PERSPECTIVE

Crisis as catalyst? Exploring cities' climate emergency declarations for transformative urban governance

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Abstract

Deep into the 'Climate Decade', radical and swift action to avert and prepare for climate disaster remains absent in cities, hindered by pervasive institutional barriers. In this perspective, we propose *capacities for transformative urban governance* as a lens to study the diffuse, institutional impacts of local governments' declarations of 'climate emergency'. We aim to illustrate an alternative approach to evaluating trans-municipal policy phenomena such as Climate Emergency Declarations – one that moves beyond linear assessments of policy progress and instead focuses on changes in urban governance arrangements. Drawing on existing scholarly reviews, we explore whether and how Climate Emergency Declarations reshape underlying governance conditions to support the pursuit of transformative change. In doing so, we foster a dialogue between reviews of Climate Emergency Declarations and Urban Transitions and Transformations research. This allows us to derive strategic directions for advancing transformative urban governance through Climate Emergency Declarations. Furthermore, Climate Emergency Declarations open new research avenues within Urban Transitions and Transformations scholarship to engage with the fear, grief, and conflicts arising from the urgency and threats associated with the climate crisis.

Science highlights

- Transformative governance capacities to assess cities' Climate Emergency Declarations (CEDs).
- CEDs offer opportunities for institutional learning beyond linear policy progress.
- Transformative urban governance capacities support critical reflection on changes in urban governance.
- CEDs open research directions on fear, grief, and conflict in transformative urban governance.

Policy and practice recommendations

- Cities' Climate Emergency Declarations (CEDs) need to overcome pervasive institutional barriers.
- Orienting CEDs towards institutional capacity building for transformative urban governance.

- CEDs establish dedicated positions, spaces, and channels for coordinating climate action.
- Untapped potential for radical experimentation, double-loop reflection, place-based community engagement.

Keywords Climate emergency, Transformative urban governance, Institutional learning, Governance capacity, Urban transition, Urban transformation

Introduction

Humanity is well into what has been termed the 'Climate Decade', yet the global urgency and momentum around climate action that surged in the late 2010s has waned. In December 2016, local governments started a large global movement by issuing Climate Emergency Declarations (CEDs), signalling that humanity faces a severe climate crisis requiring immediate and far-reaching responses. However, the movement has slowed significantly: only 109 of the 2,366 CEDs were made since 2022[1]. As cities face 'compound urban crises' (Westman et al. 2022), local governments are under-resourced and overburdened, with climate action increasingly sidelined by other priorities.

The leadership of cities in declaring a climate emergency is noteworthy, attesting to their prominent role in responding to the repeated failures of global and national climate governance (Smeds and Acuto 2018; Bulkeley 2021). However, CEDs have sparked intensive debate over whether and how they mobilise significant and rapid climate action. Critics express concerns about the political and psychological implications of framing the climate crisis as an 'emergency', which may legitimise authoritarian and exclusionary urban governance or instil fear and a sense of powerlessness (Patterson et al. 2021). The urgency implied by 'emergency' might be conflated with acting hastily and with a narrow focus. Yet a flurry of short-term measures may create a harmful fallacy of action, driving maladaptation and perpetuating social inequalities (Fazey et al. 2021). Research on the impacts of CEDs is limited, and shows significant variety in CEDs' scope, commitments, delivery planning and funding (e.g., Ruiz-Campillo et al. 2021; Davidson et al. 2025).

We propose *capacities for transformative urban governance* as an alternative approach for evaluating the impact of local governments' CEDs. Existing research focuses on the drivers and processes of CEDs (e.g., Howarth et al. 2021; Harvey-Scholes et al. 2023), their content (e.g., Gudde et al. 2021; Davidson et al. 2020; 2025; Bush and Doyon 2025), and citizen engagement (e.g., Ross et al. 2021; Satorras 2022). This evokes a linear progression from political declaration to policy implementation and outcomes, ignoring barriers in urban governance – such as fragmented priorities, short-termism, and technocracy – that have been repeatedly diagnosed as frustrating effective and collaborative climate action (Castán Broto and Westman 2020; Haarstad et al. 2024). In Urban Transitions and Transformations (UTT) research, transformative urban governance is conceptualised as a normative orientation guiding the search for governance innovations that help advance radical systems change (Loorbach et al. 2015; Frantzeskaki et al. 2019; Hölscher 2019). Capacities for transformative urban governance are understood to develop through adaptive processes of institutional learning, producing emergent non-linear outcomes across actor networks. In contrast to the linear perspective on CEDs and climate policy progress, this perspective helps trace the diffuse, longer-term

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[1] https://climateemergencydeclaration.org/climate-emergency-declarations-cover-15-million-citizens/.

institutional effects CEDs may have in overcoming persistent barriers to transformative change, even after the rate of new declarations has slowed.

We draw on reviews of CEDs to illustrate this approach to evaluating whether CEDs catalyse institutional learning relevant to four types of transformative urban governance capacities (Hölscher 2019). In doing so, we foster a dialogue between UTT research and CEDs. UTT scholarship offers insights into governance practices and tools (e.g., experimentation, visioning) to leverage CEDs in practice. Conversely, CEDs raise new research directions for transformative urban governance by foregrounding urgency, emotions, and conflicts surrounding the climate crisis.

We begin by positioning transformative urban governance as a possible outcome of CEDs (Sect. "Repositioning climate emergency declarations as a catalyst for transformative urban governance"). Next, we review the impact of CEDs on capacities for transformative urban governance and explore mutual insights and implications from UTT scholarship and CEDs (Sect. "Do climate emergency declarations strengthen capacities for transformative urban governance?"). We conclude with reflections on institutional learning facilitated by CEDs (Sect. "Concluding remarks").

Repositioning climate emergency declarations as a catalyst for transformative urban governance

The message of CEDs is clear: time is running out to avert the worst impacts of climate change. However, critics argue that CEDs remain vague about the responses they justify and how these should be deliberated and implemented. A main critique is that framing the climate crisis as an emergency obscures the profundity of the transformation required. 'Emergency' typically implies disaster management: urgent, top-down responses to immediate events (Davidson et al. 2020). Yet it is well established that the scale, complexity, and temporality of climate change also require systemic change across an intergenerational timespan (ibid.). Feola et al. (2021), for example, argue that climate change should be framed as a crisis of capitalism to address structural drivers of high-emission pathways and uneven vulnerabilities. Nissen and Cretney (2022) further show how local officials struggle to justify CEDs relative to other emergencies, taking pains to "frame the climate emergency as *not* an official civil defence emergency; *not* a change in legislative scope; *not* a centralisation of power" (ibid.: 352, emphasis added).

Bringing these debates into conversation with UTT research on transformative urban governance can reposition CEDs as potential catalysts for institutional learning – a precondition for supporting radical climate action. Like CEDs, UTT scholarship begins with the imperative to fundamentally shift pervasive, resource- and emission-intensive urban development (Torrens et al. 2021; Hölscher and Frantzeskaki 2021). UTT scholars diagnose the mismatch between conventional urban governance, which predefines problems and solutions, and the complexity and uncertainty of transformative change as the primary reason underlying barriers to rapid and radical action (Loorbach et al. 2015; Wolfram 2016). Transformative urban governance is conceptualised as a more adaptive and collaborative approach to anticipate, respond to, and shape – rather than control – transformation dynamics (Hölscher et al. 2019; Kramer et al. 2024).

In providing a new political impulse to policymaking, CEDs can catalyse processes of institutional learning through which capacities for transformative governance are developed. By institutional learning, we draw on understandings in urban planning and

environmental policy research (Steele 2011) to refer to purposive learning about how to change the institutional conditions (rules, norms, relations, etc.) that structure urban agency and may pose barriers to transformative change. Besides highlighting institutional changes as outcomes, institutional learning draws attention to the double-loop learning among urban policymakers, planners, and practitioners within diverse organisations, and social learning produced through collaboration and conflict among heterogeneous governance networks (van Mierlo and Beers 2020).

We discuss the existence and possibilities for institutional learning through CEDs using Hölscher's (2019) four *capacities for transformative urban governance*. Following models of transformative change, such as the 'x-curve' (Hebinck et al. 2022), these capacities include: *orchestrating* (coordination across sectors, levels, and time), *transforming* (radical innovation), *unlocking* (destabilisation of unsustainable systems), and *stewarding* (managing deep uncertainties). This framework offers a basis for analysing institutional learning through CEDs in reference to the emerging institutional conditions needed to foster and deepen the climate actions needed.

At the same time, CEDs prompt new considerations on how transformative urban governance can engage the varied impacts and temporalities of climate change. They may foreground the risk of sudden disasters and the need for long-term responses to cumulative effects. Acute crises may create openings for radical change (Robin et al. 2019), yet no optimal responses exist, as both capabilities for action and judgements about what is appropriate evolve alongside the progression of climate impacts. Many harms associated with climate change are better understood as 'slow emergencies', progressing gradually and discreetly, but amounting to significant harm, especially for marginalised communities (Howard et al. 2020, after Anderson et al. 2019).

Do climate emergency declarations strengthen capacities for transformative urban governance?

We review existing studies on CEDs to examine whether, and in what ways, the declarations activate and support capacities for transformative urban governance. Our literature search in Scopus using the query "climate emergency declaration" yielded 39 articles. After screening abstracts, we identified 13 empirical studies focusing on local government-led CEDs. An additional five articles were included through snowballing from the full-text screening. We also draw on the fourth author's qualitative policy analysis on CEDs in Australia.

Academic literature on local government CED remains limited – both in quantity and geographic diversity. The articles reflect the uneven geographical spread of CEDs: UK, Australia, Germany, Canada, USA, and Italy adopted the vast majority of CEDs (Ruiz-Campillo et al. 2021). The studies include cities in Australia (Chou 2020; Nissen and Cretney 2022; Greenfield et al. 2022; Too et al. 2024; Davidson et al. 2020, 2025; Bush and Doyon 2025), Italy (Salvia et al. 2023), Germany (Rilling and Tosun 2021; Brokow-Loga and Krüger 2023; Brokow-Loga and Bertram 2024), New Zealand (Nissen and Cretney 2022), Spain (Satorras 2022), Sweden (Henman et al. 2023), and UK (Howarth et al. 2021; Ross et al. 2021; Gudde et al. 2021; Dyson and Harvey-Scholes 2022; Harvey-Scholes et al. 2023; Too et al. 2024). Ruiz-Campillo et al. (2021) provide a textual analysis of 300 declarations from countries including Brazil, Sweden, Germany, France,

Table 1 Developing capacities for transformative urban governance through CEDs

Capacity	Institutional learning through CEDs + identified markers of learning - absence of markers of learning	UTT directions to strengthen CEDs	CEDs' directions for UTT research
Orchestrating capacity	+ Agenda-setting to prioritise climate mitigation and adaptation, and connect to other goals and policy domains + Dedicated positions, spaces and channels for coordination and collaboration +/- Opportunities for citizen engagement (e.g. climate assemblies), but overall limited - Limited goals, metrics and resourcing to guide and assess progress on CEDs	Co-creating inspiring visions for CEDs that guide urban development and enable social mobilisation Employing epistemic justice principles and tailoring engagement to different needs Equipping intermediaries with resources (time, money), knowledge and skills Translating CEDs into concrete targets and monitoring metrics that centre on social and environmental justice	Politicising integrative urban governance to reveal and allow struggle, contestation and conflict about trade-offs and losses, and provide space for action that falls outside of the vision and formal political arenas
Transforming capacity	+ Catalysing exemplary local climate action across multiple sectors - Prioritisation of conventional and technological climate actions - No explicit attention to creating space for experimentation	Supporting experimentation to trial and scale 'small win' innovations for rapid, radical change Embedding experimentation as a dynamic and collaborative governance mode	Connecting experimentation to instances of acute shocks and crises to tap into experiential knowledge about specific vulnerabilities
Unlocking capacity	+ Raising awareness and education to mobilise communities + Advocating other tiers of government to enable effective urban action - No decisive changes in regulation and incentive structures - No attention to deep-rooted unsustainability and structural injustices	Facilitating double-loop reflection about root causes of unsustainability (assumptions, rules, norms, actor networks), and opportunities and benefits for change Strengthening ties with 'regime' actors to facilitate openness to, and uptake of alternative ideas	Mobilising crisis as an opportunity for decisive de-institutionalisation of existing regimes
Stewarding capacity	+ Formulating aim to enhance resilience and giving meaning to differentiated climate change impacts - No attention to dealing with uncertainties, extreme events, losses and community resilience	Grounding vulnerabilities of differentiated urban communities are embedded within political, socio-economic and material configurations Building partnerships with and supporting local communities' self-organisation	Developing more empathetic forms of urban governance to provide space for pain, fear and grief about inevitable loss

and Spain. Rode (2019) discusses the implications of CEDs for urban climate governance without select case studies.

Our analysis is summarised in Table 1. We do not aim to provide a systematic assessment, but rather to illustrate which markers of each capacity (detailed in Hölscher 2019) are present or absent in reviews of CEDs. We interpret our findings in dialogue with UTT literature to derive recommendations on how CEDs might more effectively catalyse the capacities. Additionally, we outline directions for future UTT research to address the implications of CEDs for transformative urban governance.

Orchestrating capacity: a systems approach to climate action

Orchestrating capacity supports coordination across policy domains, governance levels, jurisdictions, and timeframes. Most studies suggest CEDs increase political priority and legitimacy for climate action (Rode 2019; Davidson et al. 2020; Salvia et al. 2023; Bush and Doyon 2025) – for example, by requiring climate impact assessments for new policy and planning decisions (Dyson and Harvey-Scholes 2022; Brokow-Loga and Krüger

2023). In Australia, Randwick City Council (2019) pledged to "examine how council plans, policies and works programs can address the climate emergency, and ensure this is embedded".

However, scholars doubt whether sectoral policies become more integrative of climate considerations (Rilling and Tosun 2021; Howarth et al. 2021; Gudde et al. 2021; Henman et al. 2023), and caution that many CEDs' narrow focus on mitigation and adaptation fosters maladaptation (Chou 2020; Davidson et al. 2025; Bush and Doyon 2025). UTT researchers stress *co-creative visioning* to create integrative, inspiring future narratives and guide the search for actions that balance immediate and long-term needs (Loorbach et al. 2015; Kramer et al. 2024). In Australia, some cities include goals like 'thriving communities' and 'liveable cities' (Bush and Doyon 2025), which may counter fear and powerlessness associated with CEDs. Konstanz (Germany) articulates a radical vision of a de-growth city (Brokow-Loga and Krüger 2023). While most CEDs lack metrics and monitoring (Nissen and Cretney 2022; Ross et al. 2021), Konstanz commits to bi-annual progress reviews.

As a main achievement, many CEDs *establish intermediary governance structures* – such as climate officers, dedicated offices, and cross-departmental teams – to foster collaboration across sectors and governance levels (Rode 2019; Ruiz-Campillo et al. 2021; Rilling and Tosun 2021; Greenfield et al. 2022; Salvia et al. 2023). Although CEDs often increase staffing, cities also report rising workloads (Rilling and Tosun 2021; Brokow-Loga and Krüger 2023). UTT scholars emphasise dedicated investment in time and expertise for knowledge curation, communication, and conflict mediation (Ehnert et al. 2022; Lord et al. 2024). Transnational and regional city networks can support knowledge exchange and implementation (Davidson et al. 2019). Some regions demonstrate alliances among small neighbouring municipalities for joint CEDs and shared initiatives (Salvia et al. 2023; Bush and Doyon 2025).

Despite concerns that CEDs would privilege state power over pluralistic responses, evidence for this is limited (Ruiz-Campillo et al. 2021; Greenfield et al. 2022). Still, reviews stress a need for more *inclusive citizen engagement* (Gudde et al. 2021; Greenfield et al. 2022; Davidson et al. 2025). Engagement tends to occur through expertise-driven approaches during declaration development (Ross et al. 2021; Satorras 2022; Brokow-Loga and Krüger 2023). In the UK, post-declaration engagements include citizens' juries, youth parliaments, and participation in agency working groups (Gudde et al. 2021; Dyson and Harvey-Scholes 2022). UTT scholars concerned with epistemic justice call for inclusion of marginalised groups and 'voiceless actors' – such as nature and future generations – by tailoring engagement to actors' differing capabilities and addressing power imbalances (Wijsman and Feagan 2019; Smeds et al. 2023).

CEDs raise important questions about how *conflicts are handled within urban governance* given unavoidable trade-offs and losses. Scholars caution against a reductive 'integration agenda' in 'climate-connected' forms of urbanism (Bulkeley 2021). Rilling and Tosun (2021) note that policy officers see climate policy integration as sometimes reducing efficiency, blurring responsibility, and adding workload. Others question whether the de-escalating way of developing CEDs, channelling grassroot movements into bureaucratic processes, precludes more political, i.e. decidedly less post-political, urban governance (Satorras 2022; Brokow-Loga and Krüger 2023). This requires future research

on how to create space for debate and dissent, and for action beyond official visions and formal political arenas (Davies et al. 2021).

Transforming capacity: nurturing experimentation to support radical innovation

Transforming capacity involves developing and embedding innovative ways of doing, thinking, and organising that explore and create pathways for desirable transformative change. CEDs catalyse local climate action across various sectors (e.g., building, energy, waste, transport) (Chou 2020; Rode 2019; Davidson et al. 2020; Salvia et al. 2023). However, reviews indicate that most declarations reinforce conventional, technology-driven actions, including retrofits, transport decarbonisation, and carbon pricing (Rode 2019; Dyson and Harvey-Scholes 2022; Greenfield et al. 2022; Henman et al. 2023). Brokow-Loga and Krüger (2023: 530) criticise the continued logic of inter-municipal competition prevalent in these approaches, promoting "strategies of reputation building instead of fundamental change".

We did not find evidence that CEDs are used to *create space for facilitating more radical and open-ended forms of innovation.* Some CEDs aim to nurture partnerships with businesses, academia, and civil society to deliver climate innovation (Dyson and Harvey-Scholes 2022; Henman et al. 2023). Sydney's Inner West Council (2019) created the Office of Renewable Energy Innovation to pilot new business and policy models for accelerating renewable energy, and the City of Melbourne (2019) partnered with universities to test smart meters and building intelligence systems. These examples demonstrate that CEDs can lead to new governance structures around innovation, but they reflect a technology-driven, instrumental view, focused on amplifying tested solutions rather than facilitating more open-ended, radical forms of innovation.

Thus, CEDs miss opportunities to *embed urban experimentation* as a pluralistic, dynamic governance mode. UTT scholars examine experimentation as a governance mode to trial practical interventions that work within specific contexts (von Wirth et al. 2019; Ehnert et al. 2023). Presently, experimentation runs into pervasive barriers of existing governance arrangements, such as risk-aversion, the pre-definition of solutions, neoliberal ideologies, and 'projectification' (Bulkeley 2021; Torrens and von Wirth 2021). CEDs could be positioned within efforts to embed urban experimentation through portfolio-based approaches (Torrens and von Wirth 2021), and nesting projects as temporary organisations into different types of permanent organisations (Smeds 2021).

CEDs raise questions about *linking experimentation with responses to acute shocks.* Crisis management scholars suggest crises generate experiential knowledge that can be used "to prevent and/or respond to future, similar events, to address the structural causes of acute crisis, and to increase the resilience of particularly vulnerable populations" (Robin et al. 2019: 245). Acute shocks make specific vulnerabilities and hard-to-reach populations (e.g., undocumented migrants) visible (ibid.). Aligning experimentation with crisis response demands caution to avoid veering into urban solutionism. The haste to materialise rapid, tangible outcomes from experimentation may reinforce depoliticised, growth-oriented, and unequal urban politics (Sierhuis et al. 2023).

Unlocking capacity: dismantling vested interests and powerful actor networks

Unlocking capacity involves challenging the structural drivers of high-emission pathways, maladaptation, and unequal vulnerabilities. CEDs signal strong calls from local

governments for major changes across economic investment, transport, behaviour, and land use (Rode 2019; Chou 2020; Davidson et al. 2020; Salvia et al. 2023). They often include awareness raising and education to mobilise local communities (Greenfield et al. 2022; Henman et al. 2023; Salvia et al. 2023). Yet, most lack regulatory changes, new incentive structures, and attention to social justice – thus failing to confront entrenched economic interests and historically embedded systems of oppression and discrimination in cities (Rode 2019; Ruitz-Campillo et al. 2021; Howarth et al. 2021; Nissen and Cretney 2022; Brokow-Loga and Krüger 2023; Davidson et al. 2025; Bush and Doyon 2025). Examples of more far-reaching approaches include Moreland's (Australia) CED, which identifies targeted support to alleviate energy poverty (Greenfield et al. 2022), and Konstanz's (Germany) CED, which calls for fossil fuel divestment, socially just CO_2 pricing, and climate-protected social housing (Brokow-Loga and Krüger 2023).

Dominant urban growth dependencies remain key reasons why radical climate action repeatedly loses out in political debates and planning procedures surrounding CEDs (Brokow-Loga and Krüger 2023; Too et al. 2024). UTT scholarship traditionally grapples with the obduracy of unsustainable urban regimes, which comprise historically embedded technologies, institutions, and practices that reproduce the status quo (Quitzau et al. 2013). Studies suggest promoting *interactions between regime and niche actors* to foster learning about the challenges faced by the regime to change and opportunities to resolve them (Yazar et al. 2020; Shahani et al. 2022). Along these lines, the collaborative CED process in Louisiana enabled participants to question norms and expose paradoxes, like relying on fossil fuel revenues to fund coastal restoration (Fazey et al. 2021).

Many CEDs call on higher tiers of government to set enabling frameworks for local action (Rode 2019; Howarth et al. 2021; Greenfield et al. 2022; Salvia et al. 2023). (Supra-)National regulations often inhibit municipalities from disrupting unsustainable regimes like automobility and fossil-fuelled heating (Nissen and Cretney 2022; Dyson and Harvey-Scholes 2022; Too et al. 2024). UTT scholars explore multi-level governance reform to empower municipalities – through new regulatory authority (Smeds and Cavoli 2021) or multi-level partnership mechanisms (Shabb et al. 2023). Some cities already use CEDs to explore independent finance tools such as green bonds or climate referenda in the absence of supportive central government policy (Dyson and Harvey-Scholes 2022).

CEDs raise the question of *whether crises can create openings for decisive de-institutionalisation* of existing regimes (Yazar et al. 2020), particularly amid today's political polarisation. The emergency rhetoric has drawn comparisons to structural transformation of society led by the state akin to responses to WWII or COVID-19 crisis governance (Nissen and Cretney 2022). However, top-down restructuring may inadvertently worsen tensions between diverse value systems and problem understandings (Patterson et al. 2021), triggering backlash and resistance. As Satorras (2022) shows in Barcelona, virulent debates between climate movements and powerful business elites during CED development may offer a promising avenue to rethink responsibility and legitimacy in urban climate governance.

Stewarding capacity: Preparing for and coping with uncertainty

Stewarding capacity helps prepare for and cope with short-term and long-term uncertainties, while leveraging opportunities to enhance sustainability and social equity. Although many CEDs invoke terms like 'resilience' or 'resilient communities' in response

to local climate impacts, most make only cursory mention of climate risks (Greenfield et al. 2022; Henman et al. 2023; Salvia et al. 2023; Bush and Doyon 2025). Few consider the benefits that preparing for climate change impacts offers local communities, the root causes of climate vulnerability, or the uneven consequences shaped by social and economic status (Howarth et al. 2021; Satorras 2022; Brokow-Loga and Krüger 2023). An exception is Portland (USA), whose declaration adopts a climate justice approach, acknowledging that communities of colour, low-income populations and different age groups are disproportionately affected, and committing to an equitable distribution of benefits from climate actions (City of Portland 2021).

A major challenge lies in closing knowledge gaps about the specific needs of diverse social groups and the unequal distributional effects of climate risks across populations. UTT scholars emphasise *place-based approaches at the local and neighbourhood levels*, where urban challenges are more directly visible and intersect with urban political economies (von Wirth et al. 2016; Peri-Blanes et al. 2022; Kramer et al. 2024). Such perspectives are especially associated with research in global South cities, which unravel the inextricable links between climate-related risks, poverty, and marginalisation, and prioritise those most affected (Ziervogel et al. 2019; Castán Broto and Westman 2020).

UTT research points to existing community networks and civil society initiatives as important sources for strengthening local self-organisation and fostering government-community partnerships due to their neighbourhood embeddedness (Frantzeskaki et al. 2019; Kramer et al. 2024). Some CEDs offer examples of emerging place-based resilience policy and planning, focused on *nurturing relationships with local communities*, especially those most at risk, to better understand and address their needs, and combat marginalisation. In Barcelona (Spain), the involvement of local organisations working on agroecology supported the inclusion of novel actions supporting food sovereignty for climate resilience (Satorras 2022). The city of Portland (USA) strengthens the capacity of community-based organisations working with vulnerable communities and hosts youth-led summits on climate justice.

CEDs warrant careful *attention to the emotional struggles* of living in a state of 'permanent emergency' and facing adaptation limits (Dyson and Harvey-Scholes 2022). Future research could explore more empathetic forms of governance, which create space for surfacing a spectrum of emotions, including anger, pain, and grief about loss, while nurturing receptivity and intrinsic motivation to change. Attention to emotions can open new pathways for personal and collective responses (Davidson and Kecinski 2022). Promising research avenues include the development of nuanced views about the need for processes of 'mourning and releasing' (Coops et al. 2024) before embracing new futures. Without attending to these dimensions, CEDs could prompt severe backlash and become prone to efforts to delegitimise any effort to tackle the climate crisis.

Concluding remarks

Eight years after Darebin City Council in Melbourne, Australia, became the first to declare a climate emergency, global attention to the movement has evaporated amid shifting political priorities. This reality foregrounds the need for institutional learning to overcome persistent barriers hindering the necessary step-change in tackling climate change. Through this dialogue between CEDs and UTT research, we explored the types

of institutional changes needed and how they are occurring (or not) to foster transformative changes in urban governance.

The capacities lens enabled critical debate and reflection on the diffuse, longer-term dynamics induced by CEDs. We show that CEDs contribute to institutional changes, primarily by prioritising climate mitigation and adaptation, and by establishing intermediary positions, spaces, and channels. It thus appears that CEDs, at least to some extent, create conditions for more ambitious and comprehensive climate responses. Severe shortcomings remain in how citizens are engaged, social justice is addressed, and radical innovation and decisive regulatory changes are enabled. Therefore, CEDs also risk weakening transformative capacities when used to legitimate and reinforce neoliberal urban governance and urban growth dependencies.

CEDs raise new questions for UTT scholarship, particularly regarding the multiple temporalities of the climate crisis. Acute shocks and insidious, cumulative changes – with unevenly distributed impacts – challenge current approaches to urban experimentation and (de-)institutionalisation. The compounding of crises challenges the notion of 'windows of opportunity', and highlights the importance of timing in transformative change. Further attention is needed to the ways climate action is postponed or deprioritised. At the same time, CEDs highlight the possibility for political interventions that mobilise further action, which in turn demand attention to the emotional dimension of the crisis and the responses to it.

We do not present institutional learning as a panacea for climate action. Institutional change and (social) learning perspectives in UTT research do not significantly incorporate attention to the role of financial resources in shaping capacities, including the structural constraints posed by financialised neoliberal capitalism (Hadfield and Coenen 2022) and the transformative potential of community-driven climate finance (Robin 2021). This critique also applies to our perspective presented here: the uneven geographical spread of CEDs indicates different contextual preferences and prerequisites shaping climate discourses and governance responses. While we have presented a framework-style assessment of institutional learning related to CEDs, in practice, such learning is not a one-time checkbox exercise. Rather, the core governance challenge is to sustain investment in slack resources, organisational cultures open to change, and transformative leadership, supporting those actors – councillors, politicians, policymakers, activists – who drive institutional innovation on the ground.

Declarations

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