



Multilevel Governance Approaches to address Environmental Challenges

*Report on the Keynote Presentation
and Discussions on Multilevel Governance*

CENTRE OF
EXPERTISE FOR
MULTILEVEL
GOVERNANCE

International Conference organised
under the Maltese Presidency of the
Committee of Ministers of the Council
of Europe: Overcoming institutional
Silos and developing Cross-sector
Collaboration

13 June 2025
Gozo
Malta



Presidency of Malta
Council of Europe
May - November 2025

Présidence de Malte
Conseil de l'Europe
Mai - Novembre 2025

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REPORT ON KEYNOTE PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSIONS ON MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE

International Conference on
Multilevel Governance Approaches
to address Environmental Challenges:
Overcoming institutional Silos and
developing Cross-sector Collaboration

Congress of Local and regional Authorities of the Council of Europe
Maltese Presidency of the Committee of Ministers
13 June 2025, Victoria, Gozo – Malta

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Cover design and layout: Documents and Publications Production Department (SPDP), Council of Europe

Illustration on the cover page: The Effects of Good Governance By A. Lorenzetti – Sala dei nove
Siena, Italy (1339)

Photos: Centre of Expertise for Multilevel Governance

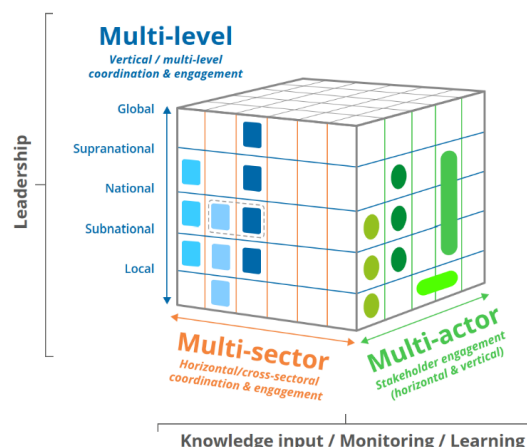
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Context	4
Multilevel governance and the environment	5
Top-down and bottom-up multilevel governance styles	6
Managing the governance mix	8
Creating beneficial conditions for Green Multilevel Governance:	9
Investing in Green Public Administration.....	9
Next steps?.....	10
Conference conclusions	11

Context

This report summarises the PPT presentation supporting the keynote speech at the International Conference Multilevel Governance approaches with a focus on environmental challenges, held on 13.06.2025 in Gozo (Malta), and some reflections from the discussions. The overall global, but also European, context of environmental policy making and implementation takes place against the backdrop of a highly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world. The challenges are huge, and they demand working together. There is a common policy framework that stimulates collaboration - the 2030 Agenda with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – but governments tend to work in silos, both between policy sectors and between levels of administration.



■ The CoE/CDDG [Report on Multilevel Governance](#) (2023)² calls for **coordination & coherence**: within and between levels of administration, different sectors, and different actors (stakeholders) (see the 'cube' figure, source: Niestroy 2025 adapted from CoE/CDDG 2023): We need to combine **multi-level, -sector and -actor governance**.

■ The 2024 CoE Conference "Multi-Level Governance for Ensuring Democracy and Strengthening Resilience" in Vilnius concluded that Effective multilevel governance could counter two great context challenges: populism, and the polarisation of society. For this, we must invest in (1) Improving participation, (2) a clearer distribution of competences between levels of governance, and (3) dynamic dialogue between all actors.

■ The 2025 report of the Secretary-General of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe introduced a roadmap 'Towards a New Democratic Pact'. This (...) means addressing urgent challenges like climate change – where it happens and where it hurts. And it hinges on our ability to restore trust in democracy by making it tangible in people's daily lives through participation, accountability and equal access to rights.³

■ The Council of Europe [Strategy on the Environment](#) (May 2025) translates this in five strategic objectives:

1. The Council of Europe endeavors to lead by example, fostering a greener, more just, and sustainable future for all.
2. Strategic Objective 1: Integrating human rights considerations in environment-related strategies, instruments, legislation, policies and actions, and vice versa.
3. Strategic Objective 2: Strengthening good democratic governance
4. Strategic Objective 3: Supporting and protecting Environmental Human Rights Defenders, Environmental Defenders and Whistle blowers.
5. Strategic Objective 4: Preventing and prosecuting environment-related crimes
6. Strategic Objective 5: Protecting wildlife, ecosystems, habitats and landscapes.

² Council of Europe (2023), Report on Multilevel Governance.

³ Similar calls can be found in [The European Urban Charter III – Urban development in our fast changing world](#).

Multilevel governance and the environment

The history of environmental challenges shows that there has always been a multilevel dimension. Multilevel governance is not new, but we need to realise it in ways that are appropriate for the challenges of our time.

— Environmental (health) protection started local before it also was national. At first it was mainly legislation: norms, standards, permits, prohibitions. International agreements are important support for environmental integration with other sectors and across administrative levels, e.g.

- For projects: Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA); for plans: Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)⁴.
- Espoo Convention on transboundary EIA, with a Protocol on transboundary SEA.
- Aarhus Convention⁵: rights regarding access to information, public participation and access to justice, in governmental decision-making processes on matters concerning the local, national and transboundary environment.

— Re-shaping multilevel governance to match better current environmental problems is urgent:

- The triple environmental crisis (climate, pollution, biodiversity) does not stop at administrative borders.
- Environmental challenges are different on different scales/levels, but they also need a joint approach. It needs to engage the whole of government & the whole of society.
- Many problems best tackled at local level (waste, water, air, noise, land use, climate adaptation, etcetera).
- In most countries, central government determines – top down – in detail what local administrations should do.
- Local governments often lack the resources, capacities, and rule-making rights.

⁴ Convention and Protocol of the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE).

⁵ Convention of the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE).

Top-down and bottom-up multilevel governance style

A typical approach to multilevel governance is the **top-down** method. A strategy or law is adopted at national, European or UN level, but the implementation often depends on local or regional action. Having a top-down mindset often implies thinking that giving instructions is the best model of multilevel governance. This can be a very good way to tackle large, cross-cutting problems.



— However, having just this one option is often slow, and may not be effective. Maslov already said that “If you only have a hammer, every problem looks like a nail”.

An example of top-down multilevel governance is when a ministry invites subnational governments to an ‘alliance’ on clean mobility solely based on the problem definition and solutions produced by the Ministry (hierarchical logic). Local government engagement on problem definition and solutions is not welcomed in this approach.

— Another, imaginary example that illustrates what can go wrong in the top-down chain when national preferences dominate the negotiations at EU level. Suppose that the European Commission plans to adopt standards for electric vehicles. This starts with a broad public consultation, and an ex-ante impact assessment of various options. When the negotiations with the Council, i.e. the member states, begin, one country might argue for adding a small diesel engine, as their car factories are specialised in that.

— Another country may focus on efficiency and argue that three wheels should be sufficient. A consensus-orientated country could propose adding a second steering wheel, because that symbolises partnership thinking. Finally, one country dislikes the mirror because that could be used by the Commission for spying on them. The second phase of the negotiations is with the Parliament. They tend to give the Commission something back that the member states have deleted. Hence, the fourth wheel is recovered – but it is negotiated that it should have a flat tire.

— After the final adoption, the original stakeholder- and science-based model of an electric vehicle looks like a monster. Then the national governments inform the local and regional authorities: “Here is again one of these idiotic standards coming from Brussels, but you have to enforce them”.

Hierarchical governance

Top-down approach



■ A **bottom-up** mindset is just as one-directional and can be as slow as top-down thinking. For example, it can take years before local innovation gets scaled-up and supported nationally, if at all. This style of multilevel governance is based on the **subsidiarity principle**⁶ and is also related to the market governance style, which favours empowerment, decentralisation, independency and competition. These are values from 'New Public Management', where governments should be run like businesses.



■ An example of bottom-up multilevel governance is when a ministry becomes partner in an already existing independent initiative from subnational governments around flood or drought management (e.g., in the Netherlands).

■ Luckily, a third approach has emerged that is **neither top-down or bottom-up**. This can be called 'real-time collaborative multilevel governance'.⁷ It is based on the network governance style, where partnerships, collaboration and trust are cornerstones. In fact, it uses elements from hierarchical governance (e.g., network rules) and market governance (e.g. stimulating local initiatives).

Network governance

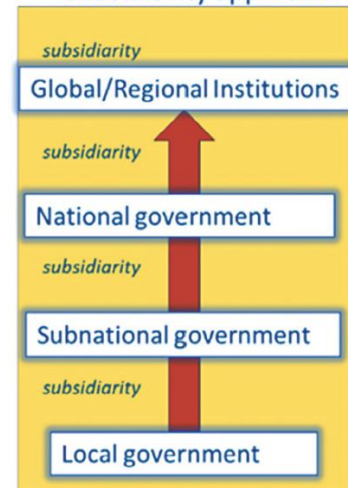


■ It implies working on complex challenges in joint teams with experts from different levels in real time which can be much faster and more effective than the two classical styles.

An example is the "Inter-administrative Dossier Teams" where national, provincial and local governments discuss which tasks regarding complex problems can be executed best at which level, and in a collaborative spirit. This mechanism exists in the Netherlands and

Market governance

Subsidiarity approach



⁶ The [EU Treaty's principle of subsidiarity](#) aims at bringing the EU and its citizens closer by guaranteeing that action is taken at the local level where it proves to be necessary. Generally, decisions should be made at the level of governance closest to the citizens affected.

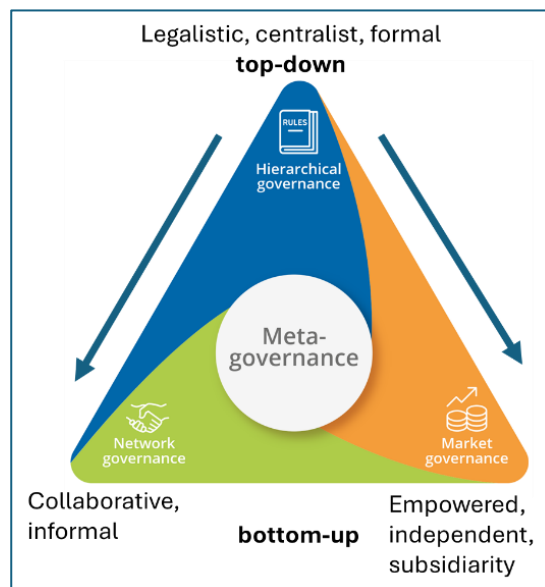
Managing the governance mix

Mixing elements of the three multilevel approaches is the best way to achieve effective governance. Traditional centralist logic (hierarchical governance) is useful for governing of high-scale problems: top-down. This must be accompanied by the logic of collaboration (network governance) and empowerment (market governance) bottom-up.⁸

— In the existing mix, we can see a **trend of shifting from a mainly hierarchical logic towards a logic of collaboration and empowerment**. This is not always done to have more effective policies: e.g., the ultimate objective of decentralisation can be cost saving at the national level. The trend to shift towards more collaborative governance, may result in a neglecting the need for **appropriate legal frameworks** to enable local governance. This was clearly supported during the break-out group discussions at the conference. Participants concluded that:⁹

- ✓ Environmental governance cannot succeed without functional, fair, and inclusive legal foundations. Clear mandates, committed coordination, and genuine participation are all critical.
- ✓ Legal mandates are frequently assigned without the accompanying financial, technical, or human resources necessary for implementation.
- ✓ A robust legal framework must define powers clearly, avoiding both overlap and gaps between governance levels.
- ✓ Any transfer of responsibility should come with guaranteed funding and capacity-building mechanisms.
- ✓ Citizens perceive inefficiency and confusion when responsibilities are not transparent or enforced, undermining the legitimacy of environmental action.

— Real consultation with local and regional actors should precede legislative action. 'Nothing about us without us' should become a principle, not a slogan. The three basic multilevel governance styles usually appear in mixtures, but it is important to note that countries have different starting points and cultural preferences. Therefore, context matters a lot when reflecting on strengthening the effectiveness of multilevel governance on the environment.



⁸ See Meuleman 2018, [Metagovernance for Sustainability: A Framework for Implementing the SDGs](#). London: Routledge.

⁹ Source: Summary report from the Breakout Group on Legislative Framework to Ensure Appropriate Distribution of Powers and Responsibilities, by moderator Senida Mesi.

Creating beneficial conditions for Green Multilevel Governance: Investing in Green Public Administration

Green Public Administration (GPA) is a recent trend. It involves integrating environmental and sustainability considerations into all aspects of government operations and decision-making. It aims to reduce the environmental footprint of the public sector, promote sustainable practices, and achieve broader sustainability goals. It also creates focused governance, skills and mindsets to support green policies.

— One of the first initiatives was the CoE/CDDG Conference “Green Public Administration in the Context of Good Democratic Governance” in April 2023. This was followed up by a working group which produces in December 2023 the ‘Report on Green Public Administration’. This report has a triple structure: (1) Policies supporting GPA, (2) Governance for GPA, and (3) Capacity building, communication and leading by example.

— Around the same time, the European Commission put a priority on ‘Capacity to lead the green transition’ (November 2023). One year later, Hungary published the UNPAN/HU Report ‘Towards Green Public Administration: Goals and Principles’ (December 2024), which was discussed at the 2025 EUPAN conference.

— In April 2025, the European Commission announced a ‘Flagship Technical Support Project’ on ‘Greening Public Administration’, under the Technical Support Instrument for government reforms. The revised European Commission’s Toolbox Quality of Public Administration will have a chapter on ‘Becoming a Green Public Administration’.

— Finally, the EU’s Public Administration Country Knowledge (EUPACK) project produced a thematic study on ‘Green Public Administration – An Introduction in 30 Pieces’ (both to be published in 2025). The latter study builds on the same structure as the CoE Report on MLG: policies, governance, and capacity and skills.

Table of contents of the report ‘Green Public Administration – An Introduction in 30 Pieces’

Part 1. Policies supporting GPA	11	Part 2. Governance supporting GPA: Definition and Principles.....
2 Green taxation and green tax shift	12	Definition and Principles of effective governance for sustainable development
3 Green public procurement.....	13	The eight ‘Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development’ (PCSD) themes ...
4 Green mobility transition	14	Leadership & strategies
5 Sustainable food transition.....	15	Integrating the long-term dimension of the green transition.....
6 Green urban development and building	16	Systemic approaches for the green transition
7 Circular economy	17	Managing green trade-offs and forging green synergies
8 Tackling climate change and transition to sustainable energy.....	18	Multi-sector governance: towards effective coordination of green challenges ..
9 Nature and Biodiversity	19	Overcoming silo-thinking to enhance green mainstreaming
10 Green digitalisation	20	Green multi-level governance: adding a collaborative style to the mix
	21	Green Inter-Municipal Cooperation
	22	National and local green deals
	23	Multi-actor engagement: between consultation and co-creation.....
Part 3: Capacity building to support GPA	24	Green deliberative democracy: how citizens become part of the solution.....
29 Integrating green competences, skills and recruitment criteria	25	Ensuring evidence-informed policy for the green transition
30 Environmental Management and Audit Schemes (EMAS)	26	Mainstreaming sustainability in regulatory impact assessment (RIA)
	27	Green budgeting
	28	Environmental permitting and effective environmental enforcement.....
		Voluntary national, regional and local reviews on sustainability and greening.

Next steps?

The keynote concluded with some thoughts about next steps. We have seen that current Environmental Multilevel governance is generally slow, hampered by silo-thinking, and in particular frustrated by insufficient local roles and resources. We need faster, cross-sectoral, more inclusive and empowered environmental multilevel governance (E-MLG).

— A successful approach in environmental policymaking has always been to use the economic metaphor of the level playing field. We need common rules to create equal conditions, while we still need to be able to apply them situationally.

Such an approach is like what has been suggested for the implementation of the SDGs: apply a principle of Common But Differentiated Governance (CBDG).¹⁰



The CoE Report Towards a new democratic pact for Europe identifies two trends:

- A human rights-based approach to environmental protection is gaining traction, reflected in landmark European Court rulings and efforts to integrate environmental rights into the European Social Charter.
- Environmental governance is evolving, with increased decentralisation allowing local and regional authorities a greater role in climate and biodiversity policies.

— Hence, one way forward to achieve a broad/universal level playing field for effective environmental multilevel governance could be:

- Consider creating an add-on, plug-in, annex or protocol to existing common agreement/rules, that supplements or elaborates on it.
- Existing examples include: 1. The SEA Protocol to the UNECE Espoo convention on transboundary environmental impact assessment; 2. Barcelona convention for the Protection of the Mediterranean Sea Against Pollution (with several Protocols); 3. Increasing calls to update the SDGs for post-2030 with a kind of protocol (instead of complete revision).

— We need a smart, balanced approach to achieve effective environmental multilevel governance:

1. More participation/collaboration can give better results – but too many results in endless talks and delays.
2. More efficiency can result in more flexibility, but too much focus on efficiency has shown to be able to destroy effectiveness.
3. Common rules/standards are essential to create, but too many is rigid and inflexible.
4. Setting up a Green Public Administration plan helps environmental MLG e.g. through a green mindset.

¹⁰ See Meuleman and Niestroy 2015, [Common but differentiated governance: a metagovernance approach to make the SDGs work. Sustainability 7: 12295–12321.](#)

International Conference
**Multilevel Governance approaches
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Overcoming institutional silos and developing cross-sector collaboration.

13 June 2025

Conclusions

At their 134th Session Luxembourg 13-14 May 2025, building on commitments undertaken in the Reykjavík Declaration “United around our values”, the Committee of Ministers adopted a Council of Europe Strategy on the Environment. A key strategic objective of the Strategy is to foster the integration of good democratic governance principles in environmental governance.

This Conference organised under the Maltese Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, building on conclusions of the Lithuanian Presidency Conference in [Vilnius](#), gathered actors from all levels of governance to help identify critical factors to ensure effective multilevel governance collaboration in the development and implementation of policies related to environmental matters.

The Conference, organised with support from the Centre of Expertise for Multilevel Governance at the Congress and the active participation of members of the Council of Europe Committee on Democracy (CDDEM), welcomed the Council of Europe Strategy on the Environment and identified the following key points to strengthen multilevel governance collaboration:

- **Clarify** responsibility and accountability across levels of governance.
- Strengthen vertical and horizontal **coordination** between national, regional, and local authorities to ensure coherence in environmental policies and actions.
- Ensure that everyone has the **capacity to act** within their area of responsibility, fostering inclusive stakeholder engagement and effective participation in decision-making processes.

In order to give effect to these guidelines, the Conference recommended:

- International, supranational and multilateral cooperation to help frame a whole of society approach to environmental challenges, including the standard-setting work of the CDDEM.
- A robust legal framework to clarify roles and responsibilities across levels of government, recognising that climate governance must remain agile to deal with fast-evolving challenges.
- Pursue preparation of a draft additional protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government on environmental protection at the local level.
- Enhance capacity-building and technical support for subnational governments to address environmental regulations aligning local actions with national and international targets.
- Support innovation and pilot projects at the local level with mechanisms for scaling up successful initiatives through multilevel partnerships.
- Engage citizens and promote meaningful and effective public participation to help build trust in public administration and strengthen democratic responses to environmental challenges.
- The bottom-up foresight and top-down coordination enabled by Malta’s Phase 2 Climate Command, promoting openness and accountability, serves as an example of good practice.

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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all members of the European Union. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities is an institution of the Council of Europe, responsible for strengthening local and regional democracy in its 46 member states. Composed of two chambers - the Chamber of Local Authorities and the Chamber of Regions - and three Committees, it comprises 612 elected representatives representing more than 150,000 local and regional authorities.