



# **THE COUNCILLOR AS GUARDIAN OF THE ENVIRONMENT**

## **Handbook A**

**ISBN 92-807-1513-5  
HS/444/97E**

**AN ESSAY AND WORKSHOP FOR LOCAL ELECTED LEADERS  
ON ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE WITH EMPHASIS  
ON ADOPTING ENVIRONMENTALLY SOUND TECHNOLOGIES (ESTS)**

## About the Hat

The Alpine hat illustration that graces the cover and title pages of this handbook carries on the conceptual hat rack theme introduced in the original twelve handbooks that comprise the UNCHS (Habitat) handbook series on Training for Elected Leadership. This hat, like the others in the series, is meant to symbolize and celebrate the many-faceted roles formed by local elected leaders world-wide.



## FOREWORD

As shown by results of training needs assessments conducted by the UNCHS (Habitat) and the UNEP-International Environmental Technology Centre (IETC), the training needs of local government officials (councillors), or of local politicians, appear among the most urgent world-wide and, at the same time, the least attended areas of capacity building for sustainable local development and municipal management.

In the last few years, a number of countries ranging from Nepal to Poland and Uganda to Paraguay embarked for the first time in several decades, and in some cases for the first time ever, on the elections of councillors and mayors. The training needs of local government elected officials are also at the top of the agenda in established municipal democracies such as India, Ecuador, and the United States of America.

Habitat and UNEP IETC have initiated programmes in response to these needs. The UNCHS (Habitat) has developed and tested a series of handbooks under the collective title *Training for Elected Leadership*. The intent of the handbook series is to assist councillors to represent the citizens, provide civic leadership, and effectively work with the central government and with the management, technical, and professional staff in local authorities and other local institutions. The handbooks cover policy and decision making, communication, negotiation and leadership, attending, managing and conducting meetings, councillors' enabling and facilitating activities, financial management, and other related needs.

To promote adoption and transfer of Environmentally Sound Technologies (EST's) the IETC has developed a capacity-building strategy by designing and implementing pilot training programmes in EST assessment and management. These programmes focus on the training needs of local government decision makers in IETC target countries. These programmes are now being implemented through regional workshops in Asia, Africa and Eastern/Central Europe.

This handbook, *The Councillor as Guardian of the Environment*, is intended as both an extension of the *Training for Elected Leadership* series and as a separate handbook within the IETC *Technical Publication Series*. The handbook generally reflects a continuation of style and design ideas exhibited in the UNCHS series. Its main purpose is to enable training institutions or government training units to de-sign, organise and implement follow-up training to regional activities facilitated by IETC, UNCHS (Habitat) and their partner organisations. This handbook has been field-tested in October 1996 during a workshop for councillors in Nakuru, Kenya.

I thank Dr. Fred Fisher and Mr. David W. Tees for preparing this handbook in collaboration with Dr. Christian Holger Strohmann of the UNEP/IETC and with Tomasz Sudra and Raf Tuts of the UNCHS (Habitat) Training and Capacity-Building Section. My thanks also go to the Government of Belgium which provided partial funding for preparation of this manual within the framework of the capacity-building programme "Localizing Agenda 21, Action Planning for Sustainable Local Development."

May, 1997  
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## HOW TO USE THIS HANDBOOK

This training handbook on THE COUNCILLOR AS GUARDIAN OF THE ENVIRONMENT can be used in several ways.

### **Self-study**

The essay that opens this handbook is intended for self-instruction. All you need is a quiet place to think, some time, and something to write with. For best results, we encourage you to write down your answers to the questions raised from time to time in the essay. The learning value of the information is multiplied many times for the reader who takes the time to do this.

### **Workshop training**

The trainer's notes and exercise materials in this handbook are intended for use by experienced trainers in a training workshop for councillors from different local governments. We have included various types of learning activities and formats to provide trainers with considerable flexibility in adapting a workshop to the specific needs of participating councillors. It has been our intention in developing this handbook to encourage you to incorporate your own experiences as a trainer to heighten the learning value of these training materials for participating councillors.

As a trainer, you may decide to use the materials in the handbook in the exact order and manner presented. If you prefer, however, you may rearrange or modify the materials as needed to meet the objectives of a particular training situation. You may choose to offer three days of training by using key exercises and activities included in the handbook. Or you may take advantage of the many materials in the handbook supplemented by content of your own to extend the length of the programme to a full week or more.

### **Team training**

These materials also can be used, preferably with the assistance of an experienced trainer/facilitator, to improve the performance of councillors who serve together on the same governing body. When training councillors who serve together, we believe the facilitator must be prepared to organize the training activities in this handbook in different ways. There may be occasions where you, as facilitator, will choose to add new activities depending on the situation and the characteristics of the group. We hope in situations like these you will view this handbook as a "tool kit" containing many optional training ideas to be mixed and matched, modified or abandoned, as suggested by the situation.

You have many options to choose from with these training handbooks. We hope you take full advantage of them.

## PART I ESSAY

Man did not weave the web of life,  
he is merely a strand in it.  
Whatever he does to the web he does to himself.

Chief Seattle, Native American Leader, 1857

### **Definition**

The councillor, in the role of Guardian of the Environment, supports development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

### **Summary**

This essay will address one of the most challenging roles confronting local councillors, providing principled leadership in the inevitable confrontation between economic and physical development and protection of the natural environment. The challenge is as old as civilization, but the consequences of competition between these two dynamic, defining forces have never been greater. While the state of planet earth dictates that we all assume the role of environmental guardian, the responsibilities and opportunities to make a difference in this age long struggle is unique to those who hold local elected offices. Degradation of the environment, whether we like it or not, begins in our own back yard.

The same is true of efforts to protect the environment and to remediate past mistakes. Many of the decisions in major investments that local governments make in their pursuit of improved public services and quality of life involve various kinds of technology that have a direct impact on the environment (e.g. waste management, waste water treatment, noise abatement and cleaner air standards.) But, the interrelationship between the use of new technologies and environmental protection is complex. Sometimes efforts to improve local conditions through the application of new technologies involve new environmental risks.

Given this personalized state of responsibility, there are many opportunities for creative leadership by local governments to heal the wounds and support development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Your responsibilities as **Guardian of the Environment** transcend both physical and time boundaries. Council decisions involving economic and physical development can influence the quality of life of neighboring communities and the health and safety of their citizens. Equally important, development decisions can jeopardize the quality of life of your grandchildren, and theirs. Being **Guardian(s) of the Environment** is a responsibility that goes beyond your own political constituents and your term of office. Your development policies and goals must be: (1) sustainable over time; and, (2) responsive to the needs of your neighbors who also worry about their quality of life by the actions you take.

Future generations will ultimately inherit the results of your actions as local leaders. Will your legacy as **Guardian of the Environment** be worthy of lasting praise? Or, a burden to be borne by those who had no equity in the decision? Like-wise, many decisions with environmental consequences have a tendency to affect the lives of those who live in other communities. When we borrow the air and water from “mother nature” for use in our daily lives, we often give it back in much worse condition than we received it. The gift to others becomes tainted by our selfish actions. Unfortunately, neither of these extended constituents can vote for you in the next election. Being a **Guardian of the Environment** requires *leadership based on principles*, what respected author and public servant John Bryson refers to as “leader-ship for the common good.”

We will be exploring ways your council can guard and enhance the natural resources of your community without jeopardizing its economic and physical development. We will:

- draw heavily on the experience of local governments that have achieved success in managing these dynamic interfaces in various parts of the world;
- suggest ways to bring together divergent, and often conflicting, community interests so a common vision and strategy can be forged to guide and direct sustainable development; and
- concentrate on environmentally sound technology as a valuable ally in your role as *Guardian of the Environment*.

We will also discuss mistakes (acts of unsustainable development ) made, by local officials and others, that have come to eventually plague their communities. In fairness, many acts of unsustainable development, in which we all have participated, are driven by good intentions and a lack of understanding of the possible long term consequences. For the sake of future generations and preservation of our global common, the role of **Guardian of the Environment** is your most important public responsibility. It will greatly contribute in defining the heritage of your leadership.

From time to time in the essay we encourage you to stop and reflect on what you have been reading. These pauses are labeled **reflections**. They are opportunities to engage in thoughtful deliberation or what some might think of as exercises in self directed learning. At times we will ask you to probe more deeply the ideas expressed in the essay and, at others, simply suggest you stop and catch your intellectual breath. By the way, **reflections**, from a scientific perspective, are defined as “the return of light or sound waves from a surface.”

## **Reflection**

When I think of myself as a **GUARDIAN OF THE ENVIRONMENT**, the following things come to mind:

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## PART I-A

### AN INTRODUCTION TO DEVELOPMENT, THE ENVIRONMENT AND TECHNOLOGY

The symbiotic relationship between development and environment was defined in the report submitted by the World Commission on Environment and Development to the United Nations Secretary General in 1987. The Commission, convened by Gro Harlem Brundtland four years earlier, defined for the first time the concept of *sustainable development*, linking together the state of the environment and economic achievement. The Commission was clear in its assertion that one can not be sustained or guaranteed without the other. But, there is another important factor in this critical relationship between the environment and development, the impact of technology.

**Technology** is at the leading edge of each of these dynamic forces. It is the link between human action and nature. However, Dieter Koenig reminds us in his article on *Sustainable Development: Linking Global Environmental Change to Technology Cooperation*, “*technology cannot compensate for shortcomings in the process of political decision making or in mismanagement.*” Nevertheless, what has come to be known as “environmentally sound technology” can be a worthy ally in your role as **Guardian of the Environment**.

Before we go further, it is essential to define what is meant by *environmentally sound technologies*, or EST. The term, *technology*, has acquired new meaning in recent years. For example, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) defines technology as encompassing both *hardware* and *software*. Under this umbrella we find not only such things as tertiary waste water treatment principles and practices (which, for the authors, is “very technical”) but also many social measures and analytical processes you employ as councillors in your everyday work to represent your constituents and the community. These “people oriented technologies” include an infinite number of possibilities you can employ as **Guardian of the Environment**. For example, new management systems, policy activities, consensus building efforts, scenario planning sessions with a cross section of community representatives, and the design of new types of organizations that cut across jurisdictional boundaries.

Your local elected leadership role as **Guardian of the Environment** will be judged, in the long run, by two interwoven criteria:

- your council’s ability to carry out sustainable development policies and programmes; and
- your creative and effective use of environmentally sound technologies.

#### ***The Agenda 21 Mandate***

Many of you will remember the June 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. Maybe some of you were there, representing your country and its environmental interests and concerns. The conference was a defining moment in the age-old dialogue about environment and development. It produced a series of directives, action steps and mandates that focus and drive the collective efforts of the UN family of organizations well into the 21st century. From the perspective of this discussion, the conference established the terms of Local Agenda 21 Programmes the world over.

Since **Agenda 21** is the foundation stone upon which we will build a case for your role as **Guardian of the Environment**, we will return to Rio for a moment and the importance conference delegates gave to local government initiatives in support of Agenda 21.

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 and establish local environmental policies and regulations. 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.

#### ***Agenda 21: From concept to reality***

One of the authors had an experience as a local government chief executive that may shed some light on the set of complex, intertwined, convoluted events that sometimes determine the road to sustainable development. The experience brought citizens, councillors, state officials, a private contractor, neighboring community leaders, public service engineers and city hall staff face to face in an unfriendly confrontation. The conflict was sparked by a joint city

council and state (provincial) highway department decision to remove several trees to widen an important road intersection.

Cutting down a few trees in the heart of the community would not have created so much controversy if it had not been part of an effort with larger and more lasting consequences. City council and the state highway department had decided to reconstruct two major streets running the length of the central business district of the city and convert them into a one-way traffic flow system. At that time, the state highway design standards required a certain minimum width for construction, which would mean removing a large number of trees, seriously narrowing the sidewalks for the entire length of the proposed one-way system and, generally changing the character of the city centre. There is a public university in the center of the community which generates a large number of pedestrians and creates a unique ambiance and physical environment enjoyed by all citizens. The “improvements” planned by local elected councillors and highway design engineers, who lived and worked over 100 kilometers away, quickly became a magnet for citizen concern.

A few citizens, who understood the consequences of the impending action, had testified at a council meeting early in the discussions of the proposed improvement programme. They requested the councillors to consider a redesign of the one way street system that would save many of the trees. The council expressed “sympathy” for the citizen perspective but said there was nothing they could do. After all, the state highway department had its standards. If the community wanted the state government’s involvement (which, of course, translated into a valuable monetary contribution from the higher level of government) the council would have to accept the wider roadway.

The private contractor and his crew arrived early one Monday morning with chain saws to remove the trees and were surprised to find the trees were filled with citizens! And, those tree sitting citizens refused to get down from their lofty perches until the council agreed to re-open the issue for more discussion. Council held firm, quoting engineering regulations and elected leadership prerogatives.

When the council refused to establish an earnest dialogue with the citizens, their constituents began to turn up the heat on the elected leaders. What began as disagreement over the fate of a few trees one early spring morning turned into a very hot summer of conflict and negotiation between the warring parties. It unearthed a wide range of environmental concerns the council had been ignoring over the years.

### ***Expanding the dialogue***

Once the council finally realized how serious the citizens were, a task force was formed to find alternative solutions to the conflict. The task force represented all sides of the complex dilemma. It included representatives of the council, the city planning commission, technical experts, state and local officials drawn into the fray, the business community, the university administration and, of course, the “not so ordinary” citizens who precipitated the action. For seven long months, the chain saws remained idle while the experts, officials, business representatives, citizens and others explored alternative solutions. The citizens had tapped a much larger and more pervasive community concern about *how to sustain development* in that rapidly growing city *without destroying the natural environment*. The natural amenities of the community and surrounding environment were, in large measure, responsible for attracting new businesses and people to the area; they were not inconsequential as an economic resource.

The final task force recommendations covered a wide range of issues and concerns, including:

- a waiver of state highway standards (as many of you will recognize this is rarely an easy accomplishment);
- a plan to remove fewer trees and plant new ones where preservation was not possible;
- elimination of on-street parking; construction of a new parking garage to assure the business community that retail activities would not suffer;
- provisions for managing solid waste and other public services within the affected area; and,
- a written commitment by the state highway commissioner and officials from the surrounding townships that they would rethink the design and location of a major by-pass highway that was planned for future construction.

Nearly all task force recommendations were adopted by the local council, the state highway department and surrounding local government elected leaders. The community remains economically vibrant with a continuing concern that economic growth be balanced by environmental concerns. This integrated strategy, which has assured sustainable development throughout the region, was greatly assisted when two of the protesters came down from their lofty perches in the doomed trees that early spring morning to campaign for seats on the local council in the next election. They won easily with support from a more enlightened and grateful electorate.

## Environmental Guardians and much more

The council's ultimate decision to expand the dialogue to include tree sitters and a wider community of concerned stakeholders offers several lessons for Councillors in the role of **Guardians of the Environment**.

- simple incremental decisions can have longer term consequences;
- policies that seem mired in technical requirements can be challenged and changed to reflect emergent concerns and new approaches;
- time spent in anticipating public responses to, and consequences of, council actions can prevent future conflicts;
- involving a cross section of opinion and expertise is essential to building consensus and assuring commitment to new mandates; and,
- the role of environmental guardian, if it to be performed successfully, will ultimately require the councillor to draw upon other roles and skills that are covered in the UNCHS (Habitat) series of training materials for councillors.

In this tree-sitting incident, the councilors were called upon to be more effective *policy makers*, *communicators*, *decision makers*, *facilitators*, and certainly better, (albeit reluctant) negotiators. Before the final vote was taken to save the trees and find alternative solutions to engineering design standards and a host of other constraints, the council was called upon to be *power brokers* in their relation to a higher level of governing processes and more proficient *financiers* and *overseers* (because the ultimate decisions required some long term improvements they had not originally planned).

Finally, they were called upon to don their enabler hats to assist other parties with constructing a parking garage so it wouldn't effect the city's long-term debt limitation.

Each of the councillor roles just mentioned are covered in more depth as individual topics in the UNCHS (Habitat) Training for Elected Leadership series.

Agenda 21 of the Rio document iterates the role of governance closest to the people: "They play a vital role in educating, mobilizing and responding to the public to promote sustainable development."

But, there are times when the public turns the tables and educates and mobilizes its elected officials to promote sustainable development. If your constituents start to climb trees, don't say we didn't warn you!

## Reflection

Take a few minutes and reflect on the role of local governments, as defined by the Rio delegates. Jot down a few ideas that define the roles your council perform in *educating, mobilizing and responding to the public that could promote sustainable development*?

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