment. It encouraged ambition but linked ambition to evidence. It helped cities tell their climate stories, while also pushing them to strengthen the substance behind those stories.

In this sense, it helped shift the meaning of urban climate leadership. Leadership was not defined only by political visibility or high-profile commitments. It became increasingly associated with credible planning, transparent reporting, measurable targets, integration of mitigation and adaptation, and the ability to learn from others. And, by helping cities position these actions within a global climate framework, the OPCC also strengthened the bridge between local implementation and international ambition.

The OPCC contributed to position urban governments as agents of transformation and leaders in the climate transition.



2. CREATING A SHARED LANGUAGE FOR URBAN CLIMATE ACTION

Urban climate leadership cannot scale if every city defines ambition differently, reports progress in incompatible ways, or measures success through isolated projects. For cities to become credible actors in global climate governance, their actions need to be legible beyond their own borders.

Through its use of the CDP-ICLEI Track, the Challenge encouraged cities to uniformly report climate actions, strategies, emissions data, targets and progress through a standardized international platform.

Reporting, thus, was not simply an administrative requirement; it was a governance practice. By reporting, cities translated political commitments into structured information for decision-making: inventories, targets, risk assessments, mitigation actions, adaptation plans, governance arrangements and implementation priorities.

What might otherwise remain a mayoral pledge, a sectoral project or a local policy document became part of a broader architecture of accountability. OPCC cities were assessed not only as individual applicants, but as participants in a wider system of measurement and learning. Their plans and targets could be compared against climate trajectories, reviewed for quality, and used to identify opportunities for improvement.

In this regard, the value of the Strategic Feedback Reports delivered by WWF staff to participating city representatives is not merely evaluative; it is developmental. They help cities understand where their climate strategies stand in relation to science-based expectations, where gaps remain, and how future action could become more ambitious, integrated and effective. In this sense, OPCC converted reporting into feedback, and feedback into a pathway for institutional learning.

The shift is important. In many cities, climate action has historically been fragmented across departments. A shared reporting language helps connect these areas. It allows cities to move from lists of projects to integrated strategies; from isolated data points to emissions trajectories; from local narratives to globally recognizable benchmarks.

This shared language also helped make urban climate action more comparable without making it uniform. A fast-growing city in the Global South, a post-industrial European city and a small coastal municipality will face different constraints and opportunities. OPCC's contribution was not to erase those differences, but to create a framework through which different cities could be assessed according to common principles: transparency, ambition, evidence, coherence and progress.

This may be one of OPCC's most durable legacies. Awards and recognition cycles come and go. But the practices they help normalize can outlast the program itself.



The OPCC contributed to define shared concepts, comparable metrics, transparent reporting, and assessment frameworks that place cities in a pathway for institutional learning and transformation.



The OPCC helped cities bring the logic of the Paris Agreement into the everyday practice of urban climate governance and conceptualize integrated climate transitions.

3. TURNING AMBITION INTO ACTION: ALIGNING CITIES WITH A 1.5 °C PATHWAY

The Paris Agreement transformed the global climate conversation by establishing a shared long-term goal: limiting global warming to well below 2 °C and pursuing efforts to limit it to 1.5 °C. This shift was particularly important in the years following.

As cities increasingly declared climate emergencies, announced carbon neutrality goals or joined global campaigns, the challenge became less about whether cities were willing to act and more about whether their commitments were credible, measurable and implementable.

Ambition without pathways risks becoming aspirational. Pathways without implementation remain theoretical. The OPCC helped connect these dimensions by asking: is the city's ambition aligned with the scale and pace of emissions reduction needed for a climate-safe future?

Its assessment process encouraged cities to move towards credible urban climate plans with a target year and a percentage reduction, but also with an emissions baseline, sectoral analysis, interim milestones, governance arrangements, financing considerations, adaptation priorities, monitoring mechanisms and a clear understanding of how different policy areas interact.

The focus on 1.5 °C alignment also changed the meaning of leadership. In earlier phases of urban climate action, leadership was often associated with innovation: a new bus rapid transit corridor, a renewable energy project, a cycling program or a waste management initiative. While these actions remain important, alignment with 1.5 °C requires systemic transformation.

The Strategic Feedback Reports also allowed participating cities to understand how their existing commitments compared with science-based benchmarks and where their plans could be strengthened. This transformed the OPCC from a recognition platform into a learning mechanism.

Cities were not only competing for visibility; they were receiving insights that could support better planning, stronger targets and more effective implementation.

This matters because local climate governance is often constrained by limited data, fragmented responsibilities, short political cycles and insufficient financing. Many cities are willing to act but lack the technical capacity to assess whether their actions are sufficient. Others have ambitious political commitments but need stronger implementation pathways. The OPCC helped address this gap by providing a structured way to assess ambition, identify weaknesses and encourage continuous improvement.

The emphasis on 1.5 °C alignment also helped connect local action to global accountability. Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) remain the formal backbone of the Paris Agreement, but national targets cannot be achieved without implementation across territories, sectors and communities. Cities influence many of the systems that determine emissions pathways, including mobility, buildings, waste, urban form and local resilience. When cities align their plans with a 1.5 °C trajectory, they contribute to the credibility of national and global climate ambition.

This helped recognize that cities can also raise ambition from below. By setting stronger targets, improving data and demonstrating feasible solutions, urban governments can influence national policy, attract investment, mobilize communities and reshape expectations about what climate action should look like. This is one of the central dynamics of multilevel climate governance: ambition can move both upward and downward.



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4. DEMOCRATIZING CLIMATE LEADERSHIP

For many years, global narratives on urban climate leadership were dominated by cities from Europe and North America. As a result, urban climate action risked being understood as something associated primarily with wealth, institutional maturity or Northern visibility.

By creating a global platform, the OPCC contributed to a more democratic understanding of climate leadership. It showed that credible urban climate action can also emerge from cities dealing with informality, inequality, rapid urbanization, fiscal constraints, climate vulnerability and complex governance environments.

Most cities around the world are innovating under constraints. They may lack the financial resources of wealthier cities, but they often face stronger pressure to deliver climate action with immediate social benefits.

In this context, climate leadership is not only about reducing emissions; it is also about improving public transport, protecting vulnerable communities, managing heat and floods, expanding green infrastructure, improving air quality and building resilience in unequal urban environments. These forms of action are not secondary to global climate governance. They are central to making it legitimate and implementable, broadening the definition of what counts as climate leadership.

The OPCC widened the geography of recognition, participation and credibility. Since its creation in 2011, it has engaged over 1,000 cities from 90 countries, creating a critical mass of local governments advancing urban sustainability and climate action. The 2025–2026 cycle alone reached over 389 cities from 51 countries, while the 2023–2024 cycle included a record 359 cities.

The OPCC shows that the future of urban climate leadership will be plural, distributed and shaped by cities acting from different realities — including those where the climate transition must also be a social transition.



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SPOTLIGHT: LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN AS A GEOGRAPHY OF URBAN INNOVATION

Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) is one of the world's most urbanized regions, and its cities sit at the intersection of climate risk, social inequality and development opportunity. Urban climate action in the region cannot be separated from questions of mobility, housing, public space, water security, air quality, disaster risk, informality and social inclusion. This makes LAC an important testing ground for a more integrated understanding of climate leadership: one where mitigation, adaptation and quality of life are not treated as separate agendas, but as mutually reinforcing dimensions of urban transformation.

Participation of LAC cities in the OPCC has grown exponentially, expanding from just 30 pioneering cities in 2013 to 164 engaged municipalities in 2024. In the current 2025–2026 cycle, LAC has reached a historic high of 122 active cities, officially becoming the #1 participating region worldwide. This unmatched level of growth reflects a deep, sustained engagement that spans across diverse local contexts, demonstrating that Latin American cities are not merely passive data reporters, but active leaders contributing to the global evidence base for urban climate action.

Mexico City became the first Latin American city to receive the global OPCC title in 2019–2020, joining previous global winners such as Vancouver, Cape Town, Seoul, Paris and Uppsala. Other LAC cities also appeared in then in the finalist lists, including Buenos Aires, Lima, Rio de Janeiro, Montería, Loja, Valdivia and Escuintla. Lima was later selected as Peru's national winner in the 2021–2022 edition, with WWF Peru emphasizing OPCC's role as one of the largest and longest-running city climate challenges in the world. In Ecuador, WWF provided ground-level guidance to six small municipalities to build their very first GHG inventories completely from scratch.

By recognizing and supporting cities in LAC, the OPCC has made the global urban climate agenda more representative, more practical and more grounded in the realities of the cities where climate action must take place.

THE REMAINING CHALLENGE: SPEED AND SCALE

Looking ahead, the OPCC's legacy should be understood as a foundation for the next phase of urban climate action. While knowledge exists, data is increasingly available, and collaboration among cities is stronger than ever, the spread of proven solutions remains too slow. Solutions developed in one city can still take years to be understood, adapted and implemented elsewhere. This operational delay is increasingly incompatible with the urgency of the climate emergency.

The climate crisis is now moving faster than the systems designed to respond to it. And in response, the next phase of WWF cities' work should focus on accelerating implementation: making existing data more usable, turning reporting into actionable intelligence, and helping cities identify, adapt and replicate proven solutions at the speed and scale the climate crisis now demands.



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