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HOW IS CLIMATE ACTION A MATTER OF GOVERNANCE?

The fight against climate change is more than just a technical issue: it is also a major political and institutional challenge that reaches beyond international summits and multilateral COPs, questioning the nature of existing social contracts and the role of public action at all levels (Aykut and Dahan 2015). As declared by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), only “effective climate governance enables mitigation and adaptation” (IPCC 2023). This entails that, to combat global warming and its effects, states must set up institutions and regulatory frameworks, and assign human and financial resources specifically to the task. These levers for action are essential to the effective implementation of climate policies.

The notion of “climate governance” may appear abstract to the general public and too general to guide public actors in their sectoral or territorial actions. In an effort to refine and operationalize this notion, this article sets out **a typology^[1] of actions to design, manage, finance, and implement climate policies**, drawing on examples from countries in the Global North as well as the South. This typology outlines three broad areas for public action on climate matters (see Figure 1): first, the political, strategic, and legal framework; second, the human, technical, and financial resources required; and finally, the monitoring and assessment necessary to evaluate the progress made and the engagement of various stakeholders. These processes and levers for action require the coordination of a considerable number of actors (public, private, community) at various levels (international, national, and local).

The political, strategic, and legal frameworks as prerequisites for action

Defining equitable and carbon-neutral development pathways

The Paris Climate Agreement established a new framework for climate governance, setting a common goal for the signatory countries: to keep the rise in the global average temperature well below 2°C. Furthermore, the Paris Agreement obliges countries to formulate short-

[1] A typology is a system of classification by types that facilitates the analysis and understanding of a field or domain of study, such as climate action in this case.

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medium-, and long-term climate commitments to adhere to this target. Each signatory country is therefore required to define its pathway toward carbon neutrality by 2050 and to align it with shorter-term action plans, known as “nationally determined contributions” (NDCs). These NDCs summarize the main risks and effects of climate change for the country, set targets for both climate change mitigation and adaptation, and outline the major macroeconomic and sectoral measures (often related to energy, agriculture and land use, transportation, and water) required to achieve these goals. For example, Cambodia has committed to halving the rate of deforestation in its territory by 2030. Morocco, meanwhile, has set itself the goal of increasing the proportion of renewable energies in its electricity mix to 80 percent by 2050. Formulating ambitious yet genuine targets is a delicate task, as it requires consultation with a vast number of stakeholders (public, private, academic, non-governmental) whose political outlooks and interests often diverge. Therefore, it is essential to produce and model reliable scientific data in order to build credible transition scenarios, discuss fair and socially acceptable options, and inform public decision-making.^[2]

Transposing these ambitions into all sectoral and territorial policies

In many countries, sectoral and territorial public policies do not adequately reflect the goals set in the NDCs. To move beyond siloed perspectives and align public policies with climate ambitions, it may be useful to establish review mechanisms or set up an institution specifically tasked with harmonizing climate efforts. In France, for instance, the recently created General Secretariat for Ecological Planning (*Secrétariat général à la planification écologique* – SGPE), placed directly under the prime minister, is an interministerial body responsible not only for coordinating the development of national climate strategies but also for ensuring that the various public policies are coherent with these strategies. Bangladesh, which is highly exposed to the effects of climate change, is a pioneer in adaptation planning at the local level. Very early on, the country developed guidelines to assist urban and rural local authorities in the task of integrating climate risk management into their local development plans. This type of initiative is vital in order to properly equip public actors at the decentralized and devolved levels, as even if they have a thorough understanding of their territories, they may lack the resources to act.

Adopting laws and regulations to compel action

Despite countries’ considerable efforts to design climate strategies, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions continue to increase, temperatures keep rising, and confidence in achieving the targets is weakening (UNEP 2023). In light of this, developing a robust legislative and regulatory arsenal may help transform the stated climate ambitions into obligations to act. 60 countries around the world have therefore chosen to adopt a framework law on climate

change.^[3] A cornerstone of an environmental and climate-related rule of law, a framework law can legally bind countries to achieve climate goals or compel public actors to equip themselves with the minimum adequate tools to achieve these goals, regardless of the political context. It is also a powerful tool for citizens, as it entitles them to request the strengthening of their state’s climate action in a court of law. Some states, such as Luxembourg and Kenya, have gone a step further by enshrining the fight against climate change and/or environmental protection in their constitutions. The ecological transition then becomes a guiding principle, “the policy of policies,” motivating the updating of all normative frameworks, beginning with legislation on energy, construction, water, and mining codes. Chile is the first country in Latin America to have enshrined carbon neutrality by 2050 in a framework law of this kind. The broader effect of this law has been to institutionalize the country’s key climate governance tools (NDC and long-term strategies, carbon budget, financing strategy, and sectoral plans) and to legally clarify the mechanisms for the design, implementation, and citizen monitoring of climate action.

Human and financial resources that determine the achievement of goals

Clarifying the institutional structure and training public officials on climate issues

Since there is a multitude of actors involved in climate action, coordination is required across sectors (horizontal coordination) and levels (vertical coordination). In 2016, Colombia redesigned its entire institutional architecture dedicated to the steering and monitoring of climate action. In addition to interministerial coordination bodies, nine “regional nodes” have been established to complement and decentralize the Colombian framework. The roles and competences of the various advisory bodies have been clarified, with dedicated scientific, financial, and technical committees. Aside from institutional organization, there is also capacity-building work to do, as well as the greening of the public sector. For instance, ministry officials, local administrators, and judges should be trained in climate action tools and relevant legislation, ideally as part of a broader capacity-building strategy, involving national schools of public administration. As an example, the Republic of the Congo has established a training program for various bodies in the institutional framework, including the association of mayors, parliamentarians, and the Economic, Social, and Environmental Council. The program aims to increase their knowledge of climate-sensitive budgeting, access to international climate finance, and the integration of intersecting issues related to adaptation, gender, and inequalities.^[4]

[2] The GEMMES and ESTEEM models are tools typically used to analyze the macroeconomic and financial dimensions of the ecological transition. See: <https://www.afd.fr/en/ressources/afd-and-macroeconomic-modelling-tools-ecological-transition>.

[3] Averchenkova, Alina, Catherine Higham, Tiffanie Chan and Isabela Keusch. 2024. *Impacts of Climate Framework Laws: Lessons from Germany, Ireland and New Zealand*. Policy Report. London: Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, London School of Economics and Political Science.

[4] These actions were implemented with the technical and financial support of the Adapt’Action program. For further details, see: <https://www.afd.fr/sites/afd/files/2021-11-09-08-29/adaptation-gouvernance.pdf>.

Mobilizing adequate financing in order to implement climate action

In Africa, although the volume of financing for climate action has been rising steadily for several years, \$2.5 trillion is still required to achieve the goals outlined in the various African NDCs.^[5] To address this significant funding shortfall and undertake the most essential priority investments, states are striving to increase and diversify their sources of financing, whether domestic or international, public or private. Various options can be mobilized, such as fiscal revenues, green bonds, loans from development banks, international climate funds, or carbon credits. However, the financial situation of each state must be considered before adopting such options, taking into consideration their ability to quantify investment needs, and then to attract and absorb available funding. In countries that face both climate and macrofinancial vulnerability, the diversification of financing sources is an increasingly pressing issue (Bedossa 2023)^[6]. More than 90 countries have joined the Coalition of Finance Ministers for Climate Action since 2019 and affirmed the role of public finances in the ecological transition. Public finances can indeed be seen as a powerful lever for aligning revenues, expenditures, and investments with the goals of climate change adaptation and mitigation (Dechery *et al.* 2022). Nearly 50 countries now have green budgets, making it possible to assess the compatibility of investments and public expenditures with climate ambitions. However, green public finances cannot be restricted solely to this tool, as they also concern fiscal policy (taxes and subsidies), budget execution, and the management of a state's assets and liabilities. Assisted by public policy loans from AFD and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Rwanda has embarked on a comprehensive process of reforms to green its public procurement, develop a sustainable purchasing policy, and integrate mitigation and adaptation issues into public investment projects.

Accountability and citizen participation in the climate transition

Enhancing the legitimacy and relevance of climate policies

Deemed insufficiently ambitious by some, unfair or too costly by others, the political responses to climate change and ecosystem degradation undeniably spark debate. Since they create winners and losers, climate measures can lead to activist actions and unprecedented social protest movements, such as the gilets jaunes movement in France, which began in 2018 in response to the introduction of a tax on energy products. These calls for social and environmental justice cast profound doubts on the ability of public authorities to engage intermediary bodies and citizens throughout the various stages of climate policymaking—beyond mere consultation—from the design of policies

through to their implementation. Various initiatives in countries in the Global South illustrate the desire of public authorities to enhance the content and relevance of climate policies via citizen dialogue bodies. For instance, an Itinerant Citizen Assembly was established in 2020 by Bogotá City Council to identify priority issues concerning the climate and environment and how they affect land use planning. Peru, for its part, has launched the very first “Indigenous Peoples’ Platform for Climate Change.” Its aim is to further include vulnerable groups in the public decision-making process. These spaces represent one of the possible responses in the process of conducting a just transition, alongside the adoption of legal frameworks to make sure all citizens can participate. That is exactly what the Escazú Regional Agreement aims to do. It enshrines public participation and the right to information in 24 countries across Latin America and the Caribbean. Among other things, it requires that specific measures be implemented to protect the rights of environmental activists in this region that accounts for three-quarters of murders of environmental defenders around the world.^[7]

Transparently reporting on the progress of public climate action

While 81 states, including almost all G20 members, have incorporated carbon neutrality into their national strategies or laws, none have yet reduced their GHG emissions sufficiently to have any real hope of achieving this goal (UNEP 2023). By systematizing and harmonizing the monitoring and assessment of the measures taken and the results achieved, the Enhanced Transparency Framework established by the Paris Agreement exposes implementation gaps to citizens and policymakers. The quality and reliability of data is ensured by national measurement, reporting, and verification (MRV) systems and, increasingly, by monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) systems. Although these systems are today held up as a model, they do not guarantee that information shall be exhaustive or even accessible and readable. To overcome this hurdle, Senegal is working to decentralize its MEL system so that it can draw lessons at the territorial level and integrate gender into the data produced. The city of Buenos Aires, meanwhile, has engaged its residents in co-creating an interactive platform that displays the state of emissions and the municipal initiatives currently under way. But such mechanisms and tools of international and citizen accountability cannot replace the institutional supervision conducted by parliamentary assemblies, courts of audit, and administrative courts. These institutions are increasingly expected to address these issues, yet they do not necessarily have the capacity to do so. Since citizens now have access to reliable and transparent information, and have gained greater awareness of their rights, they are also turning to the courts. Climate-related litigation has more than doubled in five years, with a growing number of cases brought forward by women, young people, and indigenous populations (UNEP 2023).

[5] Agence française de développement. 2024. *L'économie africaine 2024*. Repères. Paris: AFD, La Découverte.

[6] Bedossa, Bastien. 2023. *Climate-financial trap: an empirical approach to detecting situations of double vulnerability*. MacroDev 51. Paris: Éditions Agence française de développement.

[7] Global Witness. 2023. “Standing Firm: The Land and Environmental Defenders on the Frontlines of the Climate Crisis.” September 13, 2023. <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/standing-firm/>.

Figure 1 – The major levers for action to propel the climate transition



Source: Louise Guillon / AFD, Gloria Sodore.

In conclusion: Beyond public action, acting collectively for the climate

States and public actors in general therefore play a vital role in creating the conditions conducive to the implementation of climate policies, through the major levers for action described above. Nonetheless, humanity's ability to combat global warming and ensure the planet

remains habitable is still a highly complex dilemma of collective action (Korngold and Leyronas 2024). In light of this, many studies call for an increase in the number of centers of authority and decision-making at the heart of climate action and for states to move toward "polycentric climate governance," shared among public actors, market actors, and community actors in a just, democratic, and sustainable manner (Ostrom 2009).

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