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LOCALIZING GLOBAL CLIMATE COMMITMENTS: CHALLENGES FOR MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES IN SOUTH AFRICAN CITIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the challenges of localising global climate commitments, specifically the Paris Agreement, within South Africa's marginalised informal settlements. Employing a Global–National–Local analytical framework, the study explores how international agreements are translated into national policies, such as South Africa's Updated Nationally Determined Contributions (2021) and the Climate Change Act 22 of 2024, and subsequently implemented at the municipal level. Through qualitative content analysis of policy documents, implementation reports, and academic literature, the study identifies key barriers, including persistent policy fragmentation, the uneven allocation of climate finance (often misaligned with local needs), and limited institutionalisation of participatory governance in adaptation planning. While national policies advocate for urban resilience, poor implementation often leaves informal settlements behind. The paper concludes with actionable recommendations for bridging this divide, including enhancing multi-level coordination, allocating dedicated adaptation finance for informal settlements, and institutionalising community-led planning. These strategies aim to align global climate ambitions and equitable local outcomes.

KEY WORDS climate adaptation, marginalized communities, global–national–local policy alignment, climate finance, urban resilience.

1. INTRODUCTION

Marginalised communities in South Africa's informal settlements face disproportionate climate risks due to spatial inequality, inadequate infrastructure, and weak governance (UN-Habitat, 2022). Rapid urbanisation, coupled with poor service delivery and fragile governance mechanisms, has elevated their exposure to climate-related hazards such as flooding, extreme heat, and disease outbreaks (Climate Policy Initiative [CPI], 2021). Although the Paris Agreement (UNFCCC, 2015) and South Africa's Updated Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs, 2021) prioritise equitable adaptation, translating these commitments into tangible, community-level actions remains inconsistent. The 2022 UN-Habitat *World Cities Report* and South Africa's 2019 *National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy* both highlight persistent barriers to scaling localised and inclusive climate actions within vulnerable settlements. These challenges undermine efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG 11), which emphasises the importance of inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable urban development.

This paper adopts a Global–National–Local analytical framework to examine how international climate agreements, such as the Paris Agreement, are interpreted through national policy instruments, including South Africa's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and the Climate Change Act 22 of 2024, and subsequently operationalised through municipal policies and interventions. However, this translation process is often uneven, hindered by institutional fragmentation, weak intergovernmental coordination, and under-resourced municipalities. The framework serves as a lens to identify points of misalignment, particularly in responding to the urgent needs of informal settlements. Accordingly, the paper explores how and why these breakdowns occur, focusing on institutional, financial, and participatory gaps. Although South Africa's Updated NDC (2021) and the Climate Change

Act 22 of 2024 emphasise inclusive adaptation, adaptation funding remains disproportionately low compared to mitigation investments, with limited direct access at the local level (CPI, 2021; Oxfam, 2020).

Despite these systemic challenges, emerging local initiatives, such as retrofitting projects, decentralised renewable energy pilots, and community-led adaptation plans, illustrate the potential of localised climate action when supported by coherent policy, inclusive governance, and adequate finance (UN-Habitat, 2022; CPI, 2021). The Cradle to Cradle (C2C) model informs this analysis by promoting sustainable, circular solutions, such as retrofitting and decentralised energy systems, for informal settlements. The C2C model aligns with the Paris Agreement's goals by advancing resource efficiency and sustainability in adaptation strategies (UNFCCC, 2015). In the context of informal settlements, C2C principles offer guidance for infrastructure upgrades that minimise environmental harm while maximising social benefit. However, effective application of C2C principles requires participatory governance and dedicated funding, both frequently lacking in South Africa's climate response. By examining policy disconnects and proposing actionable solutions, this study contributes to the discourse on inclusive urban climate adaptation.

This study investigates the challenges of translating the commitments of the Paris Agreement into localised climate actions that benefit marginalised communities in South African cities. The central research question is as follows: *“How do governance, finance, and participation gaps hinder the localisation of global climate commitments in South Africa's informal settlements?”* To address this question, the study explores the institutional, socio-economic, and policy barriers limiting the effective implementation of global adaptation goals at the local level. It also assesses strategies for enhancing inclusivity, accountability,

and resource distribution to strengthen climate resilience in vulnerable urban communities.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite South Africa's progressive climate policy framework, informal settlements remain largely excluded from adaptation planning and financing. The localisation of global climate goals is uneven, particularly in informal settlements that are disproportionately vulnerable to climate impacts. The Climate Change Act 22 of 2024 aims to institutionalise adaptation and resilience-building at the municipal and provincial levels. However, its implementation is hindered by intergovernmental misalignment, weak coordination, and limited local capacity. These challenges disrupt the coherent translation of climate action from global to national to local levels. Key barriers include persistent policy fragmentation, limited institutional accountability, and a constrained understanding of participation, often reduced to consultation rather than genuine co-design or shared decision-making. Moreover, finance mismatches remain a critical obstacle: only around 10% of global climate finance targets adaptation, with minimal direct access for local governments (CPI, 2021; Oxfam, 2020).

Empirical studies have consistently shown that, while adaptation is prioritised at the national level, informal settlements are frequently excluded from funding and programmatic interventions. South Africa's National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy (NCCAS) highlights the enduring disconnect between national climate ambitions and the realities of vulnerable communities (Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment [DFFE], 2019). Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) and Local Adaptation Plans (LAPs) often omit informal settlements, despite their acute exposure to intensifying climate risks. Furthermore, climate finance remains predominantly focused on mitigation, with limited investment in decentralised, community-specific

adaptation, especially initiatives aligned with Cradle to Cradle (C2C) principles. These systemic challenges are compounded by fragmented governance structures and a lack of institutionalised accountability at the local level.

This study investigates how global commitments such as the Paris Agreement are operationalised through South Africa's national frameworks and examines the institutional, financial, and participatory gaps that inhibit inclusive, locally grounded climate adaptation for marginalised urban communities.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. Climate Resilience in Informal Settlements

Informal settlements are increasingly recognised as critical sites for climate adaptation due to their high exposure to environmental hazards and exclusion from formal urban planning (UN-Habitat, 2022; CPI, 2021). Globally, cities in the Global South, such as Dhaka, Lagos, and Rio de Janeiro, have adopted various strategies to integrate informal areas into climate risk reduction efforts. These include early warning systems, climate-resilient infrastructure, and community-based adaptation (CBA) initiatives (Alam et al., 2021; Carmin et al., 2020).

In contrast, South Africa's adaptation efforts lack institutionalised participation and decentralised financing mechanisms. Adaptation planning frequently excludes informal settlement communities, thereby reinforcing spatial marginalisation (UN-Habitat, 2022; Oxfam, 2020). According to UN-Habitat (2022), the effectiveness of climate action in informal settlements depends on context-specific interventions, particularly those co-designed with affected communities. Although South Africa's updated Nationally Determined Contributions (2021) and the Climate Change Act 22 of 2024 identify informal settlements as priority areas, implementation remains fragmented due to weak local capacity and inadequate policy translation. The *Climate Policy*

Initiative (2021) further highlights that adaptation finance allocated to informal settlements is minimal compared to investments in mitigation-oriented megaprojects.

3.2. Comparative Insights from Other Developing Countries

International experiences offer valuable lessons on localising global climate commitments. In Bangladesh, local governments collaborate with NGOs to implement community-driven flood defences and climate-smart housing (Alam et al., 2021). Brazil's National Adaptation Plan promotes urban agriculture and green infrastructure in favelas through municipal partnerships (Carmin et al., 2020). Kenya's Makueni County Climate Fund enables direct community input into local adaptation priorities. This model, now cited by global institutions as best practice, demonstrates the value of decentralised and participatory climate finance (UN-Habitat, 2022). These examples demonstrate that effective localisation of global climate goals requires strong subnational institutions, accessible finance, and institutionalised participatory governance. In contrast, South Africa presents a more fragmented institutional context, with limited devolution of adaptation mandates and constrained local implementation capacity.

3.3. Climate Finance and Resource Distribution

Recent global reports emphasise a persistent mismatch between climate finance flows and the adaptation needs of vulnerable populations. Adaptation receives less than 10% of global climate finance, with only a fraction reaching the local level (CPI, 2021). In South Africa, international funding is typically channelled toward national-level initiatives, leaving local governments under-resourced. While the Climate Change Act 22 of 2024 acknowledges the importance of targeted support for informal settlements, it lacks mechanisms to ensure direct funding allocation, thereby perpetuating

structural inequities.

Oxfam (2020) notes that, without "readiness funding" and technical support, municipalities face considerable barriers in accessing climate finance mechanisms such as the Green Climate Fund. This financing gap weakens the potential for locally appropriate adaptation interventions and undermines the Paris Agreement's principle of equity.

3.4. Participatory Governance in Climate Adaptation

Participatory governance is increasingly recognised as central to effective climate adaptation. Mees et al. (2019) call for a shift from passive consultation to active power-sharing between communities and local governments. UN-Habitat (2022) similarly notes that "community-led planning processes are more effective in producing equitable climate outcomes," especially in vulnerable urban contexts.

South Africa's experience with participatory governance is mixed. In cities such as Durban and Cape Town, stakeholder involvement in Local Climate Action Plans is evident, yet these efforts often marginalise informal residents or rely heavily on NGOs to facilitate participation. Genuine co-production of climate solutions remains limited, highlighting a gap in operationalising the participatory principles of the Paris Agreement at the local level.

International models, such as participatory budgeting in Brazil and Kenya's Makueni model, demonstrate that institutionalising participation can lead to more inclusive and accountable climate responses. Entrenching these practices within South African municipalities is essential to advancing climate justice and ensuring that adaptation planning reflects the lived realities of marginalised communities.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research Design and Data Collection

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach, focusing on the global–national–local trajectory of climate policy implementation in South African cities. It is designed to explore how international climate commitments, notably the Paris Agreement, are interpreted within national policy frameworks and subsequently operationalised at the local level, particularly in marginalised urban communities. The primary data sources for the review were drawn from multiple governance scales as follows:

- Global: The Paris Agreement (UNFCCC, 2015) and selected UN-Habitat reports;
- National: South Africa's Updated Nationally Determined Contributions (2021), the Climate Change Act 22 of 2024, and the National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy (NCCAS);
- Local: Municipal Integrated Development Plans (IDPs), Spatial Development Frameworks (SDFs), Local Adaptation Plans (LAPs), and program reports from key initiatives such as the Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement Programme (REIPPPP) and housing retrofitting programs. These documents were sourced from four key metropolitan municipalities, that is, the City of Johannesburg, the City of Cape Town, eThekweni, and Ekurhuleni, to capture a diversity of local experiences.
- Academic and practitioner literature: Peer-reviewed articles and reports published between 2020 and 2025 on participatory governance, local adaptation, and urban climate finance.

The documents were selected based on their relevance to climate adaptation in informal settlements, public availability, and alignment with key themes identified in recent scholarship (e.g., DFFE, 2019; UN-Habitat, 2022). The study also integrates grey literature, including NGO assessments and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) reports, to incorporate practical insights into implementation challenges not typically reflected in formal policy documents.

While the study does not include primary interviews, this limitation is acknowledged and justified by the depth and policy orientation of the document review. Future research could benefit from engaging directly with municipal officials and community members to validate the findings and better capture the lived experiences of climate policy localisation.

4.2. Data Analysis

The collected documents were analysed using thematic content analysis, a structured method suited to qualitative data interpretation, which enables the identification of recurring themes and patterns. This methodological approach follows established principles of qualitative content analysis, as outlined by Kuckartz and Rädiker (2023). The analysis proceeded in several iterative stages.

The process began with repeated readings of the documents to gain familiarity with the content, followed by open coding. During this phase, key phrases, sentences, and paragraphs related to climate policy, spatial planning, governance, finance, and informal settlements were highlighted. These initial codes were then grouped into higher-level conceptual categories. For instance, references to issues such as “budget shortfalls” and the “absence of dedicated funding streams” were consolidated under a broader theme of “Climate Finance Allocation.”

Once coding and categorisation were complete, each coded segment was

interpreted within its broader textual and institutional context to preserve the nuance and intent of the original content. To strengthen the analytical rigour of the study, triangulation was employed across different document types, for example, by comparing national policies, municipal reports, and academic sources. This cross-source comparison enhanced the credibility and robustness of the findings.

The final phase involved identifying patterns and synthesising recurring themes across the categories to form the study's key insights. All analysis was conducted manually, without the use of specialised qualitative data analysis software or artificial intelligence tools. This ensured a more context-sensitive interpretation of meaning, particularly given the complex and multilayered nature of climate governance documents.

5. KEY FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the study, organised under two overarching themes: the challenges in localising the Paris Agreement and the role of governance frameworks in strengthening urban climate resilience. The analysis shows ongoing gaps and new opportunities between global, national, and local climate policies.

5.1. Challenges in Localising the Paris Agreement Commitments

5.1.1. POLICY COHERENCE AND FRAGMENTATION

One of the most prominent findings is the lack of policy coherence between global climate goals and their local implementation. While South Africa's National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy (NCCAS) acknowledges informal settlements as priority areas, reflecting the equity and resilience imperatives of the Paris Agreement, this national policy intent often fails to materialise at the municipal level. This disconnect weakens the Global–National–Local policy chain. For example, the City of Johannesburg's

2021 Integrated Development Plan refers to climate adaptation in general terms but makes no direct mention of protecting informal settlements against climate risks, despite the national directive to do so. The plan states: “The City will mainstream climate change resilience, protect our scarce natural resources and embrace renewable, green solutions while delivering on core municipal services that are supported by well-maintained infrastructure networks, both new and existing” (City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality, 2021, p. 25). Although the NCCAS mandates the integration of adaptation measures into city planning, the implementation of this directive is left to the discretion and capacity of individual municipalities. Consequently, policy translation remains uneven, resulting in fragmented planning processes where high-level ambitions fail to translate into actionable local strategies. The Climate Change Act 22 of 2024 attempts to address this by legally requiring municipalities to incorporate adaptation into spatial plans. Nevertheless, implementation remains inconsistent, especially regarding the specific vulnerabilities of informal settlements.

5.1.2. UNEVEN CLIMATE FINANCE ALLOCATION

The analysis further revealed a systemic bias in climate finance allocation, with a strong preference for large-scale mitigation-oriented initiatives such as utility-scale renewable energy projects. This prioritisation often comes at the expense of community-based adaptation efforts. Informal settlements, in particular, are frequently excluded from direct access to climate finance, which restricts the application of localised sustainability strategies based on Cradle to Cradle (C2C) principles, such as decentralised waste systems and green housing. As Oxfam (2020, p. 23) notes, “there is a lack of data on how much climate finance is being spent at the local level in partnership with local communities, but the limited data which does exist suggests it is very little.” This observation aligns with Climate Policy Initiative’s (2021)

global findings, which indicate that less than 10% of tracked climate finance is directed toward adaptation, and an even smaller fraction reaches the local level. Moreover, municipalities often lack the technical capacity, institutional support, or enabling frameworks to develop bankable proposals for climate finance instruments like the Green Climate Fund. These constraints significantly limit their ability to implement locally relevant adaptation solutions.

5.1.3. LIMITED STAKEHOLDER INCLUSION IN DECISION-MAKING

Although participatory governance is a foundational principle of the Paris Agreement, national policies in South Africa have struggled to mandate and operationalise meaningful community participation at the local level. While the Climate Change Act 22 of 2024 contains provisions for stakeholder engagement, the reviewed documents suggest that this engagement is often superficial, comprising one-time consultations rather than sustained, co-productive planning processes. Marginalised urban communities are typically consulted but rarely empowered to influence climate policy direction meaningfully. An exception is Durban, where initiatives such as the “*iQhaza Lethu*” (Our Participation) project involve community-led mapping in informal settlements to better understand local needs and support upgrading efforts. However, such practices remain isolated and are not yet institutionalised across South African municipalities. This gap undermines inclusive climate action and weakens the localisation of Paris Agreement principles. As emphasised by Oxfam (2020), effective climate adaptation must be rooted in local participation, particularly in decisions that affect vulnerable populations.

5.2. The Role of Governance in Localising Climate Commitments

5.2.1. MISALIGNMENT BETWEEN NATIONAL MANDATES AND LOCAL CAPACITY

While national policy instruments, including the Climate Change Act 22 of 2024, provide a legal and strategic mandate for local adaptation, municipal governments often lack the institutional capacity to implement these frameworks effectively. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2023, p. 19) notes that “The development of adaptation-related expertise may be too costly for most local authorities. With the increasing frequency and intensity of climate variability and climate extremes, new and innovative adaptation knowledge and capacity are needed, going beyond what is available at most local levels”. Essentially, the limited availability of technical knowledge, human resources, and institutional infrastructure at the local level hinders the operationalisation of national objectives. Additionally, inconsistent intergovernmental coordination, exacerbated by political turnover at the municipal level, further disrupts the continuity of climate action and undermines the translation of national intent into local practice.

5.2.2. WEAK ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS

A notable gap across municipal plans is the lack of monitoring and accountability mechanisms to assess the local implementation of global climate commitments. Most Local Adaptation Plans (LAPs), where they exist, do not contain clear indicators, timelines, or enforcement tools. This reflects a broader challenge identified globally, as Christiansen et al. (2016, p. 4) observe: “There is no universally agreed method for monitoring and evaluating adaptation.” The absence of standardised evaluation metrics limits the ability to assess adaptation progress or to make meaningful comparisons

across cities. Similarly, Klein, Macura, and Canales (2023) highlight that “data on project outputs and outcomes is not easily accessible or publicly available... evaluations of adaptation interventions are rare.” These shortcomings significantly impede the capacity to track effectiveness or diagnose bottlenecks in localising climate policy, particularly in applying C2C principles. Without systematic monitoring and evaluation, adaptation strategies remain aspirational rather than actionable.

5.2.3. MISSED OPPORTUNITIES FOR CO-GOVERNANCE

The document analysis also found that the potential for institutionalising multi-stakeholder governance, widely recognised as critical for localisation, is largely unrealised. While some national frameworks gesture toward collaboration with civil society and the private sector, few municipalities have developed formalised or sustained mechanisms for inclusive governance. As Pfisterer and Van Tulder (2021, p. 46) argue, “where partnerships exist, they are typically short-term and project-based rather than embedded in governance structures.” In contrast, international models such as Kenya’s Makueni County Climate Fund and Brazil’s participatory budgeting frameworks illustrate how inclusive governance structures can enhance the equity and effectiveness of local climate responses. These models offer valuable lessons for South Africa in bridging the gap between policy and practice.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined how global climate commitments, particularly those under the Paris Agreement, are interpreted through national frameworks and operationalised at the subnational level in South Africa. By tracing the Global–National–Local trajectory of climate governance, the analysis revealed persistent challenges in policy coherence, local capacity, and climate finance distribution, especially in addressing the vulnerabilities of informal settlements. While South Africa has

developed progressive climate policy instruments, including the Climate Change Act 22 of 2024 and the Updated Nationally Determined Contributions (2021), the effective localisation of these commitments remains constrained. Informal settlements continue to be excluded from spatial planning frameworks, and most adaptation finance remains centrally allocated. Participatory governance, seen as a cornerstone of equitable climate resilience, is inconsistently applied and often limited to symbolic consultative exercises rather than enabling community leadership.

Despite these challenges, the study identified significant opportunities for transformative adaptation through localised, inclusive governance. International models such as Kenya’s County Climate Funds and Brazil’s participatory budgeting frameworks offer scalable lessons for decentralising climate planning and empowering local actors. Drawing on these insights, the following recommendations are proposed for enhancing the localisation of climate commitments in South Africa:

- Multi-level coordination mechanisms should be strengthened by establishing national-to-local climate coordination platforms. These platforms would clarify mandates, improve intergovernmental alignment, and embed climate adaptation frameworks (such as the Climate Change Act and NDC targets) within local governance systems, thereby enhancing the coherence of the Global–National–Local policy flow.
- Dedicated funding streams should be created to support adaptation in informal settlements. National climate budgets and international funding proposals should explicitly ring-fence resources for projects aligned with Cradle-to-Cradle principles, including decentralised service delivery and sustainable housing solutions. This would address the

systemic exclusion of vulnerable communities from climate finance flows, especially large-scale adaptation investments.

- Municipal capacity must be bolstered through sustained investment in training, technical support, and institutional infrastructure. Local authorities require the tools and knowledge to conduct climate risk assessments, develop localised adaptation plans, and prepare funding proposals that are responsive to their specific contexts. This will empower municipalities to effectively operationalise national adaptation priorities within IDPs and LAPs, supporting Global–National–Local coherence.
- Participatory planning processes must be institutionalised. Municipalities should be mandated to co-develop Local Adaptation Plans with communities, civil society organisations, and other local stakeholders. Such processes should move beyond symbolic consultation and embody the principles of co-production, ensuring that local knowledge and priorities inform planning and implementation as required by the Paris Agreement.
- Monitoring and evaluation frameworks should be improved by integrating outcome-based indicators for urban adaptation into the national climate monitoring system. These indicators should include metrics specific to informal settlements and should be publicly accessible to promote transparency and accountability. This is crucial for tracking the effectiveness of interventions and identifying bottlenecks in localising global climate commitments.
- Finally, South Africa should explore opportunities to adapt successful localisation mechanisms from the Global

South. Piloting approaches modelled on Kenya's Makeni County Climate Fund and Brazil's participatory budgeting, appropriately tailored to the South African context, could support more inclusive and resilient adaptation pathways.

These recommendations should be interpreted in light of the study's methodological scope. As the analysis relied exclusively on publicly available policy and planning documents, it did not include primary data from local stakeholders or community members. While the selected documents were recent and relevant, their coverage and quality varied across municipalities, which may have influenced the depth of local insights. Moreover, given the evolving nature of climate policy, the findings are time-sensitive and should be revisited as implementation progresses.

Nevertheless, this study offers a timely and policy-relevant contribution to debates on climate localisation. It emphasises the importance not only of enacting robust national climate laws but also of ensuring that such frameworks are supported by political will, financial equity, local ownership, and institutional capacity. Future empirical research is urgently needed to track the impact of the *Climate Change Act 22 of 2024* on informal settlements and to inform strategies for inclusive and just climate transitions in South African cities.

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