

Striving for Good Governance in Urban Areas: The Role of Local Agenda 21s

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One of the most significant innovations in addressing urban environmental problems in recent years has been the emergence of a new kind of city-wide initiative to address environmental problems – the Local Agenda 21. Although more common in Europe and North America, there are growing numbers of cities with Local Agenda 21s (LA21s) in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The success of many of these initiatives demonstrates their considerable potential.

From an international perspective, LA21s still face a number of critical challenges, however. Especially in more affluent settlements, more needs to be done to ensure that locally driven agendas take the regional and global impacts of local activities into account. Especially in low-income settlements, securing governmental and international support for local agendas that meet the needs of the more vulnerable groups remains an important challenge. And across the board, most LA21s still face the challenge of entering the mainstream of urban politics and policies.

LA21s came out of the 1992 Rio Summit. They were seen as the means by which local action plans could be developed within each city and town to implement the many recommendations that were within Agenda 21, the 'action plan' that governments endorsed at the Conference. The LA21s implemented since 1992 have particular importance for three reasons:

- They represent concrete experiences of addressing many environmental problems associated with urban development
- Most are locally developed and driven, not developed or imposed from outside, and they generally rely more on locally generated resources than external resources
- They support 'good local governance' for environment and development – the more

successful cases have been associated with public officials with strong commitments to democratic practices, greater accountability to citizens and partnerships with community-based organisations (CBOs) and NGOs.

Their strengths: combining good governance with action

At their best, LA21s provide a means by which environmental issues become more integrated within the planning and management of an urban area. They usually involve the development of a particular document – the Local Agenda 21 – but this should be agreed through a broad, inclusive consultation process that draws in all key interests ('stakeholders') and provides an efficient and equitable means of reconciling conflicting or competing interests. The consultation process, with its potential to secure more co-operation between the different government agencies, NGOs and CBOs is as important as any documents produced.

A critical outcome of this process should be agreement on priorities, and actions and partnerships to implement them. For instance in Manizales it led to the development of a local environmental action plan which became integrated within the municipal development plan and budget. It included measures to improve waste management

KEY CHALLENGES FOR THE EU:

- Having a functional Local Agenda 21 (LA21) should be viewed favourably in national and international decisions about financial assistance
- International donors should take advantage of the consultation processes of existing LA21s to increase stakeholder participation in their own decision-making
- International and national support for LA21s should encourage them to be accountable 'downwards' to citizens and their community organisations, as well as 'upwards' to the donors
- At every level, efforts need to be made to bring LA21s into the mainstream of urban politics and policies without compromising their consultative and participatory character

(including recycling), and to combine reducing the risk of landslides (the city is in a mountainous region) with the development of eco-parks throughout the city. The city has also developed an innovative indicators programme and a decentralised system of observatories to monitor progress.

In Ilo, the quality of the environment has been transformed through some 300 projects financed and implemented through partnerships between the municipal government and community-level management committees. Despite the fact that the city's population expanded more than sixfold since 1961, there have been major improvements in the quality of the urban environment including housing, provision for water and sanitation, green areas, sewage treatment and land management.

LA21s can also integrate what is often termed the 'brown' environmental health agenda with broader 'green' ecological concerns, which has generally proved difficult within conventional, local government-directed environmental plans. LA21s have particular importance for combating global warming: measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions are only likely to be acceptable to local populations in low-income nations if developed through consultative processes and integrated with measures to address local environmental concerns. These include the most basic environmental health necessities such as safe, sufficient water, adequate provision for sanitation and drainage and regular services to collect and safely manage household wastes. At least 600 million urban dwellers in Africa, Asia and Latin America live in homes and neighbourhoods with such inadequate provision for these that their lives are continually at risk.

Their weaknesses: lack of action, accountability and support

Perhaps the main worry for LA21s is the relatively few instances of success. Virtually all national governments formally endorsed Agenda 21, thereby undertaking to support the development of LA21s in each settlement. There should be tens of thousands of LA21s that were put in place at least six years ago and are now being implemented. But there is little evidence of LA21s being developed in most low income nations.

Another worry is that most examples of good practice in LA21s come from cities where there have been major improvements in the quality and accountability of local governments. LA21s were the means by which improvements were achieved but it was the change in local government that was the critical reason for their success. LA21s can assist local political reform but they cannot replace it. LA21s can ensure better use of limited resources – as in Ilo – but they do not, of themselves, increase investment capacity. Most urban governments in low and middle income nations remain weak and ineffective; many have little accountability to their citizens. This means less scope for LA21s to become the vehicle for real consultative processes (as outlined in Agenda 21).

A third worry is that by being 'local', they may not deal with the transfer of environmental burdens across each

locality's boundaries. Cities can develop very high quality environments by transferring their environmental costs to other people and other ecosystems. For instance, many wealthy cities import from distant places all the goods whose fabrication involves high inputs of energy and water and high levels of pollution and hazardous wastes. The environmental costs of their consumption are concentrated elsewhere. LA21s need regional and national frameworks to support the action needed to address regional and global environmental goals.

The international challenge of supporting Local Agenda 21s

International support for LA21s should help meet other key goals espoused by international agencies such as strengthening local democracy and addressing environmental problems that cause or contribute to poverty. Long-term international support for LA21s should assist development of more competent, effective, accountable city and municipal authorities.

The very name Local Agenda 21 implies international engagement. If the best way forward were simply to let local authorities get on with solving their own problems, there would be little point in even coining the term. Organisations such as the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives have made concerted efforts to draw attention to the importance of local authorities in the international arena, and to create networks that can support local initiatives.

There is also a growing recognition among international donors of the need for more support for urban areas and for 'good governance' at local level. Many international donors did little for urban areas over the last two decades – in part because of the difficulties they face in working with local governments; in part because of inappropriate definitions which greatly under-stated the extent and depth of poverty in urban areas and drew attention away from those aspects of poverty that require 'good local governance'. Recently, however, increasing numbers of international donors have developed urban programmes and strategies.

One of the main attractions of LA21s for international donors – that they are likely to result in reduced regional and global environmental burdens – also brings a risk. Attempts to convince local groups that it is in their self-interest to reduce their 'ecological footprint' can seem to be (and indeed can be) manipulative. However, if LA21s are to achieve an open and transparent character, it is important that regional, national and international (as well as local) interests be explicitly identified. It is also important to recognise that urban centres that have addressed their own local environmental problems in equitable and efficient ways are likely to be the best partners in international efforts to address global environmental challenges. ●

Case studies of LA21s in Manizales (Colombia), Ilo and Chimbote (Peru), Nakuru (Kenya), Durban (South Africa), Jinja (Uganda), Penang (Malaysia), Rufisque (Senegal) and Durban (South Africa) are being published by IIED as Working Papers, and most will be summarised in the journal *Environment and Urbanization*.