

LOCAL AUTHORITY INITIATIVES IN SUPPORT OF AGENDA 21 - CHINA

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1. Background and Concepts

1.1. Chapter 28 of Agenda 21, ‘Local authorities initiatives in support of Agenda 21’

The Local Agenda 21 concept was formulated and launched by the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) in 1991 as a framework for local governments worldwide to engage in implementing the outcomes of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). ICLEI, along with partner national and international local government associations and organizations (LGOs), championed the Local Agenda 21 concept during the 1991-1992 UNCED preparatory process. These efforts led to the integration of the Local Agenda 21 concept in the main outcome of UNCED, Agenda 21.

Chapter 28 of Agenda 21 contains a direct call to all local governments to create their own strategies and plans for sustainable development. The local authorities were given a key role to play in making sustainable development happen. These *Local Agenda 21* should translate the principles and mandates of Agenda 21 into concrete service strategies for each local community. Chapter 28 states that:

Because so many of the problems and solutions being addressed by Agenda 21 have their roots in local activities, the participation and cooperation of local authorities will be a determining factor in fulfilling its objectives. Local authorities construct, operate and maintain economic, social and environmental infrastructure, oversee planning processes, establish local environmental policies and regulations, and assist in implementing national and subnational environmental policies. As the level of governance closest to the people, they play a vital role in educating, mobilizing and responding to the public to promote sustainable development.

Chapter 28 emphasised that each local authority should enter into a dialogue with its citizens, local organizations and private enterprises and adopt a “local Agenda 21”. Through consultation and consensus-building, local authorities would learn from citizens and from local, civic, community, business and industrial organizations and acquire the information needed for formulating the best strategies. The process of consultation would increase household awareness of sustainable development issues. Local authority programmes, policies, laws and regulations to achieve Agenda 21 objectives would be assessed and modified, based on adopted local programmes.

Strategies could also be used in supporting proposals for local, national, regional and international funding.

By signing this chapter, the signatories to Agenda 21 have agreed on a number of actions to support local implementation of Agenda 21:

- Local authorities should develop local “Agenda 21s”, through consultation with citizens, organizations, and private enterprises;
- There should be an assessment (the chapter does not indicate by whom) of local authorities’ programs, policies, laws and regulations to achieve Agenda 21 objectives;
- UN and other international agencies should form partnerships to increase support for local authority programs;
- Cooperation should be increased among local authorities; and,
- Local authorities should implement programs to include women and youth in decision-making, planning and implementation.

Following UNCED, local governments, national and international LGOs, and international bodies and UN agencies entered a period of experimentation with the implementation of the Local Agenda 21 concept. The lead actors in these efforts were the local governments themselves which worked, often with the support of their national municipal associations, to develop Local Agenda 21 planning approaches appropriate to their circumstances. However, international programs played a critical role in documenting and analyzing these growing local experiences, and in facilitating the exchange of Local Agenda 21 approaches and tools.

The accumulation and exchange of practical experiences helped to identify a set of universal elements and factors for the success of Local Agenda 21 planning. While these elements and factors are being continually updated and revised by local practitioners, five key elements were defined for Local Agenda 21 planning in the 1992 to 1996 period. These are:

- Multi-sectoral engagement in the planning process through a local stakeholders group which serves as the coordination and policy body for preparing a long-term sustainable development action plan.
- Consultation with community groups, NGOs, business, churches, government agencies, professional groups and unions in order to create a shared vision and to identify proposals and priorities for action.
- Participatory assessment of local social, economic and environmental conditions and needs.
- Participatory target-setting through negotiations among key stakeholders in order to achieve the vision and goals set forth in the action plan.
- Monitoring and reporting procedures, including local indicators, to track progress and to allow participants to hold each other accountable to the action plan.

The rapid growth in interest and action around the Local Agenda 21 framework was recognized by the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). At its second session in 1994, the Commission adopted decisions in support of Local Agenda 21 and

opened the way for a special event to focus global attention on this growing movement. The third CSD session included a "Day of Local Authorities" which brought the experiences of local governments into the Commission's discussions through the presentation of case studies, a panel discussion with mayors and other municipal leaders, and an exhibition showcasing Local Agenda 21 programmes in six cities.

At the fourth session of the CSD, with the 1997 five-year review of Agenda 21 by a Special Session of the UN General Assembly in mind, the UN Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development (DPCSD) and ICLEI announced their plans to jointly conduct a detailed stock-taking of the Local Agenda 21 movement.

1.2. Global Progress on LA21

Today thousands of local governments around the globe are engaged in Local Agenda 21 activities. As the problems and possibilities to solve them differ from one community to another, the Local Agendas are all different, but, this is the idea behind the *bottom-up approach*—you take your departure from your local situation. *You start digging in your own back-yard and with your own shovel!*

Local Governments have demonstrated a deep commitment to the implementation of Agenda 21. Since 1991, more than 1800 local governments in 64 countries have established Local Agenda 21 planning processes to engage with their communities to implement Agenda 21 at the local level. Local governments and their communities also have voluntarily assumed new responsibilities for global environmental problems, such as climate change, forest destruction, and pollution of the seas. They have established their own international programs, in the context of international environmental conventions, to address these challenges. For example, 164 cities in 34 countries—and representing 4% of global carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions—have joined a Cities for Climate Protection Campaign to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by as much as 20%.

The growing role of local governments in the implementation of Agenda 21 has been recognized by national governments and the United Nations system. However, this recognition has not been accompanied by realistic discussion of the ability of local governments and communities to implement their Local Agenda 21 action plans or other sustainable development responsibilities. Over the past ten years local governments in more than 60 countries have received increased responsibilities for environmental protection and social programs as a result of national-level deregulation, decentralization, and delegation of traditional national- or state-level responsibilities. The institutional and financial capacity of local governments to fulfill these mandates, and the impacts of rapid decentralization upon the worldwide capacities of the public sector to implement sustainable development have not been sufficiently reviewed.

ICLEI's analysis of local government implementation of Agenda 21 during the 1992 to 1996 period concludes that the greatest impacts of local government actions have been in the areas of institutional development, public participation, and improved management systems. In thousands of cities and towns individual "best practice" projects also have produced concrete, positive impacts in specific areas of management.

However, few local governments have yet demonstrated their capacity to achieve dramatic improvements in social and environmental trends except in certain key areas of local responsibility, such as solid waste management or water pollution control. This conclusion highlights the importance of the following critical issues to the successful, worldwide implementation of Agenda 21:

- During the past five years, the sustainable development strategies and projects of local governments have generally been isolated from overall municipal budgeting, local development planning, land-use control, and economic development activities. As a result, sustainable development strategies, such as Local Agenda 21, have only resulted in significant changes in urban development trends in a limited number of cases.
- During the same period, many national governments have “downloaded” environmental protection and social development responsibilities to local governments in order to address national fiscal problems. This trend rarely has been accompanied by new revenue generating powers or by transfers of the revenues that were traditionally available for their execution. The resulting increase in financial burdens upon local governments is undermining their ability to implement Local Agenda 21 strategies.
- At the same time, reduced or poor national-level regulation of economic activities is weakening the ability of local governments to hold local businesses and other institutions (including themselves) accountable for the negative environmental and social impacts of their activities.
- National, subnational, and local governments continue to maintain policies, subsidies, and fiscal frameworks that inhibit efficient resource use and development control at the local level.
- Minimal incentives exist for transnational corporations and multi-lateral development institutions to be accountable and committed to local development strategies. Local governments have limited control over the toxicities, resource efficiencies, and packaging of the consumer products that are sold, used, and disposed within their jurisdictions.

The **highlights** from 1991 to 1996 in implementation of Local Agenda 21 have been:

- Local Agenda 21 planning activity is widespread.
- 1812 local governments from 64 countries are now involved.
- 933 municipalities from 43 countries have Local Agenda 21 planning underway.
- 879 municipalities are just starting to establish the process.
- Most Local Agenda 21 activity is taking place in countries with national campaigns
- 1487 (82%) are from 11 countries where national campaigns are underway.
- 117 (6%) are in 9 countries where national campaigns are just starting.
- 208 are in 44 countries where there is no national campaign.

Other key activities:

- Health and the environment. The World Health Organization’s Healthy Cities

Program now involves more than 1000 municipalities and 17 national campaigns.

- Climate and rainforest protection. The ICLEI Cities for Climate Protection Campaign—focusing on greenhouse gas emissions—includes 164 cities from 34 countries. The European Climate Alliance—additionally focusing on rainforest protection—includes 650 cities from 10 countries.
- Land-based pollution of the seas. City networks have been established to support municipal anti-pollution efforts related to specific seas, such as the Union of Baltic Cities, Environment North Sea, and the UTDA Medcities Project.
- Municipal international cooperation. Numerous North-South and East-West inter-municipal development assistance programs have been implemented under the auspices of national and international associations of local government. These programs have involves many hundreds of cities and towns.

1.3. The Guideline Document for Local Authorities Implementing Sustainable Development in China

To facilitate the implementation of China's Agenda 21 and the sustainable development strategy, the Administrative Centre for China's Agenda 21 (hereinafter referred as ACCA21), under the direction of the State Planning Commission and the State Science and Technology Commission, was formally established in May 1994. ACCA21 undertakes the daily management work concerning the implementation of China's Agenda 21. Its mandates include:

- To advise the Chinese Government on sustainable development strategies, policies, and programmes;
- To participate in international sustainable development activities as representatives of the Chinese Government;
- To serve as a clearinghouse for sustainable development priority projects in China;
- To promote sustainable development in Chinese Experimental Sustainable Development Communities;
- To provide consulting services to the industrial sectors on environmentally sound technologies;
- To develop and host in China the UNDP-sponsored Sustainable Development Networking Programme (SDNP);
- To provide training for government agencies and industry; and
- To conduct strategy research and publish educational materials in support of sustainable development.

Box 1. The Administrative Centre for China's Agenda 21

The UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), held in 1992, approved the global Agenda 21 and requested member countries to formulate their own strategy, plans, and measures concerning sustainable development according to their specific national conditions. Ex-Premier Li Peng, on behalf of the Chinese Government, made a solemn commitment at the Conference to implement Agenda 21 and other related documents. Immediately after the Conference, the Chinese Government decided to establish a Leading Group and an affiliated office, under the direction of the State Planning Commission (SPC) and the State Science and Technology Commission

(SSTC), to engage in the formulation of China's Agenda 21 and the associated Priority Programme. At the same time, the Administrative Centre for China's Agenda 21, under the direction of the Leading Group and its office, was established to be responsible for the daily management work concerning China's Agenda 21.

1.4. Formulation of China's Agenda 21

In August 1992, 300 specialists from 57 commissions and ministries under the State Council, brought together by the State Planning Commission and the State Science and Technology Commission, with the support of the UNDP, began the process of formulating China's Agenda 21. In March 1994, after many solid discussions, amendments, and active participation by related state ministries, agencies, and people from all parts of society, China's Agenda 21 was finally completed. In March 1994, the 16th Executive Meeting of the State Council passed China's Agenda 21—White Paper on China's Population, Environment, and Development in the 21st Century. China's Agenda 21, based on China's specific national conditions and paying attention to population, environment, and development, sets up a strategic goal of sustainable development that can promote coordinated development of economy, society, resources, and environment. China's Agenda 21 endeavors to:

- improve the quality of development and scientific and technological advancement while maintaining rapid economic development;
- promote overall social progress and establish a social basis for sustainable development;
- bring pollution of the environment under control so as to improve the ecosystem and rationally use natural resources, and
- gradually incorporate into the legal system those mechanisms which promote overall coordination of decision-making for sustainable development.

In July 1994, the State Council issued a notice to all provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities encouraging them to implement China's Agenda 21—White Paper on China's Population, Environment, and Development in the 21st Century. The notice pointed out that China's Agenda 21 should be regarded as the guiding principle in formulating the mid- and long-term plans of China's national economy and social development. It also demonstrated China's earnest implementation of the principles drafted at the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED).

1.5. Brief Introduction to China's Agenda 21

China's Agenda 21 consists of 20 chapters and 78 programme areas. These can be categorised into four parts:

1. Comprehensive strategy and policy of sustainable development

China's Agenda 21 provides background information and expounds China's urgent need to draft and implement the strategy of sustainable development. It also puts forward the strategic goals, priority programmes, and major actions that China should use in drafting its sustainable development strategy, lawmaking concerns, and related implementation.

It also emphasises the significance of, and principles on, drafting economic policies that can promote sustainable development and promote international cooperation on environment and development. Emphasis is placed on enhancing the capacity building of sustainable development through establishment of relevant management and information systems, improving funding mechanisms, intensifying education, and advancing science and technology. Special efforts should be made to encourage women, children, minority nationalities, workers, and scientific staff to participate in sustainable development activities.

2. Social sustainable development

This part comprises population, individual consumption, social service, poverty eradication, hygiene and health care, sustainable development of human settlement, disaster preparedness and mitigation, etc. The most important elements of this part are family planning, population control, and improving competence levels. The above mentioned requirements can be achieved by guiding people towards moderate life patterns and healthy consumption, promoting poverty eradication, enhancing the level of people's hygiene and health care, strengthening the management of urban utilization of land so as to guide infrastructure construction, promoting the development of building sectors, and improving people's living environment by supplying adequate housing to all people.

3. Sustainable economic development

In China's Agenda 21, rapid economic development is regarded as indispensable for poverty eradication, enhancement of people's livelihood, and strengthening of overall national strength. This part contains economic policies on the sustainable development of agriculture, industry, transportation, telecommunications, and sustainable energy production and consumption.

4. Rational utilization of resources and environmental protection

This includes sustainable utilization and protection of natural resources, protection of biodiversity, prevention of desertification, disaster mitigation and prevention, protection of the atmosphere, such as control of air pollution and acid rain, and sound treatment of solid wastes.

1.6. Characteristics of China's Agenda 21

China's Agenda 21, which is based on China's specific national conditions and takes the global Agenda 21 into consideration, embodies the characteristics of China's sustainable development strategy

In China's Agenda 21, economy, society, resources, and environment are taken as an inseparable whole: It not only deals with the problem of environmental protection in economic and social development, but also systematically explains interactions between sustainable development of economy and that of society. A comprehensive, long-term and progressive strategic framework, and related countermeasures concerning

sustainable development, was established which will make a new starting point for China's progress into the twenty-first Century .

China's Agenda 21 defines a new concept of development. China is a developing country and the most important task facing China is the promotion of economic development, the key to which is to coordinate social sustainable development with sustainable utilization of resources and environmental protection. Great efforts were made to bring China's Agenda 21 in line with China's national conditions, and to shift from the conventional mode of development through a phased, regulated transition with an emphasis on moving from an extensive economic development model to an intensive model.

In China's Agenda 21, the coordination of population and development is considered the key priority. The enormous population exerts great pressures on China's economy, society, resources, and environment. Taking these into consideration, China's Agenda 21 advocates that, while continuously carrying out a policy of family planning and controlling population growth, great efforts should also be made to advance educational systems, improve grassroots health care systems in urban centres and rural areas, promote social insurance systems, etc., so as to improve people's living standards. In the meantime, this huge resource can be used as an advantage in promoting the development of tertiary industry and increasing employment volume.

Within China's Agenda 21, China's strategic view on environmental and resources protection was outlined. Generally speaking, China is not a country rich in natural resources. In the long run, a shortage of natural resources and continued population growth will greatly hinder China's economic development. China's Agenda 21 serves to remind present generations of the grave consequences of the resource crisis. Economic and legal instruments which lay equal emphasis on resources protection and utilization should be implemented in order to reduce material consumption and increase efficiency. China's major challenges in the field of environmental protection will arise from those problems caused by industrial and agricultural development and the urbanization process. The key countermeasures lie in the co-ordination of industrial policies, environment policies, scientific management, and application of suitable technologies. Emphasis should be shifted from remediation of polluted environments to comprehensive environmental management, from controlling the density of pollution to controlling a combination of density and the total amount, and from extensive adjustment to a combination of extensive and intensive adjustment. Great efforts should also be made to promote the development of cleaner production, eco-farming, and comprehensive utilization of resources so as to gradually increase efficiency.

In China's Agenda 21, significant attention was paid to the coordination of China's national environment and development strategy with the global environment and development strategy. Related strategies, measures, and action plans were made on such issues as global climate change, damage to the ozone layer of the stratosphere, biodiversity protection, prevention of trans-boundary transfer of hazardous wastes, land erosion, and desertification. As the Government pointed out, China's environment problems are part of the problems facing the global environment. China is deeply conscious of its obligations and the role it should play in protecting the global

ecological environment, and is willing to undertake international responsibilities and obligations, and engage in international cooperation that is in line with China's level of development. This is a clear manifestation of the Chinese Government's deep historical commitment to undertake due obligations and responsibilities to the international community and its consistent dedication to the common causes of all humanity. In China's Agenda 21, some important measures were put forward from the perspectives of mechanism, legislation, education, science and technology, public participation, etc., in order to create a conducive atmosphere and provide an opportunity for China to participate in international cooperation concerning sustainable development .

The formulation of China's Agenda 21 and its associated Priority Programme paved the way for international cooperation and laid a foundation for its incorporation into the strategic plan of national economy and social development.

1.7. Implementation of China's Agenda 21 and principles for planning and implementing local Agenda 21

The implementation of China's Agenda 21 will greatly drive China towards sustainable development and adequately solve problems concerning environment and development. However, this implementation requires efforts from the whole of society and should be carried out by means of planning, regulations, policies, publicity, public participation, etc. The implementation of China's Agenda 21 can be divided into the following sections:

- consideration of economic structure, adjustment and transformation of the economic development model;
- gradual integration into national economy and social development plans;
- the strengthening of capacity building for sustainable development by enhancing people's understanding in this regard;
- and promotion of international cooperation through various channels by formulation and implementation of the Priority Programme for China's Agenda 21.

The principles for planning and implementing local Agenda 21 in China:

- Place economic development as top priority, strengthen the integration and harmony of development and environment;
- Establish an effective implementation mechanism (both in institutional and financial aspects);
- Strengthen capacity building, place human resources development as a high priority;
- Conduct the issue specified planning with full consideration of local characteristics;
- set up programs suited to the capability of local government; focus on pressing problems and find concrete solutions;
- Fully utilize advances in science and technology;
- Increase public awareness and ensure public participation;
- Develop international cooperation partnerships.

1.8. State Guideline for Local Activity: China's Experimental Sustainable Community

With respect to hot points such as environment, population and resources, in 1986, led by the State Science and Technology Commission, the State Planning Commission, and other relevant governmental sectors, Changzhou City and Wuxi County of Jiangsu Province were chosen, as demonstrations, to test comprehensive community management through the dissemination of innovative ways of thinking and input of science and technology. The demonstration involves both theoretical researches and extensive social practices. It has conducted comprehensive experiments in areas with great differences in natural and geographical conditions, including rural areas, county town and city blocks. Through ten years' effort, a new way has been figured out which depends on scientific and technological advancement to promote economic and social sustainable development. By the end of 1996, there were 26 such communities at the national level and 45 at the provincial and municipal level, covering 23 of China's provinces. With the implementation of china's Agenda 21, the Chinese government is placing sustainable development as one of its key strategies. These sustainable communities provide an important base of experience and practice for the implementation of China's Agenda 21 at local level.

The main objective of the experimental sustainable communities is to develop new mechanisms which will benefit economic development while keeping in harmony with social development and environmental protection; to improve the relationship between human beings and nature by increasing people's awareness of new concepts and improving their capabilities; and to "control population growth, expand job availability, improve the social security system, protect the environment; and in this way to promote social prosperity through fair, secure, civilized and healthy development."

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Biographical Sketch

Zhou Hailin, Programme Officer at the Policy & Strategy Division of ACCA21, which is responsible for policies studies on sustainable development and policy research on key issues of international response to environment and sustainable development (SD). As a Project Manager of Institutional Development of EMCP (EU-China Environmental Management Cooperation Programme), I take responsibility for research, training and consulting activities on sustainable development indicators (SDI), climate change, water management, globalization and its impacts on SD. My main achievements and research contributions are related to SDI, theories and institutional base of SD, economic approaches for implementation of SD strategy, etc. My research results are widely accepted and publications have great influence on academic research on SD in China.