

# It's time we include cities and regions as equal partners in global climate negotiations

March 6 2024, by Marjolaine Lamontagne and Charles Berthelet

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Last year's UN climate conference (COP28) made history in Dubai by introducing—for the very first time—language on "[transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems](#)" in the final version of the negotiated

text.

While significant, this achievement was not the only notable event of last year's [climate talks](#).

COP28 was also the occasion of the first [Local Climate Action Summit](#) (LCAS) which brought together over 250 subnational and local leaders. As part of this program a delegation of mayors and governors from around the world took the stage alongside world leaders.

The purpose of LCAS was to demonstrate how subnational authorities around the world are already taking action to bolster [climate](#) mitigation and adaptation, often surpassing the ambition of national governments. Such recognition is long overdue.

Subnational and local authorities have historically been grouped in with civil society and private interests as "observers" at COP negotiations. Such a categorization dismisses the fundamental role subnational governments play both in implementing a just transition and in managing humanity's lines of defense against the climate crisis.

It is high time that subnational voices be heard loud and clear, alongside national governments, within the United Nations' Conference of the Parties framework.

## **Broadening diplomacy**

Subnational climate summits are by no means a novelty of contemporary global governance.

Conferences of cities and regions organized by [advocacy networks](#) such as [Local Governments for Sustainability \(ICLEI\)](#), [Regions4](#), [United Cities and Local Governments \(UCLG\)](#), and the [Under2 Coalition](#) have

been around for decades. However, LCAS is the first gathering of its type to be included in the official program of a COP. This is clear progress.

LCAS sent the message that the parallel system of [subnational diplomacy that has been developing over the past three decades](#) ought to be fully recognized within global governance. Indeed, our climate goals will only be reached if subnational and national governments begin working together ensuring that policy expertise and financial resources are shared among different levels of governance, [including in national reporting to the UN](#).

The ideas presented at the LCAS forum were an exciting vision for the future, however, more work must be done to make this vision a reality.

Specifically, subnational governments need more direct access to UN institutions and a greater ability to weigh in on global policymaking and intergovernmental negotiations as part of a broader effort to ["formalize subnational voices" in the agenda of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change](#).

These actions must be done in recognition of the [central role subnational governments play in implementing carbon reduction and climate change adaptation and resilience policies](#).

## **On the frontlines**

Subnational and local governments are "[key enablers of a just transition](#)" on the frontlines of the climate crisis with often greater legitimacy and competence to oversee context specific environmental transitions well-attuned to local needs.

It is worth remembering that [cities emit up to 75 percent of global](#)

[greenhouse gas emissions](#) and often serve as the economic engines of their respective nations. Cities therefore have a critical role to play in reducing energy demands and consumption. These are ambitions which can be achieved by incorporating densification, climate adaptation, public transportation and building decarbonization into future urban planning.

Regional governments constitute a pivotal link between local and central authorities and are often in a better jurisdictional position than national governments to lead the environmental transition. Regional governments already lead by spearheading efforts on [climate adaptation](#) and [climate justice](#)—jointly tackling the twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss.

Ultimately, we must move beyond understanding subnational governments as "[non-state actors](#)"—alongside businesses, NGOs and private individuals—and begin viewing them as [state actors](#) in their own right. This means giving municipal and regional authorities more opportunities to influence national and global environmental outcomes.

The multilateral declaration that created the Coalition for High Ambition Multilevel Partnerships at COP28—endorsed as of now by 72 sovereign states—stimulates such progress, by encouraging national governments to create "[inclusive institutional and informal processes to enable subnational governments to contribute to further enhancing Nationally Determined Contributions.](#)"

## **Subnational leadership**

Luckily, the gradual recognition and inclusion of subnational authorities is underway and the trends are only accelerating. Meanwhile, some cities and regions have already leapt ahead by demonstrating path-breaking leadership.

Some, like [Québec and California, have even become fully autonomous actors of global environmental governance](#). California was a leading force in the Subnational Climate Action Leaders' Exchange launched at COP27 as a forum for incubating new ideas. One of these ideas, the [LOW-Methane initiative](#), was later launched by a coalition of international partners at COP28.

Meanwhile, [Québec was appointed to the co-presidency of the Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance](#). The BOGA is a coalition of sovereign and subnational states committed to banning fossil fuel investments and production on their territory. Québec [first accomplished this goal in 2022](#), making it the first jurisdiction in North America (and one of the first in the world) to do so.

Such transformational subnational leadership raises important questions about the validity of continuing nation-state monopoly in international affairs, especially in this evolving era of global transformations and ecological crisis.

It is crucial that local and regional governments [be formally awarded a distinct status and role](#) in global governance institutions, differentiating them from [other "non-state" stakeholders](#).

The creation of the [Secretary General's Advisory Group on Local and Regional Governments](#) undoubtedly represents a step in the right direction. However, much remains to be done to meaningfully reform multilateralism in the lead-up to the UN [Summit of the Future](#) next September and COP29 in December 2024.

Simply put, subnational and [local authorities](#) must be brought into the room where diplomacy and global governance takes place. An ambition which entails a critical reflection on the inherent interconnections between local, subnational and national activities.

Including the subnational and local levels is not just a good idea, it is a crucial stepping stone in achieving global climate goals.

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Citation: It's time we include cities and regions as equal partners in global climate negotiations (2024, March 6) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-03-cities-regions-equal-partners-global.html>

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