

A comparative perspective on self-assessment of Local Agenda 21 in European cities

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Joas, M. & Grönholm, B. 2004: A comparative perspective on self-assessment of Local Agenda 21 in European cities. *Boreal Env. Res.* 9: 499–507.

The aim of this article is to describe a model for evaluating Local Agenda 21 processes. The local level extension of Agenda 21, Local Agenda 21 (LA21), is a typical instrument for extensive governance. It is primarily a voluntary sustainability policy tool with a goal of activating existing local government and other local stakeholder organisations in order to meet the local level challenges for the local and global environment, and social and local economic conditions. It also aims to create new governance structures among political and non-political actors. In a European perspective, the introduction of LA21 to cities can be considered as a success-story, but these activities are not distributed equally in Europe. To compare these differences we use a quantitative database from 146 European cities, all of them active in a LA21 or similar policy process. The data presented here is collected within an international research project entitled “LASALA — Local authorities’ self-assessment of local Agenda”, funded by European Commission, DG Research, 5th Framework Programme, 2000–2001.

From government to governance

The past decade can be seen as a decade of new innovations forming the environmental policy agenda. Firstly, the goal of political action has shifted from pure environmental objectives and simple protection principles towards more cross-cutting, comprehensive ones, often called sustainable development. Secondly, the tools to reach these goals have been refined from traditional command-and-control methods towards more broad policy-oriented choices. These new tools are often seen as softer than those traditionally used by governments. They also include more actors in order to achieve results without coercion as the intention has been to increase the understanding and acceptance of sustainable development principles. This shift in policy tools has been described by many scholars as a

shift from traditional government to governance. Agenda 21 can be seen as a trans-national programme including both sustainable development and governance objectives.

Debating governance

The meaning of governance is continually being redefined. Our aim here is not to give yet another definition, but rather to state the fact that our research field — Local Agenda 21 activities — seems to fulfil the most common criteria for governance. In general, however, governance is used partly as a concept describing the practical efforts by governments to adapt themselves to factual changes in their environments.

The main foci of this research are the features of local decision making enhancing for exam-

ple the introduction of business methods to the public sector (new public management), or a set of certain common rules of conduct within public administration (good governance). Furthermore, it is interesting to consider the emergence of new international cooperation patterns (international interdependence) and the loss of government power to other actors (network theory). Another definition, described by Rhodes (2000: p. 56–61), includes a change in the contacts between political actors, states and local governments, meaning a changing role of the state in the coordination process of different social systems. All these definitions somehow reflect the reality of LA21 processes, showing that the main feature of the change is foremost about “an erosion of traditional bases of political power” (Pierre 2000: p. 1).

While engaging in Local Agenda 21 processes, a local government can be involved in at least two ongoing changes of governance.

Firstly, we can observe that local governments are gaining power over decisions concerning sustainability policies. Choices taken by local governments have effects on national level sustainability; therefore it is important for national governments to listen to the local level. This development is partly a result of intended action from national governments, but partly also of non-voluntary loss of control. The latter development happens because units other than national governments are now more easily able to influence the policy processes at the local level. This normally takes place through sub-governmental, trans-national networks and international organisations, for example the European Union, which influence political behaviour at the local level. It seems as if international networking is high on the agenda regarding sustainable development (Joas 2001: p. 261, *see also* regional evidence in Joas and Grönholm 1999, Joas 2000 or Grönholm and Joas 1999).

Secondly, LA21 often means that new local level actors — organised interests and interested individuals — are given access to the political process in a different way than before. This means, in fact, that the importance of the actors participating in the ‘normal’ political process is gradually declining.

This article does not have the ambition to explain why differences in policy implemen-

tation occur between local governments. This would be an empirical task far beyond the possibilities of the space provided for us. Instead, we will describe how new tools of governance, especially LA21, are used in different parts of Europe and examine how different features of those processes vary across different parts of Europe. To analyse the process we have created a tool to evaluate the political and administrative qualities for a local level process aiming at sustainable development. As social scientists we are first and foremost interested in the qualities of the process and not the results achieved with it. We consider the results of sustainability to be too difficult to assess in such a limited research project as LASALA.

Local Agenda 21: A tool for the governance process

An activation of the local level regarding the implementation of sustainable development has been evident since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. This was manifested in the only non-binding declaration adopted at that conference, the largely accepted and signed action plan towards a sustainable future, Agenda 21 (1992). The 10th anniversary of Rio, the Johannesburg 2002 Rio +10 World Summit on Sustainable Development, showed the local governments as being central actors in the overall development towards sustainability, even though lack of action is still evident.

Local Agenda 21 is a voluntary policy tool with a primary goal of activating and developing already existing structures, but also to some extent and in some societies creating new institutions. The development should take the local communities towards a higher level of sustainability.

In a European perspective, the introduction of LA21 to cities can be considered as a success story while the new structures have fairly rapidly been diffused all over Europe. In a global comparison, European cities, and also smaller local government units, are the most active in introducing sustainability promoting political structures like LA21. But, these activities are

not distributed equally in Europe, nor are the strengths and weaknesses equal in different parts of Europe. The way LA21 is used as a tool varies to a significant degree between countries and different political and administrative systems, as seen for example in comparative studies by Lafferty and Eckerberg (1998) and Lafferty (1999). These studies highlight the fact that national level solutions are clearly influencing local level decisions. Countries with strong national support — not necessary economic — also tend to have higher activity level at local level. This basic pattern is also evident for transition countries, even if the support for local governments might have international rather than national origin (Joas 2003: p. 122).

The local-level activities are also partly dependent on differences in the position of local governments in different countries. Also the basic resources for local governments to act vary following general economic conditions. Even within one nation a significant variation can be seen in the depth of the LA21 processes. New structures for the implementation of LA21 are thus visible not only between nations, but also within countries.

How to measure qualities of an on-going policy change process?

Analysing political and administrative progress and success is a difficult task. Often you find yourself limited to analyse just some steps or aspects of a more broad activity. It is also important to bear in mind that evaluations are estimations that are carried out afterwards based on the existing material and data in comparison to those known and clearly stated goals and intentions (Vedung 1998). In other words we look back and evaluate certain aspects or actions, and there is no attempt to predict what will happen later.

Evaluating LA21 activities

When evaluating and analysing LA21 activities, as well as any other similar activity, it is important to clearly state which details the evaluation and the analyses will focus on. As

indicated above there are many challenges in evaluating and especially in comparing LA21 processes. Since we are interested in somehow comparing LA21 processes in different regions we are forced to focus on activities that are most similar in all regions, or at least of similar importance for all countries, regions and different contexts. When studying LA21 activities we have decided to focus on factors that make the process itself strong, i.e. those factors that may influence the possibilities to successfully implement the intended plans and actions. In other words, our focus is not to evaluate how efficiently ecological and other goals and targets have been reached, nor is it on what direct influence LA21 has had on the environment. The above-mentioned limitations are the reasons for this decision.

There are several tools that have been developed for evaluating public management processes. We can point out at least two sectors, the public sector and the private sector, in which different evaluation tools are used. Firstly, there are different types of so-called quality standards such as BS 1401, ISO, EMAS and TQS. A common feature for the quality standards is that they often concentrate on the results from the processes (the product). These standards are mainly used for industrial and commercial activities and are, therefore, not directly applicable to other sectors and other types of activities. Secondly, there are also standardised tools or models to measure the public sector success or efficiency, such as the Baldrige Model, the Bertelsmann Model, the Speyer Model, European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM), the Public Administration Excellence Model, and the Common Assessment Framework. Most of these models try to find common principles for different types of activities, projects and forms of public management. These standardised tools for measuring the public sector success are commonly used tools.

As LA21 is a tool for local government to incorporate aspects described by the Agenda 21 document into their every-day municipal activities, the goals and intentions of this document must also be taken into consideration.

From earlier studies we also know that local governments have de facto chosen very different approaches to reach these more or less common

goals (e.g. Joas 2000). This seems an appropriate decision due to the fact that municipalities operate within very different contexts and circumstances. Furthermore it is important to recognise that LA21 activities are not always applicable to a single municipality but may require inter-municipal co-operation or regional efforts. Several regional or similar LA21 processes have been identified and it is therefore necessary to be aware of such contexts when evaluating and analysing LA21 processes and progress.

Of the models described above the PAEM model is best suited to work as a model for evaluating LA21 processes. It is based on the premise that it is important to focus on the whole process of a public administration organisation rather than single aspects or single results. The main focus of this model is on finding the strengths of the organisation and improving the possibilities to succeed with their tasks continuously. The idea or the hypothesis of the PAEM model is to measure and evaluate the existence and strength of factors that can influence on the success of the activities and actions in an organisation. According to the model, the following items will lead to, or at least improve the possibility of, success: customer or citizen satisfaction (20% weight in the model), employee satisfaction (9%), impact on society (6%), results of the organisation (15%), leadership (10%), policy and strategy (8%), management of the organisation (9%), resource management (9%), and process management (14%). These premises and criteria are divided into enablers and results and have been weighted for their importance, according

to the PAEM model. These are also the criteria that have been chosen for this model as crucial and important for a strong public administration and in order to succeed with intended missions and tasks.

Since the completion of the LASALA self-evaluation model, the PAEM model has been further developed into a new model called the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) (www.eipa.nl/CAF).

The LASALA self-evaluation model

As mentioned before the variation between different types of LA21 processes is so obvious that clear common measurements can be difficult to find. We can only select criteria for evaluating good LA21 processes if we understand the meaning and intentions of the Agenda 21 document and if we are aware of other existing tools for evaluating public management processes. This has been made possible by using selected elements from the above-mentioned evaluation model.

The LASALA evaluation model for LA21 processes includes nine criteria, selected by the research team, and based upon general process evaluation principles and the Agenda 21 document (Table 1). These criteria have been divided into enablers (for a process) and results (from a process). The three enabling criteria are: identification of relevant topic-areas for the LA21 process, commitment to the process, and resources available. The six result criteria are: existing sustainable development plans, level

Table 1. The LASALA good practice model.

Type of criteria	Weight in LASALA model (%)
Enablers (for the process):	40
C1. Identifying relevant topic-areas for the LA21 process	10
C2. Commitment to the process	20
C3. Resources available	10
Results (of the process):	60
C4. Existing sustainable development plan	10
C5. Level of integrated approach	10
C6. Level of participation	20
C7. Partnership between council and the community	5
C8. Level of public awareness	5
C9. Level of continuity	10
Total	100

of integrated approach, level of participation, partnership between council and the community, level of public awareness, and level of continuity (to learn more about these criteria *see* Grönholm *et al.* 2001).

By dividing the criteria into the enablers and results we can try to explain where these single criteria are most important in an ongoing process. It is important to look at all criteria together as an overall picture or as a collective requirement for a strong LA21 process. The individual criteria have also been weighted due to their importance or relevance according to the expectations of the Agenda 21 document. In the analysis these percentages are divided into points, meaning that a maximum score of points will be 100 according to the criteria above. The starting point has been to give every criterion 10 points each, but depending on the importance of the criteria changes in points were justified: 5 points meaning important, but not necessary in every LA21 process or model, 10 points meaning important for all processes and models, and finally 20 points meaning high importance due to Agenda 21 matter or process success possibility. The points for the nine criteria were given to cases based on their answers to relevant questions (for most criteria several different items) in the quantitative self-evaluation questionnaire.

The data material

In total the LASALA self-evaluation process attracted 228 participants from 29 European countries. Information for this possibility was distributed through national and international networks for local governments. Participation was open for all local governments with an interest in evaluating their on-going process towards sustainable development. This means that all participants were expected to have a LA21 process, thus resulting in an evaluation of active processes instead of overall assessment of national activity levels. However, the large number of evaluated cases enables us to draw some overall conclusions as well.

146 local governments actually completed the survey of which 123 managed to answer the questionnaire in such a way that they could be

analysed regarding all 9 criteria that were created by the project team. The analytical part of the LASALA process also included a more qualitatively oriented analysis — based on an evaluation of stakeholder workshop debates, which have been elsewhere reported. This part of the research attracted 74 participants (*see* also full research reports in Evans and Theobald 2001, Grönholm *et al.* 2001).

The description of the data — also in all analytical chapters below — is based on the quantitative data collection. As an analytical framework we use the regional division utilised by the research team. We divided Europe into four groups of countries, reflecting to some extent the differences in the political, cultural, economic and societal situations. The groups are: the Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Iceland), the western European Union countries (United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, France), the southern European Union countries (Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal), and finally the CEE countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia, Ukraine, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Slovak Republic). We admit that this is a very crude simplification of the reality, but in order to explain as much as possible of the overall situation simplifications must be made.

The highest number of answers for the LASALA questionnaire by local authorities, and thus responses to our survey, were received from the western European Union member countries, while the lowest number was from the Nordic countries (Table 2). The interest reflects naturally the overall interest in the societies towards sustainable development. Therefore, it is by no means a surprise that western European local authorities decided to sign up to the project to such a large extent — the number of local governments is high as well as the interest. The inter-regional differences in western Europe in LA21 activities are indeed substantial. However, there are distinct forerunner local and regional governments to be found as, for example, UK was one of the overall forerunners in LA21 in Europe (e.g. Lafferty and Eckerberg 1998). Even if the Nordic countries are small both in population size and in number of municipalities, it is still not very surprising that as forerunner and

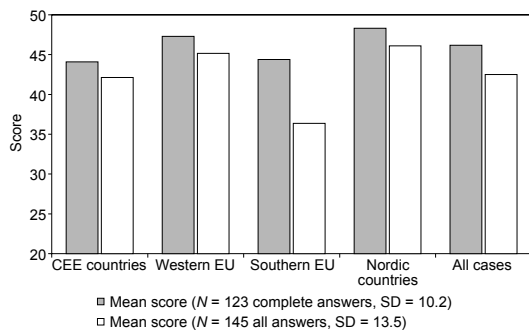


Fig. 1. Mean LASALA self-evaluation scores (theoretical maximum 100) by region (Source: LASALA database).

fast follower countries in LA21 implementation, Sweden, Finland, Norway and Denmark are in a relative sense rather extensively represented (e.g. Joas 1999, 2003). It is also encouraging to note that interest for LA21 is clearly increasing in the CEE countries, as well as in southern European Union countries. Even if the whole region is considered as “followers” in LA21 we still can find some growing enthusiasm, especially in Italy, Spain and Portugal for LA21.

Local Agenda 21 activities in a comparative Europe perspective

The highest mean score for the LASALA self-evaluation was found among Nordic local governments taking part in the project (Fig. 1). The Nordic countries were closely followed by the western European countries. The lowest mean score was found among southern European participants if all answers are taken into account. However, this group shows the highest number of missing data on the questions for our criteria variables.

The pattern described above was expected, considering the type of politics that governance means. LA21 processes are, according to earlier studies, a ‘free-time’ activity for the wealthier and more stable local governments (for example Local Agenda Survey 1997 and Second Local Agenda 21 Survey 2002). This pattern is also clearly visible if we would analyse how deeply these kinds of tools have penetrated the societies in each of the selected regions. The total number of LA21 processes, for example, is much higher in the Nordic Countries and in the western European Union than in the southern Europe or CEE and Accession Countries. But it is interesting to notice that the differences between the western and Nordic processes and the CEE and southern Europe processes are not as clear as they were some years ago.

In conclusion, the expectation of Nordic and western European cities being forerunners in sustainability policies is confirmed. However, we must emphasise that the southern European and CEE cases are not lagging very far behind. Instead, taking into account the rather late start for many of these local processes, the results are promising.

Enabling factors and results in a regional comparison

One of our basic expectations in the LASALA research project was that the regional differences (including political, cultural and economical settings for the local and regional governments) should be seen as an important explanation for differences in the European geography of LA21, and its governance features. This seems to be confirmed, as seen above, but only to some extent

Table 2. LASALA questionnaire answers by region (source: LASALA database).

Groups of countries	All answers		Complete answers	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Nordic countries	27	18.5	25	20.3
Western European Union	51	34.9	45	36.6
Southern European Union	36	24.7	25	20.3
Central and eastern European countries	32	21.9	28	22.8
Total	146	100.0	123	100.0

(Fig. 2). The regional differences in the overall scoring in the LASALA self-evaluation are clear, but still leave some variation to be explained by the differences in individual criteria.

Nordic municipalities reached the highest overall scores in the LASALA self-evaluation, and this is clearly visible for the mean values of the individual criteria as well. They perform generally well on most of our indicators, but particularly well on the awareness criterion, stressing the awareness building measures for both the community and local administration. They are clearly leading in two other criteria: the continuity and the integration criteria. However, it is evident that all respondents seem to stress the future possibilities of LA21. The expected economic and political advantage for the Nordic and western European local governments is clearly visible in the high score for the resource criterion, resulting in an easier path to achieve planning results as well.

Surprisingly, one of the clear weak points for the Nordic participants was the participation criterion. Here they scored at the same level as local authorities from the CEE countries. This is clearly contradicting our expectations and is therefore highly interesting. A possible explanation is that local democracy in the Nordic countries has already for many decades — even centuries at the local level — been a natural part of the everyday life. A normal citizen has access to, for example, political boards without too many thresholds. These political boards have been considered to constitute a forum broad enough for stakeholder activity and, therefore, an additional need for setting up a new or similar forum has not necessarily been seen as relevant. For the CEE local authorities the situation is partly new.

Even though both western European and Nordic local governments are forerunners in LA21 it is evident that there are differences between these two regions concerning some main points of activity. The Nordic countries score much better on awareness and continuity, which seem to be of much less importance in the western cases. The clear stronghold for these western European local and regional authorities seems to be the broad participation criteria. For all other criteria they seem to perform as well as the others, often close to the Nordic scoring, thus

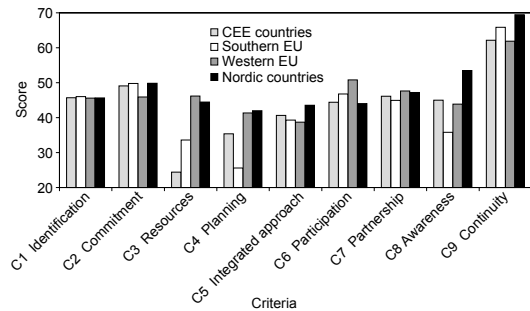


Fig. 2. LASALA self-evaluation scores (theoretical maximum 100) by criteria and region (Source: LASALA database).

resulting in a good average performance, but not outstanding.

The southern European local governments perform relatively well regarding several of our indicators. The mean scoring both for criteria that display words and humble wishes — commitment and continuity for example — but also for criteria that display deeds and actual work — as partnerships and integrated approach — rank the southern EU cases as high as the other cases. Low levels of performance are found in relation to enabling resources, clearly lower than in the western and Nordic cases, and therefore also planning, showing a very low score in comparison with the other geographic regions.

The CEE countries are, to a large extent, in a similar position as the southern European countries. The lowest score can be seen in the level of resources, not even reaching 25% of the maximum possible, and to some extent also for the planning criterion. For the latter, the CEE local governments seem to perform better than their southern European counterparts, especially considering the resources situation. The level of commitment, the level of integrated approach and the interest in creating partnerships are on the same level as for all other local authorities.

Conclusion: Towards local level sustainability in Europe through governance?

The aim of this article was to scratch the surface of what Local Agenda 21 processes look like around Europe. We have a comparative mate-

rial that clearly indicates that local governments regard LA21 as an important political process. Much of the evidence, especially when we look at the individual process criteria described above, show that if a local government takes a decision to start a local process aiming at sustainability, they are also willing to follow the rules of the game.

Governance is thus not just a catchword, and within the sustainable development policy sector, it also indicates a change in policy-making procedures. Most definitions of governance include some kind of raised level of interaction between the rulers and the ruled, a new distribution of decision-making power, including features as information and awareness. Our research indicates that these features are clearly visible in the Local Agenda 21 processes.

On a general level it seems as if LA21 has become one of the first test-cases of how new governance features can be incorporated into everyday policy-making in the municipality. This might, to some degree, be easier within a cross-cutting policy sector such as sustainable development, which is still searching for its boundaries and mining all new possibilities. The next step will be to systematically take the lessons learned from LA21 processes to other, more grounded and traditional sectors. It is, however, clear that even within these sectors changes have already occurred.

The task for the LASALA research team was partly to analyse and understand what is happening in Europe within different LA21 processes on a broad scale. Due to the research methodology this could only be done with the help of a self-evaluation approach. This would of course be a disadvantage for the project, if we were searching for LA21 activity levels overall in Europe, for example. But, our interest was to understand the internal processes of LA21 in local governments that are engaged in such a process. The benefits for the local governments self-evaluating their performances were obvious (e.g. Evans and Theobald 2003). They learned to know their own process better; they got knowledge on where their process is heading in relation to others in a similar situation. All participants received a benchmarking report, and a selection of good practices was selected for

the benchmarking use of all interested local and regional governments.

What we as the project team learned from the project was that self-evaluations should not be used too much. Local government officials are overworked and too “underpaid” in order to find time for time-consuming tasks exceeding their normal duties. This is clearly visible in all research directed towards local government officials. The tools for applied research must be simple to use, easy to access and give as direct feedback as possible. These notions encouraged the LASALA project team to go further with a project aiming at an online LA21 or similar sustainable development process self-evaluation facility for local governments. This Local Evaluation 21 facility provides easy access and instant feedback not only from the municipal viewpoint but also from a stakeholder viewpoint. The facility will, in addition, provide benchmarking reports based on the self-evaluation — all in 20 languages of Europe. The evaluation criteria are based on the original LASALA criteria, but simplified and made easier to use for all parties.

Applied research has a value in itself, but this type of applied research may also provide us with valuable research data at a later stage. It is clear that the Local Evaluation 21 Tool will be endorsed by several European networks as the main tool for evaluating local government LA21 activities. This could thus provide us as researchers with a valuable database looking at the foundations of how local governance processes function in most parts of Europe.

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Received 2 February 2004, accepted 19 May 2004