

From Crisis Hotspots to Convening Powers

African Cities Launch Diplomacy to Create Climate Mobility Partnerships

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► Key Takeaways

- African local governments cannot afford to turn into climate mobility hotspots without taking proactive action – drawing on local knowledge, convening power and access to affected communities.
- However, national governments consider questions of migration and asylum as exclusive national competencies and rarely see local governments as partners. This lack of recognition restricts municipal access to partnerships, funding, and resources further.
- To overcome this challenge, African local governments leverage city diplomacy to (1) push the urban dimension of climate mobility higher on the international agenda, (2) find international partners for locally led action, and (3) claim access to international funding.
- Even though local governments face high barriers in global climate mobility debates stretching across the policy fields of climate change, migration, and displacement, city diplomacy can enable African local governments to convene cross sectoral multi-stakeholder partnerships on climate mobility.

Introduction

In 2021, the Mayor of Freetown joined forces with counterparts around the world to create the Global Mayors Task Force on Climate and Migration.¹ In the same year, African city representatives contributed to the launch of the first climate mobility pavilion at COP26 – the United Nations annual Conference of the Parties on Climate Change. Since then, representatives of cities such as Accra, Freetown, Kampala and Nyamagabe have spoken up at a wide range of international conferences to advocate for the recognition of cities as essential partners in global climate mobility debates.²

Table 1: How to define climate mobility?

In accordance with the definition of the African Climate Mobility Initiative (ACMI), this *Ifri Memo* considers climate mobility as “the movement of people that is motivated by the adverse effects of sudden- or slow-onset climate impacts. It occurs both within and across national borders and involves different levels of constraints, agency, and vulnerability, encompassing both forced displacement and migration, including planned relocation. Climate mobility occurs over different distances and can be temporary, recurrent, or permanent.”³

Table 2: How to define city diplomacy?

City diplomacy enables local governments to “engage in relations with actors on an international stage with the aim of representing themselves and their interest to one another.”⁴ This *Ifri Memo* treats the terms international city engagement and international city agency as synonyms.

This *Ifri Memo* is structured around a series of questions: Why do African cities engage in city diplomacy on climate mobility? What diplomatic objectives do they pursue? What have these cities achieved so far? What city diplomacy challenges remain? And what opportunities are there for African city representatives in global climate mobility debates in the years to come?

At first sight, African city diplomacy in global climate mobility debates may seem surprising, given that in most African countries questions of migration and displacement are of exclusive national responsibility. African local governments, therefore, lack legal mandates and – in consequence – adequate resources and capacities to address urban migration and displacement, including in the context of climate change. However, research from the Equal Partnerships project shows that it is exactly due to this lack of

1. C40, “C40-MMC Global Mayors Task Force on Climate and Migration”, 2024, available at: www.c40.org.

2. J. Stürner-Siovitz and L. J. Morthorst, “African City Diplomacy in Global Climate Mobility Debates”, *Global Networks*, Vol. 24, No. 4, 2024, pp. 1-20.

3. African Climate Mobility Initiative (ACMI), *African Shifts: The Africa Climate Mobility Report. Addressing Climate-Forced Migration & Displacement*, 2023, p. 37.

4. R. van der Pluijm, *City Diplomacy: The Expanding Role of Cities in International Politics*, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2007, available at: www.clingendael.org.

recognition and resources that African city representatives feel compelled to reach out to the global level. Through their city diplomacy engagement, they pursue three goals:

- ▀ Advocating among (inter)national actors to focus (and take action on) the urban dimension of climate mobility developments;
- ▀ Finding national and international partners for locally-led action on climate mobility;
- ▀ Opening access to international funding, including loss and damage funding, to implement local strategies on climate mobility and the right to remain.

This *Ifri Memo* explores these three diplomacy goals, discusses current African city diplomacy achievements and challenges, and presents a number of opportunities for future city engagement to drive multi-stakeholder action on climate mobility.

So far it was mostly Northern cities that led city diplomacy engagement in the policy fields of migration, displacement, or climate change. However, when it comes to climate mobility, new development can be observed over the last three years: city diplomacy from the Global South spearheaded by cities from Africa, Asia, the Pacific Region, or Latin America and the Caribbean; cities particularly affected by climate change and with longstanding climate mobility experience. This Ifri memo aims to refocus city diplomacy research to explore objectives, barriers, and achievements of international city engagement from the Global South.

Research presented in this *Memo* is drawn from the policy-oriented Equal Partnerships project, a collaboration between African and European research institutes, city networks, and African local governments. Equal Partnerships explores opportunities and challenges of multi-stakeholder collaborations to address migration, displacement, and climate mobility in African intermediary cities.⁵

Why do African cities launch city diplomacy on climate mobility?

The World Bank's second Groundswell report on internal climate migration⁶ as well as research by the African Climate Mobility Initiative (ACMI) show that Africa is highly impacted by climate change and environmental disasters. In particular, sudden- and slow onset events, such as draughts, floods, landslides, or rising sea levels, will force people in low-income and climate vulnerable regions to move within and between African countries.⁷ As migration and displacement are often multicausal, other factors, including conflicts or economic hardship, also contribute to people's decision to leave their homes.

5. Equal Partnerships, *Equal Partnerships: African Intermediary Cities as Actors and Partners in Urban Migration Governance*, 2024, available at: <https://equal-partnerships.com>.

6. The World Bank's second Groundswell report presents projections and analysis of internal climate migration for East Asia and the Pacific, North Africa, and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. See World Bank, *Groundswell Part 2: Acting on Internal Climate Migration*, 2021.

7. Ibid.; ACMI, *African Shifts: The Africa Climate Mobility Report*, op. cit.

Africa is highly impacted by climate change and environmental disasters

Scenarios by ACMI show that by 2050 up to 113 million persons could be displaced in the context of climate change, assuming high emissions and inequitable development under a “rocky road scenario.” Even a “high road scenario” assuming high emissions and inclusive development predicts displacements of up to 95 million people.⁸ Similar prospects are presented by the Groundswell report, which considers Sub-Saharan Africa as a region with particularly high climate mobility movements, with scenarios predicting up to 85.7 million climate migrants, followed by regions like North Africa with up to 19.3

million.⁹ Both ACMI and Groundswell scenarios highlight that most of these movements will take place within countries rather than across borders.

Rural to urban as well as urban to urban climate mobility movements contribute to Africa’s rapid urbanization.¹⁰ People who have lost their livelihoods or employment due to climate events may end up in marginalized parts of urban centers or informal settlements. Some of these include areas of high environmental risk prone to flooding or landslides. People settling in such informal urban areas are therefore at risk of repeated displacement.¹¹

African cities are, thus, hubs of climate change and climate mobility. While the focus of international organizations and research institutions has for long been put predominantly on capital cities, the Africa Climate Mobility Research Network (ACMRN) shows that intermediary cities will play an increasingly important role; as persons moving in the context of climate change might consider these cities more accessible on a geographic, economic, social, and cultural level than major metropolises.¹² With annual growth rates between 7% and 9%, some African intermediary cities are already growing a lot faster than capital cities.¹³

Table 3: How to define intermediary cities?

“Intermediary cities host between 50,000 and 1 million inhabitants. They are intermediary in the sense that they link capital cities with smaller towns and rural areas through flows of goods, ideas, funds and people. At the same time, these cities are secondary regarding economic status, municipal capacities and resources, as national development strategies and (inter)national investment have for a long time prioritized capital cities.”¹⁴

8. ACMI, *African Shifts: The Africa Climate Mobility Report*, op. cit., p. 74, 79.

9. World Bank, *Groundswell Part 2: Acting on Internal Climate Migration*, 2021, p. xxii.

10. B. Tietjen, K. Jacobsen, and J. Hollander, “Climate Change and Urban Migration in Sub-Saharan African Cities: Impacts and Governance Challenges”, *Journal of Climate Resilience and Justice*, Vol. 1, 2023, pp. 20-32.

11. MMC and C40, *Cities, Climate and Migration. The Role of Cities at the Climate-Migration Nexus*, 2021.

12. J. Stürner-Siovitz, E. Easton-Calabria, and L. Nzamba Nzamba, “Climate Mobility in African Intermediary Cities: Strengthening Local Government Responses through Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships”, *CMARN Policy Briefs*, 6/2024.

13. S. Schlimmer, “Governing Cities in Africa. Panorama of Challenges and Perspectives”, *Études de l’Ifri*, February 2022.

14. J. Stürner-Siovitz, E. Easton-Calabria and L. Nzamba Nzamba, “Climate Mobility in African Intermediary Cities”, op. cit.

African cities face an urban governance paradox

As 70% of all African cities are already highly vulnerable to climate shocks,¹⁵ a growing number of local governments recognize that their cities cannot afford to become hubs of climate change without transforming into climate actors as well. However, African local governments face an essential governance paradox: even though their cities are directly impacted by national and international policymaking (or the absence thereof), local governments lack access to (inter)national policy for addressing migration, displacement, and climate change. Barriers for cities include their status as local governments for which the international system traditionally does not foresee a role, limited knowledge about official international policy-making processes, a lack of contacts and networks to obtain behind-the-scenes information on international negotiations, and limited funding and human resources for international travel. Such barriers affect cities around the world. However, the lack of international representation of cities from the Global South implies that these barriers are even more difficult to overcome for cities from that region. In consequence, African local governments directly impacted by climate change and climate mobility struggle to co-shape (inter)national strategies with their local expertise, are denied access to (inter)national funding opportunities, and are not considered relevant partners by those national governments and international actors taking action on climate mobility. This lack of recognition leads to a vicious cycle, as it neglects valuable local know-how and perpetuates a situation of limited municipal resources and capacities to address climate mobility – the very reason why local governments were not considered relevant actors in the first place.

What city diplomacy objectives do African cities pursue?

To overcome this governance paradox, a small but growing number of African local governments such as Accra, Freetown or Nyamagabe leverage city diplomacy. These local governments argue that international climate mobility debates need to include local actors to ensure that international policymaking is anchored in local potentials and needs and has a real impact on the ground. Research by the Equal Partnerships project shows that to date African local governments pursue three objectives via their diplomatic engagement.

City representatives seek to push the urban dimension higher on the intergovernmental climate mobility agenda. Arguing that a great part of people affected by climate mobility move into, out of, or within cities, city representatives aim to shift the attention of national governments and intergovernmental organizations towards urban areas; making the point that cities are not only central spaces where climate change happens but could also be vital cooperation partners for national governments and

15. African Development Bank, “Particularly Exposed to Climate Shocks, African Cities are Turning to Adaptation and Resilience”, 2022, available at: www.afdb.org.

international organizations aiming to address climate mobility. To draw the attention of the international community to urban matters, city representatives make use of existing city networks in the policy fields of migration and climate change, such as C40 and the Mayors Migration Council (MMC). City representatives highlight that international debates in both policy fora dedicated to migration and displacement as well as fora discussing climate change have for a long time neglected the central role of (African) cities.¹⁶ Therefore, African city representatives call upon national governments and international organizations to pay greater attention to interdependencies between climate change, climate mobility, and urbanization. In the words of Yvonne Aki-Sawyer, the Mayor of Freetown:

“At the end of the day, climate change is happening at the local level, it’s happening in your neighborhood and my neighborhood.”¹⁷

For this very reason, city organizations such as the MMC and C40 have launched the Global Mayors Task Force on Climate and Migration. In 2021, the Task Force published an Action Agenda at COP26, highlighting urban action on climate change, presenting future city commitments for mitigation and adaptation to climate change and calling upon national and international actors to recognize cities as relevant partners:

“[Cities] need greater support from national governments and the international community, to ensure that the urban dimension of climate and migration is adequately recognized in local, national, and international action, leaving no one behind – including migrants and displaced people.”¹⁸

Second, city representatives make use of diplomatic engagement to identify and connect with national and international partners willing to support locally-led action on climate mobility. To broaden their reach and benefit from networking expertise, African cities join global and regional city organizations such as United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the MMC, C40, Cities Alliance or UCLG Africa. They also create new city movements or collaborate with multi-actor initiatives. Central among the latter is the African Climate Mobility Initiative (ACMI), bringing together a wide range of international, national, and local actors, coordinated by the Global Centre for Climate Mobility (GCCM). ACMI advocates for a policy agenda centered on locally anchored solutions to address climate mobility. Local governments and urban spaces play a key role in this regard:

“When considering policy responses to climate mobility, national, regional and continental processes can benefit from the lessons and

16. J. Stürner-Siovitiz and L. J. Morthorst, “African City Diplomacy in Global Climate Mobility Debates”, op. cit., pp. 1-20.

17. S. Jerving, “Are Cities More Capable Than National Governments on Climate Action?”, *Devex*, November 18, 2022, available at: www.devex.com.

18. MMC and C40, *Global Mayors Action Agenda on Climate and Migration*, 2021, p. 18.

insights of African mayors and local leaders who are on the frontlines of finding solutions.”¹⁹

City representatives highlight that national and international actors interested in taking action on climate mobility cannot afford to ignore the local knowledge, community access, and local convening power of municipal governments. They emphasize that local governments are not supplicants but should be considered equal partners with important assets.²⁰

In order to implement locally led action, African city representatives claim access to international funding. The ability to secure international funding in the policy fields of migration and climate change, including loss and damage funding, would be a game changer for African cities. Similar to cities in other low- and middle-income countries around the world, local revenue only accounts for around 10% to 20% of municipal income in many cities, whereas fiscal transfers from national governments constitute 80% to 90%. However, national funding is frequently earmarked, thus constraining municipal capacities for context-specific action. On the international level, city access to loans is restricted by limited creditworthiness.²¹ To tackle the challenge of limited financial resources, city representatives make use of international fora to call for municipal access to international funding, including in the context of the newly developed Loss and Damage Fund for Developing Countries:

“City leaders are at the cutting edge of inclusive climate action, and we need this to be reflected by funding streams, with more climate finance going into cities and particularly for adaptation in the Global South.”²²

Achievements of city diplomacy

An important city diplomacy achievement when it comes to accessing international funding is the climate mobility chapter of the Global Cities Fund for Migrants and Refugees (GCF). Responding to cities’ call for adequate financial resources to address questions of migration, displacement, and climate mobility, the city diplomacy organization MMC made use of its international network and influence to build partnerships with C40, Metropolis, UCLG, UN-Habitat, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to launch this new fund. Local governments can apply for an average funding of USD 200,000 dedicated to a specific overarching topic over a period of 18 months. Funding is provided by international foundations such as the Hilton Foundation, the Robert Bosch Foundation, or the Ikea Foundation. In 2022, the fund launched a climate mobility chapter with a specific focus on African cities. Since then, 14 African cities have benefited from GCF support to drive

19. African Climate Mobility Initiative (ACMI), “Urban Engines”, 2022, available at: <https://africa.climate-mobility.org>.

20. Mayors Migration Council (MMC), “Global Cities Fund for Migrants and Refugees Announces Six New African City Grantees Delivering Solutions for People Affected by Climate Crisis”, 2022, available at www.mayorsmigrationcouncil.org.

21. MMC, “Municipal Finance for Migrants and Refugees: The State of Play. An Overview of the Barriers Facing City Governments and a Path Forward for Building More Inclusive Cities”, 2022, pp. 18, 19, 35.

22. MMC and C40, *COP26 Summary Report. C40-MMC Global Mayors Task Force on Climate and Migration*, 2021, p. 10.

local action. For instance, Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) has offered green job training to migrants and refugees in order to improve the city's waste management circular economy. Hargeisa municipality (Somaliland) has resettled 140 internally displaced households at risk of losing their homes to flooding. Monrovia (Liberia) has built resilience against coastal erosion through re-forestation and has offered business start-up funding to migrant women.²³ In addition to the direct impact which such locally-led engagement has on the lives of urban inhabitants, it also serves as proof of concept to demonstrate to international donors and finance mechanisms what local governments are capable of achieving, given adequate funding.²⁴

A less tangible but equally important city diplomacy achievement is the fact that cities are slowly recognized as actors in climate mobility debates, instead of being merely

Cities make use of international fora to call for municipal access to international funding

considered spaces for national or international engagement.²⁵

The growing presence of city speakers addressing climate mobility at COP26, 27, 28 and 29, at the Global Refugee Forum 2023, the Global Forum on Migration and Development 2024, and GCCM's Climate Mobility Summits is a case in point. It is interesting to note that while city diplomacy in international migration fora was for several years dominated by cities from the Global North, city representatives from Africa, Asia, the Pacific Region, Latin

America, and the Caribbean are the ones driving city diplomacy on climate mobility in collaboration with city networks, researchers, philanthropic, and international actors.²⁶ While some national governments were still debating the existence of man-made climate change, these cities would provide concrete evidence of climate change and demonstrate the urgency of taking international action.

Challenges of city diplomacy

The gradually growing recognition of international city agency is not self-evident, given that city diplomacy faces high barriers in global climate mobility debates.

First, cities aiming to engage internationally in these debates need to access different policy spheres – migration, displacement, and climate change – simultaneously. These policy spheres are governed by overlapping but also distinct sets of actors. To launch cross-sectorial city diplomacy cities need (1) a broad network of partners who know the interdependencies and gaps between these policy fields, (2) local knowledge on how to approach city diplomacy, and (3) adequate resources for international city engagement.

23. MMC, "Global Cities Fund for Migrants and Refugees Announces Six New African City Grantees Delivering Solutions for People Affected by Climate Crisis", *op. cit.*

24. *Ibid.*

25. MMC and C40, *op. cit.*

26. MMC, "Climate Migration", 2024, available at: <https://mayorsmigrationcouncil.org>.

However, the high competitiveness between established international actors and the lack of clear global governance structures on climate mobility make it particularly difficult for cities to establish themselves as new actors in this field. Given the fact that there is still no common, internationally recognized definition of persons moving due to climate events – do we speak of climate migrants or climate refugees? – a number of established international actors such as IOM and UNHCR claim mandates (and connected resources), whereas many national governments have for a long time neglected the topic at the national and international level, fearing new responsibilities to support persons displaced by climate change.²⁷ Climate change is thus barely mentioned in the UN Global Compact on Refugees and climate-induced migration is labeled as *irregular* in the intergovernmental Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.²⁸ However, as climate mobility *is happening* around the world, the international community had to start paying attention. Over the last years, climate mobility has been discussed within thematically overlapping but separate fora such as the Global Forum on Migration and Development, the Global Refugee Forum, the International Migration Review Forum, and the Conference of the Parties (COP). The fact that there is not a single forum specifically dedicated to climate mobility makes targeted city diplomacy interventions even more difficult.

A lack of clear global governance structures makes it difficult for cities in the field of climate mobility

Finally, local governments focusing on climate mobility encounter similar challenges as those engaging in migration city diplomacy: Their lack of legal mandates for questions of migration and displacement restricts their agency, and national governments meet city diplomacy with hesitancy as they consider questions of migration and asylum as exclusive national prerogatives.²⁹

Future city diplomacy opportunities

Despite these difficulties, a window of opportunity is opening up for city diplomacy, given that climate mobility is mostly happening within countries. City governments can, therefore, argue that they do carry legal responsibilities to provide infrastructure and services to nationals. Building on this point, the need for ensuring social cohesion through inclusive action for all city inhabitants – including those displaced across national borders by climate change – could further broaden local governments' room for maneuver.

27. J. Podesta, "The Climate Crisis, Migration, and Refugees", 2019, available at: www.brookings.edu.

28. J. Stürner-Siovitz, *Curtain Up! City Diplomacy in Global Migration Governance*, Wiesbaden: Springer, 2022, p. 126.

29. J. Stürner-Siovitz, "All the World's a Stage? A Role Theory Analysis of City Diplomacy in Global Migration Governance", *International Migration Review*, Vol. 57, No. 4, pp. 1329-1361.

There is a window of opportunity for city diplomacy in climate mobility

Over the past years, a number of African cities and their counterparts around the world have worked to push the topic of climate mobility higher on the international agenda. It is now time to ensure that this city diplomacy engagement leads to concrete action on the ground, enabling cities to shape climate mobility as a sustainable adaptation strategy while also strengthening urban resilience and supporting inhabitants who choose to remain in their place of residence. To achieve these goals, African local governments need to leverage city diplomacy, arguing that the combination of local expertise and action coupled with international engagement makes local governments ideal centerpieces of multi-stakeholder partnerships. Such partnerships should draw on national and international funding, networks and expert knowledge while driving locally led and context-specific climate mobility solutions. They could ensure that international donors and development agencies focusing on climate adaptation and migration in African countries would include African local governments in early planning and development phases to strengthen impact orientation. Furthermore, urban-centered multi-stakeholder partnerships could support national and international actors in breaking down data to the urban level and in developing networks of local data centers. Such networks could draw on modular approaches to create comparable pan-African data while at the same time tailoring data collection and analysis to specific local needs.

As more and more African cities become centers of climate mobility, their local governments increasingly recognize the need to take proactive multi-stakeholder action. City diplomacy represents a key instrument for African cities to build such partnerships by leveraging cities' convening power on the local, national, and international levels. Research could support the creation of such partnerships by providing a systematic overview of African cities that combine local action on climate mobility with regional and global city diplomacy.

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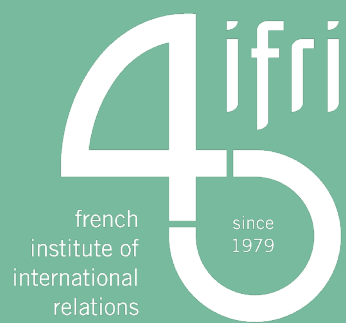
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