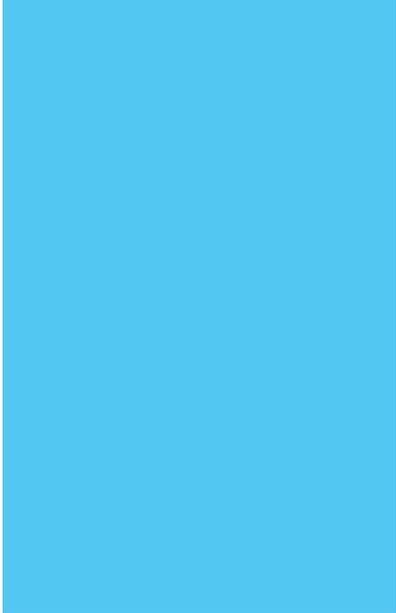




Integrating a Human Rights-Based Approach to Climate Action by Local Governments



The international human rights obligations of a State extend to all levels of government — national, regional, and local — and to any exercise of governmental authority. To enforce these obligations, many cities and local governments around the World have taken meaningful actions for protecting and promoting human rights. These actions are examples for other local, regional and city officials and decision-makers to use them as examples for taking concrete actions, including promulgating local laws, policies and administrative measures that are in line with State obligations, promoting equality, participation, good governance, building trust with inhabitants and addressing local and global human rights challenges in a sustainable way.



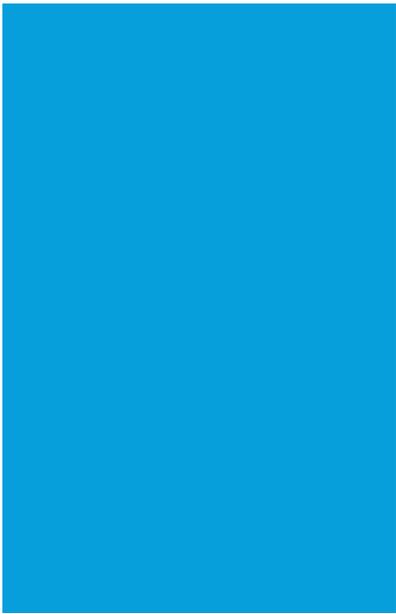
Local governments are at the frontlines experiencing the human rights harms caused by climate change. Rising global temperatures cause sea levels to rise, increase the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events such as floods, droughts and storms, and the corresponding need for disaster risk reduction and resilience measures. All these have detrimental [impacts on cities' basic services](#), infrastructure, housing, human livelihoods, and health , and thus on people's full enjoyment of their human rights. These negative impacts will increase exponentially and [disproportionately affect individuals, groups and peoples in vulnerable situations](#) including, women, children, older persons, indigenous peoples, minorities, migrants, rural workers, persons with disabilities and the poor .

Cities can make a big difference to combat climate change. They are home to [4 billion](#) inhabitants, the majority of people living on the planet . Estimates suggest that cities are responsible for [75% of global CO2 emissions](#) and account for [60 to 80% of energy](#) consumption worldwide . Meanwhile, cities are recognizing their capacity to drive change and take action, as a recent [report](#) by C40 Cities Inclusive Climate Action Programme highlights, increasingly acknowledging that the climate crisis cannot be solved without addressing inequality . Reducing their impact on the environment is of crucial importance not only to mitigate climate change but to protect human rights.

Adaptation and mitigation¹ plans at the local level provide guidance for developing resilient communities. To foster climate change resilience, local governments must put the rights of all people, including those in vulnerable situations, at the center of their policies and actions. By integrating a human rights-based approach to climate change adaptation or mitigation measures, including alternative energy sources, forest conservation or tree-planting projects, resettlement schemes and others – more sustainable, just, and equal development is achievable.

A [human rights-based approach](#) is key to guiding policies and measures of climate change mitigation and adaptation. It can inform assessments, and strengthen processes, ensuring access to essential information, effective participation, and the provision of access to justice . Incorporating a human rights-based approach implies abiding by its main principles: participation, accountability, non-discrimination and equality, empowerment, and legality.

Several local action plans incorporate these principles, which helps setting concrete goals and targets, identify groups in vulnerable situations, establish participation and complaint mechanisms, and other actions. [Seattle's \(USA\) Climate Preparedness Plan](#) explicitly acknowledges the higher risks that climate change poses to groups in vulnerable situations. The plan states that "All people and communities benefit from Seattle's environmental progress" and that "Communities most impacted by environmental injustice are engaged in setting environmental priorities, designing strategies, and tracking progress".



Ensuring meaningful participation for climate justice

Climate justice requires that climate action is consistent with existing human rights obligations, standards, and principles. Mitigation and adaptation strategies that [ensure the participation](#) of local communities as well as their access to information and access to justice are important tools for promoting, protecting and fulfilling human rights. Groups and people in vulnerable situations must take part in decision-making processes, and it should be ensured that adaptation and mitigation efforts do not have adverse effects on those that they are intended to protect. Accordingly, local governments should take strong steps towards meaningful participation in climate change response and adaptation.

[Dhaka](#) (Bangladesh) issued a “Town Watching Manual” that establishes a disaster management system in several neighborhoods of the city and increases people’s participation and mobilization for improving the community’s resilience. Including the participation of the population in disaster management is crucial for the city’s preparedness and ability to respond to climate-related natural disasters. [Mexico City](#) has fostered citizen participation in both the creation of the local climate action strategy and specific mitigation projects, like the Green Infrastructure Special Program; through open consultations and using digital tools.

Accountability enhances the fulfilment of climate targets

Accountability is a key principle for human rights-based climate governance. All levels of government should be accountable to rights-holders for their contributions to climate change, including for failure to adequately regulate the emissions of businesses under their jurisdiction regardless of where such emissions or their harms occur. Accountability is also instrumental in setting meaningful targets and indicators to verify implementation of adaptation and mitigation policies.

Clear targets can be a pathway to reaching the goals set out in the local governments’ adaptation plan. Setting targets shows its constituents that evidence-based policy decisions are concerning climate change and human rights and contributes to increased accountability about the adaptation plans’ progress. The city of [Barcelona](#) has set a climate justice target of reaching zero energy poverty by 2030 through inclusive climate action. Ongoing initiatives safeguarding people in vulnerable situations support the targets, and signals that this is a priority problem for the city from both a human rights and climate perspective. The city is also working towards the target of having 100% of the population a 5-minute walk from a climate shelter by 2030, making great strides through public outreach campaigns.



Actions for enhancing equity and non-discrimination

While climate change affects people everywhere, those who have contributed the least to climate change unjustly and disproportionately suffer its harms. Equity in climate action requires that efforts to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change benefit people in vulnerable situations and do not exacerbate inequalities. In transitioning to cleaner and more sustainable environments, governments must ensure equal and effective protection against discrimination in relation to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment. They must build adaptive capacities in vulnerable communities, including by recognizing the manner in which factors such as discrimination and disparities in access to basic services exacerbate climate vulnerability, and by devoting [adequate resources to the realization of the rights of all persons](#), particularly those facing the greatest risks.

The Expanded Social Package of [Johannesburg](#) (South Africa) targets vulnerable residents in the city such as the unemployed, youth, persons with disabilities, displaced persons, senior residents, women, and children. People with different levels of need qualify for different levels of water and electricity subsidies. This helps to mitigate the impact of potential increases in utility prices in the transition to a zero-carbon economy .

The city of [Melbourne](#) (Australia) provides highly vulnerable people with heat respite options. Since 2013, it has implemented a plan that facilitates improved access for the homeless population to climate shelters and other services that reduce their vulnerability to extreme heat . Similar actions are carried out in [Los Angeles](#) (USA), where people can access 'cooling centers' for protecting themselves from extreme weather.

Mitigating climate change while preventing its adverse human rights impacts

Local governments must take affirmative measures for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, prevent human rights harms caused by climate change and ensure a healthy environment for all.

Many opportunities emerge for tackling climate change while advancing in protecting and promoting human rights. Cities like [Athens](#) (Greece) , [Miami](#) (USA) , and [Freetown](#) (Sierra Leone) have appointed Heat Chief Officers, all of them highlighting the overriding need of putting the most vulnerable at the heart of climate action.

Social housing retrofitting in the city of [Cape Town](#) (South Africa) was instrumental in improving the health of communities while fostering the buildings' energy efficiency. Health risks are especially high in low-income communities, where housing conditions are not sufficient to protect against climate difficulties. Insulated ceilings and proper exterior plastering were installed in 10,540 homes as a means to reduce health risks and improve energy efficiency. The results showed significant improvement in the inhabitants' wellness and reduced financial burdens from energy consumption. It is estimated that the total impact of these retrofits so far will save approximately 7,400 tons of CO₂ each year and the project will be expanded to 40,000 more houses.

[Sofia](#) (Bulgaria) is among the various cities that is implementing innovative solutions for enhancing a healthy environment for all. As part of the [Urbanat](#) initiative, it is undergoing an inclusive urban planning process, with one of its objectives being to provide social housing while minimizing its impact to the environment through Nature-Based Solutions.

¹ Mitigation actions are measures to keep climate change moderate rather than extreme, while adaptation is considered a response strategy to anticipate and cope with impacts that cannot be (or are not) avoided under different scenarios of climate change. From: https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/02/WGIIAR5-Chap20_FINAL.pdf

Local governments can significantly minimize the risks that climate change poses to human rights

Local governments are essential actors for achieving international goals, like the compromise to limit global temperature rise to 1.5°C. However, more often than not, they lack resources, power and funding to address climate change. Cities and local governments have thus joint voices that call for action that supports climate goals and the enjoyment of rights. Many local governments around the globe have increased cooperation, forming coalitions and networks that are increasing efforts in combating climate change, working together for sharing knowledge, building capacity, and taking stock of international experience. As a first step towards building more resilient communities, and enhancing their power to action, local governments can join these existing networks, taking stock of their learned lessons and network opportunities.

Many more inspiring actions by local level governments of all sizes and capacities that combat climate change from a human rights perspective have emerged. In joining them, local governments take important steps towards fulfilling their legal obligations to protect their inhabitant's human rights and the rights of the inhabitants from future generations.

*We would like to acknowledge C40's [Inclusive Climate Action] programming which has supported inclusive climate action in cities since 2017, and that provided several examples of this document.

