Gemeente Amsterdam

Universiteit van Amsterdam
SEVEN



Amsterdam Town Hall COP

City conversation on Climate Justice
8 October 2026

What residents of a climate-ambitious city ask of their city, their national government and the EU. Input for COP31.

City of Amsterdam
University of Amsterdam - SEVEN Climate Institute

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Executive Summary

On 8 October 2026, the City of Amsterdam and SEVEN, the University of Amsterdam's climate institute, hosted Amsterdam's Town Hall COP. Around 85 residents, representatives of community initiatives and civil society organisations, researchers and civil servants came together to discuss one question: where does climate action feel unfair in Amsterdam, for whom, and what should change?

The outcomes were shared with ICLEI and the EU Covenant of Mayors as input for the multilevel action declaration planned for COP31 in Antalya (9–20 November 2026). They show what a just transition means at street level in a city with ambitious climate policy, and why much of what residents ask for depends on cooperation between cities, national governments and the EU.

In brief, participants' messages for COP31:

A just transition cannot run on short-term project funding: community initiatives need multi-year support, and national governments and the EU should help provide it.

Climate measures must not make life more expensive for low-income households; support must reach those who need it most, including people facing energy and mobility poverty.

Adaptation starts at home: tackling heat and mould in existing social housing should come first, with housing associations as accountable partners.

Participation must shape decisions, not just collect views: residents should be paid for their expertise and told what happened to their input.

1. The proceedings

The afternoon opened with a short statement by Deputy Mayor Lian Heinhuis, who described climate justice as placing responsibility where it belongs and offering support where it is needed. She reminded participants that inequality is not inevitable but the result of decisions, and framed the climate crisis as a 'connection crisis' , affecting how people relate to one another and to their environment. Drawing on her responsibility for green spaces and outdoor play, she illustrated how climate justice relates to children's everyday surroundings and their opportunities to play outside. She also expressed the hope that Amsterdam could set an example for other cities.

Astrid Puentes Riaño, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, then addressed the participants. She opened her speech by noting that the UN Human Rights Council had recognised this right exactly five years earlier, on 8 October 2021 (resolution 48/13).

Having recently moved to Amsterdam, she shared her positive first impression of the city's clean and healthy living environment. Her contribution placed the local discussion within the international human rights framework, a reminder that local experiences and global obligations are closely linked.

A brief conversation followed between Deputy Mayor Heinhuis and Margaretha Wewerinke-Singh of the University of Amsterdam (who had a key role in the ICJ advisory proceedings on climate change), exploring the relationship between climate justice and wider questions of social justice. Their exchange highlighted how existing social inequalities are rooted in history and influence people's exposure to climate-related risks and their ability to respond. They concluded that climate justice requires attention not only to environmental challenges, but also to the social and economic circumstances in which people experience them. They also discussed how human rights obligations, which also apply to municipalities as part of the State, can guide policy choices and the spending of public funds, for example, by attaching human rights due diligence conditions to solar panel subsidies.

Participants then joined seven round-table discussions, each supported by a moderator and a note-taker. The conversations explored three perspectives: people's own experiences in Amsterdam; community initiatives' experiences of working with the municipality; and Amsterdam's responsibility towards people elsewhere in the world and towards future generations. Questions were structured around three dimensions of justice: who pays and who benefits (distributive justice); who has a say (procedural justice); and whose experiences, needs and perspectives are recognised (recognition justice).

2. Roundtable key takeways

Climate impacts are unequally distributed and felt at home.

Some participants estimated that indoor temperatures in their homes rose to 40°C or more during heatwaves. Participants also described children growing up in mouldy homes and the stress caused by high energy bills. Older people were identified as particularly vulnerable to extreme heat. Participants described the loss of greenery in public spaces and gardens, with play areas being paved over and community centres offering no cool refuge. As one table put it, whether or not you suffer from climate change depends on the neighbourhood you live in.

Economic security comes first.

When people struggle to make ends meet, climate action is rarely their immediate priority. Participants warned that climate measures must not make life more expensive for low-income households. They also highlighted 'mobility poverty', citing night-shift workers who still depend on their cars and people whose workplaces have moved further away.

Community initiatives sustain local climate action but are structurally fragile.

Greening initiatives, energy cooperatives and neighbourhood support networks do much of the work, yet depend on short-term project funding tied to political cycles. Many remain stuck in a permanent pilot phase. Participants described how the withdrawal of neighbourhood budgets and recent funding cuts had triggered a domino effect of initiatives closing, burnout and growing cynicism.

Participation feels consultative rather than genuinely collaborative.

Participants spoke of 'table fatigue', unpaid expertise, a lack of feedback on what happens to their input, and constant turnover among municipal contacts: 'residents are the continuity'. Young people may be invited to contribute without seeing their views reflected in decisions, and communication is often inaccessible. Although younger residents, vocational students and residents with a migration background took part, participants observed that the gathering did not fully reflect Amsterdam's social diversity. In the organisers' view, the discussion exposed a broader gap between people already engaged in organised climate action and communities for whom economic insecurity, everyday concerns or distrust of institutions may make participation less accessible. Participants also noted that subsidies often fail to reach those who need them most, while personal, one-to-one contact with civil servants is highly valued.

One round-table brought together representatives of migrant churches in Amsterdam Zuidoost, older residents from Amsterdam Zuid, an energy cooperative in Weesp and the Amsterdam Sustainability Council, an independent advisory body to the City. Representatives of migrant churches explained that climate and sustainability issues often have little priority among people they work with because of immediate economic concerns. Some representatives described how experiences with unreliable or distrusted public authorities, including in countries of origin, can influence people's trust in government in the Netherlands.

They recommended closer cooperation with religious organisations to involve communities that conventional climate participation processes may not reach. A representative of the energy cooperative argued that renewable energy can be cheaper than fossil fuels, but that producing it locally may involve higher costs, which should be weighed against the wider public benefits. Participants from more affluent households described certain home improvements as financially manageable, highlighting differences in ability to pay. In the organisers' reading, these exchanges showed that meaningful recognition means taking different experiences, priorities and forms of knowledge seriously, not merely inviting diverse participants. The organisers noted that one recommendation discussed at length at this table (working with faith-based organisations) did not make it into the plenary feedback, illustrating how perspectives can be lost even within participatory processes. It is included in the recommendations below.

Organisational silos and absent actors obstruct integrated solutions.

The separation of social policy from policy on the physical environment, alongside separate budgets and portfolio boundaries, makes it difficult to address interconnected issues. Participants highlighted competing demands on space: cables and district heating networks can come at the expense of trees and green connections. Housing associations, which own much of the affected housing stock, were seen as powerful but absent from the conversation, while large emitters were perceived to escape the burdens placed on residents.

In the organisers' reading, the conversations also revealed difficult trade-offs: expanding district heating may compete with protecting mature trees and green spaces; reducing car use can burden residents who lack viable transport alternatives; and tackling overheating and mould in existing housing requires investment without raising costs for low-income households. Climate justice is therefore not only about identifying desirable measures, but also about making explicit choices about who bears the costs and who receives the benefits.

3. From Amsterdam to COP31: policy gaps and recommendations voiced by participants

Although the discussions were rooted in Amsterdam's local experience of climate change and sustainability, their relevance goes beyond the city itself. They highlight the unequal distribution of climate impacts (and of protection against them), the costs and affordability of the transition, the fragility of community-led action and the barriers to genuine participation. They point to concrete action at several levels: many recommendations are addressed not only to the City of Amsterdam, but also to housing associations, national governments and the EU. These are participants' recommendations, not formal positions of the City of Amsterdam.

- **Strengthening local capacity, trust and participation:** provide multi-year, trust-based funding for community initiatives and reinstate neighbourhood budgets; compensate residents and organisations for their time and expertise; ensure participants are told how their contributions have been taken into account in decisions; create cross-departmental budgets and assess decisions for their climate and justice implications; enable civil servants to spend time in neighbourhoods; and work with faith-based organisations and other trusted community networks to reach residents who are less connected to formal participation processes.

- **Improving housing and the living environment:** embed climate justice in agreements with housing associations; prioritise tackling heat and mould in existing social housing, so that homes remain adequate and healthy in a changing climate; install external shading; prevent further paving of gardens and the loss of mature trees; open community centres, libraries and churches as cool spaces during heatwaves; and coordinate energy infrastructure with the protection of greenery.

- **Acting at national and EU level**: simplify procurement and subsidy rules so that local initiatives can act as equal partners and support reaches those who need it most; provide sustained national and EU funding for local climate action; ensure that large emitters contribute their fair share, in line with the polluter-pays principle; and address energy and mobility poverty in national transition policy.

- **Recognising global responsibility and safeguarding future generations:** participants called on Amsterdam to recognise its responsibility beyond its borders, including its colonial history and its contribution to global emissions, and to act now for generations to come. Participants proposed looking seven generations ahead when weighing today's decisions and, as the discussion developed, 'seven generations back', linking responsibility for future generations to an awareness of historical injustice. Participants also proposed assessing every decision for its impact on childrens' rights and appointing someone with an explicit mandate to safeguard the rights of children and future generations.

4. Next Steps

The Amsterdam Town Hall COP was a consultative and advisory event. Participants were invited to share their experiences and formulate recommendations, rather than make formal policy decisions.

Ahead of COP31, the organisers have shared this summary with ICLEI and the EU Covenant of Mayors as input for the planned multilevel action declaration. This result will be presented by Anjali Mahadevia, the event coordinator, at the COP31 side event "Town Hall COPs - Strengthening Multilevel Climate Action on the Way to COP31 and beyond" that will take place on 17 November, 16:30 - 17:30 in the Multilevel Action Pavilion. She will participate in a panel alongside the Mayor of Turku (Finland) and the Deputy Secretary General of the Healthy Cities National Network of Türkiye to discuss how local insights can inform national and international climate action.

In December 2026, the City of Amsterdam, in collaboration with SEVEN, will publish a report in Dutch and English and share it with participants. The report will document their experiences and recommendations, distinguish these from formal municipal decisions, and explain how the findings may inform work on climate justice, participation and democratisation, and the city-wide knowledge agenda.

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