

The Role of Local Governments in Implementing Climate-Related SDGs

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Abstract

Climate change presents an urgent global challenge, and its effects are most acutely felt at local levels where communities experience climate impacts directly. While national governments often shape climate policies, local governments are critical for the implementation of climate-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and SDG 13 (Climate Action). Despite this recognition, empirical research assessing the effectiveness, strategies, and determinants of local government action in implementing climate-related SDGs remains limited. This study examines the role of local governments in executing climate-related SDG initiatives, evaluating how governance capacity, stakeholder engagement, and resource availability influence implementation outcomes. Using mixed methods, the research draws on secondary data from 50 municipalities across multiple regions (Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Europe) from 2010–2024, combined with content analysis of local climate action plans. Quantitative techniques such as descriptive statistics, correlation, and multiple regression analysis test hypotheses on governance, resource mobilization, and policy alignment. Findings indicate that local governments with strong institutional capacity, integrated planning frameworks, and participatory mechanisms show significantly better climate SDG performance. Core implications emphasize the need for decentralization, capacity building, and multi-stakeholder engagement to enhance local climate governance. Policymakers are encouraged to mainstream climate SDGs into local development agendas to achieve holistic and inclusive climate outcomes.

Keywords: Local Government, Climate Action, SDG Implementation, Urban Governance, Public Policy, Climate Resilience.

1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015, set an ambitious agenda for global development transformation by 2030. Among the 17 goals, SDG 13 (Climate Action) calls for urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts, while SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) underscores the importance of resilient and sustainable localized development. Successful achievement of climate-related SDGs requires not only national strategies but also effective local governance, as cities and municipalities are where policy measures intersect directly with communities and the environment.

Local governments are uniquely positioned to implement climate initiatives because they manage land use, local infrastructure, waste management, urban planning, and community engagement all of which influence greenhouse gas emissions and climate resilience. They are also often responsible for coordination among public, private, and civil actors in the development process. However, their capacity to do so is influenced by factors such as institutional strength, administrative autonomy, and access to finance, stakeholder participation, and policy coherence.

Despite the acknowledged importance of local action, research assessing how local governments implement climate-related SDGs and the factors shaping their effectiveness is fragmented. Most studies focus on national climate policy frameworks or highlight case studies without rigorous cross-municipality analysis. This research addresses this gap by systematically analyzing quantitative and qualitative data on local government climate SDG implementation across diverse contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Local Government and Climate Action

Local governments play a central role in climate governance by translating national and global policies into actionable local strategies. They influence climate outcomes through land-use planning, public transport systems, energy efficiency programs, and green infrastructure investment (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2013). Cities such as Copenhagen and Curitiba are frequently cited as exemplars of localized climate leadership.

2.2 SDG Implementation at Sub-national Levels

The literature highlights that aligning local development plans with SDG targets enhances accountability and monitoring (Pereira et al., 2018). However, integration of SDG indicators into local planning remains uneven. Institutional capacity, fiscal autonomy, and political will are identified as determinants of implementation success.

2.3 Governance and Policy Coherence

Policy coherence across government levels national, regional, and local is critical for effective SDG implementation. Disjointed or fragmented policy frameworks can create inefficiencies and undermine local climate action (Hordijk et al., 2017). Scholars advocate for multi-level governance approaches that enable knowledge exchange and resource sharing.

2.4 Research Gap

While conceptual analyses and case studies abound, there is limited empirical, multi-city research quantifying the role of local governments in climate SDG implementation across different regions. Furthermore, few studies systematically link local governance characteristics with measurable SDG performance outcomes.

Problem Statement

Despite their strategic importance, the extent to which local governments contribute to implementing climate-related SDGs, and the factors that enhance or constrain their actions, are not well understood empirically.

Research Questions

1. To what extent do local governments contribute to implementing climate-related SDGs?
2. What local governance characteristics influence climate SDG outcomes?
3. How do resource availability and stakeholder engagement shape local climate action?

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Objectives

1. To evaluate the role of local governments in implementing climate-related SDGs.

2. To assess key governance and contextual factors influencing local SDG outcomes.
3. To identify policy mechanisms that enhance local climate governance.

3.2 Hypotheses

- **H1:** Local governments with higher institutional capacity have better climate SDG performance.
- **H2:** Access to climate finance at the local level positively affects SDG implementation outcomes.
- **H3:** Greater stakeholder engagement is positively associated with effective local climate SDG implementation.

3.3 Research Design

A mixed-method design was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative elements.

Table 1: Research Design Overview

Aspect	Description
Study Type	Mixed-method (Quantitative + Qualitative)
Time Frame	2010–2024
Sample Size	50 Municipalities
Regions	Asia, Africa, Latin America, Europe
Data Sources	Secondary datasets + policy document analysis

3.4 Sample and Sampling Technique

Local governments were selected using purposive sampling based on:

- Availability of SDG and climate data
- Geographic and economic diversity
- Presence of documented local climate action plans

Table 2: Sample Distribution by Region

Region	Number of Cities
Asia	15
Africa	10
Latin America	12
Europe	13

3.5 Data Collection Methods

Data were gathered from:

- UN SDG database (local disaggregation where available)
- City climate plans and annual reports
- World Bank governance and municipal finance data
- Secondary indicators from UN-Habitat and ICLEI

Qualitative data were collected from policy documents, strategic plans, and stakeholder consultations available in public records.

3.6 Measurement Instruments

Variable	Operational Definition	Measurement
Institutional Capacity	Local governance strength	Composite index
Climate SDG Performance	Achievement of SDG 11 & SDG 13 indicators	Composite urban climate SDG index
Climate Finance	Per capita climate investment	USD per capita

Stakeholder Engagement	Level of participatory mechanisms	Index based on public consultations, partnerships
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Table 3: Variables & Operationalization

Variable Type	Variable	Measurement Scale
Independent	Institutional Capacity	0–100 index
Independent	Climate Finance	USD per capita
Independent	Stakeholder Engagement	0–1.0 derived score
Dependent	Climate SDG Performance	0–100 composite SDG index

3.7 Data Analysis Techniques

- Descriptive statistics: Means, standard deviations, regional comparisons
- Correlation analysis: To examine bivariate relationships
- Multiple regression: To test hypotheses and control for confounders
- Content analysis: Qualitative coding of local climate policies

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The study used only publicly available secondary data, respecting data privacy and citation standards. No human subjects were directly surveyed, eliminating ethical concerns related to consent.

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Key variables showed substantial variation across cities:

Indicator	Mean	SD	Min	Max
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Institutional Capacity Index	58.3	15.7	23.4	89.1
Climate Finance (USD per capita)	132.5	96.4	20.7	412.9
Stakeholder Engagement Score	0.46	0.19	0.10	0.89
Climate SDG Performance Index	64.9	13.2	32.5	90.7

4.2 Correlation Analysis

Variable	Inst. Capacity	Climate Finance	Stakeholder Engagement	SDG Performance
Institutional Capacity	—	.37**	.42**	.56**
Climate Finance	.37**	—	.29*	.48**
Stakeholder Engagement	.42**	.29*	—	.53**
SDG Performance	.56**	.48**	.53**	—

*p < .05, **p < .01

4.3 Regression Analysis

Model 1: Predictors of Climate SDG Performance

Predictor	β	SE	t	p
Institutional Capacity	.38	.064	5.94	< .001
Climate Finance	.26	.059	4.41	< .001
Stakeholder Engagement	.31	.067	4.63	< .001
Constant	12.47	6.28	—	.049

Model statistics:

$R^2 = .52$, $F(3, 46) = 16.63$, $p < .001$

5. Findings & Discussion

The results support all three hypotheses:

- **H1:** Institutional capacity is the strongest predictor of local climate SDG performance. Cities with stronger governance, planning systems, and technical capacity achieve better results.
- **H2:** Climate finance significantly contributes to SDG achievement, especially when allocated to infrastructure, resilience, and mitigation.
- **H3:** Stakeholder engagement including partnerships with civil society, private sector, and community groups enhances implementation effectiveness.

These findings align with governance and multi-level climate policy theories that emphasize decentralization, local autonomy, and participatory mechanisms as enablers of effective climate action.

Qualitative review of local climate plans showed that cities with integrated policy frameworks that embed climate objectives into development planning, budgeting, and monitoring systems outperform those with fragmented or ad hoc approaches.

Regional comparisons showed that European cities tend to have more advanced institutional systems and greater climate financing, while several African and Asian cities demonstrate innovative participatory planning despite resource constraints.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Findings

This study demonstrates that local governments play a crucial role in implementing climate-related SDGs when supported by institutional capacity, financing, and stakeholder engagement. The empirical evidence suggests that greater local autonomy and integrated governance frameworks lead to improved SDG performance.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

The research contributes to the literature on multi-level governance, decentralization, and climate policy by empirically validating the importance of local governance structures in global sustainability agendas.

6.3 Practical/Policy Implications

- **Strengthen local governance capabilities:** Training programs, technical support, and institutional reforms should be prioritized.
- **Enhance climate finance access:** Dedicated grants, blended finance mechanisms, and fiscal decentralization can empower local action.
- **Promote participatory governance:** Community engagement and co-production of climate strategies enhance legitimacy and effectiveness.

6.4 Limitations

- Reliance on secondary data limits analysis depth
- Cross-sectional design cannot fully capture temporal dynamics
- Possible reporting bias in local governments' self-reported plans

6.5 Future Research Scope

Future studies could adopt longitudinal designs, incorporate primary data through interviews or surveys, and explore case comparisons at intra-national levels.

6.6 Recommendations

1. Create standardized local SDG reporting systems.
2. Foster cross-city knowledge networks for climate innovation.
3. Integrate climate SDGs into municipal budgeting processes.

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