



Local Governments and Climate Change

Local governments are in a unique position to tackle the cause and effects of climate change as the most accessible governing authority when disaster strikes. They can provide effective leadership for their citizens because they have the opportunity to catalyse and sustain the behavioural change at individual and community levels necessary for building a more resilient community.

Climate change refers to changes in average climatic conditions and can be caused by natural processes including solar activity, volcanic eruptions and cyclic changes of the Earth's orbit. However, heightened climate change since the mid-twentieth century is very likely due to human activities, most notably those that release greenhouse gases (e.g. burning fossil fuel) and change the land cover (e.g. destroying ecosystems like forests and wetlands that have the capacity to remove greenhouse gases from the atmosphere).¹ If there is no change in current development and climate change mitigation policies, global greenhouse gas emissions will continue to radically change the climate thus seriously compromising and threatening human development. The cost of inaction could amount to between 5 and 20 per cent of the global annual GDP while only 1 per cent would be necessary to stabilise and tackle climate change at a global level.²

Climate change threatens the security, well-being and economies of all Commonwealth countries. Rising sea levels are an increasing hazard for hundreds of millions of people living in coastal areas and many of the fastest growing and increasingly vulnerable cities are built on coasts (e.g. Mumbai, Singapore, Port of Spain, Honiara and London). The 32 small states and 25 small island developing states of the Commonwealth are particularly vulnerable. The Commonwealth Heads of Government first discussed climate change in Malaysia in 1989. They have since agreed the Lake Victoria Commonwealth Climate Change Action Plan 2007, which provides a framework for prioritised actions including many that are relevant at the local level of governance.

Over the last 30 years there has been a five-fold increase in the number of climate related natural disasters worldwide. The poor suffer most from the extreme weather conditions caused by climate change — floods, storms and droughts — but even the privileged cannot escape the consequences when buildings, roads and bridges collapse unexpectedly or the health-care system is unprepared for the new challenges. Being closest to the action local governments respond quickly and effectively, monitor impacts, manage risks and vulnerabilities, and are a vital source of information to the central government. The key action arenas for local governments are:

Spontaneous and planned adaptation

'Spontaneous' adaptation is an unplanned response to climate impacts and an important 'learning-by-doing' mechanism. 'Planned' adaptation is a set of

conscious policy and financial decisions made before or just after climate impacts take place. Integrate the two approaches to maximise adaptive capacity. Use both indigenous and scientific knowledge to generate community-wide ownership and commitment to the adaptation process.

Investing in social capital

Capacity-building strengthens resilience. Ensure climate change is an urgent issue among council decision-makers and staff as well as citizens for effective participation. Provide awareness-raising programmes in partnerships with the scientific community, universities and research institutions for credibility and up-to-date information. Seek opportunities to exchange experiences and good practices with other local governments at national, regional and global levels. Develop a local adaptation plan that fits into existing local development plans.

Mitigation and adaptation

Utilise a twin-track approach — mitigation of the causes that drive climate change and adaptation to the effects of climate change. Local governments often have no choice but to focus on adaptation to protect people's lives and infrastructure, but many interventions have both adaptation and mitigation effects. For example, promoting energy saving mitigates the causes of climate change and saves financial resources to enable better adaptation to the inevitable impacts.

Funding sources

The national climate change action plan should allocate an appropriate budget to local governments but the most vulnerable will need to access international funds. The Global Environment Facility supports projects that reduce vulnerability and helps build adaptive capacity through four funding mechanisms: the Strategic Priority on Adaptation, Least Developed Countries Fund, Special Climate Change Fund and the Adaptation Fund. Several developed countries offer training and other capacity development activities through their international development assistance agencies, including DFID (UK Department for International Development), CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency) and JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency) among others.

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The full paper is available at www.thecommonwealth.org/publications

References:

1. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Fourth Assessment Report (2007)
2. Stern Review: The Economics of Climate Change (2006)