

## **LOCAL AUTHORITIES' INITIATIVES IN SUPPORT OF AGENDA 21 - EUROPE**

**Paul Selman**

Countryside and Community Research Unit, University of Gloucestershire,  
Cheltenham, England, UK

**Keywords:** Local government, subsidiarity, democracy, welfarism, *Agenda 21*, QUANGOs, local sustainability, infrastructure, policy sectors, environment policy, governance, LA21, stakeholders

### **Contents**

1. Introduction
  2. The Nature of Sustainable Development in a Local Government Context
  3. Central-Local Relations
  4. Ambient Conditions: The Case for Sustainability Planning
  5. Responses to the Sustainability Challenge
  6. The Current State of Play
    - 6.1. Finland
    - 6.2. The Netherlands
    - 6.3. Sweden
    - 6.4. Norway
    - 6.5. UK
    - 6.6. Germany
    - 6.7. Poland
    - 6.8. Southern Europe
  7. Reflection
- Glossary  
Bibliography  
Biographical Sketch

### **Summary**

Local authorities' involvement in Local Agenda 21 (LA21) activities in Europe is reviewed and progress is assessed. While LA21 has neither fundamentally challenged the policies and processes of local government, nor led to a sharp improvement in environmental conditions, its future role still remains of great significance. First, it has been an important expression of the EU's commitment to subsidiarity, with democratic bodies closest to the people creating new opportunities for sustainable lifestyles. Second, Europe is a heavily urbanized continent and, while municipalities do not have to contend with the chronic public health and housing problems of developing megacities, they do face serious challenges of settlement expansion and traffic congestion. Third, the trends revealed by the Dobris Assessment, and confirmed by subsequent audits, demand a response by all levels of government. Fourth, Europe is, in the main, an affluent continent, and thus must contend with the problems of excessive production and consumption, which can often most effectively be managed at the municipal level. Finally, Europe is experiencing climactic economic and political

change. Against this background, LA21 appears neither to have led to a transformation in local government nor to a major improvement in environmental conditions. Nevertheless, there are reasons to be positive about the future influence of LA21. These include its role in relation to urban expansion and traffic congestion in the heavily urbanized continent of Europe, in relation to production and consumption in an affluent continent, and in relation to environmental change.

## 1. Introduction

Internationally, *Agenda 21* (the framework document of the UN Conference on Environment and Development, 1992) sought to enshrine the principle of sustainable development in public and corporate actions. Chapter 28 of the framework document referred to *Local Authorities' Initiatives in Support of Agenda 21*. This brief chapter recognized that many of the ambitions of the Earth Summit could only be implemented through the mechanisms of local government. In essence, it sought an effective style of action planning which delivered a range of adequately funded environmental services and environment friendly utility services, at the municipal level, through a democratically accountable process.

Europe is characterized by a long history of municipal governance and civic pride, deep or rapidly maturing traditions of democracy, sophisticated town planning and public health legislatures, and the longest-established pollution control measures in the world. It is somewhat surprising that *Local Agenda 21* (LA21), as it has become known, has had such a significant effect, and that so much of contemporary local environmental practice has been found wanting when measured against the canons of sustainable development.

In fact, local responses to the challenge of UNCED have tested European municipal administrations in a number of fundamental ways. These include:

1. A requirement for the integration of policies and processes related to economy, society, and the environment, which conflicts with the strong traditions of professional baronies and governmental departmentalism;
2. The tensions between a system of political legitimation which relies on representative democracy, in contrast to LA21's emphasis on participatory democracy and deliberative processes;
3. An approach to land-use planning which is ends-focused (i.e. sets a number of targets and actions to be achieved within a specific time period), in contrast to one which is traditionally means-focused (i.e. based on a suite of policy statements, which set out general ways in which decisions are to be taken and proposals approved); and
4. The need to respond to sustainability challenges through a strategy of social learning, in which collective deliberation is facilitated by the fusion of expert and citizen science, creating tensions with the expert-led traditions of Europe's relatively elitist democracies.

These factors represent fundamental breaks with past practice and form part of a pervasive program of social and political modernization. Whilst LA21s have often in practice been rather flimsy and superficial, they should nonetheless be seen not as a bolt-on to existing environmental programs, but as part of a sea change in modes of policy delivery.

This review of local responses to *Agenda 21* in Europe differs to some degree from the more scientific chapters in this volume. Instead, the discussion assumes that pressures, states, and diagnoses are largely acknowledged prior to the production of LA21s, and so focuses on the response phase. This last phase represents a means of addressing a corpus of cognate issues in an integrated and holistic manner. However, initial consideration is given to the sustainability pressures associated with functionalist traditions of environmental, economic, and community planning, which have given rise to new styles of sustainability planning. Moreover, while LA21s are the main focus, it should also be noted that the philosophy of sustainable development has influenced local policy and practice more generally.

At the outset, the *objective* of the chapter is to examine the interpretation of sustainable development at the local level in a number of European countries, and to explore the ways in which this has influenced the nature of various responses. The specific *pressures* and *activities* operating to inhibit the production and implementation of local sustainability strategies are primarily those of inadequacies in inherited administrative structures and legal frameworks. These limitations comprise a lack of “joined-up thinking” with respect to the elements of sustainable development, a lack of fitness of central and local government for sustainability planning, the lack of local government capacity (legislative and financial) to pursue key sustainability imperatives, the lack of political priority and will at all levels of government, and a lack of collaboration between local authorities and other agents of change.

The pressures associated with disintegrated policy and practice are gradually leading to a *state/condition* change in which holistic action becomes more feasible. For example, local government is increasingly inclined to instigate cross-departmental working parties and corporate green policies, and thus gradually to break down policy “silos.” In addition, a number of national and international organizations assist with the networking of knowledge and good practice, stimulating cross-disciplinary and outward-looking attitudes. These include, preeminently, the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI), and domestic organizations such as Norway’s Forum for Eco-municipalities and the UK’s Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA, formerly the Local Government Management Board).

The *diagnosis* is then made that traditional means of local government are unequal to the task of delivering sustainable development, so that more innovative measures are necessary. While Local Agenda 21 has made a timely contribution to integrated action, its uptake has been extremely uneven. To an extent, all European governments have concluded that their regulatory apparatus is already extremely elaborate and that Local Agenda 21 may be superfluous. Nevertheless, some have acknowledged that an adequate response to the challenges of sustainable development requires extant protection measures to be streamlined, partnerships to be forged between governmental

and nongovernmental bodies, and environmental and socioeconomic objectives to be pursued in a mutually reinforcing fashion.

Not surprisingly, there has been a spectrum of responses to *Agenda 21* at the local level. In some cases, local government has taken a strong lead and has assured top-level political and administrative commitment to the production and implementation of its LA21. Elements of a comprehensive response have typically entailed: the instigation of roundtables responsible for identifying adverse trends and promoting innovative policies; the inclusion of citizens and stakeholders in policy design and delivery; adjustments to the preparation and implementation of planning documents; the inclusion of business attitudes and needs; preparation of sustainability strategies; collection of comprehensive information on environmental and socioeconomic indicators; and implementation of flagship projects. Some responses, by contrast, have been minimalist, entailing little more than a perfunctory document and a re-badging of existing projects. Across Europe as a whole, most municipalities have made no response at all, despite UNCED's target of 60% participation by 1996.

Although the preceding discussion has emphasized the role of local government in relation to sustainable development, it is important to remember that municipal administrations have only limited powers of direct intervention. Consequently, local responses must rely on the concept of governance rather than government, that is they must acknowledge that political goals in complex societies and economies can no longer be achieved solely by state action, but must rely on partnership and collaboration within public, private, and voluntary alliances. Thus, local authorities must seek to achieve many of their sustainable development goals through a wider constellation of interests. While the emphasis in this chapter is on local authorities, some attention is consequently also paid to the facilitative role of stakeholders who are nonlocal or nonauthoritative.

## **2. The Nature of Sustainable Development in a Local Government Context**

It is unlikely that society will ever agree upon a universally acceptable definition of sustainable development. For pragmatic reasons, national governments typically adopt the Brundtland definition, perhaps modifying it to suit particular applications such as forestry or transport policy. However, with respect to LA21, a key feature is that local people must feel ownership of the strategy if it is to gain popular support, and so the definition of sustainability must be both compatible with national statements and yet locally negotiated. Indeed, several surveys have revealed widespread public ignorance of sustainable development as a concept and general hostility toward its associated jargon. Local authorities, therefore, have tended to redefine sustainable development, and often refer to their LA21s by a more user-friendly term. Official and academic definitions of sustainable development are often eschewed in favor of plain language accounts of amenity and livability. This tendency is even more pronounced in countries that have a high degree of "legal localism," or where local authorities possess a power of general competence, and can pursue the local public good on matters where they lack an explicit legal power or duty, without risk of acting *ultra vires*. Increasing local autonomy of this nature is now encouraged by the EU's commitment to subsidiarity (devolving power as close as possible to citizens, within national and strategic constraints). Consequently, the greater the degree of devolution of environmental,

social, and economic policy responsibility, the greater the probable fluidity in the definition and interpretation of sustainable development. In some cases, local discourses are likely to be heavily protectionist and defensive of environmental amenities; in others, they are more flagrant in their courtship of inward economic investment.

Although characterized by legal centralism and a reluctant parliamentary attitude toward subsidiarity, the UK is nevertheless a good exemplar of the types of local response to *Agenda 21*, by virtue of the sheer number of strategies and plans that have been produced. As an example of the flexibility in interpreting sustainable development, one LA21 in the north of England avoids a specific definition, instead repeating those of the Brundtland Report and national countryside agencies, and using generic and user-friendly forms of words. Thus, it describes its particular approach in terms of getting the balance right between environmental concerns, continued economic growth, and social development/quality of life. Within this context, the purpose of *Agenda 21* is described as: “developing the world’s economies and enhancing the social lifestyles we all desire, without destroying the natural assets and resources of the planet we live on” (from Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council’s LA21 in 2000).

It goes on to state that: “Agenda 21 recognized that we will never achieve that fine balance (often referred to as ‘sustainable development’) without involving every country, every governing body, every decisionmaker in every organization, business, industry and trades union, every scientist, designer and teacher and all the world’s farmers and individual citizens and consumers”.

Reference to LA21 is made almost obliquely, and the authors simply state that the message of UNCED has been: “. . . translated into a local agreement (a local *Agenda 21*) between all partners in the process about exactly what needs to be done locally to ensure that the planet bequeathed to future generations is at least as healthy, as rich in resources, and as diverse in natural assets as the one we now enjoy.”

This particular example is fairly typical of the ways in which municipalities have sought to tailor *Agenda 21* to the lifestyles and political ethos of their areas, without deterring local citizens by the use of professional jargon, or potential business investors by the adoption of antidevelopment language.

The other principal way in which *Agenda 21* has been reconciled with geographically specific circumstances is through modification of the normal business of local government, such as the production of corporate and land-use plans. This is particularly significant when considering the direct and service effects of local government: namely, the impact which the local authority’s own resource consumption has on the environment, and those indirect impacts associated with the ways their policies influence other agents’ activities. Consequently, green audits (often conducted under the framework of ISO14001) reflect a twin necessity for local authorities to put their own house in order and to influence the activities of their suppliers and clients.

In the UK, land-use plans must conform to national legislation and direction, but local practice has been significantly influenced by the principles of sustainable development policy. Most significantly, central government’s guidance on planning policy to

municipalities has been extensively rewritten to accommodate these new priorities. Inevitably, the guidance is phrased in flexible terms that reflect the contestation of UNCED principles between developers and conservationists. Local authorities have not necessarily been fundamentally greened but have certainly become more attuned to the delicately poised arguments embodied in national policy guidance. For example, one structure (strategic land use) plan in the west of England sets out its mission as: “planning for change in ways that protect and enhance the distinctive environmental qualities of the County which will assist in attracting new investment and jobs, improving the quality of life of existing residents and protecting the environment for future generations” (from Gloucestershire County Council’s revised structure plan in 2000).

An example of a corporate plan from the UK is illustrated by an example from the south of England (from Richmond Borough Council’s corporate plan 2000), which states the Council’s Mission in the following terms:

We aim to enable the residents of Richmond upon Thames to share in a sustainable society which maintains the Borough’s special environment, enhances services, employment, commercial life and recreation, and minimizes the use of resources, now and in the future. We will try to make this happen by:

- balancing issues of environment, empowerment and economy;
- working together with local people, whether as individuals or through local societies, the business community and voluntary groups; and
- internally developing a management agenda which delivers the Council’s aims, based on the principles of Best Value.

(Pressures to modernize have latterly been imposed on the UK’s local authorities through a requirement to achieve Best Value in its services—which can entail demonstrating sustainable development performance). This is a more sophisticated concept than the previous financial discipline of accepting the least cost tender, and requires a community consultation process to justify the selection of options which deliver multiple benefits in an efficient manner.)

The Council subsequently claims that its work program will be based on the principles of sustainable development. Thus, the local authority commits itself to agreeing to a set of priority areas each year on which its resources will be focused, and these broadly reflect a sustainability ethos (e.g., lifelong learning, environment and economy, healthy living and antipoverty, community safety, and community governance).

-  
-  
-

**TO ACCESS ALL THE 24 PAGES OF THIS CHAPTER,**  
Visit: <http://www.eolss.net/Eolss-sampleAllChapter.aspx>

## Bibliography

- Aall C. (1998). Norway: Confronting the Inertia of Existing Reforms. *From the Earth Summit to Local Agenda 21: Working Towards Sustainable Development* (ed. W.M. Lafferty and K. Eckerberg), pp. 76–105. London: Earthscan. [See annotation to Lafferty and Eckerberg below.]
- Beuermann C. (1998). Germany: Five Years After Rio and Still Uphill All the Way? *From the Earth Summit to Local Agenda 21: Working Towards Sustainable Development* (ed. W.M. Lafferty and K. Eckerberg), pp. 106–139. London: Earthscan. [See annotation to Lafferty and Eckerberg below.]
- Bishop K., Flynn A. and Marsden T. (2000). Editorial Introduction. *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning* 2(1).
- Bond A.J., Mortimer K.J. and Cherry J. (1998). The Focus of Local Agenda 21 in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management* 41(6). [Reports on research into the balance between economic, social, and environmental considerations in sustainable development in the UK.]
- Brown L. et al. (1999). *State of the World—Millennium Edition*. Norton.
- Coenen H.J.M. (1998). The Netherlands: Subsidized Seeds in Fertile Soil. *From the Earth Summit to Local Agenda 21: Working Towards Sustainable Development* (ed. W.M. Lafferty and K. Eckerberg), pp. 106–139. London: Earthscan. [See annotation to Lafferty and Eckerberg below.]
- Department of Environment (DoE) (1990). *This Common Inheritance*, Cm 1200. London: HMSO. [Watershed White Paper committing the UK to a coherent environmental policy.]
- Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (1999). *A Better Quality of Life*. London: DETR. [Official UK strategy for sustainable development.]
- Eckerberg K. and Forsberg B. (1998). Implementing Agenda 21 in Local Government: The Swedish Experience. *Local Environment* 3(3), 333–349. [Reports on the achievements of a number of local sustainability initiatives.]
- Eckerberg K., Forsberg B. and Wickenberg P. (1998). Sweden: Setting the Pace with Pioneer Municipalities and Schools. *From the Earth Summit to Local Agenda 21: Working Towards Sustainable Development* (ed. W.M. Lafferty and K. Eckerberg), pp. 45–75. London: Earthscan. [See annotation to Lafferty and Eckerberg below.]
- European Environment Agency (1999). *Environment in the European Union at the Turn of the Century*. Copenhagen: EEA.
- Fousekis P. and Lekakis J.N. (1997). Greece's Institutional Response to Sustainable Development. *Environmental Politics* 6(1), 131–152. [Realistic account of response to sustainable development, with an emphasis on the role of local government.]
- Gibbs D., Longhurst J. and Braithwaite C. (1998). Struggling with Sustainability: Weak and Strong Interpretations of Sustainable Development Within Local Authority Policy, *Environment and Planning A* 30. [Analysis of contradictions in the interpretation of sustainable development within national policy.]
- Gloucestershire County Council (undated). County web site <[www.gloscc.gov.uk](http://www.gloscc.gov.uk)>.
- Grochowalska J. (1998). The Implementation of Agenda 21 in Poland. *European Environment* 8(3), 79–85. [Paper reviewing national and local responses to sustainable development in Poland.]
- Hewitt N. (1995). *European Local Agenda 21 Planning Guide. How to Engage in Long-Term Environmental Action Planning Towards Sustainability*. Brussels: European Sustainable Towns and Cities Campaign. [Manual giving systematic advice on the stages in preparing local sustainability strategies.]
- ICLEI (undated). *European Local Agenda 21 Programme*. <[www.iclei.org/europe/la21/home.htm](http://www.iclei.org/europe/la21/home.htm)>.

International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (1997a). *Local Agenda 21 Survey: A Study of Responses by Local Authorities and Their National and International Associations to Agenda 21*. New York: ICLEI. [International survey of local government responses to the Earth Summit.]

International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (1997b). *Local Government Implementation of Agenda 21*. Toronto: ICLEI, Toronto. [As above.]

Lafferty W.M., ed. (2001). *Sustainable Communities in Europe*. London: Earthscan.

Lafferty W.M. and Eckerberg K., eds. (1998). *From the Earth Summit to Local Agenda 21: Working Towards Sustainable Development*. London: Earthscan. [A wide-ranging collection of commissioned papers on European national responses to Local Agenda 21.]

Lafferty W.M. and Eckerberg K., eds. (1998). Introduction: The Nature and Purpose of "Local Agenda 21." *From the Earth Summit to Local Agenda 21: Working Towards Sustainable Development* (ed. W.M. Lafferty and K. Eckerberg), pp. 1–16. London: Earthscan.

Niemi-Iihlati A. (1998). Finland: Working with LA21 Under Conditions of Economic Uncertainty. *From the Earth Summit to Local Agenda 21: Working Towards Sustainable Development* (ed. W.M. Lafferty and K. Eckerberg), pp. 17–44. London, Earthscan. [See annotation to Lafferty and Eckerberg above.]

O'Riordan T. and Voisey H. (1997). The Political Economy of Sustainable Development. *Environmental Politics* 6(1), 1–23. [Critical analysis of attempts to integrate sustainable development across different policy sectors.]

Pattie K. and Hall G. (1994). The Greening of Local Government: A Survey. *Local Government Studies* 20(3). [Early account of attempts to introduce environmental management practices to local government.]

Rhodes R. (1988). *Beyond Westminster and Whitehall: The Sub-Central Governments of Britain*. London: Unwyn Hyman. [Classic text on UK policy networks.]

Ribiero T.S. and Rodrigues V.J. (1997). The Evolution of Sustainable Development Strategies in Portugal. *Environmental Politics* 6(1), 131–152. [Wide-ranging account of changing domestic policies and practices in response to the Earth Summit.]

Richmond Borough Council (undated). Borough web site <[www.Richmond.gov.uk](http://www.Richmond.gov.uk)>.

Selman P. (1996). *Local Sustainability*. London: Paul Chapman. [General account of approaches to sustainability planning and management at local levels of governance.]

Selman P. (1998). Local Agenda 21: Substance or Spin? *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management* 41(5). [Account of research into the workings of three UK Local Agenda 21 strategies.]

Stanners D. and Bordeau P., eds. (1995). *The Dobris Assessment: Europe's Environment*. Copenhagen: European Environment Agency. [Systematic state of environment report for Europe.]

Taylor D. (1998). Integrating Economic and Environmental Policy: Experience in UK Local and Regional Government. *European Environment* 8(5), 141–151. [Analysis of difficulties associated with implementing cross-departmental sustainability strategies within local government.]

Tuxworth B. (1996). From Environment to Sustainability: Surveys and Analysis of Local Agenda 21 Process Development in UK Local Authorities. *Local Environment* 4(1). [Review of comprehensive survey of Local Agenda 21 progress in the UK.]

Tuxworth B. and Thomas E. (1997). Local Agenda 21—The First Five Years. Report to the Local Government Management Board. London: LGMB. [Main survey findings relative to previous paper.]

Young S. (1998). The United Kingdom: A Mirage Beyond the Participation Hurdle? *From the Earth Summit to Local Agenda 21: Working Towards Sustainable Development* (ed. W.M. Lafferty and K. Eckerberg), pp. 170–203. London: Earthscan. [See annotation to Lafferty and Eckerberg above.]

Welch R.V. (1997). Local Government and Sustainable Environment: European Perspectives. *European Environment* 7(1), 16–24. [Provides an account of the problems faced by former centrally planned economies in creating the democratic infrastructure for sustainable development.]

Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council (undated). Borough web site <[www.wigan.gov.uk](http://www.wigan.gov.uk)>.



### **Biographical Sketch**

**Paul Selman** is Professor of Environmental Planning at the University of Gloucestershire, England. He has published widely in the fields of environmental planning, sustainable development, and applied landscape ecology, including books on *Local Sustainability* (Paul Chapman Publishing, 1996) and *Environmental Planning* (Sage, 2000). He has held research grants and contracts from the EU, UK Research Councils, and from various government departments and agencies.

UNESCO - EOLSS  
SAMPLE CHAPTERS