

Sister cities for the Anthropocene

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A ‘Sister Cities for the Anthropocene’ network could address the challenges experienced by urban communities in the wake of Anthropocene-driven change.

Cities across the world are increasingly affected by Anthropocene-driven events such as intensified droughts, wildfires, floods and superstorms¹. Because of the slow pace of coordinated climate and environmental action in many countries, cities have become important catalysts for faster climate action and have worked together via city networking, city partnerships and city diplomacy². Coordinated efforts such as C40 Cities and the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy, and philanthropic programs such as the Bloomberg American Cities Climate Challenge, have sought to scale urban leadership in climate action through municipal government initiatives³.

Although many urban efforts at Anthropocene mitigation and adaptation have focused on collaborations between city governments, sharing information on best practices and orchestrating climate-related policy, their overall effectiveness has been more difficult to determine⁴. The C40 Cities network has proven to be an accelerator of coordinated information sharing and climate governance. But substantial challenges remain, which include disparities between Global South and Global North cities: “the promise of cities is hampered by patchy collaboration with national governments, limited access to global governance processes such as the SDGs [Sustainable Development Goals] and Habitat III, meagre funding for collaboration, and poor data collection and sharing⁵”.

This raises the question of how we can better highlight the relationships – the shared perils and responses – that are being created by the Anthropocene between and among cities. The urgent conditions of the Anthropocene are both physical in nature (such as extreme heat or intensified flooding) and shared: that is, they are mutual experiences that are nonetheless experienced unevenly in different urban environments around the world. This invitation to engagement centers on making the shared yet variable experiences of the Anthropocene more visible to help build cross-city alliances for urban climate mitigation and adaptation.

With the help of urban social researchers, we suggest creating a network called ‘Sister Cities for the Anthropocene’ to help to track and raise awareness of the spread of Anthropocene-related impacts and responses in urban communities across the world. Such a network might provide a valuable online hub for communication and outreach that is committed to exchanging shared experiences and adaptive responses, raising public awareness and inspiring transnational empathy. Such a platform could be incorporated into an existing program, such as C40 cities or Sister Cities International, or it could be a standalone platform. The critical and distinctive component is that it will enroll social scientists to help to track and highlight Anthropocene connections among cities in ways that would augment physical science research and policy coordination that are already occurring.

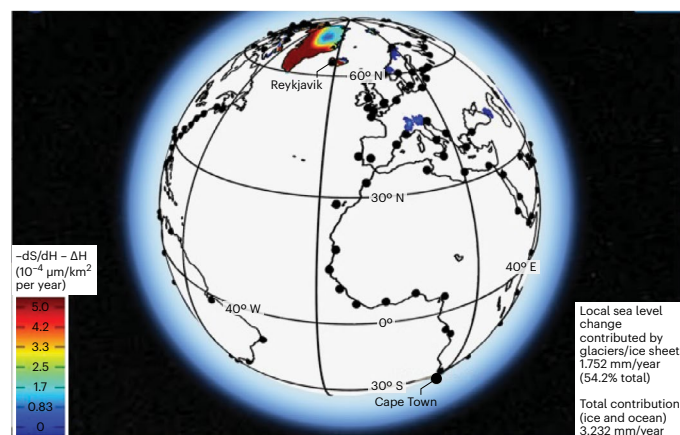


Fig. 1 | Far-reaching effects of Icelandic glacial melt. NASA’s Gradient Fingerprint Map, which indicates the relative contribution to sea-level rise from Iceland’s glacial loss as well as the locations of Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland, and of Cape Town, South Africa, the coastal city that is most affected by Icelandic melt. Courtesy NASA/JPL-Caltech¹⁵.

Potentials for collaboration among urban communities will be amplified by the familiar idiom of urban kinship (the ‘sister’ in sister cities) and reciprocally provide inspiration for thinking, organizing and acting in the face of challenges that are already here, and multiplying.

By focusing attention on the social and cultural dimensions of climate adaptation (such as the social precarity of extreme urban drought or wildfire threats), we can make impacts, causality and accountability more visible and – ultimately – work toward transnational solutions that are more broadly equitable and actionable by engaging urban communities and their needs directly. Working collaboratively with communities, urban social scientists have the capacity to highlight community-level projects and actions and to help to translate them for broader public consideration⁶. By increasing awareness across continents, and city to city about Anthropocene-related initiatives in society, politics, the arts and culture, we also have an opportunity to underscore the kinship metaphor at the heart of sister cities: that is, we are all – like a vast and sometimes-conflicted family – in this together.

There are many shared Anthropocene dilemmas that invite further social scientific investigation and comparison⁷. One example of invisible connections between cities is what happens when diminishing cryospheres reshape the world ocean and bring sea-level rise to distant shores⁸. The results are often surprising (Fig. 1). For example, our research has shown us that Reykjavik, Iceland and Cape Town, South Africa are improbably related through climate effects: when Icelandic glaciers melt, it is Cape Town that is affected more than any other city on Earth in terms of sea-level rise⁹. Although these two cities may share little else in terms of their histories, language, migration patterns or commerce, they are being newly connected by a world ocean that is experiencing the disruptive effects of climate change.

Recognizing these new Anthropocene connections also offers the opportunity to compare how different cities are adapting, including creative community responses, shifts in social attitudes or reinventions of cultural norms.

The shared Anthropocene experiences between cities are many and mounting. For regions that have been beset by chronic wildfire and drought impacts, we might ask how urban communities are assessing predictions of a hotter, drier future and making plans to adapt. In cities where flooding, sea-level rise or extreme storms increasingly threaten residents, we could look at what responses have been initiated by nongovernmental organizations, community groups and media organizations in geographically distant parts of the world, and how the outcomes and impacts of these initiatives compare. Each of these cases invites comparative analysis between social science researchers to help to draw more attention to the often-invisible lines of connection that affect our mutual futures. Unlike city governance networks that primarily focus on future harm reduction (or climate change mitigation), Sister Cities for the Anthropocene would center on adaptive responses to the harms that are already with us, and leverage concerted collective action to diminish their impact.

The original Sister Cities International program was born out of the aftermath of the Second World War and fears of nuclear conflict during the 1950s¹⁰. Similarly, our current environmental crisis portends existential threats to global peace and cooperation. The early days of Sister Cities International (or ‘People to People’ as it was originally known) were an effort to create citizen diplomacy and encourage international cultural understanding and cooperation. In President Eisenhower’s words, it was meant to “help build the road to an enduring peace”. However, although Sister Cities International has tried to bolster sustainable development goals, in practice much of the focus of the program over the past several decades has been on economic cooperation, educational experiences and travel for the purpose of mutual prosperity. Sister Cities for the Anthropocene would align with the peace and cooperation goals of its namesake, but would also shed light on how the stress of Anthropocene impacts is destabilizing political and social order across the world. Similar to the military threats of the Cold War, the Anthropocene era demands urgent and collective action – not just by governments, but by communities across the world. We know that there will be no equitable and lasting prosperity in the 21st century if we do not scale greater environmental awareness and cooperation on Anthropocene adaptation measures¹¹.

In sum, we are advocating for a platform to focus attention on the parallel Anthropocene experiences that affect urban communities across the world. For us as anthropologists, comparative research is in our DNA¹², but we clearly need multidisciplinary research to holistically understand the full range of Anthropocene impacts and community-based pathways toward adaptation. This hub would enable the wider transnational circulation of locally produced perspectives, activities and accomplishments – culturally, socially and politically, and in the

arts – in response to Anthropocene conditions. In turn, these connections could catalyze new strategies for adaptation and empowerment through mutual responses to these challenges, even when they are disparate in form (for example, megafires versus superstorms) and distant in their geographical locations¹³. If you would be interested in helping to design and build such a hub, we would be grateful to hear from you.

What is encouraging is that we know that many city leaders, urban professionals and residents are already in dialog about the ecological emergency that the Anthropocene portends. They are looking to attract and galvanize public attention to Anthropocene-related problems and to search for more mutualistic solutions¹⁴. Many urban communities are looking for ways to work together to make a positive difference – people to people, and city to city.

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