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This is the published version of a paper published in *Global Policy*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Smeds, E. (2019)

Unpacking the Politics of C40: 'Critical Friendship' for a Second Decade

*Global Policy*, 10(4): 720-722

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12757>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

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# Unpacking the Politics of C40: 'Critical Friendship' for a Second Decade

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A response to 'A Decade of C40: Research Insights and Agendas for City Networks', Kathryn Davidson, Lars Coenen, Brendan Gleeson\*.

Thanks to pioneering work, urban climate governance is a firmly established cross-disciplinary field of study, with research having focused on both its networked form (Acuto, 2013; Betsill and Bulkeley, 2004; Hoffmann, 2011) and 'on-the-ground' experiments (Bulkeley et al., 2015; Castán Broto and Bulkeley, 2013). This editorial Introduction to a Special Issue on the C40 network and an excellent recent contribution by some of the same authors (Davidson et al., 2019) offer a comprehensive stock-take of a decade of C40 activities and scholarship. In response, I offer some reflections on the three thought-provoking themes that the authors propose future research should focus on.

The opening question discussed by the authors is 'Who has power and influence to shape the direction and coordinating capacity of city networks?'. Such a research agenda on political economy can only be applauded, given that C40 has emerged as a powerful player shaping urban climate governance globally. Questions of intra-network dynamics appear especially important to understanding the kind of climate action generated by C40-networked urban climate governance, and whether this holds sufficiently transformative potential (Davidson and Gleeson, 2018; Smeds and Acuto, 2018). Some comments on this are offered by the authors in the final section of this Introduction. Inspired by this, I would argue for attention to three aspects: the politics of leadership, the politics of membership, and donor politics. Considering C40, the network's prominent leaders quickly spring to mind. It would be interesting to see some discussion of the changing positioning and activities of C40 over time: from having been established in 2005 by socialist London Mayor Ken Livingstone, to growing under NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg as the guru of entrepreneurial urban governance and incumbent President of the C40 Board, and taking on new priorities under Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo (and now Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti) as C40 Chairs. Investigating the

politics of leadership would involve answering questions such as: in what ways have the activities and strategies of C40 changed under different leaders? What is the power balance between C40 leadership and member cities represented by the Steering Committee? Second, C40 derives its credibility from a unique membership body, representing 94 cities globally. The network was originally founded with 18 'megacity' members, defined by population or global city status as ranked by GDP output.<sup>1</sup> Although membership criteria were revised in 2012 to allow for non-qualifying 'innovator cities' and 'observer cities' to join, 76 megacities remain at the core of C40 and enjoy sole access to the C40 Steering Committee and Board (C40, 2012). Here, 'unpacking' C40 could focus on understanding what power different cities yield within the network, by virtue of their membership or perceived global 'rank'. The donor politics of C40 also appear very pertinent to examine in light of the Rockefeller Foundation's April 2019 announcement that it is to end funding for its 100 Resilient Cities program (Flavelle, 2019). C40's major donors are Bloomberg Philanthropies, Children's Investment Fund Foundation and Realdania, with financial support from a range of other national government, private sector and philanthropic organisations (C40, 2019a). Is the financial sustainability of C40 fragile, or is C40 'too big to fail'? What influence do these donors exert on C40 priorities and activities? More empirical research is needed on all these politico-economic questions.

Much of existing research on C40 has focused on knowledge production and sharing, with this Introduction providing a valuable review of this literature. The authors' conceptualisation of C40 as engaged in 'knowledge creation and distribution through a hybrid form of Darwinian ... and generative experimentation' (p. 9) nicely captures the network's 'curation' of 'best practices' through both specific sub-networks and programmes and iterative city-to-city learning in relation to specific urban infrastructures. However, the argument that this amounts to C40 'orchestrating' experimentation would benefit from more analytical precision, in line with Gordon and Johnson's (2017) distinction between 'orchestrators', 'intermediaries' and 'targets'.

\*Davidson, K., Coenen, L., and Gleeson, B. (2019), 'A Decade of C40: Research Insights and Agendas for City Networks', *Global Policy*, 10 (4), 697–708

Gordon and Johnson (2017) suggest that Bloomberg Philanthropies is in fact the orchestrator of cities through C40 as intermediary, which brings us back to the argument above: the need to unpack the power dynamics within C40 and other city networks. It is very encouraging to see the debate regarding technical versus political learning in experimentation processes, discussed in our previous paper (Smeds and Acuto, 2018) that is picked up in this Introduction. When it comes to experimentation 'on the ground', learning often focuses on technical issues, rather than politics. In tracing the history of city-to-city learning from Bogota's *TransMilenio* Bus Rapid Transit system, recipient of a 2013 C40 Cities Award (C40, 2014), Montero (2018) finds that the emphasis on technical rather than political learning stems from the 'theories of change' espoused by philanthropic funders.<sup>2</sup> Montero and Baiocchi (2019) make an extremely valuable contribution in a recent paper on urban policy mobilities, in calling for conceptual and empirical attention to what aspects of 'best practices' travel (e.g. technical vs political) and proposing the concept of 'institutional immobilities' to capture the phenomenon of limited political 'learning'. This debate is a crucial component of productive future thinking on C40 and city networks.

Finally, the third theme of interactions between networked urban climate change experimentation and established urban governance is an equally important, but currently less prominent, one. Hodson et al. (2017) have similarly called for research on whether urban experimentation is co-existing, complementary or competing with pre-existing governance arrangements. My ongoing research on urban mobility in Bristol, Singapore and New York has found that experimentation as *project-based* governance in many ways exists in a 'parallel universe' to conventional transport and land-use planning.<sup>3</sup> Existing research on the longer-term impacts of experiments often focuses on institutionalisation of learning in organisations and policy frameworks (Turnheim et al., 2018), while institutionalisation vis-à-vis regulation of land use, real estate development or urban design have received less attention. This is a significant research gap since these aspects of planning will shape the material form of cities in this era of networked urbanism and the extent to which climate-proofed cities will be socially just. Consider for example the regeneration of the Heygate Estate in London's Elephant & Castle neighborhood: a highly contested project (Lees, 2014) included in the C40 Good Practice Guide (C40, 2016).

In conclusion, this Introduction sets the stage for a promising research agenda on a second decade of C40. Both C40 itself and scholarship must continue to evolve, in search for increasingly radical responses necessitated by impending climate crisis. The 'pragmatism' of city leadership as the hallmark of C40 must be interrogated, in order for scholars to serve as 'critical friends' to the ultimately progressive mission of C40. Advancing the debate on networked urban climate governance would benefit from engaging with recent debates critiquing the idea of cities as 'climate saviours' (Dawson, 2019; Wachsmuth et al., 2016).<sup>4</sup> C40's narrative of cities bypassing slow-to-act national

governments can also be examined in a new light following the resurgence of thinking on the role of the state in relation to sustainability transitions – whether as an entrepreneurial, mission-oriented investor (Mazzucato, 2011) or initiator of 'green new deal' stimulus programmes (NEF, 2008). It will be interesting to see how C40 positions itself with respect to these trends, for example, how the recent C40 declaration of support for a Global Green New Deal might influence national politics (C40, 2019b). Current C40 initiatives focus on cities financing climate action through debt and private investment for 'bankable' infrastructure projects, rather than lobbying for national government spending. Globally, a huge spending/financing 'gap' still exists for enabling societal transitions to low-carbon economies and infrastructures. As highlighted by the authors, the burden-sharing of emission reductions and what actors and financial flows will fill this 'gap' are thus central questions for the future. More empirical attention to and voices from the Global South are urgently needed (Nagendra et al., 2018) to work towards collective answers.

## Notes

1. 'City population of 3 million or more, and/or metropolitan area population of 10 million or more, either currently or projected for 2025' or 'One of the top 25 global cities, ranked by current GDP output, at purchasing-power-parity (PPP), either currently or projected for 2025' (C40, 2012).
2. Such as the Hewlett Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation.
3. With considerably stronger integration in some contexts, for example in Singapore where integrated planning and policy coordination is advanced.
4. See also a forthcoming Special Issue 'Why does everyone think cities can save the planet?' in *Urban Studies*.

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