Advancing Urban Water Resilience through Multilevel Governance:

A Collaborative Call to Action

COP28 AND BEYOND

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Introduction

Water crises consistently rank among the foremost global risks identified in the Global Risk Report (World Economic Forum, 2023[1]). The rapid pace of urbanization has profoundly altered water availability and quality, rendering communities more susceptible to a spectrum of challenges, including floods, droughts, water scarcity, and pollution, with associated adverse health impacts. Climate change exacerbates these risks, as almost 90% of natural disasters are water-related[2].

Water-related risks are also contributing to increasing inequities, impacting communities and individuals in distinct ways, depending on their socio-economic status, geographic location, and access to resources. With the world still lagging on its commitments to ensuring availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all, the everchanging and increasing risks the world is facing further distance scores of people globally from accessing their basic needs.

Building resilience in urban areas emerges as a basic condition for transformative and equitable urban development planning, requiring evidence-based, long-term, and inclusive strategies to reduce vulnerability and enhance adaptive capacity. Recognizing the need for integrated solutions, combining water management and urban planning strategies is crucial.

Cities are intimately linked to the basins in which they are situated. The

1 World Economic Forum (2023). The Global Risks Report 2023. 18th Edition. Insight Report. Geneva: World Economic Forum. Available at https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Global_Risks_Report_2023.pdf

2 Water-related risks, especially those induced by climate change, have been and will affect different communities and individuals in distinct ways, depending on their socio-economic status, geographic location, and access to resources. With the world still lagging behind on its commitments to ensuring availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all, the everchanging and increasing risks we are facing is further distancing scores of people across the globe from accessing their basic needs.

strengthening of urban water resilience requires multi-level governance that extends beyond the administrative boundaries of cities. This means that careful mapping of complex stakeholder roles and responsibilities is a prerequisite understanding the complexities of the governance structure of both engineered and natural systems.

Embarking on the evolution pathway towards urban water resilience demands a collaborative, multilevel governance approach that bridges the efforts of cities and national governments to achieve common goals in alignment with global efforts to achieve the Global Goal on Adaptation, including the Sharm El-Sheikh Adaptation Agenda 2030 solutions. Cities across the globe face escalating challenges in managing water resources amid the dual pressures of urbanization and climate uncertainty.

This paper articulates the key messages emanating from the High-Level Multilevel Roundtable discussions which took place at COP28 in Dubai, emphasizing the pivotal role of collaboration and underscoring the leadership of cities in the realm of climate action. It delineates actionable steps for decision-makers and stakeholders, providing first concepts for a roadmap for fostering a sustainable and resilient future. It builds upon the successes of the Cities Solve, Cities Deliver Event at the New York Water Week 2023, and the firm commitments to the Water Action Agenda. The overarching goal is to establish a regular dialogue starting at COP28 convened by Sharm El-Sheikh Adaptation Agenda and extending beyond, fostering commitment and synergy between national and local actions to best practices and shared lessons learned.

Advancing Urban Water Resilience: A Strategic Multilevel Approach

In the complex landscape of increasing urbanization and the uncertainties impacting urban water systems, cities find themselves at the forefront of addressing challenges posed by climate change. However, the success of city-level initiatives is intricately tied to the broader national context. This interdependence requires a collaborative approach deeply influenced by the dynamics of national governance. Simultaneously, national governments are increasingly reliant on the active participation of local governments and cities to expedite the fulfillment of their climate commitments. In this intricate dance between local and national priorities, the imperative of multilevel dialogues and collaboration becomes evident.

The strategic significance of these multilevel interactions lies in their ability to foster timely and effective climate action. They serve as platforms that encourage a coordinated approach, facilitating resource mobilization, promoting policy synergy, encouraging knowledge sharing, and providing essential political support. Acknowledging the pivotal role of cities in addressing the intricate nexus of water and climate challenges, the multilevel approach sets out to leverage strategies and systematic approaches tailored specifically for cities. By positioning cities as leaders in the broader landscape of climate action, regional governments, and national authorities can optimize the impact of climate investments. This optimization becomes a catalyst propelling the transition toward a sustainable and resilient future, reflecting the collective commitment to address the imminent challenges posed by climate change, and stressing multi-stakeholder collaboration in managing water ecosystems.

MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE AND POLICY ALIGNMENT

An imperative for sustainable urban water resilience is the adoption of a collaborative, multilevel governance approach[3]. This approach needs a harmonized alignment of endeavors among cities, regional governments, and national authorities. This alignment is not merely administrative but ensures the formulation of coherent, consistent, and mutually reinforcing policies and monitoring systems. Recognizing the pivotal role cities play in addressing water and climate challenges, the multilevel approach underscores the strategic leverage of strategies and systematic approaches tailored for cities in dealing with the intricacies of climate and water-related challenges.

A key aspect for this endeavor is for cities to actively participate in national climate planning processes, such as the formulation of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) and National Adaptation Plans (NAP). The emphasis lies in fostering cooperation and instigating joint decision-making. The commitment to establishing a regular dialogue becomes the cornerstone for ensuring sustained progress, an imperative for decision-makers keen on perpetuating the collaborative momentum initiated during COP sessions.

COMPREHENSIVE RISK MANAGEMENT

Efforts to strengthen urban water resilience demand a holistic understanding of water and climate-related risks, risk appetite and solutions. The multilevel approach is not merely a structural framework but a strategic instrument for promoting the efficiency of risk assessment tools and indicators. Emphasis is placed on the facilitation of knowledge exchange and the proliferation of innovative practices among cities.

Additionally, the sustained multilevel approach is indispensable for augmenting the understanding of risks associated with climate change, urbanization and water management. It places a deliberate focus on fostering awareness of the interconnected challenges. Collaborative endeavors with existing initiatives, projects and programs becomes a strategic need. This approach aims to build on existing efforts, fostering a harmonized and comprehensive strategy for urban water resilience, aligning decisively with the priorities of discerning decision-makers.

INNOVATION

Cities have real potential to serve as early implementers of change and incubators for adaptation and resilience action through their water systems. Cities can significantly lower emissions while making bold investments that enhance their capacity to withstand climate related shocks and stresses to their water system. Being at the forefront of dealing with climate change, cities are in a unique position to deliver impact due to their concentration of economic activity, dense social networks, human resource capacity, high levels of investment in infrastructure and buildings, relatively agile local governments, and tradition of innovation. Thus, acknowledging the critical role cities play in building resilient water systems that survive, adapt and thrive in the face of water-related shocks and stresses can fast track efforts to meet climate goals and leverage their potential for innovation.

3 The Recommendations of the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments' Statement at the 2023 UN Water Conference also highlight the "crucial role of multi-level governance and multi-stakeholder collaboration in the managing water ecosystems and the inclusion of cities, regions and territories in water related policy making". See: eng-declaracion-gtf-uclg-web.pdf

Additionally, as cities drive action towards water resilience, their experiences, successes, and lessons learned can help national governments, regions and communities overcome implementation barriers, avoid pitfalls, and replicate proven strategies. This knowledge exchange fosters collaboration, promotes collective learning, and enables the scaling up of impactful climate actions across different regions and contexts.

STREAMLINED INVESTMENTS

Efficient and effective investments require a comprehensive approach that considers the multifaceted landscape of governance and finance, while prioritizing capacity building. Within the intricate web of responsibilities spanning local, regional, and national levels of government, as well as involving diverse stakeholders, addressing boundary-less and cross-boundary water issues demands a streamlined and integrated strategy.

To achieve this, it is imperative to establish conditions for robust financial support, ensuring that resources are allocated strategically across different tiers of governance. Simultaneously, fostering good governance practices becomes key to navigate the complexities and potential overlaps in responsibilities. Moreover, a focus on capacity building at all levels will empower stakeholders to proactively engage in initiatives that contribute to a resilient and sustainable water future.

EQUITY, AWARENESS, AND COLLABORATIVE INITIATIVES

Cities, functioning as the critical nexus between governments and communities, emerge as hubs for achieving equitable and just transitions in response to climate change. The multilevel approach is unambiguous in its insistence on equitable engagement for community resilience. It recognizes that community involvement in decision-making is imperative for the development of inclusive water investments that address the disparate impacts of water risks.

Key messages from Multi-level Dialogue at COP28

The multi-level roundtable at COP28 brought together government representatives from national, regional and local levels to discuss challenges in tackling water and climate issues. Key discussion areas included governance, capacity, leadership, inclusion, and knowledge, tools, and solutions for financing. This is the first of several multilevel dialogue sessions expected to expand in subsequent COPs. Key messages are presented below:

NATIONAL LEVEL SUPPORT FOR URBAN WATER RESILIENCE

At the national level, governments recognize the critical importance of supporting urban water resilience as a cornerstone of their climate action strategy. Policies that integrate water resilience considerations into national development and adaptation plans, emphasizing the need for coordinated efforts between local and national governments were highlighted. Implementation mechanisms, like financial support and capacity building need to be established to enable cities to adopt sustainable water management practices, with for example dedicated funds allocated for climate-resilient infrastructure projects. Additionally, capacity-building programs to equip local authorities with the knowledge and tools needed to address water and climate challenges effectively is fundamental.

BOX 1: Kigali's Investments in Water Resilience

Kigali's investments in understanding water vulnerabilities through its Resilience Road Map and Water Resilience Action Plan demonstrate a commitment to climate action. Multilevel governance is essential in Kigali's approach, facilitating collaboration with the Ministries but also bringing diverse stakeholders and secondary cities to the table. This is important to ensure community buy-in and preparing the city to actively respond to climate impacts. The Road Map and Action Plan have been catalysts to identify the solutions and required phases for the implementation and Kigali is not engaging in a phase of scaling up. It exemplifies how investing in urban water resilience is key to meeting national climate goals and fostering a more sustainable and inclusive future.

BOX 2: Rotterdam's Leadership in Knowledge Sharing and Urban Water Resilience

Rotterdam, a leader in knowledge sharing among cities, emphasizes multilevel governance to overcome implementation barriers and replicate successful strategies. Through partnerships with networks like Resilient Cities Network and C40 Cities, Rotterdam facilitates collaboration, collective learning, and innovation scaling. Multilevel governance helps national governments, regions, and communities align efforts, avoid pitfalls, and implement proven strategies. Rotterdam's regional delta program showcases the potential of coordinated efforts in building urban water resilience.

LOCAL LEVEL LEADERSHIP

Local leaders are instrumental in fostering community engagement and ownership of adaptation initiatives, ensuring that solutions are not only tailored to local needs but are also embraced by the people they directly affect. This grassroots involvement enhances the sustainability and success of adaptation measures, as communities are more likely to adopt and adhere to strategies developed with their input.

In the context of National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) local level leadership acts as a bridge between national policies and on-the-ground realities. It facilitates the translation of overarching climate goals into actionable plans at the community level, aligning global targets with local priorities. Local frameworks should exist for coordination between national and local stakeholders - 'locally determined contributions', which provide institutional frameworks, a business case, and scale and ambition to align with NDCs.

NDCS AND NAPS AS CATALYSTS FOR MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE

The multilevel governance approach positions the development and implementation of National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) at its core, recognizing the imperative of enhancing cities' roles in climate change co-policymaking. These national level commitments offer a concrete entry-point to engage in the multi-level approach. For instance, according to a recent study by UN-Habitat, only 47 of the 193 NDCs have a strong focus on urban areas while 70 NDCs have low or no urban content[4]. Reinforcing intentional alignment creates a cohesive and coordinated response to urban water challenges, which do not recognize administrative boundaries. Decision-makers are prompted to acknowledge the interconnectedness of actions at both the city and national levels, emphasizing the pivotal role of collaboration in accelerating progress toward shared climate goals.

The NDCs are central to discussions during COP28, serving as catalysts for fostering multi-level governance towards water and climate-resilient cities.

4 Energy, transport and mobility and waste are the most mentioned sectors in urban mitigation challenges and responses. Infrastructure and water are the two most mentioned sectors in urban adaptation challenges and responses.

At the national level, governments regard NDCs not only as commitments to global climate targets but also as strategic frameworks for enhancing collaboration between national and local governments. This intentional alignment resonates with the SAA Working Group, as it aims to provide a platform for ongoing collaboration beyond COP for the integration of water-related targets within NDCs to align priorities and actions across different levels of governance. This catalytic role of NDCs encourages the formulation of comprehensive strategies, with specific focus on urban water resilience, ensuring that the impacts of climate change are effectively addressed at both the national and local levels.

STRENGTHENING SUBSTANTIVE DIALOGUE AND ENGAGEMENT

Recognizing the pivotal role of dialogue and engagement between local and national governments, steps can be taken to reinforce and deepen this substantive interaction. First, there is a need for a dedicated mechanism that encourages regular and structured communication between local, national authorities and other stakeholders. It should be established to encourage the exchange of expertise, knowledge, experiences, challenges, and best practices related to water and climate resilience.

Additionally, as part of the implementation process, financial incentives, capacity building projects, and stakeholder and community engagement initiatives should be explored to motivate local governments to actively participate in national climate planning processes, such as the formulation and implementation of NDCs and NAPs. Strengthening the capacity of local authorities through training programs, access to innovative tools and bringing in local community engagement will further empower them to engage meaningfully in the multilevel governance landscape.

By linking substantive dialogues with concrete actions and resources, we not only encourage knowledge exchange but also facilitate a collaborative and integrated approach to addressing the challenges of water and climate resilience within the broader context of adaptation.

BOX 3: Understanding Risks, Aligning Investments, and Efficient Responses in Brazil

Rio de Janeiro faces heightened flooding risks due to various factors, including increased rains, infrastructure gaps, and sea level rise. The city is actively planning for rising risks, prioritizing vulnerable groups. Multilevel governance plays a crucial role in understanding and aligning investments to efficiently respond to these risks in line with Brazil's climate commitments. Collaboration between national, regional, and local authorities is vital to develop comprehensive strategies, share knowledge, and implement effective responses.

TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION, MULTILEVEL EFFORTS

Transformative action requires a concerted effort between cities and national governments. The implementation of visionary projects that integrate innovative solutions for urban water resilience showcases the commitment of both levels of governance. Multilevel governance, in this context, involves joint decision-making processes, alignment of policies, and coordination of resources to achieve common goals. Transparent communication channels and collaborative platforms should be established to facilitate dialogue and ensure that the actions taken at each level complement and reinforce one another. This approach not only enhances the effectiveness of climate action but also fosters a sense of shared responsibility in addressing water and climate hazards.

BOX 4: Cape Town's Day Zero

Day zero was a pivotal moment for Cape Town. Ultimately Cape Town succeeded in moving away from Day zero and this has been possible through partnerships. The role of the Municipality has been central, but they have worked together with the private sector and other government entities including the national government. Nowadays, Cape Town has a firm commitment to never end up anymore in a situation where water is restricted. Despite new droughts to come and a growing population, the City has committed to never restrict as they did in 2018. To do so, the City builds a resilient system, and to achieve this goal, partnerships and multi-level dialogues are seen as pillars towards results.

INNOVATIVE TOOLS AND FINANCE FOR MULTI-LEVEL ACTION

Innovation is key to addressing the complex challenges of urban water resilience. Both national and local governments should actively seek and promote the adoption of innovative tools and technologies that enhance water management and climate adaptation. At the national level, the exploration of innovative financing mechanisms, such as green bonds or public-private partnerships, can provide the necessary resources for large-scale projects. Simultaneously, local governments should be encouraged to leverage technology for data collection, monitoring, and early warning systems. The exchange of experiences and best practices in utilizing innovative tools and financing mechanisms should be facilitated to catalyze transformative action at both levels of governance.

Beyond COP28: Going Forward, a Call to Action

Building on the momentum generated by the UN 2023 Water Conference, the Water Action Agenda, and the collaborative efforts to launch the SSA Multilevel Working Groups in COP28, actions must continue beyond, to propel urban water resilience to new heights. Recognizing the pivotal role of cities in achieving national climate targets and the imperative of enhanced multi-level coordination, a sustained dialogue for synergies between national and local actions must be created.

The Sharm el-Sheikh Adaptation Agenda Working Group on Urban Water Resilience, launched at the COP28, can act as a catalyst to foster multilevel collaboration and coordinated action between local, regional, and national levels of governments and stakeholders to effectively address water-related climate challenges in urban areas. This will be achieved through common action towards:

- Recognition of the critical role of cities in tackling water and climate challenges and the importance of cities and urban areas in achieving equitable and just transitions in response to climate change;
- Leveraging partnerships to enable cities to develop aligned strategies and systematic approaches in dealing with climate and water-related challenges, and mainstream climate change, integrated water management, and sanitation in their development plans and strategies;
- Improving representation of cities in the international climate agenda;
- Coordination of the work of different partners to support countries in enhancing their national climate commitments around urban water resilience, in particular supporting the NAP process. The first ever climate compendium of case studies from a diverse set of stakeholders seeking to build water resilience launched by the Race to Resilience and Sanitation and Water for All Secretariat as an outcome of COP28 is one great launching point to initiate alignment of interventions and progress.

The incorporation of stakeholder-influenced decision-making processes lays the foundation for a resilient and adaptable approach, fostering a sustained bottom-up resilience that can dynamically respond to changes as they unfold. By embracing multiple planning goals, including equity and environmental considerations, the SAA Urban Water Resilience strategy ensures a comprehensive assessment of service reliability. The metrics employed must extend beyond the mere cost of infrastructures, taking into account the provisioning of services, the impact on natural capital, economic opportunities and ecosystem services. Managing trade-offs for resilience involves local resourcing and economically efficient water use, promoting sustainable practices. Given the broad scope of water-related challenges, a holistic approach advocates for a balanced integration of qualitative and quantitative measures to achieve robust resilience in the face of evolving conditions. This comprehensive strategy not only addresses immediate concerns but also establishes a framework for long-term success and adaptability.

Conclusion

Cities' water resilience is paramount in the face of urbanization and climate uncertainty. Multilevel governance emerges as a cornerstone in fostering collaboration, coherence, and efficiency in climate action between local and national governments.

This paper resonates with the outcome of the multi-level roundtable and the call for decision-makers and stakeholders to embrace the dialogue between local and national authorities, elevate political visibility, and commit to concrete actions for urban water resilience through multilevel governance, fostering a resilient and sustainable future for cities worldwide. The SAA Urban Water Resilience Working group aims to drive such actions between the local and national level and ensure cross-pollination of water prioritization across other sectors.

Achieving urban water resilience requires a collective and concerted effort across government bodies, academia, the public sector, private sector, NGOs, and communities. Through collaboration and shared commitment, we can transform challenges into opportunities and secure a water-resilient future for generations to come.


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