

## **The role of cities in global environmental governance**

- Sayuri Moodliar, University of the Witwatersrand

*Although it is only nation states that are able to negotiate and enter into multilateral environmental agreements, cities play an increasingly important role in contributing to achieving global goals such as greenhouse gas (GHG) emission reduction targets. This paper explores why cities are the most appropriate entities through which to achieve global sustainability goals and examines some initiatives which have been implemented in this regard. It also looks at the innovative ways in which cities and city management have influenced the international environmental agenda.*

Nation states have been coming together for several decades to try to resolve global environmental problems. These negotiation sessions have become increasingly long-drawn out and rarely result in treaties that manage to resolve the crises facing the global community. On an issue like climate change, cities are better placed to achieve success through policy and regulatory changes for a number of reasons. Firstly, a consequence of increasing populations and urbanization has been that energy consumption and waste production are concentrated in cities. A recent study of various indicators of megacities in the first decade of the twenty-first century found that, as at 2010, just 27 megacities housed 6.7% of the global population, used 9% of global electricity and 10% of gasoline, while producing 13% of the world's solid waste. Local governments are able to monitor these trends and put in place appropriate regulatory measures to mitigate adverse effects of urban activities. Secondly, local governments have greater experience in balancing social, environmental and economic needs of communities, especially in urban areas. Thirdly, identifying the various stakeholders is easier at the local level, thereby facilitating public-private partnerships in order to address environmental problems. All of these factors have provided city authorities with vital experience in this regard. Many cities now have detailed environmental plans with regard to transport, planning, energy use, and waste management, resulting in innovative and successful measures being adopted so that urban communities can live and work more sustainably.

Apart from local initiatives, cities have also been proactive in influencing national and global environmental initiatives. In 1990, the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (now called ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability) was established in New York. The organization is made up of hundreds of cities and towns world-wide, and works

with local governments to raise awareness and find local solutions to global environmental problems. In 2014, the Compact of Mayors was entered into at the UN Climate Summit to commit local officials to reduce their GHG emissions and provide annual reports in this regard. In 2015, thousands of mayors and other local leaders attended proceedings during the climate change negotiations (COP21), resulting in the Paris Agreement recognizing the local and subnational dimensions of adaptation efforts.

July 2017