City Scale: Cross-sector Partnerships for Implementing Local Climate Mitigation Plans

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Barcelona works with 800+ organizations from across sectors on a commitment to climate. “We want Barcelona to lead the way and act as a benchmark in climate protection”.

Local governments play a leading role in climate change efforts as up to 70% of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions occur in cities. In particular, with support from international networks such as ICLEI Local Governments for Sustainability, C40, Compact of Mayors, and Global 100% Renewable Energy, local governments around the world are committing to aggressive carbon reduction targets for their cities. However, sustainability challenges such as climate change are too large and complex to be addressed by any single organization alone. Thus, local governments are creating cross-sector social partnerships (CSSPs) at the local level; entities created for addressing social, economic, and/or environmental issues with partner organizations from the public, private and civil society sectors. CSSPs for voluntary action at the local level are important to complement regulatory and market approaches, but they must be designed well to be effective. This commentary shares findings from over 10 years of research through a global project on implementing community sustainable plans, highlighting examples, and offering details on how to design large city-wide cross-sector partnerships to mitigate climate change.

Cities and Climate Mitigation

Research on CSSPs implementing community sustainability plans shows that among the sixteen sustainability challenges commonly being addressed around the world, climate change is one of the four most common issues, after waste, energy and water (which are also highly relevant to climate mitigation). There are two types of local climate action plans: corporate and community (i.e., city-wide). Local governments generally control decisions around land use, transportation planning, waste management, and greening of public infrastructure. They can also influence emissions from energy and other economic development. Local governments tackle these topics through corporate climate action plans (where the corporation is the local government itself and the corporate plan focuses on actions within their control and influence). Community climate action plans, in comparison, consider all GHGs emitted within the local geographic boundaries, including from industry, home heating, burning fuel in vehicles, etc. It is these community plans that require large multi-stakeholder partnerships to be successful.

Partners in these partnerships generally include the local government departments, other government departments, utilities, large businesses, Chamber of Commerce, some small and medium sized enterprises, universities, schools, and local civil society groups. The partnership aims to implement the community climate action plan through joint projects and through individual partners taking specific actions within their organizations.

Partnership Design

Research shows that the partnership's structural features enable the achievement of plan outcomes, such as reducing GHG emissions, while also generating value for the partners. For successfully achieving the partnership's purpose, five structural features are required:

1. A multi-stakeholder entity (e.g., a committee or an organization) overseeing the partnership's plan formulation and implementation.
2. A mechanism for attracting new partners and having them commit to taking specific climate-related actions.
3. Partner organizations implementing actions within their own organizations (and not just providing advice on what the local government should do).
4. A communication system that connects the network, shares knowledge among partners, recognizes organizations who are proactively contributing to the goals of the partnership, and keeps the public informed on the partnership's progress. For example, communication might occur through a website, e-newsletter, training sessions, and awards events.
5. A monitoring and reporting system that allows for assessing progress (in terms of partner actions and city-wide impacts) in order to make the necessary adjustments in due time to ensure the goals are met. For example, if the city-wide trend is not on track to meet the goal, then the partnership needs to consider engaging new partners and/or different partner actions.

There are limitations on what can be achieved through voluntary partnerships, even if they are successful in involving large emitters and most large employers in the city. Thus these partnerships should complement regulatory and market approaches.

Examples

Over 10,000 local sustainability partnerships of different sizes have proliferated around the world, with some specifically focused on climate, and others embedding climate goals (and action plans) within a larger community sustainability strategy. An exploratory study of community climate action plans in Canada found that most of these involve fewer than 10 partner organizations and are focused on the shorter term reduction goals. Toronto is an exception to this, with a new report for how to achieve a reduction of 80% of GHG emissions by 2050. To achieve aggressive community climate mitigation targets (such as the 80% reduction goals) large partnerships with 100+ partners will be needed given the diversity of organizations than can directly impact emissions in cities. One large partnership is preferred over numerous smaller partnerships as it tends to be the same organizations involved in helping achieve different actions, especially if broader sustainable development goals are considered.

As an example, Barcelona, Spain, as part of its sustainability plan developed in 2002 and renewed in 2012, has a multi-stakeholder Council (with working groups) overseeing the partnership. This is supported by a staff team in the local government's Department of Ecology. This team handles communication, monitors progress with respect to specific indicators, and engages more than 800 partner organizations from across sectors. Since 2005, Barcelona has been a member of ICLEI's Cities for Climate Protection Campaign, and it has recently included a climate action plan into its sustainability strategy, thereby leveraging the large network for its implementation. For example, one of the initiatives in the new plan is "a pilot project for a mosaic of roofs with facilities that combine renewable energies with agricultural, green and rain water-collecting spaces, adapted for several types of buildings and users". Numerous partners own buildings and can participate in this initiative. Another initiative is focused on the circular economy and engaging retailers in "deposit, refund and return systems" for packaging. Barcelona, through the actions implemented by partner organizations, reduced its energy consumption and CO_2e emissions by 2% and 29% per capitabetween 1999 and 2012.

In conclusion, the IPCC, UNFCCC, UN-Habitat, federal governments, and numerous local governments are beginning to focus on cities as a lever for climate change mitigation. Large local partnerships will be a part of the solution. But, all cross-sectoral partnerships are not created equal; institutional design influences their efficacy. Successful partnerships involve stakeholder organizations taking actions to help achieve the collective goals, have open communication channels, and ensure robust monitoring of progress. Further, they incorporate flexibility in institutional design to enable updating the action plan and partners over time, and to ensure that feedback from

monitoring is incorporated quickly so that the partnership is able to work towards its desired objectives.

Reference list can be found here.

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