

Multilevel governance and strategic planning: Supralocal governments influencing local circular economy adoption

Benoit Ruysschaert^{a,b,}, Michiel Pauwels^{c,d}, Tom Kuppens^{b,e,f}, and Nathalie Crutzen^a*

^aHEC Liège, Management School of the University of Liège,
Rue Louvrex, 14, 4000, Liège, Belgium

^bUHasselt – Hasselt University, Centre for Environmental Sciences, research group
Environmental Economics

Agoralaan, 3590, Diepenbeek, Belgium

^cKULeuven, Sustainable Materials Processing and Recycling,
Kasteelpark Arenberg 44, 3001, Leuven (Arenberg), Belgium

^dVITO, Unit of Sustainable Materials and Chemistry,
Boeretang 200, 2400, Mol, Belgium

^eUHasselt -Hasselt University, School of Educational Studies,
Wetenschapspark, 24, 3590, Diepenbeek, Belgium

^fVrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussels Research Institute for Teacher Education,
Pleinlaan 2, 1050, Brussels, Belgium

*Corresponding author: benoit.ruysschaert@uliege.be

Abstract

Local governments use strategic planning (SP) to address grand challenges like climate change. More and more local governments adopt the circular economy (CE) into their climate strategies to reduce their impact. The CE requires collaboration among different levels of government. However, there is little research considering multiple government levels in the CE transition. At the same time, the SP literature has ignored the multilevel governance (MLG) setting in which local SP takes place. Therefore, we study if supralocal governments influence the adoption of the CE in local SP for climate change and, if so, how they influence the local SP. Supralocal governments are found to have influenced the CE adoption in climate strategies of Flemish local governments. Moreover, interviews showed their influence on both the SP content, process, and implementation. These results highlight the importance of considering the MLG context in which local SP takes place and the influence of supralocal governments.

Keywords: Strategic Planning, Multilevel Governance, Local Government, Climate Change, Circular Economy

1 Introduction

Local governments are recognized for having a key role in addressing grand challenges like climate change (Corfee-Morlot et al., 2010). Taking up their responsibilities, local governments are using strategic planning (SP) to achieve climate objectives, for example, through the Covenant of Mayors (European Commission, 2024b). SP has become a popular approach in the public sector to manage complex problems and achieve long-term objectives (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2020). However, local governments are often constrained by a lack of capacity and limited jurisdiction, requiring the involvement of stakeholders beyond the organizational boundaries (Corfee-Morlot et al., 2010). Involving external stakeholders in SP improves the quality of the strategy and commitment to the implementation (George, 2020; George et al., 2018). In the SP literature, different strategy practitioners have been considered, including top management, internal staff, and external stakeholders (Vandersmissen & George, 2023). The role of multiple levels of government has not been addressed, ignoring the literature on multilevel governance. Collaboration among governments is, however, needed to avoid the decoupling of strategies and to pool the resources required for addressing global issues (Agranoff, 2014). Research on local governments, in general, did not take an intergovernmental perspective (Agranoff, 2014). Especially the role of supralocal actors supporting local governments received little attention (Melica et al., 2018).

The circular economy (CE) is a means for achieving sustainable development and provides opportunities for local governments to reduce their negative impact on climate change (Bellezoni et al., 2022; Christis et al., 2019). The CE is about transforming linear production and consumption systems by reducing, reusing, recycling, and recovering materials (Kirchherr et al., 2017). In the European Union, the CE is a priority in becoming the first climate-neutral continent (European Commission, 2019). Local governments have a key role in this transition to apply the CE to their local context (Bourdin & Jacquet, 2025; European Commission, 2020). However, local governments cannot do this on their own. The CE requires a systemic change that needs a broad alliance of stakeholders, including governments of different levels (Ghisellini et al., 2016; Kirchherr et al., 2023). It requires both vertical collaboration between provincial and local governments and horizontal inter-municipal collaboration to overcome local governance barriers (Bellezoni et al., 2022; Bourdin & Jacquet, 2025). However, little research has considered multilevel governance for the CE.

Bringing together the need to consider the MLGe context of local SP and its consideration in research on the CE, this study asks: Do supralocal governments influence the adoption of the CE in local SP for climate change? And if so, how do supralocal governments influence the local SP?

The SP of Flemish local governments has been studied for the Covenant of Mayors. This covenant brings together local governments committed to achieving the European climate objectives and requires the development of a Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan (SECAP). Through a text search for the CE in these strategies, high similarity was found among local governments that involved the same supralocal government. These supralocal governments were interviewed, and

the MLG framework of Homsy et al. (2019) was used as an analytical tool to study their influence on the local SP. Supralocal governments not only influenced the content of the local SP but also influenced the process and implementation. They supported local governments to develop a strategic plan and facilitate its implementation to overcome the local lack of capacity. At the same time, supralocal governments might have reduced local tailoring, ownership, commitment, and organizational learning.

The theoretical contribution of this paper is identifying the potentially large influence of supralocal governments on local SP. For SP researchers, this shows the need to consider the MLG context and the usefulness of using it as an analytical tool. It also provides insights into the MLG context of the CE, showing how supralocal governments can promote the local adoption of the concept.

The article continues by discussing the local SP literature for addressing climate change and the adoption of the CE. MLG is also introduced. Next, we describe the methodology and results before discussing the implications and concluding the study.

2 Literature

2.1 SP in local governments

Like any organization, local governments need strategic guidance to achieve their long-term objectives. Over the past decades, strategy has obtained a crucial role in the public sector to deal with complex problems (Drumaux & Joyce, 2018). SP has become widespread as a “*deliberative, disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization (or other entity) is, what it does, and why*” (Bryson, 2018, pp. 7–9). SP typically starts with analyzing the environment to identify strategic issues. Next, a vision and mission are defined and operationalized in a strategy with objectives and actions (Bryson & George, 2020). SP can benefit the performance of public sector organizations (George et al., 2019; Vandersmissen & George, 2023). In some countries, SP is mandatory, like for local governments in Flanders (George, 2017).

Under New Public Governance, public management has shifted from focusing on command and control to valuing collaboration within and beyond organizational boundaries (Osborne, 2006). This shift results from the need to address complex societal problems that cannot be solved by the public sector alone. Therefore, SP should be opened to other stakeholders to build commitment for its implementation (George, 2020; George et al., 2018). Involving stakeholders in SP can improve decision quality and can function as a communication tool for creating support to ultimately benefit performance (George, 2016; Johnsen, 2018; Vandersmissen et al., 2024). Who is involved and how is, therefore, key to the success of SP (George, 2017). The SP literature considered the involvement of different stakeholders. A review found that, most often, top management and politicians were involved (Vandersmissen & George, 2023). One-third also involved external practitioners like consultants, clients, or donors. However, the SP literature did not consider the involvement of other

governments, ignoring the MLG context in which local SP takes place. This gap is particularly important for smaller local governments, which often face capacity constraints (Corfee-Morlot et al., 2010; Homsy et al., 2019). Such collaboration is even more important when addressing grand challenges like climate change.

2.2 SP for climate change: the Covenant of Mayors

An example of local SP to address climate change can be found in the context of the Covenant of Mayors Europe (Scorza & Santopietro, 2024). This covenant aims to gather European (local) governments committed to achieving the European climate objectives to keep global temperature rise below 1.5°C (European Commission, 2024b). The first version of the covenant aimed to reduce emissions by 20% by 2020. The second version aimed for a 40% reduction by 2030. In 2021, the ambition was increased to a 55% reduction by 2030 and climate neutrality by 2050.

More than 12.000 European governments signed the covenant. Once signed, local governments have two years to develop a Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan (SECAP). This plan consists of two parts. The mitigation part starts with an inventory of local emissions and includes a mitigation action plan. The adaptation part contains a climate risk and vulnerability analysis combined with an adaptation action plan. The covenant requires civil engagement to develop this plan and clear statements of the local vision, mission, objectives, and actions to reduce local emissions. This implies that developing a SECAP is a form of local SP.

Although local governments have an important role in addressing climate change, such a complex problem requires coordination at different levels (Homsy et al., 2019). The Covenant of Mayors recognizes this need for collaboration. The covenant includes over 200 Covenant Territorial Coordinators (CTCs), mainly supralocal governments like national, regional, and provincial governments, who support their local governments. This makes the Covenant of Mayors an interesting context to study the interrelatedness of local SP and MLG.

The Covenant of Mayors focuses on reducing territorial emissions, which means that indirect emissions that occur at different stages of the value chain fall outside its scope. As a result, these emissions are often not addressed in SECAPs. Nevertheless, indirect emissions make up a large part of the climate impact of local governments and could be substantially reduced by using CE strategies (Christis et al., 2019). The covenant does, however, not suggest adopting the CE in the SECAP.

2.3 CE as means to address climate change

The CE is about reducing, reusing, recycling, and recovering materials and products in production and consumption processes with the aim of accomplishing sustainable development (Kirchherr et al., 2017). In Europe, the CE has become a priority in its transition to become the first climate-neutral continent (European Commission, 2019). The European Union recognizes the important role of local governments to implement locally tailored strategies (European Commission, 2020). Studies have confirmed the potential of CE strategies for local governments to reduce their

emissions (Bellezoni et al., 2022; Christis et al., 2019). Local governments have recognized this opportunity to adopt the CE for addressing climate change (Bourdin & Jacquet, 2025). Local governments can engage citizens to customize the CE to the local context and to increase engagement for its implementation (Bourdin & Jacquet, 2025). Moreover, by increasing awareness, experimenting, and leading by example, local governments can implement the CE in key areas like waste management and buildings (Bourdin & Jacquet, 2025; Paiho et al., 2020).

However, local governments have limited capacity and cannot implement the CE alone. The CE requires a systemic shift, including consumers, producers, researchers, and policymakers (Kirchherr et al., 2023). Collaboration with supralocal governments is a key driver for French local governments to adopt the CE and overcome the local lack of capacity (Bourdin & Jacquet, 2025). Nevertheless, there is a lack of research considering the MLG context in which local governments adopt the CE.

2.4 Multilevel Governance (MLG)

MLG was introduced by Gary Marks (1993) to describe the new governance model observed in the European Union, where governments became more interconnected and the role of different government levels changed. Like the principal-agent relationship, governments can be classified into three levels with different powers (i.e., the principal, supervisor, and agent) (Fan et al., 2024). ‘Multilevel’ refers to the high interdependence among different government levels, while ‘governance’ focuses on the process of negotiation and decision-making involving different governments and non-governmental actors (Bache & Flinders, 2004). MLG has been applied beyond the European context, and subnational policy-making has also been considered (Stephenson, 2013; Tortola, 2017). Although the concept is of great interest to both researchers and policy-makers, conceptual clarity is lacking (Stephenson, 2013). To some, considering the role of non-governmental actors was an essential part of MLG, while most focused on the role of different government levels (Tortola, 2017). Marks and Hooghe (2004) proposed a distinction between two different types of MLG. Type I follows the federalist idea where MLG has a general purpose, and each level bundles multiple jurisdictions. In contrast, type II MLG is about public authorities who address a specific task like organizing, for example, policing, fire protection, and welfare. Here, authority overlaps between government levels, and often, non-governmental actors are included. Both types are complementary, and type II is often embedded in type I jurisdictions.

Over time, the MLG was increasingly used as an analytical tool (Stephenson, 2013). It can be used as a theory of public policy that studies the actual (day-to-day) making and implementation of public policy (Tortola, 2017). This corresponds to the practice turn in the strategy and SP field (Vandersmissen & George, 2023; Whittington, 2006). Research found that not only formal procedural relations were important in MLG but that informal interactions like meetings and workshops are required for building support and consensus (van Popering-Verkerk & van Buuren, 2016). To operationalize MLG, Homsy et al. (2019) proposed a framework distinguishing five ingredients of MLG:

1. Sanctioning and coordinating authority
2. Framing co-benefits
3. Provision of capacity
4. Knowledge co-production
5. Engagement of civil society

Sanctioning and coordinating authority is about the organizational structure, how power is shared, and who can sanction and coordinates other levels. *Framing co-benefits* reflects the need for different governments to build consensus on the importance of the problem to their specific territories. The *provision of capacity* shows the need to mobilize technical, professional, and financial resources at different levels to build enough capacity. *Knowledge co-production* is about sharing information and experiences horizontally and vertically among government levels. Lastly, the *engagement of civil society* is considered a necessary ingredient for the success of MLG. Homsy et al. (2019) demonstrate the usefulness of their framework by applying it to two cases of MLG for environmental issues addressed by national, regional, and local governments.

MLG has also been studied at the subnational level, considering the role of local and supralocal governments. According to Agranoff (2014), local governments can use upward, outward, and inward collaboration. Upward means vertical collaboration with higher levels of government. Outward collaboration means horizontally working with other local governments, also called interlocal or inter-municipal collaboration. Inter-municipal collaboration can take the form of a separate organization called a local government association (LGA). Inward collaboration is about involving local stakeholders. In Canada, vertical collaboration between provinces and local government facilitated local capacity-building and resulted in opportunities for policy learning, transfer, and exchange (Conteh & Harding, 2023; Martin et al., 2012). However, in Spain, vertical collaboration mainly resulted in supralocal governments exploiting the same sustainability initiatives across multiple local governments (Barrutia & Echebarria, 2019). Here, inward collaboration with local stakeholders was complementary to also bring new ideas. Supralocal governments, like provinces, are often found to be important for coordinating local sustainability initiatives (Fan et al., 2024; Torfing & Hofstad, 2015). Especially environmental policy provides a useful context for applying and theorizing MLG (Fairbrass & Jordan, 2004). Within environmental policy, several authors applied MLG to the issue of climate change in different contexts, such as East Asia (Schreurs, 2010), South Africa (Leck & Simon, 2013), and Europe (Melica et al., 2018).

According to an OECD working paper, “*climate change is a problem that can only be adequately addressed if action is taken at all levels of government*” (Corfee-Morlot et al., 2010, p. 86). The paper argues that MLG can help to align policies and to overcome the local lack of capacity. Melica et al. (2018) studied the MLG model used for the first version of the Covenant of Mayors. They found that CTCs had an important role in supporting smaller local governments to sign the covenant. However, their study did not consider the influence of the CTCs on the local SP, and the authors expressed the need for more research on the role of supralocal governments supporting the local level.

This study considers the influence of supralocal governments for the second version of the covenant and focuses on the local SP. Doing so connects the previously isolated MLG and SP literature, showing their interconnectedness. At the same time, we provide insights into the MLG context of the adoption of the CE by local governments.

3 Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-method approach. First, document analysis was used to explore if supralocal governments influenced the adoption of the CE in local SP. Next, the involved supralocal governments were interviewed to study how they influenced the local SP. The next section starts by introducing the studied context.

3.1 Research setting

This study examined the municipalities of Flanders. Flanders is Belgium's northern, more urbanized region, with around 6.8 million inhabitants and Dutch as the first language. Belgium is a federalist state, where the three regions (Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels Capital Region) are the most important domestic governments (Voets & De Rynck, 2008). At the local level, local governments are responsible for their municipality. Flanders counts 285 municipalities.

280 Flemish municipalities signed the Covenant of Mayors (VVSG, 2024). Belgian, and especially Flemish local governments made the second highest use of CTCs (Melica et al., 2018). The Flemish context is, therefore, an interesting case for studying MLG. In Flanders, the CTCs are mainly provinces and Local Government Associations (LGAs), which we refer to as supralocal governments. The responsibilities of provinces and LGAs are supposed to be complementary but often overlap.

Flanders counts five provincial governments that can be located between the local and regional governments (i.e., Antwerp, Flemish-Brabant, Limburg, East-Flanders, and West-Flanders). Provinces have some territorial responsibilities, but their competencies and resources are limited and have been diminished over time (Voets & De Rynck, 2008).

LGAs have become a popular form of inter-municipal collaboration in Flanders to collaborate with neighboring local governments (Voets & De Rynck, 2008). These LGAs can be created to deliver specific public services like waste collection but can also be more general-purpose to support local governments with complex policy issues like mobility, safety, and climate change. LGAs are, however, no government themselves. The LGAs discussed here are working on multiple regional policy issues like climate change and aim to support their local governments in these areas.

The Flemish regional government has the ambition to implement the CE and actively stimulates local governments to adopt the CE (Circular Flanders, 2023; Flemish Regional Government, 2018). Flanders is also one of the pilot regions in Europe for implementing the CE, given its high potential (European Commission, 2024a).

The high commitment of Flemish local governments to the Covenant of Mayors, the strong multilevel governance setting, and the current policy interest to adopt the CE make Flanders a suitable focus for this study.

3.2 Document analysis

The first step was to explore whether the CE was adopted in the SECAPs of Flemish local governments and if the involved supralocal governments had influenced this.

The SECAPs of 262 Flemish local governments were obtained (94%) out of the 280 that have signed the Covenant of Mayors. These documents were found on the local government's website or were requested by email. On average, documents contained 116 pages and were published between 2017 and 2024.

NVivo was used to search the SECAPs for references of the CE (translated: “circular”, “circulair*” and “circulariteit”). These references, with the context in which they were used, were exported for further analysis. Frequency tables were used to determine how often identical references could be observed among SECAPs where the same supralocal government was involved.

3.3 Interviews

To further understand how supralocal governments influenced the SECAPs, the supralocal governments who were involved in a large number of SECAPs were contacted for an interview. 11 out of the 12 supralocal governments agreed to be interviewed. Semi-structured online interviews were conducted with the local climate policy officers of 4 provinces and 7 LGAs. The interview guide can be found in the appendix (see Appendix 1). Interviews took place in September 2024 and lasted an average of 63 minutes (between 44 and 82). Interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. The transcripts were coded using the five ingredients of the MLG framework of Homsy et al. (2019), and results for each dimension were summarized.

4 Results

First, the results of the SECAP analysis are discussed, followed by the interview results.

4.1 Supralocal governments involved in developing SECAPs

Of the 262 analyzed SECAPs, only 22 local governments did not involve their province or LGA. Especially the larger local governments worked independently as 8 of the 12 Flemish municipalities with a population higher than 50.000 inhabitants were in this group. The other 92% of the local governments did involve supralocal governments. Table 1 shows how often the 11 interviewed supralocal governments were involved in the SECAPs of local governments.

The majority (57%) of the local governments developed an individual SECAP with either the province (29%), the LGA (4%), or both (24%). For example, in the province of Limburg, the SECAP of 35 local governments was analyzed. They all collaborated with the province to develop an individual plan. In this province, there are no LGAs responsible for local climate policy. In contrast, the province of Antwerp has three LGAs who supported their local governments in developing individual plans together with the province. Local governments can also develop a shared SECAP for multiple municipalities. This was done by 90 (35%) local governments and was often in collaboration with their LGAs (17%), but also with the province (9%) or both (9%). For example, the LGA Leiedal developed one shared SECAP for 13 local governments.

Table 1: supralocal governments involved in SECAPs

Province	LGA	Local governments supported	individual SECAPs	Shared SECAPs
Limburg	-	35	35	-
Antwerp	IGEMO	5	5	-
Antwerp	IGEAN	24	24	-
Antwerp	IOK	27	27	-
Flemish-Brabant	-	36	14	7
East-Flanders	Interwaas	11	-	1
East-Flanders	Solva	16	3	1
East-Flanders	/	26	26	-
-	WVI	36	8	4
-	Leiedal	13	-	1

4.2 Similarities among CE references in SECAPs

After cleaning, 3.231 references of the CE were identified in the SECAPs of the 262 local governments. 85% of the SECAPs contained at least one reference. The average number of references was 12, and the median was 7. The highest number of references is 124 in the SECAP of Bruges.

The references from SECAPs with the same supralocal governments involved were grouped, and frequency tables were used to determine to what extent references were unique to one SECAP or were used by multiple local governments. The results are presented below (see Table 2). For each group, results are shown for:

- the total number of CE references in the SECAPs
- the average number of references in a SECAP and the standard deviation
- the number of different references used in that group
- the amount and percentage of references that are used only once in that group
- the amount and percentage of references reflected by the 25% most common references.

For example, the SECAPs of the 36 local governments where the province of Flemish-Brabant was involved contain 871 references to the CE. On average, a SECAP contained 24 references and the standard deviation is only 5. Also, there are only 89 different references used, of which 43 are only used once. The 25% most common references represent 80% of all the references, showing high similarities between the SECAPs where this province was involved.

Table 2: Results of similarity analysis for each group of involved supralocal governments

Province	LGA	Total #refs.	Mean CE refs. (s.d.)	#Different refs.	#refs used only once	#refs. using top 25% most common refs
Limburg	-	428	12 (4)	34	16 (4%)	277 (65%)
Antwerp	IGEMO	62	12 (3)	30	15 (24%)	33 (53%)
Antwerp	IGEAN	266	11 (4)	75	59 (22%)	210 (79%)
Antwerp	IOK	127	5 (7)	40	27 (21%)	92 (72%)
Flemish-Brabant	-	871	24 (5)	89	43 (5%)	696 (80%)
East-Flanders	Interwaas	782	71 (1)	73	1 (1%)	198 (25%)
East-Flanders	Solva	19	1 (3)	16	13 (68%)	7 (37%)
East-Flanders	/	106	4 (3)	49	34 (32%)	66 (62%)
-	WVI	31	1 ()	12	5 (16%)	13 (42%)
-	Leiedal	22	2 (1)	2	0 (0%)	5,5 (25%)

For most groups, the percentage of references that are only used once is rather low, and the 25% most common references represent large proportions of the total number of references. This indicates that references are often not specific to the SECAP of one local government and that local governments often use the same references. While it is expected that local governments with a shared SECAP have the same references (e.g., Waasland and Leiedal), individual SECAPs from IGEAN, for example, had 79% of the references coming from the top 25% most common references, showing very high similarity.

However, when comparing the different groups of involved supralocal governments, the similarity is much lower. There are three groups that involved the province of Antwerp but also involved a different LGA. Results show that 72% of the references used in these three groups were unique, indicating a low level of similarity. This indicates that not the province but the LGA influenced the CE adoption as similarity within SECAPs developed by each LGA is much higher. When comparing all the groups of involved supralocal governments, the similarity was even lower, with only 5% of the references occurring more than once.

These results indicate that SECAPs show many similarities when the same supralocal government was involved. The interviewees confirmed the influence of supralocal governments on the local SP and the CE adoption in the SECAPs, as discussed in the next section.

4.3 The influence of supralocal governments

The interviewed supralocal governments were involved in 229 (95%) SECAPs of the 240 local governments that involved supralocal governments. Therefore, these results provide good coverage of the Flemish context. Below, we describe the MLG context in which these SECAPs were developed using the framework of Homsy and colleagues (2019) to study the influence of the supralocal governments on the local SP.

4.3.1 Sanctioning and coordinating authority

The Covenant of Mayors is an initiative supported by the European Commission, which can be considered the principal authority (European Union, 2021b). At the European level, the objectives are determined, as well as the format and organizational structure of the covenant. It was decided at this level to only count territorial greenhouse gas emissions, and the CE was not mentioned as a key consideration. The focus on territorial emissions prevented the adoption of the CE by some local governments as the CE mainly reduces emissions elsewhere in the supply chain. According to an LGA, local governments reacted to the suggestion to adopt the CE by saying, “*We are not going to focus too much on that because there is already more than enough work to do.*” (Interview LGA 6). The ignorance of the importance of considering indirect emissions and the CE contradicts other initiatives by the European Commission to stimulate the adoption of the CE by local governments (European Commission, 2024a).

Although signing the covenant is voluntary, it comes with the expectation of developing a SECAP and reporting requirements. The voluntary nature of the covenant makes it hard to sanction local governments that do not respect these conditions.

Power is shared with so-called Covenant Territorial Coordinators (CTCs) who “*commit to support signatories within their geographical scope in many different ways including promotion of the Covenant of Mayors, technical and/or financial support to develop and implement Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans, networking activities involving the Covenant signatory municipalities.*” (European Commission, 2024b). In Flanders, the Flemish regional government itself is a CTC supporting all the Flemish local governments that signed the covenant. The Flemish

government operates as a sanctioning authority in this context as it has indirectly linked its provisioning of subsidies for local governments to the requirement of signing the covenant by integrating it in their ‘Lokaal Energie- en Klimaatpact’. This requirement stimulated many local governments to sign the covenant and can explain the high level of commitment in the region. Although the Flemish government also actively promoted the adoption of the CE by local governments, they did not promote its adoption into the SECAPs of local governments.

In addition to the regional government, provinces and LGAs are also CTCs, taking up the coordinating role in their territories. In cases where both a province and LGA were active on climate policy, agreements were made on who takes what role as CTC. These roles included, for example, administrative support for the covenant, guidance on developing the SECAP, and support for its implementation. Generally, provinces took up more high-level policy roles, while LGAs supported the practical application. CTCs also function as the first point of contact for covenant-related questions. While some of these supralocal governments were aware and knowledgeable about the CE, others did not consider it. Several supralocal governments had adopted the CE in their own climate plan and had multiple CE projects.

Moving to the agent level, local governments sign the covenant and can determine what actions to undertake. As the name of the covenant suggests, mayors sign the covenant. However, reducing local emissions cannot be done by mayors alone, as mentioned by an interviewee: *“They (Mayors) say: this is the Covenant of Mayors. We commit to a 40% reduction in emissions but do not control that, no matter how hard we try. And it seems like the mayor is held accountable, but it is out of our control.”* (Interview LGA 5). Many policy instruments are not in the hands of local governments. Appropriate policies are also needed at the regional, national, and European levels to achieve these local objectives, as mentioned in the official commitment document: *“We count on the support of our national governments and the European institutions to provide policy, technical and financial resources that fit the level of our ambitions.”* (European Union, 2021b). The same was said to be true for the CE, where supralocal governments acknowledged the important role of local governments in the transition while stressing the need for action at all levels of government.

4.3.2 Framing co-benefits

For local governments to engage in the Covenant of Mayors, they had to be convinced of its importance. Some local governments were already engaged in the covenant for the first version. For them, signing the second version might have been just a continuation of their prior commitment. While some local governments were proactive in committing, other local governments had to be convinced of its importance. The supralocal governments took a significant role in this. Both provinces and LGAs mentioned as a first step that they tried to encourage local governments to sign the covenant. One interviewee even said this was their most important role, to create awareness about: *“What is this climate story actually about? Also, why are we doing this? [...] There are really local governments where I sat next to the alderperson and spent a lot of time teaching them about this [...] (and why) does everyone actually have to contribute their piece of the puzzle to the story?”* (Interviewee LGA 2).

Other interviewees mentioned that they tried to convince local governments by highlighting available subsidies and explaining what support was offered. Later, the requirement to sign the covenant to get subsidies from the regional government resulted in almost all local governments signing the covenant.

For the CE, the supralocal governments already engaged in the CE tried to convince local governments to do so too. Although indirect emissions were not counted, the importance of also considering these emissions was explained, and an additional chapter was suggested to address this topic, as discussed in the next section.

4.3.3 Provision of capacity

Both Flemish provinces and LGAs had a long tradition of supporting local capacity. For the LGAs, this is the reason why they were created. Most CTCs had worked before with local governments on the first version of the covenant. Some also provided support to find funding for developing a SECAP.

The CTCs took up an important role during the development of the SECAPs. The main reason was that especially small local governments did not have the capacity to develop a SECAP by themselves. In small municipalities, climate policy is often added to the job of the environmental officer, who has a lot of other responsibilities and does not have the time nor the skills to develop a SECAP. An interviewee said: *“It is something that is not taken up by smaller local governments because they just do not have a clue or the capacity or the manpower and then we do indeed try to work supralocal on this, possibly also with the province.”* (Interview LGA 4). This was also why some LGAs suggested developing a shared SECAP for the local governments of their region (see LGAs: Interwaas, Solva, Leiedal). In larger municipalities, CTCs were not so much involved as these local governments had more capacity, with a team of experts working on climate change.

Some supralocal governments believed that the capacity of local governments had to be used for implementation instead of making plans. For example, an interviewee said: *“The less plan burden, the better, because in the end, municipalities just have to get to work.”* (Interview LGA 2).

Different methodologies were used by the CTCs to develop SECAPs. In most cases, the province provided the local analysis required in the SECAP and a template with all possible local actions. An interviewee explained: *“We drafted a template mitigation plan where they (local governments) then had to complete it further, choose their actions, and so on.”* (Interviewee province 1).

The use of these templates explains the high level of similarity in CE references observed. Local governments selected actions from a list of predefined options. Therefore, the supralocal government that developed this template had an important influence on the CE references. The CE was often mentioned in an additional chapter, defined by the supralocal governments, to discuss action regarding more sustainable consumption and production.

Using the results from the local analysis, local governments selected the actions they wanted to focus on. This was often done through participatory workshops, which were usually facilitated by

the LGA or the province when there was no LGA. Some supralocal governments suggested the adoption of the CE during these workshops. Interviewees mentioned their “*facilitating*” (Interview province 3) and “*coordinating*” role (Interview LGA 3) in these workshops. Some local governments also paid consultants to facilitate the process. Based on the workshops, the LGA or province then processed the input into a draft SECAP that was refined with the local government until a final version was accepted by the local council.

The role of the CTCs did not stop after the development of the SECAP. They continued to actively support local governments in implementing it. For example, provinces offered subsidies or consultancy support to local governments. Both provinces and LGAs also said to develop climate actions like group purchases for solar panels, where local governments could just participate. Two LGAs hired a climate officer who would spend their time in different local governments to set up climate actions, pooling the limited capacity of the local governments into one full position. An interviewee explained: “*So then some (local governments) said: [LGA 3], please help us on a permanent basis, so then we had someone going there one day a week.*” (Interview LGA 3). Supralocal governments also supported local governments in implementing the CE by helping to do a circular scan and implement CE projects.

The CTCs continued to take up a coordinating role, supporting local governments with, for example, reporting and regional meetings to allow knowledge sharing, as discussed in the next section.

4.3.4 Knowledge co-production vertically & horizontally

Vertical knowledge co-production was mainly found to be top-down. Starting from the European level, the covenant provides guides to support local governments. Additional support was found on the Flemish level, where calculation tools were provided to help the local governments make an inventory of their local emissions and calculate the impact of the selected actions. As explained in the previous section, provinces and LGAs also supported local governments by providing templates and support to develop their SECAP.

An important part of the knowledge co-production for the covenant is the mandatory reporting. Local governments report to the European Union, which allows learning about local progress. The Flemish provinces have a key role in this reporting as they gather data and make it available to local governments. The provinces or LGAs provided further support for reporting as this was said to be rather complex: “*Because that is a bible in itself, that manual (for reporting) and looking at how to do it and get it right. The English language is often a barrier as well. You have to convert everything into English and so on. So we (LGA) do that*” (Interview LGA 5). As CTCs, helping to report is their role: “*It is also a thing that we try not to bother them (local governments) too much with. Also with the reporting and so on, that's also our job that we do all that, so they don't have to worry too much about it.*” (Interview LGA 1).

Horizontal knowledge co-production was mentioned at two levels. The provinces and LGAs have regular meetings to discuss best practices, experiences, barriers, etc. Furthermore, they facilitated

horizontal interaction between the local governments. LGAs mentioned the regular meetings they organized between the local governments of their region to discuss local climate policy, usually with the sustainability officer and competent alderperson. For example, the interviewee from LGA 3 explained: *“We have so-called regional networks, regional meetings where that that all our sustainability officers and alderpeople are invited to attend, on which that we then explain projects and share experiences. So that is happening very well.”* (Interview LGA 3). Also, horizontal knowledge co-production was an important argument for developing shared SECAPs.

4.3.5 Engagement of civil society

The covenant asks to *“ensure stakeholder participation in both development and implementation of climate action”* (European Union, 2021a, p. 2). Some supralocal governments also required broad engagement. However, different levels of participation were observed.

In most local governments, the environmental or sustainability officer coordinated the internal process, supported by the province and/or LGA. In the workshops, different departments were invited to think about how they could contribute and create commitment to the strategy. Political involvement varied depending on who was competent and interested to participate. Sometimes, only the competent alderperson or mayor joined, while in others, several politicians were involved. Political support was essential as, ultimately, the local council had to approve the final SECAP. In some groups, participation was limited to these internal stakeholders.

External experts were sometimes invited to share their knowledge on specific topics. Several groups also involved citizens through, for example, a hackathon, climate tables, or surveys to do the prioritization. Citizen involvement was sometimes limited to informing them about the plan and getting them engaged, as mentioned by an interviewee: *“So yes, that participatory process, yes, that in itself is actually more useful just to get more support in the municipality and also to make the wider public more aware of there is here... There is work being done here on a climate policy within the municipality, but a little less to really get those very innovative new ideas. Sometimes it does, but that's fairly limited actually, yes.”* (Interview province 1). Others, however, said that citizen participation was organized *“where we really want to listen to the citizens”* (Interview LGA 3).

Two LGAs were involved in a European project where the focus was on broad stakeholder engagement for climate action planning and implementation. They included both citizens, local associations, and professionals and believed strongly in the importance of civil engagement: *“You can include as much (goals) as you want as a local government; if the others do not follow suit, then you will not achieve your goals of course [...] It will be the citizens, businesses and so on who will have to implement the actions effectively. So the idea is to get their support as well.”* (Interview LGA 5).

Participation was also complicated for some local governments as the development of their SECAP took place during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5 Discussion

The results show that supralocal governments were important as they were involved in 92% of the SECAPs. This confirms previous findings where the first version of the Covenant of Mayors was considered (Melica et al., 2018). While the CE is not required to be addressed in the SECAP, 85% of the local governments had adopted the concept and had, on average, 12 references to it. The high level of similarities for CE references among SECAPs, where the same supralocal governments were involved, confirms the influence of supralocal governments on the adoption of the CE and the SP content.

The analysis of the MLG context showed that not only the SP content was influenced by supralocal governments. Through the five ingredients of the MLG framework of Homsy et al. (2019), their influence was also observed on the SP process and implementation.

Analyzing the *sanctioning and coordinating* government for the Covenant of Mayors showed a similar structure to the general functioning of the EU, where policy objectives and structures are determined at the European level as principal government. Implementation and localization are done by agents, which are the local governments in this case. In between are the supervisors, who are recognized by the covenant as CTCs. In Flanders, the role of supervisors is mainly taken up by the provincial governments and LGAs. Their role was not limited to the SP process but continued during the implementation. However, sanctioning power is limited as the covenant is a voluntary initiative. The Flemish regional government has, however, stimulated local commitment to the covenant by linking it to the provisioning of funding.

According to the distinction of Marks and Hooghe (2004), the Covenant of Mayors can be considered a type II MLG. Collaboration is organized for the specific purpose of addressing climate change. However, as is often the case, this collaboration takes place in a type I system where the governments involved are general-purpose with predefined but diverse jurisdictions for their territories.

While both the European Union and the Flemish regional government actively promote the adoption of the CE by local governments to address climate change, they did not promote the adoption of the CE within the Covenant of Mayors. By only focusing on territorial emissions, the European Union did not stimulate local governments to reflect on indirect emissions and to consider CE solutions to address these emissions. Some supralocal governments, in contrast, did stimulate reflection on indirect emissions and the CE, resulting in the CE adoption in the strategic plans.

From the start, supralocal governments had an important role in *framing the co-benefits* to motivate local governments to sign the covenant. This was done by informing local governments about the importance and offering help to apply for funding or develop their strategy. Therefore, CTCs have an important influence on the level of uptake of the covenant by local governments in their region

(Melica et al., 2018). Supralocal governments made similar efforts to promote the adoption of the CE.

The *provision of capacity* was the main reason for the high level of involvement of supralocal governments. Especially smaller local governments relied heavily on supralocal governments to overcome their lack of manpower and expertise. The lack of capacity was also an argument for developing shared strategies to be more efficient in the SP process but also to share the workload for implementation. Previous work also showed the importance of supralocal governments to include rural areas in the first version of the covenant (Melica et al., 2018) and to adopt the CE (Bourdin & Jacquet, 2025).

Both provinces and LGAs have a history of supporting local governments in overcoming their lack of capacity. Especially LGAs are created to overcome the local lack of capacity through inter-municipal collaboration and can be important drivers for the CE adoption by local governments (Bourdin & Jacquet, 2025).

Already for the first version of the covenant, CTCs were found to take care of both organizational, technical, and financial aspects (Melica et al., 2018). In Flanders, supralocal governments had large roles in the SP process, starting with preparing the local analysis and templates, facilitating participatory workshops, and drafting the strategy. In many local governments, the supralocal governments were the ones holding the pen. Using templates developed by supralocal governments to determine the SP content explains the high similarities in CE references. Although local governments selected which actions they wanted to adopt, there was little customization of SECAPs, while previous work underlined the importance of avoiding one-size-fits-all solutions for adopting the CE in local governments (Bourdin & Jacquet, 2025).

In addition, support is provided for implementing the plan. Where both provinces and LGAs were involved, agreements were made on who took what role. Generally, the provinces had a more high-level expert and policy role, while LGAs were in closer contact with local governments and helped them with the practical aspects. On the one hand, the support of supralocal governments can be considered positive as it allows local governments to overcome their capacity problems. On the other hand, taking over too many tasks in the SP can undermine organizational learning and commitment to the strategic plan. Local governments might not feel ownership of a strategic plan developed by the supralocal government. Previous work concluded that the SP in local governments itself is more important than the final strategy as it facilitates learning and commitment building (Brorström, 2020).

Knowledge co-production was found vertically and horizontally among governments, and supralocal governments were key to this. Supralocal governments facilitated both top-down and bottom-up knowledge co-production. Down to the local level, using guides and action lists and facilitating the SP processes helped local governments follow the rules from the covenant on how to make a SECAP. At the same time, supralocal governments helped local governments with mandatory reporting. Horizontally, knowledge co-production took place between supralocal

governments who shared their experiences. However, the low similarity between CE references of SECAPs with different supralocal governments involved showed that different templates were used. Also, at the local level, knowledge was shared between local governments, often through networks and events coordinated by supralocal governments.

Although the covenant required *civil engagement* in the SP process, some local governments did not involve external stakeholders or only informed them. Supralocal governments recommended who to involve and often facilitated workshops with stakeholders, but local governments decided who to engage. A lack of capacity to engage stakeholders could explain the low levels of engagement. This lack of engagement might negatively affect the implementation as collaboration is a key driver for the successful implementation of the CE, according to local governments (Bourdin & Jacquet, 2025).

Overall, supralocal governments were found to strongly influence the local SP and the adoption of the CE. These results contribute to theory by showing the importance of considering the MLG context in which local SP for climate change takes place, as not only the SP content but also the process and implementation were found to be influenced by supralocal actors. At the same time, the results provide insights into how MLG influences the adoption of the CE. The SP and MLG literature should be connected, and the framework proposed by Homsy et al. (2019) can be used as an analytical tool to study SP, as demonstrated by this study. For practitioners, these results show how supralocal governments can help local governments overcome their lack of capacity and adopt concepts like the CE.

Although these findings will be, to some extent, specific to the case of the Covenant of Mayors, other cases of SP in the public sector are also likely to be influenced by their MLG context. This study, therefore, stresses the need for SP research to consider the MLG context. Future research can study the MLG context of SP in other contexts, considering other regions, types of public sector organizations, and SP initiatives. This study also shows the need for SP research to devote more attention to its public and, therefore, political nature, using insights from, for example, policy coordination and policy networks. For the Covenant of Mayors, future research can study how MLG determines the implementation and, ultimately, its success.

6 Conclusion

SP can be useful for local governments to address grand challenges like climate change. This study argues that the Covenant of Mayors provides a useful context to study local SP for climate change. The SP literature has studied the influence of different stakeholders involved, but ignored its MLG context and the role of supralocal governments. At the same time, the CE can help local governments address climate change, but it requires action from all levels of government. The MLG context for the adoption of the by local governments was therefore considered. In Flanders, 92% of the local governments involved supralocal governments in their SP for the Covenant of Mayors. The CE was mentioned in 85% of the strategic plans. The analysis of these CE references

showed a high degree of similarity among strategic plans where the same supralocal governments were involved. This was mainly due to the templates provided by supralocal governments. However, the influence of supralocal governments was much broader, as they often facilitated the SP process and continued to support local governments with the implementation. Supralocal governments helped to overcome the local lack of capacity, especially of smaller municipalities and facilitated knowledge co-production. Therefore, supralocal governments can help local governments address grand challenges like climate change and adopt the CE. However, this should not undermine learning and commitment building for the strategy within local governments. These findings show the need for SP research to carefully consider the MLG context in which SP takes place, as it is often interconnected with other levels of government.

Ethical disclosure

This study obtained positive ethical advice from the Social and Societal Ethics Committee of Hasselt University under reference REC/SMEC/2023-2024-49.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no conflicting interests.

7 References

- Agranoff, R. (2014). Local Governments in Multilevel Systems: Emergent Public Administration Challenges. *The American Review of Public Administration*, 44(4_suppl), 47S-62S.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0275074013497629>
- Bache, I., & Flinders, M. V. (2004). *Multi-level governance*. Oxford University Press.
- Barrutia, J. M., & Echebarria, C. (2019). Drivers of exploitative and explorative innovation in a collaborative public-sector context. *Public Management Review*, 21(3), 446-472.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2018.1500630>
- Bellezoni, R. A., Adeogun, A. P., Paes, M. X., & de Oliveira, J. A. P. (2022). Tackling climate change through circular economy in cities. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 381. Scopus.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2022.135126>

- Bourdin, S., & Jacquet, N. (2025). Closing the loop at the local scale: Investigating the drivers of and barriers to the implementation of the circular economy in cities and regions. *Ecological Economics*, 231, 108542. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2025.108542>
- Brorström, S. (2020). The strategy process as a result of learning, questioning, and performing in a city organization. *International Public Management Journal*, 23(5), 611–630. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10967494.2019.1606127>
- Bryson, J. M. (2018). *Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations: A Guide to Strengthening and Sustaining Organizational Achievement*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Bryson, J. M., & George, B. (2020). Strategic Management in Public Administration. In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Public Administration*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.139>
- Christis, M., Athanassiadis, A., & Vercalsteren, A. (2019). Implementation at a city level of circular economy strategies and climate change mitigation – the case of Brussels. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 218, 511–520. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2019.01.180>
- Circular Flanders. (2023). *Lokale Besturen en de Circulaire Economie in Vlaanderen*.
- Conteh, C., & Harding, B. (2023). Boundary-spanning in public value co-creation through the lens of multilevel governance. *Public Management Review*, 25(1), 104–128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2021.1942529>
- Corfee-Morlot, J., Kamal-Chaoui, L., Donovan, M. G., Cochran, I., Robert, A., & Teasdale, P.-J. (2010). *Cities, Climate Change and Multilevel Governance*. OECD. <https://doi.org/10.1787/220062444715>
- Drumaux, A., & Joyce, P. (2018). *Strategic Management for Public Governance in Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan UK. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-54764-4>

- European Commission. (2019). *The European Green Deal*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2019%3A640%3AFIN>
- European Commission. (2020). *A New Circular Economy Action Plan*. https://ec.europa.eu/environment/strategy/circular-economy-action-plan_nl
- European Commission. (2024a). *Circular cities and regions initiative*. European Commission - European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/research-area/environment/circular-economy/circular-cities-and-regions-initiative_en
- European Commission. (2024b). *Covenant of Mayors—Europe*. <https://eu-mayors.ec.europa.eu/en/about/objectives-and-key-pillars>
- European Union. (2021a). *Annex to the Commitment Document of the Covenant of Mayors - Europe*. <https://eu-mayors.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-07/Annex%20to%20commitment%20text.pdf>
- European Union. (2021b). *Covenant of Mayors—Europe Commitment Document*. <https://eu-mayors.ec.europa.eu/en/about/objectives-and-key-pillars>
- Fairbrass, J., & Jordan, A. (2004). Multi-level Governance and Environmental Policy. In I. Bache & M. Flinders (Eds.), *Multi-level Governance* (p. 0). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0199259259.003.0009>
- Fan, L., Wu, C., & Zhou, Z. (2024). The dance of power and responsibility: Understanding the multilevel government influence on CSR practices in Chinese state-owned enterprises. *Public Management Review*, 0(0), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2024.2416040>
- Flemish Regional Government. (2018). *Vision 2050. A Long-Term Strategy for Flanders*. <https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/vision-2050-a-long-term-strategy-for-flanders>
- George, B. (2016). *Unravelling the determinants of strategic planning effectiveness in public organizations: A strategic decision-making perspective at the individual and organizational*

level [PhD Thesis, Ghent University].

<https://biblio.ugent.be/publication/8131253/file/8131254>

George, B. (2017). Does strategic planning ‘work’ in public organizations? Insights from Flemish municipalities. *Public Money & Management*, 37(7), 527–530.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2017.1372116>

George, B. (2020). Successful Strategic Plan Implementation in Public Organizations: Connecting People, Process, and Plan (3Ps). *Public Administration Review*, 81(4), 793–798.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13187>

George, B., Desmidt, S., Cools, E., & Prinzie, A. (2018). Cognitive styles, user acceptance and commitment to strategic plans in public organizations: An empirical analysis. *Public Management Review*, 20(3), 340–359. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2017.1285112>

George, B., Walker, R. M., & Monster, J. (2019). Does Strategic Planning Improve Organizational Performance? A Meta-Analysis. *Public Administration Review*, 79(6), 810–819.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13104>

Ghisellini, P., Cialani, C., & Ulgiati, S. (2016). A review on circular economy: The expected transition to a balanced interplay of environmental and economic systems. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 114, 11–32. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2015.09.007>

Homsy, G. C., Liu, Z., & Warner, M. E. (2019). Multilevel Governance: Framing the Integration of Top-Down and Bottom-Up Policymaking. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 42(7), 572–582. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2018.1491597>

Johnsen, Å. (2018). Impacts of strategic planning and management in municipal government: An analysis of subjective survey and objective production and efficiency measures in Norway. *Public Management Review*, 20(3), 397–420.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2017.1285115>

- Kirchherr, J., Reike, D., & Hekkert, M. P. (2017). Conceptualizing the circular economy: An analysis of 114 definitions. *Resources, Conservation and Recycling*, 127, 221–232. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resconrec.2017.09.005>
- Kirchherr, J., Yang, N.-H. N., Schulze-Spüntrup, F., Heerink, M. J., & Hartley, K. (2023). Conceptualizing the Circular Economy (Revisited): An Analysis of 221 Definitions. *Resources, Conservation and Recycling*, 194, 107001. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resconrec.2023.107001>
- Klijn, E. H., & Koppenjan, J. (2020). Debate: Strategic planning after the governance revolution. *Public Money & Management*, 40(4), 260–261. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2020.1715097>
- Leck, H., & Simon, D. (2013). Fostering Multiscalar Collaboration and Co-operation for Effective Governance of Climate Change Adaptation. *Urban Studies*, 50(6), 1221–1238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098012461675>
- Marks, G. (1993). Structural Policy and Multilevel Governance in the EC. *The State of the European Community*, 2.
- Marks, G., & Hooghe, L. (2004). Contrasting Visions of Multi-level Governance. In I. Bache & M. Flinders (Eds.), *Multi-level Governance* (p. 0). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0199259259.003.0002>
- Martin, J., Paget, G., & Walisser, B. (2012). Rural municipal development and reform in Canada: Policy learning through local- provincial collaboration. *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance*, 10, 32–50. <https://doi.org/10.3316/informit.913461226721932>
- Melica, G., Bertoldi, P., Kona, A., Iancu, A., Rivas, S., & Zancanella, P. (2018). Multilevel governance of sustainable energy policies: The role of regions and provinces to support the

- participation of small local authorities in the Covenant of Mayors. *Sustainable Cities and Society*, 39, 729–739. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scs.2018.01.013>
- Osborne, S. P. (2006). The New Public Governance? 1. *Public Management Review*, 8(3), 377–387. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719030600853022>
- Paiho, S., Mäki, E., Wessberg, N., Paavola, M., Tuominen, P., Antikainen, M., Heikkilä, J., Rozado, C. A., & Jung, N. (2020). Towards circular cities—Conceptualizing core aspects. *Sustainable Cities and Society*, 59, 102143. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scs.2020.102143>
- Schreurs, M. A. (2010). Multi-level Governance and Global Climate Change in East Asia. *Asian Economic Policy Review*, 5(1), 88–105. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-3131.2010.01150.x>
- Scorza, F., & Santopietro, L. (2024). A systemic perspective for the Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan (SECAP). *European Planning Studies*, 32(2), 281–301. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2021.1954603>
- Stephenson, P. (2013). Twenty years of multi-level governance: ‘Where Does It Come From? What Is It? Where Is It Going?’ *Journal of European Public Policy*, 20(6), 817–837. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2013.781818>
- Torfin, J., & Hofstad, H. (2015). Collaborative innovation as a tool for environmental, economic and social sustainability in regional governance. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Administration*, 19(4), 49–70.
- Tortola, P. D. (2017). Clarifying multilevel governance. *European Journal of Political Research*, 56(2), 234–250. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12180>
- van Popering-Verkerk, J., & van Buuren, A. (2016). Decision-Making Patterns in Multilevel Governance: The contribution of informal and procedural interactions to significant multilevel decisions. *Public Management Review*, 18(7), 951–971. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2015.1028974>

- Vandersmissen, L., & George, B. (2023). Strategic planning in public organizations: Reviewing 35 years of research. *International Public Management Journal*, 27(4), 633–658. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10967494.2023.2271901>
- Vandersmissen, L., George, B., & Voets, J. (2024). Strategic planning and performance perceptions of managers and citizens: Analysing multiple mediations. *Public Management Review*, 26(2), 514–538. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2022.2103172>
- Voets, J., & De Rynck, F. (2008). Contextualising City-regional Issues, Strategies and their Use: The Flemish Story. *Local Government Studies*, 34(4), 453–470. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930802217371>
- VVSG. (2024). *Burgemeestersconvenant 2030*. <https://www.vvsg.be/kennisitem/vvsg/burgemeestersconvenant-2030>
- Whittington, R. (2006). Completing the Practice Turn in Strategy Research. *Organization Studies*, 27(5), 613–634. <https://doi.org/10.1177/017084060606064101>

8 Appendix

8.1 Appendix 1: Interview guide

Introduction:

- About the researchers
- About the research
- Role and experience of interviewee?
- About the supralocal government?

SP Process:

- Explain the SP process (initiator, timing, approach, content, actors involved)
- Explain your role in this process
- Explain role of your supralocal government
- How was the local context taken into account?

CE

- Personal understanding of CE and role of local governments
- What supralocal government does for CE
- If and how CE was part of the SP

Validation of results document analysis

- Results presented of CE occurrence in local strategies
- Discuss results (agreement, comments, opinion)