



# NEGOTIATING CLIMATE CHANGE IN CRISIS

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# 18. Local Net Zero Emissions Plans: How Can National Governments Help?

*Ian Bailey*

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Since 2016, nearly 2,000 local government authorities in thirty-four countries have declared climate emergencies and begun initiating plans to reduce emissions in their areas. Local governments have the potential to make a major contribution to achieving global climate mitigation goals but they need greater support from their national governments. Assistance is particularly needed through the provision of supportive national climate policy environments, greater empowerment of local governments, and enhanced finance for local net zero transitions.

## Introduction

In December 2016, Darebin Council in North Melbourne became the world's first local government body to declare a climate emergency. Since then, over 1,948 local authorities across thirty-four countries have made similar declarations and initiated plans to reduce or achieve net zero emissions by or before 2050, and the number is still rising (Climate Emergency Declaration 2021). Local action on climate change is far from a new phenomenon. Initiatives like the *Cities for Climate Protection* campaign and ICLEI—*Local Governments for Sustainability* network have already demonstrated the potential for urban and regional initiatives to mobilise actors, catalyse capacity building and knowledge exchange, and promote policies and practical actions to address climate change

and other sustainability issues (Bulkeley 2012). However, the current wave of local emergency declarations offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to unleash the capabilities of local actors to promote flexible, place-based, and democratically-informed approaches to achieving net zero or negative emissions (Davidson et al. 2020). In South Korea, for example, 226 local governments issued a joint climate emergency declaration at its National Assembly in June 2020, one of the largest climate declarations by any country in the world. Even in countries like the United States and Australia, whose federal governments have yet to declare climate emergencies at the national level, 12% and 36% of their respective populations now live in local government areas that have declared climate emergencies.

Local government powers in areas like land-use planning and infrastructure development provide vital tools for the development of practical strategies to reduce emissions. Local climate emergencies nevertheless remain a predominantly Global Northern phenomenon with just a handful of sub-national authorities from five countries in the Global South having declared climate emergencies. Equally, local governments' capacity to act is heavily influenced by factors over which they often have limited control. Of particular importance is the support—or lack thereof—they receive from national governments. As such, the approach of national governments is likely to be critical in determining whether local climate emergencies become a driving force for reducing emissions or another false dawn for effective climate mitigation (Ghag 2019).

This chapter examines three areas where support from central governments is essential for the future of local net zero plans: the creation of supportive national policy environments; ensuring local governments are granted and can exercise delegated powers to influence emissions; and the provision of finance to support emissions-reduction activities.

## Supportive National Policy Environments

A growing number of countries have adopted framework climate legislation establishing emissions targets, carbon budgets, and other institutional arrangements aimed at giving clarity on the long-term direction of climate policy. Many governments have also introduced

‘Green Deal’ policies to stimulate green industrialisation, investment and public procurement, particularly in Asia, North America and Europe, and many have introduced national carbon taxes and trading schemes to target emissions more directly (Eskander and Fankhauser 2020). However, although countries like the UK and Germany have made encouraging progress towards their decarbonisation goals, more concerted action is needed before the majority of countries can claim to have coherent and durable policy landscapes to support net zero transitions at either the national or sub-national levels.

National climate policies are also likely to be significantly influenced in the short-to-medium term by economic and fiscal responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. ‘Build back better’ has become a clarion call for ambitions to embed low-carbon investment and nature protection into COVID recovery programmes and was further underlined by the launch of the Build Back Better World (B3W) Partnership at the 2021 G7 meeting in June 2021 (The White House 2021). Yet governments also face strong pressures to regrow their economies as rapidly as possible, by both low- and high-carbon means (Hepburn et al. 2020). It is imperative that recovery programmes do not short-circuit climate mitigation and that investment and policy continue to flow towards climate goals in addition to addressing short-term economic and social concerns. The United Nations Summit on Biodiversity in September 2020 offered further cause for optimism about governments’ commitments to integrate environmental protection into COVID-19 responses (General Assembly of the United Nations 2020).

However, such pledges will need to be supported by convincing and durable policies. One of the most important things national governments can do is to declare country-wide climate emergencies and develop action plans to achieve net zero, as New Zealand did recently with the publication of its Climate Change Commission’s first advice on carbon budgets and emissions reduction plan (Climate Change Commission 2021). Other national policies to meet climate-change and green-deal goals need to extend beyond national concerns to provide active support for local and regional net zero initiatives (also see Whitmarsh’s chapter, this volume). The widespread application of full-cost pricing to emissions generating activities will be crucial to ending subsidies for climate liabilities in areas like waste management and transport.



Financial support mechanisms for renewable and other low-carbon energy sources equally need to focus consistently on providing levels of reward and policy stability that will attract investment in infrastructure with long-term payback periods (Liu et al. 2019). This is especially the case for high potential but less commercially advanced technologies, such as tidal, wave and deep geothermal power, which will continue to require support for some years to realise their contribution to decarbonising national energy systems. Regulatory reforms are also needed to enable local authorities to capitalise on interest in local generation tariffs, peer-to-peer options, and other local energy supply models as part of efforts to create a supportive policy environment for local climate initiatives (Regen/Scottish and Southern Electricity 2020). Whatever approaches are adopted, central government policies need to provide clear and stable signals of their commitment to net zero transitions and avoid undermining the direction or stability of local government net zero plans.

## Empowering Local Governments

Each country apportions governing responsibilities between central, regional and local government in different ways. However, areas like planning, transport, housing, and land use typically fall within the remit of sub-national governments and provide important levers for influencing emissions. Transport, housing and planning feature prominently in many local net zero carbon strategies (Davidson et al. 2020) but, even here, local governments rarely operate independently. Local planning decisions in the United Kingdom, for example, need to demonstrate compliance with goals of the National Planning Policy Framework and sector-specific planning guidance issued by the central government, where local planning authorities are obliged to follow nationally determined interpretations of climate action and sustainable development. Local plans in the UK similarly require approval from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government—which also controls approvals for national infrastructure projects—while rejected planning applications may be appealed to the Planning Inspectorate, another central government executive agency (Berisha et al. 2021).

Such checks and balances are commonplace and necessary for coordinating central and local government policy but reinforce the need for central governments to provide local governments with clear policy direction and powers to pursue net zero emissions. One example of ways to confer these powers involves ensuring planning policy allows local governments to demand that all new developments achieve zero or negative emissions criteria and do not compromise other critical objectives, such as nature protection and combating poverty (Friends of the Earth 2020). Another is to ensure local transport authorities have sufficient powers and coordinate with service providers, users and neighbouring areas to develop integrated public transport networks operating single ticketing systems that promote user-friendly ways of linking with non-motorised transport networks (Buehler et al. 2019).

Vertical coordination in the planning system is also vital to safeguarding against successful appeals—in other than exceptional circumstances—against development proposals local planning authorities reject as incompatible with net zero emissions. Removing ambiguity over when emissions-intensive developments, such as fossil-fuel extraction and airport expansions, should be rejected is especially important to achieving climate-coherent planning systems. More generally, kneejerk planning-policy responses from central governments to the COVID crisis have the potential to lock in carbon-intensive infrastructure for decades, and may determine whether or not carbon neutrality by 2050 remains possible. Put simply, national land-use policies and regulations in areas like building construction and transport need to have zero emissions at their core and to be applied with conviction and consistency over the next thirty years if local net zero ambitions are to survive and thrive (also see Dyke et al. and Lankford, this volume, on these net zero ambitions and complexities).

Empowering local governments in the ways described above will require a combination of approaches and cannot happen just by central governments deciding which powers to grant and in what measure. More dynamic and creative relationships are only likely to emerge through open dialogue with local government representative bodies and other concerned groups, such as Canada's *Climate Emergency Unit*, Australia's *Council Action in the Climate Emergency* and the US's *The Climate*

*Mobilization*, to share ideas on how to develop local climate emergency plans and capacities (Council Action in the Climate Emergency 2021).

## Financing Local Net Zero Transitions

Studies of local climate initiatives frequently stress their role as crucibles for experimentation in technological, governance and social innovations, and their potential to provide ‘learning-by-doing’ in emissions reduction (Bulkeley and Castán Broto 2013). However, a large proportion of innovative approaches falter in their early stages and scaling-up successful experiments remains a major challenge. Local governments in many countries have additionally suffered sizable cuts in funding as a result of responses to the 2008–2009 global financial crisis, while their resources have been stretched further by the need to provide healthcare and other services during the COVID pandemic (Anand 2020). Additional and secure funding will be critical to whether local governments can support the low-carbon innovation and infrastructure development needed to stimulate a genuinely green recovery (on climate finance, see the chapters by Bracking, and Kaplan and Levy, this volume).

Friends of the Earth (2020) estimates that £7 billion–£10 billion is needed per year in the UK alone to fund urban public transport and cycling and argues that substantial further investment is needed in low-carbon skills development in housing retrofits and heat-pump installation. Retrofitting programmes for existing buildings require significant funding commitments, though they are more cost-effective and quicker to achieve than many state-of-the-art building programmes (Zuo and Zhao 2014). Analysis of low-carbon transportation policy scenarios in California, for example, indicates initial additional investment of around \$4 billion but potential long-term savings in the region of \$23 billion by 2045, in addition to \$28 billion in health benefits (Brown et al. 2021).

The ability of councils to stimulate low-carbon employment will be severely restricted without greater direct funding from central governments, measures to encourage private low-carbon finance, and enhanced powers for local governments to raise more funds within their areas, for example, through road-user charging and local levies on



waste, single-use plastics and other emissions creating activities in their areas. In many countries, the lion's share of environmental tax revenues flow to the central government and either contribute to general finances or are hypothecated for environmental or social investments (Cadoret et al. 2020). Although the latter (if targeted suitably) can increase overall expenditure on climate mitigation, these funds could gain greater and more nimble leverage by directing a greater proportion of funding towards local government to empower climate emergency response plans. Even where funds remain controlled by central government, higher direct investment in emissions reduction and green infrastructure (e.g. sustainable travel, renewable energy, and ecological restoration) could provide assistance to local authority net zero plans, cost-effective job creation and the generation of co-benefits, such as reducing fuel poverty, improving health, and flood prevention.

## Conclusions

The recent surge in climate emergency declarations offers one of the clearest indications to date of the strength of grassroots concern about climate change. The simple—and uncontroversial—plea in this chapter is for national governments to be more energetic in supporting local and regional net zero initiatives. Three main priorities have been identified: a clearer and more reliable orientation of national policies towards net zero emissions; empowerment of local governments in planning, transport and other areas of delegated responsibility; and enhanced financial and practical assistance for local net zero initiatives. If governments fail to support the current enthusiasm for local net zero strategies, there is no guarantee this momentum will be regained in time for local governments to make a meaningful contribution to climate mitigation efforts. National governments need the support of local administrations as much as local governments need support from their national governments for net zero to become a reality.

Alongside practical considerations, how national governments approach climate politics in the future is also likely to have a direct bearing on the fortunes of local net zero initiatives. A number of recent studies have explored how experiences from the COVID crisis might inform responses to climate change (Howarth et al. 2020; Manzanedo

and Manning 2020). A common conclusion is that the pandemic has redrawn the boundaries of acceptable central government interventions and limits on personal freedoms to protect health and employment. However necessary these actions have been, an ethos of democratic deficit—where national governments bypass or overrule local governments—must not become pervasive. Responses to the climate crisis will need to be sustained over a protracted period and require long-term social mandates that are only likely to be achieved through dialogue rather than prescription. The need for zero-carbon strategies to reflect the emissions profiles and needs of individual regions adds further weight to arguments for dialogue within regions and between central and local actors, rather than overreliance on top-down approaches.

A further challenge is to broaden the geographical range of local net zero initiatives beyond their present concentration in a small number of affluent countries. At the time of writing, local governments from just three Latin American and three Asian countries (excluding Japan and South Korea) had declared climate emergencies according to the *Climate Emergency Declaration* database, although Bangladesh and Maldives had adopted national declarations. Relatively few climate emergency declarations had been made by local governments in Central and Eastern Europe, in contrast with 104 in Germany, 113 in Italy, and 510 in the UK. Soberingly given their exposure to climate risks, no African national or local governments had declared climate emergencies (Climate Emergency Declaration 2021). Local net zero initiatives in Asian, African and Latin American countries are likely to have different goals, action programmes, and working relationships with their national governments from those in the Global North, but this in no way diminishes their importance or the urgency of encouraging communities across the world to be actively involved in debating and shaping their climate futures.

Of equal importance is the need for all tiers of governance to avoid the partisan and even tribal climate politics that often has dominated discussions on climate change. One common feature of countries that have adopted national climate change acts is cross-party support for ambitious long-term action, even where disagreements persist on targets and implementation (Nash and Steurer 2020). A return to—or

the failure to break free from—ideological partisanship and short-term politicking on climate change risks undermining not only national climate policy but also the consensuses that enabled local politicians to agree on climate emergency plans in the first place. One of the greatest contributions national governments can make to local emergency response initiatives is to defend the idea that climate change is too important for party politics and demands new and more cooperative forms of political leadership.

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