About this Guide

- CDKN aims to help decision-makers in developing countries design and deliver climate compatible development.

- Supporting climate action at the city and subnational is one of our priorities. This involves understanding the drivers for and barriers to climate action at the subnational level – and working in partnership with others to overcome barriers and innovate fresh solutions.

- This CDKN Guide aims to support national planners and policy-makers, and the constellation of civil society and community actors in favour of positive change, to mobilise political commitment and resources in support of low-carbon and climate-resilient development in their localities, and to scale up success.

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The politics of climate change at the city level: Insights from a comparative study of Buenos Aires, São Paulo and Mexico City

Summary

This Guide summarises the findings of a CDKN-supported research project by the Fundación Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (FARN, Environment and Natural Resources Foundation), Argentina, into the politics of climate-related decision-making in three Latin American mega-cities: Buenos Aires, São Paulo and Mexico City. The project's findings provide insights into the dynamics of climate change awareness among the citizenry, and the political pressures on city leaders to take action – or not.

The study found that linking to local issues is a key factor in advancing the climate agenda at the city level. Climate champions play a critical role, mainly in the process of adopting policy commitments, but they are not sufficient on their own for the implementation of the climate agenda. Building broad and enduring political and social support for climate policies helps sustain the implementation of climate commitments beyond electoral cycles and changes in political leadership. However, climate change is still not an electorally salient issue in local democratic politics, nor subject to competition between political parties.

1. Introduction

Many experts and practitioners argue that there is a gap between policy debates on the relevance of local action on climate change, and political reality. Local governments the world over are making commitments and adopting policies and programmes to address climate change issues, but implementation is often weakened or stalled for different political reasons.

This Guide explores the local politics of climate change, analysing some of these factors as well as the conditions that shape the development of local climate change policies in developing countries. It is based on the findings of comparative research into the climate politics of Buenos Aires in Argentina, São Paulo in Brazil, and Mexico City, the capital of Mexico. These studies were carried out between 2013 and 2014. Our research focused on the factors affecting the implementation of climate policies in these three cities, which are the largest urban areas in Latin America.

During the last decade, all three have taken steps towards developing an institutional and policy framework to address climate change issues. For example, in 2010 they signed the Global Cities Covenant on Climate (also known as the Mexico City Pact); and, in 2012, during the Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development, the three city mayors signed a joint

declaration (often referred to as the 'G3 Declaration') in which they stressed that local governments should take an active role in addressing climate change issues.[1] Moreover, the three cities have passed climate change laws and adopted specific policies and plans. However, despite the relevance of these developments, climate change issues still play a relatively peripheral role in the local political agenda, while the implementation of climate policy commitments faces many political obstacles in all three cities.

Building on this comparative research, this Guide discusses four issues that are critical for the analysis of the local politics of climate change: (1) links to local issues and agendas; (2) the relevance of political leadership; (3) building social coalitions to support climate policy initiatives; and (4) the level of politicisation of climate issues at the city level.

2. Links to local issues and agendas

Many experts argue that pursuing climate objectives depends on whether they fit the social and economic concerns of communities and local governments.[2] These claims rest on the hypothesis that local governments and communities are more likely to develop and advance climate-friendly policies if they can be framed in relation to local problems and generate other socioeconomic or environmental benefits.

The findings of our three-city study strongly support the argument about the relevance of problem framing, as well as the advantages of identifying co-benefits to advancing the local climate agenda. For instance, Metrobus – a rapid-transit bus system in Mexico City – was identified by local government officials for its contribution to reducing the city's greenhouse gas emissions. However, the initiative was framed politically in terms of reducing traffic congestion and alleviating local air pollution – issues that were already on the local political agenda.[3]

In other cases, the main political drivers of successful policy measures for reducing greenhouse gas emissions were not necessarily climate change-related. This also applies to the installation and operation of biogas plants in the Bandeirantes, as well as in the São João landfills, both located in São Paulo. These initiatives in the field of waste management are two of the largest Clean Development Mechanism projects in the world, and major contributors to greenhouse gas emission reductions within São Paulo. Interestingly, our analysis of the political processes surrounding these projects suggests that although they had a very high impact in terms of reducing greenhouse gases at the city level, they were motivated primarily by the benefits derived from the generation of electricity and improving air quality in communities around the landfills.[4]

The political logic behind the need to link climate policy to local issues and agendas is clear. Climate policies – particularly mitigation policies – are perceived as generating long-term global benefits, and for that reason, they tend to face challenges in raising and sustaining political support because of collective action problems.[5] Meanwhile, the costs of climate mitigation measures tend to affect specific social and economic sectors in the short term, giving them the incentive to actively oppose the adoption and implementation of these policies on the grounds of cost. In this context, local framing – linking global, long-term climate concerns to issues of local relevance – helps by changing the distribution of costs and benefits of a climate policy. In doing so, it enhances the possibility of building broader and stronger local political and social support for climate initiatives.

3. The relevance of politicial leadership

Several reports and studies stress the opportunities for political leadership in promoting local climate change policies and the role of the 'political entrepreneur' or climate champion.[6] Generally, these are senior local government officials – elected or appointed – who take on leadership roles in promoting the climate change agenda or specific initiatives at the local level. Different motives can lead local politicians or appointed government officials to do this. In some cases, they may have ideological commitments; others may simply want to advance their careers.

Our research into the climate politics of Buenos Aires, São Paulo and Mexico City shows that political leadership was a major influence behind the initial adoption of climate change legislation and plans. For instance, during their administrations, mayors Marcelo Ebrard (Mexico City, 2006–2012) and Gilberto Kassab (São Paulo, 2006–2012) played key roles in adopting climate commitments and encouraging the development of institutional frameworks on climate change within their cities.

However, several researchers and experts point out the limitations of political champions in advancing the climate agenda. Bulkeley and other scholars, for instance, argue that policy entrepreneurs can only "take climate change action so far" and that, in order to overcome administrative and political obstacles, broader institutional capacity is necessary.[7] Similarly, our research shows that changes of administration in São Paulo and Mexico City in 2012 seriously affected the momentum of the climate agenda and the implementation of the existing policy commitments in both cities. In São Paulo, a different political coalition took over the local government from Gilberto Kassaband his party, while in Mexico City the same political party stayed in control of the city government but under a different leadership. In both cases, the new administrations did not consider climate issues to be as important in their political agendas. This clearly shows the relevance, but also the limitations, of political leadership in fostering action on climate change. Moreover, it stresses the need to build institutional capacity as well as social–political coalitions that can support and sustain climate policies and programmes beyond electoral cycles and changes of leadership.

4. Building social coalitions to support climate policy initiatives

As mentioned in Section 3, the need to build broad and enduring political and social support is critical to advancing the climate agenda, and especially for the implementation of policy commitments. But building these broader coalitions requires going beyond environmental groups and networks. This is particularly relevant for cities in developing countries where the urban poor tend to be the most exposed to the impacts of climate change.[8]

In relation to this, there is well-documented experience from social movements, organisations and networks in cities of the global South that integrates environmental concerns into the broader agendas of pro-poor urban policy reforms related to access to public services and urban improvements.[9] These experiences raise a series of interesting questions and challenges for climate policy-makers about how to approach these potential new constituencies and build new political coalitions for climate action.

Similarly, businesses can be important actors in coalitions supporting climate action. Business actors have different motivations for supporting the local climate agenda, such as taking advantage of a new market or gaining a competitive advantage. For example, in Buenos Aires, bicycle manufacturers and retailers strongly supported the local government policy of promoting the use of bikes in the city. However, advancing climate agendas at the city level also raises opposition from those economic and social sectors affected by the policies and initiatives. For instance, in Buenos Aires, taxi owners' associations and employees – a powerful constituency in city politics – systematically tried to block measures promoting the use of bikes in the city. Meanwhile, in Mexico City, the Metrobus initiative was forcefully opposed by the owners and employees of minibus companies that lost routes to the Metrobus lines.

As these examples show, social and political coalitions supporting and opposing climate policies and initiatives are formed of groups from very different social and economic backgrounds. This is an important element that should be taken into account by climate policy advocates and practitioners when designing political strategies to advance climate compatible development at the city level. Moreover, it reinforces our argument that linking climate objectives with issues of local concern enhances the possibility of building broader support for climate action.

5. The level of politicisation of climate issues at the city level

There is a striking lack of analysis on the role of political parties in the development of urban climate policy.[10] This might reflect the low levels of politicisation of climate issues at the city level – meaning that climate change is not an electorally salient issue and is not subject to competition between political parties.[11] This is not a minor concern; the degree of politicisation may be a significant indicator of the social relevance attributed to an issue by a particular polity.

Our research in Buenos Aires, São Paulo and Mexico City confirms this assessment. The challenges of climate change are still not conceived as central issues in the local politics of these cities, although it is interesting to note that the legislatures of all three cities approved climate change laws with the support of governing coalitions and opposition parties.[12] One could ask to what extent these high levels of cross-party legislative support are the result of a growing consensus among local political elites about the need to address climate change, or just mere expressions of political correctness. In any case, the interesting issue raised by the experiences of Buenos Aires, São Paulo and Mexico City is that, while local political elites in all three cities have agreed to advance climate legislation, climate issues are still not part of the local political debate.

The consequences of this low politicisation require further research and analysis. Nevertheless, one can reasonably argue that low levels of politicisation may reduce the potential electoral or political costs faced by governing parties or coalitions for the weak implementation of existing climate policies or commitments. Moreover, it might also speak of the fragility of the political support behind many climate policies. As other researchers have already stressed, adopting climate programmes or passing local climate legislation tends to be relatively uncontroversial politically, especially when this only implies broad programmatic commitments or aspirational goals.[13] In contrast, policy implementation requires concrete government actions, which are likely to trigger latent oppositional interests to the approved climate policy and to demands for the government to deploy organisational and economic resources. It is at this stage of the policy process that the political weakness of many climate programmes and polices becomes more obvious and pressing.

6. Conclusions

Linking to local issues is a key factor in advancing the climate agenda at the city level. The extent to which a municipal climate policy is linked to local concerns helps to change the perception of costs and benefits of climate policies, and increases the chances of building broader social and political coalitions that support these measures.

Climate champions play a key role in adopting climate policy commitments, but do not guarantee the implementation of the climate agenda. This underlines the need to build institutional capacity within city governments to implement climate policies, and to foster lasting political and social coalitions that can sustain those policies beyond electoral cycles and changes of political leadership.

Building broader and stronger coalitions supporting climate compatible development requires going beyond traditional environmental constituencies. In the context of the cities of the global South, it is especially critical to approach and engage those sectors that are more vulnerable to climate events – usually the urban poor. Similarly, businesses engaged in low-carbon activities can be key actors in coalitions supporting different climate agendas.

Climate change issues generally show low levels of politicisation at the city level. This means that climate change is neither an electorally salient issue, nor subject to competition between political parties. It is unclear, however, what the reasons for this low politicisation may be, or how they affect the development of local climate change agendas. More focused research is needed on this issue, as well as more generally on the links between climate issues and the dynamics of democratic politics at the city level. These are critical topics that need to be studied in order to gain a better insight into the conditions under which local climate policies can be adopted and implemented successfully.

Endnotes

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