

URBAN TRANSIT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT IN COSTA RICA: A STUDY OF
INTERNATIONAL CLIMATE FINANCE AND PARTNERSHIPS

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Environmental Studies and Science

Colorado College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Environmental Studies Degree

Bachelor of Arts

By

Malia Rivera

May 2024

Advised by Professor Corina McKendry, PhD

Introduction

Climate finance or International Climate Finance (ICF) plays a pivotal role in addressing the complex issues posed by climate change. Due to the global scale of climate change issues, collective international action is deeply required. Through ICF, developed countries can mobilize financial and technical resources for developing countries and climate-vulnerable regions to support efforts in greenhouse gas mitigation and adaptation practices. Though in theory vital to addressing global climate change, ICF has faced criticisms and challenges, including questions regarding its effectiveness, equity, and alignment with the priorities and needs of recipient countries.

This thesis aims to contribute to the current debates surrounding ICF by analyzing a Costa Rican urban development project called MUEVE, an acronym standing for Sustainable Mobility, Urbanism, Equipment, Valuation of Public Space, and Greening and Equity . This project, derived from the EU's Partnerships for Sustainable Cities Program, focuses on sustainable urban development through international partnerships and intermunicipal collaboration. The exploration of the power dynamics and processes within MUEVE's international partnerships shows that the structure and explicit goals of Project MUEVE are intentional in supporting the recipient actors. As a case study in ICF, Project MUEVE demonstrates an ideal example of the processes that lead to a successful and equitable ICF transfer where all actors gain crucial benefits.

Literature Review

Defining Climate Finance

Climate finance is one of the most crucial aspects in the global effort to address climate change in a world grappling with rising temperatures, extreme weather events, and other climate-related challenges. Addressing climate change will require an exorbitant amount of resources. The Climate Policy Initiative (CPI) estimates that the needs to both mitigate and adapt to climate change range from USD 5.4 trillion to USD 11.7 trillion per year until 2030. In the following two decades, this range increases to between USD 9.3 trillion and 12.2 trillion per year. These estimates are based on the 1.5°C scenario. Delaying climate action or continuing under a business-as-usual (BAU) scenario will result in steeper costs down the line. Although there are some costs that can never be captured in dollar amounts, CPI estimates that a BAU scenario (2025-2100) will result in USD 2,328 trillion in losses due to climate change while the 1.5°C scenario (2025-2100) will result in USD 1,062 trillion. These are global estimates, but, as a result of severe global wealth inequality, not all countries are equal in their need for climate-change resources nor are they equal in their contributions to climate change. In efforts to rectify this disparity, climate finance calls for significant contributions by developed countries to provide financial assistance for developing countries, especially those experiencing disproportionate climate change impacts. Climate finance is not merely a financial transaction but an important facet of the global commitment to building a more equitable and sustainable future.

Climate finance is a comprehensive term that encompasses the financial support provided for activities and initiatives aimed at either mitigating or adapting to the impacts of climate change. This funding is channeled across local, national, and international levels, and it is

derived from a mix of public and private sources. There are diverse combinations of donor and recipient actors within climate finance, ranging from small entities like municipalities to large international organizations. The complex interplay between donor and recipient actors shapes the landscape of climate finance, reflecting the dynamic nature of global efforts to deal with climate change. Climate finance also refers to the social and political processes through which these funds are raised, distributed, and used. Therefore, climate finance is inseparable from the broader context of international politics and diplomacy regarding climate change, sustainable development, and global environmental governance (Grantham Institute of Research, 2023).

There are various forms of climate finance, with a crucial differentiation existing between private and public funding. Private climate finance is funded by individuals and corporations, and there is a wide range of actors operating through various channels. Individual investors or large banks can engage in a variety of financial transactions, each characterized by distinct terms and features. Nearly all private finance is characterized by the need to provide risk-adjusted returns for the investors (United Nations Environment Programme Finance Initiative, 2014). Public climate finance comes from governments and their entities, development banks, and international climate funds. Operating through bilateral or multilateral channels, public climate finance predominantly manifests in the form of loans and grants (Buchner et al., 2023). Bilateral finance originates from one actor, exemplified by entities like the U.S. Agency for International Development, whereas multilateral finance, like many climate funds, involves two or more collaborating actors chartering the fund. In the case of public climate finance, instruments commonly utilized by development finance are frequently employed for climate finance (UNFCCC, 2016).

Given its crucial role in global environmental and climate change governance, the United Nations (UN) stands out as a unique intergovernmental body with significant authority within public climate finance activities. Through entities such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and its annual Conference of the Parties, the UN fosters space for nations to create and negotiate collective agreements on climate-related issues, such as the allocation and utilization of international climate finance. The UN also oversees various funds, including the Adaptation Fund, Special Climate Change Fund, and the Green Climate Fund, that help facilitate the flow of finance from developed to developing countries for climate change action. The Standing Committee on Finance continually works to enhance these financial mechanisms by improving the coordination, mobilization, and measurement of financial resources. The overall activities of the UN wield significant influence, particularly true in the realm of climate finance, given the global nature of both climate change and the financial processes required to address climate change. The proceedings of the UN serve as influential benchmarks, establishing prominent precedents and examples that guide global approaches to climate change and climate finance (UNFCCC, no date).

A Unique Focus on the UN

Examining climate finance through the UN reveals the fundamental concepts that justify and propel climate finance on a broad scale. While climate finance extends beyond official financial mechanisms like the Green Climate Fund and other public institutions overseen by the UN, numerous other forms of climate finance draw guidance from these UN concepts and activities. A primary example is the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), replacing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which have become a central focus for many

environmental and climate change initiatives. They represent a spectrum of global issues and their broad solutions, charting a path for holistic progress beneficial for humans and the planet. The SDGs serve as guiding frameworks for many funding mechanisms and environmental organizations. Notably, the MUEVE project, the subject of this paper's analysis, aligns with and integrates the principles embedded in the SDGs.

One crucial concept shaping international climate finance discussions is that of historic responsibility. The notion that countries bear different obligations in combating climate change based on their varying contributions to climate change has been present since the draft stages of the UN's main body concerning climate change, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). When the UNFCCC was adopted in 1992, the division of countries between Annex 1, 2, and Non-Annex 1 parties demonstrated an acknowledgement of this idea of historic responsibility, especially given that Annex 1 countries were expected to take the main lead in addressing climate change. Although officially recognized only at COP16 (Friman and Hjerpe, 2015), the concept has maintained a somewhat divisive reputation in conferences. Though this could be for many reasons, a large reason stems from conflicting understandings of historic responsibility (Friman and Strandberg, 2014). The conceptual view of historic responsibility considers the current unequal distribution of the capacity to act and the historical factors that lead to this distribution rather than the direct connection between past emissions and present responsibility (Ikeme, 2003). The proportional view understands the current responsibility to act in proportion to historical contribution (Müller, Höhne, and Ellermann, 2009). These varying definitions have different implications for climate change action, but the concept remains a potent driver of international climate finance policy.

Another influential concept in international climate finance is the loss-and-damage framework. This framework involves understanding historical responsibility for climate change, but it places a greater emphasis on the current unequal effects of climate change. It acknowledges the reality of more vulnerable countries and populations that are experiencing the earliest and most extreme climate change effects while usually being the least historically responsible for emissions. The intent behind agreements and agendas drawn from the loss-and-damage framework is to compel affluent developed countries to compensate vulnerable countries for the losses and damages that have been occurring or will occur due to historic emissions despite current adaptation and mitigation attempts (Grantham Research Institute, 2021). This is closely linked to the concept of climate reparations. These reparations or compensation can come in the form of international climate finance that aids countries in the Global South with adaptation or mitigation projects, like energy transition projects (Kaur Paul, 2021). However, the institutionalization of climate reparations is still a subject of ongoing international negotiations. COP19 adopted the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage in 2014, and other mechanisms followed, like the Santiago Network for technical assistance and the Fiji Clearinghouse for Risk Transfer, but these lacked real funding (Puig, 2022). The implementation of the loss-and-damage framework is still in its early stages because of key questions that need addressing, such as defining which events can be considered as a loss and damage, determining eligibility for compensation, and establishing who should contribute to a fund and how much (Clemencon, 2023). Despite ongoing specification of details, these concerns have highlighted the necessity and urgency of international climate finance.

Evolution of International Climate Finance

Foundational principles of international climate finance developed at the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio, also known as the Rio Earth Summit. During this conference, politicians, scientists, and non-governmental organizations aimed to create a comprehensive international agenda addressing environmental issues and economic development that would guide international cooperation and policy in the subsequent century. Several frameworks and declarations materialized from the Rio Earth Summit, such as the Rio Declaration, Agenda 21, and the Convention on Biological Diversity (United Nations, n.d.). Recognizing the financial burdens associated with these conventions the Global Environment Facility (GEF) was established, offering support to developing countries and those with transitioning economies. The GEF was the first global, multilateral environmental funding mechanism for projects related to biodiversity, forest management, pollution, and other environmental issues. The GEF is funded by 40 participating donor countries, primarily developed countries, through the World Bank, and the resources are mobilized through a replenishment process every four years (Global Environment Facility, 2023). The concept of international finance transfers between affluent and less affluent countries for environmental problems was solidly established through the GEF, becoming a central tenet in the following global conferences and treaties regarding the environment (Scott Cato, 2022).

While many international conferences until this point had focused on a variety of environmental issues, the Rio Earth Summit also initiated the inclusion of climate change-specific issues and actions on a large scale with the creation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). This international treaty, signed by 156 countries in 1992, aimed to control greenhouse gas concentrations in order to prevent dangerous

effects from human-induced climate change. Today, 198 countries have ratified the Convention, and they make up the Parties to the Convention. While the specifics of achieving the goals of this Convention were yet to be negotiated, the Convention provided a valuable framework for future agreements and policies. A crucial principle outlined in the Convention is the principle of common but differentiated responsibility. Acknowledging that different countries have different responsibilities and capabilities to act on climate change, this principle suggests that developed countries should take the lead in addressing climate change. Additionally, the nations under the Convention agreed that it was necessary to provide developing countries with extra and additional financial support for action on climate change (UNFCCC, n.d.). While the GEF was still in use for some climate-change related issues, a funding mechanism specifically for adaptation and mitigation strategies had not yet been established.

The Kyoto Protocol, adopted in 1997 under the UNFCCC, marked a pioneering effort to commit developed countries to reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. It established legally binding reduction targets for developed countries and countries with economies in transition, while developing countries were encouraged to voluntarily comply. The Kyoto Protocol also sought advancements in climate finance by creating market-based financial mechanisms: International Emissions Trading, the Clean Development Mechanism, and Joint Implementation. These mechanisms, established to help countries meet their emission reduction goals, promote cost-effective GHG mitigation through trading emission credits and investing in mitigation projects in developing countries (UNFCCC, n.d.). However, debates persist regarding the effectiveness of these mechanisms and the Kyoto Protocol as a whole. Criticisms include the overwhelming focus on mitigation over adaptation, the ability of high-emitting countries to easily withdraw, and the genuine impact of emissions trading and transnational investment in

green technology in combating climate change (Falkner, 2019). Nonetheless, the Kyoto Protocol was a next step in establishing financial mechanisms specifically for addressing climate change.

The institutionalization of international climate finance took a significant step forward at 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Montreal, known as COP15. One of the biggest results of COP15 was an unprecedented commitment by developed countries to provide substantial funds for developing countries to adapt to disproportionate climate change effects and mitigate emissions. These countries collectively pledged to provide USD 100 billion annually by 2020, alongside committing to providing new and additional funds around \$30 billion during 2010-2012 (UNFCCC, 2009). The Parties continued to advocate for the solidification of this commitment, leading to the creation of the Green Climate Fund (GCF) at COP16 in Cancun the following year. The GCF was created as the main mechanism to support climate change projects and policies under the UNFCCC, with a specific focus on addressing the needs of the most climate-vulnerable nations. 31 nations, most of which are developed nations, currently contribute to this multilateral climate fund with a replenishment every 4 years. The most recent replenishment for the 2024-2027 period reached a record funding level with a pledge of USD 12.8 billion (Green Climate Fund, 2023).

At COP21, the 2015 Paris Agreement accomplished many things, one of which was bolstering climate finance objectives. To match the ambition of keeping global warming below 2°C, the Paris Agreement reiterated the obligations of developed country Parties to mobilize financial support for climate action in developing countries. This reiteration took the form of a new commitment to extend the collective mobilization of USD 100 billion per year through 2025, with a new yearly target to be set before 2025. While the Agreement still heavily emphasizes the use of the official financial mechanisms of the UNFCCC, it underscored the need

to mobilize climate finance from a diverse range of sources, instruments and channels to meet broader climate finance goals (UNFCCC, n.d.). Additionally, the Paris Agreement also made the shift from common but differentiated responsibilities to nationally determined contributions (NDCs) in an effort to depart from the rigid distinction between industrialized and developing countries and promote a more inclusive consideration of the ‘subtle differentiation’ between countries and their capacities to address climate change (Pauw, Mbeva, and van Asselt, 2019). The UNFCCC remains committed to making progress in expanding climate finance goals and solidifying pathways of action towards those goals.

The Current State of Climate Finance

Understanding the current state of climate finance is crucial for evaluating the efficacy of various climate finance mechanisms and how they can improve. Public actors committed an annual average of USD 640 billion in 2021/2022, approximately half of the global total of climate finance. This is an impressive 91% increase from USD 335 billion in 2019/2020. The overwhelming majority of public finance, USD 364 billion, was provided by development finance institutions (DFIs). National DFIs, particularly in East Asia and the Pacific, remained the largest source of public finance by providing USD 238 billion, though most was through domestic commitments. Multilateral DFIs provided USD 93 billion, with 45% of this funding going to Emerging Markets and Developing economies (EMDEs) and 40% going to developed countries. Least Developed countries (LDCs) received 14% of this funding, 60% of which was in the form of debt. Governments and their agencies provided USD 100 billion, though most of this was a result of strengthening domestic climate finance policies. Multilateral climate funds only provided USD 3 billion, or 0.5% of public climate finance. The Green Climate Fund provided

71% of this funding, but this amount is expected to significantly rise after the second replenishment process commences for 2024-2027. Through climate-specific projects, the Global Environment Facility also funded around 3% of public climate finance (Buchner et al., 2023).

Climate finance also grew with significant geographical differences, especially between international and domestic flows. 16% of climate finance in 2021/2022 was channeled internationally, and 74% of this was provided by public actors. 84% of international finance was provided by developed countries, 13% was provided by EMDEs, and less than 2% was committed by developing countries in the Global South. The most climate vulnerable regions received most of their climate finance from international channels while many other regions in the Global South were nearly split between international and domestic climate finance. Conversely, developed countries received most of their climate finance from private and domestic finance. Just over 2% of climate finance flowed to or within LDCs, which are often in regions that are the most at risk from climate change impacts, and 14% went to EMDEs (Buchner et al., 2023). Of finance that went to LDCs, there was an almost even split between grants and concessional loans, but both LDCs and EMDEs experienced difficulties in securing finance because of risk perceptions and complex funding processes (World Resource Institute, 2021).

ICF Critiques

The mobilization of funds by developed countries for developing countries is currently underway through various channels, albeit not always meeting the target amounts in accordance with the international climate finance goals, mainly \$100 billion per year in climate funding by 2020 and on, established by the UN. While the Green Climate Fund is designated as a primary

financial mechanism of the Paris Agreement mandates, other funds such as the Special Climate Change Fund, the Least Developed Countries Fund, which are managed by the Green Environment Facility, and the Adaptation Fund also contribute to these goals. Despite these commitments, a significant portion of funding from developed countries is channeled through multilateral DFIs, like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. The smallest channels used by nearly every contributor are multilateral climate funds such as the Green Climate Fund. However, this doesn't align entirely with the UNFCCC's vision. The Paris Agreement specifically designates these climate funds a special role in the implementation of the climate finance goals because developing countries have a greater influence in their governance as well as easier direct access, particularly when compared to development banks (Bos, Gonzalez, and Thwaites, 2021). Climate finance is also experiencing uneven geographic trends, especially where the most at-risk regions are receiving insufficient funding. Clearly international climate finance is in motion, but debates persist on the optimal approach and the effectiveness of the aid, coupled with critiques of the current processes of ICF. Given that public ICF, like the Green Climate Fund, dominates funding to the regions most vulnerable to climate change, it is crucial to address ICF critiques to ensure the proper operation of climate finance. The critiques are not consistent across all actors, and some even present contradictions. Nonetheless, they raise fundamental questions about the landscape of international climate finance. These critiques of international climate finance encompass imbalances between donors and recipients, reliance on debt-based financing, donor self-interest in allocations, debates over technical approaches and co-benefits, and questions of efficiency.

A pervasive critique of international climate finance surrounds the persistent power imbalances between donor and recipient actors, intricately woven with broader notions of

development and sustainable development. According to some critics, an analysis of the UN 2030 Agenda and the SDGs unveils the centrality of underlying patriarchal, colonial, and class logics that shape the hegemonic discourse of “development” and its outcomes (Lang 2021, Kotzé, 2018). Despite the professed neutrality and altruism of the SDGs and similar agendas, some argue that they operate within the power dynamics of an inherently unequal world dominated by corporations and financial institutions. One clear example of this is the prioritization of economic growth within the solutions proposed by Agenda 2030 and the SDGs, reflecting the persistent dominance of GDP and the Western narrative of linear and infinite progress. While a focus on economic growth does not inherently illustrate power imbalances, international development bodies hailing economic growth as a universal solution to all issues positions the neoliberal capitalist economy as a force that objectively improves the world (Lang, 2021). However, this opinion held by international development bodies is far from objective. For example, there is no SDG measure to *limit* economic growth despite the fact that the richest 10% are responsible for about half of global emissions (Oxfam, 2015). A singular focus within developmental goals, which are often coupled with climate goals, on reducing poverty, is essential, but it can turn a blind eye to the problem of extreme wealth concentration in a few hands (Lang, 2021). In this way, global development bodies like the UN are the sum of their parts; they condense power relations on a global scale and their solutions will inherently reflect unequal power dynamics that already exist (Hirsch, 2005; Brand et al, 2008).

Critiques in this vein argue that power dynamics continue to structure global efforts to address climate change, heavily influencing the international climate finance process. Omala’s (2023) examination of power relations between donor and recipient countries sheds light on how these dynamics impact international climate finance coordination. Omala finds two main types of

interactions within relational power: power *with* (cooperation, learning and deliberation) and power *over* (coercion and manipulation). Actors within climate finance exercise their power either to achieve an objective at the expense of other actors or to jointly achieve an objective through cooperation with other actors. Power asymmetries among actors, especially within the climate finance landscape, is common due to different amounts of material and ideational power, but the navigation of these asymmetries determines coordination and implementation outcomes. Upon analyzing various Pilot Programs for Climate Resilience (PPCRs) facilitated by multilateral development banks (MDBs), Omala (2023) found that MDBs predominantly exercise power over domestic actors, negatively affecting the project coordination and overall success. An example of exercising power over is MDBs choosing the focal agency for a PPCR in the recipient country rather than prioritizing the recipient actor's choice. Utilizing power over other actors in the realm of international climate finance is likely to reinforce existing inequalities and perpetuate systems that continue to reproduce negative impacts. These insights highlight the need for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of historic and contemporary power dynamics to foster equitable and effective international climate finance coordination.

A second set of critiques have been raised about the existing global mechanisms and structures of financing, and how they have the potential to further harm through cycles of debt and dependence. The normative frameworks within the UN and SDGs that shape international climate finance continue to promote an excessive reliance on international finance to drive developmental goals. Recipient countries have historically been subordinated through debt relations and foreign financial institutions, a subordination that began with structural adjustment and US dollar hegemony (Perry, 2021). A UN Trade and Development Report (2019) further states that the unintentional and uneven integration of developing countries into the global

financial systems has led to increasing debt and financial speculation. Although climate finance occurs through both debt instruments and grants, investors and development banks have come to prefer debt for climate change projects, and this is evident by the overwhelming majority of climate finance in 2021/2022 being raised through debt (Buchner et al., 2023; Bracking and Leffel, 2021). The current flows of finance in international climate funding and sustainable development, in this context, risk reproducing past hierarchies and creating new sources of reward for investors through further commodification of climate change projects while pushing poorer countries further into debt.

A third main critique is concerned with self-serving reasons for funding. The mobilization of international climate finance and other kinds of foreign aid has shown to be determined in some capacity by the potential benefits it can bring the donor. Bayramoglu et al. (2023) demonstrates how bilateral trade positively influences donor countries' allocations of bilateral climate aid. While this effect is deemed positive, it reveals a potentially self-serving side. The provision of aid is often based on pre-existing commercial relations rooted in historical, geographic, and geopolitical factors that may be threatened by the impacts of climate change. While Bayramoglu et al. specifically examine trade relations within international climate finance, there are broader conversations surrounding the notion that foreign development aid as a whole is often determined by donor needs. There is somewhat of a consensus that motivations behind aid often combine both altruistic and selfish motivations (Berthelemy, 2006). While not inherently negative, international climate finance runs the risk of perpetuating cycles that are more advantageous for the donor rather than the recipient. Given that the most vulnerable countries are often the recipient actors, there is a dangerous potential for them to be ignored due to lack of benefit they could bring the donor actor as a result of lacking trade relations.

A fourth major debate centers around the more technical applications of international climate finance, with the primary focus of the conversation on climate finance that incorporates co-benefits versus climate finance with a more narrowly defined approach solely targeting emission reductions. Buchholz and Rubbelke (2021) argue that climate finance and development aid are defined by different objectives and should be treated as such. Citing an efficiency argument, the authors advocate for addressing sustainability and development concerns through alternative sources of funding to maximize the cost-effectiveness of climate finance. This argument refers to co-benefits, which are additional benefits of climate change mitigation efforts. According to these critics, the “vagueness” of co-benefits jeopardizes the effectiveness and efficiency of global climate protection (Buchholz and Rubbelke, 2021). Finance mechanisms with dual aims of achieving both SDGs and emissions commitments might stretch funds too thin.

Bazbauers (2022) also explores the co-benefits discourse by analyzing the priorities of multilateral banks when funding climate-resilient city projects. Bazbauers observes a narrow focus on infrastructural development utilizing high technology, noting that there is uncertainty in their ability to address various social and economic factors contributing to climate change. To these multilateral banks, social development benefits or co-benefits in general are not the primary goal but are considered positive if they happen to accompany the projects. The difficulty of measuring and quantifying social co-benefits compared to technical outputs, such as emissions reduction, could be a contributing factor to this sentiment. Social benefits are, again, considered far too vague for a multilateral bank to make a decision solely based on them, leading to a common preference for measurable technical outcomes.

A fifth debate focuses on the best ICF frameworks for efficiency. There are various ways to facilitate ICF processes given the diversity of donors, recipients, and the funding mechanisms

through which they operate. When analyzing current ICF frameworks for efficiency, von Lupke, Aebischer, and Neuhoff (2021) found that top-down approaches, often implemented by the principles of international development cooperation, haven't worked significantly. They propose improvements, one of which involves increasing the reciprocity of mitigation efforts. This entails both the donor and recipient countries combining their efforts to commit to more ambitious climate change targets that are appropriate for their contexts. Establishing linkages across political decision-making levels would encourage stronger partnerships that can facilitate better knowledge exchange, policy diffusion, and financial aid. Sudo (2016) also advocates for increasing international cooperation with a more horizontal structure within climate change efforts in order to share and build knowledge about technical and management skills. Recognizing capacity as a critical factor in solidifying the longevity of climate change activities, developing countries, in collaboration with international partners, should focus on developing the ability to manage and finance climate change projects.

Additionally, there are calls for ICF to flow through all levels of government, rather than remaining at the national level. Despite challenges in measuring the complete flow of finance to the local level, initial estimates reveal a significant imbalance between the funding allocated to local levels of government and other government levels. Most climate and development finance predominantly flows within national levels, neglecting the great potential for more effective and efficient utilization at local levels. One way it can be more effective is through local governments' proximity to people and their authentic lived experiences. They are held more accountable to the people, enabling greater inclusion of vulnerable and minority populations in plans and decision-making processes. Local governments also contain experts in local knowledge and context, making any interventions and projects with their insight more likely to

be genuinely effective for their environment. Leveraging this local expertise can allow for the seamless integration of both climate and development agendas, even when the parameters of a project lean toward technical outputs (Soanes et al., 2017).

While the mobilization of international climate finance is in progress, there are various critiques about its status and process. Firstly, there are major disparities among the utilization of international climate finance channels and their geographic focuses. Other critiques encompass power imbalances between donors and recipients, reliance on debt-based financing, self-serving donor motivations, and debates over technical approaches, such as the incorporation of co-benefits versus narrowly targeting emission reductions. Additionally concerns arise regarding the effectiveness and equity of the current international climate finance processes, with calls for more efficient frameworks and increased involvement of local governments to address the uneven distribution of funding and ensure effective community engagement. These critiques reflect broader concerns about perpetuating inequalities, prioritizing economic growth over sustainability, and the need for transparent and equitable allocation of climate finance. Through focusing on Project MUEVE, these critiques can be analyzed and responded to with a real world example.

Methodology

This research mainly utilizes qualitative methods to understand the nature of the MUEVE Project and explore the power dynamics within the international partnerships. Semi-formal interviews were conducted with eight experts engaged in the project on the municipal and international levels in Costa Rica, and this was supplemented with content analysis to establish a foundational understanding of the project and its contextual backdrop before holding interviews.

The analyzed content consisted of online sources related to Project MUEVE, the EU's Partnerships for Sustainable Cities Program, and various national and municipal plans pertaining to decarbonization, adaptation, and urban development. These methodological approaches aim to center the perspectives of Costa Rican actors involved in the project and gain their insights into the dynamics of the MUEVE Project regarding its efficacy and equity. Given the critiques of international climate finance, it is important to prioritize the experiences of recipient actors to evaluate the power dynamics within the process and identify potential recommendations for improvement.

Due to the limited availability of online information regarding the current state of MUEVE, this research primarily relies on interview data to comprehensively understand the organizational structure of the project as well as its impact and efficacy. While the online resources, especially those related to the Partnerships for Sustainable Cities Program, provided some background information on the project, they are not fully up-to-date, as revealed by the Project Director of MUEVE and other interviewees. To gain insights directly from those closely involved in the project, I contacted the urban planning departments of the 15 municipalities participating in the project. Additionally, I reached out to the Sustainable Urban Development program at the University of Costa Rica and a nonprofit organization called the Center for Urban Sustainability to potentially obtain alternative perspectives on urban planning in Costa Rica and understand how they might interact with the municipalities within the context of the project. Various members of the urban planning departments of Heredia, Goicoechea, and Alajuela agreed to meet with me, while a member of the Center for Urban Sustainability recommended that I speak with the Project Director of MUEVE who operates within the Costa Rican National Union of Local Governments, the main actor interacting and collaborating with international

partners. Through discussions with both the municipal representatives and the Project Director, I gained insights from individuals directly engaged in on-the-ground work in the municipalities as well as those collaborating with international partners.

I conducted eight interviews with urban planning experts, delving into various aspects of their involvement in the project and their evaluation of the project. The introductory questions focused on specifying the project's parameters and timelines, followed by the interviewees' specific roles within the project. Subsequently, discussions centered on identifying successful components of the project while addressing the major barriers that the project has encountered. From this point, the interviews diverged slightly based on what was most pertinent to the municipality. Using a semi-structured format I tailored the interview questions to address topics the interviewees felt the most strongly about. Once a solid profile of the project from the specific municipality's perspective was established, I asked questions regarding the structure of the project and how international partners contribute to the project. This included inquiries about the level of autonomy within the project requirements, the role of international partners in helping or hindering the overall success of the project, and the dynamics of the relationship between the municipalities and the international collaborators.

After conducting the interviews, I transcribed and translated the recorded audio to begin the coding process. Upon completing the interview transcriptions, I organized the responses according to their respective subject or question. This consisted of gathering specific quotes and summarizing them into notes for each category. These categories mirrored the interview questions and encompassed details about the project structure, municipality-specific goals regarding the project or urban development, successes and accomplishments, main barriers to success, and the deliverables of the project. I then evaluated the content of these categories based

on the research questions concerning international climate finance and partnerships, the effectiveness of these partnerships, and the underlying power dynamics within these collaborative efforts. I aimed to comprehend how Project MUEVE responds to the criticisms of international climate finance.

Case Study

Project MUEVE Context and Background

Project MUEVE was created from the EU's Partnerships for Sustainable Cities program. The EU launched this program in 2018 to support social, environmental, and economic facets of sustainability and urban development within cities. One of the program's main goals is to strengthen the EU's relationship with local governments through peer-to-peer exchanges. With the mobilization of €165 million, this program facilitates 57 global partnership projects between local authorities of EU Member States and local governments within the Global South (Bossuyt and Sabourin, 2023). Additionally, the program targets various Sustainable Development Goals, including SDG 11 "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable" and SDG 17 "Revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development" (European Commission, n.d.). According to the European Center for Development Policy Management, approximately 65% of the 169 targets constructing the 17 SDGS will not be reached without the engagement and coordination of local and regional governments. More specifically, Partnerships for Sustainable Cities both provides funding for projects and activities within partnerships and promotes joint learning among all actors involved. This knowledge sharing will improve urban conditions and development as well as inform future policies regarding cities and international cooperation in both the EU and local government partners (Bossuyt and Sabourin, 2023). In

2019, the EU called for proposals for the first round of partnership projects. More than 250 proposals were submitted from around the world. The MUEVE Project, which is an acronym for Sustainable Mobility, Urbanism, Equipment, Valuation of Public Space, and Greening and Equity, was one of four winning proposals from Latin America and secured a funding of just over €5 million for a 5-year timeline from 2020-2025.

Fifteen municipalities in the metropolitan area around Costa Rica's capital city of San José collaborated on the MUEVE Project to improve urban mobility and interconnectivity between their cities as well as stimulate socioeconomic development in the involved areas. In order for the project to be selected, the proposal had to address key themes such as urbanism, sustainable transportation, gender equality, and accessibility among others. To develop a comprehensive project which addressed all of these themes, the National Union of Local Governments (UNGL), the political entity that represents local municipalities in Costa Rica, facilitated the creation of interdisciplinary teams from the participating municipalities. These municipal teams form one half of Costa Rica's MUEVE team while the other half consists of the UNGL, who report to and coordinate with the EU and other international partners. MUEVE's primary international partners include the International Cooperation Agency of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG), Fomento San Sebastian, a public project management company in Spain, and the municipality of Pereira in Colombia. These partners possess specific technical knowledge and experience in urban transportation and intermunicipal governance, two thematic targets of the Partnerships for Sustainable Cities Program as well as MUEVE.

The original MUEVE Project was structured around three main goals or objectives. The first goal was to rebuild and modernize the existing train line that traverses the metropolitan area containing the 15 municipalities. Historically utilized for moving produce across the country, the

train line now serves citizens. While the service is reported as quite good, there are limitations such as a short operating schedule only during peak hours and poor accessibility from many other locations in the metropolitan area. The project's plan involved transitioning this train line to an electric train system while improving the surrounding urban infrastructure. For this to be accomplished, the project set out to develop an Intermunicipal Plan for Transport-Oriented Urban Development (PIM-DUOT) aimed at enhancing urban mobility, especially access to the electric train. The third main goal was to formulate a Project Plan for specific urban interventions in each of the 15 municipalities. Beyond these concrete goals, Project MUEVE seeks to advance broader objectives such as strengthening intermunicipal urban governance, promoting inclusion of vulnerable populations in municipal planning through increased citizen participation, and improving environmental quality and urban sustainability. By extension of the EU's original goals, MUEVE is also designed to facilitate robust knowledge exchange between Costa Rica's municipalities and international partners in both directions.

Since the beginning of the project, MUEVE has deviated from its original plan due to various political reasons, one of them being the complex relationship between municipal and national government in Costa Rica. Costa Rica operates under a highly centralized governmental structure, and many initiatives related to MUEVE, and urban development in general, often need approval from national entities. That being said, national support for MUEVE is a very large component of the success of the project. MUEVE launched during the administration of President Carlos Alvarado Quesada and First Lady Claudia Dobles Camargo. Both were heavily engaged in furthering Costa Rica's sustainability goals. President Alvarado set a global precedent by establishing the goal of zero net emissions by the year 2050, making Costa Rica the first country to make such a target. With First Lady Dobles, an architect and urban planner,

advocating for the project, MUEVE experienced strong national support at the time. Despite its municipal focus, the national government was heavily involved in the project, a notable advantage considering that the train line falls under national jurisdiction by the Costa Rican Institute of Railroads (INCOFER). During this administration, the plans were set, and the national government was looking for the complete financing to implement the electric train system.

However, in 2022, Rodrigo Chaves Robles was elected to presidency and has since acted in an anti-establishment manner, resulting in INCOFER pulling out of the project and the subsequent suspension of the electric train initiative, one of the main aspects of MUEVE. Additionally, another aspect of MUEVE was effectively shut down by political opponents. The intermunicipal urban development plan (PIM-DUOT) was previously formed and approved by the necessary stakeholders, but an appeal was filed to the Constitutional Chamber to review the plan. The plan was declared unconstitutional, although the precise reasons for this decision remain unclear. Because of this, the intermunicipal plan could not be legally binding in any way, leaving the implementation of this aspect of MUEVE contingent on local governments' voluntary acceptance and execution of the plan's recommendations.

Despite these challenges, MUEVE continues to commit to its original objectives. Because the electric train was established as the base project for the rest of the urban development in the surrounding municipalities, some municipalities were left in a state of uncertainty after the train was no longer being considered. However, some municipalities like Heredia and Alajuela were better positioned to navigate these changes because of the preexisting urban development or sustainable mobility plans they had developed. Contrastly, MUEVE has yet to commence in some of the municipalities that lack pre-existing development plans, like

Goicoechea. MUEVE has since altered its approach, allowing the municipalities to propose a project that fulfilled the requirements of MUEVE and streamlining the process of reviewing, updating, and implementing the project. For instance, in Heredia, the urban planning office has long envisioned a boulevard that would “return” the center of the city back to pedestrians, prioritizing their access, mobility, and safety. With MUEVE supporting this specific project, it will be the 6th attempt the urban planning office has made to accomplish this project. This is only one aspect of the broader municipal plans they are currently working on, like their Proposal of Sustainable Territorial Regulation. According to interviewees, there is still much progress being made in areas other than the train, such as technical training and intermunicipal communication and collaboration.

Project MUEVE in the broader picture of climate finance

Power Asymmetries critique

The power asymmetries critique refers to the misuse of power imbalances between donors and recipients within international climate finance, usually within the form of “power-over” dynamics. Project MUEVE acknowledges this critique and is structured to avoid “power-over” dynamics. MUEVE is designed to be an exchange of experiences between partner cities and municipalities with a strong focus on collaboration and mutual benefits for all actors that heavily displays a “power-with” dynamic. The Partnerships for Sustainable Cities program explicitly stated that the lessons learnt during the joint learning process among partnerships will shape future EU policies and practices towards cities and local municipalities in terms of external action and development cooperation. In exchange, local municipalities like those of MUEVE can also receive knowledge and training in areas they lack. The municipal teams’ travel to San Sebastian was especially beneficial for this. Not only did they meet with mayors and technicians,

but the municipal teams shared their experiences in Costa Rica. In a retelling of the experience, one member explained how San Sebastian 20 years ago was “like us now” in terms of the priority given to cars within urban infrastructure. She explained that they had the exact same obstacles, and San Sebastian was able to overcome them and return the center of their city to other pedestrian-friendly modes of transportation. While San Sebastian and Costa Rican cities have different profiles, the teams were able to connect over shared experiences despite being in different spots currently and learn from each other. The knowledge of Costa Rica’s municipalities is held in equal regard to the information that international partners can provide even if the information comes in different forms.

Excessive reliance and self-serving funding critique

When placed in conversation with the critique of excessive reliance on international climate finance to drive developmental and climate goals, the MUEVE Project demonstrates its explicit capacity-building design for all actors involved but especially for the Costa Rican municipalities. The plans, training, and facilitation of collaboration that MUEVE provides focuses on improving the self-sufficiency of Costa Rica’s local governments in terms of urban governance and development so that progress can continue long after the project ends. This, accomplished through a deeper look at the deliverables of Project MUEVE, directly addresses concerns about climate finance locking in countries and governments in cycles of financial or technical reliances. MUEVE also addresses the self-serving funding critique through its commitment to increasing and supporting long-term climate change goals.

In terms of plans, one of the ultimate goals of the project is to provide in-depth urban development and mobility plans for local governments to use in the future. With the financial and technical resources of the international partners in MUEVE, two main types of plans are being

formulated. One of these plans is the Intermunicipal Plan for Transport-Oriented Urban Development (PIM-DUOT), enabling municipalities to coordinate urban transportation and infrastructure for greater permeability and accessibility for citizens. The second type of plan is a local Project Plan in each municipality for an urban intervention of their choosing. These plans would also prioritize transport-oriented development in alignment with the overarching Intermunicipal Plan while still accommodating the specific needs of each municipality. From each plan, a demonstration work with an approximate value of €90,000 will then be carried out. These plans are intended to be incorporated in the municipalities' future budgets and plans. This focus on the design and demonstration aspect of these plans rather than the physical implementation is an explicit effort to allow the municipalities to have full control over the project outcomes.

Another important aspect of increasing self-sufficiency is building the technical-skills capacity of the municipalities in various areas so they have the tools and knowledge to implement new plans in the future without outside aid. For example, at least one person from the technical team of each municipality went to the municipality of San Sebastian in Spain for one week to see the urban infrastructure and city intelligence systems. MUEVE's international partners are constantly holding workshops, courses, and consultancies for the municipal teams in the pursuit of capacity building. Members from multiple municipality teams expressed the importance and impact of various workshops, especially workshops about citizen participation. Seeing that public approval of urban initiatives is a large barrier to the success of urban development plans, understanding how to work with citizens and involve them in the decision-making processes has proven to be very useful.

MUEVE also aims to improve communication between institutions in Costa Rica, both national and local, regarding urban development so that the facilitation of future projects is more efficient and effective. Prior to MUEVE, there have been instances where national institutions, like INCOFER, have been unaware of the municipalities' land use plans and tried to build on land belonging to the municipalities. With MUEVE, the plans of local governments are being visualized on a national level so that more institutions can be involved and supportive. In a similar way, coordination between different municipalities and intermunicipal policies has not been common, especially within urban development. Given that urban infrastructure, especially regarding transit, does not “stay” within one municipality, this has led to disjointed urban amenities and attempts at urban improvement. With MUEVE, this coordination is greatly improving in a way that establishes methods of collaboration that will extend far beyond the MUEVE's project dates.

Co-benefits critique

The co-benefits debate centers on the technical applications of international climate finance and whether it should focus on emission reduction goals only or incorporate other additional benefits. Project MUEVE takes a firm stance within this debate. Both MUEVE and its mother program from the EU, Partnerships for Sustainable Cities, explicitly focus on co-benefits while affirming their necessity for the holistic success of urban planning and development initiatives. The Partnerships for Sustainable Cities program, which created MUEVE, “aims to strengthen urban governance by supporting social, environmental or economic sustainability” (European Commission, n.d.). This program states at the very beginning that their method of improving urban governance, and, by extension, urban development, is through promoting

various co-benefits. One of the thematic areas of the program include ensuring social inclusiveness of cities by promoting urban systems which, for example, address the ‘urban planning gender gap’ by responding to women’s needs, including safety and security in urban public spaces. Another thematic area of Partnerships for Sustainable Cities is about promoting economic vitality through the fostering of job creation and commerce. The resulting proposals submitted to the program needed to have certain characteristics that addressed social inclusiveness, like gender equality and accessibility, and economic improvement in order to be approved and funded. Even after MUEVE was approved and created, the smaller, local project plan proposals that the municipalities presented needed to incorporate these thematic areas.

Another way MUEVE focuses on co-benefits is through its municipal teams. In order to create project proposals that are inclusive in all the ways the requirements call for, the municipal teams must be interdisciplinary. Many of the municipal teams have members from various specializations, like architecture, topography, environmental management, political administration, civil engineering, and gender equality. Prior to MUEVE, such interdisciplinary teams within the municipalities did not usually exist. But many members of the municipal teams attributed much of the success of MUEVE to the fact that their teams have so many professionals from different fields, allowing them to generate urban development plans that are holistically sound and address a broad range of urban issues. Many members of the municipal teams especially cited gender equity and general inclusion of vulnerable populations as a large priority within the projects. Not only are the heads of the Gender Equality departments deeply involved in the process, but the citizenship participation training plays an important role in these goals as well. While public approval of projects can be a barrier to MUEVE’s overall success, it is also an integral part of the success because the municipal teams need to know what people need in order

to build the infrastructure that will work for them. MUEVE can bring about many more benefits than more efficient urban mobility or improved development. These interdisciplinary teams will continue to work together on various projects to ensure that co-benefits are always an important aspect, no matter the nature of the intervention.

Top-down approaches critique

The top-down approaches critique targets the inefficiencies of many international climate finance frameworks. In response, there are many calls for international climate finance to operate with a more horizontal structure, allowing room for the important utilization of local level actors. The MUEVE Project and the EU responds to these calls through its design and current operation that places the locus of control with local governments while combining the efforts of all involved actors. The EU has had a long history of promoting decentralization and empowering local authorities to play main roles in development. These principles are also written into the Partnerships for Sustainable Cities program. The EU cites local governments as the closest authorities to citizens, and they are key to achieving the 2030 Agenda (European Commission, n.d.). The contest for partnerships was designed so that local governments would submit proposals that were locally relevant and needed. The EU only controlled certain requirements that the proposals needed to fill, like the various axes of the project. For MUEVE, the municipalities proposed the electric train and accompanying urban infrastructure to address the issues most pertinent to their environment and citizens. Even after the train was no longer an immediate option, each municipality was allowed to submit another proposal for a local project. In the municipality of Heredia, the urban planning department was working on multiple projects relating to urban development, particularly the connectivity and pacification of the city. When

MUEVE arrived, the department picked a specific boulevard that they had been attempting to reconstruct in order to connect different major areas of the city, increase pedestrian space, and revitalize for commerce, recreation, and work. This project was able to be streamlined. In the municipality of Alajuela, the urban planning department had a urban development plan for about 10 years prior to MUEVE. Struggles with implementation were cited as the aspect keeping the plan on paper, but MUEVE has allowed the department to “take it closer to a level of execution”. Even further than just streamlining, MUEVE has strengthened and promoted the local plans of the municipalities in multiple ways.

MUEVE’s partners are also primarily local governments. As previously mentioned, the knowledge transfers among these local governments effectively combine the efforts of donor and recipient actors in a more decentralized manner rather than a hierarchical one. This is especially beneficial because Costa Rica has a very centralized government, making urban development and improvement a difficult and tedious process. MUEVE’s partners operate within more decentralized governmental environments, and this is a rich area of knowledge transfer for Costa Rica’s municipalities. While the municipalities cannot do a great deal in order to change the structure of their government, the methods of collaboration and coordination, both with each other and with international partners, that the municipalities are gaining are extremely valuable in establishing more efficient urban development practices.

Discussion

The MUEVE Project is an example of the positive potential of ICF. There are various debates and critiques about the current processes of international climate finance that address various areas such as power relationships, debt-based financing, co-benefits, and technical

approaches. These critiques are nuanced and can be understood differently in each context, but they are effective questions for evaluating the impacts of international climate finance and questioning how they can be improved. The MUEVE Project is an ideal case study through which these critiques can be viewed, presenting an example that centers equity, collaboration, and longevity. Through this project, the recipient actors are empowered to guide the utilization of aid, both financially and technically, fostering a sense of ownership and agency. The project's goals are geared towards mutually beneficial outcomes for both the donor and recipient actors, and they address both current needs and future sustainability goals. Perhaps most notable about the MUEVE Project are the relationships it builds between the donor and recipient actors, establishing an environment for future collaboration, something that climate change issues require.

Understanding the MUEVE Project is crucial to international climate finance and broader climate change efforts. The partnerships in the MUEVE Project between local governments in Costa Rica, the Netherlands, and Spain are being formed in a way that dismantles traditional barriers between donor and recipient positionalities. One of their main goals is to foster collaboration, coordination, and partnerships, and these are key to the future of ICF and all other climate change initiatives. It has long been known that climate change requires a global response, but this response must be catered and specific. Every country and city has a different context and a different capacity for climate change action, and a global comprehensive and effective response to climate change must take this into account. ICF is trying to address this diversity, but it is not without its criticisms, as outlined in this paper. Given the reality of the climate change emergency, ICF is essential to climate change action, and it is imperative that the means by which it is implemented are equitable, ensuring that the ends are also just. While the MUEVE

Project is not representative of all climate projects, it serves as a testament to the potential for ICF to be equitable and impactful.

Even if the MUEVE Project is very hopeful for future dynamics within ICF, it encounters significant challenges. The project faces many barriers in Costa Rica related to political, social, and cultural factors at local and national levels. It is in a constant process of negotiation with other institutions and actors in Costa Rica, and addressing these negotiations is the key to further success of the project as defined by the municipalities. However, it is important to note that such barriers are not unique to the MUEVE Project but are present in any climate initiative. Recipient actors will be best prepared to navigate these challenges with the genuine support and collaboration from donor actors. Further research in these kinds of climate initiatives, especially those that center recipient actors, will be crucial to understanding all the ways ICF processes can overcome challenges of all kinds.

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