

GLOBALINDIA

Building capacity in municipal governments for urban climate action ¹

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Given the impacts of climate change it becomes important for governments to have a strong policy response. Cities play an important role in climate action as they house high concentrations of population, resources, infrastructures, and assets.

This policy brief sets out how cities can work to check the effects of climate change by learning from an early adopter of climate action policies. How early adopters that can provide a policy blueprint to influence the actions of other cities. Specifically, it focuses on the lessons from a medium sized Indian city which overcame governance barriers, particularly institutional, financial and technical barriers that pose a major hindrance to urban climate measures.

INDIAN CITIES AND THE PROBLEM OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Cities in India grapple with multiple challenges that impede their development. A rapidly urbanising and industrialising society gives rise to unprecedented challenges for efficient resource management, and service delivery. Climate change is a crisis catalyst that exacerbates existing development issues. In the absence of a national level urban climate policy, some Indian cities have started addressing climate concerns through their own institutions. However, weaknesses and deficiencies in the governance framework of cities, and the diffuse nature of climate change often hinders this form of urban climate action.

One of the major governance barriers - hindering urban climate action in this context - is the lack of

adequate resources and capacity (institutional, financial, and technical).

With respect to institutional capacity, local governments in India lack power and autonomy over urban planning and decision-making processes (Pinto, 2000, Weinstein et al., 2013; Sami, 2018; Khosla and Bhardwaj, 2019). To compound this problem, environmental and climate issues are not mainstreamed into local developmental objectives (Kumar and Geneletti, 2015; Sami, 2017; Khosla and Bhardwaj, 2019) and the absence of formal rules guiding local climate action in India creates an institutional void.

Indian municipal governments have an acute lack of knowledge and awareness on urban climate issues, and inadequate technical capacity to cope with existing and new challenges (Sami, 2017).

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GLOBALINDIA

Climate change continues to be perceived as a global issue requiring global or national responses as opposed to local ones (Sharma and Tomar, 2010; Sami, 2018). This means that there is a serious knowledge deficit at the level of cities in terms of what is appropriate climate action.

Coupled with these challenges, local governments in India face severe financial constraints, reducing their capacity to implement climate measures. Municipal administrations, especially in smaller towns and cities, not only have limited financial resources and ability to generate resources, but also lack adequate support from central and state governments (Sami, 2018).

Rajkot, a city with a population of over a million², located in the semi-arid region of Gujarat (western part of India), stands out as successfully overcoming these barriers to pursue climate action. The city did this through a combination of relying on existing **domestic frameworks**, using **development objectives as entry points** for climate action, **engaging with experts** and **building capacity** of city officials.

Reliance on domestic frameworks: as one of the barriers to local climate action is limited financial capacities, especially in the case of medium sized non-metropolitan cities. The Rajkot Municipal Corporation (RMC) overcame financial constraints by dovetailing existing State³ and Central⁴ (infrastructure) schemes and programmes to implement local action⁵.

Development objectives as entry points for climate action: the absence of a national urban climate policy, provided Rajkot an opportunity to innovatively implement policy measures. As there are significant overlaps between development objectives and climate action⁶, RMC officials were able to identify these overlaps and use them to pursue both developmental and climate change agendas without additional cost. This approach also facilitated the mainstreaming of climate goals into local development plans⁷.

Engagement with domain experts: the municipal corporation engaged with non-state actors, particularly domain experts⁸, to acquire guidance on specific issues⁹. This was successful as engagement with society – both through domain experts and the broader civil society

² The city is governed by a Municipal Corporation, the Rajkot Municipal Corporation (RMC).

³ State sponsored schemes like the Swarnim Jayanti Mukhya Mantri Shaheri Vikas Yojana (SJMMSVY) (2009-10) aided Rajkot's efforts.

⁴ Rajkot's efforts were aided by central schemes such as the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) (2005), the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) (2015), and the Smart Cities Mission (SCM) (2015). Additionally, the corporation also utilised grants from the Finance Commission (e.g. 13th, 14th and 15th) to further local action.

⁵ The corporation improved its water distribution network (e.g. augment existing water reservoirs, build water storage and treatment capacities, upgrade water supply system etc.) with the support of domestic schemes and programmes.

⁶ In the case of Rajkot, solar photovoltaic panels were installed on a water treatment plant to reduce energy consumption and emission contribution, and

simultaneously ensure service delivery. Similarly, regularising illegal connections improve water supply and municipal finances, along with resilience against future risks.

Thus, local efforts not only ensure improved service provision, but also results in improved adaptive capacity, and resilience of citizens to future climatic events.

⁷ A popular approach employed by cities is to embed climate goals into prevailing municipal agendas (Carmin et al., 2012a,b; Groven et al., 2012; van den Berg and Coenen, 2012; Rosenzweig et al., 2011; Aylett, 2014).

⁸ These experts provide domain specific and policy-relevant knowledge, and fill technical deficits of governments especially in uncertain situations.

⁹ For instance, while formulating the Climate Resilient City Action Plan (CRCAP), the RMC invited non-state stakeholders such as local NGOs, citizen association groups, university partners, and members from the Chamber of Commerce, to review the climate action plan.

GLOBALINDIA

embeds the State in its social setting and enables relevant and innovative decision making.

Active participation in capacity building activities: another important factor facilitating climate action is climate specific training and capacity building. Rajkot city officials participated in various capacity building activities including workshops, project meetings and seminars¹⁰. Such engagements provide an opportunity to engage with domain experts, share their experiences, and learn about best practices with respect to climate action.

Through these innovative approaches the local government of Rajkot improved its financial, technical and institutional capacity and this enabled it to pursue and sustain climate action.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Cities can augment their financial capacity by **dovetailing existing policies and programmes**. While different centre and state sponsored programmes may have different objectives, for example, towards improving infrastructure (e.g. AMRUT, Smart Cities Mission) or reducing emissions/climate specific (e.g. National Solar Mission), city governments can combine various funds towards local priorities.
2. A deficit in terms of technical knowledge in local governments, can be overcome by **engagement with domain experts**, including both state (e.g. retired officials, other departments and levels of government) and non-state actors (e.g. academics, civil society, citizen groups, media). Engagements with experts provides access to new information that can result in the formulation of locally relevant policies.
3. City governments also need to engage in **climate-specific capacity building**. City officials should regularly participate in training and workshops that improve their understanding of climate issues and actions. Such capacity building should be cyclical in order to reinforce learning and to ensure that climate lessons find their way into the daily working of the city. Such platforms also enable cities to learn from best practices and to share knowledge with others.
4. Local governments need to **recognise synergy between development and climate objectives**. Development objectives, for example, improved service delivery or universal access to water supply has a beneficial impact on climate action, including reduced vulnerability and improved resilience. Acknowledging the climate co-benefits of development facilitates the mainstreaming of climate goals into urban planning and therefore also into local priorities. This would be a significant step towards filling the institutional void in local governments with respect to climate action.
5. **Institutionalising climate action through a dedicated team** including municipal officials, non-state and other state stakeholders, is a crucial step towards improving institutional capacity. A climate change group or department within the local government structures that can collectively deliberate on climate issues, scrutinise existing development projects, and ultimately prioritise explicit climate action will boost the capacity of cities to act effectively.

¹⁰ For instance, officials participated and presented their success cases at the climate workshop organised by the Ministry of Housing & Urban Affairs (MoHUA), and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit

(GIZ). Similarly, the members also participated in the Low carbon & Resilient City development meeting, Delhi 2019 comprising of members from SDC, South Pole, ICLEI, National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA).

GLOBALINDIA

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