Getting local governments, residents and enterprises to respond to the new IPCC assessment

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SUMMARY: The new IPCC assessment – Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability – highlights how city governments have to add climate change adaptation and mitigation to their policies, plans, regulatory frameworks and budgets. But how can these be supported without drawing attention away from poverty reduction, universal provision of basic services and disaster risk reduction? And supported in ways that are rooted in local needs, priorities and capacities?

How can the IPCC’s scientific assessment translate into local action? This Brief highlights the need for an expanding network of research that documents and supports local good practice that involves local governments and engages urban poor groups and their organizations. This is so needed to build knowledge, capacity and learning in all urban centres.

This Brief also discusses how to achieve coherence across four urban agendas: development, disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation and mitigation. All four focus on reducing risk although they might emphasize different risks. All focus on getting the most out of what individuals, households and communities can do. All depend on local political processes that are accountable to those most at risk and show what is possible in addressing all four agendas – and thus to shift to transformative adaptation.

I. NEW CHALLENGES

Two new urgent challenges now face city and municipal governments: they have to add climate change adaptation and contributions to mitigation (especially reducing carbon dioxide emissions) to their policies, plans, regulatory frameworks and budgets. This is one of the key messages from the new assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability.

Yet so many city and municipal governments have little or no capacity to do so. Many cannot meet long-standing challenges such as ensuring provision of basic services to most of their inhabitants, and the scale of their failure in this regard can be seen in the one billion urban dwellers who live in informal settlements and who lack provision for risk-reducing infrastructure and basic services.

It seems so unfair to add these two new challenges for most urban centres in low- and middle-income nations. They have little or no investment capacity. They have to adapt to the increasing risks and uncertainties created mostly by wealthier nations and people. And the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions is so urgent that they are asked to contribute even if their emission levels are low.

Then there is the urgent need for city and municipal governments to pay attention to disaster risk reduction, which includes disaster risks other than those linked to climate change. How can progress be achieved across the vast and diverse set of cities and smaller urban centres in all four priority agendas – poverty reduction that includes universal provision of basic services; disaster risk reduction; and now the two new challenges of climate change adaptation and mitigation – in ways that are rooted in the needs, priorities and capacities of each urban centre and its population? We have examples of cities that show progress is possible. But these are the unusual, the exceptions, the outliers.

II. TRANSFORMATIVE ADAPTATION

The new IPCC assessment includes a long and detailed chapter on adapting urban areas. This highlights the very large differences in adaptive capacity among the world’s urban centres. It then discusses how risk levels may change for a range of climatic drivers of impacts in the near term (2030–2040) and the long term (2080–2100), assuming global mean temperature increases of 2°C or 4°C. This highlights
If we focus on addressing the four urban agendas, what needs to be done to respond to the IPCC’s Fifth Assessment? Do we simply continue with the new assessments every five years or so and thus begin planning for the IPCC Sixth Assessment? There is certainly recognition within the IPCC and the Technical Support Units for each of the three new reports of the need for wide dissemination, supported by effective communication strategies. The timing for the release of these new assessments fits well into the discussions on what should replace the Millennium Development Goals – and what form the post-2015 sustainable development agenda will take. There is a very substantial network of organizations that includes many international agencies and local governments that is demanding a stand-alone urban Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) to “…mobilize stakeholders, promote integrated, city-level approaches and accelerate progress towards sustainable development, including the end of extreme poverty.” The IPCC’s Fifth Assessment also comes in time to influence discussions at Habitat III (the third UN Conference on Human Settlements), planned for 2016, and hopefully to ensure that climate change gets adequate attention. It received no attention at all in the Habitat Agenda that came out of the second UN Conference on Human Settlements in 1996.

But what needs to happen to encourage and support action on climate change in urban areas? Clearly, there is a need to involve urban governments and those who are or will be most at risk within urban
FIGURE 1: The four urban agendas and their overlaps

- **Poverty reduction and universal provision of services**
  - Poor housing, living and working conditions and lack of infrastructure and services underpin poverty and contribute much to disaster risk, especially in low- and lower-middle income nations. So there are many overlaps between reduction of poverty and reduction of disaster risk. Also some overlaps in what provides resilience for low-income households and for cities.

- **Disaster risk reduction**
  - Large overlaps between the three, especially in low- and lower-middle income nations. All are concerned with reducing local risks; all need risk-reducing infrastructure and health care and emergency services.
  - Importance of local citizen/civil society pressure and organization to get action on these, especially for most vulnerable groups.

- **Climate change adaptation**
  - Climate change mitigation not having many direct overlaps as the risks it is addressing are global and with their largest impacts in the future.

- **Climate change mitigation**
  - But mitigation is essential to the other three agendas because without it, the scale and nature of risk in the future threatens progress in all the other urban agendas.
10. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is an intergovernmental body set up under the auspices of the United Nations and currently 195 countries are members – see http://www.ipcc.ch/organization/organization.shtml.


populations. Yet how can this be done in ways that protect the scientific integrity of the process? How will representatives from national governments who form the IPCC[10] feel about being called on to engage with local governments and civil society? How will governments react to an engagement by researchers with representative organizations formed by the residents of informal settlements, who absolutely have the right to influence government responses and to take action themselves?

There is also the issue of how the next IPCC assessment can fully cover urban issues in light of the very large increase in the literature. Is it possible to rely on a small team of urban specialists to do this, most of them working with no financial support other than having their transport and accommodation costs covered when attending meetings?

V. GETTING URBAN ASPECTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE TAKEN SERIOUSLY

Perhaps we are finally at a tipping point regarding recognition of the need for urban issues to be taken far more seriously in development and disaster risk reduction and now in climate change adaptation and mitigation. This can be seen in the Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, which gives serious attention to urban areas and to their local governments. As it states: “The post-2015 agenda must be relevant for urban dwellers. Cities are where the battle for sustainable development will be won or lost.”[11]

It has taken a long time to reach this point – and the knowledge base on urban issues remains woefully thin in most low- and many middle-income nations. The experience of the CGIAR (Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research) is relevant here – it set up and helped fund an international network of research centres to address the enormous knowledge gaps identified several decades ago on agricultural and rural development. Perhaps now there is a comparable need for a substantial international funding system to support urban research. But what we need is not so much a formal network of international urban research centres but, rather, a process that encourages and supports relevant research in each nation (and city) that can be drawn on for needed synthesizes and shared learning. This would bring together key individuals and institutions around different aspects of climate change adaptation and mitigation within a framework that prioritizes poverty reduction and disaster risk reduction. The learning has to be strongly connected to what is being done or tried in particular urban centres (metropolitan, city, smaller urban centre). It needs to become more specific and useful to local actors so they understand the particular implications of climate change for, for instance, heat stress and heat islands within cities, or coastal flooding, sea level rise and storm surges. This will depend on the buy-in and support from existing institutions, and in many cases the funding and staff they could commit to this. The system is not envisaged as an initiative to fund research but, rather, to support researchers and other key actors to meet, engage, learn and synthesize. It would need a budget to support these activities and to support a strong documentation process – so that there is a process that constantly updates syntheses of what is known for each climate change risk. It can also commission assessments of local experiences in order to drive learning and develop the material that is relevant and useful to enterprises, local governments and civil society. In effect, to support the documentation of what could be termed “good practice” – and to discuss the relevance of what these cities have done for other urban centres.

This process needs to involve local government staff chosen for their expertise. The urban chapter for Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability was greatly enriched by having a senior local government staff member on the author team. It would need to draw on relevant grey literature, following the careful guidelines developed by the IPCC and the Technical Support Units regarding how to do this. What is implied here, then, is a global network of researchers and research institutions with competence on urban issues and on climate change issues who choose to work together and who collectively focus on and update the literature on each identified climate change-related risk and its implications for urban economies, populations and governments.

Such a network would need to be inclusive, encouraging new individuals and institutions to join. Initially, university departments or research institutes that have already shown leadership in the field could be invited to consider how they could contribute. The mix of institutions in this network should not all be in high-income nations and should be able to cover the literature in languages other than English. From the outset, there should be plans to expand the network – bringing in other university departments and research institutes and, as the network consolidates, supporting centres of training, including those for local governments. This would need to recognize where there is work already underway and ensure that those involved are fully included in this network. So this would include the Asian Cities Climate Change and Resilience Network (ACCCRN), the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD), the Urban Climate Change Research Network (UCCRN) and the Rockefeller Foundation’s 100 Resilient Cities, among others.

One of the most important yet difficult issues is how such a process would engage with civil society – especially those groups that are formed by or represent low-income urban dwellers. This includes hundreds of millions of urban dwellers who live in informal settlements and/or work in the informal economy. They are usually seen by local and national governments as illegal and often as detrimental
to urban development. They also include most of those in the urban population who face the greatest risks and those who are particularly vulnerable. They need to be engaged not only because they are “at risk” but also because they can bring knowledge, capacity and innovation to adaptation (and mitigation). This engagement with those most at risk has to involve more than inviting representatives to attend meetings. There is a need to also support the documentation of “good practice” by grassroots organizations and federations in what they do and contribute – and perhaps most critically in the partnerships they form with local governments.

This process would also need to think about how it could support the National Adaptation Plans that the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) will be supporting (starting with the least-developed countries). These are meant to be more operational than the existing National Adaptation Programmes of Action, where a role for sub-national stakeholders (e.g. city governments) is already recognized.

This process would develop regular briefs written for non-specialist audiences and would link with institutions or networks of local governments to develop these and ensure their widespread dissemination in a range of languages – for instance, through United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and each of its regional secretariats, ICLEI (Local Governments for Sustainability), C40–Cities Climate Leadership Group, ...

Thus, this process would help amplify the knowledge of how to act on the IPCC’s Fifth Assessment in relation to urban development and help provide the foundation for any new IPCC assessment. Regarding the financing needed to support this, it is difficult to know what to recommend, except that it has to build knowledge, capacity and learning in each nation. As we move to a far greater engagement with developing, implementing and financing adaptation (and mitigation) in each urban centre within a commitment to meeting development and disaster risk reduction needs, so the central role of changing urban planning, management and governance becomes obvious. The potential cost of what is outlined above is negligible in relation to what it could contribute in terms of knowledge on how deaths, injuries and massive economic disruptions can be avoided. There is a strong case now for support for work on urban adaptation in each nation – and beyond this on transformative adaptation.

VI. INSIGHTS INTO THE FOUR-FOLD URBAN AGENDA

City and municipal governments may look with horror at new obligations to address climate change adaptation and mitigation. Most can claim that they lack the funding, resources, knowledge and capacities to do so (and to address poverty reduction and disaster risk reduction). But it is worth reflecting on what can help achieve coherence across the four agendas. All four seek to reduce risk. Although they may highlight different risks, there are many overlaps. Addressing the needs of those living in poor quality housing built in areas at risk of flooding with no provision for the collection of solid and liquid wastes meets development needs, reduces disaster risks and should increase resilience to climate change impacts (and it can be done in ways that reduce greenhouse gas emissions – for instance in how solid waste is managed). All four aspects include as a priority attention to vulnerable populations and measures that can be identified to reduce or remove the risks they face. What is more difficult is to know how to assess and rank priorities. Avoiding dangerous climate change needs action now to get emissions down but this is reducing future risks. Priorities need to be influenced by the needs and demands of those who are most at risk but this includes those who will be confronting enormous risks in the last few decades of this century unless the needed global agreement on emissions reduction is achieved very soon. In some cities, this has been well served by elected mayors and other local politicians or civil servants who have received local support for the four agendas. Here, a focus on addressing the most pressing local risks now is integrated with measures that help reduce still-to-come local risks (adaptation and disaster risk reduction) and global risks (mitigation).

There is evidence of progress from which we can learn. In many cities, more attention is being paid by local governments to resilience to disasters, especially with regard to changes in their institutional framework and engagement with communities and other stakeholders. Also in mobilizing finance, undertaking multi-hazard risk assessments, upgrading informal settlements, adjusting urban planning and implementing building codes. Here, resilience is seen as resistance + coping capacity + recovery + adaptive capacity. 

There are also case studies of cities where local governments have begun addressing climate change adaptation. In Manizales (Colombia), the city’s long-established urban environmental policy provides a foundation for incorporating climate change adaptation into its plans. This is rooted in coherent, multi-level governance, including a capacity to integrate disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation, land use and territorial planning and development serving all stakeholders. In Chetumal (Mexico), the city and state governments are seeking to make development compatible with disaster risk reduction (especially for cyclones) and environmental protection. 

Our knowledge of how to act on key sectoral issues is also growing – for instance in changes in water resource management. There is now some attention to the politics of transformative adaptation and to the importance of a gendered perspective to understanding the relationship between the built environment and vulnerability and resilience for women and men. The power to make decisions in...
the built environment and the nature of gender subordination, rights and entitlements will influence the capacity to adapt to climate extremes. The literature on individual, household and community adaptation is also growing. This includes how “bottom-up” community asset planning can help to address the uncertainties in how climate change will impact each particular city and help mainstream this into “top-down” citywide strategic and operational planning. It includes more insight into how urban residents’ coping and adaptive practices can be supported by municipal authorities and aid organizations. The success or failure of urban societies in building resilience and moving towards transformation does not necessarily depend on the effectiveness of individual coping strategies but on the flexibility and inclusiveness of coping/adaptation systems at the individual, household and community level (i.e. the combined set of strategies). There is also the issue of whether the practices of low-income urban residents in responding to climate-related shocks and stresses can create the conditions in which individuals and households can strengthen their own long-term resilience and whether this, in turn, can generate broader political change that strengthens the position of marginalized groups in the city.

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Contents list of Environment & Urbanization Vol 26, No 1, April 2014

Editorial: Getting local governments, residents and enterprises to respond to the new IPCC assessment – David Satterthwaite

Towards transformative adaptation in cities: the IPCC’s Fifth Assessment – Aromar Revi, David Satterthwaite, Fernando Aragón-Durand, Jan Corfee-Morlot, Robert B R Kiungi, Mark Pelling, Debra Roberts, William Solecki, Sumi Chakraborty, P. Sreedhara Murthy, Cathy Needham, and Alice Sorendzik

Advocacy for urban resilience: UNISDR’s Making Cities Resilient Campaign – Cassidy Johnson and Sophie Blackburn

Re-thinking “Biomanzales”: addressing climate change adaptation in Manizales, Colombia – Jorgelina Hardoy and Luz Stella Velásquez Barrero

Institutionalizing climate change adaptation at municipal and state level in Chetumal and Quintana Roo, Mexico – Jorgelina Hardoy, Ivita Hernández, Juan Alfredo Picheco and Guadalupe Sierra

Moving beyond short-term coping and adaptation – Christine Wamsler and Elba Brink

Individual, communal and institutional responses to climate change by low-income households in Khulna, Bangladesh – Anika Nasra Haque, David Dodman and Md. Mohataz Hossain

Resilience, transition or transformation? A comparative analysis of changing water governance systems in four southern cities – Michaela Jordijk, Liliana Miranda Sara and Catherine Sutherland

Adapting the built environment: the role of gender in shaping vulnerability and resilience to climate extremes in Dhaka – Humaera Jabeen

Asset planning for climate change adaptation: lessons from Cartagena, Colombia – Alfredo Stein and Caroline Moser

Averting a downward spiral: building resilience in informal urban settlements through adaptive governance – Lonne Seeliger and Ivon Turuk

Transformational resilience thinking: putting people, power and politics at the heart of urban climate resilience – Aditya Bahadur, Zainafah Ilyas and Thomas Tanner

Feedback

African urban fantasies: dreams or nightmares? – Vanessa Watson

The real lives of urban fantasies – Gautam Blum

Interrogating urban poverty lines – the case of Zambia – Minvra Chibuye

Participatory budgeting at scale and bridging the rural–urban divide in Chengdu – Yves Cabannes and Zhuang Ming

Community-based approaches to settlement upgrading as manifested through the big ACCA projects in Metro Manila, Philippines – Jakub Galuszka

Researching entrepreneurship in low-income settlements: the strengths and challenges of participatory methods – Katherine Gough, Thilde Langsvang and Rebecca Namatovu