

# CITIES AND CLIMATE DIPLOMACY

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*Cities have become important actors in climate change discussions, formulating and implementing adaptation policies and setting mitigation goals and targets. Their role is also becoming increasingly important in the field of climate and environment as well as sustainability and green growth. Within the scope of climate diplomacy, cities have a clear role at three different levels: (1) through a collective position; (2) through interaction and engagement with each other and (3) through advocacy at a national and local level. This policy brief provides some recommendations on how cities can better engage and participate in climate diplomacy across various levels and highlights how their specific advantages and capabilities are best used to support international processes associated with international climate action.*

\*This policy brief builds on the discussion paper “Cities and Climate Diplomacy in the Asia Pacific”.

## Introduction

For the last two decades, climate diplomacy has largely been understood as the negotiations by parties within the context of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Due to the nature of the structure under which the UNFCCC is governed, this primarily came to mean the negotiations and diplomacy conducted by member states as they tried to arrive at a consensus on greenhouse gas (GHG) emission baseline and mitigation targets. However, a stocktaking of all the activities and initiatives that have taken place on an international scale outside the framework of nation states and the UNFCCC suggests that climate issues and the “diplomacy” surrounding them go beyond this narrow perspective or framework.

Non-state actors are increasingly involved in issues surrounding climate change and they too have been engaging across political boundaries to cooperate, learn, and assist one another on an international scale. Looking at the sheer number of initiatives and projects related to climate and environment taking place around the world, state-driven and state-led examples constitute but a small

proportion. A large percentage of climate initiatives are in fact being carried out by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and increasingly by cities and local governments on their own.

Cities have been acutely aware of their position as major sources of GHG emissions and of their disproportionate vulnerability in the face of global warming and climate change impacts. It is therefore important to appreciate as well as make use of the unique advantages, capabilities, and opportunities that climate diplomacy by cities could offer. This policy brief thus focuses on cities, and by proxy on local governments, and makes some suggestions on how these actors can use their advantages and capabilities, either as a collective actor or as individual actors, to further the objectives of climate action through climate diplomacy.

## How and Why Do Cities Engage in Climate Diplomacy?

City diplomacy has been practised since the early city-states of Ancient Greece, long before the traditional inter-state diplomacy of today. Cities, despite being sub-national governments, are recognised as international actors and have the capacity and authority to represent their interests against, along or beyond those of their national governments. Cities therefore have (or can have) a defined foreign policy, particularly in terms of security, development, economy, culture, cooperation (networks) and representation.

The inherent structure and mechanisms of the United Nations, under which UNFCCC falls, prioritise only nation states and national governments. Other parties, be they sub-national, local or city governments, NGOs or advocacy groups, are relegated to observer status with limited avenues for inputs and without any direct or meaningful influence. This has been a predicament for city governments.

Despite this reality, the diplomatic activities of cities for combating global warming are noteworthy. By working with one another, cities have been addressing and tackling some climate-related challenges at the local level. One of the reasons is that land-use planning, waste management, transportation issues and energy consumption are local in nature and have to be addressed at this level. A large number of these climate actions have however, also come about as a result of cities engaging and learning from one another.

Cities practise climate diplomacy through four different mechanisms: (i) through networks; (ii) bilateral relations with other cities; (iii) local-national city relations and (iv) city-global multilateral mechanisms. The last mechanism is not an option for most cities and only applies to city-states (e.g. Singapore) that have direct representation and a diplomatic role in global climate governance regimes, which includes the UNFCCC and the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD).

Most cities engaged in climate diplomacy do so on at least one of the following three levels: (1) through a collective position; (2) through interaction and engagement with each other and (3) within national borders.

### Climate Diplomacy Through a Collective Position

This form of climate diplomacy is conducted through various city networks, like the C40 Climate Leadership Group (C40) and ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI). While most major cities probably do contribute and give inputs to national authorities who participate in global climate negotiations at the UNFCCC, their voice is limited due to a number of factors. In general, the national agenda always takes precedence and hence specific issues faced by cities within the country are likely to take a backseat. Secondly, even if the issues of cities are tabled and given precedence by the respective national representatives, the extent to which this is likely to be addressed or even heard

depends strongly on the clout of the national government at the negotiating table. These are considerable challenges that cities and local governments have to overcome.

By being part of a city network, cities band together to push for a common agenda. There is certainly strength in numbers; however such groupings and networks also do not have a formal seat at the international table. Networks like ICLEI and C40 thus work on the sidelines of the UNFCCC, in the capacity of an NGO, using various avenues for inputs to the main proceedings.

The numerous declarations, pacts and the resolve demonstrated in networks of cities often serve as a reminder that a consensus and willingness to seriously address and tackle climate related issues is possible. Without the constraints of sovereignty issues and broader foreign policy agendas, which national government representatives are often bound by, cities clearly demonstrate acceptance of the challenge posed by climate change and of the urgent need to address it. Cities are ahead of their national counterparts in this regard.

Perhaps the greatest contribution and benefit of climate diplomacy by cities in networks is the strength and encouragement it provides to member cities to start working on some climate challenges in their own capacity with the help of one another. There is a sense of empowerment when cities do not have to wait for something to happen at the national level before acting or addressing present and future risks. The act of climate diplomacy by cities, through networks, has allowed them to become positive and proactive on such issues.

### **Climate Diplomacy Through Interaction and Engagement with Each Other**

The role of cities in contributing to GHG as well as the disproportionate burden of climate change impacts is well appreciated by now. This knowledge certainly makes climate issues more urgent for cities. There is also an understanding that urbanisation, especially of global cities (and aspiring global cities), follows a similar trajectory. Cities often face similar challenges and issues in different stages of their development.

The appreciation and understanding of these commonalities create the necessary space for diplomacy between cities. While climate change and sustainable development issues are but one aspect of the broader diplomacy between cities, it is slowly becoming an important one, which city leaders and mayors are recognising and prioritising. Cities, therefore, are often open and keen to engage with one another to learn or share their experiences.

Diplomacy between cities in terms of climate change happens when two cities see mutual benefit in their relations. Most bilateral city diplomacy seems to happen between cities that are at different stages of economic development or with differing local government implementing capacities. As such, one serves as a resource city, seeking recognition, while the other city serves as a recipient or experimental city, seeking models or best practices to tailor to its own local context. The example of Bangkok and Yokohama's city-to-city cooperation on sustainable urban development shows how Yokohama's Partnership of Resources and Technologies (Y-PORT) initiative serves as a brand to promote and utilize Yokohama's environmental technologies for other cities.

Some cities also choose to engage their counterparts directly through various events and symposiums, for example Singapore's World Cities Summit initiative. Such initiatives help the host to assume a leadership role as well as promote its brand image. For a relatively less developed city engaging in such interactions helps it to learn from others' experience as well as to network and explore potential partnerships for developing a better, more environmentally friendly city for the future.

## Climate Diplomacy Within National Borders

Capital cities are the site of all major organs of national governments, that is the legislature, judiciary and the executive, and especially the bureaucracy. This, therefore, puts primary/host cities, in a unique position to be able to directly engage and work with state governments on certain issues. Climate change and sustainable development are areas that overlap both city and national administrations' agendas.

Diplomacy at this level happens when city officials and administrations push for certain agendas with regard to climate change and the environment. This kind of diplomacy is reflected in trying to persuade national counterparts to speak on behalf of cities or local administrations at international platforms like the UNFCCC, or even in influencing national governments to enact certain climate-sensitive laws, resilience-building regulations or norms. It could even be as simple as just lobbying for a greater share of the national budget for adaptation and mitigation strategies for the city.

Another dimension of climate diplomacy by cities within the national context could be with other secondary cities within the country. Bangkok serves as a good example in this regard. The Bangkok Metropolitan Authority is known to have good relations with other Thai cities like Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, which it engages on various platforms with regard to climate change and urban development issues. Once again, such engagements can be beneficial for the secondary cities to learn from the experiences of an established primary city, while on the other hand it adds to Bangkok's clout as a leader in urban climate and environmental governance within the country.

## What Are the Advantages and Limitations of City Climate Diplomacy?

Cities recognise the value of learning about and sharing local climate governance and elevating such initiatives to multilateral platforms. They often do this through their own climate change networks where goals and objectives influence and overlap with their local climate policies. It is however clear that there are certain areas where cities working in their own capacity and their own diplomatic efforts are more successful, while in other areas their position sometimes limits or restricts them.

### What Cities and City Networks Do Better

- *Setting more ambitious goals.* The experience of city networks has shown that cities can often work together and come to a consensus on setting more ambitious goals for themselves in terms of mitigation and resilience-building.
- *Act on and implement climate action.* Given the appreciation of the risks involved, cities have proven to be more proactive and willing to work on climate action (mitigation and adaptation) with a greater sense of urgency. One of the reasons for this is also that city administrations face relatively less administrative and bureaucratic red tape and hurdles as compared to the national level.
- *Serve as role models for local and international level collaboration.* The effectiveness and success of cities in setting and implementing climate action through their own diplomatic efforts can serve as an example for other local governments and the international community to showcase how cooperation based on mutual benefit is possible and should be pursued and emulated.

### Where Cities and City Networks Are/Can Be Limited

- *Scaling-up climate action.* Cities and metropolitan regions have political boundaries in terms of jurisdiction. Climate actions, initiatives and programmes which can be enacted are thus limited by these physical limits. Expanding some of these initiatives to surrounding regions, which might be the source of numerous problems for cities can become problematic and hence reduce the

level of effectiveness or prevent achievement of full potential. This hurdle can often be overcome when transboundary issues such as pollution serve as impetus and common ground for cities to collaborate on.

- *Governance structure limitations.* While cities have been engaging independently with other actors on climate issues, the national governance system and the political and administrative boundaries within which cities and local governments can operate vary between countries. As a result, local governments may be limited in what they are able to do or undertake based on the level of autonomy they enjoy. Some cities in the same country may even have differing local administrative powers – whether legally defined or constrained by local resources.
- *Limited influence.* Other than the fact that cities are yet to receive official negotiator status, cities also have relatively less access to multilateral funding mechanisms as compared to the preferred access given to national governments and agencies. The state-centric system of climate governance and diplomacy in general makes it difficult for cities to influence donor and global policy agendas. Cities and local governments often get to know about the different climate finance options available for cities only through their participation in city networks.

## How Can Climate Diplomacy by Cities Be Strengthened?

While cities have taken the initiative to tackle the issue of climate on their own and have started engaging in climate diplomacy, there is still a long way to go. Some potential avenues to sharpen their effectiveness and to become better practitioners of climate diplomacy are listed below.

### Recommendations for City Mayors and City Officials

- *City officials should institutionalise a city climate diplomacy agenda or an international relations policy on climate change.* An official plan focusing on long-term urban development and climate change would help cities plan and provide direction. There is always difficulty when term limits constrain local government leaders from establishing a vision for the city in terms of climate action. City leaders should maximise opportunities to publicise the city government's best practices vis-à-vis other local governments. Some available avenues are external research, assessments and international nominations or awards. Green growth opportunities and incentives can bolster a city diplomacy agenda that is conscious of climate resilience or sustainable development.
- *Cities should train their representative agencies and officials to tap into international climate finance.* Funding can often be a constraint in implementing new plans and policies. There are however numerous funding opportunities for building capacities that have gone untapped for the mere reason that city administrations are unaware of the procedures and application mechanisms.
- *City implementing agencies, honed through years of experience and expertise, should also be trained to double up as climate diplomats for cities.* The Singapore Cooperation Programme and the CLC and BCA's training programmes are good examples of how cities can leverage their climate action to further brand themselves and garner influence among their peers. A programme that can train city officials in the art of diplomacy could yield benefits in the short and the long term.

### **Recommendation for City Networks**

- *City networks can strengthen the system of matching or grouping cities and local governments in terms of their strengths and weaknesses. Concrete agendas and plans can heighten the appeal of networks for cities and local administrations. Additionally, if networks can help cities make a plan, preferably with ranked priorities, for climate change adaptation and mitigation needs based on urgency, this could prove to be a great boost in terms of membership. Such a plan could have the added benefit of serving as a basis for identifying potential partner cities within the network. City networks should also equip city leaders and implementing agencies to focus not only on sharing best practices but also the challenges and the lessons from less successful but progressive initiatives. Such initiatives may not have worked in their context but can work elsewhere given the appropriate political and economic environment.*

### **Recommendation for National Governments**

- *Ministries concerned with climate change issues, departments of foreign affairs and other relevant national agencies should work more closely and potentially train city officials and local leaders. Cities have already demonstrated their capability and at times even leadership in working internationally on issues like climate change independently. Rather than letting cities conduct their diplomacy entirely on their own, some form of aligning of agendas and interests might help both cities and national governments in the international sphere. There is potential that city diplomacy could possibly open doors to national level engagements and bilateral relations, or vice versa. The versatility of being able to switch between national and local/city diplomacy could offer numerous new opportunities and avenues for climate diplomacy.*