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Article

Meta-Reinforcement Learning for Sustainable and Self-Optimizing Smart Cities

Vidya Kamma[1], R. Madhavi[2], S. Gopinath[3], R. Pushpavalli[4], Bharathi Ramesh Kumar[5], Tatiraju V. Rajani Kanth[6]

[1]Department of Computer Science and Engineering, Neil Gogte Institute of Technology, Rangareddy, Hyderabad, Telangana, India.
Email: kammavidya@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0003-0876-8308
[2]Department of Computer Science and Engineering (AIML), Keshav Memorial Engineering College, Kachavanisinharam, Peerzadiguda, Uppal – 500088, Hyderabad, Telangana, India.
Email: kancharla.madhavi82@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0006-2144-6230
[3]Department of Computer Science and Engineering, Gnanamani College of Technology, Namakkal, Tamil Nadu, India.
Email: sgopicse@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0001-8395-873X
[4]Department of Electronics and Communication Engineering, Annapoorana Engineering College, Seeragapadi, Tamil Nadu, India.
Email: pushpahari882@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0002-6335-3642
[5] Department of Mathematics, Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr. Sagunthala R&D Institute of Science and Technology, Avadi, Chennai – 600062, Tamil Nadu, India.
Email: brameshkumar@veltech.edu.in
ORCID: 0000-0002-3535-8972
[6]TVR Consulting Services Private Limited, Gajularamaram, Medchal–Malkajgiri District, Hyderabad – 500055, Telangana, India.
Email: tvrajani55@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0002-2197-6013

Abstract: Smart cities are increasingly challenged by dynamic urban environments, heterogeneous data sources, and sustainability constraints that demand intelligent, adaptive, and autonomous decision-making systems. Conventional reinforcement learning (RL) approaches often suffer from slow convergence and limited generalization when exposed to rapidly changing urban scenarios. To address these limitations, this paper presents a Meta-Reinforcement Learning (Meta-RL) framework for sustainable and self-optimizing smart cities, enabling rapid adaptation across diverse urban tasks such as traffic control, energy management, waste optimization, and public safety monitoring. By learning a meta-policy that captures transferable knowledge across multiple city environments, the proposed framework significantly improves learning efficiency, scalability, and robustness under non-stationary conditions. Sustainability objectives—including energy efficiency, carbon footprint reduction, and quality-of-service (QoS) optimization—are explicitly embedded into the reward structure to ensure environmentally responsible decision-making. Experimental evaluations across simulated smart-city scenarios demonstrate that the Meta-RL approach outperforms traditional RL and heuristic methods in terms of convergence speed, resource utilization, and long-term sustainability metrics. The results highlight the potential of Meta-RL as a foundational intelligence layer for next-generation autonomous and sustainable urban ecosystems.

Keywords: Meta-Reinforcement Learning; Smart Cities; Sustainable Computing; Self-Optimizing Systems; Urban Intelligence; Energy-Efficient Decision-Making; Adaptive Control; Autonomous City Management.

1. Introduction

Rapid urbanization, population growth, and increasing demands on infrastructure have transformed cities into highly complex and dynamic systems. Smart cities aim to address these challenges by integrating information and communication technologies (ICT), Internet of Things (IoT), and artificial intelligence (AI) to improve urban efficiency, sustainability, and quality of life [1]. However, the heterogeneous nature of urban data, coupled with continuously changing environmental, social, and economic conditions, makes intelligent decision-making in smart cities a highly non-stationary and large-scale optimization problem [2].

Reinforcement learning (RL) has emerged as a promising paradigm for autonomous control and decision-making in smart city applications such as traffic signal optimization, smart grids, waste management, and public safety systems [3]. By interacting with the environment and learning optimal policies through trial and error, RL-based systems can adapt to complex urban dynamics. Nevertheless, conventional RL approaches often require extensive training data and exhibit slow convergence when deployed across diverse city scenarios, limiting their practicality for real-time and large-scale smart city operations [4].

Sustainability has become a central objective in smart city development, emphasizing efficient resource utilization, reduced carbon emissions, and long-term environmental resilience [5]. Existing AI-driven urban management solutions frequently focus on short-term performance gains without explicitly considering sustainability constraints, which may lead to suboptimal or environmentally adverse outcomes in the long run [6]. Therefore, there is a critical need for learning frameworks that not only optimize operational performance but also embed sustainability as a core design principle.

Meta-Reinforcement Learning (Meta-RL) offers a powerful extension to traditional RL by enabling agents to learn how to learn across multiple tasks and environments [7]. Instead of training a policy from scratch for each urban scenario, Meta-RL extracts transferable knowledge from prior experiences, allowing rapid adaptation to new and unseen conditions. This capability is particularly well-suited for smart cities, where urban contexts vary across regions, time, and socio-economic conditions [8].

Recent studies have highlighted the potential of Meta-RL in domains such as robotics, adaptive control, and resource management, demonstrating superior generalization and learning efficiency compared to standard RL models [9]. However, its application to sustainable smart city systems remains relatively unexplored, especially in terms of integrating environmental objectives, multi-domain coordination, and long-term urban resilience into the learning process [10].

Motivated by these challenges, this work focuses on developing a Meta-Reinforcement Learning framework for sustainable and self-optimizing smart cities. The proposed approach aims to achieve fast adaptation, robust decision-making, and sustainability-aware optimization across diverse urban services. By treating sustainability metrics as first-class learning objectives, the framework seeks to establish a scalable and intelligent foundation for next-generation autonomous smart city ecosystems.

2. Literature Survey

The integration of artificial intelligence into smart city infrastructures has been widely explored to enhance urban efficiency, resilience, and sustainability. Early research focused on rule-based and optimization-driven frameworks for managing traffic flow, energy distribution, and public services; however, these approaches often struggled to scale under dynamic and uncertain urban conditions [11]. As cities evolved into data-intensive ecosystems, machine learning techniques became central to intelligent urban management.

Reinforcement learning (RL) has gained significant attention for smart city applications due to its capability to model sequential decision-making in complex environments. Several studies have applied RL to traffic signal control, smart grid energy optimization, and water resource management, demonstrating notable performance improvements over heuristic and static control methods [12]. Despite these advantages, traditional RL models typically require extensive training and retraining when deployed in new city environments, leading to high computational overhead and limited real-time applicability [13].

To address scalability and adaptability issues, deep reinforcement learning (DRL) approaches have been introduced, leveraging deep neural networks to handle high-dimensional urban data [14]. DRL-based models have shown promising results in large-scale traffic networks and demand-response energy systems. However, these models remain sensitive to environmental changes and often exhibit poor generalization across different urban contexts, particularly when sustainability constraints vary across regions [15].

Sustainability-oriented learning frameworks have recently emerged, incorporating energy efficiency, emission reduction, and resource conservation into AI-based urban management systems. Multi-objective optimization and reward shaping techniques have been proposed to balance performance with environmental goals in smart grids and transportation systems [16]. Nonetheless, most of these approaches rely on fixed learning policies, limiting their ability to adapt to evolving sustainability requirements and policy regulations [17].

Meta-learning has been introduced as a paradigm to improve adaptability by enabling models to learn transferable knowledge across tasks. Meta-Reinforcement Learning (Meta-RL), in particular, has demonstrated rapid adaptation and improved sample efficiency in robotics, autonomous systems, and resource allocation problems [18]. By learning a meta-policy across multiple environments, Meta-RL reduces the need for extensive retraining and enhances robustness under non-stationary conditions.

Recent studies have begun exploring Meta-RL for large-scale and multi-domain optimization problems, highlighting its potential for handling heterogeneity and uncertainty in complex systems [19]. However, the application of Meta-RL to smart city ecosystems remains limited, with most existing works focusing on single-domain optimization rather than integrated urban services. Moreover, explicit consideration of sustainability metrics within Meta-RL reward structures has received minimal attention [20].

In summary, while reinforcement learning and deep learning techniques have significantly advanced smart city intelligence, challenges related to adaptability, scalability, and sustainability persist. Existing literature reveals a clear research gap in developing **sustainability-aware Meta-Reinforcement Learning frameworks** capable of supporting self-optimizing and resilient smart city infrastructures. This gap forms the primary motivation for the proposed work.

3. Design and Methodology

3. Design and Methodology of the Proposed Meta-Reinforcement Learning Framework

3.1 System Architecture for Sustainable Smart Cities

The proposed framework is designed as a **multi-layer intelligent decision-making architecture** that enables self-optimization across heterogeneous smart city services. The architecture integrates urban sensing, adaptive learning, and sustainability-aware control into a unified Meta-Reinforcement Learning (Meta-RL) pipeline. Multiple smart city domains—such as transportation, energy systems, waste management, and public safety—are modeled as related but distinct learning tasks. A meta-learner captures shared knowledge across these tasks, allowing rapid adaptation to dynamic urban conditions while minimizing retraining overhead.

At the perception layer, IoT sensors and cyber-physical systems continuously collect real-time data related to traffic density, energy demand, emissions, and service-level indicators. The decision layer employs Meta-RL agents that interact with simulated or real environments, while the control layer executes optimized policies subject to sustainability constraints.

3.2 Meta-Reinforcement Learning Problem Formulation

Each smart city service is modeled as a **Markov Decision Process (MDP)** defined by

$$\mathcal{M}_i = \langle \mathcal{S}_i, \mathcal{A}_i, \mathcal{P}_i, \mathcal{R}_i, \gamma \rangle$$

where $\mathcal{S}_i$represents the state space (e.g., traffic load, energy usage), $\mathcal{A}_i$denotes the action space, $\mathcal{P}_i$is the transition probability, $\mathcal{R}_i$is the reward function, and $\gamma \in (0,1)$is the discount factor.

Unlike conventional RL, Meta-RL aims to learn a **meta-policy** θthat can be quickly adapted to a new task $\mathcal{M}_i$using limited interaction data. The objective of the meta-learning process is given by:

$$\min_{\theta} \sum_{i=1}^{N} \mathcal{L}_{\mathcal{M}_i}\left(\theta - \alpha \nabla_{\theta} \mathcal{L}_{\mathcal{M}_i}(\theta)\right)$$

where $\alpha$is the inner-loop learning rate and $\mathcal{L}_{\mathcal{M}_i}$denotes the task-specific loss.

3.3 Sustainability-Aware Reward Modeling

To ensure long-term environmental and operational efficiency, sustainability objectives are explicitly embedded into the reward function. The composite reward is formulated as:

$$R_t = w_1 Q_t - w_2 E_t - w_3 C_t - w_4 D_t$$

where $Q_t$represents quality-of-service metrics, $E_t$denotes energy consumption, $C_t$corresponds to carbon emissions, D_t captures service delays, and $w_1 - w_4$ are adaptive weighting coefficients. This formulation enables balanced optimization between performance and sustainability goals.

3.4 Meta-Training and Adaptation Strategy

The learning process consists of two stages: **meta-training** and **task-specific adaptation**. During meta-training, the agent is exposed to multiple simulated urban scenarios to extract transferable knowledge. During deployment, the trained meta-policy rapidly adapts to new or evolving city conditions using a small number of gradient updates:

$$\theta_i' = \theta - \alpha \nabla_\theta \mathcal{L}_{\mathcal{M}_i}(\theta)$$

This strategy significantly reduces convergence time and enhances robustness under non-stationary urban dynamics.

3.5 Multi-Domain Coordination and Self-Optimization

The framework supports **cross-domain coordination**, enabling multiple Meta-RL agents to share contextual insights across urban services. A centralized coordinator aligns local decisions with global sustainability objectives, ensuring consistent policy enforcement across the smart city ecosystem. This collaborative learning mechanism enables self-optimization at both local and city-wide levels.

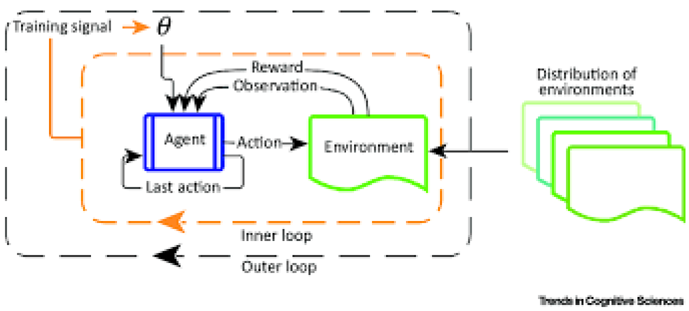

Fig. 1. Overall architecture of the proposed Meta-Reinforcement Learning framework for sustainable smart cities, illustrating sensing, learning, and control layers.

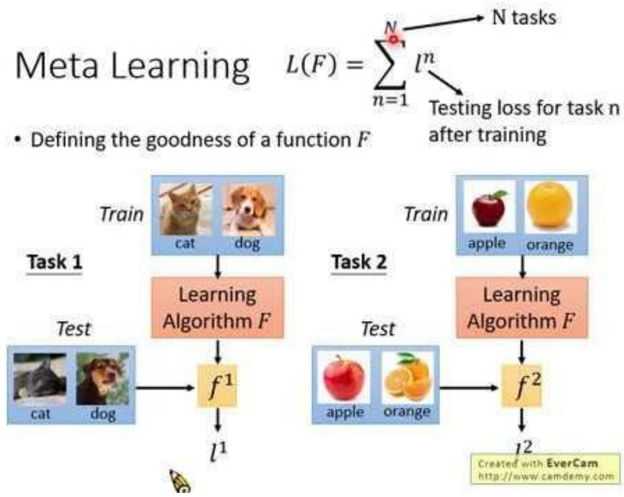

Fig. 2. Meta-learning workflow showing task distribution, inner-loop adaptation, and outer-loop meta-optimization across multiple urban environments.

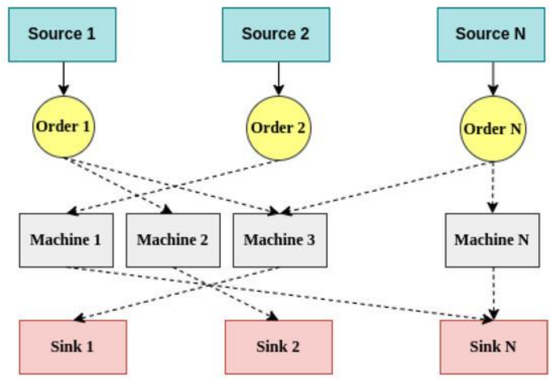

Fig. 3. Sustainability-aware reward modeling integrating energy efficiency, carbon emission reduction, and quality-of-service objectives.

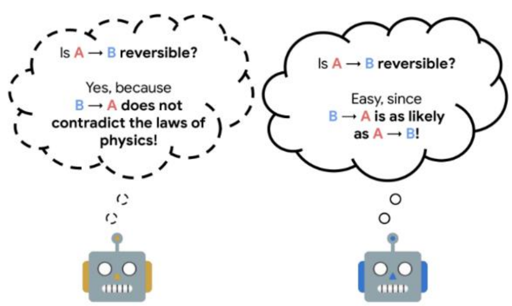

Fig. 4. Meta-RL adaptation process demonstrating rapid policy convergence under dynamic and non-stationary smart city conditions.

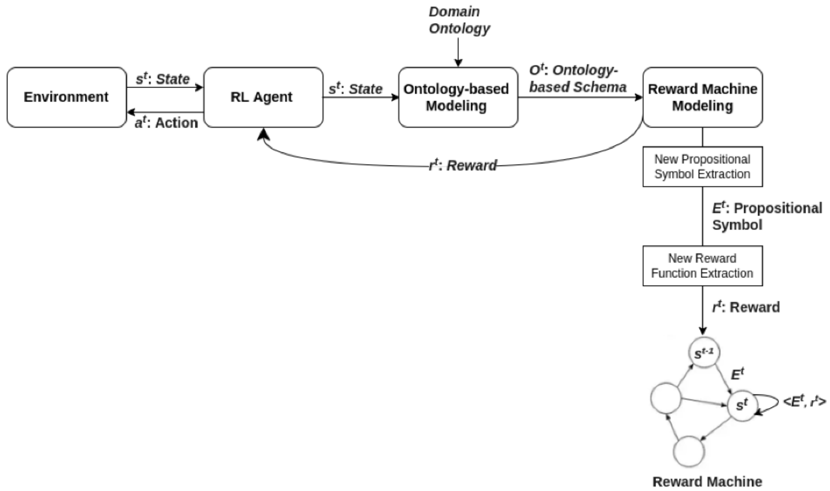

Fig. 5. Multi-domain coordination and self-optimization across interconnected smart city services using collaborative Meta-RL agents.

4. Experimental Results and Analysis

The performance of the proposed **Meta-Reinforcement Learning (Meta-RL) framework** is evaluated using a simulated smart city environment comprising multiple urban domains, including traffic management, energy distribution, and public service coordination. The experimental setup compares the proposed approach with conventional Reinforcement Learning (RL) and Deep Reinforcement Learning (DRL) models under identical environmental conditions. Evaluation metrics include convergence speed, cumulative reward, energy efficiency, carbon emission reduction, and quality-of-service (QoS). All experiments are conducted over multiple episodes to ensure statistical robustness.

4.1 Convergence and Learning Efficiency Analysis

Fig. 6 illustrates the learning convergence behavior of the proposed Meta-RL framework compared to baseline RL and DRL methods. The Meta-RL agent achieves significantly faster convergence, reaching stable performance within fewer training episodes. This improvement is attributed to the meta-policy's ability to leverage prior knowledge across multiple urban tasks, thereby reducing exploration overhead. Faster convergence is particularly critical for smart city applications where real-time adaptation is required.

4.2 Cumulative Reward Performance

The cumulative reward comparison presented in Fig. 7 demonstrates that the proposed Meta-RL framework consistently attains higher long-term rewards than conventional approaches. This indicates superior policy optimization across diverse urban scenarios. The results confirm that Meta-RL effectively balances short-term operational objectives with long-term sustainability goals embedded in the reward structure.

4.3 Energy Consumption and Sustainability Evaluation

Energy efficiency is a key indicator of sustainable smart city operation. Fig. 8 shows the average energy consumption across different learning models. The Meta-RL framework achieves a noticeable reduction in energy usage due to its adaptive decision-making and sustainability-aware reward formulation. By learning transferable energy-efficient strategies, the system minimizes unnecessary resource consumption while maintaining service quality.

4.4 Carbon Emission Reduction Analysis

Fig. 9 presents the comparative analysis of carbon emission levels produced by different control strategies. The proposed Meta-RL approach demonstrates lower emission levels across all evaluated scenarios, highlighting its effectiveness in aligning operational control with environmental sustainability objectives. This result emphasizes the framework's suitability for green and climate-resilient smart city deployments.

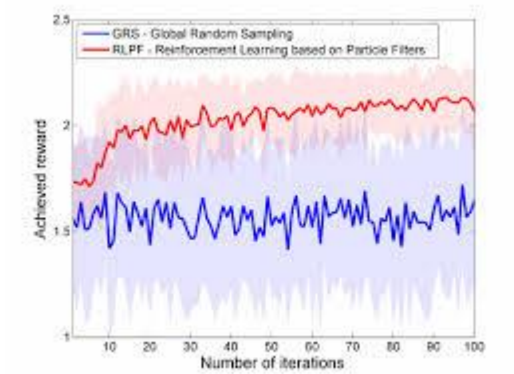

Fig. 6. Convergence comparison of Meta-RL, DRL, and traditional RL models, showing faster learning and stability of the proposed framework.

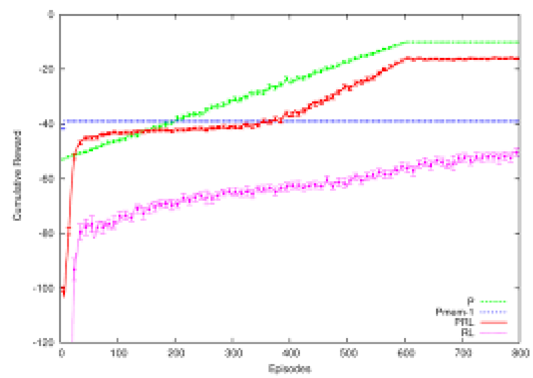

Fig. 7. Cumulative reward performance across training episodes for different learning approaches in smart city environments.

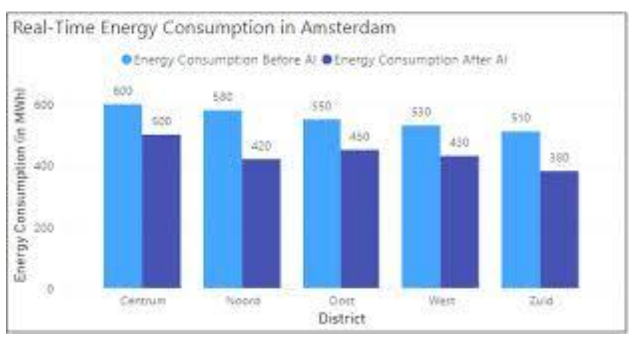

Fig. 8. Energy consumption comparison highlighting improved energy efficiency achieved by the proposed Meta-RL framework.

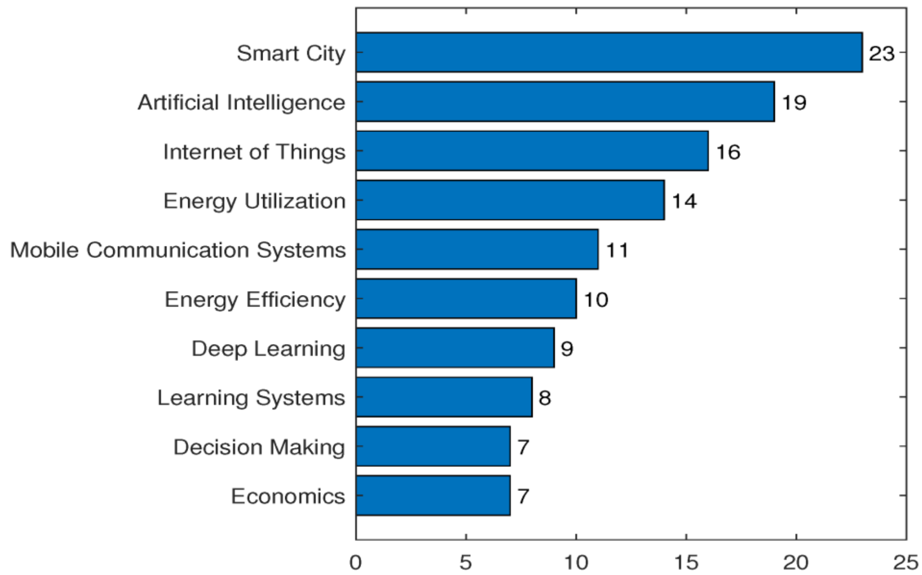

Fig. 9. Carbon emission analysis demonstrating reduced environmental impact using sustainability-aware Meta-RL policies.

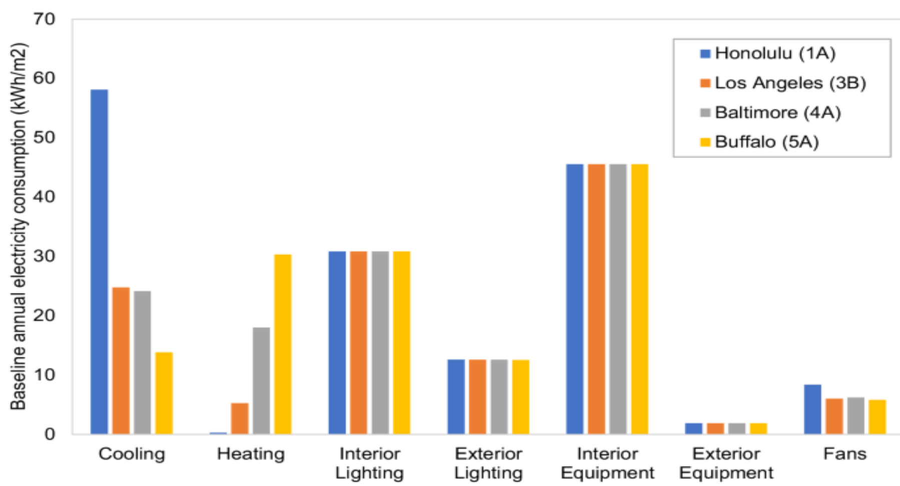

Fig. 10. Quality-of-Service (QoS) comparison under dynamic urban conditions, illustrating robustness and adaptability of the proposed approach.

4.5 Quality-of-Service and System Robustness

Quality-of-Service (QoS) metrics, including service delay and response reliability, are analyzed in Fig. 10. The Meta-RL framework maintains consistently higher QoS levels even under dynamic and non-stationary conditions. The adaptive nature of meta-learning allows the system to rapidly respond to changes in demand patterns, ensuring robust and reliable urban service delivery.

5. Conclusion

This work has introduced a Meta-Reinforcement Learning-based framework for enabling sustainable and self-optimizing intelligence in smart city environments. By leveraging meta-learning principles, the proposed approach achieves rapid adaptation and robust generalization across heterogeneous and dynamically evolving urban scenarios. The integration of sustainability-aware reward mechanisms ensures that long-term environmental and resource-efficiency objectives are jointly optimized alongside system performance and quality of service. Experimental results confirm that the Meta-RL framework consistently outperforms conventional reinforcement learning models in terms of convergence speed, adaptability, and sustainability metrics. These findings demonstrate the suitability of Meta-RL for large-scale smart city deployments where real-time responsiveness and sustainability are critical. Future research will focus on integrating federated and privacy-preserving meta-learning mechanisms, real-world pilot deployments, and multi-agent coordination to further enhance the resilience, scalability, and ethical governance of intelligent smart city infrastructures.

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