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THE FUTURE OF URBAN CLIMATE ACTION

Shaping systems for equitable,
long-term change



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

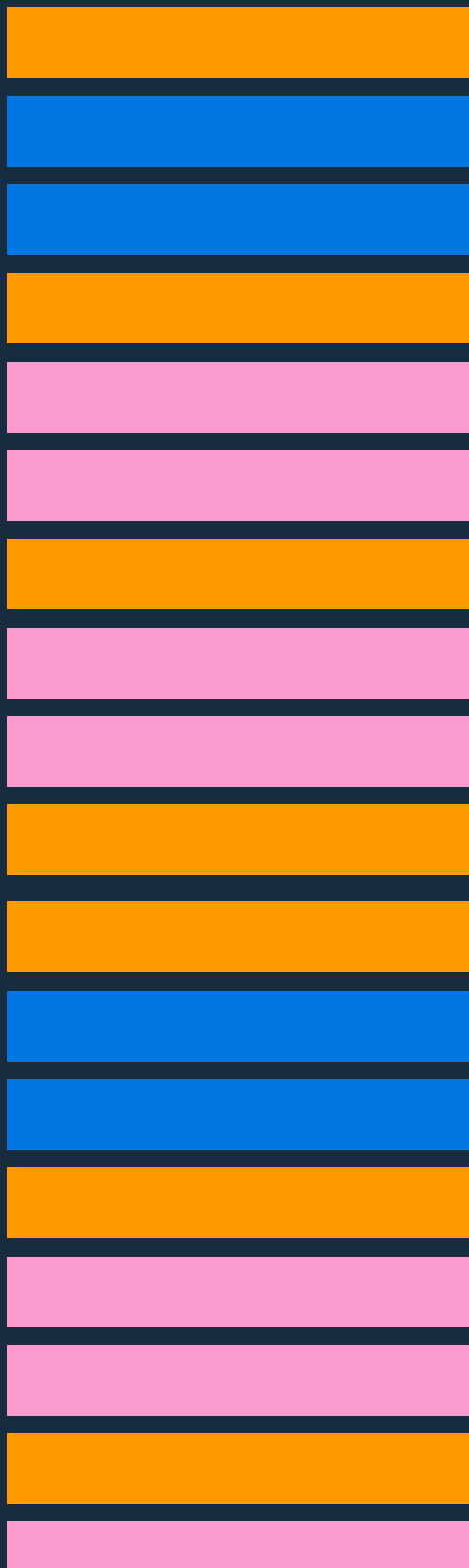
This report is the product of a collaborative effort between the Centre for Public Impact (CPI), the Kresge Foundation, C40 Cities, the Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN), and Climate Mayors.

We are deeply grateful to all the roundtable participants – city leaders, philanthropists, nonprofit practitioners, and representatives from academia – who generously shared their time, insights, and perspectives during the session held at the Aspen Ideas: Climate 2025 convening in Chicago.

This convening, and the report that follows, would not have been possible without the thought partnership and trust of our collaborators. Special thanks to the Aspen Institute for hosting us, to our session moderator Jennifer Bradley, and to the many voices in the room whose honesty and vision are the heartbeat of this work. Your courage to confront entrenched challenges and imagine new futures together inspires us.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The climate crisis is intensifying, but our systems for addressing it remain fragmented and underpowered.

Despite increased investment and local leadership, cities struggle to keep pace with the scale and urgency of the challenge. As federal funding fluctuates and political support becomes less predictable, cities are being asked to do more with less, and faster.

Yet in this volatility lies opportunity. Disruption creates space to rethink how the climate ecosystem operates. We now have a chance to move beyond rapid-response funding and short-term wins toward long-term resilience, equity, and structural reform.

In July 2025, the Centre for Public Impact (CPI), in partnership with C40 Cities, Climate Mayors, the Urban Sustainability Directors Network, and the Kresge Foundation, hosted a closed-door roundtable at the Aspen Ideas: Climate event.

The session convened 30 city leaders, funders, and nonprofit partners under the Chatham House Rule to reflect on barriers, unlock new thinking, and co-develop priorities for action. Below, we share some of what we heard and accomplished during the session:

Barriers to progress persist across the system: Misaligned goals, siloed governance, fragmented funding, ineffective messaging, and equity that is often treated as an add-on rather than embedded.

Activating leverage points can lead to transformation: Areas of opportunity include reframing climate goals around community outcomes, building coalition capacity, investing in the “connective tissue” of systems, and supporting local leaders as system stewards.

Commitments in motion demonstrate that change is possible now: Participants left with 60-day shifts to test, ranging from reworking city goals and shared governance models to evolving philanthropic investment practices.

The event reaffirmed a straightforward yet urgent truth: if we want different outcomes, we must work differently, together.



INTRODUCTION

Urban climate action has reached a crossroads.

After years of momentum built through local leadership, federal stimulus, and rising community demand, many cities now face a shifting landscape: waning federal support, volatile funding, increasing climate impacts, and growing pressure to deliver tangible results.

This is not a new crisis, but it is a new kind of moment. As one participant put it, “the way we worked six months ago is not coming back.” Despite deep investments and dedicated leadership, existing systems have not delivered at the speed or scale required. That means we must go beyond scaling current efforts and fundamentally rethink how we fund, govern, collaborate, and implement.

At the same time, there’s a powerful sense of possibility. Cities are often at the forefront of housing, health, transportation, and resilience, where the impacts are most immediate and the need for innovation is high. Philanthropy is also evolving: looking beyond one-off grants to shape ecosystems that can hold complexity and drive durable change.

This roundtable was designed to meet that moment.

WHY THIS CONVENING, AND WHY NOW?

Organized by the Centre for Public Impact in collaboration with C40 Cities, Climate Mayors, USDN, and the Kresge Foundation, the roundtable brought together 30 leaders from local government, philanthropy, and civil society. It was held during Aspen Ideas: Climate in Chicago, a backdrop that encouraged forward-looking, provocative conversations.

Held under the Chatham House Rule and structured to move quickly from reflection to action, the session invited participants to break down barriers and shape a new vision of the future together.

Despite the diversity of roles and experiences, participants shared a common thread: exhaustion from reactive, disjointed work and a deep desire to move from planning to implementation. Sentiments like “overwhelmed but focused” and “the soil is rich beneath the dormant bed” captured the tone – urgency paired with cautious optimism.





WHAT WE DID

The format blended open dialogue with structured collaboration to uncover insight and energy for action:

- Large group visioning ('A future we want') imagined what success could look like in 2035, from thriving communities to climate philanthropy that works.
- Breakout sessions ('what's holding us back?') explored deeper, structural challenges in roles, norms, and funding.
- Collaborative synthesis ('rethinking how we work together') surfaced shifts in power, language, incentives, and strategy to unlock real progress.

Participants left with clear 60-day commitments, such as reframing city goals, piloting shared governance practices, and shifting philanthropic funding approaches.



WHY THIS REPORT

This report aims to:

- Capture key themes and insights from the session
- Share tangible takeaways for city and philanthropic leaders
- Support a field-wide conversation about what's next
- Help catalyze longer-term, systems-oriented collaboration

It reflects the intent behind the convening: to confront systemic challenges, surface shared priorities, and build the foundations for long-term, cross-sector coordination.



INSIGHTS TO DRIVE CHANGE

Through facilitated discussions, small-group breakouts, and participant commitments, a set of shared insights and imperatives began to emerge. These reflections were not theoretical – they were lived, practiced, and urgent.

What surfaced was a deep acknowledgement that while the tools for progress often exist, the conditions for using them effectively remain fractured. Yet, participants also expressed hope and resolve, grounded in the belief that by honestly confronting barriers and imagining new ways of working, we can build toward a more just and resilient urban future.



ENVISIONING THE FUTURE

This activity invited participants to imagine it's 2035, and their city or region has made meaningful progress on climate.

The resulting headlines reflected a mix of bold ambition, hard-won progress, and community-centered transformation – from clean air and affordable energy to climate-smart economic growth and equitable neighborhood revitalization. Together, they painted a picture of a future where climate action is measured not only in emissions reductions, but also in jobs created, lives improved, and communities made more resilient, inclusive, and empowered.

Several memorable headlines stood out, offering powerful insights into how participants are reimagining the future of climate action:



"Was it all a myth? Billions spent, but the people are safe from the storms"

There is a core tension in climate adaptation: its success is often invisible. When investments work, disasters don't happen – making the benefits harder to see or value. This underscores the challenge of communicating counterfactual outcomes, and the need to invest in prevention even when the payoff isn't immediately visible.



"After net zero: How the U.S. climate movement won by rethinking its goals"

A bold call to reframe the climate narrative: this headline suggests that "net zero" may be the wrong goal, and that the climate movement must shift toward tangible, widely understood outcomes – such as economic strength, energy security, and national renewal – to build broader coalitions and public support.



"U.S. cities have the highest standards of living"

This headline reflects the ultimate promise of climate action: real, material improvements in people's lives. It underscores the need for an equitable climate transition – one that delivers visible benefits, particularly for historically disadvantaged and marginalized communities.

BARRIERS TO THE FUTURE

Throughout the event, participants identified barriers to realizing the future they envisioned. This section summarizes the most persistent and widely shared barriers raised in the discussion.

Stuck in the status quo

Bureaucratic inertia, partisan politics, and siloed governance models hinder efforts to align actors and scale successful initiatives. Rigid or short-term funding structures combined with a fear of failure in government prevent long-term planning and discourage experimentation.

Fragmented funding

Climate initiatives are hindered by isolated, restrictive, and short-term funding streams, particularly as federal support declines. Without flexible, sustained investment, promising efforts stall before they scale.

Siloed goals, scattered messages

Climate action is often disconnected from broader community concerns such as housing, jobs, and safety, creating the perception of competing priorities when the issues are deeply linked. At the same time, abstract goals and technical jargon, such as “net zero,” often fail to resonate with the public, making it harder to build trust or momentum.

Misalignment between funders, implementers, and communities – including conflicting theories of change and unclear messaging – further fragments efforts and weakens support for long-term transformation.

Equity as an add-on

Equity is frequently named but not deeply integrated into processes or outcomes, leading to mistrust and disengagement among frontline communities. Funding requirements can dilute justice-centered work, and change is often resisted when people fear loss or lack the space to process grief and uncertainty.



UNLOCKING TRANSFORMATION

After identifying the core barriers to local climate action, participants were asked to identify leverage points—specific areas in complex systems where a small shift can catalyze significant and lasting changes. This section summarizes the most prominent shifts that emerged.

Reframe the goal, not just the message

The deep transformation our cities need to adapt to climate change depends on strong public support. That means local climate action must deliver clear, tangible benefits – better jobs, safer neighborhoods, and healthier communities – not just lower emissions. We must redefine success: from abstract targets to real, visible improvements in people’s daily lives, with equity, resilience, and shared power at the center.

Move from intention to results

The real gap isn’t between planning and action – it’s between intention and results. There’s no shortage of effort, but without a sharper strategy and ruthless prioritization, cities risk spreading themselves too thin.

Driving real progress means aligning around interventions that are both high-impact and implementable – and having the courage to confront the deep political and infrastructural lock-ins that quietly stall transformation.

Steward the system

To meet the systemic, cross-cutting nature of the climate crisis, we must break down silos across departments, sectors, regions, and levels of government.

Climate mitigation and adaptation demand integrated action across the entire city ecosystem. This means mayors, sustainability directors, and local leaders must act as system stewards – leveraging their unique power to convene across divides, align efforts, and build coalitions bold enough to challenge entrenched structures and deliver real change.

Invest in the whole, not just the parts

Meeting the scale of the climate crisis requires a shift from fragmented to systemic investing. Instead of funding isolated projects, we need to support portfolios of coordinated interventions alongside the enabling conditions that make lasting change possible: trust, governance capacity, community engagement, and data infrastructure.

As federal climate funding recedes, cities must become more creative in aligning diverse capital sources – such as tax credits, bond measures, and economic development tools – with their climate goals. Philanthropy plays a critical role in filling funding gaps, de-risking experimentation, and investing in the connective tissue that makes system change possible.

COMMITMENTS IN MOTION

To conclude the event, participants were asked to commit to one shift they or their organization could test over the next 60 days to help advance their vision for local climate action. The section below summarizes commitments that emerged from discussion and individual reflection.

Focus on results that matter to people	• Prioritize community engagement and shared governance when making influential decisions around budget, procurement, and strategy. • Reevaluate climate action plans (CAPs) to reflect community priorities around access, affordability, stability, and safety. • Balance long-term ideas with implementable near-term solutions such as infrastructure retrofits or job creation. • Recognize and reward changemakers who experiment, adapt, and implement, rather than striving for a perfect plan.
Make an undeniable and honest case for change	• Create a compelling vision of the future that people want to be part of. Consider using tools like scenario planning to build a path towards that future and anticipate disruptions. • Align priorities and commitments with people-first benefits and success stories. • Demonstrate the value of change by taking action and sharing tangible results, not just intentions. • Be bold and transparent in explaining decision-making tradeoffs, risks, bureaucratic processes, and the barriers they present.
Broaden the coalition	• Launch or deepen coordination with departments whose work intersects with climate-related issues, such as economic development or public works. • Engage frontline communities and foster new relationships, particularly across political divides. • Convene stakeholders to regularly align on common ground, exchange lessons, align on key results, and contribute to shared metrics. • Leverage different stakeholder strengths to maximize impact across a portfolio of initiatives.

CONCLUSION

The climate crisis continues to evolve, and so must our collective response. This convening reaffirmed that while the barriers are real, so is the commitment to doing things differently.

Progress will require more than just new funding or technical solutions – it demands a shift in how we work, who we work with, and what we value.

Resetting our systems, norms, and partnerships won't happen overnight. But this moment calls for designing with tangible community benefits at the center, prioritizing relationships over transactions, and building coalitions that can hold complexity and drive lasting change. While each place will chart its own path, a shared alignment toward just, resilient, and thriving communities is essential.

This roundtable was just the beginning. In the months ahead, CPI and our partners will continue to explore ways to support the shifts identified in these conversations, including follow-up convenings, communication tools, city-level pilots, and shared investment strategies. We invite others, particularly local governments and philanthropies, to join us in advancing this work.

The conditions for transformation are emerging. Now is the time to act together.





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