

Viewpoint: Look to cities, but past their mayors, for new climate solutions

March 1 2023, by Christof Brandtner



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

A little over three months after the COP27 climate summit in Sharm-el-Sheikh drew to a close, the global community is no closer to finding a solution to the problem of climate change. The most-attended climate change conference to date has left observers [frustrated](#) and [disillusioned](#). What started with the [promise](#) of a much-needed focus on environmental

justice ended with unambitious commitments [muffled](#) by fossil fuel producers and insufficient funds on the table.

Despite the disappointment, there is continued hope in finding a high-level solution to an exceedingly complex problem: the preparations for COP28 in UAE are [well underway](#). In Dubai, governments and international organizations will continue to demand grand, sweeping changes requiring monumental amounts of money and coordination.

But major policies such as a Green New Deal or UN-sanctioned treaties face a perennial struggle to find political support and are notoriously unreliable. Recent failures recall the debacle of the United States' 2017 exit from the Paris Climate Agreement, a legally binding treaty to keep global warming under 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. The allegiance of the United States, then-president Donald Trump [claimed](#), was "to Pittsburgh, not Paris."

From Pittsburgh to Paris

In fact, what could have stood out as a cautionary tale about the unpredictability of federal commitment to climate action ended up reminding us that the real action may be off the national stage. In 2017, it took less than a week for the mayors of Pittsburgh and Paris, Bill Peduto and Anne Hidalgo, to [issue a joint statement](#) reaffirming the goals of the Paris Agreement. Hundreds of cities in the United States and worldwide have since joined climate pacts such as the ["We're Still In"](#) campaign or the [Global Covenant of Mayors](#), supported by philanthropists and politicians.

The willingness of [city](#) leaders to take a more significant role in tackling the world's most pressing problems suggests that one way of turning the tide of climate change is to focus on [experimentation](#) and [innovation](#) from the bottom up. Instead of trying to implement grand plans, cities

and communities can continue to lead the way with experimentation.

Do cities deserve such optimism? They do, with a caveat, suggests the example of energy-efficient construction, which I have studied over the past years as a senior research fellow at Stanford University's [Civic Life of Cities Lab](#) and a scholar at the University of Chicago's [Mansueto Institute for Urban Innovation](#). Green construction is an integral part of the solution to climate change. The built environment accounts for an [estimated](#) 40% of [carbon emissions](#) in industrialized cities, and the green [building](#) industry has rapidly and steadily grown for two decades.

The technology for green buildings already exists, and its widespread application by introducing reasonably high standards for new buildings and retrofitting old ones [can make a real difference](#) in the fight against climate change worldwide. Investments in building energy efficiency are at an all-time high. Despite these advances, a [COP 27 status report](#) shows that increased CO₂ emissions from new construction has outpaced building energy efficiency. Building greener may not be enough, but green building demonstrates that cities can lead profound changes.

But the overall search for technical solutions does not account for one of the crucial facts of city climate action: not all cities were part of this movement toward green construction right away, and some are still lagging. Smaller, poorer, and more conservatively led cities are unlikely to take [climate action](#). My research [suggests](#) that this is not only because of politics or a lack of resources but also because of a lack of a thriving civil society.

Greening from the bottom up

In a [new study](#) published in the *American Journal of Sociology*, I analyzed the uptake of [LEED](#) (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), a certification of high energy efficient construction developed

by the U.S. Green Building Council, among over 10,000 towns, cities, and villages in the United States. I examined which cities first turned to green construction, and how many of a city's buildings are among the roughly [60,000](#) that sought LEED certification after 15 years of construction with LEED being an available standard.

I show that cities with a greater presence of nonprofit organizations that are willing to take risks to pursue their social mission made the turn to green construction sooner. Cities with a more robust nonprofit sector also have more energy-efficient buildings in total. Washington, DC, for instance, is among the national leaders of green construction and features a rich population of nonprofit organizations. One of the city's chief sustainability planners told me in 2017 that "the number of LEED buildings is a general benchmark of the impact of the built environment on climate."

Why this strong association? In cities like Chicago, Cincinnati, and San Francisco, it was museums, laboratories, and foundations that paved the way to the first green buildings in the early 2000s. Office buildings, apartment complexes, and retailers followed suit once it became clear that energy-efficient buildings see savings and national recognition. The tangible link between nonprofit organizations and green buildings remains even when considering state and municipal regulatory initiatives to lift environmental standards.

This is not to say that city leaders can simply delegate climate initiatives to civic leaders. Local laws make a big difference—according to my analyses, about 10 to 18 additional green buildings per year after city hall passed an incentive or requirement for new buildings to be certifiably green. But legislators mostly approved such policies in cities that already see a lush landscape of [green buildings](#) constructed by project owners passionate about sustainability. States and nations, in turn, have learned from successful local regulations of green

construction and [raised the bar](#) for cities and construction owners behind the curve.

Pushing for carbon neutrality

This finding suggests that initiatives for green building did not originate in international and national policymaking, nor do they originate in the proactive policies of mayors. The key is nonprofit organizations that offer proofs of concept, engaged expert organizations (such as the [World Green Building Council](#) or the [Urban Sustainability Directors Network](#)) that develop and teach protocols for action, and city administrations that make best practices visible and, when the case is clear, even mandatory.

Cities from New York to Buenos Aires to Copenhagen have been pushing toward [carbon neutrality](#). To get there, we need to encourage the development of a healthy civil society in cities worldwide that have room to experiment and share their experiences. The implication is to support nonprofit organizations and community groups working to address climate change, even if returns to investment are not immediate. It means providing funding and resources to these organizations so that they can take risks and pursue their values.

High-level solutions and grand designs will not fix climate change. Conferences like COP are an essential venue for subnational governments to share best practices. Still, the bulk of the action will have to take place at the interfaces between local governments and the organized citizenry. Our next big idea for how to fight against [climate change](#) will not come from COP28's host city Dubai, but from Montréal, Nairobi, Grenoble, or Vienna. For that to happen, our leaders have to take experimentation and innovation from the bottom up and cultivate a vibrant civil society at least as seriously as they do annual negotiations between self-interested nations.

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