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LOCAL GOVERNMENT AS CLIMATE ACTORS; THE UNTAPPED POTENTIAL IN INDIA, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE ON KERALA

AUTHOR - ADV NIRVRITHY PRASANNAN S, ADVOCATE

CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF KERALA, DEPARTMENT OF LAW

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Abstract

A crucial but underutilised role is played by local governments in India's climate governance framework. Panchayaths and municipal bodies are in a unique position to convert national and state climate objectives into locally relevant mitigation and adaptation measures because of their constitutional responsibilities over land use, water, local infrastructure, and community welfare. Kerala is used as a specific case study in this article to investigate the role that local self-governments (LSGs) can play as climate actors. Teachings can be learnt from Kerala's experience following the 2018 floods, the Haritha Kerala Mission's institutional structure, the state-level climate planning (SAPCC 2.0), community organisations like Kudumbashree, and new pilot projects (like carbon-neutral island plans). The report outlines current programs, identifies institutional and capacity deficiencies, and makes useful suggestions for scaling and mainstreaming local climate across india.

Research Gap; Local governments are underutilized in climate action, There's limited study on scaling Kerala's decentralized models.

Statement of the Problem; Climate policies in India remain top-down, Local bodies lack tools, funds, and formal roles in climate governance

Research Question; What roles can LSGs play in climate action? How can Kerala's model be scaled nationwide?

Objectives; Assess LSG-led climate initiatives in Kerala, Propose a framework to empower LSGs across India.

Hypotheses; Empowered LSGs can drive climate resilience, Kerala's post-flood reforms offer scalable models.

Methodology; Qualitative case study based on Kerala's experience. Data from reports, policies, and expert analyses.

Major Findings; Kerala's LSGs show effective local climate action. Barriers include finance, capacity, and data gaps.

Suggestions; Enable: Set up Climate Cells and technical support hubs. Train 1,000+ LSG climate officers nationwide.

Finance: Launch Climate Block Grants and blended finance. Enable access to carbon credits and outcome payments.

Integrate: Mandate LAPCCs in local budgets and planning. Use standard metrics linked to climate funding.

Introduction

Urban flooding, coastal erosion, localised temperature increases, changed monsoon patterns, and public health effects are all signs of climate change, but policy responses are frequently still top-heavy. The first responders and primary managers of common infrastructure, such as roads, drains, water supply, sanitation, solid waste, local markets, and community welfare, are local governments (rural panchayats and urban municipalities) in India's multi-tiered governance structure. Local governments can adapt climate responses to

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place-specific risk profiles and social realities thanks to their close proximity to citizens. They can also mobilise social capital and local institutions to promote resilience and behaviour change. In spite of this, formal climate planning and funding discussions usually ignore local bodies. Kerala, a state with significant climate vulnerability, a long history of decentralisation, and vibrant community institutions, serves as an example of both. Local governments oversee resources and services (such as local roads, solid waste management, drainage, and water supply) that are directly impacted by climate variability. They can lessen vulnerability by making simple investments because they have control over these processes (e.g., improve drainage to reduce flood exposure, decentralised water harvesting to manage drought). It explains the functional closeness.[147] Targeted awareness campaigns and quick mobilization during disasters are made possible by the relationships and understanding of local livelihoods that local governments and community organizations (youth clubs, women's self-help groups) have built. Innovation and policy subsidiarity such as Decentralized units are able to rapidly iterate and create templates for larger programs by piloting low-cost, replicable interventions (such as micro-retention basins, community composting, and coastal vegetation restoration). Limitations of current practice However, many local governments lack direct access to climate finance, face strict regulations, and have limited capacity (technical skills, planning, intergovernmental coordination).[148]

Kerala as an illustrative case: context and drivers

Kerala is particularly vulnerable to landslides, coastal erosion, and extreme monsoon swings. In August 2018, the state suffered from severe flooding, which revealed institutional flaws in its infrastructure and planning. The state then initiated a number of institutional responses, including the Haritha Kerala Mission (HKM), which aims to mainstream environmental management through local governments, Rebuild Kerala (RKI) for resilience and reconstruction, and a revised State Action Plan on Climate Change (SAPCC 2.0) that aligns state priorities with local implementation. Kerala is a valuable laboratory for comprehending local climate action in India as a result of these developments.[149]

Mapping Kerala's local climate initiatives

establishing local action through the Haritha Keralam Mission (HKM); Haritha Kerala, a state government initiative, combines sustainable agriculture, waste management, and water conservation. Importantly, it uses panchayats and municipalities as execution nodes and mobilises local self-governments as the operational units for implementation, offering technical coordination and departmental convergence. HKM's focus on people-centered, decentralised projects (watershed revival, source segregation, and community composting) shows how a state mission can operationalise local climate outcomes.[150] LAPCC pilots and Local Action Plans on Climate Change (LAPCC),To identify place-specific hazards and interventions (such as micro-watershed works, early warning linkages, and mangrove restoration), several local governments in Kerala have created Local Action Plans on Climate Change (LAPCC). These plans are designed to work in tandem with central schemes and the SAPCC.[151]

coverage and technical depth vary across local bodies. programs for community resilience and Kudumbashree. The women's network, Kudumbashree, actively engages in environmental management, ranging from

[147] Directorate of Environment and Climate Change, Government of Kerala. (2022, December). Kerala State Action Plan on Climate Change 2.0 (2023–2030). Government of Kerala.
[148] Haritha Keralam Mission, Government of Kerala. (n.d.). Haritha Keralam Mission — Profile and programmes..
[149] World Bank. (2022, June). India — The first Resilient Kerala Program (Rebuild Kerala Initiative summary). World Bank.
[150] National Institute of Disaster Management, & State Post Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA). (2018). Floods and landslides — Kerala 2018: Post disaster needs assessment. National Institute of Disaster Management.
[151] WRI India. (2024, November 19). Local self-governments lead Kerala's shift to clean energy transition. World Resources Institute India.

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livelihood resilience to waste management. Additionally, it conducts disaster awareness and child-led resilience programs (such as the "Sajjam" program), which show how community networks can be strengthened to adapt to climate change.[152] Post-disaster climate-smart governance: World Bank Resilience Programs and Rebuild Kerala Safer housing, improved infrastructure, and risk-informed planning were given priority in the Rebuild Kerala Initiative, which coordinated state reconstruction and resilience investments after 2018. Resilience financing and technical assistance, which prioritised decentralised decision-making and enhanced local capacities, were backed by international partners (World Bank). Recent pilots include the local clean energy transition and carbon-neutral island planning (Goshree DPR). More recent initiatives include WRI-backed local clean energy transition pilots that help and DPRs for carbon-neutral projects in island panchayats (Goshree project around Kochi).[153]

Achievements and lessons from Kerala's local action

Operationalising convergence: By coordinating departments and resources, HKM demonstrates how a state mission can mainstream environmental objectives through LSGs. Community mobilisation: Kudumbashree created local support and sustainable practices by connecting livelihoods and food/waste systems. Learning after a disaster: The 2018 floods sparked structural changes (resilience planning, RKI) that brought local risk assessments and reconstruction guidelines more focus. Among the lessons learnt and enduring limitations are Bottlenecks in capacity: Many local governments lack the planning resources and technical staff necessary to create large-scale climate-proof projects. Fragmented finance: There are still few steady multi-year funding sources for LSG climate projects, even as states launch missions and pilots. Data gaps and monitoring: Evidence-based prioritisation is limited by the frequently insufficient local risk information (asset inventories, local climate projections). Shortcomings in integration: Not all local plans (LAPCCs) are successfully incorporated into state budgets. Based on Kerala's experience, this section suggests a workable, three-pronged framework to scale local government climate action: Enable, Finance, Integrate. ENABLE: technical assistance and institutional capacity Local Climate Cells: In each LSG (or group of small panchayats), designate and fund a Climate Cell or nodal officer who is in charge of risk assessments, project planning, and communication with state agencies.[154] Offer training toolkits that are standardised. Knowledge Hubs: To offer modular planning templates (such as the LAPCC template, checklists for coastal erosion, and a playbook for nature-based solutions), state governments ought to operationalise technical support hubs, just like HKM does. FINANCE: stable, adaptable funding tools such as Climate Block Grants: Provide LSGs with conditional climate block grants for adaptation and mitigation projects that are prioritised (e.g., decentralised renewable energy, urban green/open space, drainage upgrades) with streamlined application processes. Windows for blended financing: The State and State and national climate funds should create blended finance instruments targeting LSGs, combining grants for capital costs with low-interest loans for revenue-generating interventions (waste composting plants, microgrids). Access to carbon and performance payments: For mitigation pilots (e.g., carbon-neutral island projects), create pathways for local bodies to access carbon finance, green bonds, or outcome-based payments. Mandatory LAPCC–Panchayat Budget Link: Local Action Plans on Climate Change should be required to be

[152] Government of Kerala, Local Self Government Department, & Kudumbashree. (2023, July). Sajjam: Building resilience programme. Government of Kerala.
[153]Government of Kerala. (2024). State unveils carbon-neutral Goshree project DPR (Kerala islands). [Press release/news report]. Government of Kerala.
[154] Climate Action Network South Asia. (2019). Climate resilient Kerala: SAPCC reviews and recommendations (2017–2019). Climate Action Network South Asia.

integrated into annual plans and budgets of LSGs, with simple reporting metrics. Local risk information systems: Invest in district-level data platforms that provide LSGs with hazard maps, climate projections at relevant scales, and asset vulnerability modules. Intergovernmental coordination protocols: Form clear protocols for LSG-state-central coordination during disaster response and for routine planning (e.g., building permits linked to hazard maps).[155]

Recommended Kerala-specific actions that have national relevance

Scale HKM's convergence model nationally: The Haritha Kerala model a mission which coordinates technical support while using LSGs as the executing agencies can be adapted to other states' environmental missions to promote local ownership. Institutionalise community networks (Kudumbashree-style) in climate programs: Women's and community groups are effective vectors for waste segregation, agroecological practices and resilience training; national programs should create conditional finance streams routed through such networks. Post-disaster reconstruction to mainstream resilience: Rebuild Kerala offers a template for integrating resilience into reconstruction funding and standards; states should codify protocols that require climate-proofing in reconstruction grants.[156] Support municipal and panchayat renewable energy plans: WRI-led pilots and DPRs for carbon-neutral islands demonstrate scalable approaches for local energy transitions (microgrids, rooftop solar on community assets). Provide subsidy windows and technical assistance for LSGs to develop energy transition plans. Local health and climate interface: Kerala's recent SAPCCHH (State Action Plan on Climate Change and Human Health) shows the importance of integrating health preparedness at LSG level; implement joint health-climate preparedness modules for LSGs. Issue guidelines for mandatory inclusion of LAPCCs in LSG annual plans.[157] Launch a training-of-trainers program to create 1,000 LSG climate officers across priority states. Pilot a Climate Block Grant in a cohort of 50 panchayats with monitoring dashboards. Roll out blended financing windows for LSGs with concessional credit and grant components. Institutionalise technical support hubs (based on Haritha Kerala structure) in every state. Create a simple, standard indicator set for LSG climate action (e.g., number of climate-proofed assets, hectares of watershed restored, local GHG reduction estimates) linked to outcome-based funding.[158]

Challenges and risk mitigation

Political economy risks: Local climate projects may face elite capture or politicisation. Mitigation: transparent grievance redressal, community monitoring, and performance-linked grants. Technical complexity: Some climate interventions (coastal engineering, flood modelling) require specialist inputs. Mitigation: state technical hubs and university partnerships. Sustainability of operations: Many local projects fail when the recurrent cost burden falls on LSGs. Mitigation: design revenue-generating components or secure provision for recurrent costs in state grants.[159]

Conclusion

Local governments represent an untapped reservoir of climate action potential in India. Kerala's experience from Haritha Keralam's convergence approach and Kudumbashree's

[155] National Centre for Disease Control. (2024, October). Kerala State Action Plan on Climate Change and Human Health (SAPCCHH). Government of India.

[156] 1. State Government of Kerala. Kerala State Climate Change Adaptation Mission (KSCCAM): Mission approved by State Cabinet on August 2, 2023, to serve as a monitoring and coordinating mechanism for climate change-related activities, aligning economic development with long-term targets of GHG reduction and adoption of cleaner technologies; headed by a Chief Resilience Officer

[157] 4. Government of India, Ministry of Panchayati Raj. 15th Finance Commission Grants to Rural Local Bodies in Kerala. In FY 2024-25, ₹266.80 crore released as untied grants for all eligible district, block, and gram panchayats to strengthen local self-governance and essential services.

[158] Cochin University of Science and Technology. (n.d.). Local Action Plans on Climate Change (LAPCC) pilot documents. CUSAT.

[159] 2. Government of India & World Bank. Kerala Climate Resilient Agri-Value Chain Modernization (KERA) Project. Approved October 2024; aims to support ~400,000 farmers with climate-smart practices, build resilient agricultural value chains, especially for farmers of spices like cardamom, vanilla, and rubber; includes infrastructure for food parks, financing access for agribusiness SMEs.

community engagement to post-2018 resilience planning and nascent carbon-neutral pilots illustrates that decentralised climate governance is both feasible and effective when backed by coherent state support, predictable financing and technical capacity[160]. National climate strategies must therefore shift to treat local bodies as primary implementers, not mere beneficiaries. Operationalising this requires structured capacity building, new financing pathways, data and planning integration, and formal institutional linkages. If India can scale localized climate action strategically, it will unlock resilient development pathways that are equitable, context-appropriate and politically sustainable.

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10. Local academic collaborations on LAPCC templates — CUSAT/University pilot documents on Local Action Plans on Climate Change.

[160] 3. Haritha Keralam Mission. Watercourse Restoration & Drainage Network Revival Project. Under the initiative "Let's Secure Western Ghats," HKM mapped natural watercourses/drainage systems in 216 out of 230 gram panchayats, and has reclaimed ~2,742.44 km of watercourses to restore flow and reduce mudslide/landslide risk.