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Sustainable Urbanization as a Key to Advancing International Climate Agreements

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SUSTAINABLE URBANIZATION AS A KEY TO ADVANCING INTERNATIONAL CLIMATE AGREEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

Cities have always played a role in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's (UNFCCC) process and meetings.¹ A key actor in facilitating their input and engagement is ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability, a city network that acts as the official focal point of the Local Governments and Municipal Authorities (LGMA) observer group to the UNFCCC. This text will shed light on the history of this engagement and will outline the prospects for the topic of sustainable urban development at the UNFCCC COP27 in Sharm El Sheikh in November 2022.

ABOUT ICLEI

ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability is a global network of more than 2,500 cities and subnational governments in 125 countries committed to sustainable urban development. The non-profit

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1. This article is part of the conclusion to the March 2022 conference.



Figure 1. ICLEI's five strategic pathways for sustainable urban development. Source: ICLEI (n.d.).

organization has more than 300 in-house experts in sustainable urban development across twenty-four offices around the globe. The ICLEI World Secretariat has been hosted by the city of Bonn in Germany since 2009 and currently employs staff from over thirty different nationalities.

ICLEI conceptualizes sustainable urban development across five interlinked pathways (ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability n.d.; see Figure 1).

Currently, the organization is involved in more than two hundred active projects, which typically integrate actions across multiple pathways.

ICLEI AND ITS ROLE IN THE UN SYSTEM

ICLEI was founded at the margins of the UN General Assembly in 1990 and tasked with preparing the input of cities to the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. From this summit, three UN conventions, the so-called 'Rio conventions', emerged: the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD) and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).

Out of these three, the most well known is the climate (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties (COP), which will hold its twenty-seventh meeting in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, later this year. In these conventions, as is usual for the UN as an intergovernmental body, negotiations occur between the parties to the different conventions, which are all national governments. However, the three conventions all foresee mechanisms for the engagement of civil-society stakeholders as observers, who have a right to intervene in the discussions but no right to vote on or veto any outcomes and decisions. Observers are classified into different *observer groups* (e.g. Indigenous people,

businesses, research organizations etc.), whose exact naming varies between the conventions. Nevertheless, all three Rio conventions count on an observer group to facilitate the engagement of cities and subnational authorities. ICLEI acts as the subnational government focal point for the three Rio conventions and is tasked with coordinating the input of the various stakeholders in this group (cities, subnational authorities and their networks) into the negotiations.

THE ROLE AND RECOGNITION OF CITIES IN THE UNFCCC COP PROCESS

The earliest outcome of the UNFCCC process is the 1997 Kyoto Protocol (agreed upon at COP3), which makes no direct reference to cities. This changed only with the 2015 Paris Agreement (outcome of COP21), ‘recognizing the importance of engagement of all levels of government’ (Paris Agreement, Preamble para. 15, see United Nations 2015; Arikan 2021, slide 4). The same agreement paved the way for the establishment of the Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action, recognizing the important contribution of non-party stakeholders, including cities. This created the function of ‘High-Level Champions’, which act as figureheads to mobilize non-party stakeholder engagement, including from cities, through initiatives such as the ‘Cities Race to Zero’ and the ‘Cities Race to Resilience’, which offer the opportunity to mobilize and collect commitments from cities on their own mitigation and adaptation efforts (UNFCCC 2016; UNFCCC Climate Champions 2022).

At COP26, the reference to subnational action was strengthened through the 2021 Glasgow Climate Pact (outcome of COP26), ‘highlighting the urgent need for multilevel and cooperative action’ (Glasgow Climate Pact, Preamble para. 9, see United Nations 2021) as well as including multiple other references to local and regional governments (Arikan 2021, slide 4).

Since UNFCCC COP1, ICLEI has actively mobilized mayors and other subnational leaders to attend the UNFCCC COPs and represent their collective interests on the official stage. In Glasgow, at COP26, the number of subnational leaders attending events in the Blue Zone surpassed four hundred, unofficially accounting for the third-largest of all delegations.

While the contributions of subnational government levels are increasingly recognized in convention texts, the logic of the agreements remains unchanged: the Paris Agreement foresees that each party submit a nationally determined contribution (NDC) to collectively achieve a sufficient decrease in carbon emissions. In Glasgow, the originally intended five-year cycle of submissions was shortened to allow for the resubmission of improved NDCs towards COP27 in Sharm El Sheikh. Under these conditions, how can cities come into the picture at the COP stage?

For many years, ICLEI has been promoting and supporting governments to engage in multilevel collaboration and action to inform the NDCs. This follows the logic that coordinated efforts across different levels of government can prevent silos and circumvent responsibility and resource gaps, thus increasing the efficiency of joint efforts. In the lead-up to COP26, sixty parties submitted an NDC that included a multilevel action component (Arikan 2021). Half of these parties pertain to the Global South, proving that the concept is applicable across different geographic contexts and levels of development. Through funding from the NDC Partnership, ICLEI was able to assist seven national governments in Africa and Latin America in the redesign of their NDCs before COP26 and looks forward to continuing to assist national governments around the world in similar efforts in the future (NDC Partnership 2021).



Figure 2. UNFCCC COP parties that have submitted a multilevel NDC. Source: Arikan (2021).

OUTLOOK TOWARDS UNFCCC COP27

At the *Facing Climate Change: Making Sustainable Cities Conference* in Cairo in March 2022, the Egyptian Minister for the Environment, Dr Yasmine Fouad, stated that ‘Sustainable cities will have a place at the heart of COP27’. Speakers and participants alike agreed that, with 55 per cent of the global population living in urban areas and cities being responsible for an estimated 60 per cent of global material processing or consumption and 70 per cent of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, the topic of sustainable urban development in Egypt and abroad remains a key area of action to achieve the objectives of international sustainability agreements such as the Paris Agreement (UN-Habitat 2020).

Since then, the Egyptian COP27 Presidency has significantly advanced on two developments that will raise the visibility and recognition of sustainable cities in the COP arena:

- Supported by UN-Habitat and ICLEI, the Egyptian COP27 Presidency, under the leadership of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and involving responsible line ministries, has initiated an initiative on sustainable cities under the name of ‘Sustainable Urban Resilience for the next Generation’ (SURGe, see UN-Habitat and ICLEI 2022). This initiative was developed in a collaborative process with a multistakeholder group of national and local governments, a wide range of urban actors, multilateral development banks and other UN entities. It aims to build on and add momentum to existing initiatives, and provides a holistic framework to achieve sustainable and resilient urban systems (UN-Habitat and ICLEI 2022). As it is sponsored by the COP27 Presidency as the highest political body of a UNFCCC COP, this constitutes an elevation of the topic of sustainable urban development to an unprecedented level of importance.
- At the UN-Habitat Executive Board meeting in March 2022, Member States requested that UN-Habitat’s executive director explore with the COP27 Presidency the possibility of convening a housing and urban development ministerial meeting on cities and climate change to be held at COP27. Under the leadership of the COP27 Presidency and hosted by the Egyptian Ministry of Housing, this first-of-its-kind Ministerial Meeting on Urbanization and Climate Change will be convened at the COP27 Solutions

Day on 17 November 2022 in Sharm El Sheikh. This ministerial meeting aspires to being the foundation to create a long-term legacy and representation of urban issues in climate negotiations. Its ambition is that, combined with the SURGe Initiative, it will help involve key urban actors more strongly in the implementation of the Paris Agreement.

While urban actors have always had a role to play as observers in the UNFCCC COP process, they were off to a somewhat bumpy start in terms of recognition. Since the 2015 Paris Agreement, there has been a growing recognition of the important contributions that sustainable urbanization can make to reaching international climate goals. COP27 might further add to this through the SURGe Initiative and the envisaged first-of-its-kind Ministerial Meeting on Urbanization and Climate Change.

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