

# A PLACE FOR SUBNATIONAL GOVERNMENTS AT THE INTERNATIONAL CLIMATE NEGOTIATING TABLE

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It can be difficult for subnational governments and cities to acquire a place at the negotiating table for international climate events, such as UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) gatherings. This is despite the fact that subnational governments are often best placed to implement the outcomes of climate change negotiations. The role of cities in global geopolitical negotiations and agreements has been undervalued, with subnational governments dependent on national structures to carry their message forward, even as the city space gains ever greater prominence with rapid global urbanisation. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and local government associations (LGAs) have stepped into this often contested and politically charged space to represent the voices of subnational governments and cities on the world stage. They profile the need for co-ordinated, effective climate action at subnational level through improved vertical and horizontal co-operation with central governments and other role players in the climate action space.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure that the targets and action measures from international climate agreements are relevant and implementable at the local scale, an institutional architecture should:

- 1 Actively strengthen internal co-operation and collaboration between national and subnational governments by moving beyond 'consultation' to a model of 'co-production' in the climate change policy sphere.
- 2 Adopt fiscal measures that allow for the rapid movement of finance for climate change mitigation and adaptation measures from donor organisations to subnational governments.
- 3 Deepen the collaboration between transnational actors, central and subnational governments to maximise the opportunities for innovative and locally relevant mitigation and adaptation measures.
- 4 Recognise potential intra-governmental sensitivities and plan accordingly for conflict resolution measures that diffuse tensions that may arise.

## INTERNATIONAL POLICY ENVIRONMENT AROUND CLIMATE CHANGE

The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries saw unprecedented levels of industrialisation and development, with concomitant increases in anthropogenic greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. GHGs have a heat-trapping effect on the Earth's atmosphere, which has resulted in a warming trend near its surface of approximately 1.5°C over the last century, in a process that has become known as climate change. Recognition of this trend and its potentially catastrophic results for humanity has prompted a spate of studies, consensus reports and policy frameworks aimed at understanding, mitigating and adapting to the effects of anthropogenic climate change.

Given the scale of the climate change issue, it is perhaps unsurprising that the UN has been the rallying point for efforts to combat GHG emissions (and other harmful human activities) through its Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and international climate change treaty, the UNFCCC. Member states that align themselves to the UNFCCC have met annually since 1994 to assess the implementation of the framework and its associated agreements. These discussions include the institutional and financial arrangements needed to facilitate its implementation among member states. The UNFCCC has traditionally adopted a 'top-down' approach to implementation, where decisions are taken at the international level and disseminated downwards.<sup>2</sup> Thus the strategies to address GHG emissions that emanate from these treaties and agreements tend to be both negotiated by nation-states and aimed at the level of the nation-state for implementation.

## INCREASING IMPORTANCE OF THE CITY SPACE

At the turn of the century, then mayor of Denver, Colorado, Wellington E Webb stated that 'the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a century of empires, the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a century of nation states. The 21<sup>st</sup> century will be a century of cities'.<sup>3</sup> What would prompt Webb to suggest that the role that cities play on the global geopolitical stage is set to outstrip and usurp that of the nation-state? The simple answer is growth, with global urban trends unequivocally indicating that the move towards increasingly urban societies is occurring at an accelerating speed.

The UN Human Settlements Programme highlights some key statistics that lend weight to this assertion in

its World Cities Report of 2016. Among these are that globally, the urban population increased by an annual average of 57 million between 1990 and 2000. Between 2010 and 2015, urban populations grew by an average annual increase of 77 million. In proportional terms, in 1990 urban dwellers represented 43% of the global population (2.3 billion people), while by 2015 that figure stood at 54%, approximately 4 billion people.<sup>4</sup> In the next decade, over 1 billion people will be added to the present urban population, with predictions that 70% of the global population (7 billion people) will live in urban areas by 2050.<sup>5</sup> This transition to an urbanised global society is staggering in its rapidity, especially considering that a mere 20% of the world's population lived in urban areas in the early 1900s. With the majority of the world population now living in urban areas there is an increased focus on the role of cities in addressing climate change issues.

## A MISMATCH OF SCALE?

In contrast with the local or subnational scale of the aforementioned activities, the institutional architecture of current climate change governance under the auspices of the UNFCCC has been developed largely by agreement between nation-states. The interventions that emanate from these institutional arrangements must of necessity be applicable to signatory states in their entirety, and as such cannot help but be somewhat generic and often out of touch with the economic, political, social and environmental contexts of individual countries and cities. Proponents of subnational governments would argue that there are certain key areas and competencies in which subnational governments are more suited to play a primary role, particularly those related to service delivery and building resilience.<sup>6</sup> From a legal perspective, while it is national governments that are legally bound to achieve climate targets, it is subnational governments that implement many of the policies to achieve those goals.<sup>7</sup> Subnational governments are closer to citizens, and in many ways more autonomous within their mandates than national governments and thus more flexible. Their mandates are often also well aligned with many of the policy areas of climate intervention measures.<sup>8</sup> Despite this obvious suitability of subnational governments to implement mitigation and adaptation measures, the prevailing vertical/hierarchical arrangement of the nation-state government structure has been known to hinder cities in their attempts to implement climate change interventions. Additionally, government finance mechanisms, which control the flow

of funding from the central or national government to the subnational level, are often restrictive when it comes to securing finance for the implementation of climate change mitigation and adaptation projects, even when external donors are the source of the funds. From the perspective of political will, city leadership structures are often driven to implement mitigation and adaptation measures but have neither the legal mandate nor the available finances to do so. These factors make for a compelling argument that subnational governments, and indeed cities, have a greater role to play in climate change mitigation and adaptation than is currently occurring in the international climate policy space.

### **CITIES AS TRANSNATIONAL ACTORS**

The climate negotiation and action space can be sensitive from a political perspective, particularly with subnational governments and cities assuming an increasingly important role. National governments may feel that powerful cities are going beyond their mandate in driving climate policy, which at times can cause tension between these different levels of government. It can therefore be difficult for subnational governments and cities to obtain a place at the negotiating table for international climate events such as the Conference of the Parties (COP), unless well-co-ordinated and functional co-operation systems with central or national governments are already in place. It is thus unsurprising that the role of cities in global geopolitical negotiations and agreements has not always been given the prominence it deserves, as subnational governments have been dependent on internal co-operative government structures to carry their message forward.

LGAs and NGOs have recognised this political impasse, and have stepped into this often contested and politically charged space as ‘transnational actors’<sup>9</sup> to collectively represent the voices of subnational governments and cities on the world stage. Organisations such as Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI), United Cities for Local Government and the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group can transcend national boundaries and political loyalties to overcome issues of scale mismatch and focus on the issues pertinent to subnational governments when it comes to implementing the interventions agreed upon by international climate negotiations. The roles of these organisations in the international negotiating space are growing,<sup>10</sup> with ICLEI in particular playing an active role

in advocating for greater representation of its member subnational governments.

Recognising the need and opportunity for an organisation that could support the exchange of information and experiences between subnational governments and cities, ICLEI was founded in 1990 on the premise that locally designed initiatives can provide the most effective way to achieve local, national and global sustainability objectives, including climate change mitigation and adaptation.<sup>11</sup> Under the co-ordination and leadership of ICLEI, this approach has led to the emergence of multi-level governance frameworks that are focused on bridging the gap between central and subnational government, effectively giving cities greater freedom and representation on the international climate policy stage. In particular, the side events at the international COPs have proven to be a productive space for subnational government networks to meet and supplement their participation through the states acting as their voice, while also attaining observer and consultative status at these conferences.<sup>12</sup> This gives subnational governments previously unheard-of access to the main international negotiation processes and thereby the opportunity to actively seek full international recognition.<sup>13</sup>

### **AFRICAN CITY NETWORKS**

The dynamics of current and future climate variability and change in city-regions are poorly understood, particularly at the regional subnational scale.<sup>14</sup> At the continental level, the Draft AU Climate Change Strategy aims to promote a platform for sharing experiences and transferring technologies to create an enabling environment for climate-resilient sustainable urban development.<sup>15</sup> Beyond this overarching guidance, there is little cohesion on climate policy at the continental or regional level in Africa. Against this backdrop, the Future Resilience of African Cities and Lands (FRACTAL) project pursues critical questions of how climate change influences decision-making across governance, economics, business, energy, and national security planning, particularly at the subnational level, through its creation of a local government network located in eight cities in seven Southern African countries.<sup>16</sup> FRACTAL is funded by the UK’s Department for International Development and Natural Environment Research Council; and is led by the University of Cape Town’s Climate Systems Analysis Group in concert with a number of partners, including ICLEI.

## TOWARDS A NEW MODEL FOR THE NEGOTIATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF INTERNATIONAL CLIMATE POLICY

Against the backdrop of an urbanising world, cities and subnational governments are increasingly attaining greater autonomy over their development trajectories and local economic landscape.<sup>17</sup> Importantly, more cities now have directly elected mayors instead of political appointees, which allows for greater political autonomy and the prioritisation of local issues.<sup>18</sup> There is growing recognition of this agency and capacity of subnational governments and cities to effect meaningful change in mitigating and adapting to the impacts of climate change in key institutions within the global climate change policy space, including the UNFCCC and IPCC. If this agency and capacity is to be effectively harnessed, the 'new' role of subnational governments needs to be matched by strategies that increase internal co-operative government (ie, 'vertical collaboration'), married with horizontal co-operation initiatives. In this context, horizontal co-operation is based on the opportunity for learning, information sharing and co-operation between all levels and sectors of government, as well as with non-state actors such as NGOs, research organisations and the private sector that can influence the policy dialogue and negotiation process.<sup>19</sup> The ICLEI member network consists of upwards of 1 500 cities, towns and regions that collectively represent over 25% of the global urban population. Organisations such as ICLEI are therefore well positioned to co-ordinate such efforts, given their emphasis on co-operation between members and the documentation of local government experiences in policy implementation, as well as their global footprint. A further consideration for the devolution of negotiating responsibility from centralised government structures to subnational and city scales would be to incorporate and reinforce a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches. This is in recognition of the reality that national governments cannot effectively implement national climate strategies without working closely with subnational governments; and that subnational governments, in turn, are legally and institutionally dependent on central governments.<sup>20</sup>

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Luke Moore is a geographer with experience in urban sustainability, political ecology and integrated coastal management. At ICLEI Africa, his role is to develop strategic partnerships and provide technical project input across work streams.
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- 4 UN-Habitat (UN Human Settlements Programme), 'World Cities Report 2016', <http://unhabitat.org/wpdm-package/world-cities-report-2016/?wpdmdl=117431>, accessed 20 October 2016.
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- 9 Velenzuela JM, *op. cit.*
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- 11 Von Begin G & M Zimmerman, 'ICLEI Seoul Strategic Plan 2015–2021: Building a World of Local Actions for a Sustainable Urban Future', ICLEI Local Governments for Sustainability, 2015, [http://e-lib.iclei.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Strategic-Plan-2015-August-2015\\_web.pdf](http://e-lib.iclei.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Strategic-Plan-2015-August-2015_web.pdf), accessed 10 June 2016.
- 12 Velenzuela JM, *op. cit.*
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 FRACTAL (Future Resilience for African Cities and Lands), 'About FRACTAL', <http://www.fractal.org.za/>, accessed 5 November 2016.
- 15 AU, *Draft African Strategy on Climate Change*. Accra: AU, 2014, AMCEN-15-REF-11.
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- 17 Galarraga I, Gonzalez-Eguino M & A Markandya, *op. cit.*
- 18 Velenzuela JM, *op. cit.*
- 19 Galarraga I, Gonzalez-Eguino M & A Markandya, *op. cit.*
- 20 *Ibid.*

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