

Striving for Good Governance in Urban Areas: The Role of Local Agenda 21s in Africa, Asia and Latin America

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 in Africa, Asia and Latin America. This paper draws on case studies of Local Agenda 21s in Manizales (Colombia), Ilo and Chimbote (Peru), Nakuru (Kenya), Durban (South Africa), Jinja (Uganda), Rufisque (Senegal) and Durban (South Africa).¹

Local Agenda 21s came out of the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (also known as the Earth Summit) held in Rio de Janeiro. 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 government representatives endorsed at the Conference.

The Local Agenda 21s implemented since 1992 have particular importance for three reasons:

- *They represent concrete experiences that have sought to address the many environmental problems associated with urban development* – and many have considerable achievements.

- *Most are locally developed and driven, not developed or imposed from outside, and they generally rely more on locally generated resources than external resources.* Some of the most successful Local Agenda 21s (for instance those in Ilo in Peru and Manizales in Colombia, with which two of the authors have been involved) relied almost entirely on locally generated resources.
- *They support (and reinforce) 'good local governance' for environment and development.* In Latin America in particular, the more successful Local Agenda 21s have been associated with politicians and civil servants with strong commitments to democratic practices, greater accountability to citizens and partnerships with community organizations and NGOs.

Their strengths; combining good governance with action

At their best, Local Agenda 21s 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 the significance of the document should be that it was developed through a broad, inclusive consultation process that draws in

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

all key interests ('stakeholders') and that 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 (including local offices of national or provincial agencies), NGOs and community organizations is as important as any documents produced.

A critical outcome of the consultation process should be agreements on priorities and on actions and partnerships to implement them. For instance, in Manizales, it led to the development of a local environmental action plan (Bioplan-Manizales) which became integrated within the municipal development plan and municipal budget. It included measures to improve waste management (including recycling), to combine reducing the risk of landslides (the city is in a mountainous region) with the development of eco-parks throughout the city and improve public transport. Each district (comuna) within the city developed its own local agenda and included measures to address particular local problems – for instance in the poorest district, Olivares, this included micro-credits for local environmental enterprises and measures to increase local employment while protecting the district's architectural heritage. The city has also developing an innovative indicators programme – the environmental traffic lights – and a decentralized system of observatories to monitor progress. In Ilo (Peru), 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 (see **Box 1** for more details).

Local Agenda 21s can also integrate what is often termed the 'brown' environmental health agenda with broader 'green' ecological concerns.² This integration has generally proved difficult within conventional, local government-directed environmental plans. Local Agenda 21s have particular importance for combating global warming, since 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. This includes concerns for 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. This includes hundreds of millions who have no access to safe water and tens of millions who have no provision for sanitation at all – and so must resort to defecation in the open or into plastic bags.³

Their weaknesses

Perhaps the main worry for Local Agenda 21s is the relatively few instances of success. Virtually all national

governments formally endorsed Agenda 21 and so committed themselves to supporting the development of Local Agenda 21s in each settlement. This means that by 1996, most local authorities in each country should have undertaken a consultative process with their populations and achieved consensus on a Local Agenda 21. Thus, there should be tens of thousands of Local Agenda 21s that were put in place six years ago and that are now being implemented. But there is little evidence of Local Agenda 21s being developed in most low income nations.

Another worry is that most examples of good practice in Local Agenda 21s come from cities where there have been major improvements in the quality and accountability of local governments. Local Agenda 21s were the means by which improvements were achieved but it was the change in local government that was the critical reason for their success. Certainly in Ilo and Manizales, national decentralization programmes and support for elected local authorities (and mayors) underpinned their success. In addition, in both cities, the innovations pre-date 1992. Local agenda 21s can assist local political reform but they cannot replace it. Local Agenda 21s 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 little scope for Local Agenda 21s to become the vehicle for real consultative processes (as outlined in Agenda 21). Or even if they do, the Local Agenda 21s may founder on the very limited investment capacity of local governments.

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 involved high inputs of energy and water and high levels of pollution and hazardous wastes. The environmental costs of their consumption are concentrated elsewhere. The mobility and comfort of their citizens is underpinned by high levels of private automobile use and energy use – which may cause few local environmental problems but means high levels of greenhouse gases and thus contribution to global warming with its many environmental costs. This is a greater worry for Local Agenda 21s in high-income nations, since these generally have a much larger transfer of environmental burdens. Local agenda 21s need regional and national frameworks to support the action needed to address regional and global environmental goals.

The origin of Local Agenda 21s

As noted above, the term Local Agenda 21 comes from Agenda 21, the document formally endorsed by all government representatives attending the UN Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit) in 1992. Agenda 21 was the most substantive document to come out of this Conference and it was meant to form the action plan for governments to integrate environment and

development. Local Agenda 21s were to be the means by which each locality (including each city and town) developed their own sustainable development plan. The text of Agenda 21 recognizes that such local action plans are central to its achievement

“Because so many of the problems and solutions being addressed by Agenda 21 have their roots in local activities, the participation and cooperation of local authorities will be a determining factor in fulfilling its objectives. Local authorities construct, operate and maintain economic, social and environmental infrastructure, oversee planning processes, establish local environmental policies and regulations and assist in implementing national and sub-national environmental policies. As the level of governance closest to the people, they play a vital role in educating, mobilizing and responding to the public to promote sustainable development” (28.1).

Although this might overstate the actual role of most local authorities, the recognition of the role they should have in both development and environmental management is important. Agenda 21 also lists two objectives for local authorities: that they should undertake “a consultative process with their populations and achieve a consensus on a Local Agenda 21 for their community”; and that they should be encouraged to implement and monitor programmes which aim to ensure that women and youth are represented in decision making, planning and implementation processes. It is worth noting that these objectives are not so much on what Local Agenda 21s should include but on how they should be organized, especially the local consultation processes to ensure that all groups are involved.⁴

The fact that virtually all governments committed themselves to implementing Local Agenda 21s in 1992 does not, in itself, mean much. In all the global UN Conferences held since the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment, government representatives have formally endorsed a great range of recommendations, most of which have been ignored or hardly implemented. It is worth recalling that most of the world’s governments committed themselves in the mid 1970s to ensuring that all their population would have access to safe water and adequate provision for sanitation by 1990. The 1980s was even designated by the United Nations as the ‘International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade’. Yet hundreds of millions of rural and urban dwellers still lack access to safe water and adequate provision for sanitation, 11 years after the target date. But in the case of Local Agenda 21s, there is evidence of considerable innovation in urban areas in different continents. There are also new initiatives to encourage city governments to share their experiences (including more conferences, journals and newsletters) and the new interest in urban development by many international agencies.

Experience to date

Local Agenda 21s have varied enormously from place to place. This is not surprising, since the relevant chapter of

Agenda 21 did not – and indeed could not be expected to – specify in detail how the consultation process should be developed and implemented. Even within an individual city, there can be a multiplicity of Local Agenda 21 initiatives, displaying different organizational forms, interpretations of sustainable development, and modes of action. This diversity is increasingly seen as a potential source of strength, though it does make it difficult to generalise about what has been achieved.

Three additional examples, illustrating the variety of ways in which Local Agenda 21s can take shape, are given below:

Building on Local Partnerships in Rufisque, Senegal:

Decentralisation in Senegal has devolved to local authorities many of the responsibilities taken up in Local Agenda 21s. Local stakeholders, including local authorities, Non-Governmental Organisations, Community Based Organisation and private enterprises, had already been engaged in a range of collaborative efforts to improve local conditions that conform to the recommendations of Agenda 21. With the assistance of an international NGO centred in Dakar – Enda Tiers Monde – these efforts helped provide the basis for an attempt to develop a more formal Local Agenda 21.

Roundtables for a Sustainable Penang, Malaysia: As one of its first steps towards a Local Agenda 21, the Sustainable Penang Initiative organized a series of roundtables, centred on different aspects of sustainable development. These roundtables brought together a range of stakeholders, provided the basis for the ‘Penang People’s Report’ (centred on a series of sustainable development indicators), led to a variety of local initiatives, and fed into the more formal Penang Strategic Development Plan 2000–2010. The initiative was led by the recently established Socio-Economic and Environmental Research Institute (SERI), a state ‘think-tank’ for sustainable development.

Sustainable Development Planning in Durban, South Africa:

Durban’s Local Agenda 21 programme was initiated in 1994, and local government structures have been the driving force for the programme since its inception. Durban’s administrative structure and boundaries have changed radically since 1994, but the international origins of the Local Agenda 21 concept helped provide a politically neutral platform for pursuing sustainable development at the local level. The Local Agenda 21 has set up a range of stakeholder groups. For their State of the Environment and Development Report, for example, there were three key stakeholder groups: an Interim Steering Committee, a larger Advisory Committee and a local government centred Inter Service Unit Network. The Local Agenda 21 programme has also engaged in a series of consultation exercises linked to particular projects and initiatives.

Two examples of the potential of Local Agenda 21s are given in **Box 1** overleaf.

As yet, it is too soon to judge the significance of the Local Agenda 21 movement. Thousands of urban centres may report that they have developed a Local Agenda 21 but many are neither participatory nor effective. Some are no more than a document setting out the goals or plans of some government agency which was developed with little

BOX 1: Examples of Local Agenda 21s

MANIZALES (Colombia): A local environmental action plan (Bioplan-Manizales) was developed with widespread consultation and this has become integrated into the municipal development plan and the municipal budget. It includes measures to protect and revitalize the city's rich architectural heritage, improve public transport (partly funded by a tax on petrol), reduce the risk of landslides (the city is in a mountainous region) and relocate the population living on steep slopes at high risk of landslides. The relocation programme was linked to the development of eco-parks throughout the city, some on land that had slopes that were too dangerous for permanent settlements and others with important ecological functions – for instance one integrated into the city's watershed, and another focused on protecting biodiversity. Many of these eco-parks were managed by community associations. Community based environmental initiatives helped to generate jobs – for instance managing eco-parks, running tree nurseries and increasing recycling. More localized environmental action plans have also been developed – for instance one for Olivares commune (one of 11 communes in Manizales and also the one with the lowest average income) identified the commune's main environmental problems and also the areas's environmental resources on which the agenda built. The city also developed an innovative indicators programme – the 'environmental traffic lights' through which progress in each of its 11 communes are tracked in regard to social conditions, community involvement, natural resource use, energy efficiency and waste management. Data on current conditions and trends in each commune are displayed in public places. They are called environmental traffic lights because, for each indicator, public boards show whether conditions are improving (green), getting worse (red) or stable (amber). The monitoring of progress is helped by environmental observatories in different parts of the city.⁵

ILO (Peru): In this port city in southern Peru, the environment has been transformed over an 18 year period with major improvements in the quality of housing and liquid and solid waste management and in provision for water, sanitation, garbage collection, electricity, paved streets and green areas. Some 300 projects have been financed and implemented through partnerships between municipal government and community-level management committees. The local authorities have a land development programme which ensures land for housing is available to low income households, and so Ilo avoided the problem of rapidly expanding illegal settlements, even though the city's population has expanded more than sixfold since 1961. A large coastal area within the city has been reclaimed for public use (with the municipal authorities helping to move the industries, settlements and institutions that were located there) and this now includes a pier, tree-lined walkways, play spaces and an amphitheatre. There has been a long fight with a copper factory that was set up in Ilo some 40 years ago that generates high levels of solid waste and air pollution. Citizen pressure forced the company to stop polluting the local bay and dumping wastes on local beaches although reducing the very high output of sulphur dioxide has been more difficult. Development plans for the city occur within a coherent environmental plan, which is developed through consultation with different groups and is supported by a Commission with representatives drawn from many agencies and sectors.⁶

consultation with citizens and for which there is little interest or capacity to implement. Some may simply be conventional development plans renamed. Others may be the result of one or two workshops, which also result in little action. Others may include admirable consultative processes and well-developed goals, yet founder on the very limited capacity of the city authorities to work in partnership with other groups and to plan, invest and co-ordinate the investments and activities of other agencies (including those of higher levels of government). And all city authorities, regardless of how effective they are, will have difficulties incorporating those aspects of sustainable development that respond to the needs of future generations or to limiting the environmental costs that are passed onto 'distant elsewhere' (to use William Rees' term, in his discussion of cities 'ecological footprints').⁷

Drawing from the as yet limited documentation of experiences to date, the following points seem relevant:

- ***The more successful Local Agenda 21s were possible because of some coincidence of key local and national changes,***⁸ especially decentralization (which gave more scope for local action, even if it often did not transfer public resources) and strengthened local democracy. This was important for both the examples given in Box 1. It is no coincidence that most innovative Local Agenda 21s are in cities with strong local democracies. Much of the innovation in Local Agenda 21s has been the result of local rather than national or international initiatives.
- ***Many Local Agenda 21s have been spurred by citizen action to address particular environmental hazards,*** as in Ilo where all citizens wanted action on the very high levels of air pollution and the other environmental costs generated by the Southern Peru Copper Corporation. A Local Agenda 21 was developed in Chimbote to counter a threat to a park/tree nursery and the industrial pollution from a steel mill and local fishmeal processing industries.⁹ These environmental problems helped mobilize citizen action, which then evolved into a coalition that now seeks to address a wider range of environmental problems. Indeed, effective Local Agenda 21s depend on an active and committed civil society that is prepared to engage in local issues and seek ways to work with local authorities.¹⁰
- ***Local Agenda 21s can be much strengthened if local governments and businesses see them as part of a strategy to attract and hold new investment.*** For instance, the richness and diversity of the ecology in and around Manizales and the area's great natural beauty are obvious assets on which the city can build its tourism base. Even for cities that are seeking to attract industry, a reputation for good environmental management need not be a disadvantage and can be turned into a strong advantage, as the good environment makes it attractive for employees and as an efficient government ensures that infrastructure and services are available for enterprises.
- Many innovative experiences benefited from ***long term political support***. So often, good long term initiatives set in motion by one mayor are immediately reversed or changed by their successor. Ilo's success owes much to the fact that six successive mayors have supported and

developed the innovations set in motion by its first elected mayor in the early 1980s.

- Local NGOs or universities often having important supporting roles. For instance, the local NGO Labor in Ilo and the local NGO Natura in Chimbote, were instrumental to their successes. The National University in Manizales has had a central role in the formulation and development of Bioplan Manizales and in supporting its implementation and monitoring.

In Peru, one reason for the innovation in Local Agenda 21s in many cities has been the support they received from Ecociudad.¹¹ This small Peruvian non-government organization has taken on the role of encouraging and supporting local authorities to develop Local Agenda 21s. This is assumed to be a task for national governments – but in this instance, there was little interest from national government in doing this. This NGO has encouraged many local authorities to develop local agendas and has organized workshops and exchanges to allow such authorities to share their experiences. It has advised many local authorities on how to develop Local Agenda 21s and developed manuals and other documents to help guide them. It has also developed new courses with universities. In effect, it is doing what governments should do but rarely do. It is perhaps symptomatic of new alliances and partnerships that it was a small local NGO that developed strong working relationships with the official, elected authorities in many of Peru's cities.

As more Local Agenda 21s become documented, it will become easier to better understand the kinds of policies and institutions that make them more effective. One significant tendency is that a large share of innovative Local Agenda 21s are outside large cities and national capitals. For Ilo, its physical distance from Lima, the national capital and its relatively small size may have been an important protective factor. For large cities, it is more difficult to get an effective city-wide Local Agenda 21 if the city is made up of many municipalities (and usually with different political parties in power in the different municipalities) and vested interests that benefit from lax environmental management are more powerful. Capital cities are particularly problematic as national and local government agencies have different priorities and are, so often, in conflict.

- **integrating concerns for environment and for development.** Local Agenda 21s should allow citizens' concerns for environmental quality to become more influential in government – both in the use of public resources and in government regulation and control of private sector development. Where significant sections of a city's population suffer serious environmental health problems – for instance from industrial pollution or lack of provision for water, sanitation, drainage and garbage collection – by being inclusive, the Local Agenda 21 should help ensure that these problems receive a higher priority. They should also guard against too elitist or middle-class biased concerns for the environment.
- **ensuring that plans are driven by local concerns based on knowledge of local resources and eco-systems** – although they should take into account regional concerns (for instance as a locality's production or waste may damage resources in a neighbouring locality) and national and global issues, particularly regarding resource use and waste generation.
- **ensuring co-ordination and cooperation between different government agencies** – as they involve the different public bodies or agencies active within any locality (including those responsible for infrastructure and service provision, land use planning and management and environmental regulation).
- **tapping what one former US President referred to as that 'vision thing'** – for instance pride in a locality's natural resources and cultural heritage, and in the quality of its governance (including its Local Agenda 21) and a commitment to protecting resources for the future. This has been particularly significant in Ilo since the Local Agenda 21 of this small, relatively poor, isolated small city has attracted international recognition which in turn has helped encourage and support it. It has also helped the city authorities and its citizens in their attempt to get the local copper foundry to reduce its very high sulphur dioxide emissions.

The diverse environmental challenges Local Agenda 21s need to address

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