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## **A Tale of Cities: Local Champions for Global Climate Action**

*By Gianna Gayle Herrera Amul and Maxim Shrestha*

### **Synopsis**

*Despite being the biggest contributors to climate change and home to majority of the world's population, cities have so far had little say in global climate negotiations. As the frontlines of climate risks, cities will need to lead climate action.*

### **Commentary**

CITIES CONSUME two-thirds of the world's energy and represent 70 per cent of global carbon emissions. Approximately 54 per cent of the total world population was said to have lived in cities or urban regions in 2014. Asia in particular houses about 53 per cent of the 3.9 billion urban dwellers. The Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2014) noted that the risks and negative impacts of climate change are expected to affect urban populations and local economies disproportionately.

Despite this skew, current climate change negotiations have remained strictly within the realm of national governments and often clouded by international political dynamics. Cities, subnational, and local governments who bear the brunt of climate impacts and realities have so far been excluded from a seat at the table. But increasingly cities and local governments are coming together to not only be more vocal but also to take it upon themselves to address climate challenges.

### **Cities charging ahead**

It is often the case that most environmentally friendly and climate adaptation measures are initiated, implemented and run by city and local governments, rather than national administrations. Having to deal with the fallout of climate-related impacts, cities and local governments seem to have greater impetus to provide their citizens liveable, safe and healthier environments. Examples of this abound all over the world and the Asia-Pacific region is no different.

Since the 2011 Bangkok floods, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration has been working towards urban resilience with various defensive measures against climate change and preventive measures against flooding as well as specific programmes and policies on energy, solid waste management and environmental education. Similarly, the city of Melaka is now seen as a model for green growth programmes, environmental initiatives, and climate adaptation and mitigation planning in Malaysia. The Melaka River Rehabilitation project, the adoption of 'green seal' building standards and the electrification of bus transport are but a few of the examples of note.

Other cities in the region are now exploring the possibility of emulating Bangkok and Melaka and adopt similar practices and projects. Learning from the experience of other cities is not new; such exchange of knowledge and technical support has been institutionalised and on-going through programmes like the sister city network which began in the aftermath of the Second World War. Since the 1990s however such exchanges have expanded and occur between scores of cities on a global scale.

### **Enter city networks**

In recent times, city networks have often served as important platforms for cities to come together to share, learn and get the necessary support (financial as well as moral) to start or expand their capabilities and projects. City networks like the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) – Local Governments for Sustainability and C40 Cities (C40) have also been presenting the collective positions of hundreds of cities, municipalities and local governments and advocating a local agenda at international forums like UN Conference on Sustainable Development and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). In spite of such efforts however cities officially still remain on the side-lines of international negotiations and proceedings so far.

At official intergovernmental platforms, cities are stepping up. For example, the Ministerial-Mayoral dialogues initiated at the UNFCCC Conference of Parties in Warsaw by city networks, opened up avenues for linking local governments to national and regional counterparts and to contribute towards advocacy goals of cities on matters like pre-2020 emission targets. In Lima, the *Nazca Climate Action Portal* incorporated the cities-led carbonn Climate Registry to form part of the call to exemplify climate action from non-state entities, including cities, regions, companies and investors.

### **City action and diplomacy**

On some level, cities are already far ahead of the game. Despite current limitations in setting the global agenda, city networks are actively convening and organising their own global bodies and summits, such as the World Mayors Council on Climate Change and the World Mayors Summit on Climate.

Such efforts have helped launch the *Global Cities Covenant on Climate* (also known as the Mexico City Pact), as well as the *Compact of Mayors* which commits cities to self-report their actions and inventories in the carbonn Climate Registry. The *Global Protocol for Community-Scale Greenhouse Gas Emission Inventories (GPC)* which allows for benchmarking, accounting and reporting of city-wide emissions is still another important milestone attributed to the work and effectiveness of cities and their diplomacy.

In addition to mitigation efforts, cities are also increasingly cognisant of their role in adaptation and building urban climate resilience. This is evident from various city-led initiatives such as the *Durban Adaptation Charter* (2011) and the *Bangkok Call for Action towards Urban Resilience in the Asia Pacific* (2015).

### **Way forward**

While global climate negotiations continue to be in a quagmire, through networks like ICLEI and C40, scores of major international cities and hundreds of local governments have already agreed on their very own climate-related targets and goals and have started working towards them. Many of these are more ambitious and far sweeping than those currently being discussed on the international level.

Politics aside, mayors and governors have proven to be more proactive on climate than national leaders. Compared to national government leaders, who are often hard pressed to pursue conservative foreign policies, uphold identities, or defend sovereignty, local government leaders are more autonomous and have the ability to focus on needs, vulnerabilities and solutions.

Given the present geopolitical realities and deadlock in global climate negotiations, cities and their governments seem more suited and equipped in dealing with climate challenges. It is thus imperative

that cities and its leaders are not only given a proper voice in setting the climate agenda and its negotiations, but also serve as examples and role models for national governments to follow.

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*Gianna Gayle Herrera Amul is a Senior Analyst and Maxim Shrestha is an Associate Research Fellow of the Centre for Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.*

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**Nanyang Technological University**  
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798  
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)