

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND CLIMATE CHANGE: A Review of Adaptation Activities in Jurisdictions inside and outside Canada

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

1. Introduction:

On October 23, 2007, the School of Public Administration, University of Victoria and the Ministry of Community Services hosted a research seminar on local government responses to climate change. The purpose of the event, as part of the Local Government Knowledge Partnership, was to present findings from student research papers on adaptation strategies used by local governments in Europe (UK, Germany and Sweden); Australia; Canadian jurisdictions outside of BC; and the United States. In addition, Harry Swain, Senior Research Associate at the University's Centre for Global Studies, presented a background paper on findings and implications for British Columbia of the recent IPCC Report¹, while representatives from the Ministries of Community Services and Environment provided an overview of adaptation in BC followed by a round-table discussion on potential lessons, impacts, and future strategies.

2. Participants:

The seminar was attended by a total of 15 representatives from the University of Victoria (7), the Ministry of Community Services (6), the Ministry of Environment (1) and the CRD (1).

3. Discussion:

- The framework for the day was provided by Harry Swain's presentation on the recent IPCC Report and its implications for BC. He talked about the strengths and weaknesses of GCMs (Global Climate Change Models) and highlighted the challenge of reducing them to a regional or local scale, which makes it difficult to predict future conditions. The general consensus, however, was that BC will face a more Mediterranean climate with rising temperatures in the North, more seasonal precipitation, rising sea levels in the Strait of Georgia, deforestation due to limited rainfall, and less snow pack for increasingly shorter periods of time combined with an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events.
- Following this presentation, Alan Osborne, Executive Director of Intergovernmental Relations, Ministry of Community Services provided an overview of the BC Government Green Plan, which focuses primarily on mitigation through the reduction of GHG emissions. The plan includes tracking GHGs and preparing energy profiles for different municipalities with the goal of achieving carbon-neutrality by 2012. Osborne reported that climate action is one of the most complex inter-governmental issues, as it requires cooperation across different levels and regions in the Pacific Northwest. Specific challenges include:
 - different standards of measuring CO₂ across jurisdictions
 - lack of a concerted effort for sustainable initiatives
 - lack of research and information on potential impacts of climate change
 - lack of performance standards and evaluation frameworks for measuring the effectiveness of different actions
 - lack of public engagement and education.

¹ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. *Climate Change 2007: The Physical Science Basis. Summary for Policymakers*. World Meteorological Organization: Geneva, 5 February 2007.

- The Province’s Green Communities Project, managed by the Ministry of Community Services, is a cross-government initiative to support municipalities in taking action to mitigate climate change. The focus is on building local government capacity to develop long-term sustainable plans. Specific measures include:
 - measuring and rewarding climate change action
 - encouraging communities to invest in transit and sustainable infrastructure
 - reducing watering demands through conservation and wastewater recycling
 - implementing mandated GHG reduction strategies
 - offering incentives for sustainable developments
 - applying green building codes for new developments.
- The four student presentations focused on local government responses to climate change with an emphasis on adaptation strategies. The research on Europe (UK, Germany and Sweden), Australia, Canadian jurisdictions outside BC, and the United States revealed that adaptation, overall, is still in its infancy, that there is a lack of information and incentives for action, a need for motivation and a coordinated effort across jurisdictions, as well as a necessity to develop consistent measures for evaluating the efficiency and effectiveness of different strategies.
- It was further established that the complexity of the issue requires new and innovative approaches across jurisdictions, such as partnerships and other collaborative arrangements, long-term strategic planning and a mix of policy tools, including incentives, subsidies, information, and regulation. Local governments play a crucial role in climate change action, but require support from the federal/provincial/regional level to develop appropriate tools and strategies, engage in proactive measures, promote public awareness and foster behavioural change.²
- In concluding the seminar, Jenny Fraser, Climate Change Adaptation Specialist with the Ministry of Environment, provided comments on the student papers as well as an overview of adaptation in BC.

4. Summary:

The most significant challenge for the development and implementation of climate change strategies around the world is a lack of precise information. Preparing for an uncertain future makes it difficult to measure adaptive capacity and develop concrete action plans. Time, however, is essential and proactive, “no-regret” strategies are needed. Surveys indicate that public opinion is changing quickly with increasing concerns about climate change and sustainability, but there appears to be a lack of trust in government.

The question is whether more government intervention is needed or whether grassroots initiatives outside of government are more effective. There is also the question of whether climate change is a federal or a provincial responsibility.

Overall, there is a need for long-term strategic planning and investment in sustainability at all levels of government. In addition, government must ensure that better information is provided to municipalities and citizens in order to promote public awareness and action.

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² For more information and to access individual research papers, please visit public admin website