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Think Local, Act Local? Issues of Co-ordination and Integration in Local Agenda 21

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Abstract

The political response to the complex package of environmental problems which threaten the future of our planet has been to introduce a new agenda of environmental action based on the principles of sustainability and subsidiarity. This has been crystallised in world agreements signed at the Earth Summit in Rio. One of these, Agenda 21, calls for the governments and communities of the world to prepare action plans for their areas which can build consensus between the various stakeholder groups and feed the principles of sustainable development back into their policies and day-to-day practices.

This paper explores the experience of Local Agenda 21 type processes at three levels in the South East of England: the regional, county (sub-regional) and local level. In particular it undertakes a critical appraisal of the success of these participatory and consensus-building exercises in developing an integrated and co-ordinated approach to environmental action planning. It concludes that, although much useful work has been done in raising awareness and modifying policy and practice, there are significant cultural and institutional barriers which are hindering progress.

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1. Local Agenda 21, Participation and the Policy-Action Relationship

The political response to a range of post-war environmental problems has cascaded from the United Nations to all levels of government reaching a 'pinnacle' of attention at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. This built on the work of the earlier Brundtland report and defined sustainable development (SD) in broad socio-economic terms as, "Improving the quality of human life whilst living within the carry capacity of supporting ecosystems" (UNCED, 1992). One of the key outcomes from Rio was Agenda 21, an action programme for SD into the 21st Century, emphasising widespread participation and involvement. Chapter 28 of Agenda 21 called on the world's governments and local communities to prepare Local Agenda 21's (LA21) for countries and local areas. It declared that, "by 1996 most local authorities in each country should have undertaken a consultative process with their populations and achieved a consensus 'a Local Agenda 21' for the community" (UNCED, 1992: para. 28.2).

This call for local action was justified on the grounds that:

- environmental problems have to be tackled at all relevant levels;
 - it is essential that a consensus is built between all key interests (including those normally marginalised);
 - a sense of ownership (of the principles and practices of SD) is required by all stakeholders and this needs to be spread right down to individual communities;
- SD should be built (as far as possible) on local solutions and decision-making (i.e. an emphasis on subsidiarity).

A variety of approaches have been developed to take the LA21 process forward in individual countries, regions, authorities and communities. Stephen Young (1996) provides a useful template which identifies four basic approaches used in the UK (one of the most active countries in this area):

- A top-down strategy: with LA firmly in control of the process leading to a limited kind of 'consultation'. This is clearly out of line with the principles of Agenda 21.
- Limited dialogue strategy: heavily top-down but with some flexibility and compromises on final policy.
- "Yes...but..." strategy: applying a bottom-up and relatively open process but where certain key policies and proposals remain 'non-negotiable'. In its worst form it emerges during process; at its best it begins with an honest statement of policy and financial constraints.
- Bottom-up strategy: the ideal type of LA21 process. Active engagement with full range of interests, listening and learning, not leading but sharing ownership with 'partners' in process. LA is prepared to make radical changes in response to LA21 process. Young suggests that this has yet to be achieved in the UK; but many LAs are striving to achieve it!

In the UK (and in many other countries as well) there has been a significant groundswell of activity on LA21 (see UNA-UK, 1995; Selman, 1996; Sharwood and Russell, 1997; and ICLEI 1998). Much of this locally-generated debate and action-planning has sought to apply the bottom-up approach of participatory democracy and innovative techniques (e.g. Fora; consensus-building; visioning; village appraisals; planning for

real; and citizens' juries) have been used to reach agreements, policies and proposals. However, the process has inevitably been fraught with difficulties given the radicalism of the original idea of LA21 and the complexity inherent in the concept and practice SD. These problems include:

- Difficulties in communication: the 'green ghetto' problem of preaching to the converted and the apathy of many disadvantaged groups due to years of social exclusion or the experience of past 'top-down' policy initiatives;
- The limited range of interests often involved: often selected for their 'acceptability'.
- Conflicts of interest: some of which have not been resolved through consensus-building.
- Variable contribution of business: particularly at the local level where it has sometimes been necessary to establish separate Business Agenda 21's in order to engage with in an 'acceptable' way (e.g. WWF UK 1995).
- 'Sustaining' the initiative beyond 1996: the deadline for the published products of the LA21 process. There is now a need to give the LA21 movement its next big goal or target.
- Integration of LA21 policy and action into the day to day policy and practices of a range of public sector authorities and agencies; and
- Co-ordination of the different LA21 initiatives between the various levels of decision-making; from the global to the local.

It is the last two issues I wish to concentrate on in this paper as both are now becoming central concerns in the attempt to put the 'agenda into action' (to use the title of the Rio+5 conference held in New York in 1997). In order to explore these issues, case studies from three different levels of the LA21 process in the south east of England will be reported on.

2. From Rio to Reading: The Levels of Agenda 21

As mentioned earlier, the UK has been one of the leading nations in developing LA21. Indeed there are environmental fora and action plans operating at all levels of the political and organisational system. At the central state a UK Roundtable of key stakeholders has been established. It has produced advisory reports on transport, housing capacity, energy, and various other issues. Below this consultative body there is a range of other, often more participatory, fora working on LA21 initiatives. In the south east of England these have been set-up at regional, county (sub-regional), local and, sometimes, neighbourhood level. We shall report on the hierarchy of initiatives leading down to the communities in Reading, Berkshire, a town of 120,000 in the Thames Valley 60 km west of London.

a) Regional Level LA21: The SERPLAN Sustainability Panel

The London and South East Planning Conference (SERPLAN) is a regional planning body which represents the views of over 140 local authorities and provides advice to central government and its members on regional planning issues for the region. In order to incorporate the principles of sustainable development in to its regional

planning strategy SERPLAN established a Sustainability Panel in 1994. This Panel drew its membership mostly from local authorities but also included representatives and experts from the private sector, voluntary (NGO) sector and local universities. The task of the Panel was to develop a framework which could be used to develop and appraise the emerging regional strategy.

A number of tasks have been completed including the preparation and formal approval/adoption of:

- a framework document of 'Sustainability Principles' which has been widely applauded as an holistic and robust outline from which to build sustainable regional planning policies. It places emphasis on five main principles (futuraity; environment; development; equity and participation) applied through seven features of sustainability (including demand management; carrying capacity; diversity; and quality of life);
- a participation strategy ('Working with the Public') which emphasises the need to target representative groups at the regional level, but also to feed-in the inputs from various fora already established at the sub-regional and local levels; and
- a methodology document entitled 'Strategic Environmental Assessment: A Methodology and Appraisal Framework for the Review of the Regional Strategy' which currently being used to review the Regional Planning Strategy and monitor its subsequent implementation.

The main lessons (see Doak et. al. 1998) from this, still to be completed, process are:

- the value of bringing together the energy and expertise of a range of individuals from academic and other non-governmental organisations into the development of policy-making frameworks aimed at sustainable development;
- the quality of analysis and creativity of solutions produced using a relatively open system of informal meetings in which brain-storming and debate are the main means to progress action;
- the difficulty of grappling with the generality and uncertainty of sustainability issues at a regional level, but also the value of the subsequent learning process;
- the need to keep people interested and involved in order to spread ownership and commitment, but the difficulty of integrating the 'consensus' into the work of all SERPLAN working groups;
- The difficulty of co-ordinating the various sub-regional LA21 initiatives as a meaningful input into the work of the Regional Panel;
- the valuable, but rather imprecise, role of Strategic Environmental ('Sustainability') Assessment in the policy-making process, and ongoing debates about the definitions and criteria used in this (see also Therivel et. al. 1998); and
- the need to define sustainable development in broad (socio-economic) terms and not just in relationship to (simplistic) environmental constraints.

b) Strategic Level LA21: The Berkshire Environmental Forum

Berkshire County Council established the Berkshire Environmental Forum (BEF) in February, 1994 with the following objectives:

- To provide an arena for the exchange of information and ideas on environment and sustainability;
- To review and advise on the preparation and implementation of environmental strategies for the County;
- To review the work of the Forum's Working Groups

It met on an annual basis until its demise in early 1998, although four working groups (covering Development and Transport; Business and Environment; Education and Information; and Pollution and Waste) met more regularly. The membership of the BEF and its working groups was drawn from local authorities, industrialists, environmental and community groups, developers, landowners, transport operators, educational establishments, and central government agencies.

Each of the working groups developed its own style of working but they all made use of debate, brain-storming and formal presentations on key issues. There was considerable discussion about the objectives and purpose of the groups and the decision to use them predominantly for information exchange rather than progressing action disappointed some of the members. Although the BEF and its working groups had the potential to link-up the regional and local fora discussed in this paper, it singularly failed to energise the relevant members through a committed process of action planning. Despite this it has helped to build the network of established contacts at this level and debate key issues facing the County.

Probably the biggest contextual problem was the shadow cast over the Forum by the proposals, and then reality, of local government re-organisation in Berkshire. This eventually resulted in the abolition of the County Council in April 1998 and the establishment of six separate unitary authorities. The political uncertainty and conflict generated by this process led to a luke-warm attitude to the BEF from the district authorities, and in one case (Bracknell) to complete withdrawal from its activities. In the case of the LA21 initiatives in Reading Borough (see below), the BEF provided very few worthwhile areas of 'value-added' and the LA21 manager from the Borough Council was quite critical of the lack of direction in the Forum, and particularly a lack of enthusiasm by the 'dying' County Council. In defence of the County Council, they tried to emphasise that the Forum was not 'owned' by them and that its members could have developed their own initiatives and action programmes for the Forum if they so wished. However, in a context of variable enthusiasm, this has led to a situation of variable action!

c) Local Level LA21: Reading's Neighbourhood Agenda 21

The approach to LA21 in Reading has been energetic and committed. The Borough Council quickly produced an Environmental Strategy (RBC 1991) which it has built on and expanded during subsequent years. Its approach to LA21 has been to facilitate and draw together three strands of activity:

- Involving the community in environmental decisions (a set of Neighbourhood Agenda's);
- Engaging businesses in environmental discussions (a Business Agenda); and
- Managing the Council's own environmental performance and integrating SD into its own policies and activities (a Local Authority Agenda).

The Council has made use of nationally available resources to pilot these initiatives. For instance, the Neighbourhood Agenda 21 approach has been part-funded by the WWF (see WWF 1995) and the Business Agenda 21 has been supported by the NatWest Bank and the WWF.

The Borough Council published the Local Agenda 21 statement for Reading in 1997 (RBC 1996) in which it outlined the Council's approach and reported on the achievements at that time. The statement reports on:

- A range of environmental projects undertaken by the seven neighbourhood GLOBE (Go Local On a Better Environment) groups so far established;
- Various environmental management initiatives within the Borough Council;
- The establishment of an Environment Centre to support school and community initiatives;
- Energy efficiency programmes with local businesses;
- Developing sustainable transport plans for large local businesses; and
- Successfully bidding for grants from central government and the EU to undertake 'sustainable urban regeneration' programmes in the most deprived areas of the town.

However, less attention (inevitably) is paid in the LA21 Statement to the difficulties in the process. Based on some existing studies (Fleming 1994; Jones 1995; Hollins and Percy 1995) and personal discussion with Council officers and local people (Doak and McLoughlin, 1998), a number of problems can be identified which have slowed down or hindered the process:

- relatively low levels of participation in the Neighbourhood and Business agendas;
- lack of confidence, awareness and skills amongst the neighbourhood forums, often leading to very tentative and conservative action programmes focused on very localised issues (e.g. clearing-up dog mess has been seen as the most important environmental issue in a number of the active neighbourhoods);
- lack of direction amongst the Neighbourhood fora, partly due to the Borough Council's unwillingness to 'lead' the process;
- limited business interest in neighbourhood agendas, 'solved' by establishment of separate Business Agenda forum. However, this creates danger of 'fragmented' debate and action-planning; and
- difficulties in taking forward initiatives in Local Authority Agenda due to reluctance of officers and some councillors to change established practices.

Despite these problems, the Reading case illustrates what can be achieved if there is a committed local authority and a willing set of community and business interests. Of the three cases studied, Reading comes closest to the ideal bottom-up strategy described by Young, although Reading (at the 'bottom' of the UK government hierarchy) is best placed to develop that kind of approach. However, this has not prevented a number of difficulties, particularly with regard to integration of the principles and 'policies' of LA21 into day to day service delivery. This has also caused difficulty at the other levels reported on; all of which have failed to develop effective linkages with each other. We can reflect on these issues below.

3. Rio +5 and the Reading Creek: Paddling Towards Co-ordinated and Integrated Action?

The case study examples outlined above illustrate the range of issues that have been encountered at different levels of work on LA21. Much energy has gone into dealing with many of them: the explosion of techniques to engage with a range of stakeholders; the learning process of consensus-building in order to build partnerships and coalitions and address the inherent conflicts of interest; the development of action programmes, area plans, environmental management plans and a library of other environmental policy to guide actions at different levels. However, two issues seem now to be looming large in the push to put locally generated policy objectives into effect; those of integration and co-ordination. We can consider each in turn.

Firstly, as mentioned earlier, the implementation of many LA21 action programmes is likely to require significant integration of the principles of SD into public (and private) policy and practice. This may be achievable in certain committed authorities, agencies and departments but for others LA21 is seen as an environmental and participatory side-line or an ‘unrealistic imposition’ on the established practices and procedures of their work. Thus LA21 can be conceptualised as one of many ‘policy processes’ or ‘policy networks’ which can vie with each other in the day to day business of policy making and implementation (Healey 1990 and Marsh and Rhodes 1992). We have noted this ongoing tension in the case of Lancashire which has had an established LA21 programme since 1992 (Doak and Martin, 1998).

In the three cases reported above there is evidence of mixed success in integrating the principles of SD and the outcomes of LA21 into mainstream policy formulation and service delivery. The SERPLAN Sustainability Panel has had some difficulty in persuading other Policy Working Groups to use the ‘Sustainability Principles’ and the subsequent SEA framework in their work. The Berkshire Environmental Forum has remained rather detached from the key policy debates and service delivery issues of the County Council and the other public and private sector partners. The imminent abolition of the County Council has certainly not helped. Reading meanwhile has made a determined attempt to build a community-based LA21 and to take it through into LA policy and practice. Even though much has been achieved, there has been a definite caution on the part of some councillors and officers to integrate SD into the day to day workings of their jobs. It is being a slower and more fragmented process than many envisaged.

The second problem that pervades the LA21 objective of ‘thinking global and acting local’ is the rather fragile relationship and linkage between the levels of LA21 mapped-out in the case studies. This fragmented and localised approach is an inevitable outcome of the imperative to build a slow and participatory local initiative. It could be rationalised and justified on the basis that this process of ‘exploratory subsidiarity’ will mesh together in time. However, it cannot be denied that, so far, communication between the three levels of fora has been based almost entirely upon one or two individuals who are involved in more than one level of LA21 activity. Apart from this, there is very little discussion or cross-fertilisation of ideas and issues between the three fora. This may not have been a problem if it wasn’t for the desire and indeed need for

local communities to tackle the issues they've identified by taking them to the appropriate level of public/private sector decision-making.

These two issues, therefore, remain as hurdles to be overcome in the strive for SD through locally based consensus building and community participation. At the end of the day, they will be two of the key 'acid tests' of the LA21 initiative; and a major determinant of whether our children live in sustainable societies and communities on our fragile planet.

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