

MAKING SPACE FOR PLANNING: WHY THE CLIMATE DEBATE MUST INCLUDE PRACTITIONERS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Spatial planners have a great role to play in global climate policy and financing. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), cities are responsible for approximately 70 percent of global CO₂ emissions, particularly within G20 countries. While technical and sectoral interventions dominate climate discussions, planning mechanisms remain underutilized in climate governance, and planners are often missing from the discussion. From compact urban form and transit-oriented development to anticipatory resettlement and nature-based solutions, planners influence systemic urban decisions that shape long-term resilience, especially in rapidly urbanizing areas. Planners often contend with fragmented mandates, limited access to climate finance, and training that falls short of today's realities, especially in low-capacity contexts, informal urban settings, and where planning education remains uneven. Planners must be empowered to engage more in major climate dialogues and expand

their mandates and resources to deliver systemic and long-lasting change.

This essay is authored by members of the Initiative for Climate Resilient Planning (ICRP), which was launched by ISOCARP in 2024. Drawing on six decades of global work and observer roles in UNFCCC and IPCC, the initiative aims to strengthen the voice, visibility, and capacity of planners in the climate arena. It supports peer exchange, advances professional education, and fosters stronger connections between global processes and local realities. As founder Sam van Embden described, planners are the doctors and surgeons of cities, and life-saving procedures might already be overdue.

This contribution offers a gap analysis of the actions needed to support planners in fully engaging in climate action and presents a forward-looking agenda. It highlights current efforts under the ICRP, including the development of a climate-focused curriculum and accreditation framework, joint programming with partners, and regular engagement in climate spaces. We reflect on what is needed to enable professionals, from improved national policy frameworks and mandates to education. Finally, the chapter highlights ways for the planning community to engage more through participation in global dialogues, co-creation of partnerships, and active leadership in shaping a shared professional roadmap for climate-responsive planning.

2. KEY GAPS TO ACHIEVE MORE RESILIENT PLANNING

Urban planners are vital to climate solutions, yet they remain underutilized in climate governance. Cities account for over 70 percent of global CO₂ emissions and two-thirds of energy use (IEA 2021). This makes urban planning a critical arena for both mitigation and adaptation. The latest IPCC reports affirm that better spatial planning—such as co-locating jobs and housing for compact urban form—can significantly cut emissions, especially in rapidly growing cities (Lwasa et al. 2022). Planning strategies like transit-oriented development, densification, and nature-based solutions can reduce energy demand, curb sprawl, and build resilience to climate impacts

(Lwasa et al. 2022). Yet global climate policymaking has largely focused on technical sectors (energy, transport, industry) rather than on how cities grow and adapt. Planners are often absent from high-level climate discussions, and their tools—land use plans, development controls, urban design—are not fully leveraged in national climate plans. This gap undermines climate action: cities can only achieve net-zero emissions through deep decarbonization and systemic transformation, engaging all levels of government and stakeholders (Lwasa et al. 2022). In short, empowering planning practitioners is essential for climate goals, but several key barriers must be addressed. International experience shows that when planners are empowered institutionally and financially, they can deliver transformative results through integrated policy frameworks and predictable investment mechanisms.

2.1 EDUCATION AND CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT GAPS

Most planning professionals lack the climate training and resources needed to meet today's challenges. Planning curricula and professional development have not kept pace with the climate crisis. In many countries, the built environment education system has been slow to integrate climate science, leaving graduates without critical skills in mitigation and adaptation. A recent review noted that students in architecture and planning often 'lack appropriate knowledge and skills in several key areas for both mitigation and adaptation' due to outdated curricula (Keenan 2024, cf. AESOP's updated core curriculum for recommendations with better coverage). There is also a shortage of faculty with deep climate expertise, limiting the capacity to train the next generation of climate-responsive planners. The result is an uneven global landscape: a handful of universities and programs produce climate-savvy urban planners, while many others impart minimal climate literacy. In low-capacity and fast-urbanizing contexts, this gap is even more pronounced—planners on the frontlines of climate impacts may have little formal training on resilience planning or greenhouse gas reduction strategies. Beyond formal education, continuing professional development opportunities in climate resilience planning are limited. Planners struggle to stay 'up to speed' on emerging climate data, tools, and financing mechanisms. This capacity gap contributes to adaptation planning lagging behind mitigation efforts in cities (Dodman et al. 2022)—even as climate impacts accelerate. Building a comprehensive climate skillset among practitioners through updated curricula, certifications, and knowledge exchange is an urgent priority.

Professional associations demonstrate that structured learning and accreditation can close this divide. The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) is actively working with ISOCARP on resilience and adaptation planning and prioritizes climate resilience in their strategy, while the American Planning Association (APA) has a Sustainable Communities Division to integrate mitigation and adaptation into local planning practice. These examples illustrate how professional leadership, peer learning, and continued accreditation can realign planning education with contemporary climate imperatives. At the academic level, Campbell (2016) emphasizes that planners must navigate trade-offs between growth, equity, and environmental limits—a skillset central to building climate-resilient cities.

2.2 FINANCE: UNLOCKING CLIMATE INVESTMENT FOR CITIES

Local planners often cannot access the funding needed to implement climate solutions, due to fragmented mandates and finance gaps. Even when planners have good climate plans on paper, turning them into action requires money for transit infrastructure, green space, building retrofits, flood defenses, and more. But municipal budgets and climate finance remain grossly insufficient relative to needs. A recent analysis by the World Bank estimates that resilient, low-carbon urban development in all low- and middle-income countries requires US\$256–821 billion per year

through 2050, substantial but at the same time only about 1–3 percent of those countries' GDP (Deuskar et al. 2025). Crucially, these investments are not 'luxury' climate add-ons; they are the basic infrastructure and services cities need. As the report put it, these are not additional 'climate costs' but foundational investments that can drive economic growth, improve services, and reduce future risks if done right (Deuskar et al. 2025).

The cost of inaction—failing to invest now—will be far higher in damages and lost productivity later. Yet most cities, especially in developing countries, cannot finance these up-front investments. Local governments often face fragmented or narrow mandates and have little capacity to finance their climate plans under current fiscal arrangements (Deuskar et al. 2025). Many municipalities depend on higher-level government transfers or donor funds, which may prioritize other needs or trickle down too slowly. Climate finance mechanisms (e.g., the Green Climate Fund, adaptation funds) have been slow to reach city-scale projects, and private investors perceive urban adaptation projects as high-risk with long payback periods. Moreover, approximately 90 percent of global climate finance to date is spent on mitigation, not adaptation (Dodman et al. 2022), leaving resilience efforts severely underfunded.

International practice demonstrates that sustained, dedicated funding mechanisms can empower local planning. The Netherlands' Delta Fund provides multi-decade financing for spatial adaptation and flood protection, while Chile's Regional Climate Plans link national resources directly to local planning priorities. These approaches show how devolved, long-term funding aligned with spatial planning objectives can strengthen local climate resilience (UN-Habitat 2020).

The outcome is that planners in cities worldwide struggle to implement climate actions—from upgrading drainage in an informal settlement to expanding bus rapid transit—because of inadequate funding. Innovative solutions are emerging (city climate funds, resilience bonds, land value capture for transit), but scaling these will require supportive policies and capacity-building so that cities can prepare 'bankable' projects. Bridging the urban climate finance gap is not just about money; it's about empowering local planners to make the economic case for resilience and to navigate complex funding channels. Strengthening municipal finance systems, devolving resources, and aligning climate funds with urban development goals must be part of the strategy to enable planners to deliver low-carbon, resilient communities.

2.3 NATIONAL POLICIES AND THE LOCAL DIMENSION

Many national climate strategies have yet to fully integrate urban planning and local action, hampering coordinated climate outcomes. Under the Paris Agreement, countries submit Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) outlining their climate targets and policies. While most NDCs now acknowledge cities or urban sectors, the depth of integration varies. A global review found that about two-thirds of updated NDCs contain



Figure 01 ISOCARP member Ulrich Graute with members of the LGMA delegation at SB62 in Bonn

‘moderate or strong’ urban content (UN-Habitat 2024), meaning they mention urban issues or local governments. However, mentions alone do not guarantee empowerment of local action. In practice, planners often operate in a policy vacuum where national climate goals do not translate into clear local mandates or resources. For example, few NDCs explicitly spell out the role of city planners in delivering mitigation through urban form or adapting land-use plans to climate risks. Important policy instruments like national urban policies, building codes, and infrastructure standards may not be aligned with climate resilience objectives, or they languish without enforcement. Fragmented governance is a major obstacle: without coordination across ministries, levels of government, and sectors, planners are left navigating conflicting agendas. In some cases, responsibilities for climate-related planning (e.g., coastal zone management, disaster risk reduction, energy codes) are split among agencies with little cooperation.

The IPCC notes that achieving transformational change in cities requires engaging multiple scales of governance, including governments and non-state actors, along with substantive financing (Lwasa et al. 2022). The Summary for Urban Policymakers (IPCC 2023) underscores this by stating that effective climate governance depends on integrating national, subnational, and local planning processes. France’s Plan Climat-Air-Énergie Territorial (PCAET) framework, which requires regional and municipal authorities to align climate, energy, and spatial planning objectives, demonstrates how coordinated mandates can institutionalize climate action across levels of government.

Globally, momentum is growing to close this gap. The Local Governments and Municipal Authorities (LGMA) constituency in the UN climate negotiations has advocated for multilevel climate governance—meaning national and local governments planning and acting in concert. Ahead of the third round of NDC submissions (for 2025–30), cities’ networks are calling on countries to formally include and consult subnational authorities in NDC formulation and implementation. This is a chance to embed urban priorities like compact growth, public transit, and equitable adaptation into national commitments, and to ensure cities get the support needed to achieve them. Additionally, national policy frameworks (from land use laws to development bank criteria) should expand planners’ mandates to pursue low-carbon, resilient development. In sum, aligning national policies and NDCs with local planning practice—through mandates, financing, and partnership mechanisms—is critical so that the ambition set at the top can be delivered on the ground (cf. UN-Habitat 2025).

Across education, finance, and policy, international experience demonstrates that progress relies on professional capacity, predictable finance, and coherent governance. Examples from RTP1 and APA show the value of structured professional learning, while the Netherlands and France illustrate how integrated financing and planning frameworks can mainstream climate action. These models offer practical lessons for building institutional ecosystems that enable planners to deliver sustained resilience outcomes.

These findings inform the next section, which translates identified gaps into actionable recommendations for planners and their institutions.

3. WHAT TO FOCUS ON?

The complexity of the climate challenge can be paralyzing, but planners excel by turning broad challenges into practical action. It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the enormity of climate change – the myriad risks, sectors, and stakeholders involved. However, effective planning depends on breaking complexity into manageable interventions that respond to community needs. Building on the lessons above, planners and their institutions can translate these insights into specific, context-appropriate actions. The summer of 2025 underscored this pragmatism: as record heatwaves hit cities across multiple continents, the most effective responses are often straightforward local measures—cooling centres, tree planting, adjusted building codes, and heat emergency plans—implemented by city practitioners. These actions, while not ‘solving’ global warming alone, provided immediate relief and built momentum for broader resilience. The lesson is that planners should neither freeze in the face of complex climate models nor chase every trendy concept; instead, focus on targeted, context-specific solutions that cumulatively drive systemic change.

We suggest three focal strategies:

1. Enable planning practitioners—rapidly build climate literacy and skills among planning professionals and communities.

A well-informed practitioner community is the foundation for all other efforts. Planners must continually update their understanding of climate science, risks, and solutions. This means investing in training programs, workshops, and knowledge networks so that even small-town or junior planners can access the latest tools. Peer learning is valuable: city-to-city exchanges on successful climate-responsive projects can inspire replication. Additionally, planners should help educate others, from local officials to the public, about climate risks and the benefits of sustainable urban development. Getting everyone climate-savvy also involves reframing climate action as core to better cities (clean air, jobs, safety), not an added burden.

2. Tackle one problem at a time with focused, problem-driven planning interventions.

Given the sprawling scope of climate change, it is challenging to remain optimistic and feel capable of addressing the issue. To start, planners should identify priority issues where they can make tangible progress in the near term. A city or district might start by focusing on, say, urban heat resilience or flood risk in a particular district, using that as a pilot for broader climate adaptation. This iterative problem-solving builds confidence, awareness, and political will. Planners should pick priority actions that resonate locally and drive them to implementation. Even a narrow project (like a new bike lane network) can yield climate gains, health benefits, and social equity improvements.

3. Cultivate a supportive ecosystem for climate action.

Planners cannot sustain climate action alone if the larger institutional ecosystem is unsupportive or fragmented. To break out of this cycle, practitioners should simultaneously work on enabling conditions: mandates, financing, inter-agency collaboration, and knowledge partnerships. This also means embedding climate criteria into development approval processes or capital investment plans, so that action is system-driven. A supportive ecosystem makes transformational planning possible.

4. WAY FORWARD AND ISOCARP'S ROLE

The path forward is clear: elevate planning in the climate arena through awareness, education, and advocacy, and the global planning community is mobilizing to do just that. ICRP under ISOCARP is working to close the gaps identified above. Its threefold strategy includes:

First, build awareness and a unified voice in the planning community about climate change.

Through a group of about 25 ISOCARP members, newsletters, special sessions at Congress, webinars, and reporting from COP and IPCC processes, ISOCARP is ensuring that planners stay informed and visible in the climate debate.

Second, make climate learning and accreditation engaging to professionalize climate-responsive planning. ICRP is developing a tiered certification program, tailored for climate planning.

This would validate skills and provide tangible proof of competency to both public and private sector actors, and can increase the value for planners to engage in ongoing professional development.

Third, advocate for an enabling ecosystem and partner with global climate actors.

ISOCARP works closely with the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), the LGMA constituency managed by ICLEI, and others to promote multilevel governance and integrate planners' needs into international climate frameworks.

5. CONCLUSION

As ISOCARP's founding member, Sam van Embden, once said, planners are the doctors and surgeons of cities. Climate change is a critical illness, and planners hold essential knowledge to respond. It is time to make space for them in the climate debate. ISOCARP and ICRP invite practitioners, institutions, and partners to contribute ideas, join global delegations, and shape a shared professional roadmap for climate-responsive planning. Only by empowering planners can we deliver systemic, long-lasting change in a climate-constrained world.

6. REFERENCES

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