

Global Ambition, Local Action:

Facilitating Local and Regional Governments' Participation for More Effective and Inclusive Multilateral Environmental Agreements

Advanced copy – Working Paper

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Acknowledgments

This working paper was prepared by the Institute for Housing & Urban Development Studies (IHS), of Erasmus University Rotterdam. It was commissioned and funded by the UNEP Subnational Action Unit (Sectoral Transition Section), of the Climate Change Division Mitigation Branch.

The principal authors of this report are Lucas Snaije, Research Officer, and Dr. David Dodman, General Director, at the Institute for Housing & Urban Development Studies (IHS), with coordination, inputs, and review from Gulnara Roll, Chief of Sectoral Transformation Section, Sharon Gil, Head of Subnational Climate Action Unit, Elsa Lefevre, Programme Management Officer, UrbanShift, and Cecilia Consalvo, Partnerships and Project Management Fellow (UNEP), at the Subnational Climate Action Unit.

Additional review was provided by: Elena Marie Enseñado (IHS), Lea Ranalder (UN-Habitat), Yunus Arikan (ICLEI), Michele Acuto (Bristol University), Agathe Cavicchioli (GCoM), Asif Nawaz Shah (GCoM), Niclas Svenningsen (UNFCCC), Xenya Scanlon (UNCCD), Andrea Rizzo (UNEP), Kamelia Kemileva (Global Cities Hub), Pablo Fernández Marmissolle (UCLG), Toby Walker (Under2), Rachel Levesque (Government of Quebec).

IHS & UNEP extend their gratitude to the following experts who participated in research interviews: Michele Acuto (University of Bristol), Alessandra Antonini (European Commission Committee of the Regions), Yunus Arikan (ICLEI), Alope Barnwal (Global Environment Facility), Bernhard Barth (UN Habitat), Kobie Brand (ICLEI), Harriet Bulkeley (Utrecht University), Agathe Cavicchioli (GCoM), Bianca Lisboa Da Camara Brasil (CBD Secretariat), Tshewang Dorji (Global Environment Facility), Pablo Fernández Marmissolle (UCLG), Tadashi Matsumoto (OECD), Joe Muturi (Slum Dwellers International), Nadia Pellefigue (European Commission Committee of the Regions), Daniel Pejic (Melbourne Centre for Cities), Lea Ranalder (UN-Habitat), Andrea Rizzo (UNEP), Debra Roberts (University of KwaZulu-Natal), Caterina Sarfatti (C40), Emilia Saiz Carracedo (UCLG), Asif Nawaz Shah (GCoM), Andras Szorenyi (Global Cities Hub), Natalia Uribe (Regions4), Gino Van Begin (ICLEI), Toby Walker (Under2), Xueman Wang (World Bank Group).

Glossary of Acronyms

CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CHAMP	Coalition for High Ambition Multilevel Partnerships
C40	C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group
COP	Conference of the Parties
DLDD	Desertification, land degradation, and drought
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
GBF	Global Biodiversity Framework
GCoM	Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy
GTF	Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments
HLPF	UN High-level Political Forum on sustainable development
ICLEI	Local Governments for Sustainability
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
LAMG	Local Authorities Major Group
LGMA	Local Governments and Municipal Authorities Constituency
LRGs	Local and Regional Governments
MEA	Multilateral Environmental Agreements
NBSAPs	National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans
NDC	Nationally Determined Contributions
NAP	National Adaptation Plans
UCLG	United Cities and Local Governments
UNACLA	UN Advisory Committee of Local Authorities
UNCCD	United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification
UNEA	United Nations Environmental Assembly
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

Executive Summary

Coordinated and strategic multi-level action is key for more effective and inclusive outcomes in global environmental governance. This can be facilitated both through more structured and effective engagement of government actors from multiple scales in agenda-setting and policy-making, and through clearer pathways for implementation at the local and regional scales. Structural engagement of Local and Regional Governments in Multilateral Environmental Agreements is not simply beneficial, but is essential for delivering global environmental commitments.

As the world confronts interconnected crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, land degradation, and pollution, growing empirical evidence indicates that current trajectories fall short on meeting globally agreed targets without coordinated, well-resourced action at the subnational level. More than 70% of climate solutions fall under local and regional governments' jurisdictions, and Local and Regional Governments (LRGs) are advancing ambitious mitigation, adaptation, and nature-positive actions, with multiple co-benefits for health, resilience, and equity. Yet their role within most Multilateral Environmental Agreement implementation processes remains informal, selective, and insufficiently supported.

This working paper examines how LRGs have historically engaged in global environmental governance, with a specific focus on the Rio Conventions (UNFCCC, CBD, and UNCCD). It highlights key entry points through which they have influenced global agendas, identifies persistent structural and institutional barriers, and proposes actionable recommendations to enhance effective multi-level governance. Informed by a literature review and expert consultation process, the analysis reveals a maturing but uneven landscape of LRG involvement across conventions.

Within the scope of their constituency-based engagement in the intergovernmental processes, LRGs have mobilized themselves as united voices through city and subnational government networks such as ICLEI, UCLG, C40, Regions4, Under2, and more, that have spearheaded voluntary coalitions, thematic pavilions, and high-level ministerial dialogues during meetings of parties of relevant Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs). A number of subnational governments themselves are also directly and formally engaged in Multilateral Environmental Agreements, in some cases as legally bound entities and active participants in diplomatic processes. This advocacy has led to increasing recognition in outcome texts, from the Paris Agreement's acknowledgment of "all levels of government" needed to achieve climate goals and the urgent need for multilevel collaboration, to the CBD's endorsed Plan of Action on Subnational Governments. Similar progress is emerging within the UNCCD, particularly through the revitalization of subnational engagement during COP16 in Riyadh. However, recognition remains inconsistent, and LRGs largely remain observers, without differentiated status despite being government stakeholders.

LRGs' practical contributions to MEA implementation are extensive: integrating biodiversity into land-use planning, advancing nature-based solutions, reducing emissions through sustainable transport and building policies, and enhancing resilience through inclusive urban planning and adaptation. Their actions often complement national commitments and actions, demonstrating innovation that can accelerate the achievement of global goals. Nonetheless, LRG participation is hampered by limited upstream access to negotiations, complex MEA processes, fragmented coordination, and constraints in accessing adequate finance.

This paper's findings demonstrate significant added value to LRG engagement in accelerating the MEAs' implementation. In order for this engagement to be effective, there is a need for concrete actions and reforms, however this hinges on political will of governments – parties to MEAs.

The analysis proposes a wide range of tools and instruments to enhance LRG engagement. Parties to MEAs can establish structured, permanent mechanisms for LRG consultation throughout MEA cycles, from preparatory meetings to COP negotiations. National governments can institutionalize multi-level governance, embedding LRGs into national planning, reporting, and implementation processes. MEA secretariats could accelerate progress by formalizing LRG engagement frameworks, improving accreditation mechanisms, and promoting integrated monitoring and evaluation systems that align local action with national and global targets.

Cross-cutting issues such as climate justice, gender inequalities and responsiveness, data availability, and the need for stronger scientific integration, including the forthcoming IPCC Special Report on Cities, are central to enhancing LRG participation. Policy coherence across MEAs, and with related global agendas, will be critical to unlock synergies and scale up local implementation. Additionally, enabling LRGs to fulfill their potential requires expanding access to finance. Dedicated funding windows and more flexible mechanisms would allow cities and subnational governments to plan, deliver, and scale transformative solutions aligned with MEA objectives. Finally, ensuring equitable representation, particularly for under-resourced municipalities and regions in the Global South, is essential to avoid reinforcing existing disparities.

Introduction

Since the establishment of the United Nations in 1945, multilateral cooperation has been instrumental in advancing global environmental governance. Landmark agreements, from species conservation to ozone layer restoration, have demonstrated the capacity to coordinate international action and address complex environmental challenges. Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) have become core instruments of international environmental law. They provide structured frameworks for tackling urgent global and regional environmental issues, including atmospheric protection, biodiversity loss, and the sustainable management of chemicals and waste.

MEAs are essential to delivering global environmental commitments and aligning national policies with international obligations. As the number and scope of MEAs continue to expand, so does the imperative for coherent and inclusive governance across sectors and constituencies. Recognizing this, the sixth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-6) introduced for the first time a supplementary agenda item focused on enhancing cooperation with MEAs. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) supports the implementation of these agreements by serving as the secretariat for 15 MEAs, and is demonstrating increasing institutional commitment to strengthening synergies, improving implementation, policy coherence, and ensuring that MEAs remain fit-for-purpose in a rapidly evolving environmental landscape.

While MEAs are negotiated and adopted at the international level, their implementation increasingly depends on action taken at the local and subnational levels. This working paper sets out to explore, through a focus on the Rio Conventions, what initiatives, entry points, mechanisms, and stakeholders have led to successful engagement of Local and Regional Governments (LRG)¹ in MEAs, as well as identify the barriers and constraints they have faced. It seeks to understand how LRGs can engage further to support the goals and effectiveness of MEAs, while generating additional benefits for local sustainability. Finally, it puts forward indicators to assess the quality and depth of Local and Regional engagement across MEAs.

The 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm was a pivotal moment that positioned environmental protection as a key international policy issue. It established the groundwork for today's system of international environmental law, and sparked a significant expansion in treaty-based environmental governance. Since then, the number and scope of MEAs have grown considerably, supporting long-term cooperation among states and adapting to evolving environmental priorities. The Rio Conventions, established at the Earth Summit in 1992, are particularly important in shaping global environmental governance today, by addressing the interconnected crises of biodiversity loss, climate change, and land degradation. These conventions, which include the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), set common global standards for sustainable development and conservation efforts.

Despite over 70% of climate solutions lying within the boundaries of LRGs², there is still a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding how they engage with MEAs, and to what extent they influence or contribute to their implementation. Over the past three decades, following the designation of Local Authorities as a Major Group (LAMG) at the Earth Summit, LRGs have had entry points to put forward a common voice in global climate governance. Since its formal recognition in 1995, with ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability as its focal point, the Local Governments and Municipal Authorities (LGMA) Constituency has advanced the agenda of recognizing, engaging, and empowering local and subnational governments within the UNFCCC. Coalitions of city and subnational networks have also spearheaded efforts within the CBD, UNCCD and related intergovernmental processes.

This report provides an assessment of the evolving role of LRGs in the Rio Conventions in order to set a baseline from which to begin a clearer monitoring and support of effort that responds to the critical implementation needs across multiple environmental conventions. It is informed by a policy and academic literature analysis, as well as consultations with more than 25 experts from City and Subnational Networks, Academia, and IGOs (Methodology in Annex C). Section 1 provides a review of existing knowledge and analysis of LRGs in global environmental governance. Section 2 highlights milestones and outcome decisions resulting from LRG engagement and mobilization in the Rio Conventions. Section 3 presents an analysis of expert interviews to put forward a set of enabling conditions and opportunities for more effective participation, supported by associated policy recommendations in Section 4. A set of indicators is put forward in Annex A in order to evaluate different components of effective participation of LRGs in MEAs.

1 This paper primarily uses Local and Regional Governments (LRGs) as the term encompassing subnational governments at municipal (cities, towns), and regional (states, regions, provinces) levels. Other terms that are used include cities and subnational governments, local and regional authorities, and local and subnational governments. The choice of terminology for this report mirrors the process for a United Nations global strategy for the engagement of local and regional governments in intergovernmental processes" (2024).

2 The Global Subnational Climate Fund (2022). Catalysing Solutions at the Local Level. Green Climate Fund. <https://www.greenclimate.fund/document/global-subnational-climate-fund-sncf-global>

Section 1.

Local and Regional Governments in Global Environmental Governance

LRGs have increasingly asserted themselves as influential actors in global climate and environmental governance. Although they are not formal signatories to MEAs, the academic, media, and policy landscape at large recognizes that cities and regions are on the front lines of climate change, and that this proximity to people and environmental challenges makes them well positioned to implement responsive policies.

At least 65% of the 169 targets spread across the 17 SDGs, of which SDG11 is specifically dedicated to cities and human settlements, could not be reached without concerted engagement and coordination with LRGs.³ Meanwhile, under conditions of population growth, economic development, and accelerating migration to cities, urban areas today consume two thirds of energy and generate more than 70% of global CO₂ Emissions.⁴ By 2030, 40% of strictly protected areas are expected to lie within 50km of a city, rendering local action critical for biodiversity⁵. Meanwhile, land degradation affects nearly 40 per cent of the world's land area and directly impacts 3.2 billion people in both rural and urban settings, underscoring the critical linkages between climate, biodiversity and land degradation⁶.

Many of the impacts of climate change are concentrated in urban areas, particularly among economically and socially marginalized populations. Women and girls often experience these risks differently and more acutely due to unequal access to land, housing, income, services, and decision-making power. At the same time, women are key agents of local adaptation, resilience, and environmental stewardship, particularly at the community and neighborhood levels which is an asset that remains underrecognized in global environmental governance. An estimated one billion people living in informal settlements face some of the most severe consequences. These communities are often poorly equipped to withstand climate shocks, with heightened vulnerability to flooding and landslides due to substandard housing and insufficient infrastructure management, storm resistance, and heat mitigation⁷. LRGs play a key role in addressing many of these underlying issues, yet they continue to face constraints, from their limited mandate in global decision-making spaces, to lack of resources and capacity to address the multiple challenges they face.

A growing body of research and policy analysis has also focused on the role of subnational actors in global climate mitigation. Recent studies indicate that subnational actions can deliver emissions reductions that are additional to national policies, helping to narrow the gap between current trajectories and pathways consistent with limiting warming to 1.5°C or 2°C. In some contexts, including countries where national ambition has lagged, city- and region-level commitments have been shown to make a potentially significant contribution toward meeting national climate targets⁸.

1.1 Local Governments and International Engagement

Local governments have long been engaged in international affairs. The International Union of Local Authorities (IULA) was founded in 1913 to promote city interests within the League of Nations, and has held consultative status with ECOSOC since 1947, a status currently maintained by UCLG. In 1990, the establishment of ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability at the United Nations Headquarters as a global network with a particular focus on environment and sustainability with support from OECD and UNEP was a milestone for connecting local action to global goals and creating a legacy of constituency-based engagement at intergovernmental processes. The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro marked a significant moment in including non-state major groups actors, with specific reference to “local authorities” in its Chapter 28. A key achievement through this acknowledgment of subnational actors and local governments as one of the agenda’s nine major groups, was the creation of the Local Authorities

3 Cities Alliance (2015). Sustainable Development Goals and Habitat III: Opportunities for a successful New Urban Agenda. <https://www.citiesalliance.org/sites/default/files/Opportunities%20for%20the%20New%20Urban%20Agenda.pdf>

4 IEA (2021), Empowering Cities for a Net Zero Future, IEA, Paris <https://www.iea.org/reports/empowering-cities-for-a-net-zero-future>, Licence: CC BY 4.0

5 IUCN Urban Nature Alliance. (2021). Cities and Biodiversity: The Issues. IUCN <https://iucnurbanalliance.org/cities-and-biodiversity-the-issues/>

6 UNCCD and UN-Habitat. 2024. Primer on Urban-Rural Linkages and Land. Bonn, United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and Nairobi, UN-Habitat

7 Satterthwaite, D., Archer, D., Colenbrander, S., Dodman, D., Hardoy, J., Mitlin, D., & Patel, S. (2020). Building resilience to climate change in informal settlements. *One Earth*, 2(2), 143–156. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oneear.2020.02.002>

8 Lwasa, S., K.C. Seto, X. Bai, H. Blanco, K.R. Gurney, Ş. Kılıç, O. Lucon, J. Murakami, J. Pan, A. Sharifi, Y. Yamagata, 2022: Urban systems and other settlements. In IPCC, 2022: Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change. Contribution of Working Group III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [P.R. Shukla, J. Skea, R. Slade, A. Al Khourdajie, R. van Diemen, D. McCollum, M. Pathak, S. Some, P. Vyas, R. Fradera, M. Belkacemi, A. Hasija, G. Lisboa, S. Luz, J. Malley, (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA. doi: 10.1017/9781009157926.010

Major Group (LAMG). The LAMG ensures LRG voices can formally participate in the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) processes. This has enabled entry points for their participation in these MEAs, where they have continuously vied for greater recognition as both sites and agents in the implementation of sustainability action.

The experience through the 20 years of the implementation of Local Agenda 21 paved the way for SDG11 and other efforts on localization of global agendas. In addition to Local Agenda 21, The three “Rio Conventions”, on Biodiversity, Climate Change and Desertification, derive directly from it, with each convention representing a major pathway for contributing to the Agenda 21 UN Sustainable Development Plan. The Local Governments and Municipal Authorities (LGMA) constituency at the UNFCCC, with ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability serving as focal point since its inception in 1995, has become an important platform for local governments to exchange knowledge, share best practices, and collaborate on sustainability initiatives and engage in global environmental governance issues. LRGs have steadily expanded their influence across a range of other global policy processes, demonstrating an increasing appetite for international engagement. Evidence of the growing and globalizing role of LRGs is prolific, with increasing size and number of city and regional networks, as well as acknowledgements in multilateral programs and declarations, and the continuing internationalization of mayoral activities.⁹

The formation of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) in 2004 marked a further turning point, consolidating city representation in international forums beyond environmental issues. In 2013, UCLG and partners launched the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (GTF) to coordinate urban voices within the UN system. These efforts, among others, helped secure formal recognition of LRGs in global policy agendas. The 2030 Agenda and the inclusion of Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG11) affirmed cities as key drivers of sustainable development, encouraging localizing the SDGs, through collaboration between national governments and local authorities. In 2019, ICLEI was announced as the focal point for the 3 Rio Conventions and related agendas on behalf of the Global Task Force, and in 2025, ICLEI convened its first annual review of local and subnational action on 3 Rio Conventions, addressing the convergence, complexity and innovation as the main trends across all these processes.

While increasingly present within multilateral spaces, cities and subnational governments continue to have limited agency and recognition within formal negotiation processes. Academic researchers have for example stressed the need for deeper consideration of the issue of status of cities in UN frameworks, as well as role in global governance more generally, highlighting their key role in service delivery and democratic engagement. One analysis assessed the way in which cities were framed by UN documents, with 43 % of mentions defining them as ‘actors’, 33 % as ‘issues’, and 24 % as ‘sites’, concluding that recognizing cities in UN policies and practices requires a more systematic approach to incorporating cities into multilateral governance. It highlighted the strategic importance of planning for cities’ growing roles within the United Nations system¹⁰. This has identified key challenges for multilateral governance, as urban actors gain international influence, and underscored that cities and subnational governments are no longer peripheral to global governance: instead, they are becoming essential partners for UN agencies and national governments in shaping international agendas. These findings suggest that cities’ roles in global governance extend beyond academic interest and are increasingly crucial for UN agencies and national governments, stressing the role of cities’ status in UN frameworks as a strategic concern.¹¹

This proposition is consistent with initiatives seeking to rethink the position of LRGs within multilateralism. The High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism, established in 2022 by the UN Secretary General, proposed providing a special status for cities and regions, suggesting for example that consideration should be given to involving LRGs directly in relevant multilateral treaty processes, allowing them to become signatories with responsibilities.¹² Under the leadership of Secretary-General António Guterres, the UN has embraced urbanization as a defining trend of the 21st century, and in 2023 the Advisory Group on LRGs was launched to address modalities and means to enhance institutional mechanisms to strengthen engagement of LRGs in intergovernmental processes.¹³ Over its one-year mandate (October 2023–September 2024), the Group advanced recommendations from Our Common Agenda and informed preparations for the Summit of the Future (21–22 September 2024, New York). The Advisory Group recommended several ways to enhance the UN systems’ abilities to support national planning and SDG impact through stronger engagement with

9 Acuto, M., Kosovac, A., & Hartley, K. (2021). City Diplomacy: Another Generational Shift?. *Diplomatica*, 3(1), 137-146. <https://doi.org/10.1163/25891774-03010007>

10 Acuto, M., Kosovac, A., Pejic, D., & Jones, T. L. (2021). The city as an actor in UN frameworks: formalizing ‘urban agency’ in the international system? *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 11(3), 519–536. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2020.1860810>

11 Kosovac, A., Acuto, M. and Jones, T.L. (2020), Acknowledging Urbanization: A Survey of the Role of Cities in UN Frameworks. *Glob Policy*, 11: 293-304. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12783>

12 High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism (HLAB), (2023) A Breakthrough for People and Planet: Effective and Inclusive Global Governance for Today and the Future. New York: United Nations University

13 UN-Habitat. (2024). Secretary-General’s Advisory Group on Local and Regional Governments. UN-Habitat. <https://unhabitat.org/news/26-aug-2024/secretary-generals-advisory-group-on-local-and-regional-governments>

LRGs, both within the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) process and through shifts in its global, regional and national support structures.¹⁴ This culminated in a UN Secretary General Report, identifying mechanisms to strengthen LRG engagement in UN intergovernmental processes, such as enhancing and extending the role of the UN Advisory Committee of Local Authorities (UNACLA), providing UN General Assembly (GA) Observer Status to allow LRG representation at GA meetings, and holding an annual UN hearing to build awareness on the issues and contributions of LRGs.¹⁵

1.2. Environmental Issues, a Priority for LRGs

Environmental issues have consistently remained a key arena in which LRGs' have engaged internationally. This has been particularly true in relation to climate change: cities produce a significant share of global greenhouse gas emissions while also facing major risks from climate impacts. They are also uniquely positioned to implement effective adaptation and mitigation strategies that offer multiple benefits, such as reducing poverty, creating jobs, improving public services, and enhancing overall quality of life¹⁶. Some of the most innovative and forward-thinking climate solutions are already emerging from cities and communities, and although urbanization continues to be a major source of greenhouse gas emissions, in many contexts urban emissions per capita are now lower than national averages.¹⁷ For example, 73% of the 96 C40 city-members with available data have officially peaked their emissions and are on a downward trajectory, faster than their national governments.¹⁸ A report released to mark the 10 years of the Paris Agreement found that over 13,700 cities and regions worldwide are actively advancing climate strategies aligned with the Paris Agreement through city and regional network initiatives, demonstrating measurable progress.¹⁹

At the subnational level, states and regions often have significant financial and regulatory powers, particularly in federal and more decentralised countries. This allows them significant leeway to undertake ambitious climate action on their own or in conjunction with national governments. Even in contexts where hard powers are limited, research shows states and regions can still influence climate action through soft powers and agenda-setting.²⁰ An assessment from 33 OECD countries found that subnational governments were responsible for 63% of climate significant public expenditure, and 69% of climate significant public investment such as energy, waste, housing, environmental protection. Additionally, 186 states and regions had adopted net zero targets in 2024.²¹ The Canadian province of Quebec is a strong example of how this fragmented and polycentric governance can work effectively in practice²². The government of Quebec has a unique combination of legal obligations under MEAs, with full participation within the national delegation, co-leadership roles in CBD advisory bodies, and active contributions to global coalitions including the High Ambition Subnational Taskforce with California and the Local and Subnational Governments Coalition to End Plastic Pollution.

In recent years, and notably since the 2015 Paris Agreement, a shift has been observed with considerable implications for policy development.²³ Analysis of the post-Paris climate regime demonstrates sub- and nonstate actors going from acknowledgement to integration in its very core.²⁴ Multi-level governance has been increasingly recognized as foundational to the global effort to combat climate change, underscoring that effective action requires collaboration and coordination across various levels of government, as well as

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- 14 United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat). (2024). Secretary-General's Advisory Group on Local and Regional Governments. Retrieved, from <https://unhabitat.org/news/26-aug-2024/secretary-generals-advisory-group-on-local-and-regional-governments>
- 15 United Nations General Assembly, Report of the Secretary General. (2025). Recommendations on how engagement with local and regional authorities could advance the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in particular the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals A/79/968. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/79/968> [docs.un.org]
- 16 Dodman, D., B. Hayward, M. Pelling, V. Castan Broto, W. Chow, E. Chu, R. Dawson, L. Khirfan, T. McPhearson, A. Prakash, Y. Zheng, and G. Ziervogel, 2022: Cities, Settlements and Key Infrastructure. In: *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* [H.-O. Pörtner, D.C. Roberts, M. Tignor, E.S. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, A. Alegría, M. Craig, S. Langsdorf, S. Löschke, V. Möller, A. Okem, B. Rama (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA, pp. 907–1040, doi:10.1017/9781009325844.008.
- 17 UN-Habitat. (2024). World Cities Report 2024: Cities and Climate Action. United Nations Human Settlements Programme. https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2024/11/wcr2024_-_full_report.pdf
- 18 C40 Cities, Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy. (2025). Local Action, Global Goals Cities delivering on the Global Stocktake and Global Goal on Adaptation
- 19 C40 Cities, Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy. (2025). From Paris to Belém: A decade of local climate leadership
- 20 Wong, J., Hagemann, M., Smit, S., Höhne, N., & Kurdzie, M.-J. (2023). Exploring the role of regional governments in achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement: A closer look at regional powers and capacities across different countries. NewClimate Institute
- 21 Under2. (2025). Keeping the Paris Agreement Alive: a Decade of Subnational Action and Global Impact. Climate Group
- 22 Chaloux, A., Simard, P., Boudreau, J. & Séguin, H. (2020). États fédérés et gouvernance climatique mondiale : analyse des engagements du Québec envers l'Accord de Paris. *Revue québécoise de droit international / Quebec Journal of International Law / Revista quebequense de derecho internacional*, 33(2), 19–51. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1086440ar>
- 23 UN-Habitat. (2024). World Cities Report 2024: Cities and Climate Action. United Nations Human Settlements Programme. https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2024/11/wcr2024_-_full_report.pdf
- 24 Hale, T. 2016. "All Hands on Deck": The Paris Agreement and Nonstate Climate Action. *Global Environmental Politics*; 16 (3): 12–22. doi: https://doi.org/10.1162/GLEP_a_00362

with non-state actors.²⁵ Scholars have also noted that city and subnational diplomacy is gaining strategic prominence in international affairs, with growing endorsement from philanthropic foundations, private sector leaders, academic institutions, and a wide array of UN bodies and national governments.²⁶

LRGs have independently dedicated considerable energy and successfully gained prominence in international fora addressing climate change, biodiversity and other sustainability concerns. They have formed global networks to facilitate cooperation and enhance their visibility, are growing their multilateral activities through their international relations offices, are increasingly integrating and implementing international law within their jurisdictions, and have started adopting the language and practices typical of States, such as signing agreements and issuing international declarations, contributing to the internationalization of cities and subnational governments.²⁷

A 2024 survey of cities found that a vast majority (84%) communicated at least once every three months with their national governments on international issues, with climate change being by far the top priority.²⁸ While responses were skewed toward cities of the Global North, and therefore may not be globally representative, they indicate more frequent engagement between subnational and national governments regarding international issues, potentially indicating growing alignment on their priority international issues. Despite communications efforts however, a majority of these cities also indicated a belief their residents are often unaware of their international engagements.

Developments at subnational levels are also understood as key to understanding the gradual transformation that has occurred in international climate politics, with subnational governments taking proactive initiative to create climate mitigation pledges and policies.²⁹ Using the case of the UNFCCC, academic researchers found not only a growing size, scope, and prominence of climate action by sub/nonstate actors, but an also increasingly central role of these players in a “new catalytic and facilitative climate regime”, from subnational climate action being galvanized ahead of negotiations, to increased recognition within COPs, and a larger role set out in negotiated texts.³⁰

1.3. The Role of Networks and Coordinated Subnational Action

Transnational municipal and regional networks are central players in the engagement of cities and regions in intergovernmental processes, and have been multiplying across the globe. These organizations are connecting cities and subnational governments beyond national borders, representing local interests, sharing knowledge and best practices, setting standards, offering technical support, building local capacity, and managing or developing projects. This combination of territorial governance with transnational collaboration and institutional flexibility enables these networks to engage effectively with, and in some cases challenge, the global governance system solely centred around nation states.³¹

Coordination and leadership from city networks have supported the emergence of multi-level governance frameworks that focus on bridging the gap between central and subnational government. This development has provided cities and regions greater representation on the international climate policy stage, through opportunities to meet and supplement their participation, attaining observer and consultative status at COP conferences, gaining greater access to the main international negotiation processes, and thereby the opportunity to actively seek full international recognition.³²

The number of non-state and subnational actors pledging climate actions through various membership networks and international cooperative initiatives has steadily increased, in parallel to the growth and diversification of these networks themselves. Such diversification has raised doubts about their effectiveness, primarily due to capacity constraints, diffusion of efforts, and the lack of complementarity and coordination. The growing number of actors and private investments in international city networks has sometimes resulted

25 Maharjan, P. (2024). UN DESA Policy Brief No. 162: Multilevel Governance for Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation

26 Acuto, M., Pejic, D., & Trijsburg, I. (2024, March 25). Strengthening city diplomacy in 2024. *Diplomatic Courier*. <https://www.diplomaticcourier.com/posts/strengthening-city-diplomacy-in-2024>

27 Szpak, A. (2025) UN summit of the future – Where are cities? A lost chance for more inclusive and effective multi-level governance, *Cities*, Volume 161, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2025.105878>.

28 Pejic, D., Kling, S., Leavesley, A., Klaus, I., Trijsburg, I., Kosovac, A., and Acuto, M. ‘City diplomacy in response to multiple crises: the 2024 Cities and International Engagement Survey.’ Melbourne Centre for Cities, DOI: 10.26188/26866966.

29 Falkner, R. (2016), The Paris Agreement and the new logic of international climate politics. *International Affairs*, 92: 1107-1125. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12708>

30 Hale, T. 2016. “All Hands on Deck”: The Paris Agreement and Nonstate Climate Action. *Global Environmental Politics*, 16 (3): 12–22. doi: https://doi.org/10.1162/GLEP_a_00362

31 Tortola, P. D. (2025). Mapping the landscape of transnational municipal networks. *Cities*, 159, 105801. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2025.105801>

32 Moore, L. (2016). A Place for Subnational Governments at the International Climate Negotiating Table. *South African Institute of International Affairs, Policy Briefing* 156.

in competition and fragmented representation, potentially weakening cities and regions' ability to engage effectively with multilateral organizations, and underscoring a need to foster cooperation and align efforts across networks with strong advocacy capacity.³³

Additional complexities emerge when questioning the potential for mirroring existing global inequalities when observing subnational engagement in climate governance, with leadership and participation tending to more strongly represent developed countries.³⁴ Some assessments indicate that global urban governance is disproportionately shaped by a concentrated core of economically dominant cities, representing just 4% of the global urban landscape, that have gained higher influence in agenda- setting and idea-sharing across international platforms.³⁵

Alongside increased participation in the international and national agendas, cities and regions are taking many initiatives of their own through local policies to address global sustainability issues. These include reducing GHG emissions, which also generates co-benefits such as improved health, liveability, resilience, and economic prosperity. Individual commitments by regions, provinces, cities, and businesses have the potential to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions significantly beyond what is expected from current national policies alone.³⁶ A 2021 analysis revealed that more than 75% of Global Covenant of Mayors signatories set a more ambitious target than their respective national governments, and more than 50% aimed to achieve their targets faster, representing a crucial "urban opportunity" to accelerate national climate action.³⁷

Cities are also actively engaging in City to City (C2C) learning, leveraging their peers to enhance knowledge about climate change adaptation and resilience policies and plans, climate financing, climate neutrality initiatives and other actions including biodiversity, energy, transport, buildings, waste, water, and land use sectors.³⁸ Such exchanges, whether informal or through networks, could lead to policy innovation and improved implementation of MEA goals. This participation in a range of networks is also leading to the adoption of shared norms and standards, for example that cities have both the responsibility and capacity to act locally and are a nimble source of climate solutions, and this process is leading cities to transform the way they organize their space and economies to achieve climate goals.³⁹

It is important to note however, that LRG engagement in MEAs is not limited to voluntary action through transnational networks but, in some cases, is grounded in formal legal relationships that allow participation within national delegations. In these cases, subnational governments may act as institutional co-leaders of MEA work programmes, shaping agendas, negotiation inputs, and follow-up mechanisms. This direct participation also complicates efforts to quantify LRG presence, since many are accredited under national delegations rather than observer constituencies in their own right.

33 Fernández de Losada, A. (2019). Towards a cooperative ecosystem of city networks. Monografías CIDOB n°. 72. Rethinking the ecosystem of international city networks. Challenges and opportunities

34 Kok, M., Widerberg, O., Negacz, K., Bliss, C., & Pattberg, P. (2019). Opportunities for the Action Agenda for Nature and People. PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency.

35 Leffel, B., Derudder, B., Acuto, M., & van der Heijden, J. (2023). Not so polycentric: The stratified structure & national drivers of transnational municipal networks. *Cities*, 143, 104597. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2023.104597>

36 Data Driven Yale, NewClimate Institute, PBL (2018) Global climate action of regions, states and businesses. Research report published by Data Driven Yale, NewClimate Institute, PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency,

37 Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy. (2021). Further and faster together: The 2021 Global Covenant of Mayors impact report. Global Covenant of Mayors. <https://www.globalcovenantofmayors.org/impact2021/>

38 Enseñado, E. M., J. Edelenbos, and L. van den Dool. 2025. "The Rules of Engagement: Conditions for City-To-City Learning on Climate Change Policy." *Environmental Policy and Governance* 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1002/eet.70007>.

39 Lin, J., (2020) Chapter 13: The role of subnational actors in transnational climate change law in: *Research Handbook on Transnational Environmental Law*. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781788119634.00024>

Section 2.

LRG Engagement in MEAs: the Rio Conventions as Illustrative Cases

The 1992 Rio Earth Summit catalysed the adoption of three major global conventions: biodiversity, desertification, and climate change. While each convention has evolved, climate efforts expanding from mitigation to also encompass adaptation and resilience; biodiversity moving from species protection toward living in harmony with nature; and desertification becoming a broader dialogue on land degradation and drought, they are united by the shared goal of advancing sustainable development while protecting the planet.

In the post-Rio era, notable progress was also made in regulating hazardous substances. The Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal, was adopted in 1989 to address concerns over the management, disposal, and transboundary movement of hazardous wastes. The 1998 Rotterdam Convention established the Prior Informed Consent procedure for international trade in certain hazardous chemicals and pesticides, while the 2001 Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) addressed long-lived toxic substances. Together they form the BRS Conventions, which have met jointly since 2013 with each treaty having its own mandate and taking its own decisions. The first major MEA of the 21st century, the Minamata Convention on Mercury, was approved that same year, complementing previous treaties on toxic substances by aiming to reduce mercury use and its manufacture and export, as well as its emission into the atmosphere.

The development and evolution of these MEAs have underscored the need for continued legal innovation, stronger institutional coordination, and inclusive implementation strategies to meet today's environmental challenges. Most treaty bodies, including plenary sessions of Conferences of the Parties (COPs) and their subsidiary bodies, have granted observer access to accredited non-governmental organizations, and intergovernmental organizations, with the intention of strengthening transparency and facilitating broader stakeholder engagement. These evolving roles reflect a broader trend: non-state actors have incrementally been embedded in the operational and normative dimensions of international environmental law and are being perceived as moving beyond mere observers. Their contributions, ranging from technical analysis to compliance support, public engagement and policy localization, are understood as essential to strengthening transparency, implementation, and ambition across global environmental frameworks.⁴⁰

While cities and regions are often required to seek accreditation through city networks alongside other major group "non state actors", many cities and subnational governments are also accredited as part of their respective national delegations. While this facilitates their participation in MEA processes, it can also make it more difficult to clearly identify and quantify the extent of LRG engagement across these agreements. Most multilateral processes engage LRGs primarily through their representative networks, which hold the formal observer or consultative status that enables LRG participation. A notable exception is the UN Forum of Mayors in Geneva, which allows LRGs to have direct representation where mayors participate in their own capacity rather than as members of a network. At the regional level, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe constitutes another such example.

The Rio Conventions, emerging from the 1992 Earth Summit, offer useful illustrative cases that can provide a basis for analysis of the frameworks, decisions, and mechanisms that have enabled the engagement of LRGs. Cities and local authorities are within the 9 officially recognized constituencies or "major groups" and have engaged the most dynamically and consistently within the three Rio Conventions through the Local Authorities Major Group (LAMG). These conventions, in particular climate and biodiversity, have been considered from their onset to have local policy relevance, also incentivizing the engagement of cities. The illustrative cases for each convention in the following section highlight non-exhaustive initiatives that have mobilized and engaged LRGs within the UNFCCC, CBD, and UNCCD, as well as their reflections within official programming, negotiated outcomes, decisions, and declarations.

40 Bäckstrand, K., Kuyper, J. W., Linnér, B. O., & Lövbrand, E. (2017). Non-state actors in global climate governance: from Copenhagen to Paris and beyond. *Environmental Politics*, 26(4), 561–579. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2017.1327485>

2.1 Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was adopted on 22 May 1992 and opened for signature at the Rio Earth Summit on 5 June that year. It entered into force on 29 December 1993 and now includes 196 parties. The Convention's core objectives are to conserve biodiversity, ensure its sustainable use, and promote the fair and equitable sharing of benefits from genetic resources.

Engagement and Mobilization

The CBD played a pioneering role among all 3 Rio Conventions by consistently recognising the importance of local authorities and subnational governments undertaking specific initiatives to implement relevant objectives of the CBD's programmes of work within their respective areas of competence, as exemplified by Table 1. LRGs are also encouraged to participate in the development of national policies for the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity, with their constituency based engagements facilitated by the ICLEI Cities Biodiversity Center.



Photo credit: @UNEP/Duncan Moore

Table 1 Engagement & Mobilization of Sub-National Government Entities at CBD COPs

CONFERENCE	DATE	ENGAGEMENT & MOBILIZATION OF SUB-NATIONAL GOVERNMENT ENTITIES
COP8 Curitiba	2006	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Local Action for Biodiversity (LAB) initiative is launched by ICLEI—Local Governments for Sustainability, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) to empower local governments to integrate biodiversity into their policies, strategies, and implementation frameworks. In March 2007, the Mayor of Curitiba convened a high-level meeting titled “Cities and Biodiversity: Achieving the 2010 Biodiversity Target,” which culminated in the adoption of the Curitiba Declaration. CBD Executive Secretary releases the notice “Cities and Biodiversity: Engaging Local Authorities during the Enhanced Phase of the Implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity.”
COP9 Bonn	2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The first global Biodiversity Summit of Cities & Subnational Governments is held in parallel to the CBD COP. Coordinated by ICLEI’s Cities Biodiversity Center with the CBD Secretariat, host country, and key partners, Governors, mayors and other subnational government leaders from around the world gather to showcase action and solutions and contribute to a statement to Parties on behalf of local and subnational governments. Local Governments deliver a formal appeal “call to action” to implement the CBD objectives, marking their inaugural coordinated voice in the CBD arena.
COP10 Nagoya	2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Plan of Action on Subnational Governments, Cities and Other Local Authorities for Biodiversity is agreed by parties. The Global Partnership on Local and Subnational Action for Biodiversity is launched. The Advisory Committee on Subnational Governments and Biodiversity (AC SNG) is launched.
COP12 PyeongChang	2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fourth Global Biodiversity Summit for Cities & Subnational Governments, convenes over 500 delegates from 86 cities and regions - outcomes are delivered directly to the ministerial segment, reinforcing city-level engagement.
COP13 Cancun	2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> GoLS (Group of Leading Subnational Governments toward Aichi Biodiversity Targets) was established during the 5th Biodiversity Summit of Cities and Subnational Governments held in parallel with COP13. The coalition brings together leading subnational governments committed to advancing and operationalizing the Aichi Biodiversity Targets at regional and local scales.
COP14	2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Sharm El- Sheikh to Kunming Action Agenda for Nature and People is launched to mobilize urgent action in the lead up to COP 15 in 2020; enhance the implementation of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity (2011-2020) and the Aichi Biodiversity targets in the final two years of their validity; as well as support the development of a Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework. CitiesWithNature is launched, a global platform for cities and other subnational governments, their communities and experts to connect, share and learn from each other in mainstreaming nature into cities. Between COP14 and COP15, the open-ended working group (OEWG) was launched, formalizing the LRG Major Group and the Edinburgh Process.
COP15 Montreal	2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seventh Summit for Subnational Governments and Cities as an official parallel event. First dedicated Pavilion “Place Quebec” is launched focusing on subnational government and city actions and opportunities and providing a dedicated meeting hub. Updated Plan of Action Subnational Governments, Cities and Other Local Authorities for Biodiversity. Led by the Government of Québec and the State of California, a dedicated Subnational Governments Taskforce is launched in partnership with the High Ambition Coalition for Nature & People (HAC). The taskforce aims to strengthen subnational advocacy for the 30x30 target and to support effective implementation of 30x30 at the subnational level. CitiesWithNature Action Platform is launched in 2022 (RegionsWithNature launches in 2021), reporting implementation of the KunmingMontreal Global Biodiversity Framework and national biodiversity strategies and action plans.
COP16 Cali	2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Eight Summit for Subnational Governments and Cities is held as an official parallel high-level event to COP16 and includes a high-level dialogue among ministers, governors, mayors, business champions, heads of MDBs and other key stakeholders focusing on implementation progress and resource mobilization in line with the COP16 priority areas; Signing process and launch event of the Berlin Urban Nature Pact. First ever sub-national contribution to the Global Biodiversity Framework Fund (GBFF).

Outcomes, Decisions & Declarations

Over 20 formal COP Decisions, with several detailed in Table 2, recognize the role and contributions of local and subnational governments to the implementation of the CBD and global biodiversity targets. This sustained inclusion reflects the commitment of CBD Parties and the Secretariat to integrate cities and regions as strategic actors in delivering the Convention’s global biodiversity goals.

Table 2 Negotiated Outcome Text Recognizing Sub-National Government Entities at CBD COPs

CONFERENCE	DATE	DECISION	DOCUMENT	OUTCOME TEXT
COP9 Bonn	2008	IX/28	Promoting engagement of cities and local authorities	<p><i>Article 3: Encourages Parties, in accordance with national legislation, to recognize the role of cities and local authorities in their national biodiversity strategies and action plans, to facilitate the adoption by cities and local authorities of practices that support the implementation of these strategies and action plans, and to support the development of local biodiversity strategies and action plans consistent with National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans;</i></p> <p><i>Article 5. Invites Parties, other Governments and international development agencies to support and assist cities and local authorities in encouraging and promoting practices,</i></p> <p><i>6. Invites Parties to engage their cities and local authorities, where appropriate</i></p>
COP10 Nagoya	2010	X/22	CBD Action on Subnational Governments, Cities and Other Local Authorities for Biodiversity	<p><i>1. Endorses the Plan of Action on Subnational Governments, Cities and Other Local Authorities for Biodiversity (2011-2020) annexed to the present decision and encourages Parties and other Governments to implement it, as appropriate, in the context of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020, taking into account national priorities, capacities and needs, and to report on their activities in the fifth national report of the Parties to the Convention;</i></p> <p><i>2. Invites Parties to involve subnational governments, cities and other local authorities when revising their national biodiversity strategies and action plans;</i></p> <p><i>3. Invites subnational governments, cities and other local authorities and their networks to contribute to the implementation of the Plan of Action, in coordination with their national Governments, taking into account activities conducted to implement the programme of work on communication, education and public awareness (CEPA);</i></p>
COP11 Hyderabad	2012	XI/8	Engagement of other stakeholders, major groups and subnational authorities	<p><i>4. Invites Parties and other Governments to develop, with their local and subnational governments, guidelines and capacity-building initiatives to develop, enhance or adapt local and subnational biodiversity strategies and action plans, or to mainstream biodiversity into sustainable development, in line with their national biodiversity strategies and action plans, so as to ensure harmonious and coherent implementation of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 and the Aichi Biodiversity Targets at all levels of governance</i></p>
COP13 Cancun	2016	XIII/3	Strategic actions to enhance the implementation of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 and the achievement of the Aichi Biodiversity Targets, including with respect to mainstreaming and the integration of biodiversity within and across sectors	<p><i>para96.a. To enhance their efforts to engage subnational and local governments in order to strengthen their contribution to the implementation of the Convention and its Strategic Plan, taking into account the usefulness of networking within local governments.</i></p>
COP15 Montreal	2022	XV/12	Engagement with subnational governments, cities and other local authorities to enhance implementation of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework	<p><i>Preamble para2: Noting also that subnational governments, cities and other local authorities are a constituent part of many Parties and other Governments, and that the implementation and monitoring of the KunmingMontreal Global Biodiversity Framework needs to involve all levels of government as appropriate,</i></p> <p><i>Preamble para3: Recognizing the important role of subnational governments, cities and other local authorities in the implementation of the objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity, as well as monitoring and reporting, mainstreaming, resource mobilization, capacity-building and communication, education and public awareness, social participation and public access to information</i></p>
COP16 Cali-Rome	2024-2025	XVI/33	Financial Mechanism	<p><i>Annex 2: Requests the Global Environment Facility to provide financial assistance, upon request, to all eligible countries, including for eligible capacity-building and development activities, for subnational, national and regional projects to implement the Global Action Plan on Biodiversity and Health</i></p>

Box 1: Case Study - The Berlin Urban Nature Pact & the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF)

The Berlin Urban Nature Pact is an initiative by a number of cities building on and partnering with the Edinburgh Process in an ongoing, comprehensive consultation process for cities, local and regional authorities around the world that are ready to lead the transition towards implementation of bold biodiversity action. The Pact seeks to halt and reverse biodiversity loss to put nature on a path to recovery for the benefit of people and the planet in cities worldwide by 2030. It builds on the 2020 Edinburgh Declaration and the 2022 Montreal Pledge, and focuses on the implementation of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) and renewed Plan of Action on Subnational Governments, Cities and Other Local Authorities for Biodiversity (2023-2030).

The Pact is accompanied by a set of 6 implementation principles that safeguard the effective implementation of the Pact's targets: Commitment to action & ambition, enhance policy & governance frameworks & financing for biodiversity, Stepwise implementation: Berlin Pact Action Plan with SMART Targets, Equal & just co-creation with local initiatives & stakeholders, Capacity building & collaboration of cities, Monitoring & reporting.

7 target areas that translate the Edinburgh Process' proposed Plan of Action into ambitious and measurable targets covering the following key topics of biodiversity action are also included: Green infrastructure, trees & forests, Blue infrastructure & water management, Food & agriculture, Education & nature experience, Soil health, Co-habitation, Species & habitats.

The Pact Signatory Cities will state and track the progress towards their commitments on the CitiesWithNature Action Platform, setting examples of bold action for other cities to follow. CitiesWithNature is a singular initiative that recognizes and enhances the value of nature in and around cities across the world. Its Action Platform is closely tied to the engagement of cities and regions in the CBD process and is recognized by the CBD in the Plan of Action on Cities and Other Local Authorities for Biodiversity (2023-2030), as the place where cities will monitor and report on their voluntary commitments to national and global biodiversity targets.

2.2. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

The adoption of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1992 was a central moment in the global political response to climate change. It established the foundational legal framework for international cooperation to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that will prevent dangerous human interference with the climate system, in a time frame which allows ecosystems to adapt naturally and enables sustainable development. Entering into force in 1994, and strengthened through the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, the Convention now includes 197 parties.

Engagement and Mobilization

Pursuant to the legacy of the 1992 Earth Summit, the Local Governments and Municipal Authorities (LGMA) has been recognized as one of the first 3 Constituencies under the UNFCCC since COP1 in 1995. However, unlike Local Agenda 21, the lack of substantial provisions in the UNFCCC and Kyoto Protocol for engagement with local and subnational governments meant that there was little involvement of these actors during the period from 1995 to 2006.

However, in the last two decades, recognition and visibility of claims made by LRGs and their partners has been steadily increasing. Consistent advocacy from the LGMA was initiated through the Local Government Climate Roadmap in 2007. This incorporated a triple mission to increase recognition, engagement, and empowerment of LRGs. Since then, a range of initiatives, as shown in Table 3, have been spearheaded by the LGMA Constituency at COPs, during preparatory meetings and across various other stages of agenda setting. These have showcased the significance of urbanization in shaping climate impacts and responses, highlighted the importance of multilevel collaboration, and enhanced the visibility and recognition of local and subnational authorities' roles. LRGs were explicitly recognized by the COP30 Presidency in Belém, notably within the Action Agenda, reflecting the growing institutional visibility of LRGs, not only as implementation partners but as strategic actors contributing to the advancement of climate objectives across governance levels.

Table 3 Engagement & Mobilization of Sub-National Government Entities at UNFCCC COPs

CONFERENCE	DATE	ENGAGEMENT & MOBILIZATION OF SUB-NATIONAL GOVERNMENT ENTITIES
COP15 Copenhagen	2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Local Government Climate Roadmap mobilizes more than 1,200 representatives of cities and regions from around the world at the Local Government Climate Lounge. The Copenhagen World Catalogue of Local Commitment is released, capturing more than 3,000 voluntary targets worldwide. The Local Government Lounge is hosted by ICLEI and the UNFCCC COP15 Presidency, convening dialogues between scientific experts that highlight the important connection between climate change and biodiversity.
COP16 Mexico City	2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Mexico City Pact is adopted by 207 local governments, introducing global transparency and accountability of local commitments via voluntary reporting at the carbonn. The first official dialogue of Mayors & Parliamentarians with the COP Presidency is held.
COP17 Durban	2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Durban Adaptation Charter (DAC) is signed by a total of 283 city leaders and local governments associations representing over 1,000 local government constituencies from 45 countries around the world. At the High Level Segment, the signatories urge national governments to acknowledge the critical need for local level adaptation, especially in the developing world, and to focus on the importance of urbanizing the global climate agenda.
COP19 Warsaw	2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The first "Cities Day" within the UNFCCC takes place, moving the visibility of cities and other subnational authorities from the periphery closer to the core of the event. Friends of Cities at the UNFCCC is launched, pushing for the adoption of a 10 Year Action Plan, conducting thematic technical studies, and convening Ministerial-Mayoral dialogues. The Ad-Hoc Working Group on the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action (ADP) convenes a workshop on urbanization and the COP Presidency hosted the first Cities and Subnationals Dialogue, where Ministers, Mayors and sub-national leaders and representatives of other observer groups discuss enhancing adaptation and resilience and enhancing global mitigation efforts through action at the local level.
COP20 Lima	2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cities are integrated into technical expert meetings in Bonn Subsidiary Body Meetings, in the lead up to COP20. The Global Climate Action Portal (NAZCA: Non-State Actor Zone for Climate Action) is launched by the President of COP20 on its Climate Action Day, showcasing a diverse range of actions that are being undertaken globally to address climate change.
COP21 Paris	2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Close to 400 cities issue the Paris City Hall Declaration, at the Climate Summit for Local Leaders held in Paris during the COP21 negotiations, in which local leaders from five continents collectively commit to "deliver up to 3.7 gigatons of urban greenhouse gas emissions reductions annually by 2030 and support ambitious long-term climate goals. The Paris Agreement text acknowledged the role of cities and subnational actors formally in the most significant manner yet, paving the way for multiple entry points to advocate for further local action and the importance of multilevel governance.
COP22 Marrakech	2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action is launched to support implementation of the Paris Agreement by enabling collaboration between governments and the cities, regions, businesses and investors to act on climate change.
COP23 Bonn	2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cities are included in the Talanoa Dialogues, emphasizing inclusive storytelling and multilevel engagement.
COP26 Glasgow	2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Glasgow Climate Pact, along with other COP26 outcomes, enshrines "multilevel collaboration" as a new normal for how the Paris Agreement can be implemented. The LGMA Multilevel Action Pavilion provides a space for debate, knowledge exchange, and success stories of sub-national climate action and collaboration with other levels of government. Launch of the Race to Zero including more than 1000 cities committed to a net-zero trajectory. First ever invitation for a mayor (Los Angeles) to address the World Leaders Summit.
COP27 Cairo	2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishment of the first Ministerial meeting on Urbanization and Climate Change. Launch of SURGe (Sustainable Urban Resilience for the next Generation), a COP27 Presidency initiative to leverage cities and sustainable urbanization as allies to help deliver the targets of the Paris Agreement and the SDGs
COP28 Dubai	2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Second Ministerial meeting on Urbanization and Climate Change. The first of its kind Local Climate Action Summit is held during the COP leaders segment, highlighting the critical role local leaders play in reducing emissions, addressing climate risk, and supporting national efforts to move further and faster on climate progress. More than 70 countries endorse the Coalition for High Ambition Multilevel Partnerships (CHAMP), launched at the Local Climate Action Summit as a COP28 Presidency initiative.
COP29 Baku	2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Third Ministerial meeting on Urbanization and Climate Change. Multilevel Action and Urbanization Pavilion, co-hosted by ICLEI and UN-Habitat, further elevated the role of cities and regions during COP29 Launch of the Baku Continuity Coalition, with the aim of building continuity between COP Presidencies on urban and multilevel issues and building links to the World Urban Forum Declaration on Multisectoral Actions Pathways (MAP) for Resilient and Healthy Cities is launched as a COP29 Presidency initiative, highlighting how partnerships between cities, subnational actors, and national governments can deliver on the Paris Agreement.
COP30 Belem	2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Local Leaders Forum is hosted by the COP30 Presidency and Bloomberg Philanthropies in Rio de Janeiro. More than 14,000 cities, towns, and regions endorse the outcome document of the Forum, delivered to the COP30 presidency and the UN Secretary General at COP30. Fourth Ministerial meeting on Urbanization and Climate Change Global snapshot of content in NDCs 3.0 released by UN-Habitat, revealing that the number of NDCs with strong urban content almost doubled between NDC 2.0 and NDC 3.0, and are moving from generic mentions of cities towards sector specific responses

Outcomes, Decisions & Declarations

Key outcome decisions are reflective of the incremental progress the LGMA constituency has had within the UNFCCC process. The language and text in negotiated outcomes, as shown in Table 2, are both a reflection of successful visibility, while in turn allowing for newer and deeper entry points for LRGs to engage.

Table 4 Negotiated Outcome Text Recognizing Sub-National Government Entities at UNFCCC COPs.

CONFERENCE	DATE	DECISION	DOCUMENT	OUTCOME TEXT
COP16 Cancun	2010	1/CP.16	The Cancun Agreements: Outcome of the work of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Long-term Cooperative Action under the Convention	Para7: Recognizes the need to engage a broad range of stakeholders at the global, regional, national and local levels, be they government, including subnational and local government...
COP19 Warsaw	2013	1/CP.19	Further advancing the Durban Platform	Para5(b): Facilitating the sharing among Parties of experiences and best practices of cities and subnational authorities, where appropriate, in identifying and implementing opportunities to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change, with a view to promoting the exchange of information and voluntary cooperation;
COP21	2015	1/CP.21	Paris Agreement	Preamble para15: Recognizing the importance of the engagements of all levels of government and various actors, in accordance with respective national legislations of Parties, in addressing climate change Article 7.2: Parties recognize that adaptation is a global challenge faced by all with local, subnational, national, regional and international dimensions Article 11.2: Capacity-building should be country-driven, based on and responsive to national needs, and foster country ownership of Parties, in particular, for developing country Parties, including at the national, subnational and local levels.
COP26 Glasgow	2021	-/CP.26	Glasgow Climate Pact	Preamble: Recognizing the important role of indigenous peoples, local communities and civil society, including youth and children, in addressing and responding to climate change, and highlighting the urgent need for multilevel and cooperative action
COP28 Dubai	2023	-/CMA.5	Outcome of the First Global Stocktake	Para161: Urges Parties and non-Party stakeholders to join efforts to accelerate delivery through inclusive, multilevel, gender-responsive and cooperative action
COP30 Belem	2025	-/CMA.7	Global Mutirão: Uniting humanity in a global mobilization against climate change	Para10: Stressing the important role and active engagement of non-Party stakeholders, particularly civil society, business, financial institutions, cities and subnational authorities at multiple levels

Box 2: Case Study - CHAMP & Urban Content of NDCs

The Coalition for High Ambition Multilevel Partnerships (CHAMP) for Climate Action, launched at COP28 in 2023, marks a major global commitment to strengthening cooperation between national and subnational governments on climate action. Endorsed by 78 Parties (including the European Union), CHAMP mobilizes countries to consult cities, states, regions, and provinces when preparing and updating core climate strategies including NDCs, NAPs, NBSAPs, and LT-LEDS, while also integrating local investment priorities into national financing frameworks. A key milestone is the inclusion of subnational contributions in the third generation of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs 3.0) due at COP30 in 2025, accompanied by voluntary reporting through the CHAMP High-Level Political Dialogue.

NDCs 3.0 demonstrate unprecedented recognition of the urban dimension of the climate crisis. Of the 128 NDCs submitted by 31 December, a UN Habitat report found that 81 percent now feature well-developed urban content, reflecting a deeper understanding of cities as both climate-vulnerable hotspots and essential partners in delivering mitigation and adaptation outcomes. These commitments span the articulation of urban risks, sectoral responses in areas such as transport, buildings, waste, and resilience planning, and clearer pathways for implementation across levels of government.

Brazil offers a clear example of how CHAMP principles are shaping national commitments. Its latest NDC explicitly embraces “climate federalism,” affirming coordinated climate action among federal, state, and municipal levels of government. As an early CHAMP endorser, Brazil highlights the coalition directly in its NDC, signalling a political and institutional commitment to multilevel collaboration, further highlighted by Brazil assuming co-leadership (with Germany) of the coalition through COP32. The NDC commits all federal entities to align efforts to address the climate emergency, integrating climate policy into short-, medium-, and long-term planning, strengthening preparedness for extreme events, and improving coherence across government planning instruments.

Taken together, CHAMP and the NDC analysis of urban content signal a shift toward multilevel climate governance as an important lever for Paris Agreement implementation. Brazil’s approach illustrates how national leadership, empowered by coordinated subnational action, can translate global ambition into locally grounded, climate-resilient development pathways.

2.3. United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)

The UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) was initiated by UN Member States through Agenda 21, the action plan adopted at the 1992 Earth Summit, which called for a global response to desertification and drought. An intergovernmental negotiating committee met five times between May 1993 and June 1994 to draft the Convention, which was adopted on 17 June 1994 along with regional implementation annexes for Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Northern Mediterranean. The Convention entered into force on 26 December 1996 and now includes 197 parties. A fifth annex, covering Central and Eastern Europe, was added in 2001.

Engagement and Mobilization

While Mayors were present at the first UNCCD COP, most of its events, from regional preparatory meetings to COPs, have primarily focused on national-level implementation and regional coordination, without much emphasis on urban or subnational governance, illustrated by relatively less engagement shown in Table 5. While progression of this constituency has been slower than within the UNFCCC or the CBD, it has however been incrementally growing, with a renewed vitalism observed in particular at COP16 in Riyadh in 2024.

Table 5 Engagement & Mobilization of Sub-National Government Entities at UNCCD COPs

CONFERENCE	DATE	ENGAGEMENT & MOBILIZATION OF SUB-NATIONAL GOVERNMENT ENTITIES
COP1 Rome	1997	The Mayor of Rome addresses the COP Plenary, to report on the results of the Mayor's Forum, held a week prior - where mayors of cities and local authorities from 21 countries are gathered to review urban and rural development in the light of desertification-induced migration and agreed to liaise with national and local authorities to seek an integrated response to desertification within the framework of national action programmes.
COP14 New Delhi	2019	Local and Regional Governments Day is convened in collaboration with the UNCCD Secretariat, ICLEI South Asia, and the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change of the Government of India. The event centres on the theme "Land Degradation and Cities: The Essential Role of Local and Regional Governments" and brings together over 100 participants from 13 countries. The full-day session facilitated dialogue on the interlinkages between urbanization and land degradation, emphasizing the critical role of local and regional authorities in promoting sustainable land management practices.
COP16 Riyadh	2024	<p>The high-level interactive dialogue titled "Mayors' Forum: Local leadership and innovative governance for sustainable land management" is held during Governance Day as part of the COP 16 Action Agenda, and organized through the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments under the coordination of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and in partnership with ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability.</p> <p>The declaration on "Local and Regional Governments united against drought and desertification" is launched. It acknowledges Local and regional governments (LRGs) as critical actors in addressing desertification, land degradation, and drought (DLDD), and stresses that the UNCCD process is increasingly acknowledging their role as key actors in combating DLDD.</p> <p>COP 16 features side events such as "Dry Lands, Green Cities", which explore urban forestry and nature-based solutions in dry urban areas, and a World Economic Forum session, "From Sand to Soil: Nature Positive Approaches to Urban Desertification".</p> <p>UNCCD produces the Primer on Urban-Rural Linkages and Land with UN Habitat, which offers practical strategies for enhancing urban-rural synergies in land use planning</p>

Outcomes & Decisions

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) has progressively acknowledged the critical role of cities, subnational governments, and multilevel governance in addressing land degradation, desertification, and drought (DLDD). This recognition is reflected in several key negotiated texts and declarations, found in Table 6.

Table 6 Negotiated Outcome Text of Sub-National Government Entities at UNCCD COPs

CONFERENCE	DATE	DECISION	DOCUMENT	OUTCOME TEXT
COP13 Ordos	2015	18/COP.13	Follow-up on the work programme of the Science-Policy Interface for the biennium 2016–2017	Paragraph 7. Calls upon Parties to develop and promote policy instruments that help to overcome technological, institutional, economic and sociocultural barriers to the large-scale implementation of local sustainable land management practices by creating an enabling environment at national and subnational levels
COP14 Delhi	2020	COP(14)/L.9	The New Delhi Declaration: Investing in Land and Unlocking Opportunities	Convinced that diverse multi-stakeholder participation, as appropriate, at local, subnational, national and regional levels and from all sectors of society, including civil society organizations, local government and the private sector, will be crucial to achieving the objectives of the UNCCD
COP15 Abidjan	2022	22/COP15	The positive role that measures taken under the Convention can play to address desertification/land degradation and drought as one of the drivers that causes migration	Paragraph 1.c. Implement land and ecosystem restoration as an essential part of land-use planning at national and subnational level by enhancing understanding of how changing rural–urban interactions affect the livelihoods of low-income and vulnerable people in both urban and rural contexts; Para 3.d. Share and support the scaling up of good practices identified at the local and subnational levels, which pursue sustainable land management and land restoration in the urban-rural interface, such as peri-urban green belts, urban agriculture, urban forestry, and soil de-sealing, with a view to encouraging the adoption of similar practices, if necessary, and promote training and capacity-building
COP16 Riyadh	2024	23/COP.16	The positive role that measures taken under the Convention can play to address desertification, land degradation and drought as one of the drivers that causes migration	encourages parties to implement land use planning that integrates sustainable land and ecosystem management, including land restoration, at national and subnational levels, by enhancing understanding of how changing rural-urban interactions affect the livelihoods of low-income people and people in vulnerable situations;

Box 3: Case Study - Local and Regional Governments United Against DLDD

At UNCCD COP16 in Riyadh (December 2024), local and regional governments (LRGs) issued a joint declaration recognizing their essential role in combating desertification, land degradation, and drought (DLDD).

The declaration underscores how climate change, biodiversity loss, rapid urbanization, and unsustainable resource use are intensifying DLDD impacts on local territories. They called for the integration of land-based and nature-based solutions—such as wetland restoration, reforestation, aquifer recharge, and sustainable watershed and landscape management—into local planning frameworks. This approach acknowledges DLDD as a cross-cutting challenge linked to food security, water scarcity, rural-urban dynamics, and community resilience.

A major outcome of the initiative is a call for structural engagement between LRGs and the UNCCD, modelled after successful mechanisms under the UNFCCC and CBD. The declaration urges Parties and the UNCCD Secretariat to work systematically with the Global Taskforce of LRGs to ensure subnational expertise shapes global strategies. It highlights priorities including regional cooperation on land and water issues, cross-sector governance, community awareness programs, and long-term decentralized cooperation aligned with national environmental commitments. Financial mobilization is stressed as critical, with LRGs calling for transparent, accessible funding dedicated to drought-resilient infrastructure, food systems, and community-based adaptation.

To operationalize these ambitions, LRGs and the UNCCD jointly launched the Riyadh Process, a roadmap aimed at strengthening local contributions to multilateral negotiations, empowering subnational action, fostering partnerships, and producing evidence-based knowledge grounded in local practice. Through this mechanism, LRGs seek to institutionalize their role in global DLDD governance between COP cycles and within formal negotiations.



Photo credit: @UNEP/Duncan Moore

2.4. Engagement in other MEAs & Intergovernmental Processes

While LRGs have principally focused their engagement in the Rio Conventions, which form the basis of analysis of this paper, looking at other international conventions and frameworks is useful in order to contextualise gaps and opportunities for engagement in other areas where local implementation is key.

Basel, Rotterdam, Stockholm Conventions & the Minamata Convention

The Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm Conventions (BRS) form a unified framework addressing hazardous chemicals and waste, with direct implications for LRGs (LRGs), especially in waste management and pollution control. Despite their frontline role, LRGs are not systematically included in BRS decision-making, though recent COPs have emphasized the need for stronger multilevel engagement. The Basel Convention governs transboundary hazardous waste movements; the Rotterdam Convention ensures informed consent for hazardous chemical trade; and the Stockholm Convention targets persistent organic pollutants. Regional Centres (BCRCs/SCRCs) support capacity building and technology transfer for implementation. The Minamata Convention on Mercury, meanwhile, addresses mercury pollution from sources like artisanal gold mining and industrial emissions. It encourages national action plans and assessments, with growing recognition of the role of municipalities in reducing mercury exposure and managing mercury-containing waste.

Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030) is an international document adopted by the United Nations (UN) member states in March 2015 at the World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction held in Sendai, Japan, and endorsed by the UN General Assembly in June 2015. LRGs (LRGs) are formally recognized within the Sendai Framework through mechanisms such as the Sendai Stakeholder Engagement Mechanism (SEM), established by UNDRR in 2018 to integrate stakeholders into intergovernmental policy-making⁴². SEM provides LRGs structured access to global and regional disaster risk reduction processes, enabling them to influence policy design, implementation, and monitoring. Additionally, LRGs participate in National Platforms coordinated by Sendai Focal Points, ensuring a “whole-of-society” approach to resilience strategies. At regional events, LRGs issue joint statements advocating multilevel governance frameworks, dedicated funding streams, and accredited representation in national disaster governance. These mechanisms collectively embed LRGs into formal DRR policy processes, granting them recognized roles in shaping resilience agendas.

Convention on Wetlands of International Importance

The Ramsar Convention, formally known as the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, is an international treaty established in 1971 to promote the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands worldwide. The Ramsar Convention formally engages LRGs through the Wetland City Accreditation Scheme, introduced at COP12 (2015, Punta del Este).

Ongoing Plastic Treaty Negotiations

In March 2022, at the resumed fifth session of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-5.2), a historic resolution was adopted to develop an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, including in the marine environment. The UNEA resolution (5/14) requested the Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) to convene an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) to develop “the instrument,” which is to be based on a comprehensive approach that addresses the full life cycle of plastic, including its production, design, and disposal. The INC began its work in the second half of 2022. Kicked-off at INC2 in Paris in 2023, the Local and Subnational Governments Coalition to End Plastic Pollution formulated constituency-based engagement of local and subnational governments in the INC process. The Coalition is co-coordinated by the governments of Québec and Catalonia, together with ICLEI, Global Cities Hub, and UCLG. Bringing together more than one hundred signatories, the LSNG Coalition engages with Member States, the INC Secretariat, and the INC Bureau to support the effective and explicit recognition of the roles of local and subnational governments within the final text of the instrument.

Since the conclusion of INC-5.2 and the resignation of the previous chair in August 2025, the plastics treaty negotiations have stalled. For the first time in a binding treaty process, the Chair’s text released on 15 August 2025, serving the basis for future negotiations, included explicit references to subnational and local governments (Articles 7.2(a) and 17). It is the result of sustained advocacy from the Local and Subnational Governments Coalition to End Plastic Pollution yet is still provisional as the text will be renegotiated once the session resumes.

⁴² United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. (n.d.). Stakeholder Engagement Mechanism. Retrieved from <https://www.undrr.org/implementing-sendai-framework/partners-and-stakeholders/stakeholder-engagement-mechanism>

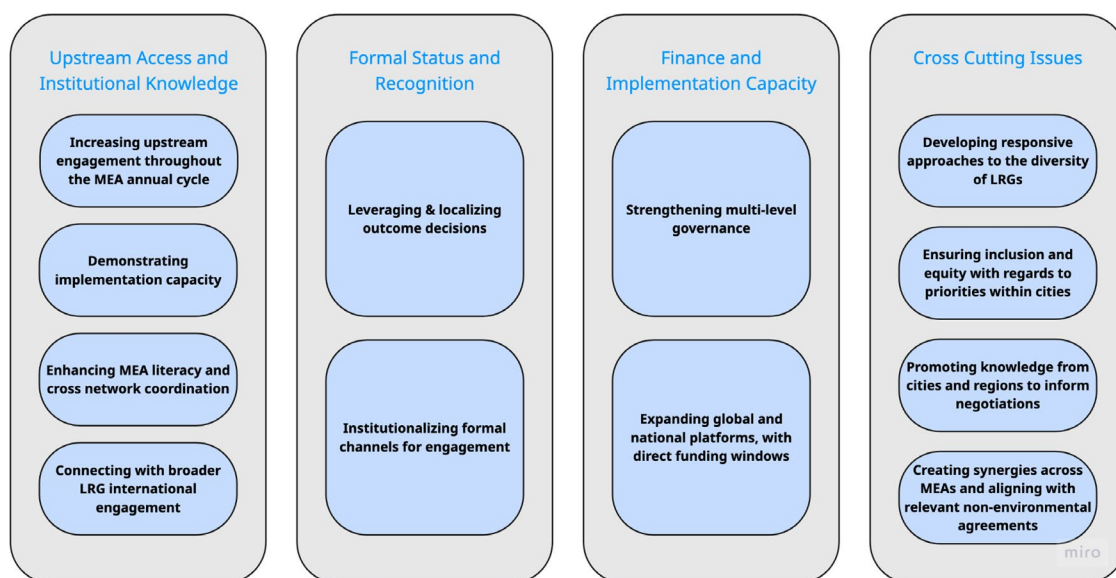
Section 3.

Enabling Conditions and Opportunities for Effective Participation

Despite the recognition shown above, the full potential of LRG engagement in environmental governance is yet to be met. This potential has at least two dimensions: increased legitimacy of the conventions, and increased effectiveness of sustainable action in towns, cities, and regions. While LRGs are indisputably formal entities of government, the intergovernmental architecture of state-centric MEAs can limit the integration of LRG contributions. There are limited formal mechanisms facilitating greater LRG participation, and MEAs have few dedicated structures for LRG input, with the Convention on Biological Diversity being a notable exception. This can lead to selective inclusion where LRGs are often treated as generic non-state actors, creating a risk of disinterest or disengagement over time.

This section draws on insights derived from expert interviews and groups them thematically into four key categories - Upstream Access and Institutional Knowledge, Formal Status and Recognition, Finance and Implementation Capacity, Cross Cutting Issues. If these are collectively taken into greater consideration, they have the potential to generate opportunities for greater participation of LRGs across a range of MEAs, and a greater cumulative contribution to addressing global sustainability goals.

Fig. 1. Summary of enabling opportunities for greater participation of LRGs in MEAs.



3.1 Upstream Access and Institutional Knowledge

Local and Regional Governments (LRGs) could seek alternative modes of engagement in MEA processes beyond either solely observer or implementer roles, aiming for structured participation throughout negotiation cycles. Upstream access to preparatory meetings and strategic events, alignment with local frameworks, as well as capacity-building for city diplomacy are possible means of achieving this deeper and more meaningful role.

3.1.1. Increasing upstream engagement throughout the MEA annual cycle

LRGs could more strongly engage throughout the MEA process, rather than primarily in consultations during and around the COPs. By ensuring greater upstream influence, LRGs can promote their interests and demonstrate their value in a more continuous manner, which ultimately can help policy localization, resource mobilisation, capacity building and technical support.

Clearer and more intentional input from LRGs can be gathered through entry points and meetings that are occurring at various points in the cycles of formal negotiations throughout the calendar year. Preparatory meetings, regional climate weeks, and other strategic intergovernmental events may be more actively used as avenues for translating and communicating local needs to national government representatives. Many of these actions require greater COP guidance, political steering from COP Presidencies, and Member States.

Greater alignment and coordination among coalitions of LRGs, with an emphasis on diversity, both terms of levels of government and geographical representation, are understood to be an important leverage in these spaces to advocate for formal recognition and influence. This can also be a way to enhance cooperation, enabling LRGs to seize opportunities to submit inputs and build a stronger understanding of them with

negotiators. Examples include the LAMG, and GTF's engagement in nomination processes, as well as the UN Secretary General's report deriving from Action 55e of the Pact of the Future.⁴³ These build on the representation practices established within the HLPF, in line with resolution 67/290, including the right to attend official meetings, access official documents, intervene, submit written and oral contributions, and make recommendations⁴⁴.

Making the tactical shift from focusing on negotiation environments to engaging in spaces where cities and subnational governments can share lessons and results may be more effective at demonstrating the importance of multilevel governance and local implementation. The current understanding of COPs as critical nodal points in MEAs may not be the most effective or strategic use of energy and resources under the current institutional arrangements. Expanding upstream spaces where LRGs can present their plans and projects, access resources and means of implementation could bring net benefit that would help LRGs efforts.

3.1.2. Demonstrating implementation capacity

LRGs could more effectively shape frameworks by demonstrating their capacity to implement and offer bottom up local solutions, referring more clearly to the MEA goals that they are contributing towards. LRGs can make the case at national level that they are a fundamental player for successful implementation of MEA goals.

LRGs already implement MEA decisions through local policies and infrastructure development. This has often stemmed from independent action, where subnational actors have set increasingly ambitious climate and sustainability targets that often exceed national commitments, or have joined voluntary coalitions and developed their own climate action plans.

LRGs have the capacity to demonstrate that multilateral cooperation and ambitious climate planning can still work effectively, even and especially when national-level progress stalls. These actions are often coupled with policy innovation, where cities are leading with progressive regulations and acceleration of sectoral action through clean transportation, nature-based solutions, waste management, just transitions, urban resilience, and inclusive finance, connecting these efforts with MEA objectives. LRGs have also shown that an approach of policy alignment, embedding MEA targets in regional laws and plans, enhances delivery and accountability.

3.1.3. Enhancing MEA literacy and cross network coordination

Many LRG representatives lack the knowledge or resources to navigate the UN system. The capacity for engagement needs to be strengthened on both sides: enhanced diplomatic and multilateral policy skills for LRGs must be met with greater urban and regional awareness from national actors.

Training, continuity mechanisms, and dedicated city diplomacy units to strengthen institutional memory are needed, as well as further funding for city and subnational diplomacy work. This is key for deeper involvement in specific MEA mechanisms related to finance or technology, and go beyond political visibility.

Transnational Networks of LRGs have played a key role as bridging institutions, translating complex diplomatic language and processes into actionable local strategies, and acting as intermediaries, translators, and conveners. Avoiding fragmentation and competition between these networks is critical. Inadequate coordination, paired with duplication and reporting fatigue due to multiple overlapping platforms and initiatives risks reducing the effectiveness of engagement.

Only a fraction of cities and local governments are able to attend COPs or participate in MEAs, meaning that those present, supported and amplified by network secretariats, speak on their behalf and must do so with particular attention to members that may not feel adequately represented. Within this group, women representatives often face additional constraints, including limited access to political leadership positions, unequal distribution of care responsibilities, and lower institutional support for international engagement. Addressing these barriers requires intentional strategies to promote genderbalanced representation and leadership within LRG delegations and networks. Many LRGs, especially in the Global South, are unaware of MEAs or lack capacity to engage. Networks, through their ability to represent LRGs collectively, are a remediating force that should however continue to be aware of regional biases, the reinforcement of existing power structures, and how certain voices are visible over others.

UN Country Teams can also be important enablers by acting as incubators and facilitators of local level action to support MEAs implementation.

43 United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General. (2025). Recommendations on how engagement with local and regional authorities could advance the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in particular the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals. (A/79/968). <https://docs.un.org/en/A/79/968>

44 United Nations General Assembly. (2013). Format and organizational aspects of the high-level political forum on sustainable development (A/RES/67/290). United Nations. <https://docs.un.org/en/a/res/67/290>

3.1.4. Connecting with broader LRG international engagement

Representation of LRGs varies across global UN bodies, including UN Regional Economic Commissions. This underscores both the strategic importance of LRGs within the global multilateral system, and the need to harmonize engagement mechanisms to strengthen partnerships and improve collective performance across multiple issues.

While recognizing the integrity of the state-centric system, structural reforms such as permanent consultative or advisory mechanisms, and nomination criteria for cities and regions to grow their decision-making power within key multilateral agendas could be ways to improve the effectiveness of agenda delivery. By providing clear entry points for LRGs within relevant MEAs, these conventions can align themselves, and potentially spearhead, a broader movement towards enhancing the role of local authorities within the current UN system.

Acknowledging that national governments vary greatly in their level of openness to subnational engagement is essential for understanding the current structural limitations in institutional arrangements. National governments may view empowered cities as political threats: in particular, centralized regimes may resist empowering subnational actors due to political rivalry or sovereignty concerns, for example in countries with primate cities that are managed by opposition parties. In this regard, MEAs should however be seen as a helpful bridge that can temper political divisions by facilitating cooperation between politically opposed national and subnational actors. Without greater member state support however, embedding LRG representation in formal MEA modalities is unrealistic.

While environmental issues are often the most significant area of global engagement for LRGs, they are engaged across a number of global policy issues, such as human rights, migration, disaster risk and health, that can be sources of both synergies and learnings to enhance engagement in MEAs.

3.2 Formal Status and Recognition

Despite their governmental nature, LRGs have limited ability to influence decisions, contribute to implementation and access key benefits such as means of implementation support. Challenges such as accreditation, lack of formal engagement channels, and tokenistic inclusion underscore the need for differentiated recognition, permanent advisory mechanisms, and integration of LRG priorities into negotiated texts.

3.2.1 Leveraging and localizing outcome decisions

LRGs are constrained through their non-party, observer status, which groups them with actors such as civil society and businesses, and has consequences on their ability to be accredited, contribute to agenda setting, and thereby gain visibility and legitimacy at the core of the MEA processes.

Various MEAs have different rules, logic, and recognition mechanisms leading to uncertainty and fragmented accreditation. Complications around accreditation and limited availability of badges across various processes restricts participation. In addition, reliance on national delegations has been perceived to undermine independent representation, expressing a desire to expand accreditation for LRGs across MEAs.

Without a strong value proposition offered to LRGs by the COPs, disengagement is a risk. Engagement has been consistent due to the collaborative nature of cities and their frontline response to environmental challenges, backed by an increasingly dense web of supportive networks and other actors. Mayors and subnational representatives speaking at the COPs and global summits signal recognition and influence which has kept them active. However, visibility alone is insufficient and cities and regions need tangible benefits like funding and policy influence to remain engaged in multilateral processes.

Enhancing local legitimacy in the engagement of LRGs across multilateral environmental processes is important. City representatives in particular need to demonstrate how MEA engagement translates into real benefits for citizens, in sectors such as transport, health, resilience or green jobs for example. This is increasingly important in the face of perception challenges, where international travel is often scrutinized and participation may be seen as self-serving. Participation in the COPs may not yield immediate local benefits, making it complicated to justify involvement.

Recognition in outcome decisions and negotiated texts is one of the clearest mechanisms to gain deeper access to MEA processes. Outcome decisions, and the ability to influence and input LRG priorities, mentions, and acknowledgments as partners is perceived as essential. These references provide crucial entry points for deeper engagement both in MEAs, and to negotiate stronger positions within national planning. The capacity for indirect influence due to networks' ability to engage with negotiators and encourage them to include relevant language to advance local agendas. Ideas from LRGs are however often not captured in final COP decisions and recognition is often in vague terms like "multi-level" rather than being more explicit. This makes the creation of spaces with a strong value proposition for LRGs to engage in, offering concrete benefits to LRGs important, in order for them to justify their time commitment and effort.

3.2.2. Institutionalizing formal channels for engagement

Accreditation and the institutional design of MEAs is repeatedly mentioned as a barrier for effective engagement by LRGs. MEA Secretariats have provided various platforms for input, but often lack consistent mechanisms for LRG inclusion, and these engagement spaces are not shaped in a way to leverage LRGs' policy-making or implementation capacities.

More structured engagement is an important enabling factor for successful participation, exemplified by the plan of Action on Subnational Governments within the Convention on Biological Diversity. Establishing steering committees for national and regional governments, such as those that exist in the CBD, could be a way to help close the gap between levels of government and MEA secretariats, and to elevate local priorities in global agendas.

The creation of clear dialogue channels is also important, in parallel with the need to formalize consultations between negotiators and LRGs. Moving from ad hoc consultations to structural, permanent advisory boards with self-organization and nominations would recognize LRGs as partners in the implementation of MEAs, with involvement throughout these various processes, which would allow enhanced visibility and access to support.

Incorporating LRGs (LRG) commitments into national reports and planning would strengthen the alignment between subnational and national actions. There is positive direction in multiple MEAs, LRGs submitting formal commitments in support of the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) in the CBD, and the increased number of urban content in NDCs in the UNFCCC, and the rapid rise of the CHAMP initiative.

Formalizing engagement through the official recognition of LRG focused programs, pavilions, and forums is important. In particular, the establishment of the Ministerial Meeting on Urbanization and Climate Change in the UNFCCC has provided a platform to bring together ministers, mayors, governors, community leaders, and global partners to reaffirm the central role of urbanization in accelerating climate action, and has been noted as a critical moment for LRGs in the last four COPs. Such institutional signalling can also be understood through the establishment of "Urban Days" and Pavilions, providing platforms for cities to engage, although these often remain peripheral to the core negotiations.

3.3. Finance and Implementation Capacity

Effective MEA implementation hinges on multi-level governance and adequate financing for LRGs, which currently receive a small fraction of climate funds despite bearing significant mitigation and adaptation responsibilities. Pathways to strengthen collaboration between national and local actors, leverage global platforms, and secure direct funding windows for cities and regions are increasingly critical.

3.3.1. Strengthening multi-level governance

Member States remain the central actors of formal MEA processes, and their willingness to include LRGs (LRGs) is pivotal for effective implementation. While terms like "multi-level governance" increasingly appear in COP texts, institutionalizing this approach is essential to shift MEAs from commitment to action.

National governments backing city diplomacy through representation and funding is essential, as weak coordination still limits meaningful dialogue between cities and national delegations. Strengthened frameworks—such as CHAMP—offer voluntary pathways for engagement, but formal inclusion requires both top-down and bottom up support.

Embedding multi-level governance in MEAs is understood as holding the potential to unlock significant implementation power. LRGs are critical for delivering NDCs, LT-LEDs, and adaptation plans, and could close up to 40% of the emissions gap if their commitments are fully realized, as exemplified by a recent report.⁴⁵ Aligning global goals with local mandates strengthens policy coherence and enables resources to flow where they are most needed, while integrating urban climate action into NDCs gives cities strategic visibility.

45 C40 Cities, Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy. (2025). From Paris to Belém: A decade of local climate leadership

3.3.2. Expanding global and national platforms, with direct funding windows

Global platforms and financial mechanisms are increasingly critical for enabling LRGs to access resources and support the implementation of MEA commitments. The ability of LRGs to access funding to effectively implement global climate and biodiversity commitment is key - with dedicated and direct finance windows being proposed as a solution.

At present, major climate funds such as the Green Climate Fund (GCF), Global Environment Facility (GEF), and Adaptation Fund primarily channel resources through national governments, leaving cities with limited autonomy and creating delays in project execution. Dedicated funding windows tailored to varying local capacities are essential, alongside mechanisms that link MEA participation to tangible economic incentives such as infrastructure development. Direct engagement with multilateral development banks (MDBs) and donors at COPs can help open new channels, but structural reforms are needed to institutionalize these pathways. Without accessible and predictable finance, many municipalities—especially vulnerable and under-resourced ones—cannot scale climate action or innovate solutions. Empowering capable LRGs with direct access to finance will not only close the funding gap but also accelerate policy innovation, improve implementation alignment, and ensure that global agreements translate into locally relevant, high-impact action.

Initiatives such as UrbanShift (UNEP-led, GEF-funded) and the Global Platform for Sustainable Cities (World Bank-led) provide advocacy, peer learning, and technical exchange to align urban policies with global agendas. These platforms complement financing opportunities through major climate funds and multilateral development banks (MDBs), including the African Development Bank and Climate Policy Initiative, which are essential for scaling urban climate action. Participation in COPs has evolved into a strategic space for cities to secure grants, forge partnerships, and negotiate access to funding, with recent examples such as GEF-8 allocating \$170 million in new grants directly to urban projects. By leveraging these platforms and financial channels, cities and regions can accelerate implementation, strengthen policy innovation, and ensure that MEA-aligned funding translates into transformative local action.

Aggregation mechanisms, referring to the pooling of multiple small or medium-sized local projects into larger and more bankable investments, are also interesting avenues that can be considered by and for LRGs. Pooling projects and applications is often a necessary intermediary step for accessing international finance, given the mismatch between project scale and available funding mechanisms. States and regions are well positioned to play this role, acting as aggregators of local demand and investment pipelines. However, there is currently a lack of dedicated financing mechanisms or accelerator-type funds designed specifically to support this function at the subnational level, representing a notable finance gap.

3.4. Cross Cutting Issues

LRG engagement in MEAs must account for diversity, equity, and knowledge integration to ensure inclusive and context-sensitive implementation. Global priorities need to align with local agendas, prioritizing inclusion and equity, breaking sectoral silos, and leveraging urban knowledge to inform global policy. By mainstreaming urban realities, MEAs can enhance legitimacy and effectiveness in addressing global challenges.

3.4.1. Developing responsive approaches to the diversity of LRGs

The world is rapidly urbanizing, but urban development is far from uniform. While megacities continue to expand, most urban residents live in small and medium-sized cities, which make up 96 percent of all cities worldwide.⁴⁶

Strengthening urban–rural linkages and investing in local governance capacity are critical to managing these diverse trajectories and achieving balanced, sustainable development. Recognizing the diversity of subnational governments, made up of mega-cities, towns, provinces and regions, and their differential institutional arrangements, relative centralisation, geographic, economic and social specificity is essential to better understand how LRGs can, and should engage in MEAs. Ensuring balance and differences in the makeup of LRGs as a constituency should be an ongoing consideration when determining how to influence and advocate for certain demands in the architecture of global environmental governance.

⁴⁶ United Nations (2025). *World Urbanization Prospects 2025: Summary of Results*. UN DESA/POP/2025/TR/ NO. 12. New York: United Nations.

3.4.2. Ensuring inclusion and equity with regards to priorities within cities

MEAs should better connect with urban priorities to ensure inclusive and effective implementation. Mayors may often prioritize immediate urban challenges, with global processes and priorities seeming less relevant or distant.

Aligning MEA objectives with local agendas fosters ownership and relevance, while leveraging the nuanced expertise of LRGs, with their detailed knowledge of specific locations such as coastal versus inland environmental needs, ensures context-specific solutions. Cities often use MEAs to legitimize local action, especially when mandates lack funding or clarity, and they play a critical role in engaging citizens and advancing climate justice, which is essential for MEA success. Strengthening trust through local engagement can restore public confidence in global climate processes.

LRGs have the capacity to engage directly with citizens at the local level, through the provision of basic infrastructure, services, and activities such as job creation. It is important that when LRGs engage in MEA processes that they continue to carry this mandate, particularly in relation to the representation and inclusion of the needs for vulnerable groups, including residents of low-income and informal settlements. This includes applying a genderresponsive and intersectional approach that recognizes the differentiated needs, knowledge, and leadership of women, girls, Indigenous peoples, residents of informal settlements, and other marginalized groups. Genderresponsive MEA engagement can strengthen climate justice, improve policy effectiveness, and increase public legitimacy of global environmental action.

Upstreaming local priorities into national strategies like NDCs and NAPs guarantees that urban actions are reflected in broader climate commitments, creating a more integrated and inclusive approach to global environmental governance. Greater upstreaming of local priorities within MEAs could also signal to international development or national funds that investment in local action is critical to the delivery of global goals.

3.4.3. Promoting knowledge from cities and regions to inform negotiations

Promoting urban and regional knowledge is essential to inform engagement and negotiations in MEAs.

LRGs may be able to make legally binding decisions related to building regulations or procurement, such as solar roofing mandates or green fleets for city vehicles, that directly advance MEA objectives, while their capacity for policy innovation allows them to pilot and scale solutions faster than national governments.

By bringing this expertise upstream, LRGs can help shape more urban- and locally-sensitive international agreements, ensuring that global frameworks are easier to localize. Well-designed MEAs aligned with local realities not only improve implementation but also strengthen the overall effectiveness of environmental governance. Leveraging and integrating insights from initiatives like the IPCC Special Report on Cities, expected in 2027, is one approach. The report is intended to provide governments at all levels with scientific information that they can use to develop climate policies, as well as guide current and future decision-making within the UNFCCC.

Constructive engagement should also extend beyond environmental treaties to non-environmental agreements with strong subnational relevance, ensuring alignment with frameworks such as the 2030 Agenda and the New Urban Agenda. Embedding urban perspectives across these processes strengthens coherence, promotes inclusive governance, and ensures that global commitments translate into actionable, locally relevant strategies.

3.4.4. Creating synergies across MEAs and aligning with relevant non-environmental agreements

In order to enhance overall effectiveness of LRG engagement in intergovernmental processes, breaking sectoral silos to promote integrated approaches is important.

MEAs operate separately with distinct targets and reporting obligations, making integrated engagement harder. The Policy Coherence Agenda, which promotes integrated decision-making across ministries and local authorities, is an important entry point to enhance LRG engagement across MEAs.

Effective LRGs (LRG) engagement hinges on interoperable Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) systems that create a shared evidence base across biodiversity, climate, and development agendas, driving policy coherence and unlocking synergies among MEAs. To fully realize these synergies, M&E should address persistent barriers: indicator fragmentation, cross-departmental coordination gaps, and data access/verification constraints, particularly under capacity-limited conditions. Standardized, flexible indicator sets and shared data protocols—paired with national review pathways—could harmonize subnational reporting with national stocktakes while preserving local priorities.

Section 4.

Policy Recommendations

The findings clearly show that for implementation of MEAs to improve effectiveness and meaningfully shift towards implementation, parties and conventions should be more receptive to LRGs playing a role as partners in these processes. They should be formally recognized as active government stakeholders, with their role extending beyond consultative status or post-decision implementation to meaningful engagement throughout negotiations. To achieve this, structured mechanisms should be established to gather clear input from LRGs prior to and in parallel to formal negotiations through dedicated meetings and multiple entry points, and greater should be channelled for local action.

The following policy recommendations reflect the results of the analysis section and can enhance a supportive and clear enabling environment for LRG engagement in MEAs, improving their effectiveness:

For LRGs, Associated City & Regional Networks

- **Prioritize continuous engagement:** Move beyond selective observer status by demanding and engaging in structured mechanisms for LRG input throughout the MEA cycle (such as within preparatory meetings, regional climate weeks).
- **Strengthen network coordination:** Reduce fragmentation among LRG networks through further joint advocacy platforms and harmonized agendas through recognized self-organized mechanisms.
- **Invest in diplomatic capacity:** Establish city and subnational diplomacy units and training programs to build institutional memory and negotiation skills for sustained engagement in MEAs. For smaller cities with limited resources, leveraging networks is an important enabler. Ensuring genderbalanced representation in delegations, leadership, and spokesperson roles is also key to mainstream gender equality in MEA engagement.
- **Demonstrate policy alignment:** Embed MEA targets in local laws and plans, and showcase implementation through dedicated MEA frameworks and processes.
- **Advocate for direct finance access:** Continue to push for dedicated funding windows within climate and biodiversity funds to enable technical, contextualized, and inclusive implementation of MEA commitments.

For National Governments

- **Embed multi-level governance in MEA engagement:** Institutionalize collaboration with LRGs, both within national delegations and as independent voices for other local governments, both during the negotiation process & through national consultation mechanisms ahead of the COPs, leveraging established and legitimate structures of representation.
- **Take a multi-level approach to implementation:** Improve the integrating urban priorities in decisions, planning, and reporting cycles, working with LRGs in the delivery of MEA goals planning, implementation, reporting, and financing. Support LRGs to integrate gender equality commitments into NDCs, NAPs, NBSAPs, and land strategies.
- **Support city diplomacy:** Allocate resources and formal backing for LRG participation in MEAs through ministries and national frameworks, and add local leaders to delegation lists to showcase multilevel governance in practice.
- **Create structural dialogue channels:** Establish permanent advisory boards or steering committees to formalize consultations between negotiators and LRGs.
- **Facilitate accreditation reforms:** Advocate for differentiated accreditation for elected LRG officials to ensure independent representation in MEA processes.
- **Link MEA engagement to local benefits:** Ensure that participation translates into tangible outcomes for citizens (e.g., green jobs, resilience projects) to maintain legitimacy and prioritize equity and inclusion of local agendas.
- **Expand the mandate of MEAs for multilevel reform:** Support and provide the mandate for MEA secretariats to reform institutional architecture that constrains the participation of LRGs, to allow for more inclusive and effective implementation.

For MEA Secretariats & IGOs

- **Formalize engagement mechanisms:** Expand and standardize LRG accreditation, develop dedicated work programs for multilevel action, and promote dedicated action plans for subnational and city governments, including integrated reporting platforms.
- **Expand direct funding channels:** Create or increase predictable, accessible finance windows for LRGs within funds such as GCF, GEF, and Adaptation Fund, tailored to varying local capacities, with consideration for aggregation mechanisms.
- **Institutionalize urban platforms:** Maintain and scale initiatives like Urban Days, Ministerial Meetings on Urbanization, and thematic pavilions to embed urban priorities in MEA agendas.
- **Promote knowledge integration:** Leverage urban data and research (e.g., IPCC Special Report on Cities) to inform negotiations and strengthen urban-sensitive frameworks.
- **Enhance equity and inclusion:** Ensure representation of diverse LRGs, especially from the Global South, through targeted capacity-building and funding support, alongside genderbalanced participation of LRGs.



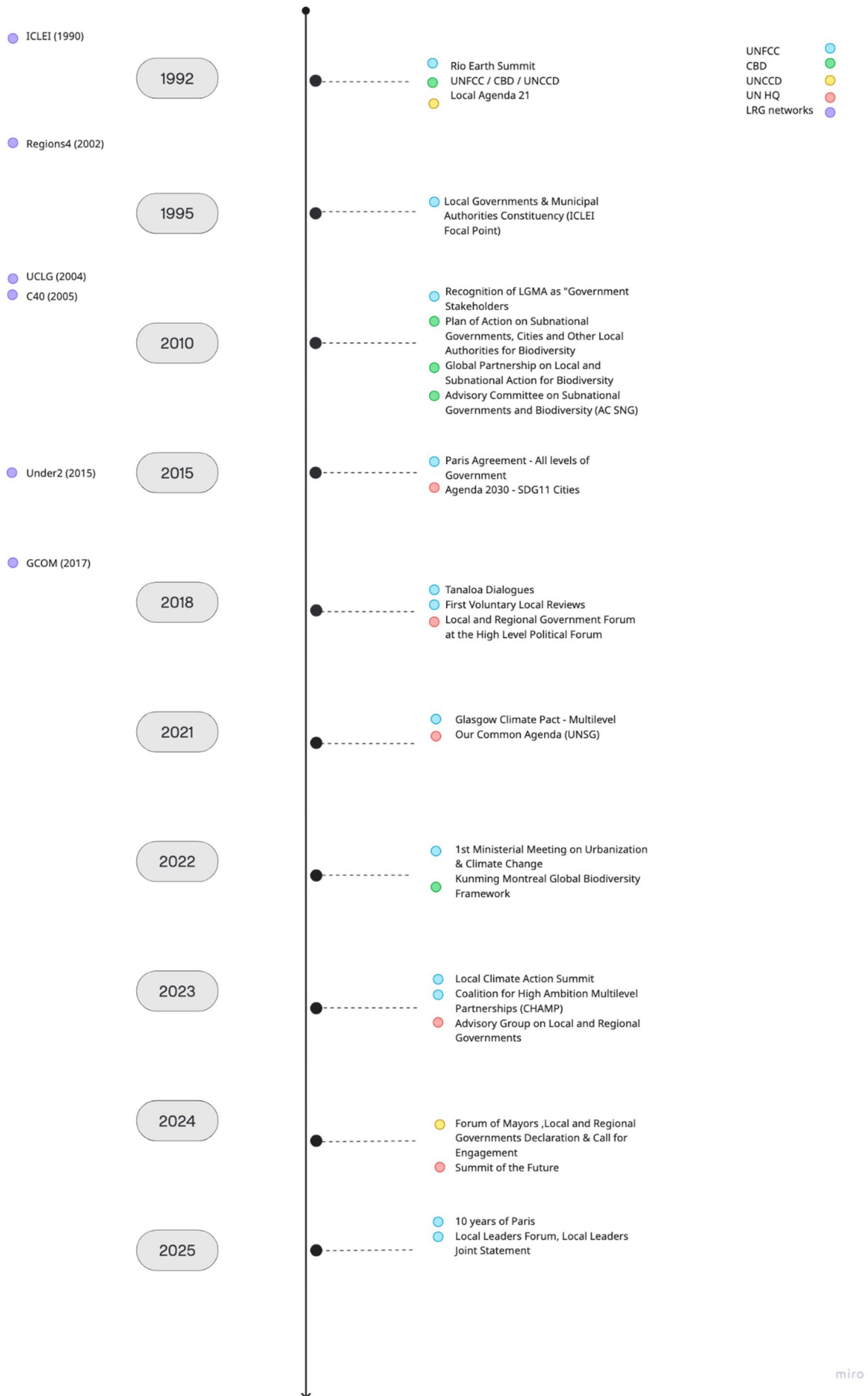
Photo credit: @Igor Riabchuk

Annex A: MEA Tracker, Indicators to Assess LRG Engagement

This set of indicators is intended to form the basis of an initial “tracker” to deepen and standardise exploration and monitoring of the involvement of LRGs in the MEAs in a more consistent manner. It centres around the three key categories: 1) Recognition, Participation & Engagement; 2) Finance, Implementation, and Impact; 3) Strategic Influence

INDICATOR NAME	INDICATOR DESCRIPTION	SUBSET	DATA SOURCE AND VERIFICATION
Category I: Recognition, Participation & Engagement			
Constituency recognition & accreditation	Existence and scope of LRG constituency, with associated status and accreditation	a) constituency b) accreditation	MEA non-state actor recognition, secretariat registration portal, qualitative case studies
Delegation size & composition	Number of LRG representatives attending COPs	a) n government delegates b) n city or regional network delegates	MEA COP registration database
Dedicated discussions & agendas	Number of LRG-focused events organized, as side events and high-level dialogues	a) n side events b) n high level dialogues	MEA official program side events
Speaking opportunities	Number and diversity of LRGs represented in official events	a) n speakers b) government level	MEA official program speaker list
Language in negotiated texts and outcome documents	Inclusion and quality of references and mentions in Outcome Documents of LRGs and Multilevel governance	a) n references as issues or places b) n references as actors or partners c) n quality references specific to LRGs	Outcome document content analysis
Institutional design	Existence of frameworks or work programmes explicitly supporting multilevel governance, urban issues or subnational approaches.	a) multilevel b) urban c) subnational	Outcome documents and work programmes
Category II: Finance, Implementation & Impact			
Finance mobilization	Fundraising outcomes of COPs directly benefiting subnational, urban, or multilevel action or diplomacy	a) subnational implementation b) city implementation	MEA & Constituency announcements
Direct access to funding	Availability of direct funding windows, and size and proportion of climate funds benefiting LRGs	a) grant size b) proportion of climate funding c) aggregation mechanisms	Grants & funding mechanisms within MEAs and related funds
Policy integration and localization	LRG adoption of laws, plans, initiatives, and investments connected to MEA goals	a) case studies and examples of laws, plans, initiatives,	Network initiatives, Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), Action Portal
Project initiation	Partnerships, and projects initiated at COPs, as well as inclusion within action agendas	a) n announcements	Databases from city networks and NGOs
Category III: Strategic Influence			
Agenda and policy influence	Quality of windows for input and participation in shaping MEA agendas and frameworks	a) n formal meetings held with presidency b) n submissions to consultations	Call for inputs, consultation meetings
Upstream engagement with Secretariats	Presence at subsidiary bodies meetings, climate weeks, and other	a) case studies and examples of delegations and events throughout MEA cycles	Event registration databases, official programmes
Multilevel & Cross MEA synergies	Consistency of engagement and connection between efforts across MEAs, and policy coherence efforts	a) n mechanisms to support coordination across MEAs b) n mechanisms to facilitate multilevel coordination	Documentation from city and subnational networks, UNEP/OECD Questionnaire on Policy Coherence
Cross pollination with UN system engagement	Systemic synergies with wider global international governance system	a) case studies and examples of engagements with city and subnational networks and diplomacy mechanisms	Documentation from city networks and intergovernmental frameworks

Annex B: Chronology of LRG Engagement Milestones



Annex C: Methodology

The findings from this working paper are drawn from a review of academic and policy literature, and a qualitative expert interview process.

Over 50 peer reviewed articles and policy briefs were identified and analysed in order to contextualise the role of Local and Regional Governments (LRGs) within the historical and political landscape of global environmental governance, as well as the broader position of LRGs within the current multilateral system. This literature review was used to consolidate research questions, identify key stakeholders and organisations for interviews, and shape the associated interview protocol.

Both inside and outside experts were selected for interviews. Inside experts (decision makers from various sectors that are engaged in the processes themselves) were chosen to provide experiential accounts of successes, barriers, and milestones. Stakeholders with longstanding engagement in MEAs were interviewed to provide analytical, high-level strategic insights, as well as technical staff that were in a position to discuss specific processes and workstreams in more granular detail. Outside experts (primarily academic researchers) were engaged to provide assessments from pre-existing research, and to provide a more detached view that could counterbalance potential bias in respondents that are embedded in the processes. In total, 26 semi-structured interviews were carried out.

Early findings of the report were presented at the UNEA-7 Cities & Regions Summit in Nairobi, December 2025, in order to begin socializing the analysis with national and LRG representatives in attendance, as well as city and subnational networks and other relevant stakeholders

The analysis of the interviews used a standardised LLM prompt to synthesize and categorize information from over 300 pages of transcripts. This process was systematically cross checked with full interview transcripts to ensure accuracy. Deductive coding was then applied to group responses with a focus on enabling factors and opportunities for further engagement, in order to put forward a set of key recommendations for LRGs, national governments and MEA secretariats.

