
Project or Process? Fifteen years' experience with Local Agenda 21 in Sweden

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Este trabajo discutirá, a partir de la experiencia sueca, el potencial de desarrollo de la Agenda 21 Local (A21L, en adelante) como un proceso de larga duración. Suecia fue uno de los primeros países en implantar la A21L, lo que explicaría que con el paso del tiempo se registrase en Suecia una elevada proporción de actividad de la A21L europea. Hasta el momento, la A21L lleva implantada ininterrumpidamente en Suecia quince años. Durante este periodo, el gobierno central ha aumentado el apoyo financiero a la A21L, pero, a pesar del éxito general de las cada vez más numerosas iniciativas locales a favor del desarrollo sostenible, lo cierto es que aparecen signos de cierta fatiga y de una menor actividad en los últimos años, lo que da lugar al interrogante acerca de la sostenibilidad de la misma Agenda 21 Local. ¿Es ésta un proceso duradero o más bien un proyecto de corta duración? ¿Qué pueden aprender de la experiencia sueca aquellos países que no han llegado tan lejos?

Lan honek, Suediako esperientzian oinarrituta, Tokiko Agenda 21 (aurrerantzean, TA 21) delakoaren garapen-potentziala iraupen luzeko prozesu gisa aztertuko du. Duela hamabost urte, Suedia TA 21 martxan jarri zuten herrialdeetako bat izan zen. Horrek azaltzen du zergatik, denboraren poderioz, gauzatu zen Suedian Europako Tokiko Agenda 21 delakoaren jarduera-maila handiena. Denboraldi horretan, gobernu zentralak finantza-laguntza handiagoa bideratu du TA 21 delakorako, baina, gero eta ugariagoak diren garapen iraunkorren aldeko tokiko ekimenak gero eta ugariagoak izan arren, eta arrakasta orokorra izan duten arren, kontua da nolabaiteko nekea eta jarduera txikiagoa antze-man dela azken urteotan, eta horrek Agendaren beraren iraunkortasunaren inguruan galde egiteko bide ematen duela: prozesu hau iraunkorra da ala, beharbada, iraupen laburreko proiektua? Zer ikas daiteke Suediako esperientziatik?

This article will discuss the potential of Local Agenda 21 as a lasting process, drawing from the Swedish experience. LA 21 in Sweden had both an early start and a high proportion of LA 21 activity. To date, Sweden has implemented LA 21 for almost fifteen years, have been tested. Over time, central government has increased its financial support to LA 21, but despite a general success in increased local initiatives towards sustainable development, there are also signs of a certain fatigue and less activity in recent years. The question thus arises: How sustainable might Local Agenda 21 become? Is it a lasting process, or is it rather a short-lived project? What might countries that have come less far learn from the Swedish experience?

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1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the potential of Local Agenda 21 (LA21) as a lasting process, drawing from the Swedish experience. When Local Agenda 21 was agreed upon in the 1992 Rio Summit, Swedish local authorities reacted quickly. Assessments of the status of LA21 in Europe show that Sweden had both an early start and a high proportion of LA21 activity (Eckerberg 2001; Eckerberg, Coenen and Lafferty 1999). To date, Sweden has implemented LA21 for almost fifteen years. Different approaches have been tested. Over time, central government has increased its financial support to LA21, but despite a general success in increased local initiatives towards sustainable development, there are also signs of a certain fatigue and less activity in recent years. The question

thus arises: How sustainable might Local Agenda 21 become? Is it a lasting process, or is it rather a short-lived project? What might countries that have come less far learn from the Swedish experience?

1.1. Questions and methodology

More specifically, we address the following:

- What has been the profile of Swedish LA21 over time and how has it been organized?
- How has financial support from the national level impacted on LA21?
- Which municipalities remain active and why?
- Has LA21 had its day?

—How can a lasting effect be promoted?

The primary source of data is a survey that we carried out in 2004¹ in cooperation with the Swedish Institute for Ecological Sustainability² (Dahlgren and Eckerberg, 2005a), building on earlier surveys from 1998 and 2001 (Brundin and Eckerberg, 1999; Eckerberg and Edström, 2002). In those, we investigated the profile, organization, scope and resources of Swedish LA21. In addition, we draw upon other evaluations of Swedish LA21 and its national support systems.

There is an in-built tension between the long-term strengthening of institutions to ensure local implementation of sustainable development, expressed for instance by ICLEI³, and the short-term project funding that has characterized national support systems. This tension can be analysed from an organisational viewpoint. According to Christiansen and Kreiner (1997) projects can be distinguished from a more established organisation for recurring tasks: (1) Projects handle exceptions, fall outside of normal routine, practice and competence and therefore their solution needs extraordinary organisational measures; (2) Projects are normally characterised by complexity; (3) Projects are temporary

organisational solutions and their dissolution is planned in advance; (4) The most central characteristic of projects, however, is their goal orientation. The goal orientation of a project is different from that of the main organisation, since it is specific to the situation. The aim of the project is analysed, negotiated and decided and is at the start of the project often explicitly specified. During the project implementation all activities are carried out with specific reference to this goal (Christensen and Kreiner 1997; cf. Bruzelius and Skärvad 2004).

Performance towards sustainability, however, requires long-term, persistent implementation of action plans by instituting routines and systems. Understandably, a Local Agenda 21 process might start out as a project, before and until the forms for long-term sustainability work have been formulated and agreed upon; but ideally, the pursuit of the Local Agenda 21 must become part of a regular municipal routine independent from shifts in political leadership. This requires strategies for anchoring principles and criteria in municipal decision making, and appropriate policy, information and control instruments in municipal management (cf. ICLEI, accessed 2006-02-21). Previous studies of the implementation of LA21 across Europe point to the importance of favourable baseline conditions for environmental policy both at national and local level, combined with support from central government, involvement of social partners and political will to embrace the notion of LA21 (Lafferty and Eckerberg, 1998). In Germany, the diffusion of Local Agenda 21 can be explained by the local authorities' capacities for action, financial and political support from national and

¹ The survey included the 290 Swedish municipalities, plus the 18 district councils of the city of Stockholm. 73 % responded.

² The Swedish Institute for Ecological Sustainability (IEH) was reconstructed and renamed in January 2005 to the Swedish Council for Sustainable Development (Hållbarhetsrådet).

³ ICLEI, the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives. An international association of local governments and national and regional local government organizations that have made a commitment to sustainable development: (www.iclei.org, accessed 2006-02-24).

regional government organisations, and the existence of agenda transfer institutions which accelerate LA21 processes (Kern, forthcoming). Similarly, Evans *et al* (2004) stress the importance of 'good governance', or 'good practice' (Evans *et al*, 2001) defined as institutional and social capital at the local level of government, as a precondition for sustainability initiatives like LA21 to become adopted and widespread. We will now examine how Sweden has managed to live up to its mandate in this respect.

1.2. Sweden's response to UNCED

Since the 1960s, Sweden has often been regarded as a model society which has combined high and fairly evenly distributed social welfare with rather far-reaching environmental policy goals. However, the economic crisis of the 1990s changed the context of welfare distribution and created a new and difficult situation for environmental policy, through the political objective of reducing public spending (cf. Eckerberg 2000).

The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA), established in 1967, has been the prime motor in developing and implementing environmental policy. During the 1980s, municipal environmental units were significantly strengthened. The main function of SEPA shifted in the 1990s towards formulating and evaluating policy, leaving the task of implementation to the various sector agencies, County Administrations and municipalities. By tradition, the Swedish municipalities have a general power to govern their own affairs. Municipal autonomy includes

rights to levy taxes on their citizens and to develop local policies within most sector areas. Gradually, the autonomy of municipalities in environmental decision-making concerning their own territory has been strengthened, which also means that the administrative organization of environmental affairs varies among municipalities (cf. Eckerberg 2000).

Already at the time of the 1987 Brundtland report, the momentum for environmental policy was high in Sweden. The Swedish government responded promptly to the UNCED agreements. Once a Swedish translation for the term sustainable development was in place, the concept was seldom used without the prefix *ecologically* sustainable development. (Eckerberg, 2000). Swedish local authorities have also emphasized the environmental and ecological dimensions of sustainability (Eckerberg, 2001). Great faith is put in technological development, and most policy-makers claim that economic growth can be successfully combined with a sustainable society (Eckerberg, 2000).

2. LOCAL AGENDA 21 IN SWEDEN

2.1. An initial forerunner

The municipalities' work with Local Agenda 21 in Sweden clearly preceded similar efforts at county and national level. The bottom-up approach was emphasized by the NGOs and supported by SALA⁴. Initially, the national government did not attempt to guide the process other than by encouraging the exchange of

⁴ SALA, Swedish Association of Local Authorities.

information and experiences between municipalities. Beginning in 1994, however, financial incentives were created, and central institutions were set up to coordinate efforts. Common traits of most of these initiatives are that they have been limited in time, given specific and temporary tasks and/or significantly shifted their focus over time; a project approach that is not optimal for the institutionalization of LA21 (cf. Eckerberg 2000).

According to the Swedish report to UNGASS in June 1997, virtually all local authorities had by then embarked on the process of initiating a Local Agenda 21 (LA21) process. In practice, however, many of the local projects carried out in the name of LA21 resembled traditional environmental policy rather than a new approach to sustainable development. A group of about forty to sixty pioneer municipalities had initiated a wide range of activities, of which some projects and policy goals may be seen as early signs of more fundamental changes in local government policies. In several cases these municipalities adopted policy goals and instruments which were much more far-reaching in their orientation towards achieving sustainable development than approaches endorsed at the national level. Many also introduced new forms of participation, and included neighbourhood groups, schools and local business in the process (Eckerberg et al 1998, Eckerberg 2000). However, studies from the late 1990s indicated a growing gap between pioneer municipalities, and those that had dismissed their coordinators and ceased funding towards LA21 in the wake of UNGASS (Eckerberg 2001).

2.2. Present status

The 2004 LA21 survey revealed, amongst other things, some interesting results on the impact of national financing programmes on LA21 work. We will come back to this later in this article. First we will present a general overview of the contents, profile and organisation of LA21 in Sweden, stressing its more recent development.

2.2.1. LA21 plans

By 2004 some 70% of Swedish municipalities had adopted LA21 plans. However, the adoption of a LA21 plan does not necessarily mean that it is transformed into practice. The formal decision to adopt the plan might in some cases be the end point of a process. We found that the LA21 plans are used and followed-up to less extent today than previously. In 2004, 31% of the municipalities reported that the plan had had its day, while in 2001 it was only 17%. A positive interpretation would be that the ongoing integration of LA21 issues into municipal planning and every day work has rendered the plan, as a separate document, obsolete. It might also be linked to the fact that the temporal scope in LA21 plans is usually 5-10 years and many plans were adopted in 1998 or earlier, which means that the majority of them should be up for revision. A more pessimistic interpretation would be that an adopted plan does not necessarily imply that LA21 activities are ongoing (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a).

2.2.2.. *Profile*

From the beginning, the profile of Swedish LA21 work was dominated by traditional environmental and technological issues such as renewable energy, biological diversity, resource management etc., even if a growing number of municipalities by 1998 had started to pay attention to the social dimensions. In 2001, the area most frequently mentioned was LA21 activities in schools and pre-schools. In 2004, however, this area of activities fell to fourth place and the lead was once again taken by traditional environmental areas (Brundin and Eckerberg, 1999; Edström and Eckerberg, 2002; Dahlgren and Eckerberg, 2005a). New and growing areas of activity in 2004 were consumer issues, equality/ integration, integration of LA21 into regular activities/sectors, business issues and growth (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a).

Moreover, fewer municipalities report that they have taken specific action to involve municipal citizens in their LA21 work. This proportion fell from 66% in 2001 to 48% in 2004. There is a clear correlation to the existence of a LA21 coordinator, since 69% of the municipalities that had a LA21 coordinator employed in 2004 also took specific action to involve their citizens. The share of municipalities with some sort of public forum for LA21 has also dropped from 48% in 2001 to 30% in 2004 (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a).

2.2.3. *Organisation*

The number of municipalities with LA21 coordinator decreased from 65% in 2001 to 52% in 2004 and a similar trend is visible in terms of financial resources set aside for LA21. In 2001, 69% of municipali-

ties reported such funds compared to 49% in 2004. This is a structural problem in the prioritisation of municipal resources, since LA21 is a voluntary endeavour which needs to compete with compulsory activities regulated by law. Indeed, many municipalities solve LA21 funding through temporary and ad hoc solutions, using for instance different kinds of labour market policy funds, a fact which might obstruct long-term institutionalisation efforts (cf. Forsberg 2002).

As to the management or leadership of LA21 work, the influence of the municipal executive committee (MEC) has increased over time, from 44% in 2001 to 60% in 2004. This could be a positive sign that LA21 now occupies a more prominent position than traditional environmental issues in these municipalities (compared to those where LA21 management is placed with the environment and health board, a special committee or the like). Support for this interpretation is found in the fact that 20% of these municipalities reported that the LA21 plan has been integrated into municipal structure planning, compared to 14% of the total number of municipalities. Slightly fewer municipalities in this group also reported that the LA21 plan has had its day (27% compared to 31% totally). At the same time, however, a smaller proportion than average of these municipalities have LA21 coordinators employed and financial resources set aside for LA21. Also, the participation element is significantly smaller in these municipalities. About 40% of them reported to have taken action to engage citizens in the LA21 work in 2004, compared to 48% in the total group and

fewer of them than average have some sort of public forum or venue⁵ for LA21 (25%, compared to 30%) (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a).

2.2.4. *Commitment and integration*

A survey study in 2002 showed that party politics and the commitment and interest of local politicians is an important factor for successful LA21 work. Municipalities governed by socialist parties, or socialists in coalition with the Green party, were more active in LA21 than those governed by non-Socialist parties. Furthermore, the municipal board and other politicians seemed to be more active in the LA21 work in the socialist-governed municipalities, whereas citizens and other groups were more prominent in non-Socialist but LA21-active municipalities. This study also showed that in LA21-active municipalities generally, the political interest had increased more over time than in other municipalities; the degree of political unity was higher; the initiative in the LA21 process was more centrally placed in the MEC or the Municipal Council and the commitment of local politicians and civil servants was higher (cf. Eckerberg *et al*, 2003).

Generally, however, a majority of Swedish municipalities reported limited LA21 commitment and involvement from different actors in 2004 (as in 2001), and the share of considerable commitment further decreased. Notably, the number of “do not know” answers increases over time, especially with regard to involvement of actors outside of the municipal organisation. This is most likely a conse-

quence of fewer LA21 coordinators (with less capacity to assess the situation) and reduced activities to stimulate citizen involvement. No more than 9% of municipalities reported that the initiative in LA21 resides with groups outside the municipal organization (i.e. citizens, NGOs, business etc) which confirms that the bottom-up perspective of LA21 has decreased (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a).

The political interest in LA21 has also decreased over time. In 2001 as well as 2004, approximately 40% of municipalities reported that the political interest had decreased. However, close to 40% of municipalities reported in 2004 that the degree of political unity was high or relatively high as compared to 55% in 2001. Again, the response alternative that increased the most in 2004 is “do not know”. LA21 might have become a non-issue in many municipalities. Notably, some of the municipalities mention that LA21 has been integrated into regular municipal work and/or wider sustainability activities and is no longer pursued under the *label* of LA21. Possibly, LA21 thus continues under new designations, but it could also be that LA21 no longer remains on the agenda (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a).

Integration of LA21 in regular municipal sectors is best understood as a process of Environmental Policy Integration (EPI), which represents an operational principle to implement and institutionalise the idea of sustainable development (cf. Lenschow 2002a). The LA21 integration in Swedish municipalities seems stable over the past few years, even if there are signs of reduction. The reduction is difficult to explain; it might indicate that integration

⁵ e.g. internet web page or the like.

initiated earlier has come to a halt, or that the expectations on the effects has increased and coloured the respondents' assessments (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a). Lenschow (2002b) offers some possible explanations for these findings: while the emphasis that the sustainability concept and EPI puts on 'win-win' scenarios (with regard to the environment and the economy) is persuasive from an aggregate and long-term perspective, this 'win-win' logic breaks down on less aggregate levels. The paradigm of sustainable development implies a restructuring of the economy with redistributive effects, where not every producer or consumer will gain. This implies that the EPI principle is more likely to gain acceptance on top levels, or among conceptually working persons, but will face resistance where immediate trade-offs are being felt. Lenschow also states that the tools needed to facilitate EPI, e.g. sustainability indicators and targets, have been underdeveloped which has left sectoral policy-makers overtaxed in assessing the environmental impacts of their programmes and projects and in evaluating sustainable practice (Lenschow 2002b).

2.3. The impact of central funding

In Sweden, funding towards LA21 has increased dramatically over time. From 1997 to 2002 a Local Investment Programme for Ecologically Sustainable Development (LIP) became the single largest source of central government funding for municipal initiatives. The Government allocated SEK 6.2 billion, which was matched by local funds allowing a total sum of SEK 27.3 billion to

local projects (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005b). The LIP came about partly as a response to the criticism from municipalities that little money had been provided from the national government to help towards local sustainable development efforts (Eckerberg 2001). Even if the LIP funding terminated in 2002, some municipalities had not finalized their projects when the latest LA21 survey was carried out in 2004, and yet others had received grants from the new, but rather similar, Climate Investment Programme (KLIMP). By the fall of 2004, 56% of the Swedish municipalities had received some funding from one or the other of the two grant systems (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a).

2.3.1. Impacts on an aggregate level

There was a competition element to the LIP grant system which set municipalities against each other in trying to achieve funding. This, in combination with more financial resources to back up their applications, made larger municipalities benefit more from LIP than others. Those municipalities that were already among the LA21 or environmental policy forerunners were also rewarded by this system. The competition element was also directly counter-productive regarding the ambition that ideas and results would spread between municipalities. Instead, the competition caused municipalities to be secretive and carefully guard their ideas, in direct opposition to the cooperative LA21 climate between municipalities, established during the 1990s (Dahlgren and Eckerberg, 2005b; cf. Berglund and Hanberger, 2003; Forsberg, 2005).

2.3.2. *Impacts on local sustainability work*

The vision of LIP as a second step in the LA21-process was present with at least some of its initiators from the very start, and some questions that might shed light on how LIP and LA21 have interacted were included in the 2004 survey. Approximately 40% of municipalities reported that LIP had a positive or a very positive impact on LA21, while few claimed that the LIP influence had been negative. However, the difference between municipalities with and without LIP funding is significant. While 63% of LIP-funded municipalities reported a positive impact, the proportion among those without funding is 4%. The most common answer among those without LIP funding is that they do not know what impact LIP has had, while 17% report that the impact has been negative (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a).

The fact that non-LIP funded municipalities are more critical towards the design of the grant system might seem obvious. Nevertheless, most municipalities did apply for funding and several stakeholders at the national level had hoped that the process of planning and applying would bring positive side effects for the local process even in municipalities that were not approved. They had hoped that the plans made would be a platform for future activities without grants (cf. Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005b; cf. Forsberg 2005). Based on the 2004 survey results, it seems that those hopes were not fulfilled. A contributing factor is probably that the experiences and results of LIP projects did not spread among municipalities as expected (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a). These findings are supported by

a study of eight non-LIP funded municipalities, which shows that even though the investment programme contributed to strengthening the status of sustainability politics in some municipalities, the negative effects of programme development and the rejection of programme proposals had a more profound impact and is the main reason why sustainability work in practice has come to a halt in several municipalities (Forsberg 2005).

2.3.3. *Top-down or bottom-up?*

In the 2004 survey, we also asked how the LIP and LA21 work had been carried out: in a top-down manner, a bottom-up or a combination of both. A clear pattern emerges: the LIP work has been carried out in a top-down fashion while LA21 uses a combination of both top-down and bottom-up strategies. Again, those respondents that do not know how the work has been carried out grows significantly from 2001 to 2004. For LA21 the share of responses that the work has been top-down is slightly increasing while fewer report a bottom-up or combination approach. Given that the LIP projects have been considered to be a part of, or a continuation of, the LA21 work, the character of LIP might have coloured the views on LA21. Another explanation is the growing number of municipalities with no activities to involve their citizens, which decreases the bottom-up element of LA21 (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a). Given the major physical investment profile that LIP had through its funding criteria, and pursued through the funding decisions, the participation of stakeholders that occurred in the LIP programme also steered away from the specifically

targeted groups in LA21, namely women and youth. According to LIP evaluations local business were the most frequent external participants in LIP, while local citizens and NGOs were largely absent (cf. Berglund and Hanberger 2003).

2.3.4. *The LIP-funded municipalities*

What, then, characterises those municipalities that succeeded in their applications for central government funding? Over all, the LIP-funded municipalities report deeper LA21 than those without LIP funding, both in terms of organisation, content and penetration. More of them have adopted an LA21 plan; implemented it in several sectors and in municipal structure planning; have employed LA21 coordinators; increased personnel resources; set aside financial resources for LA21; and taken action to involve local citizens such as a public forum. More than average report a high degree of involvement/commitment from all categories of actors and a higher degree of political unity (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a).

It is worth pondering, however, what came first. Evaluations of the LIP grant system show that municipalities that were approved for LIP funding had come further in their local environmental work than the average municipality, even before LIP (cf. Berglund and Hanberger 2003). We can also observe that in several areas the LIP-funded municipalities and those without LIP funding are approaching each other in 2004, compared to 2001. This is true for e.g. activities to involve local citizens, the provision of a forum for citizen ideas and opinions, the commitment of different

actors and some LA21 themes such as work in schools and preschools, grass root projects in housing areas and public health. These are “softer” issues that do not primarily bring investments of the kind that has dominated LIP. In other areas the differences between the two categories of municipalities remain, or are even reinforced, for instance, work on environmental indicators which can be explained by the strong focus on measurability of results in LIP. Hence, the differences that could be observed between LA21 active and other municipalities before LIP have remained over time and in some areas even been reinforced by the new funding, while the differences in other areas are reduced, primarily due to the fact that LIP-funded municipalities' activities in these areas have decreased (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a).

These results confirm tendencies seen early on, when the LIP programme started, that the practical allocation of funding within the investment programme had a clear bias towards ecological modernisation. Apart from activities related to environmental policy, LA21 included a greater emphasis on schools, day-care centres, grass-roots projects, lifestyle and social welfare. This difference was not as distinct in the LIP programme criteria as it was in practice. According to a follow-up by the Swedish National Audit Office, and other later studies, there were many examples where local priorities in the municipalities' applications for funding were changed in favour of the national goals and criteria, or where LIP changed the direction of local sustainability work generally (Eckerberg 2001; cf. Forsberg 2005).

2.4. Which municipalities remain active and why?

Even though LIP-funded municipalities have retained LA21 coordinators and monetary resources to a higher degree than the average municipality, the activity is even higher in another group of municipalities, funded or not, namely the Eco municipalities⁶. Among these, 68% have set aside financial resources for LA21 and the reduction in funds between 2003 and 2004 is significantly lower than in LIP-funded municipalities. The Eco municipalities also keep LA21 coordinators to a higher degree, 71% compared to 61% in LIP municipalities. They reported the highest degree of increased personnel and the lowest degree of reduced personnel since 2001. Many of them have taken action to involve their citizens in LA21, and have used more two-way communication means for this in the form of study groups, open meetings, visionary workshops and public forums. They display a more intense LA21 work in eight out of fifteen LA21 areas and the same level of activity as the LIP-funded municipalities in another six. Furthermore, a higher proportion of them report that the degree of integration of LA21 into municipal sectors is high or rather high, compared to both LIP municipalities and others (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a).

⁶ The Eco municipality association is a voluntary and non-profit network of municipalities, aimed at making all Swedish municipalities sustainable. Each member municipality is represented by one civil servant and one leading politician, to ensure that environmental issues are raised in the municipal organisation. Both politicians and civil servants exchange experiences and learn from each other's examples. In 2004, 26 % of the Swedish municipalities were members of the Eco municipality network.

LA21 is thus continuously a prioritized issue in the Eco municipalities. No more than 9% of them report that they do not know whether there is political unity on LA21 in their municipality, compared to 25% in LIP municipalities and 41% in municipalities without LIP funding. The political interest in LA21 is more stable over time than in other municipalities, and they have managed to run LIP with a combination of top-down and bottom-up approach. It is plausible that the municipalities that choose to join the Eco municipality network, with the obligations that entails, have a broader political interest in and support for these issues before hand and are thus less vulnerable to the impact of the project character of national initiatives. The standpoint of being an Eco municipality in itself seems to legitimize an engagement in LA21, which is reinforced over time as awareness and commitment to the issues leads to more resources set aside (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a).

Six municipalities in the 2004 survey reported increased financial resources for their LA21 work, even though they had not received any funds from the national grant systems LIP and KLIMP. They constituted a heterogenous group in respect to municipal types, sizes, geographical locations and demographic trends. The Eco municipalities dominated this small group or were proportionately represented depending on which stand one takes on the district councils of Stockholm⁷. Four reported high, or

⁷ Two of the cases are district councils of the city of Stockholm. The question is whether these should be categorized as members of the Eco municipality network or not, considering that the city of

relatively high, degree of political unity while the other two reported some degree of political unity. These municipalities enjoy a stronger support from local politicians and business than other municipalities. They have kept their LA21 coordinators and all of them have taken action to involve local citizens in 2004. Their LA21 work is primarily focused on child care and education in combination with renewable energy and biological diversity. They have thus kept a softer profile in their LA21 work (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a).

2.5. Has LA21 had its day?

As noted above, nearly a third of the Swedish municipalities stated in 2004 that the LA21 plan had had its day. That is almost twice as many as in 2001. The question that then arises is what the LA21 work of these particular municipalities is like, compared to the rest. Does the fact that the plan has had its day imply that LA21 has had its day too? (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a).

Compared to other Swedish municipalities, those who say that their LA21 plan no longer is active have fewer LA21 coordinators employed, set aside less financial resources for LA21 in 2003 and 2004 and have even less frequently taken action to involve their citizens. They also reported a lower degree of political

unity and 60% said that the political interest has decreased since 2001. Fewer than average think that LA21 has been integrated into municipal sectors and into municipal structure planning (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a).

The political leadership of LA21 in these municipalities resides to a higher degree with the environment and health board or equivalent bodies. In clearly environmental sectors such as environment and health, water and sewage, and thematic areas such as biological diversity and environmental management systems, these municipalities are as successful in integration and as active as the others. However, in the other areas they perform below average. The commitment of business and citizens is at par with the average municipality but lower amongst politicians and civil servants. Thus, it seems that these municipalities to a higher degree than average has retained a traditional environmental profile to their LA21 work. If this is a consequence of, or a reason for, the lack of political commitment and interest and limited resources is hard to say without a more qualitative study (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a).

According to open-ended answers in the 2004 survey, the term Agenda 21 is less frequently used because it is too much associated with narrow environmental issues, such as the recycling of waste, rather than sustainable development. Hence, some of the work continues, but under new labels and/or integrated into regular work. Amongst those that have commented on the forms of LA21, the most frequent comments concern the fact that work has become more oriented towards environmental quality objectives,

Stockholm is a member. The standpoint of the authors is that it seems more reasonable to regard them as members than not to. However, in this case, with so few observations, the effect of that standpoint is significant. Assuming that the Stockholm district councils should be categorized as Eco municipalities, four of the six cases were members of the network.

i.e. directed towards follow-up and indicators. The second most frequent comment is that they have moved from words to action through physical investments. Several municipalities also mention integration into the municipal organisation or into municipal sectors as a thematic LA21 area in itself. Amongst more general statements on the LA21 trends, the most frequent answer is that LA21 work has come to a halt, is fading or has been put on hold (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a).

Thus, it seems that we are witnessing two parallel developmental trends; on the one hand actual reductions of LA21 work and on the other a change of direction and content, and the initiation of a new phase (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a).

2.5.1. *The democratic element of LA21*

Broad participation in all decision making is stressed in chapter 23 of Agenda 21, and a democratic vision also permeates the quest for the bottom up approach to LA21 in Sweden. In practice, however, many LA21 coordinators have experienced difficulties in generating public interest in solving complex environmental problems and developing strategic municipal planning. It has proven particularly difficult to sustain such interest over time (Eckerberg 2001; cf. Forsberg 2002). As mentioned, over time Swedish municipalities invest less in activities to involve their citizens in LA21 work. This trend might be the result of an increased focus on internal integration into municipal organisations (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a). An in-depth study into the local sustainability work of four municipalities showed that some LA21

representatives at the local level perceived that the tools for institutionalising LA21, e.g. through the national environmental quality objectives and environmental management systems, might be difficult to combine with the bottom-up ideals (Forsberg 2002). However, the trend also seems to be linked to what resources are set aside for the work (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a).

Those municipalities that have retained their LA21 coordinators report more intense activity in all areas. No less than 69% have taken action to involve their citizens and 41% keep a public forum. They also report a higher degree of commitment and involvement than others, amongst NGOs, local politicians and civil servants. This indicates that the existence of a LA21 coordinator renders more participation. In the light of reduced financial and personnel resources it is not surprising that two-way communication between the municipal organisation and its citizens is generally dropping. Instead, one-way communication dominates municipalities' efforts to involve citizens, such as information materials to households and contacts with local media⁸ (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a).

The LIP-funded municipalities reduced their efforts to involve citizens more than they have reduced their activities generally, and have thus approached the level of other municipalities. Even if the LIP grants have generally helped to sustain a high degree of activities in LA21, its effect on LA21 as a democratic

⁸ Research shows that information sent to households is rarely read by others than those already convinced (Bennulf 1996).

process has thus not been lasting (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a).

2.5.2. *The future of Swedish LA21*

The future of LA21 in Sweden is strongly linked to the needs and priorities of the municipalities. Over time, there have been some notable changes. While lack of resources remains the most important obstacle, short-sighted political decision making and lack of commitment is increasingly mentioned. Possibly, this is linked to the initiated but not progressing integration of LA21 in regular work and different sectors that comes into conflict with other temporal viewpoints in politics and administration (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a). By contrast, lack of knowledge is no longer perceived as a significant problem. Perhaps the strong emphasis placed on education in sustainable development has indeed had an effect.

Amongst the non-LIP funded municipalities lack of commitment was more frequently mentioned as an obstacle than short-sighted political decision making. These municipalities report a lower degree of LA21 integration into municipal sectors and therefore ought not to have run into the problem of short-sighted decision making in relation to LA21 to the same degree as others. Furthermore, the LIP grants have probably worked as an injection into the sense of commitment in the municipal organisation, which explains why the lack of commitment is perceived as less of an issue in the LIP-funded municipalities (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a).

In those municipalities where the LA21 initiative resides with the MEC or the

Municipal Council, the lack of central government support and structural obstacles are perceived as more of a problem than the lack of commitment. The reason might be that these municipalities are one step ahead and could meet resistance outside the municipal realm of decision power rather than within (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a).

Still, and despite the massive LIP support, all municipalities ask for more financial resources. Many mention the need for a LA21 coordinator and continued support from central government to networking and incentives for long-term planning. This indicates that support for long-term institutionalisation is perceived to be missing, as is the setting of examples at the national level (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a, Aae-Redin 2004).

3. **HOW CAN A LASTING EFFORT BE PROMOTED?**

We believe that a long-term and lasting LA21 depends on the success of municipal cross-sectoral institutionalisation of sustainable development and on interaction between a bottom-up and top-down approach. As comparative studies of LA21 across Europe have shown, the combination of strong support from central government and political impetus at local authorities is crucial to its evolution, but to become institutionalised the democratic aspects are indeed one of the core issues (Lafferty and Eckerberg, 1998).

What can then be learnt from the Swedish experience? In the wake of UNGASS, Swedish municipalities were comparatively well equipped and

responded both quickly and broadly to the call for LA21. There are, however, signs that Swedish municipalities' commitment to LA21 has decreased over time, that the wide range of LA21 work has narrowed and that the bottom-up approach is gradually fading. To some degree this result can probably be attributed to the fact that some of the work on sustainable development has been renamed, but it hardly explains the entirety of reductions in activities we have observed in a series of surveys over time. Even if the municipalities themselves carry a lot of the responsibility for this development, we can also see a quest for further support from central and regional levels of government and this despite the substantial financial support that the LIP has provided (Dahlgren and Eckerberg 2005a).

3.1. Project or process?

To institutionalise LA21 requires support to process and long-term commitment. In practice, however, the LIP funding for local sustainability had an explicit project character (cf. SEPA, 2005). At the national level LIP was treated as an exception and a separate and highly irregular organisation was set up to handle the grant system. Part of the explicit motives for this organisation was the complexity of the programme which the initiators thought disqualified the regular institutions as trustees of its administration (cf. Dahlgren and Eckerberg, 2005b). It was also explicitly temporary in character, aiming at being an injection into or a kick-off for local initiatives and spanning the years 1998-2000 (cf. Lindh *et al*, 1997). The pro-

gramme was later extended until 2002 and the administration moved to SEPA⁹. The goal orientation of LIP is complex. It was meant to fit into the general state initiative to promote sustainable development through protection of the environment, efficient resource management and sustainable provision of natural resources. But there was also an employment goal; to help reduce the unemployment figures by half until year 2000¹⁰ (cf. Government bill 1997/98:1). As the administrative criteria and routines of the programme settled, a clear demand for measurability of results crystallised, which helped steer the programme towards its subsequent physical investment profile.

These project characteristics at the national level fed into and emphasised already existing and related project characteristics locally. At the municipal level, and through the grant decisions in each application case, the goals and measures of the local LIP programmes were over all short-term and quite technically specific. In an evaluation of LIP at the municipal level several municipal environment coordinators expressed that LIP was not an appropriate support for the attitudinal and behavioural changes needed for long-term sustainability work (cf. Berglund and Hanberger, 2003). Given the temporary character of the programme as such, the organisational solutions at the local level also turned out to be aimed at handling

⁹ An organisation that was later given responsibility for the new and narrower investment programme KLIMP, specifically targeting climate issues.

¹⁰ Subsequently, the employment goal was toned down.

LIP as a temporary exception. An in-depth study shows that in many cases local LIP coordinators were needed to coordinate the work and in municipalities where they lacked means to employ such extra resources, LIP sometimes supplanted LA21 work. The same study indicates that possible effects of LIP on the municipal organisation in terms of cross-sectoral internal environmental coordination were perceived as positive but temporary (Forsberg, 2005). Another study shows that some municipalities feel that LIP focused too much on single projects rather than strengthening comprehensive municipal programmes for sustainable development (Sköllerhorn and Hanberger, 2004).

The LIP funding has therefore redirected LA21 to become more technical and less bottom-up focused. Even if a majority of Swedish municipalities have adopted LA21 plans, this does not imply that they have a strategy for long-term follow-up and development of their sustainability policies. It has been difficult to maintain enthusiasm over time and political support is decreasing in many municipalities. In part, the local ad hoc solutions are linked to the voluntary character of LA21 that must compete for resources with compulsory municipal activities (cf. Forsberg, 2005; Forsberg, 2002).

3.2. Support for integration and democracy

There are signs in our survey study that the integration of LA21 into regular municipal sectors is slowing down. However, there are also signs that the

work on tools and infrastructure needed for such integration is gaining pace, with intensified work on indicators and focus on work within the municipal organisation. From an EPI point of view this is to be supported as it facilitates the EPI process and thus furthers the institutionalization of sustainable development efforts. In spite of this development, we believe that national support for this integration process needs to be intensified; a standpoint which is strengthened by the municipalities' descriptions of obstacles, needs and wants. Not least, the national level needs to show that what they expect from the local level in terms of cross-sectoral integration, they themselves can achieve. Understanding for the breakdown of the 'win-win' scenario of sustainable development at lower levels of government, and initiatives that support attempts to create incentives for potential 'losers', are also vital.

As for the participatory bottom-up element of LA21 we can see that the presence of a LA21 coordinator is a vital factor for success. We can also observe that the number of LA21 coordinators is decreasing and that many municipalities would like to see national financial support for such posts. When LA21 coordinators are no longer present it directly affects the commitment of different groups both within and without the municipal organisation and thus also the LA21 work. National support systems have so far not been very successful at supporting the long-term processes that the bottom-up approach implies, or the specific activities that facilitate participation. Rather, the support systems have in some cases even steered efforts away from the participatory elements of LA21.

Given potential tensions between tools for institutionalization and a bottom-up approach, and probable difficulties in institutionalizing the bottom-up element, efforts to support both these processes need to go hand-in-hand.

We conclude, therefore, in line with several other studies of LA21 across

Europe, that the institutionalisation of LA21 requires involvement of the social partners as well as mainstreaming sustainability within all decision making in the local authorities (Lafferty and Eckerberg, 1998; Evans *et al*, 2001; Evans *et al*, 2004) and that this demands much more than producing an LA21 plan or pursuing it as a short-term project.

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