United Cities and Local Governments Asia-Pacific

POLICY BRIEF

Insights and Analysis on Local Governance in Asia-Pacific

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ASEAN's Path to Resilient, Low-Carbon, and People-Centred Cities

Factsheet and Context

- *Rapid urban growth: Over half of ASEAN's population lives in urban areas, with an additional 70 million city dwellers by 2025[1]. By 2050, nearly 68% of Southeast Asia's population is projected to live in cities [3], intensifying demands on infrastructure and services.*
- *Urban engines and emissions: Cities drive about 80% of ASEAN's GDP [2] and account for 70% of global CO_2 emissions [4]. Urban policies are therefore pivotal for economic growth and climate change mitigation.*
- *Climate risks to economy: Recent analysis warns that climate change and disasters could wipe away up to 35% of Southeast Asia's GDP by 2050 under worst-case scenarios [5]. The poorest countries may face annual GDP losses of 8–9% by mid-century if high emissions persist [6].*
- *Population at risk: Over 50% of the population in several ASEAN countries (e.g. Vietnam, Philippines, Thailand) could be exposed to climate-induced disasters (death, displacement, disease) by 2050 without urgent action [7]. In the last decade, Asia-Pacific saw 177 million disaster-related displacements – the highest of any region globally [8].*
- *Inclusive action imperative: Marginalised groups are disproportionately affected by urban shocks. Persons with disabilities are 2–4 times more likely to die or be injured in disasters than others [9], underlining the need for GEDSI (Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion) in climate strategies.*
- *Climate finance gap: Southeast Asia received only 5% of global climate finance in 2018–2019 [10]. About 84% of these funds went to mitigation, while just 12% supported adaptation [10] – leaving resilience efforts underfunded. An estimated US$210 billion per year is needed for climate-resilient infrastructure in the region [11], far above current investment levels.*

Overview

ASEAN's urban future faces a dual challenge: rapidly growing cities must cut carbon emissions while protecting millions of urbanites from intensifying climate hazards. Southeast Asia's dynamic urbanisation – with 70 million new urban residents by 2025[1] – is powering economic growth but also exacerbating vulnerability. Many ASEAN cities are low-lying or coastal, making them highly exposed to floods, storms, and sea-level rise, as well as heatwaves and pollution. Climate change impacts are no longer abstract: for example, heat-related deaths among the elderly in ASEAN rose by 117% in recent years (2000s vs 2010s) [15].

This policy brief underscores the urgent need for integrated urban climate action – combining mitigation (low-carbon development) and adaptation (resilience) – to ensure Southeast Asian cities can thrive in a changing climate. ASEAN leaders recognize the urgency: initiatives like the ASEAN Smart Cities Network (26 pilot cities in 2018, expanded to 31 cities by 2024) [16] and the ASEAN Sustainable Urbanisation Strategy reflect a commitment to inclusive, sustainable urban growth. However, fragmented efforts and financing shortfalls persist. Without scaled-up, coordinated action, climate risks could undermine urban development gains, threatening economic vitality, social equity, and the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 goal of a Resilient, Innovative, Dynamic, and People-Centred ASEAN [17][18].

Key Messages

- **Integrate Climate in Urban Planning:** Embed low-carbon and resilience objectives in city development plans, budgets, and land-use policies. All ASEAN cities should adopt Climate Action Plans aligned with national NDCs and the SDGs, ensuring mitigation and adaptation are addressed together.
- **Invest in Green & Resilient Infrastructure:** Substantially increase funding for sustainable urban transport, renewable energy, waste management, and nature-based solutions. With such solutions accounting for less than 1% of current urban infrastructure spending [12], scaling up will cut emissions, mitigate flooding, and improve quality of life.
- **Strengthen Multi-level Governance:** Establish mechanisms for effective coordination between local, national, and regional authorities. City climate task forces, aligned with ASEAN initiatives [13], can bridge silos and ensure coherent action.
- **Empower Inclusive Climate Governance:** Apply GEDSI principles by actively involving women, youth, the elderly, persons with disabilities, and marginalised groups in decision-making [14]. Inclusive governance builds equitable solutions and community resilience.
- **Mobilise Finance & Partnerships:** Unlock diverse financing sources, including climate funds, green bonds, PPPs, and regional cooperation platforms, to provide smaller cities with funding and technical expertise.
- **Build Capacity & Data Systems:** Enhance skills of city officials, strengthen climate data and monitoring systems, and promote regional peer learning to enable evidence-based policy and attract investment.

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What's the Issue?

Southeast Asian cities are at a crossroads: they are major greenhouse gas emitters and, simultaneously, frontline victims of climate change. The core issue is a lack of integration – historically, urban mitigation (e.g. energy, transport) and adaptation (e.g. disaster risk reduction) have been pursued in silos, often without a unifying strategy. This fragmented approach leads to inefficiencies and misses opportunities for co-benefits. For instance, a city's transport policy might aim to cut emissions but ignore flood-prone infrastructure, or a flood-control project might not consider low-carbon design. Key barriers exacerbate the problem: (1) Fragmented governance, where responsibilities for climate action spread across agencies with limited coordination; (2) Limited funding at the city level, making long-term climate investments difficult; (3) Data and capacity gaps, as many cities lack downscaled climate data, technical expertise, or tools to plan effectively; and (4) Inclusion gaps, where vulnerable communities are left out of decision-making. This last point is critical – without inclusive planning, climate actions risk neglecting those most at risk. For example, inadequate evacuation planning for persons with disabilities has led to disproportionate disaster fatalities [9]. Additionally, many ASEAN cities face basic service deficits (housing, sanitation, public transport) which climate stressors magnify. In summary, the issue is not a lack of recognition – it's the difficulty of translating recognition into coordinated, inclusive local action on the ground.

Why is this Important?

Integrating climate action in cities is strategically vital for Southeast Asia's sustainable future and global commitments. Firstly, cities are pivotal to climate success – they are economic powerhouses but also carbon hotspots. Urban areas in Asia-Pacific already produce about 75% of the region's energy-related GHG emissions [19]. Without transformative change in cities, ASEAN countries will struggle to meet their Paris Agreement targets. Conversely, climate-smart cities can drive low-carbon growth and innovation, reinforcing ASEAN's position as the world's fourth-largest economy by 2030. Secondly, the stakes for resilience are immense: by mid-century, over half the population in several ASEAN nations could suffer climate-related disaster impacts [7]. The human and economic costs of inaction are rising – Southeast Asia risks losing up to a third of its GDP to climate impacts by 2050[5], and extreme weather events are already displacing millions annually. Building urban resilience is therefore critical for regional stability, poverty alleviation, and public health. Thirdly, global and regional frameworks demand action. The United Nations' 2030 Agenda (SDGs) calls for sustainable, inclusive cities (SDG11) and urgent climate action (SDG13). The Paris Agreement requires progressively stronger climate measures – cities' contributions (through reduced emissions and adaptive capacity) are essential. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 likewise emphasizes urban risk management to reduce disaster losses. ASEAN has echoed these commitments in its own Vision 2045, aiming for a green, people-centred community [17][18]. In this context, integrating mitigation, adaptation, and inclusion in urban policy is not just a local issue – it's a linchpin for ASEAN's collective resilience and a contribution to global climate stability.

Research Method

The development of this policy brief adopted a comprehensive approach combining rigorous desk-based research with targeted data analysis. A literature review of over 50 publications from 2021–2025, including academic journals, think-tank reports, ASEAN policy documents, and UN agency outputs, formed the evidence base. Key quantitative inputs were drawn from the UNFCCC NDC registry, IPCC Assessment Reports, the ASEAN Sustainable Urbanisation Strategy, and recent ASEAN State of Climate reports. City-level data on greenhouse gas emissions, climate hazards, socio-economic indicators, and finance flows were extracted from sources such as the CDP Cities database and World Bank urban indicators to identify regional trends. Throughout the process, a Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion lens was applied, seeking disaggregated data and reviewing literature addressing the differentiated impacts on women, low-income households, and persons with disabilities. Findings were synthesised into policy options and refined through expert peer review to ensure their relevance, feasibility, and alignment with ASEAN and global frameworks.

Policy Options

Building on the challenges, opportunities, and urgency outlined above, a set of policy options is proposed to guide local governments in ASEAN towards resilient, low-carbon, and people-centred cities. The three options are designed to be complementary – combining integrated planning, investment in green and climate-resilient infrastructure, and mechanisms for climate finance and regional partnerships. Each option is presented with a description, key advantages, potential disadvantages, estimated costs and feasibility, and the responsible stakeholders. The following table summarises these elements as a reference for policymakers.

Policy Option	1. Integrated & Inclusive Climate Planning	2. Green & Resilient Urban Infrastructure	3. Climate Finance & Regional Partnerships
Description	Develop city-wide Climate Action Plans that integrate mitigation, adaptation, and GEDSI. Embed climate targets into urban master plans, budgeting, and land-use regulations. Establish cross-department climate units in city governments.	Invest in sustainable infrastructure projects that reduce emissions and enhance resilience. Examples: mass transit and electric mobility, renewable energy (solar, waste-to-energy), flood control systems, drainage upgrades, green parks and mangrove restoration for coastal defence. Leverage nature-based solutions wherever possible.	Create mechanisms to mobilise funding and knowledge through regional cooperation. Examples: an **ASEAN Urban Climate Fund** pooling international aid and green finance for city projects; city twinning and peer networks for knowledge exchange; regional platforms to standardise project preparation (fast-tracking bankable projects). Partner with initiatives like the ASEAN Smart Cities Network, C40 Cities, and UCLG ASPAC to amplify support.

Main Advantages	• **Holistic approach:** Addresses emissions reduction and resilience together, capturing co-benefits (e.g. green infrastructure that cuts heat and emissions). • **Inclusive process:** Engages communities and vulnerable groups, leading to more equitable outcomes and public buy-in. • **Alignment:** Ensures local actions support national SDGs, NDC commitments, and ASEAN frameworks, avoiding policy contradictions.	• **Dual benefits:** Projects like BRT systems or solar farms cut carbon and improve air quality; flood defenses and wetlands protect communities while preserving ecosystems. • **Economic gains:** Creates jobs and attracts investment; improved infrastructure raises quality of life and city competitiveness. • **reduction:** Proactive adaptation (dikes, improved drainage, etc.) significantly lowers future disaster losses and recovery costs.	• **Resource mobilisation:** Pooled funds and aggregated projects improve access to international climate finance, benefiting smaller cities that can't borrow alone. • **Capacity sharing:** Cities learn from each other's successes and failures; proven solutions can be replicated, reducing trial-and-error. • **Regional solidarity:** Joint initiatives strengthen ASEAN integration, showcasing collective action towards Vision 2045 goals. They also give cities a louder voice in global fora.
Potential Disadvantages	• **Complex coordination:** Requires breaking institutional silos; multiple agencies must cooperate, which can be challenging if mandates conflict. • **Capacity gaps:** Smaller cities may lack expertise to draft and implement integrated plans without external support. • **Time-consuming:** Broad consultations and plan development might slow immediate action if not well managed.	• **High upfront costs:** Requires significant capital investment; smaller municipalities may struggle without external funding or private partners. • **Implementation risks:** Large projects can face delays, cost overruns, or technical issues. If not properly managed, it could lead to maladaptation (e.g. poorly designed seawalls shifting flood risk). • **Social impacts:** Infrastructure construction might require land acquisition or relocation; without safeguards, this can negatively affect communities (especially the urban poor).	• **Coordination burden:** Setting up and managing regional funds or networks requires strong coordination by ASEAN bodies; bureaucratic hurdles or political differences could slow progress. • **Uneven participation:** More advanced cities might dominate partnerships, while weaker cities struggle to keep up or absorb funds. Ensuring equitable access and technical assistance is necessary. • **Dependence on donors:** Initial capital for funds likely comes from international donors or development banks; sustained support isn't guaranteed and may be subject to geopolitical shifts.
Costs/Feasibility	• **Moderate cost:** Primarily administrative and training costs. Funding needed for capacity building (which can be supported by international donors). • **Feasible with support:** Many elements (data collection, stakeholder workshops) are feasible if guided by clear national guidelines and toolkit. External technical assistance can jump-start planning in low-capacity cities.	• **Capital intensive:** Costs vary by project (e.g. mass transit systems in the billions, green parks in millions). Multilateral development banks, climate funds, or PPP models can offset public costs. • **Feasibility: High** if financing is secured. Proven technologies exist for transit, energy, and resilience; many ASEAN cities have pilot projects. Political will and maintenance capacity are critical for long-term success.	• **Cost: Low-to-Moderate:** Networking and knowledge activities are relatively low cost (workshops, staff exchanges). A regional fund's size depends on donor contributions – administrative overhead needs to be minimised. • **Feasibility: Medium.** ASEAN has precedents (e.g. infrastructure funds, ASCN). Political endorsement is needed to launch new mechanisms. With backing from entities like the ASEAN Secretariat, ADB, or EU, such partnerships can be established within 1–2 years.
Responsible Stakeholders	• **City governments** (lead planning process and implementation). • **National urban and environment ministries** (provide frameworks, technical guidelines, and oversight). • **Civil society & community groups** (participate in planning, ensure inclusivity). • **International partners** (e.g. UN agencies, NGOs providing expertise and funding for plan development).	• **Local governments** (project initiation, planning, and maintenance). • **National governments** (funding support, enabling policies, PPP frameworks). • **Private sector** (as investors or contractors in PPP projects; providers of tech and innovation). • **International financiers** (MDBs like ADB, World Bank; Green Climate Fund, etc., to provide loans/grants). • **Communities** (consulted in design to ensure projects meet local needs and do no harm).	• **ASEAN Secretariat and sectoral bodies** (convene and manage regional initiatives, e.g. ASEAN Working Group on Environmentally Sustainable Cities. • **National governments** (contribute seed funding, approve city participation, align national programs with regional efforts). • **City governments** (actively engage in networks, propose projects for funding). • **Development partners** (donors, MDBs providing financial support and expertise). • **City networks (ASCN, UCLG ASPAC, C40)** (facilitate peer learning, technical support).

While the proposed policy options provide a clear pathway for advancing resilient, low-carbon, and inclusive cities, their success will depend on overcoming a range of practical barriers. These include fragmented governance structures, funding shortfalls, limited technical capacity, and insufficient community engagement. Addressing these challenges requires targeted and coordinated responses that not only resolve immediate bottlenecks but also strengthen long-term institutional and societal capacity. The following table outlines the key implementation obstacles alongside practical strategies to overcome them, offering local governments and their partners a roadmap for turning policy commitments into effective action on the ground.

Implementation Obstacle	Proposed Strategy to Overcome
Fragmented governance & siloed planning: City departments and national agencies	**Establish coordination mechanisms.** Set up cross-sectoral climate task forces or committees at city level, involving planning, environment, finance, and disaster management units. Develop

often work in isolation, causing climate initiatives to lack coordination.	**"vertical integration"** frameworks where national ministries guide and support city climate action (e.g. standardized planning templates), ensuring local plans align with national policies[13]. Regular multi-level dialogues (e.g. annual city-national climate forums) can foster alignment.
Insufficient funding for climate projects: Most cities face budget constraints and rely on limited transfers. Climate projects may be perceived as too costly or not yielding immediate returns.	**Diversify and unlock finance.** Integrate climate priorities into city budgets and medium-term expenditure plans (making them core development priorities). Simultaneously, tap external resources: e.g. access **international climate funds** (Green Climate Fund, Adaptation Fund) by bundling smaller projects into programmatic proposals; engage private investors through **public–private partnerships (PPPs)** for green infrastructure; and explore municipal green bonds where feasible. National governments and ASEAN could support project preparation facilities to make city projects "bankable".
Limited technical capacity & data gaps: City officials may lack expertise in climate science, project design, or accessing finance. Data on local climate risks or emissions is often sparse, hindering informed decision-making.	**Build capacity and data systems.** Implement continuous training programs for local officials on climate risk assessment, emissions accounting, and project management – possibly through regional institutes or e-learning (leveraging the **Asia-Pacific Mayors Academy** model[20]). Develop user-friendly data platforms: e.g. city climate risk maps, GHG emission inventories, and early warning systems. Encourage open data initiatives (like the Open Data for Resilience Initiative[21]) to crowdsource and share data. National support units or universities can assist cities in data collection and analysis until in-house capacity grows.
Low community engagement & inclusion: Top-down planning neglects local knowledge and fails to address the needs of women, youth, the elderly, and marginalised communities. This can lead to public resistance or vulnerable groups being left further behind.	**Institutionalise participatory approaches.** Create formal channels for community input in climate policymaking – e.g. city climate advisory committees including civil society, women's unions, youth representatives, and slum-dweller associations. Conduct community consultations in vulnerable neighborhoods to co-design solutions (for instance, participatory budgeting for resilience projects). Adopt **GEDSI guidelines** for climate programs (ensure infrastructure is accessible for all abilities, early warning systems reach all groups, etc.). Empower community organizations through small grants to implement local micro-solutions (urban gardens, rainwater harvesting), building grassroots capacity and ownership. Public communication campaigns should also raise awareness about climate risks and encourage behavioural change across society.

Further important considerations

Achieving and sustaining integrated climate action in cities will require attention to crosscutting enabling factors beyond formal policies. Key considerations include:

Monitoring & Evaluation: Establish clear indicators and monitoring systems to track progress of climate initiatives (e.g. city-level GHG emissions per capita, number of households with improved flood protection). Conduct regular evaluations and publicly report outcomes to maintain transparency and accountability. Independent audits or civil society oversight (community scorecards) can strengthen M&E. This feedback loop allows for adaptive management – policies can be tweaked based on what is working or not, ensuring continuous improvement.

Capacity Building: Human capital is critical. Invest in ongoing capacity building for local authorities and stakeholders. This could involve executive training for mayors and urban planners (for example, through the Asia-Pacific Mayors Academy which mentors city leaders [20]), technical courses for municipal engineers on green infrastructure, and peer-learning exchanges among cities. Embedding climate curricula in local government training institutes will ensure new staff are climate aware. Furthermore, nurture champions – local leaders or community advocates who can drive the agenda and inspire others.

Sustainable Financing: Develop a long-term financing strategy for urban climate action. In addition to tapping external funds, cities should explore innovative financing: earmarking a percentage of local revenues for climate projects, issuing municipal green bonds, or establishing revolving funds for energy efficiency investments. National governments can incentivise action by offering matching grants or performance-based funding (e.g. grants to cities that achieve certain climate or resilience milestones). Aligning climate action with city development plans helps integrate it into routine budgeting. Over time, demonstrate how investments yield economic benefits (avoidance of disaster losses, green jobs, etc.) to justify sustained funding.

Stakeholder Engagement: Active stakeholder engagement must continue beyond the planning phase. Multi-stakeholder platforms – bringing together local government, private sector, academia, NGOs, and community representatives – should guide implementation. For instance, a city-level Climate Action Council can review progress, resolve conflicts, and maintain momentum. Strong engagement with the private sector is also crucial: businesses can contribute solutions (innovations in energy, transport, fintech for insurance) and finance but need clear policy signals. Building public awareness and participation (through climate education in schools, public campaigns, and recognition of community initiatives) will create a culture of climate responsibility and citizen support for tough measures when needed.

Data & Digital Systems: Invest in robust data and digital systems to support decision-making. This includes developing climate information systems (downscaling climate projections for city use, mapping hazard zones) and leveraging technology for real-time monitoring – e.g. sensor networks for flood levels, heat indexes, and air quality in urban hotspots [19]. Smart city technologies, when applied with inclusivity in mind, can greatly assist in managing climate challenges (for example, IoT-based early warning systems or AI for optimizing energy use). Equally important is knowledge management: create open-data portals where climate and urban data can be shared across departments and with the public (following models like the Open Data for Resilience Initiative) [21]. Improved data not only aids local planning but strengthens the case when cities seek external funding by providing credible evidence and project monitoring capabilities.

Key Next Steps

To operationalise the above options, a phased approach with clear milestones is recommended:

1. By Q4 2025: Institutional set-up and commitments. Each ASEAN city should establish a dedicated climate action team or task force (if not already in place) under the Mayor/Governor's office. ASEAN and national authorities can support by issuing guidelines on integrated climate planning and announcing initial funding facilities. A joint declaration at the next ASEAN Mayors Forum could formalise city commitments to low-carbon, resilient development.
2. 2026 (Short-term): Planning and quick wins. Cities commence development of Integrated Climate Action Plans (target completion within 12 months), including stakeholder consultations. Simultaneously, implement no-regret quick wins – e.g. launching a tree-planting or urban greening campaign, pilot community-based adaptation projects in flood-prone wards, and conducting training workshops for city staff. National governments should at this stage establish climate budget codes or earmarks so that from 2026 onwards, city budgets reflect climate expenditures.
3. 2027–2028 (Medium-term): Financing and project implementation. Secure financing for priority infrastructure projects identified in the plans. By 2027, at least 50% of ASEAN capitals and major cities should have accessed new climate finance (via domestic budget, PPP, or international funds) for a mitigation or adaptation project. Break ground on flagship projects – for example, a new BRT line, a solar farm powering city facility, or a major flood retention basin. ASEAN, via its Secretariat or development partners, can facilitate an ASEAN Cities Climate Finance Forum 2027 to connect cities with investors and donors, accelerating fund mobilisation.
4. 2030 (Long-term milestone): Review and scale-up. Aim that by 2030 all ASEAN member states' primary cities (and many secondary cities) have enacted and begun implementing their Climate Action Plans. Conduct a regional stock-take in 2030 (aligned with the global Paris Agreement Global Stocktake and SDG timeline) to evaluate progress: e.g. aggregate urban emission reductions achieved, number of people protected from climate risks, etc. Use this to refine strategies for the next phase (2030–2045). At this point, successful pilot projects should be scaled up or replicated in other cities. Planning for net-zero emissions by mid-century should be well underway, supported by technological advances and deeper regional cooperation (potentially an ASEAN city carbon trading or shared resilience insurance mechanism).
5. 2045 (Vision): ASEAN cities fully transformed. By ASEAN's envisioned 2045 milestone, target that the region's cities collectively are on track to net-zero emissions around mid-century and have significantly reduced climate vulnerability. This entails urban development firmly centred on sustainability and inclusiveness: green mobility is the norm, renewable energy is widespread, all major cities have robust flood defenses and heated action plans, and urban poverty linked to climate shocks is drastically cut. Achieving this will fulfill the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 of a resilient, people-centred region, and make ASEAN's cities exemplars of low-carbon, climate-resilient development globally.

These steps provide a roadmap linking immediate actions with long-term transformation. Regular monitoring and political leadership at each stage will be key. Success in this timeline not only depends on cities themselves, but also on sustained support from national governments, ASEAN bodies, and international partners to maintain momentum through 2030 and beyond.

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