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From Local Action to Global Impact: Elevating Subnational Governments in the G20 Climate Agenda

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Introduction

Local governments – cities, towns and districts – are at the forefront of translating global climate and environmental commitments into tangible action. As the level of government closest to communities, they deliver essential services, manage critical infrastructure and safeguard natural resources. Their performance directly influences whether national governments can achieve their multilateral commitments under the Paris Agreement, the Kunming-Montréal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and related international commitments.

Beyond service delivery, local governments are innovation hubs. They design and implement community-driven solutions, integrate nature-based solutions and ecosystem-based approaches in urban planning and advance climate-smart infrastructure. From Cape Town's water security initiatives and Freetown's flood resilience planning to Durban's biodiversity stewardship programmes, municipalities across Africa, and the Global South more broadly, are demonstrating how localised action can deliver measurable environmental and social outcomes.

Local governments are also powerful economic actors. By investing in renewable energy, circular economy models and climate-resilient green and blue infrastructure, they stimulate green and nature-positive jobs, attract private sector investment and strengthen local economies. With the right support, local governments can transform climate, biodiversity and waste challenges into opportunities for sustainable growth, resilience and inclusive development.

South Africa's 2025 G20 presidency offers a unique opportunity to elevate local governments as strategic partners in global climate and environmental governance. By embedding local and developing country perspectives in the Environment and Climate Sustainability Working Group (ECSWG) and other Sherpa Track deliberations, the presidency can ensure that South African, African and Global South priorities are reflected in G20 outcomes.

The South African Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE), which leads the 2025 ECSWG, has identified six thematic priorities, all of which depend on municipalities as the operational bridge between national ambition and community-level delivery. At the same time, rapid urbanisation in South Africa, Africa and the Global South underscores the urgency of strengthening municipal capacity with adequate financial, technical and policy support.

Local governments as implementers of the climate and environmental agenda

South Africa's 2025 G20 presidency comes at a pivotal moment for global climate and environmental governance. As the first African nation to host the G20, South Africa can set a precedent for integrating local government perspectives into the G20 agenda, aligning with the continent's priorities under the AU's Agenda 2063, the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment and the African Group of Negotiators on Climate Change.

The South African G20 presidency also coincides with the final push to meet the Paris Agreement's 2030 targets and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), both of which require accelerated action at the local level. Given that the G20 represents over 80% of global GDP and nearly two-thirds of the world's population, South Africa's leadership can drive commitments that unlock the resources, policy frameworks and partnerships necessary for local governments to deliver transformative climate and environmental outcomes. Importantly, more than half of the world's GDP depends directly on nature and its ecosystem services, making local stewardship for these resources indispensable.[1]

[1] World Economic Forum, "How a Nature-Forward Global Economy Can Tackle Both Instability and Inequality", February 2024.

Local governments as frontline actors

Local governments sit at the nexus of policy ambition and on-the-ground delivery. As legally mandated spheres of government, led by elected councils or equivalent authorities, they deliver essential services, regulate land use and manage critical natural resources. Their direct connection to communities enables them to translate global and national commitments into tangible local action.

Far from being passive implementers, local governments are innovation hubs, testing solutions, building trust with citizens and advancing integrated approaches to climate, nature and sustainable development challenges. By safeguarding infrastructure, reducing disaster costs and creating green jobs, local governments protect lives while securing the economic foundations of long-term prosperity.

Adaptation, resilience building and risk reduction

Because they are closest to where climate impacts are most acutely felt, local governments play a pivotal role in adaptation and resilience. They assess vulnerabilities, upgrade infrastructure and design strategies that safeguard communities against droughts, floods, heatwaves and sea-level rise. Many are also first responders in times of crisis. Cape Town's 2015–2018 drought, for example, became a global case study. Through its Critical Water Shortages Disaster Plan the city combined bold demand management, public awareness campaigns and targeted infrastructure investments to avert 'Day Zero' and secure water for millions. In Freetown, Sierra Leone, anticipatory land-use planning now prevents informal construction in high-risk floodplains and on unstable slopes, reducing risk while enhancing urban safety. The city has also appointed Africa's first 'chief heat officer' to coordinate urban heat action plans, promote nature-based cooling and protect vulnerable populations. Partnerships with national agencies on early warning systems further demonstrate how collaboration across governance levels strengthens preparedness and response.[2]

Across the continent, local governments are shifting from reactive crisis management to proactive risk reduction. Durban, in eThekwini, South Africa, is pioneering integrated approaches that align climate action with ecosystem restoration and livelihoods. Its Dune Rehabilitation Programme uses nature-based solutions to buffer against coastal erosion while conserving biodiversity. Furthermore, its Biodiversity Stewardship Programme formalises conservation agreements with landowners, embedding long-term ecological protection into urban planning and creating local green jobs.

At the same time, in partnership with the EPIC Africa Network and ICLEI Africa, Durban is piloting a community-based flood early warning system in a local informal settlement. By combining municipal forecasts with real-time community alerts, the system demonstrates how high-resolution data, local knowledge and trust-building can work together to save lives and reduce losses. During the devastating 2022 floods, this system is estimated to have saved more than 300 lives, underscoring the life-saving potential of proactive, locally driven risk reduction.[3]

Mitigation and low-carbon transition

Local governments are also central to mitigation and the shift towards low-carbon development. They are accelerating renewable energy uptake by ensuring their distribution grids and metering systems cater for small-scale embedded generation (SSEG). They are retrofitting public buildings for efficiency and installing SSEG, developing their own renewable energy projects, working with independent power producers and

[2] Karen Barrass, "Building Low-Carbon Resilience into Freetown's Future", International Institute for Environment and Development, February 14, 2024.

[3] Brandon Abdinor and Michelle Sithole, *Polluter Pays for Climate Change and Loss*, Report (Centre for Environmental Rights, March 2024).

establishing wheeling frameworks to source renewable sources of power. These actions reduce emissions, enhance local energy security and stimulate green economic growth.

The Kouga Local Municipality in South Africa's Eastern Cape is leveraging private sector partnerships to invest in wind energy, boosting both local development and emissions reductions.[4] In addition, Cape Town has committed to sourcing 35% of its electricity from renewables by 2030,[5] including piloting a municipal utility-scale solar PV facility. By embedding clean energy into their mandates for transport, waste and land-use management, municipalities are advancing national decarbonisation targets while responding to energy demand and energy security challenges, including load shedding.

Safeguarding ecosystems and managing waste

As custodians of natural assets, local governments enforce land-use regulations, rehabilitate degraded ecosystems and establish coastal setback lines to protect vulnerable areas. These measures conserve biodiversity, maintain ecosystem services and build resilience against climate shocks. In South Africa, the municipality of Overstrand's holistic watershed management approach aims to rehabilitate the Onrus River catchment corridor to safeguard water resources and prevent land degradation.[6] In the Amazonian city of Manaus in Brazil, local government is promoting agroecology in urban and peri-urban agriculture as a nature-based solution to increase food security and reduce pressure on precious nearby forests.[7]

Local governments are also leading circular economy, sustainable waste and chemicals management. In Johannesburg, South Africa, a mandatory separation-at-source programme, developed through public–private partnerships, has reduced landfill pressures, expanded local recycling industries and created jobs, demonstrating the dual benefits of environmental stewardship and economic opportunity.[8]

Local intelligence and action for global impact

Because they are embedded in communities, local governments generate detailed knowledge on climate vulnerabilities, risks and losses. This data is indispensable for targeted interventions and strategic decision-making at higher levels. For example, Dakar in Senegal has established a climate impact database that records both economic and non-economic losses, informing resilience planning and strengthening the city's case to access funding.[9] Crucially, this 'local intelligence' feeds into national policy, strengthens reporting against global frameworks and shapes international processes such as the G20.

On the ground, municipalities are also powerful conveners of community action. In Kenya, Nairobi's urban tree-planting schemes and Mombasa's large-scale beach clean-ups show how local governments can mobilise citizens, demonstrating that municipalities are not only administrators but also community leaders for sustainable development.

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[4] Greg Babaya and Andy Louw, "Kouga Wind Farm Generates Multiple Benefits for Investors, Community", Stanlib, January 19, 2021.
[5] City of Cape Town, "Our Shared Energy Future: The 2050 Energy Strategy for the City of Cape Town", accessed September 5, 2025, https://resource.capetown.gov.za/documentcentre/Documents/City%20strategies%2C%20plans%20and%20frameworks/Energy_Strategy.pdf.
[6] UN Environment Programme and UN Food and Agriculture Organization, "UNEP Announces 19 Cities to Restore Nature's Rightful Place in Urban Areas", accessed September 5, 2025, https://www.decadeonrestoration.org/cities/news/unep-announces-19-cities-restore-natures-rightful-place-urban-areas
[7] UNEP and FAO, "UNEP Announces 19 Cities".
[8] Urban Sustainability Exchange, "Separation at Source Programme in City of Johannesburg", accessed September 5, 2025, https://use.metropolis.org/case-studies/separation-at-source-programme-ss
[9] PARIS21, "PARIS21 and Senegal Share Their Experience on Mobilising the Climate Change Data Ecosystem with Countries in the Region", August 22, 2024.

Platforms for collective action and partnership building

Local governments amplify their impact by acting together and with a variety of diverse stakeholders. Through national associations (eg, the South African Local Government Association [SALGA]), continental initiatives (eg, the Covenant of Mayors in Sub-Saharan Africa [CoM SSA]) and global networks (eg, Local Governments for Sustainability [ICLEI]), they coordinate positions, exchange expertise and present a collective voice in global forums. In South Africa, SALGA is supporting municipalities to integrate resilience into governance by aligning their climate action plans with the country's new Climate Change Act. At the same time, CoM SSA's 390+ signatory cities are developing sustainable energy access and climate action plans that align local action with national climate and energy priorities. Furthermore, SALGA, the DFFE and ICLEI are engaging mayors throughout South Africa in 'Town Hall COPs'. These are collaborative engagements, hosted across participating municipalities, to strengthen local climate action and environmental governance. They bring together municipalities, communities and key stakeholders to discuss challenges, share solutions and align efforts with national and global climate goals.

Furthermore, online initiatives have become extremely useful in connecting partners virtually. For example, 360 cities and regions in 78 countries have captured their voluntary commitments to the KMGBF on platforms such as CitiesWithNature and RegionsWithNature. These online partnership initiatives strengthen ecosystem restoration and biodiversity conservation, promote peer learning and serve as a commitment and reporting platform recognised in global forums such as the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and Wetlands Convention.

Barriers to effective municipal action

The Paris Agreement (2015) and successive CBD decisions (2010, 2020) formally acknowledge the role of subnational governments in bridging the gap between ambition and implementation. Across Africa, local governments are already contributing to Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), National Adaptation Plans and related environment and biodiversity strategies. Yet their ability to scale impact remains constrained by several systemic barriers, discussed below.

Finance gaps and capacity constraints

Securing sustainable financing remains one of the greatest hurdles for local governments across Africa and the wider Global South. Many municipalities face mounting debt and infrastructure backlogs, which restrict their operational flexibility, inflate costs and compromise service delivery. In South Africa, for example, 47% of clean and treated water was lost through leaks or could not be accounted for.[10]

At the continental scale, the gap between climate finance flows and adaptation needs is stark. Recent data from the Landscape of Climate Finance in Africa 2024 report shows Africa's climate finance must at least quadruple annually until 2030 to meet the investment needs for implementing its current NDCs. According to the report, only 23% of Africa's estimated needs are currently met. The investment gap is significant for both mitigation and adaptation objectives, with only 18% of annual mitigation needs and 20% of adaptation needs being met in 2021/22.[11] Meanwhile, the global biodiversity finance gap is estimated by UNEP at $700 billion annually, further underlining the systemic shortfall.[12]

Rapid urbanisation is also driving increasing waste volumes that overwhelm municipal budgets and infrastructure. Across African cities, recycling rates remain low, landfill capacity is stretched and illegal dumping contributes to greenhouse gas emissions, water contamination and public health risks. Coastal

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[10] Anja du Plessis, "Water Crisis in South Africa: Damning Report Finds 46% Contamination, 67% of Treatment Works Near to Breaking Down", *The Conversation*, December 7, 2023.
[11] Chavi Meattle et al., *Landscape of Climate Finance in Africa 2024*, Report (Climate Policy Initiative, 2024).
[12] UNEP, "Governments Adopt First Global Strategy to Finance Biodiversity: Implications for Financial Institutions", March 3, 2025.

local governments also face mounting marine litter, with plastics threatening fisheries, tourism and biodiversity. These challenges highlight the urgent need for circular economy solutions, stronger regulation and investment in green infrastructure.

Without tailored financial instruments for subnational governments, municipalities remain trapped in a cycle of underinvestment, unable to scale up the climate and biodiversity actions on which national and global targets depend. These shortfalls are further compounded by human resource limitations. Across Africa, many local governments lack staff with the technical expertise to conduct climate risk assessments, design adaptation plans or enforce environmental regulations. Smaller and rural authorities often operate without any dedicated climate or environmental personnel. Where climate strategies exist, they are frequently disconnected from economic and social planning, limiting their impact.

High staff turnover, low remuneration and limited career pathways further undermine institutional memory and capacity. Crucially, weak project design, monitoring and reporting skills make it difficult for local governments to access and manage climate finance. Without sustained investment in training, knowledge exchange and institutional strengthening, local governments risk being sidelined in national and global policy processes.

Data gaps and spatial planning limitations

Robust data underpin effective climate action, yet many local governments lack access to reliable spatial, environmental and socio-economic information. Fragmented datasets, limited information sharing between agencies and resource limitations constrain the development of robust climate vulnerability and risks assessments. While many local governments are innovating with community-based data collection and leveraging partnerships with universities, civil society and networks, gaps in consistency and coverage make it difficult to build comprehensive risk profiles. This, in turn, weakens their ability to strengthen the business case for investment, scale pilot initiatives and ensure that adaptation and resilience finance is directed to where it is most needed.

Fragmented mandates and weak coordination

Local governments operate in complex environments where responsibilities are often shared across multiple levels of government. Effective collaboration, coordinated support and multi-level governance are therefore essential to maximise their impact as co-creators of climate and environmental solutions.

Despite being central to delivery, local governments often remain peripheral in many national climate decision-making processes and in international negotiations. While global frameworks increasingly acknowledge the role of cities and regions, mechanisms for meaningful participation and structured dialogue with national governments across Africa remain limited. This disconnect constrains the ability of local governments to shape policies and finance flows that directly affect their mandates and communities. The Local Governments and Municipal Authorities Constituency to the UNFCCC has been instrumental in amplifying local voices on the global stage, but stronger integration into national and international decision-making is still urgently needed.

Elevating municipalities in the G20 climate agenda

Across Africa, local governments, whether metropolitan cities, secondary towns or districts, are the closest tier of government to citizens and the frontline of climate action. When properly empowered, local governments are more than implementers: they are innovators, conveners and long-term custodians of climate resilience and ecological health. Their effectiveness directly determines the extent to which national governments can deliver on international commitments. Under South Africa's G20 presidency, recognising local governments as co-creators of the global climate and biodiversity agenda is not symbolic; it is a strategic imperative for translating commitments into measurable, on-the-ground results.

Realising this potential requires that municipalities are equipped with the technical capacity, financial resources and political mandate to act. In South Africa alone, 257 municipalities (eight metropolitan, 44 district and 205 local) hold critical statutory mandates for natural resource management, service delivery and climate resilience. Their performance directly shapes the country's development trajectory, including reducing inequality and poverty, and creating jobs. By leveraging the convening power and insights found within national and global city networks, the South African G20 presidency can demonstrate how municipalities contribute not just to implementation but also to building a global legacy of climate and environmental leadership. In addition, the G20 can work towards solving the numerous challenges that limit the potential of local governments to drive systematic change at scale.

South Africa's G20 presidency creates a unique opportunity to elevate African local governments as indispensable partners in advancing global climate and environmental priorities. The G20 presidency's overall thematic priorities – a just energy transition, climate resilience, sustainable infrastructure, nature-positive growth and climate finance reform – cannot be achieved without the leadership and implementation capacity of local governments across the continent.

Globally, G20 members account for over 80% of global GDP and emissions, while Africa is the fastest-urbanising region and has the most climate-vulnerable populations. Bringing local government perspectives into G20 working groups, ministerial tracks and communiqués would strengthen implementation and demonstrate that multi-level governance and locally driven action enhance national credibility, global commitments and community resilience.

By positioning local governments as equal partners, South Africa's G20 presidency can embed a model of climate governance that reflects Africa's realities and sets a replicable framework for other G20 members.

Policy recommendations for the ECSWG Ministerial Declaration

To translate this vision into action, the South African G20 presidency should champion:

- a G20 multi-level climate governance declaration, recognising the indispensable role of local and regional governments in achieving the SDGs and committing to structured engagement with local government leaders;
- a dedicated local climate action forum, convened alongside ministerial meetings to elevate municipal innovations, share best practices and shape G20 policy inputs;
- a G20 climate finance access facility for cities and local governments, designed to streamline access to climate finance for subnational governments, including readiness support and project preparation assistance; and
- an urban resilience and nature-positive infrastructure initiative, to accelerate investment in nature-based solutions, disaster risk reduction and climate-smart urban planning, aligned with global frameworks such as the KMGBF, the Loss and Damage Fund and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.

Conclusion

South Africa's 2025 G20 presidency offers a rare platform to unite its domestic climate and environmental governance achievements with its global leadership ambitions. By advancing a multi-level, locally anchored agenda, South Africa can demonstrate that development progress and the climate–biodiversity–oceans nexus are mutually reinforcing; show how local governments drive the practical delivery of global and national commitments; and position South Africa as a bridge-builder between the Global North and South on climate and biodiversity governance reform.

The presidency should leverage the G20 to secure formal, lasting recognition of local governments as core partners in climate and environmental action, backed by finance, data and policy integration. Doing so would not only leave a meaningful legacy for South Africa's term but also strengthen the G20's collective ability to deliver on multilateral climate, biodiversity and sustainable development commitments.

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ICLEI Local Government for Sustainability AFRICA

Local Governments for Sustainability is a global network of 2,500+ local and regional governments committed to sustainable urban development.

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The South African Local Government Association (SALGA) is the constitutionally mandated representative body of all 257 municipalities, established to strengthen and transform local government as a driver of poverty alleviation, socio-economic development and service delivery.

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