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THE CASE FOR A DEDICATED REGIONAL MECHANISM FOR CLIMATE CHANGE: A COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT

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Contents

- [Abstract](#)
- [Introduction](#)
- [Comparative Assessment of Regional Cooperation on Climate Change](#)
- [Conclusion](#)

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ABSTRACT

Climate change is a common concern that requires collective efforts to address. Regional cooperation on climate change can take place either within a dedicated mechanism or as a part of a larger environmental agenda. Building on an earlier study that examines climate change cooperation at the Lower Mekong River Basin, this Insight looks into regional mechanisms for climate change across different regions. An assessment of regional cooperation efforts in Europe, North America, Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and South America affirms the earlier observation made on the Lower Mekong River Basin cooperation that shows the need for a specialised regional arrangement for more effective climate actions.



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INTRODUCTION

A number of regional cooperation aimed at addressing climate concerns have sprung up in the last decade following the relevant developments at the international level. Regions, however, differ in their approach and conceptualisation of such cooperation. Koremanos et al.,¹ posited that the design of international institutions vary based on membership, scope, centralisation, control and flexibility. Centralisation refers to the convergence to a single focal entity to carry out specific functions that may include “disseminating information, reducing bargaining and transaction costs, and enhancing enforcement.”² Centralisation often alludes to authority, which may suggest that the European Union (EU)’s supranational characteristic is needed as a prerequisite for such a centralised structure. Contrary to this view, the concept of centralisation in this article focuses on the *availability of a dedicated regional mechanism* that specifically looks at climate issues irregardless of the nature of the regional grouping. A dedicated regional mechanism may be created within a supranational body like the EU, and it can also be created in any other regional grouping that has strong political will and commitment to combat climate change. This study argues that a special mechanism at the regional level is critical to effective and implementable climate actions as it allows dedicated coordination, planning, budget allocation, execution, and monitoring for climate initiatives.

In the first part of the Insight series, the Lower Mekong River Basin (LMB) cooperation under the Mekong River Commission (MRC) was studied.³ The LMB was chosen because, in contrast to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the LMB has a dedicated and structured mechanism for climate change adaptation cooperation. The reference used to examine the mode of cooperation is the framework designed by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which identifies the need for ‘management practices’ that plan, implement, monitor, and evaluate regional initiatives on climate change adaptation.⁴ Management practices may translate to an institution or mechanism working specifically on related climate change issues. In the first Insight series it was observed that a dedicated Climate Change and Adaptation Initiative (CCAI) within the MRC has indeed given strong focus on climate change and enabled climate change adaptation measures to be implemented in the MRC member states, i.e. Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Lao PDR. It was noted, however, that project design remains focused on national needs instead of adopting a regional perspective.

To further assess the argument for the need to establish a dedicated regional mechanism for climate change, this second part of the Insight series aims to examine climate change cooperation across different regions. The questions that guide the assessment of existing climate cooperation model include: 1) *Has it been able to go beyond conducting studies, dialogues, knowledge sharing and other confidence-building measures?*, and 2) *Has it been able to formulate regional-level interventions grounded on a holistic assessment of the region as an ecosystem?* The study looks into regional climate efforts in Europe, North America, Africa, Middle East, South Asia, and South America. It affirms the earlier observation made in the LMB case, and concludes that a dedicated regional mechanism for climate change indeed enables more effective and implementable climate change interventions in the region.

¹ Koremanos, Barbara, Charles Lipson, and Duncan Snidal, “The Rational Design of International Institutions.” *International Organization* (55)(4)(2001): 761–99.

² *Ibid.*, p. 771.

³ See: Margareth Sembiring, “Examining Cooperation for Climate Change Adaptation in Southeast Asia: The Case of Lower Mekong River Basin”, *NTS Insight*, No. IN18-03. Singapore: RSIS Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies (NTS Centre), 2018. Accessed June 20, 2018. <http://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/NTS-insight-Technology-Applications-in-Climate-Change-Adaptation-Regime-LMB-Case.pdf>

⁴ Climate Change Secretariat (UNFCCC). *Technologies for Adaptation to Climate Change*. Bonn: UNFCCC, 2006.

COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT OF REGIONAL COOPERATION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

The mode of multilateral cooperation vary across regions. Some regional institutions like the European Union (EU) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) enjoy a dominant presence in their respective region. Others like the League of Arab States (LAS) and the African Union (AU) stand alongside with other important regional platforms such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Regional Economic Communities respectively. The regional arrangement in North America contrasts starkly with the South American model as the former has no regional organisation whereas the latter has myriad regional groupings that look into environment and climate change issues. Despite varying arrangements, each region has its own way to address climate change. The assessment of these different regional mechanisms leads to the following observations:

1) A dedicated regional mechanism facilitates more comprehensive climate interventions

As a supranational body, the EU presents the best case study for a centralised regional mechanism to deal with regional issues like environment. The EU established **the European Environment Agency (EEA)** that specifically looks into environment-related issues including climate change. The presence of the EEA, supported by the European Commission (EC), enables a comprehensive approach that lays down the necessary enabling factors to implement regional climate actions at the national level. These include funding, technical and policy support tools, knowledge-sharing platform, meteorological services body, and research institution.⁵ A dedicated 'LIFE' funding that currently runs for the period of 2014 to 2020 is accessible for climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts. Copernicus Climate Change Services, which is currently operationalised by the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts (ECMWF) in Reading, the United Kingdom, was established to monitor and analyse weather and climatic data. Joint Research Centre-Institute for Environment and Sustainability (JRC-IES) was instituted in Ispra, Italy, to serve as the science and technological arm of EU's environment-related policymaking processes.

In addition to establishing the necessary building blocks, the EU is also able to design its own solutions to regional climate-related problems through research and technology. The EU assessed climate adaptation gaps within member states, and integrated them into €80 billion worth of region-wide Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme from 2014 to 2020.⁶ Furthermore, the dedicated regional mechanism has enabled the creation of an informative web-based knowledge-exchange platform called Climate-ADAPT.⁷ The sharing of best practices and experiences is an important component in climate change adaptation, and a platform of a similar scale is yet to be found in other regional arrangements.

Beyond capacity-building, the EU is capable of formulating region-focused measures as evidenced in the establishment of various transnational cooperation such as, among others, in the Adriatic-Ionian, Alpine Space, Atlantic Area, Balkan-Mediterranean, and Baltic Sea sub-regions.⁸ The use of regional lens to addressing climate change is further observed in

⁵ European Commission. "Strengthening Europe's Resilience to the Impacts of Climate Change." Accessed June 20, 2018. https://ec.europa.eu/clima/sites/clima/files/docs/eu_strategy_en.pdf

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ European Climate Adaptation Platform. Accessed June 20, 2018. <https://climate-adapt.eea.europa.eu/>

⁸ European Climate Adaptation Platform. "Transnational Regions and Other Regions and Countries." Accessed June 20, 2018. <https://climate->

the incorporation of climate considerations in the existing regional policies such as the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the Cohesion Policy and the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP).⁹

By employing a regional perspective, climate actions are serving not only national needs but also the region more broadly. It is evident, therefore, that the whole-of-Europe approach provides a seamless machinery for effective regional climate change actions. The EU model affirms the earlier observation on the LMB cooperation¹⁰ which noted that a dedicated regional mechanism for climate change leads to better coordination, planning and implementation of relevant initiatives.

2) A dedicated regional arrangement is likely to formulate implementable interventions at the national level despite not having an ecosystem perspective in their project design

In the LMB case study, it was noted that a specialised regional mechanism for climate change enables the development of implementable climate interventions at the national level although it may not adopt a regional ecosystem approach in their project design.¹¹ An examination into the regional cooperation in North America confirms this argument. Despite not having a regional institution, North American countries namely the United States (US), Canada and Mexico signed the North American Agreement for Environmental Cooperation (NAAEC) that came into effect in 1994, and established **the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC)** following the agreement.¹² The CEC focuses on sustainable development and environmental and economic policies and makes climate change one of its priority areas. Although it is unclear whether the CEC has conducted a region-wide climate vulnerability assessment, it has implemented a number of climate mitigation and adaptation pilot projects in the three countries. An example is a current project on the syndromic surveillance (SyS) systems to monitor extreme heat events implemented in some pilot sites in the US, Canada, and Mexico.¹³

Recent developments surrounding the relations between the US, Canada and Mexico on multiple issues including trade and immigration present an interesting question as to whether they will interrupt regional climate efforts. Since the CEC is grounded on the NAAEC, its workings are unlikely to be affected directly by the dynamics among the three countries. The U.S. domestic policies on the environment, however, may have a significant bearing on the CEC. This is because the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), together with Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) and Mexico's Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT), govern the CEC as its Council members.¹⁴ The Trump administration's proposed budget cut on the EPA in 2017,¹⁵ which was turned down by the U.S. House of Representatives in

adapt.eea.europa.eu/countries-regions/transnational-regions

⁹ European Commission. "Strengthening Europe's Resilience to the Impacts of Climate Change." Accessed June 20, 2018.

https://ec.europa.eu/clima/sites/clima/files/docs/eu_strategy_en.pdf

¹⁰ See: Margareth Sembiring, 2018.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Commission for Environmental Cooperation. Accessed June 20, 2018. <http://www.cec.org/>

¹³ Commission for Environmental Cooperation. "Monitoring Health Impacts from Extreme Heat Events." Accessed June 20, 2018. <http://www.cec.org/our-work/projects/monitoring-health-impacts-extreme-heat-events>

¹⁴ United States Environmental Protection Agency. "International Cooperation: EPA's Role in the North America Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC)." Accessed June 28, 2018. <https://www.epa.gov/international-cooperation/epas-role-north-american-commission-environmental-cooperation-cec>

¹⁵ American Bar Association and Environmental Law Institute. *Environmental Protection in the Trump Era*. Washington, D.C.: American Bar Association and Environmental Law Institute, 2017. Accessed June 28, 2018. https://www.eli.org/sites/default/files/book_pdfs/environmentalprotectiontrumpera.pdf

March 2018,¹⁶ could have affected the workings of the EPA including its contributions to the CEC. The CEC, therefore, is susceptible to policy changes in the US, Canada and Mexico.

3) A dedicated regional mechanism for climate change can rely on other existing regional institutions for implementation

The African Union (AU) model provides another example of the importance of a dedicated mechanism for climate change. The AU Commission, together with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and the African Development Bank (AfDB) established **the Climate for Development in Africa (ClimDev-Africa) Programme** that works specifically on climate change issues.¹⁷ Unlike the CEC, ClimDev-Africa Programme neither formulates nor implement projects directly. Rather, it functions as a support system for national climate initiatives by facilitating capacity building, knowledge exchanges, studies and assessments.

Aside from ClimDev-Africa Programme, there are a few other regional arrangements such as the Framework of Southern and Northern Africa Climate Change Programmes and the East African Community Climate Change that also look into climate change issues.¹⁸ ClimDev-Africa Programme, however, plays a central role as reflected in the support it enjoys from the Africa Climate Policy Centre (ACPC), the Climate Change and Desertification Unit (CCDU), and ClimDev Special Fund (CDSF), and other entities including Africa's Regional Economic Communities, River Basin Organisations, national governments, among others.¹⁹ They are encouraged to take up and implement ClimDev-Africa Programme's work outputs. Additionally, other regional institutions such as Regional Climate Centres, Regional Climate Research Partnership, and Regional Outlook Forum were set up to execute climate actions.²⁰

Against this backdrop, it can be observed that while a dedicated regional mechanism for climate change may provide an avenue for effective interventions, partner institutions may be activated to implement them. In such instances, it is critical for the specialised regional institution to monitor and evaluate ongoing planning and initiatives by partner institutions to ensure effective project coordination and implementation.

4) The absence of a dedicated regional mechanism for climate change limits the extent of climate actions to assessments and knowledge exchanges

The benefits of having a dedicated regional mechanism imply that the absence of such a mechanism will inhibit climate interventions in the region. An examination into the regional cooperation in the Middle East and South Asia supports this argument. In the Middle East, the League of Arab States (LAS) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are important regional organisations. They do not, however, establish climate change cooperation mechanism within their own institutions. It is the United Nations-related organisations, with the support from aid agencies such as the Swedish's SIDA and German's GIZ, that are taking the lead in regional climate efforts.

¹⁶ Cama, Timothy. "Spending Bill Rejects Trump's Proposed EPA Cut." *The Hill*, March 21, 2018. <http://thehill.com/policy/energy-environment/379679-spending-bill-rejects-trumps-proposed-epa-cut>

¹⁷ ClimDev-Africa. Accessed June 20, 2018. <http://www.climdev-africa.org/>

¹⁸ Lisinge-Fotabong, Estherine, Mamadou Diakhité, Kwame Ababio and Cheikh Tidjane N'dongo. *Climate Diplomacy in Africa*. Berlin: Adelphi, 2017. Accessed June 20, 2018. <https://www.climate-diplomacy.org/file/2566/download?token=0ttwy308>

¹⁹ ClimDev-Africa, Annual Report 2015: Supporting Africa's Response to Climate Change, 2015. Accessed June 20, 2018. <http://www.climdev-africa.org/sites/default/files/DocumentAttachments/ClimDev-Africa%202015%20Annual%20Report.pdf>

²⁰ ClimDev-Africa, Annual Report 2016: Supporting Africa's Response to Climate Change. Addis Ababa: Africa Climate Policy Center, 2016. Accessed June 20, 2018. <http://www.climdev-africa.org/sites/default/files/DocumentAttachments/ClimDev%20annual%20report%202016--%20Final.pdf>

This is evidenced in the formulation of *Arab Climate Resilience Initiative* by the UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States (UNDP-RBAS),²¹ a report on *Regional Cooperation for Climate Change Adaptation in the Arab Region* by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN ESCWA),²² and a report on *Adaptation to a Changing Climate in the Arab Countries* by the World Bank.²³ The UN ESCWA is particularly pivotal in galvanising climate actions, bringing regional actors together, and assisting the LAS in climate change impact assessments, capacity development, and technical cooperation. In fact, it supported the establishment of the Regional Initiative for the Assessment of Climate Change Impacts on Water Resources and Socio-Economic Vulnerability in the Arab Region (RICCAR).²⁴ It is arguably the most prominent regional arrangement on climate change to date as its 2017 Arab Climate Change Assessment Report²⁵ was the first intervention that took on a regional perspective.

At this junction, it can be observed that climate actions in the Middle East are limited to information collection and knowledge sharing. Although the AU's ClimDev-Africa Programme shares similar functions, the absence of a dedicated regional institution in the Middle East does not show how the information and assessments produced will be coordinated, implemented, monitored and evaluated among the LAS members.

A similar observation is made in South Asia. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) articulated their commitments to address climate change in the 2008 Dhaka Declaration and the 2010 Thimpu Silver Jubilee Declaration. Such commitments were further manifested in numerous regional centres and policy documents that ensued. Notably, in comparison to ASEAN, the SAARC has more dedicated regional centres that look into specific environmental issues. These include SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC) in Delhi, SAARC Forestry Centre in Bhutan, SAARC Energy Centre in Islamabad, SAARC Meteorological Research Centre (SMRC) in Dhaka, and SAARC Coastal Zone Management Centre (SZMC) in Male.²⁶ The SAARC also gives access to the SAARC Development Fund to finance climate-related interventions.²⁷

It was observed, however, that these initiatives are mainly focused on capacity building and knowledge producing and sharing, and there remains a lack of joint planning and project implementation at the regional level.²⁸ The absence of a dedicated regional mechanism for climate change could potentially contribute to a lack of joint implementable projects, and

²¹ UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States (UNDP-RBAS). "Arab Climate Resilience Initiative." Accessed June 20, 2018.

<http://www.arabclimateinitiative.org/index.html>

²² United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA). *Regional Cooperation for Climate Change Adaptation in the Arab Region E/ESCWA/SDPD/2017/IG.1/5*, 2017. Accessed June 20, 2018.

https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/events/files/regional_cooperation_for_climate_change_adaptation_eng.pdf

²³ Verner, Dorte. *Adaptation to a Changing Climate in the Arab Countries: A Case for Adaptation Governance and Leadership in Building Climate Resilience*. Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2012. Accessed June 20, 2018. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/12216>

²⁴ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA). *The Regional Initiative for the Assessment of Climate Change Impacts on Water Resources and Socio-Economic Vulnerability in the Arab Region (RICCAR)*. Accessed June 20, 2018. <https://www.unescwa.org/climate-change-water-resources-arab-region-riccar>

²⁵ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) et al. *Arab Climate Change Assessment Report – Main Report*.

E/ESCWA/SDPD/2017/RICCAR/Report. Beirut: RICCAR, 2017. Accessed June 20, 2018. <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/riccar-arab-climate-change-assessment-report>

²⁶ UNISDR/SDMC. *Integration of Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Adaptation in SAARC Region: Implementation of the Thimphu Statement on Climate Change – A Comprehensive Study of the Policy, Institutional Landscape, and Resource Allocation for Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Adaptation in South Asia*, 2014. Accessed June 21, 2018.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/299430726_Integration_of_Disaster_Risk_Reduction_and_Climate_Change_Adaptation_in_SAARC_Region

²⁷ Misha, Arabinda, Yvani Deraniyagala, Dorji L, Khan S.R., Rahma A., Roy J., Kelkar U., Karky B.S., Mohan Munasinghe, Sharef M., Neer Shrestha Pradhan, and Vaidya R.A. *Climate Risks in the SAARC Region: Ways to Address the Social, Economic & Environmental Challenges*, 2014. Accessed June 21, 2018.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283436395_Climate_risks_in_the_SAARC_region_ways_to_address_the_social_economic_environmental_challenges

²⁸ *Ibid.*

it may be worsened by regional political constellation and deep-seated mistrust among SAARC member states²⁹ brought about by issues such as, among others, India's alleged hegemony over its regional neighbours and enduring India–Pakistan border dispute.³⁰

5) A single overarching body is important for policy coherence in regions that have multiple climate-related institutions

Cooperation in South America is characterised by a vast number of regional groupings that vary according to membership and focus areas. The regional arrangements that look into climate-related issues alone include Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), Summit of Latin America and the Caribbean on Integration and Development (CALC) and the Rio group, Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), Ibero-American Forum of Ministers of Environment, Organization of American States (OAS), Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization, Andean Community of Environmental Authorities (CAAAM), Caribbean Community (CARICOM), Association of Caribbean States (ACS) and the Caribbean Sea Commission (CSC), and Central American Commission for Environment and Development (CCAD).³¹ The CARICOM even has a dedicated Caribbean Community Climate Change Centre (CCCC).³² Myriad regional arrangements suggest that environmental and climate-related issues receive considerable attention in South America. At the same time, however, it also reflects a lack of coordination at the regional level.³³ A multitude of groupings render prioritising regional climate actions difficult, and there is a possibility of effort overlap and resource over-stretch as a result.

The critical need for a centralised structure for climate change at the regional level was realised relatively recently with the signing of the Cartagena Declarations in 2016. It brought all 33 Latin and America and Caribbean (LAC) countries to work on climate change collectively, and it envisioned the establishment of a Regional Cooperation Platform.³⁴ The effectiveness of this new regional mechanism on climate change remains to be seen; however, learning from the insights from other regions, the establishment of such a dedicated institution is a step in the right direction for climate change actions in South America.

CONCLUSION

This comparative study on regional arrangements for climate change efforts in Europe, North America, Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and South America has affirmed an earlier observation presented in the first part of the Insight series on the need to have a dedicated regional mechanism to handle climate concerns.

Among the different regional groupings being studied, the EU is the only institution capable of formulating climate plans and projects from a regional perspective. Other regions, despite having numerous regional policy documents and action plans, tend to apply a country-focused lens as they concentrate more on building national capacity and implementing projects at

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Khan, Owais Hasan and Anwasha Pal. "Combating Climate Change: A SAARC Perspective." *Journal of Centre for Environmental Law*. June 2016: 8. Accessed June 28, 2018. <http://ilnu-jcel.org/combating-climate-change-a-saarc-perspective/>

³¹ United Nations Environment Programme. *Review of Existing Intergovernmental Priorities on Sustainable Development, with an Emphasis on Environment, in Latin America and the Caribbean*. UNEP/LAC-IGWG.XIX/8, 2014. Accessed June 21, 2018. http://www.pnuma.org/forodeministros/19-mexico/documentos/Regional%20and%20subregional%20priorities%2023%20August%202013%20_3_.pdf

³² Caribbean Community Climate Change Centre. Accessed June 21, 2018. <http://www.caribbeanclimate.bz/>

³³ Lazzari, Alessandra. "Climate Cooperation in Latin America and Caribbean Countries." In *International Climate Policy* 41 (2016): 14–15. Accessed June 21, 2018. <http://www.iccgov.org/iccgstudies/international-climate-policy-n-41/>

³⁴ *Ibid.*

the national level. Although a dedicated regional climate mechanism is yet to take on a regional perspective in its project design, its presence is nonetheless important to facilitate the implementation of climate interventions at the national level. Indeed, in regions where climate change is still being handled without a specialised mechanism, the extent of cooperation is limited to assessments, capacity building and knowledge sharing.

While these observations may affirm the need for the EU's supranational trait to enable effective centralisation, the African and North American models showed that a dedicated regional mechanism for climate change can also be created in other regional settings. In fact, the Lower Mekong Basin River cooperation discussed in the previous Insight series similarly showed that such a specialised arrangement can be established within the sub-regional grouping although it does not have a supranational characteristic. It is the clear awareness of its benefits and the strong political will from member states that are paramount to establish such a special regional arrangement.

As climate change becomes a more pressing concern that demands urgent solutions to, the establishment of a dedicated regional mechanism is therefore critical. It will enable the application of an ecosystem approach in the formulation, management, and implementation of regional interventions. Having such a special regional arrangement for climate change, however, is only the initial step. Ensuring that it has sufficient mandate and means to carry out regional climate actions effectively will be the next equally important step.

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