

“The role of intergovernmental relations in breaking resilience: Bridging urban environmental agendas in climate change and the waste sector in Malaysia”

ABSTRACT

Introduction

With the rise of climate changes, there are large bodies of research on resilience and resource efficiency in the urban areas, as they are key to cope with those changes. Many practitioners and scholars have put tremendous efforts to understand urban system resilience to recover from hazardous natural events. However, a less explored area of research is to understand the resilience that affects urban areas but in adverse ways. Weak governance, social and political conflicts and lack of resources and capacity in many cities have detrimental environmental and human outcomes that have existed for long periods and are reinforced by resilience, which leads to systemic reproductions of behaviors and lack of consistent interventions which impedes radical changes. Thus, the paper tries to understand how to break the resilience of urban systems in order that they advance the agenda of sustainability and do not return to their initial (unsustainable) state and path. An important component is how to build institutional capabilities to link the two urban environmental agendas (physical resilience and resource efficiency) and break the inertial of unsustainable urban systems.

The paper examines how best to translate issues related to climate change into urban planning and management having the waste management sector in sub-national level in Malaysia, as the object of research. It explores how the link of the two important urban environmental agendas analyzing the opportunities for climate co-benefits (win-win) can break resilience by bridging local (waste) and national/global (climate change) environmental issues. The research examines particularly the role of inter and intra governmental relations in institution building to break the system resilience in service delivery in waste sector both in terms of improving resource efficiency and physical resilience against extreme events. The paper aims at better understanding the impacts of national initiatives on sectoral services including design, implementation and outcomes, as these initiatives involve inter and intragovernmental relations.

Research question and scope

The broad focus of the research is on examining the role of inter and intra governmental relations in institution building and policy implementation to address service delivery in the waste sector and links with climate change. The main research question is:

How do inter and intragovernmental relations in Malaysian states and local authorities impact service provision and climate policies?

The research aims at better understanding empirically sectoral provision in waste management and climate policy, particularly the effects of the inter and intragovernmental relations to break resilience in two Malaysian states: Penang and Johor. The research examines the solid waste management sector for service provision, though it includes the links with other urban sectors. The paper analyzes the patterns of local governance for mainstreaming global environmental issues in urban policies to understand institution building and policy implementation where several departments and levels of governments

have to work together, including links with international regimes (in the case of Penang/Georgetown, it was also inscribed on the UNESCO's World Heritage List besides several initiatives at the international and national level related to the climate change agreements). The research discusses how best to translate issues related to climate change into urban planning as the objects of research. Intergovernmental relations can hinder or facilitate the institutional capacity building in urban management and the incorporation of global environmental issues in city development in developing countries more broadly. The analyses of Penang and Johor seems to have some important lessons to contribute to these topics, as the two states have different political relations with the national government (Penang is opposition to the coalition in power nationally, the Barisan Nasional (BN), and Johor is allied to BN), though both states have been able to work together with the national government in several initiatives. The waste sector is particularly interesting to study as there was a movement to centralize waste management decisions in the end of 2000s, but Penang was able to keep waste management under state control, while waste management in other states, including Johor, was taken over by the national government.

Research methodology

The research methodology used the case study method at the two states through document/data analyses, field visits (2 visits to each state) and semi-structured interviews with policy-makers in government, academia, civil society groups, private service providers (if it is the case) and population. It was carried out an extensive data collection on the trends of the different sectors and environmental issues in Penang, Johor and Malaysia, but focusing more on waste management. One local authority in each state was chosen for more in depth analysis (MPPP/Georgetown in Penang and Johor Bahru in Johor). From the interviews, it was collected information on the various factors that shaped the relations between organizations in different levels of government and governance, and how those relations built or hindered institutions to address urban environmental issues (e.g., waste) and links with climate change. The interviews provided material to examine how different initiatives in the waste sector emerged, how the institutional capacity was built to break resilience and how the stakeholders were able to overcome various political, resource and institutional obstacles to improve the waste agenda.

Findings and contribution to the debates in academia and practice

The paper contributes to the debates in practice and academia by analyzing the patterns of local governance that breaks the system resilience by mainstreaming global environmental issues in sectoral policies. In the case of the waste sector several departments and levels of governments have to work together, including links with international regimes, which can also help to overcome political economy barriers in the development of local policies. Intergovernmental relations influence the capacity for good urban management and the incorporation of global environmental issues in city development. The research has some important lessons to contribute to these topics, as, even though Penang and the national governments are from different parties (with tremendous political rivalry, particularly recently), they have been able to work together in several sectors by establishing special organizations, such as the Think City, or joint initiatives as the case of waste management prizes for primary schools. The role of intermediary organizations with a more technocratic scope bridged the political differences and strengthened local capacities for urban management. Some of those organizations were created for different purposes and sectors, but the need for the intermediary role and resources in other sectors changed the scope of

those organizations. They equalized the relations between two politically opposing governments to make the competition a strength to drive capacity building and avoid the resilience that brought them back to the zero-sum game, common in political relations. Other organizations were key to break resilience and push service delivery where governments are politically allied to avoid collusion and inaction.