

# Implementing Local Agenda 21 in Europe A Cross-National Analysis of 12 National Reports<sup>i</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

This paper compares the status of Local Agenda 21 in 12 European countries and suggests possible explanatory factors to the relative quantity and tempo of LA21 activity. To what extent and how do these countries vary in their implementation of LA21? Are there any patterns that emerge and how could these be explained?

Seven years after the Rio Earth Summit there are still relatively few traces of the Summit's ambitious program for change. Two major exceptions are progress on the Framework Convention for Climate Change and the implementation of Chapter 28 of Agenda 21. While the former has been widely publicised through the recurring 'Conferences of the Parties' (COPS), with representatives of the leading climate-degrading countries seriously pursuing a new international regime for the control of greenhouse gasses, the latter has evolved in a less visible but hardly less consequent manner. Chapter 28 of Agenda 21 is the shortest chapter in the 40-chapter action plan, a fact which may account for its relative success. While other chapters are well-loaded with numerous guidelines and 'objectives' as to substantive problem areas, Chapter 28 is a relatively simple appeal for a new time of dialogue and co-ordinated strategy for pursuing sustainable development at the local level.

More specifically, Chapter 28 is addressed to 'local authorities' as one of several 'major groups' which the Agenda singles out as particularly relevant for achieving the aims of the overall Agenda itself. It is because 'so many of the problems and solutions being addressed by Agenda 21 have their roots in local activities', that the participation and involvement of local authorities is viewed as 'a determining factor' in fulfilling the objectives of the action plan. As the level of governance closest to the people, local authorities 'play a vital role in educating, mobilizing and responding to the public to promote sustainable development' (para. 28.1, A21).

It is within this focus, that Chapter 28 stipulates only four major 'objectives', three of them with very specific deadlines.

- By 1996, most local authorities in each country should have undertaken a consultative process with their populations and achieved a consensus on 'a Local Agenda 21' for the community;
- By 1993, the international community should have initiated a consultative process aimed at increasing co-operation between local authorities;

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<sup>i</sup> The paper is a working draft prepared for discussion at the EURA Workshop, Oslo, April 22-23, 1999. The draft is for discussion purposes only and should not be cited without permission of the authors. SUSCOM is a 'concerted action' under the Environment and Climate Programme of DGXII of the European Commission.

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- By 1994, representatives of associations of cities and other local authorities should have increased levels of co-operation and co-ordination with the goal of enhancing the exchange of information and experience among local authorities;
- All local authorities in each country should be encouraged to implement and monitor programmes which aim at ensuring that women and youth are represented in decision-making, planning and implementation processes.

What we learn from these objectives is: (1) that the aim of the Chapter is an identifiable result of a consultative process – ‘a Local Agenda 21’; (2) that the effort in question should be both cooperative and coordinated across national boundaries, with the specific assistance of the international community and transnational NGOs; and (3) that the sub-programme should make a particular effort to bring women and youth into the change processes.

These signals are then followed-up somewhat more specifically in three sub-paragraphs on ‘activities’. Without going into detail on these, it can be said that they serve to fill out the objectives, adding a number of specific ideas and identifying the types of international organisations and transnational bodies that could become involved in the coordinating activities.

This report is divided into four parts. First, we give a short background on what a ‘Local Agenda 21’ is all about. We also describe how we arrived at a dynamic perspective on environment-and-development policy through a set of criteria to distinguish LA21 in our comparative analysis. Secondly, we present our reporting protocol with specific questions for the country case studies, that correspond to underlying assumptions about possible explanatory factors. This builds upon previous research within the project, and is largely related to implementation theory. Third, we compare the results of how the 12 countries have implemented LA21 on the basis of timing and relative number of initiatives. We arrive at four categories of ‘front-runners’, ‘runners-up’, ‘late-starters’ and ‘laggards’. Finally, we describe and discuss emerging patterns of variance between the countries in relation to the suggested explanatory factors. Our goal is thus to shed light on why some countries reacted quickly after UNCED while others are only recently beginning to take on LA21.

## **2. ICLEI and the Aalborg Charter**

Several international and regional organisations have played a major role in following up, and filling out, the documentary signals provided by Chapter 28. Foremost among these has been the International Council on Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI). Established two-years prior to the Earth Summit, ICLEI played a major role in preparing and coordinating Chapter 28 of the Agenda. Working closely with organisations such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA), and the European Commission, ICLEI has taken a clear and forceful lead after the summit in sponsoring and promoting Local Agenda 21 initiatives.

Two activities of major importance here for an understanding of what ‘Local Agenda 21’ has come to mean are the European ‘Sustainable Cities and Towns Campaign’, and the survey conducted by ICLEI as part of the reporting exercise for the 1992 special session of the UN General Assembly, ‘Earth Summit +5’.

Beginning with a resolution by the European Council in 1991 to establish an 'Expert Group on the European Environment', there gradually coalesced a multi-organisational effort on 'Sustainable Cities and Towns in Europe', the name of a conference held in Aalborg, Denmark in May 1994. The conference resulted in the so-called 'Aalborg Charter', a three-part document outlining basic values and strategic options for sustainable development in European urban areas, and launching a broad-based campaign for sustainable cities and towns in Europe. Part III of the Charter made a specific commitment to following up Chapter 28 of the Rio Agenda, and also made a direct connection between the Charter, Agenda 21 and the European Union's Fifth Environmental Action Programme, 'Towards Sustainability'.

Most importantly in the present context, however, the Aalborg Charter also proposed what it considered to be an eight-stage model for preparing and implementing a local action plan (i.e. a Local Agenda 21):

- recognition of the existing planning and financial frameworks as well as other plans and programmes;
- the systematic identification, by means of extensive public consultation, of problems and their causes;
- the prioritisation of tasks to address identified problems;
- the creation of a vision for a sustainable community through a participatory process involving all sectors of the community;
- the consideration and assessment of alternative strategic options;
- the establishment of a long-term local action plan towards sustainability which includes measurable targets;
- the programming of the implementation of the plan including the preparation of a timetable and statement of allocation of responsibilities among the partners;
- the establishment of systems and procedures for monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the plan. (Aalborg Charter, Part III)

These stages can be interpreted as a logical practical extension of the objectives and activities put forth in Chapter 28 of the Rio Agenda. Taken together with Part I of the Charter (which outlines the notion and principles of 'sustainability'), we arrive at a relatively concise understanding of what 'a Local Agenda 21' is all about:

- A Local Agenda 21 is a local action plan for the achievement of sustainable development. It is to be worked out through a broad consultative process between local authorities, citizens and relevant stakeholder groups, and eventually integrated with existing plans, priorities and programs.
- The 'consultation' in question is clearly meant to be a new and different process from existing protective and remedial environmental activities.
- The process has a clear strategic intent. Though the actual content of 'a Local Agenda 21' is not spelled out, there is a clear presumption of both change and instrumental rationality with respect to a realisation of the Earth-Summit goals.
- The action plan should be implemented with due provision for ongoing input, monitoring and revision underway, and it should make special efforts to engage women and youth in all phases of the implementation process.

- Chapter 28 of Agenda 21 is specifically addressed to 'Local Authorities': The responsibility of national governments is primarily facilitative with respect to the LA21 process.
- The substance of any particular 'Local Agenda 21' will be relative to the specific nature of the local community in question (its geography, demography, economics, society and culture), and it should be expected to evolve dynamically over time.

### 3. The implementation of LA21 in Europe: Development of the SUSCOM project

Trying to attach a specific connotation to the notion of 'a Local Agenda 21' is important for a number of reasons. Empirical overviews of the implementation process in several European countries (Lafferty and Eckerberg, 1998) indicate that there is considerable confusion as to just what the idea signifies. While a certain amount of conceptual openness is surely necessary for applying the idea across a broad spectrum of local and regional communities, there is also a need for a common understanding as to what is different and significant with the idea. If LA21 is to be understood as simply anything which resembles 'environmental policy', the idea will quickly deteriorate into a catch-all category with little potential for either evaluation or cross-national comparison and analysis.

It was a dialogue on the exact nature of the LA21 idea that first brought together a small group of researchers during a conference on environmental policy in Oslo in the Spring of 1996. By that time, the SEER project of the European Commission had begun to circulate reports which indicated that Local Agenda 21 was apparently an idea whose time had come.<sup>1</sup> The group meeting in Oslo (with researchers from Sweden, Norway, Finland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom) quickly constituted itself as a research network, with the goal in mind of developing a systematic approach to the study of the LA21 phenomenon on a cross-national basis. With support from the Research Council of Norway (through the ProSus programme), the Norwegian Ministry of the Environment and the research institutions of the individual network members, the team conducted a series of workshops between 1995 and 1997, and gradually expanded its membership to include Germany, Austria and Ireland. The original efforts resulted in the overview mentioned above (Lafferty and Eckerberg, 1998), which was produced to coincide with the special follow-up session to the Rio Summit held by the General Assembly of the United Nations in June of 1997.

These efforts led in turn to a further expansion of the network (bringing in Denmark, Italy, France and Spain), and to the funding of the network as a 'concerted action' under the Program for Climate and Environment of DGXII of the European Commission. Entitled 'Sustainable Communities in Europe' (SUSCOM), the project is funded for two years and aims to bring together the diverse experiences of the twelve countries in a systematic, policy-relevant way.<sup>2</sup>

In trying to bring together data on LA21 initiatives in twelve different national settings, the network has developed two types of reporting 'conventions'. The first is a set of identifying criteria for LA21 activities and for the transition from earlier and existing types of environment-related policies. The second is a set of key variables or factors that can be presumed to influence variation in implementation efforts across the countries surveyed.

#### 4. Identifying LA21 activities

The network has approached the problem of common criteria and consistency in reporting along two dimensions: one static, focusing on the nature of the activities themselves, and one dynamic, focusing on the transition across different levels or types of policy-related activity. The following identifying characteristics were gradually agreed in the course of the initial network workshops (Lafferty and Eckerberg, 1998: 5-6):

- A more conscious attempt to relate environmental effects to underlying economic and political pressures (which in turn derive from political decisions, non-decisions and markets.)
- A more active effort to relate local issues, decisions and dispositions to global impacts, both environmentally and with respect to global solidarity and justice.
- A more focused policy for achieving cross-sectoral integration of environment-and-development concerns, values and goals in planning, decision-making and policy implementation.
- Greater efforts to increase community involvement, i.e. to bring both average citizens and major stakeholder groups, particularly business and labour unions, into the planning and implementation process with respect to environment-and-development issues.
- A commitment to define and work with local problems within: (a) a broader ecological and regional framework, as well as (b) a greatly expanded time frame (i.e. over three or more generations).
- A specific identification with (reference to) the Rio Summit and Agenda 21.

Underlying these criteria is a presumption of innovation and change with respect to different types of environment-and-development policy. To make this difference more explicit, we have adopted the following dynamic perspective:

Conservation and environmental improvement: The first stage refers to policies and initiatives which are primarily designed to either conserve nature or improve and redress the environment. They are initiatives which could have been taken prior to the publication of the Brundtland Report, and which are addressed to environmental concerns in a relatively narrow, more technical and more 'natural-science' type of perspective. Such activities are simply referred to as 'environmental initiatives', and are not presumed to reflect *any* of the above six characteristics.

Sustainable development: The second level refers to policies and initiatives which specifically refer to the concept of 'sustainable development' as expressed in the Brundtland Report; or which use broad concepts such as 'global ecology', reflecting the general concerns of the Brundtland Commission without specifically using the terms and categories of the report itself. Such activities should reflect most or all of criteria 1 through 5 above, and can be referred to as 'initiatives for sustainable development'. Most of these local initiatives would

have been instigated in the period following the publication and dissemination of the Brundtland Report, that is between 1987 and 1992.<sup>3</sup>

Agenda 21: Finally, at the third level, we identify activities which make specific reference to the Rio Summit and/or Agenda 21. Only these activities qualify, in the strict sense of the term, as 'a Local Agenda 21'. Such activities should reflect all six of the above criteria, and they should do so as a conscious attempt to implement the intentions of Chapter 28 of the Agenda.

It must be stressed again that these criteria are employed as 'sensitizing devices' to facilitate a common understanding and standardised reporting on the phenomena in question. If everything that has to do with either improving the environment or achieving 'sustainability' is categorised as a 'Local Agenda 21', then there is clearly no way to meaningfully monitor and evaluate the impact of the Rio accords. The major differentiation thus goes between the first level of more 'traditional' environmental activities on the one hand, and the second and third levels – both of which express the values and goals of 'sustainable development' – on the other. The criteria allow us (hopefully!) to establish empirically based levels of achievement with respect to the pursuit of sustainable development by means of the specific objectives of Chapter 28 of Agenda 21.

First, some remarks about what we define as 'local authorities' and how the constitutional structure varies among the 12 countries.

Local authorities are those government units that can express the local society's common interests, and are thus dependent on the local citizens. At the same time, however, local authorities are instigated and regulated by the national state. The legitimacy of local authorities hence depends on its citizens, while their legality depends on the state. We have defined local authorities according to Lidström (1996, p. 14 ff):

Local authorities are geographically bounded within a nation, or within a federal state;

Local authorities have a certain degree of autonomy;

Local authorities exert some authority towards their citizens;

Local authorities are ruled by representatives elected by the local citizens.

The criteria distinguish local authorities from other types of local governance. To be able to develop and implement local Agenda 21, these criteria are essential. The territorial dimension delimits the issues to be dealt with in LA21, and brings them closer to the citizens. Local authorities must also have some power to make decisions that are not directly set by the national state. Further, they must be able to make binding commitments towards their citizens. Their legitimacy in this respect is secured through local elections.

## **5. Identifying possible explanatory variables**

Given the prospect of achieving a reasonable cross-national 'ranking' of LA21 accomplishments, the next question becomes one of identifying possible positive and negative factors which may account for the variance. This is always a very difficult part of any implementation analysis, and much more so when we are talking about a new form for global-local policy initiative across twelve different cultural-political contexts. The solution we arrived at was to develop a relatively simple check-list of those factors which had emerged during the initial phase of the network; factors which had clear explanatory potential, without

binding the reporting to any one theoretical persuasion. The 12 country teams were thus asked to monitor LA21 activities with respect to the following six dimensions:

Constitutional structure: Central-local authority patterns: A brief outline of the pattern of authority/responsibility between central, regional and local authorities. Given that Chapter 28 of Agenda 21 is a call for action by 'local authorities', what are the constitutional constraints on local-government action? What is the relative strength of local governments with respect to key issues of environment and development? Have there been any major recent changes with respect to centralisation/decentralisation, and how does the current economic situation affect central-local relations.

Baseline conditions: What are the existing 'baseline' conditions for integrating environmental concerns at the local level of government (that is prior to Agenda 21)? What reforms, social experiments and environmental policies were in place for local government at the time of Rio, and how did such baseline condition affect the introduction and implementation of the LA21 idea?

Antecedent role in UNCED: What role (if any) did representatives of the central government and/or organisations of local authorities play in developing the Local Agenda 21 initiative during the run-up to the UN Conference on Environment and Development?

Government reaction: How did central government (the legislature and responsible ministries/departments) initially react to and interpret the LA21 initiative? What programs, institutional changes, strategies, action plans, resource allocations, etc., were initiated? To what degree have issues of national centralisation/decentralisation affected the implementation process? To what degree have issues related to existing EU policy and subsidiarity affected the process?

Local-community reaction: To what degree have local communities initiated LA21 activities on their own initiative? What are the most outstanding features of the most-active ('best-case') municipalities? What was the reaction of national umbrella associations for local authorities, and what programs or initiatives have they initiated? To what degree have either of these initiatives been integrated with central government initiatives?

NGO's and the social partners: How have leading nongovernmental organisations (particularly leading environmental groups, but also national organisations for business, labour and farming) reacted to and become involved in the LA21 idea? What types of major-group co-operation (networks, covenants, charters, negotiations) have been brought into play?

Political and policy impact: Where and how have specific LA21 initiatives made the greatest impact? To what degree have LA21 processes integrated specific climate-change and biodiversity programs? What is the short-term (5-year) prognosis for further development and institutionalisation of the LA21 idea?

The purpose of the protocol has been to provide a minimum number of common categories for cross-national comparative analysis. The key notion underlying the research design is that the common commitment to the goals of the Earth Summit – at both the national and regional EU levels – provides a unique political basis for studying implementation processes and their implications for a number of practical and theoretical issues. As social and technical scientists

with a strong interest in the conditions of change for achieving sustainable development, we have viewed the follow-up on Local Agenda 21 as an opportunity to see how a common idea, with more or less common objectives, is being realised in twelve different national settings. The problematic presents, in other words, decided advantages from the point of view of comparative research. We are dealing with a situation where the stimulus for change is about as standardised as cross-national socio-political projects can be; and where the focus of interest becomes the *how, why and wherefore* of context-specific implementation.

## **6. The status of LA21 in the twelve countries**

The first question we want to look at is the overall status of LA21 implementation in the 12 countries. How far have they come in trying to make Local Agenda 21 a reality?

Arriving at figures for involvement in LA21 activities is a very tricky business. Most of the statistics available derive from either government reports to the UNCSO, or from surveys undertaken by the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI). This has largely to do with the reporting requirements for the 'Earth Summit +5' meeting in New York in June of 1997. We are not going to discuss the reliability of these figures here, as the problem comes down (once again) to different interpretations of what a 'Local Agenda 21' consists of (Lafferty and Eckerberg, 1998). Many of the figures are, moreover, now outdated. In trying to gain an up-dated overview of the situation, we operate with the best estimates of figures available to the SUSCOM participants at the end of 1998.

Table 1 shows an initial attempt to categorise the 12 countries according to the 'timing' of the overall initiative within the national context, and the 'relative number' of individual LA21 efforts in place. It must be stressed again, however, that this is a very tentative classification. We will need considerable more dialogue as to the nuances involved, particularly with respect to the question of when a specific LA21 'effort' is to be categorised as an effort. In some cases it would appear that a local community is accorded LA21 status if any effort at all with that name is visible, while in others the status reflects strong involvement by the local authorities in direct line with the overall strategic intent of Chapter 28 and the ICLEI-Aalborg guidelines. All we can say here is that the categorisation in Table 1 reflects the general impression of how the LA21 idea has been received, and the overall level of apparent activity related to the idea.

What appears to be the case is that Sweden is in a category by itself, with the earliest start of all countries monitored, and the highest proportion of local government units showing LA21 activity. Denmark was apparently slower to initiate activities, but seems to have achieved a relatively high level of involvement within a brief period. The United Kingdom and the Netherlands show early signs of interest in the LA21 idea, but don't seem to generate the type of breadth manifest in Sweden. Finland and Norway take more time to get started, but once the idea takes hold, it seems to move quickly on a broad front.

At the lower level of involvement, we find first Germany and Austria, who are relatively late getting started, but where there are increasing signs of interest and activity. Finally, we have Ireland, France, Spain and Italy – all both latecomers and still relatively weak in putting the idea into practice.



Table 1 The timing and breadth of LA21 activities in 12 European countries

Relative number of initiatives	Timing of active and broad-based implementation		
	Early (1992-1994)	Later (1995-1996)	Latest (1997-1998)
High (>60%)	Sweden	Denmark	
Medium (20-60%)	UK Netherlands	Finland Norway	
Low (< 20%)		Austria Germany	Spain Italy Ireland France

On the basis of the two criteria we can construct four groups for future reference:

- The 'front-runners': Sweden, UK and the Netherlands
- The 'runners-up': Denmark, Finland and Norway
- The 'late-starters': Austria and Germany
- The 'laggards': Spain, Italy, Ireland and France

Given the prospect that these categories roughly capture the quantity and tempo of LA21 activity (saying nothing at this point of the quality of individual cases), what can we say about possible explanatory factors? Are there any patterns that emerge from the protocol categories?

#### **The 'front-runners': Sweden, UK and the Netherlands<sup>4</sup>**

These three countries responded quickly to the UNCED agreement, and could report a large number of local authorities involved in LA21 by the time of UNGASS. Thereafter, they have continued to eagerly implement LA21 although some differences can be traced in recent years. While Sweden has intensified its efforts since 1997, with the launching of a massive national investment programme for ecologically sustainable development, the development of LA21 in the Netherlands and Britain has somewhat levelled away. In the Netherlands, the previous national financial support to LA21 (VOGM) ceased in 1997. It is yet too early to say whether LA21 is sufficiently institutionalised to survive the battle of funding with other, often more established policy areas. Some recent studies indicate, however, that most municipalities have still maintained (or even raised) their commitments. Similar positive signs are traced in Sweden, although there are also some municipalities that have diminished their allocation of funding and manpower to LA21. Possibly, this will lead to a polarisation in Sweden of pioneering municipalities who are increasing their efforts on the one side, and those with little or no LA21 activities on the other. In Britain, the new Labour government in 1997 has implied a pause in local authorities' development of LA21 activities. Although Tony Blair announced in June 1997 that he wanted all local authorities in the UK to adopt LA21 strategies by the year 2000, still no new resources have been committed to this end. A new initiative by Labour to rejuvenate local democracy by a statutory duty for councils 'to promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of their areas' has been postponed to the 1999/2000

Parliamentary session. Possibly, this could become a new birth to the LA21 movement but is yet too early to judge.

While the three countries are quite diverse in their central-local relations, the position of municipalities (Sweden representing the most decentralised system) and the institutionalisation of environmental policy, they were all actively involved in the preparations for UNCED and in promoting the role of local authorities as implementors of Agenda 21. Both Sweden and the Netherlands are well reputed for a firmly established environmental policy, both at national and local levels of government. The Netherlands was already by the time of the Brundtland report in 1987 working with sustainable development as a national policy priority. Britain, by contrast, was labelled the 'dirty man of Europe' in the late 1980s, and is still generally slow at developing environmental programmes.

In both the Netherlands and Sweden, the municipalities were already environmentally advanced prior to UNCED. A bottom-up development of LA21 could thus build upon previous environment-and-development activities. In both countries, the national government helped spur this development by allocating special funds for LA21, and by establishing a national committee for co-ordination. In the UK, such national support never occurred. Instead, the Local Government Management Board played the role of national co-ordinator. They collaborated closely with ICLEI in preparing Chapter 28, and continued to work with LA21 campaigns after UNCED. In all of the three countries, special campaigns, seminars and educational activities initiated by national organisations have been frequent. This has probably contributed greatly to their comparative success in implementing LA21.

It should be noted that even if we have categorised these three countries as 'front-runners' in LA21, the width and scope of LA21 in different pioneering municipalities varies greatly. Although over half of the municipalities in these three countries claim to have some LA21 activities, only some 10-20 per cent are 'seriously involved' – implying that they expose both a great width of environment-and-development activities and have engaged a variety of citizen groups or local industry in these efforts. In general, the social dimension, and linking LA21 to welfare distribution and global equity is the least developed dimension in LA21. Sweden's emphasis has so far been mostly on the ecological dimension, although some change can be traced in recent surveys. However, it seems that the UK and the Netherlands can show the most comprehensive interpretation of LA21 in relation to our initial definition. This may be explained by a tradition in working with public-private solutions in policy implementation. In the UK, it has been driven by the financial constraints of local authorities, where private organisations have become a necessary partner for delivering public services. In the Netherlands, initiatives from a range of social groups (labour unions, peace movements, churches, third world organisations, farmers, women's groups and youth) have contributed, as well as their established 'target-group approach' in environmental policy-making and implementation. In Sweden, even the social movements are to some extent more linked to national government through a tradition of public funding of social initiatives. Here, the greatest impact of LA21 is perhaps within the schools and day-care centres – public services that are more or less fully controlled by the municipalities. The Social Democratic government's new investment programme towards ecologically sustainable local initiatives in 1998-2001 could become a powerful support to LA21. However, the investment programme has also been criticised for being an essentially 'top-down' programme instead of responding to local needs and priorities. Moreover, it is designed as an investment programme to create new jobs and ecological efficiency rather than the wider range of LA21 activities currently

promoted by Swedish local authorities. Currently, the second round of applications from municipalities for funding is being processed, and some adjustment to fit with LA21 has been announced by the Ministry of Environment (who allocates the money). The potential of this programme is great since it corresponds to almost twice the budget of the entire public environmental sector in Sweden - about 7 billion SEK in five years.

### **The 'runners-up': Denmark, Finland and Norway<sup>5</sup>**

Compared to Sweden, the other three Northern European systems examined within this study came later in responding to LA21. The Danish, Finnish and Norwegian governments and municipalities felt they were well ahead in local environmental work, and thus had no reason to adopt the new label 'Local Agenda 21' for activities that they considered were already underway. In Finland, an LA21 project with 14 municipalities had started already in 1992, building largely on the 'eco-municipality network' that involves some 10-40 municipalities each in Sweden, Norway and Finland, beginning already in 1980. The further progress of LA21 was however slow, and shifted to a high speed only toward the end of 1996. In 1998, over half of Finnish municipalities are implementing LA21 activities, which means that Finland is now equally engaged in LA21 as in the above 'front-runners'. In Denmark, although one municipality (Storstrøms Amt) was even awarded in Rio, the first co-ordinated national campaign for LA21 did not take off until in the autumn of 1994. This occurred at the Ministry of Environment, where two persons were placed in the planning department to initiate LA21 as a part of participatory spatial planning. In Norway, the Ministry of Environment insisted until the summer of 1997 before they accepted LA21 as something 'new'. Before this date, they claimed that the Municipal Environmental Policy (MIK) that was launched in 1988 as a joint programme between the Ministry of Environment and the Norwegian Association of Local Authorities to strengthen environmental competence in local authorities was identical to LA21, and hence no further action was required for its implementation. From 1997, however, LA21 is to replace MIK as the heading for municipal environmental policy. This has also implied a new interpretation of environmental policy in which the ecological perspective is complemented with both a welfare perspective and a future generations' perspective in the Parliamentary White Paper presented in 1997. The Norwegian government has now declared that a national competence centre on sustainable development will be established to support the municipalities with expertise on LA21 related issues.

So far, however, none of the three 'runners-up' have allocated substantial national funding towards LA21. The MIK programme could, perhaps, be seen as such financial support. Nevertheless, Sweden and the other Nordic countries differ considerably in this respect. In general, the three 'runners-up' show quite different approaches to launching LA21 on the political agenda of local authorities. In Finland, the Association for Local Authorities has played the major role in promoting and co-ordinating LA21, partly in collaboration with the Ministry of Environment. Likewise in Norway, LA21 has been promoted recently through close collaboration between the Association of Local Authorities and the Ministry of Environment. Both in Finland and Norway, sustainable development has been included in national policy and legislation. In Denmark, however, it seems that local initiatives have developed with less national government co-ordination. The Danish approach appears much more participatory, judging from the large number of 'bottom-up' co-operative efforts and projects emerging in Danish communities. There is a strong tradition to build upon with 'experimental activities' at the local level, both with energy saving, re-introducing nature in

urban areas, lowering car traffic and urban ecological constructions. Also, the Danish environmental policy – like in the Netherlands - has more recently focused on active involvement by farmers and industrialists in designing and implementing pollution prevention as opposed to command-and-control strategies. Partly, this development has been triggered by the pressure on local authorities to enforce environmental legislation despite a poor reputation in policy delivery. In this situation, LA21 was finally seen as a new chance to revive and increase community involvement and enhance democratic legitimacy.

Although Denmark only recently engaged in LA21, it has the potential to turn out as the most comprehensive response to sustainable development among the pioneering countries. The first period of a voluntary approach to implementing LA21 has recently been complemented by a proposal to the Danish Parliament from the Minister of Environment Svend Auken. He wants to change the Planning Act so local authorities would be required to show how public participation and cross-sector initiatives towards sustainability will be fostered, and also to report what will be done to decrease resource consumption and pollution, decrease CO<sub>2</sub>-emissions and enhance biological diversity.

In none of the three countries, however, did social or environmental movements take up the task of promoting LA21 more generally in response to the poor national government interest. It seems, thus, that despite the grass-root and bottom-up approach to LA21 that is prevalent in the Nordic countries (including Sweden), if such activities are not spurred or supported by national government bodies, they tend not to take off to any considerable extent. Perhaps the tradition of the strong public sector, and previous welfare society in the Nordic countries to some degree prevents non-government organisations to take such initiatives. This stands in contrast to several of the other examined countries, such as the UK.

### **The 'late starters': Austria and Germany<sup>6</sup>**

The remaining six countries, Austria, Germany, France, Spain, Ireland and Italy, can all be labelled as laggards: they responded relatively late to the UNCED agreement and could report only small numbers of local authorities involved in LA21 by the time of UNGASS. The 'late starters' Austria and Germany can be considered a subcategory of laggards with a high potential. Although they are not yet as engaged in LA21 activities as the 'front runners' or the 'runners-up', they have the potential to catch up soon. Austria and Germany are two examples of countries which, on the basis of their overall environmental policy performance, are expected to rank higher among the countries with LA21 initiatives.

One possible explanation for the relatively late start made by Germany and Austria is the law of diminishing returns. Before UNCED both countries were among the front runners in the field of local environmental policy and taking their first steps towards local sustainable policies. The idea began to circulate in local and national government that LA21 was nothing new, or that it was even superfluous. Austria had already experimented with LA21-type activities such as *Öko-stadte* and spatial plans *leitbilder*, and Germany had experimented with integrating environmental concerns into strategic decision making. Many of the members of the Climate Alliance are in Germany and Austria, and this influenced decisions by municipalities in these countries to initiate LA21 activities. Moreover, in the seventies both countries developed a tradition of involving citizens in local planning processes. Given these favourable basic conditions, the increasing signs of interest and activity in LA21 in Germany and Austria should not come as a surprise.

Germany and Austria are the only countries compared that have a federal structure. In both countries there are clear regional differences. In Germany the focal point for LA21 co-ordinating activities are the Bundesländer, and some of the German länder are front runners, an example being North Rhine-Westphalia. In Austria the province of Styria is running an intensive campaign on the implementation of LA21. Austria developed its own variant of sustainable development early on: the concept of the eco-social market economy, and in the nineties the Austrian government produced its first national environmental policy plan (NUP), which contained many Agenda 21 topics. Attempts have been made to derive regional plans from the NUP. In Germany, municipalities have great scope for the development of strategies for local policy relevant to LA21, but the general economic situation had an important influence on priorities: unemployment benefits imposed a heavy burden on municipal budgets as the number of unemployed rapidly rose. Austrian municipalities have many responsibilities, especially since Austria's accession to the EU; but Austrian municipalities vary greatly in size and the possibilities open to them are accordingly varied.

Both Germany and Austria seemed to react quite early to the World Commission report and Agenda 21 – at least if judged by the production of white papers, national environmental policy plans and establishment of sustainable development commissions – but explicit and specific reactions to LA21 were late in coming or negligible in impact. In Germany neither the preparations for UNCED nor its outcome were a national priority. Austria took an active part in the preparations but the national association of municipalities played no significant role. Directly after UNCED there was a period of almost complete silence on this issue from both countries and a relatively passive government attitude. Nevertheless, both national governments and other players re-emerged in the run up to the RIO+5 conference. In Austria the social partners generally play a very active role, but this social partnership is in decline. The social partners in LA21, such as business organisations, labour unions and the agricultural sector, are active locally but not at a national level. In Germany there is a national Forum for Environment and Development, social partners such as consumer associations are active and NGOs initiated a substantial number of the local LA21 initiatives.

### **The laggards: Spain, Italy, Ireland and France<sup>7</sup>**

The laggards are relative latecomers in the implementation of LA21 and are still weak in putting the idea into practice. Compared with the other countries the laggards share more or less four characteristics of relevance for the implementation of LA21:

- a low level of institutionalisation of environmental policy in general and of local environmental policy in particular;
- weak local government;
- a limited role in the preparations for UNCED generally, and specifically for Chapter 28;
- weak national co-ordinating mechanisms;
- limited experience with public participation.

#### *Low level of institutionalisation of environmental policy*

In contrast to the other three categories, no laggard countries have a well institutionalised local environmental policy. EU structural funds are important sources of funding for sustainable projects, especially in Ireland, Italy and Spain.

### *Weak local government*

'Weak local government' has at least four related dimensions: a weak constitutional position, strong central government control and a highly centralised financial system, a lack of resources, and poor quality local management and governance.

The position of a municipality cannot easily be deduced from the national constitution. For instance, the Italian constitution provides for highly decentralised responsibilities, but give broad and poorly defined powers, and in Ireland there is no real constitutional basis for local government. Local tax revenues are a good indicator of local self governance. In contrast to the Nordic countries, the laggards have a relatively weak basis for local self governance, with a highly centralised financial system, relatively low municipal revenues (Ireland, Spain and Italy) and a high level of state control (France, Italy and Ireland). This is not unique to the laggards, though. Municipalities in the Netherlands, a front runner, need higher approval for important planning and financial decisions.

The resources available to develop LA21 depend partly on the size of the municipalities. In all four laggards a large number of municipalities are small. In Spain, for instance, more than half of the municipalities have fewer than 1000 inhabitants and some have fewer than 300; others are metropolitan areas. But this is not unique to the laggards; in Norway one third of the municipalities have fewer than 3000 inhabitants.

Size can be directly related to competence in the field of environmental policy, with the more difficult and complex tasks being given only to larger municipalities, as in Spain and Ireland, or municipalities have to pool resources, as in France. The number of inhabitants will determine the level of available resources because of the strong correlation between population size and local tax revenues or national funding. There will also be a strong correlation with the knowledge, professionalism and experience of civil servants.

This brings us to a fourth dimension of 'weak local government': the quality of local governance. We find generally poor quality local governance (Italy), a lack of managerial capacity in small communities (Spain), local authorities limited to executive agencies (Ireland) or having to co-operate with other municipalities and national government agencies (France).

### *Low involvement in UNCED preparations*

The third characteristic which the laggards share is a relatively low level of involvement in the preparations for UNCED generally, and specifically for Chapter 28. Spain, Italy and Ireland played a very minimal role in the UNCED process. France played a bigger role, but neither France nor any of the other laggards played a really active and direct role in drafting Chapter 28. National discussions before and after the Summit were limited in all four countries.

### *Weak national co-ordination*

The fourth characteristic that the laggards share is relatively weak national co-ordinating activities. It is not that there is no national co-ordination at all, but rather the combination of a lack of initiative from all sides, which differs from country to country, that partly explains the position of the laggards. In Spain there was no central government support, except for one very active autonomous regional government, and neither national NGOs nor municipal associations were very active. In Italy there was little central government support and no action by the national association of municipalities; some of the national NGOs played an

important role and there is a strong correlation between the Sustainable Cities and Towns Campaign and LA21 initiatives. In Ireland the more substantial national co-ordinating activities started late, from 1998 onwards. In France there was a boom in political and administrative interest in sustainable development in 1996, but national co-ordinating activities are directed more towards related or similar activities rather than LA21 itself.

#### *Limited experience with public participation*

The fifth characteristic the laggards share is relatively limited experience with public participation compared with some of the Northern European countries. There is a lack of structural or 'real' citizen participation.

## **7. An initial attempt to identify emerging patterns**

We examined the timing and scope of implementation of LA21 in 12 countries. On the basis of the results we divided the countries into four groups – the front runners, the runners-up, the late starters and the laggards – and have briefly described the common characteristics of each of these four groups. In these conclusions we attempt to identify emerging patterns within the protocol categories that might explain the differences between and among these groups.

### Constitutional structure

The pattern that emerges within the protocol category 'constitutional structure' is that a large part of the variance in LA21 activity can be explained from the constitutional position of municipalities. Constitutional systems with relatively strong local authorities seem to have favoured the implementation of LA21. On the basis of literature (compare Lidström, 1996<sup>8</sup>) we can distinguish among the twelve countries examined here, four major types:

- Northern European systems (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland). Local authorities in these countries have a high degree of autonomy, supported by local tax revenues. They build upon historic traditions in which peasant proprietors played an important role. After major conglomeration of municipalities, they nowadays represent rather large territorial units.
- British systems (Great Britain and Ireland). Also here the units are large, and represent large populations. However, they lack a firm financial base and are much more dependent on the national state. The constitutional rule of competence *ultra vires* means that local authorities can only exert those powers that have been given by Parliament.
- Middle European systems (Germany, Austria). The federal structure divides the powers between three levels of government. The local authorities are thus rather small, and their size and authority varies within the federation. For instance, the mayor plays a more important role in southern Germany than in the northern part. Historically, the local authorities have had a tradition of great local autonomy.
- The Napoleon systems (France, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy). They share a common history of being designed with a high degree of state control. Local authorities were supervised by the Mayor, who was in turn appointed by the national state. In general, the local units are small, but there are also some of the largest local authorities in Europe represented in Italy and France. There are often four levels of government, in which the middle levels (départements, provinces, regions) play an important role of co-ordination (France) and sometimes also exert their own powers (Spain).

Two of the above types – the Northern and Middle European systems – can be characterised as relatively strong local authorities. It would be expected that those systems would favour the development of LA21. The British system is the most centralised, and has even resisted the general European trend of increased decentralisation in recent years. The state sets the scene for local authorities through regulation in the Northern European systems, but also in the British systems and in the Netherlands. This means that the state can also to some extent influence what is done locally. In the federal states, as well as in Italy and Spain, regional or federal levels of government exert these powers to decide over principles of division of tasks and geographical coverage for local authorities.

In our analysis, we can see that our four categories of ‘front-runners, runners-up, late-starters and laggards’ correspond quite neatly with the four types of organisation of local authorities. The Northern European countries are all represented among the ‘front-runners’ and ‘runners-up’. The ‘late-starters’ are the two federal systems, while the ‘laggards’ are the southern European Napoleon systems along with Ireland. There are, however, two exceptions of which both are found among the ‘front-runners’. Britain was early out to develop LA21 despite its low degree of local autonomy compared to the other countries. Also, the Netherlands stands out as an enthusiastic promotor of LA21, thus contrasting the result of the Napoleon system as a ‘laggard’ in LA21.

### Baseline conditions

A pattern that emerges from the description of the baseline conditions for LA21 in the 12 countries relates to the level of institutionalisation of environmental policy. Most front runners and runners-up established environmental policies early on, with the exception of the UK. All the four laggards drew up environmental policies relatively late. This pattern does not imply that LA21 merely builds on the traditional tasks of environmental administration.. These tasks are considered to be a first stage on the road of environmental awareness and improvement, involving policies and initiatives primarily designed to either conserve nature or restore and improve environmental quality. A well established environmental policy will tend to favour LA21 if the degree of local autonomy for LA21 action is higher. This in turn depends on (1) the general level autonomy of local government, (2) specific autonomy with regard to the LA21 policy area and legislation, and (3) the local capacity for action as measured by resources and competence (Laffery and Eckerberg 1998, p247–249). The second stage – ‘sustainable development’ – involves policies and initiatives which specifically refer to the concept of ‘sustainable development’. Austria and Germany, which are regarded as having reached this second level, are in the category of late starters. An explanation here is the law of diminishing returns.

### Initiative in the preparations for UNCED

The front runners and runners-up took a much more active role than the late starters and laggards in the preparations for UNCED in general and Chapter 28 in particular. Of the front runners and the runners-up, all the four Nordic countries and the Netherlands played an active role before and during UNCED. The Swedish, Norwegian, Danish and Dutch also played a very active role in the preparation of Chapter 28, co-ordinating the efforts of pioneering local initiatives. In the UK the Local Government Management Board played a major role in UNCED preparations through their research and training activities.



### Government reaction

The strength or weakness of national government reactions to Agenda 21 in general and LA21 in particular is expressed in their efforts to implement them. In all these countries except one<sup>9</sup>, national government took some form of explicit national co-ordinating role, although the timing and effort vary widely. We identified four broad forms of explicit reactions:

- setting up a focal point for co-ordination and information dissemination;
- manuals, guidelines, books and training;
- funding for research and experiments;
- broad earmarked funding.

These can be seen as forming a ladder of national support for local action, with earmarked money for LA21 activities at the top. All the countries studied, except Spain, have taken the first three steps on this ladder, although some to a limited extent or only very recently. But only the Netherlands, Sweden and some German Bundesländer have earmarked funds for LA21 activities.

### Local community action

Local authority associations play a clear role in local community action. The relative inactivity (Austria, Spain and Italy) or late involvement (Norway and Germany) of some of these organisations may partly explain the low number of LA21 initiatives. In Northern Europe and Britain such associations defend the interests of local authorities in discussions with central government. In France, Spain and Italy personal relations between local and national government representatives are much more important. The associations of local authorities in these countries are more regionally based, and this probably also affects their ability to initiate national LA21 campaigns.

The characteristics of the pioneering municipalities – those that took up LA21 relatively early on – also follow an identifiable pattern, despite the fact that pioneering municipalities in the countries studied seem to have very different roots and motives. These characteristics are:

- an active and organised population;
- interested and motivated civil servants;
- interested local politicians;
- international contacts and networks;
- existing initiatives.

### NGOs and social partners

Environmental NGOs play an important role in co-ordinating activities. Two general models can be distinguished. In several countries, existing NGOs themselves have been instrumental in co-ordinating activities and disseminating information,<sup>10</sup> and have even played a role in some countries where LA21 activities are more limited.<sup>11</sup> In the second model, environmental NGOs pursue a co-ordinating role at a national level within national forums or organisations for sustainable development<sup>12</sup> or in specific Agenda 21 organisations.<sup>13</sup> Two countries fall outside these models: Spain, where environmental NGOs took very limited action,<sup>14</sup> and Norway where they responded late.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> SEER refers to Socio-Economic Environment Research within DGXII of the European Commission. Launched in 1992, the programme has gone through several phases. The first systematic research perspectives on Local Agenda 21 were, to our knowledge, documented in O'Riordan and Voisey (1997).

<sup>2</sup> The full title of the project is 'Sustainable Communities in Europe: A Cross-National Assessment of the Implementation of Agenda 21 at the Local Level of Governance' and is funded for two years beginning in December 1997. As a 'concerted action', the principal purpose of the project is to try to synthesize and enhance the policy relevance of ongoing research within the general area. The 'work programme' for the project is available at: <http://afux.prosus.nfr.no/la21/eu/program.html>.

<sup>3</sup> As for the concept of 'sustainable development' itself, the term was apparently applied in a manner similar to the Brundtland Report by Barbara Ward in the mid 1970's (Holmberg and Sandbrook, 1992: 19). Dennis Pirage contributed to spread the concept further in his anthology on The Sustainable Society in 1977, and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) made it a central idea of its World Conservation Strategy in 1980. (See Dahle, 1997: 197). It was not, however, until the idea was made the core concept of the Brundtland Report and the UNCED process that it gained its current prominence and legitimacy. (See Lafferty and Langhelle, 1998 and Trzyna, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> This section builds upon the reports by Frans Coenen, Katarina Eckerberg and Stephen Young in Lafferty (ed) 1999.

<sup>5</sup> This section builds upon the national reports of Jesper Holm, Anita Niemi-Iilahti and Carlo Aall in Lafferty (ed) 1999.

This categorisation builds upon Lidström 1996. Other variants also exist, for example Hesse and Sharpe 1991 who put the Northern European model together with the middle European.

<sup>6</sup> This section builds on the reports by Christiane Beuermann & Otto Schütz and Michael Narodslawsky in Lafferty (ed.) 1999.

<sup>7</sup> This section builds on the reports by Gerald Mullally, Francesca di Pietro & Corinnen Larrue, Nuria Font, Francesca Gomilla & Joan Subirats and Emiliano Ramieri & Fabio Fiorentini in Lafferty (ed.), 1999.

<sup>8</sup> This categorisation builds upon Lidström 1996. Other variants also exist, for example Hesse and Sharpe 1991 who put the Northern European model together with the middle European.

<sup>9</sup> In the Spanish case the environment ministry stated that it has no power to be involved in the implementation of LA21.

<sup>10</sup> Especially in Sweden, where the Swedish Society for Conservation and Nature was a major driving force behind the rapid growth of LA21 (Eckerberg and Forsberg, 1998). In Finland (Finnish Nature Conservation, Finnish Friends of the Earth) and the UK (WWF and Friends of the Earth) environmental NGOs were also important actors.

<sup>11</sup> Ireland (Ann Taisce) and Italy (Legambiente, WWF)

<sup>12</sup> The Netherlands (NCDO), Germany (Forum for Environment and Development), France (4D) and Austria (Okobureau)

<sup>13</sup> France (Comité 21) and Finland (Finland 21).

<sup>14</sup> Greenpeace, Adena WWF and Friends of the Earth.