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## **The diffusion of Local Agenda 21 in the Netherlands**

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# **The diffusion of Local Agenda 21 in the Netherlands**

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## **1. Introduction**

This paper addresses the diffusion of Local Agenda 21 (LA21) in the Netherlands. LA21 is a particular type of global policy. LA21 is based on chapter 28 of Agenda 21 and is a relatively simple appeal to local authorities all over the world to engage in a process with their community to formulate a LA21. Chapter 28 does not state what the content of a LA21 should be, this is left to the communities given their specific geographical, demographic, ecological and cultural characteristics. There is a strong voluntary aspect in taken up LA21. Although chapter 28 addresses all municipalities in the world and sets even as a goal that most municipalities should be involved by 1996, in practice world-wide only around 3000 municipalities are engaged. So it would be simplistic to see the implementation of LA21 as only an implementation process of an international treaty.

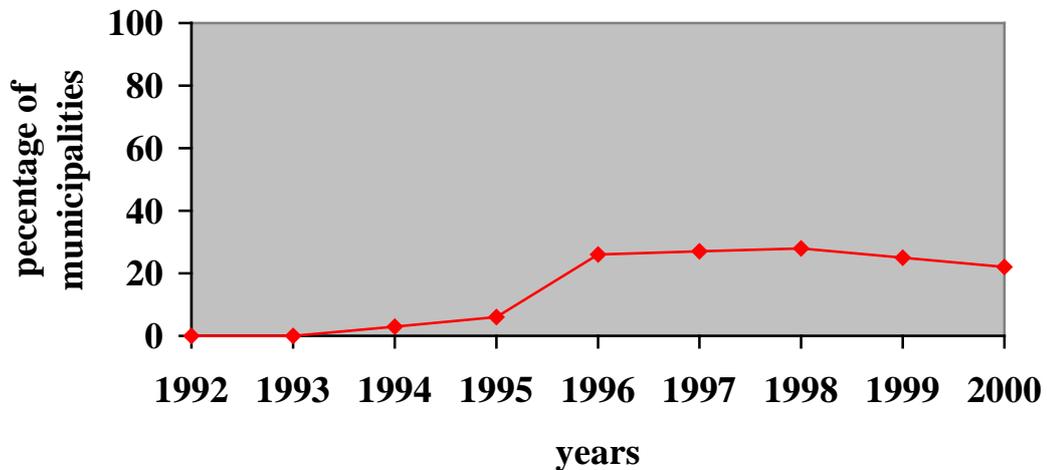
The aim of this paper is to raise attention for the aspect of 'interpretation' in transnational diffusion processes. The process of interpretation and meaning giving to LA21 is most crucial for the diffusion because interpretation precedes implementation. The understanding of LA21 diffusion in the Netherlands must begin with an analysis of the interpretation and introduction of LA21 as a policy initiative into the policy process. This given the specific policy context of an advanced country in environmental policy and sustainable development. The beliefs that the participants of the Dutch implementation process hold determines this process. Doubts about the value-added aspect and the confusion of LA21 with other 'innovations' in urban governance have biased the implementation of LA21 in the Netherlands.

We will argue in the paper that in the process of interpretation of LA21 key-actors in the Netherlands neglected another key identification characteristic namely a specific identification with (reference to) the Rio Summit and Agenda 21. The story line for the Dutch case is that the interpretation by key actors of LA21 as an initiative with an only limited added value to existing initiatives in Dutch political culture explains for a large part the current state of affairs.

## **2. The diffusion in four phases**

The diffusion of LA21 in the Netherlands is summarised in the following simple graph. We distinguish here between the initial reactions up to 1995, a second stage which started with a national campaign and municipal funding programme, a third stage in which this campaign was expanded and strengthened and a fourth stage in which local environmental policy enters a new era and earmarked funding ends. These stages are illustrated in the graph below. The first initial stage starts directly after the UNCED-conference in 1992. The start of the second stage is illustrated with a turning point in 1995 where the number of municipalities goes up very strongly. During the third stage this number very slowly rises. In the fourth and last stage, started on the 1 of January 1998 the number of LA21 municipalities is slowly decreasing. In each of the four stage the attitude of national government and municipalities towards LA21 is different.

## Diffusion of LA21 in the Netherlands



## 2. The initial stage

### 2.1 The run-up to RIO

In the preparation for the Rio conference several NGOs (f.i. Friends of the Earth Netherlands/*Vereniging Milieudéfensie*) and NGO-platforms (particular the Alliance for Sustainable Development and the Brazil 92 campaign) tried to raise attention for the preparations for the Rio Summit. In the lead up to UNCED, Dutch NGOs tried to stimulate and heighten interest within municipalities for global environmental problems and sustainable development.

The majority of municipalities remained pretty much on the sidelines in the preparations for RIO, with the exception of a particularly active but relatively small group, those involved in the 'Working for Cleaner World' campaign and active in the Climate Alliance. The Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG) participated in the preparations conducted by the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA) and in drafting the 'Oslo Declaration'. The association also represented Dutch municipalities in several of the initiatives and campaigns mentioned above.

On the eve of UNCED, Dutch municipalities possessed certain basic qualifications for promoting LA21: they were well ahead on environmental policy compared with other countries, and sustainable development had become a political issue; experience with an integrated approach and participation in environmental policy had been gained; and there was a tendency towards political and administrative modernisation. Almost immediately after the publication of *Our Common Future* in 1987, the Dutch government adopted the concept of 'sustainable development' as the major guideline for overall Dutch government policy. This concept was then incorporated into the first National Environmental Policy Plan (NEPP). There was great interest in the idea at the municipal level as well. Environmental issues played a major role during the local council elections of 1990, and sustainable development was an issue in many of the political programmes of the newly elected municipal councils. Considering the nature and scope of their environmental responsibilities, and also their own initiatives, Dutch

municipalities were at that time clearly among the most environmentally advanced in the world.

The second basic qualification was the attention being given to an integrated approach to Dutch environmental policy. The 'internal integration' of environmental policy was meant to break down the sectoral compartmentalisation of environmental policy (air, water, soil) into either more general themes, geographical areas, flows of materials or target groups. This internal integration was shaped not only by plans but also in institutions and laws such as the Environment Management Act, which replaced several different environmental laws. In addition, 'external integration' or cross-sectoral policy integration is a key element in Dutch environmental policy. Many policies at all levels of government have significant effects on the environment and underline the importance of intra-governmental and inter-governmental decision making. Since the first NEPP, much more attention has been devoted to this 'external integration of environmental policy': matters such as transport policy, spatial planning, agricultural policies, structural economic policy, water management, building regulations, energy policy and educational policy are to be harmonised with national environmental policy (States General, 1990), not only at national level but at the provincial and municipal levels as well.

The third basic qualification is the involvement of stakeholders in making and implementing environmental policy. The Netherlands has a highly consensus-based social structure. It has a long tradition of government consultation with various social groups, institutionalised in tripartite forums such as the Social Economic Council (*Sociaal Economische Raad*, SER) in which environmental questions are incorporated into social and economic issues. As a part of this tradition of consensus building, all relevant parties are involved in environmental policy planning.

A prime aspect of Dutch environmental policy in this respect is the 'target group approach'. After a framework of national environmental objectives has been formulated in the National Environmental Policy Plans, target groups and their representatives are closely involved in all further stages of the policy process. Consultative structures between the government and the industrial organisations acting on behalf of the polluters (i.e. the target groups) have been established. They define the tasks for individual industrial sectors within this framework and formalise them in covenants (agreements) and other guidelines.

Target group policies can also play an active part in municipal environmental policy planning. The planning system set out in the Environment Management Act proposed the concept of open planning, with 'open' referring to the involvement of the relevant stakeholders early on in the planning process. This is designed to increase the scope and recruiting power of planning, which in turn is related to the goal of 'internalising' environmental responsibility among the plan's target groups. Before UNCED, it was not unusual to involve target groups at the municipal level when drawing up environmental strategies, but this occurred in only a minority of municipalities and involved relatively limited methods. The majority of the municipalities relied simply on consultations on draft plans (Coenen, 1998a).

The fourth important basic qualification is the trend towards the modernisation of political and administrative working methods, or the search for new ways of making policy which (presumably) are better suited to people's demands. The dramatic drop in turnout for the March 1990 election prompted many municipalities to take action. This usually involved changing their methods of communication with the public. Social scientists refer to these methods as 'interactive policy making', 'co-production of policy', or strategic 'bottom-up' policy making. A generally accepted diagnosis of the problem was an over-formalised and closed municipal 'policy style' and an inward-looking public administration. The policy style was found to be out of line with the more general changes in relations between municipalities and their citizens. Instruments were introduced to find out what people think and want, such as referendums or forms of opinion polling and market research. Through a more communicative approach to policy making people were brought into the policy-making process at the outset rather than when the draft plans have been completed.

## **2.2 The diffusion of LA21 in the initial stage**

The *initial stage* of diffusion period extends from the UNCED-conference to the beginning of 1995. During this initial stage there was quite a difference between the reactions to Agenda 21 and Local Agenda 21. The initial communications and documents issued after Rio are mainly concerned with the consequences of UNCED at the national level. In July 1993, Parliament was presented with an overview of the changes deemed necessary in Dutch policies and law (States General 1992-1993, number 22031, 16). The departments responsible had compared present policies with the contents and prescriptions of Agenda 21. The main conclusion was that the goals and actions of Agenda 21 were, to a significant degree, already being pursued under current policies in the Netherlands. It was also pointed out, however, that there were numerous recommendations and actions that still had to be put into effect. On the whole, these documents and communications devoted relatively little attention to the role of the municipalities and provinces. Municipalities were mentioned as one of the several major groups which had an important role to play in implementing policy but were not given the same amount of attention as other groups (the young, for example). The complete version of Agenda 21 was translated into Dutch and disseminated with other information to the 'major groups'.

The Netherlands did not establish a National Council for Sustainable Development because the policy planning procedures (NEPP) already involved various government and non-governmental actors and agencies. Moreover, there was no separate Dutch implementation plan for the Rio commitments.

There were, however a number of pioneers among the Dutch municipalities. There are only a few cases where the initiative for an LA21 (usually related to the previously mentioned local campaigns for sustainable development in the run-up to Rio) came from the bottom up (Roosendaal, Etten-Leur). In some cases, the pioneering municipality gave no indication of wanting to become involved in the initiative at all, whereas in others the first steps were taken by enthusiastic aldermen or local authority officers (The Hague, Schiedam). Some of the pioneering LA21 initiatives substantially influenced later activities in the Netherlands. The Hague, which began its LA21 process in 1994, deserves a special mention, as does a pilot project in the province of Noord-Brabant<sup>1</sup> where an LA21 initiative was launched by 20 municipalities in November 1994.

### 2.3 Explaining the diffusion in the initial stage

The idea of LA21 was initially received with little enthusiasm by Dutch municipalities. One reason for this was the feeling that local government was already doing a great deal in the environmental area – to the point of leading the international field. There was a misconception that LA21 required little more than what Dutch municipalities were already doing. Local authorities could not immediately see the ‘added value’ of LA21. The Dutch umbrella organisation for local authorities, the Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG), early on made the claim that Dutch municipalities were in fact indirectly complying with Agenda 21 (Dordregter, 1994). Despite this claim the VNG has taken some initiatives to promote LA21 as a more specific activity; one of these was a conference organised in June 1994, in collaboration with a society of environmental professionals, on the development of municipal environmental policy within the context of the second NEPP. A number of workshops were held at an environmental education and information conference, and LA21 was among the topics covered. Further the VNG took on the role of auditor to working groups on LA21 within up the NGO umbrella organisations set up after UNCED (see below).

Second, the municipalities felt that they were already overstretched trying to fulfil the devolved regulatory tasks and responsibilities under the first NEPP. Little time, capacity and energy were left to develop new initiatives. During the initial stage after Rio and until 1995 there was an ‘unwritten agreement’ between the VNG and the environment ministry that municipalities were not prepared to take on any extra tasks at that time.

Lastly, the general atmosphere of environmental enthusiasm had begun to decline in the Netherlands and media coverage, public interest and political attention were falling off before the final stage of the run-up to UNCED.

Why were there still LA21-pioneers in the Netherlands? This of course depends on the individual pioneers but a similarity was the involvement in pre-UNCED campaigns. These campaigns raised attention for LA21 among local groups, so-called sustainable development platforms, civil servants and municipal alderman. All in all about 30 municipalities took serious initiatives in 1993 and 1994. In January 1991 the Vereniging Milieudefensie started a greenhouse-campaign aimed at consumers and municipalities. Later the Climate-Alliance was incorporated into this greenhouse-campaign, which itself became part of a wider campaign called ‘Work towards a cleaner world’. Third world organisations (NCO, NOVIB) participated in this campaign, together with the environmental movement (Vereniging Milieudefensie, Stichting Milieu-educatie), the ministry of Environment and the Association of municipalities (VNG). The VNG called all his members to join this campaign held between Earth day (22nd April) and the World Environment Day ( 5 June) 1991 (Circular, 8 March 1991).

A similar 92-campaign was held dedicated to the UNCED-conference and especially directed to the topic ‘climate change’ and the possibilities for a local greenhouse policy. It involved a conference on municipalities in a sustainable world, the founding of local groups, a model-resolution including an action program to be signed by municipalities and actions with postcards supported by international networks (World Life Fund, Friends of the earth) .

Within the general 92-campaign 'Work towards a cleaner world' the UNCED-part was very much directed towards the founding of local platforms. Local platforms received some seed money (NLG f 5,000), a information package and support by Regional Centres for Development Co-operation (COS) and Provincial Consultancies for Nature and Environment-education (Provinciale Consultschappen Natuur- en Milieueducatie). The involvement of the municipality was a condition for support<sup>2</sup>

### **3. The earmarked funding period**

#### **3.1 The diffusion in the earmarked funding period**

There was a turning point in the attitude of national and local government towards LA21 in the beginning of 1995. This change in attitude towards LA21 was marked by a conference held in March 1995 called 'Working with Agenda 21', which received considerable interest: besides the 400 municipal politicians and administrators attending 150 more were on the waiting list.

The second NEPP (launched in March 1994) can be seen as the post-UNCED document in which the government takes a close look at future Dutch responsibilities with respect to Agenda 21. The second NEPP makes more direct reference to LA21 and to the role of the municipalities in its implementation. As a result, key aspects of the idea of a Local Agenda 21 were included in the second Central Plan for Enacting the National Environmental Policy Plan (March 1995). And later in 1995 in the new VOGM funding programme for municipal environmental policy as a separate action. This funding program can be seen as the start of *second stage* in the diffusion of LA21 in the Netherlands with *earmarked funding* for municipalities to set up an LA21. The total budget for municipalities carrying out a local Agenda 21 was about 94 million guilders. To be eligible for this financial assistance the following conditions had to be met:

- a dialogue with local target groups leading to concrete results had to be in place;
- an action plan must have been completed in 1995;
- nature and environmental education had to be included in the activity; and
- the activity had to add new elements to the action taken by the municipality.

More than 150 municipalities chose LA21 as a specific VOGM task. All VOGM tasks had to be performed to an adequate level by the reference date of 1 January 1998. For LA21 this meant that, in principle, the LA21 process should have started and that there should be a guarantee for continuation of the process.

#### **3.2 Explaining the diffusion in the earmarked funding period**

As a result of the VOGM funding within the more than 140 municipalities that choose LA21 as VOGM policy priority, the larger part were starting an LA21 process. If the about 30 municipalities that started before the VOGM-funding are considered as the pioneers, the rest of the group of 143 municipalities, are the followers.

What factors influenced the rapid diffusion of LA21? Was it only the availability of the ear-marked money? Here we discuss shortly the municipalities that picked up LA21 as either a pioneer or follower. Were these the bigger, more progressive and left-wing dominated, more global oriented municipalities? Were there any regional differences? And what were their motives to choose for LA21?

The first relevant factor is the *number of inhabitants*. Relatively more (60 %) of the larger Dutch municipalities (over 100,000 inhabitants) chose for LA21 as an action point than small (beneath 30.000 inhabitants) municipalities (17%). Approximately 84 % (547 out of 653 in 1993) are smaller than 30,000 inhabitants and only 20 ( 3 %) are bigger than 100,000 inhabitants.

A second factor characteristic is the *political colour* of the local council and the Alderman responsible for environmental affairs. LA21 was not specifically chosen by left-wing dominated local councils nor by municipalities with a left-wing Alderman responsible for environmental affairs<sup>3</sup>

Research shows some regional differences in the choice for LA21 (Coenen, 1998a). There are probably two reasons for these differences. Firstly in some provinces like Noord-Brabant NGO's have been very active in stimulating LA21. Secondly because municipalities have to co-operate in regions, consisting of several municipalities. The reason for this co-operation in regional groups of municipalities is the minimum scale (70,000 inhabitants) required for adequate capacity and expertise. In municipal funding there is a bonus for municipalities who co-operate in such regions. There are over 50 regions. But regional agreements on co-operation can sometimes mean that if the majority of the municipalities in a certain region want to choose for an LA21 the minority has to follow.

Did the fore-runners in environmental policy in Dutch municipalities choose for an LA21? The Ministry of environment ( 10 September 1993) published a list which divided all the municipalities into three categories. Those municipalities which the Environmental Inspection expected to reach the BUGM-targets for an adequate environmental policy performance (achievers), those who were not expected to meet this deadline (stragglers), and those who kept behind at this moment (strugglers). One would expect that the municipalities which have their permit-giving and -control on an adequate level, in particular would be the first to be interested in LA21. Surprisingly enough, research (Coenen, 1998a) shows that of the 110 municipalities with more than 30.000 inhabitants relatively more strugglers than achievers opted for LA21.

Finally a factor that influences the diffusion could be the involvement of Dutch municipalities in international initiatives We compared the group who choose for LA21 with 68 municipalities who did not choose for LA21. Only 54 % of the municipalities which were involved in international initiatives like the Climate Alliance and the Aalborg Charter chose for an LA21, compared with 72.% of the other municipalities who were not involved.

In a telephone survey (CSTM, 1996) all the 43 bigger municipalities (over 30,000 inhabitants) were asked for their motives to choose for LA21 as a VOGM action point. We broke their motives down in nine categories. The responsible civil servants who were interviewed named one or more of these motives.

Policy continuation. LA 21 was chosen because it was seen as a logical consequence of an already established policy in the Environmental Policy Plan or the Political Program of the Alderman. This motive is largely connected with the nature- and environmental education component of the LA21 VOGM-tasks.

New possibilities. LA21 was seen as an opportunity to apply innovative environmental policy. Innovation was especially mentioned in the context of dialogue and participation.

VOGM-stimulation. The VOGM-funding was mentioned as a motive.

Local stimulation. The motive was pressure from local groups (political parties, environment and development groups).

Civil servants. Civil servants pushed the subject on the political agenda.

Regional tuning. Other regional co-operating municipalities wanted to make the choice for LA21, which more or less obliged the municipality to make the same choice.

Easiest choice. LA21 looked as being the easiest of the VOGM-tasks to carry out.

Membership. Membership of for instance the Climate Alliance made LA21 a logical option.

Special interest. The motive to choose for LA21 is based on a special interest in one of the VOGM-aspects of LA21, as for instance environmental education or environmental communication.

Note that the VOGM ( actually getting money) was seldom mentioned. Policy continuation and new possibilities were given as the main reasons to start with LA21.

## **4. Intensification of the VOGM campaign**

### **4.1 Diffusion during the VOGM-period**

As the *third stage* of the diffusion of LA21 in the Netherlands, we can identify a intensification of the VOGM campaign. There were two main reasons for this: (1) dissatisfaction with the processes already begun in the VOGM municipalities, and (2) a desire to further promote LA21 among the municipalities which had not chosen this action. This third phase can be characterised as one of clearing up bottlenecks. A large part of the work was taken up by the Platform for Sustainable Development (PDO), a new umbrella NGO audited and subsidised by national government in which the two main umbrella organisations, the Alliance for Sustainable Development and the Brazil 1992 campaign merged. The PDO functioned as a forum for discussions between a wide variety of independent Dutch organisations with the goal of promoting and achieving sustainable development. The PDO has published two widely disseminated books on LA21 (PDO, 1993, 1994) and also published a newsletter. At the beginning of 1994 the Dutch LA21 Steering Group was formed. It is aided and co-ordinated by the PDO. At the beginning of 1994 the LA21 Steering Group declared that its goal now was to achieve a broad-based LA21 process in all Dutch municipalities within the next five years (Duurzaam, 20 March 1996). In a progress report produced in December 1995 the Steering Group was also critical of developments in those municipalities which had opted for the LA21 action. LA21 processes were found to be slow in getting started. They often lacked sufficient political backing and support from outside the environment department, and so became restricted to environmental topics, and left out the global perspective and North-South dimension of sustainable development. In a new campaign, advisory teams were assembled to visit municipalities on request, and regional meetings were organised where pioneering municipalities could inform other municipalities about the added value of LA21. New initiatives were also being taken by national government to resolve bottlenecks at the municipal level. A committee of representatives from the ministries for development co-operation, the environment and foreign affairs developed some new initiatives. In the second half of 1996 a major effort was put into developing a training programme for local government officers (IPP, 1996).

The VNG claimed that Agenda 21 is not restricted to the municipalities that are formally engaged in LA21 under the VOGM funding scheme, in line with earlier views that Dutch municipalities were in fact indirectly complying with Agenda 21 (Dordregter, 1994), and that a number of municipalities are working on LA21 without using the name itself (VNG, 1996). There are clear similarities with the policy formulation and implementation aspects of some of the other VOGM actions and in other aspects of municipal environmental policy making. Examples from the VOGM programme are sustainable building projects and energy conservation. Other examples include local mobility plans and neighbourhood policy making.

Despite their claim that LA21 was broader diffused in the Netherlands than the formal LA21-municipalities, the VNG was actively involved in resolving information bottlenecks in the implementation of LA21 and encouraging municipalities to take up the process. Parallel to the training course mentioned above, the VNG published and widely distributed a book on LA21 in July 1996. This addresses not only the formal LA21 process but also working in the general spirit of LA21 based on collective experiences.

On 1 January 1996 the Platform for Sustainable Development merged with a similar organisation for international co-operation to form the National Commission for International Co-operation and Sustainable Development (NCDO). Around 50 NGOs from all sectors of society participate in this organisation to stimulate the debate on sustainable development at the national level. The Commission also consults with the government on issues concerning international meeting such as the CSD. Although the sustainable development and international co-operation fall under separate programmes and budgets, international co-operation has become more prominent in stimulating LA21. First, through the creation of the new fund for local NGOs. Second, the through a big evaluation conference combining two separate conferences, one on 25 years of international municipal government co-operation and one on LA21. Third, by starting the New World campaign which calls upon local NGOs to become involved in LA21.

## **4.2 Explaining the diffusion during the VOGM-period**

The intensification of LA21-campaigns points to the observation that funding and the availability of money is helpful but not enough. Especially because the VOGM-funding related LA21 with 'plans of approaches' and favoured 'concrete projects' through a LA21-guideline issued by the Inspectorate which functioned for some municipalities as pseudo-regulation. Even among the fore-running municipalities LA21 officers (CSTM, 1998) identified several barriers:

- \* capacity in terms of lack of man power, resources but also in experiences with interactive policy making;
- \* a small societal basis for LA21 leading to 'green ghetto' participation (only traditional 'green' organisations) or a lack of representativeness (e.g. the lack of business involvement);
- \* disturbed relation with local groups from past experiences and a negative attitude towards the local authority in general;
- \* lack of internal government officials support;
- \* lack of political support and back-up;
- \* unclear scope and meaning of the LA21-proces and its influence on decision making

Pioneering cities show that it is very difficult to avoid LA21 becoming a separate process with weak links to ongoing planning and policy processes (Andringa, 1998). Many good municipal sustainable development initiatives such as sustainable building and green transport often do not become, or become associated with, a Local Agenda 21 activity. Some municipalities try to link LA21 with their non-mandatory environmental planning process, but this is then largely limited to environmental policy.

The problem is that through the VOGM-funding programme, which is an environmental policy funding scheme, LA21 is still widely considered to be an environmental initiative. Consequently also the global dimension is very weak. Much attention is given to quality of life issues such as crime rates, litter and dogs fouling the pavement, and several organisations have raised serious reservations about a strong international dimension to LA21; global issues are considered 'a bridge too far'.

## **5. The post-VOGM period**

### **5.1 The diffusion after the earmarked funding**

The last stage of diffusion we discuss here is the period after the VOGM. The formal end of the earmarked environmental VOGM funding was on 1 January 1998 and rounding of the subsidising process took a large part of 1998.

The publication of the third NEPP in 1998 ushered in a new era for LA21.

Discussions between national government, the VNG and individual municipalities have emphasised the possibilities of LA21 as an integral framework for sustainable development by broadening municipal environmental policy to encompass wider sustainability issues (NEPP 3, 1998: 69, 83). During 1997 the environment ministry and the NCDO (the newest umbrella organisation) established a new fund to help local NGOs become involved in LA21. Local groups, organisations or individuals who want to work on an LA21 for their municipality could apply for funding. And during the 1998 municipal elections the NCDO tried to raise interest in sustainability and LA21 as an election issue.

After the ending of the ear-marked funding both pessimistic and optimistic views of the future of LA21 circulated among policy professionals and in literature. The pessimistic view feared that municipal environmental policy in general, and LA21 specifically, is not institutionalised enough to survive the battle for budgets with other, often more established, municipal policy fields if funds for LA21 or not longer earmarked. The more optimistic view is based on the new 'spirit of the age' in Dutch government: LA21 fits in very well with the growing importance of interest groups at the local level. According to the third NEPP and high ranking officials at the environment ministry LA21 can and will become *the* integral framework for sustainable municipal policy.

## 5.2 The status of implementation of LA21 in the Netherlands at its high-point

We will sum up<sup>4</sup> the status of LA21 at the end of the last century, which could well be LA21 at its high point. In the auditing process of the VOGM-funding by the Environmental Inspectorate progress of LA21 was monitored. Numbers on LA21-initiatives can be confusing in the Netherlands because during the VOGM-period (1996-1998) through redivision of the municipalities the total number went down from over 600 to about 540. The figures over the last year are based on self-reports of 545 municipalities and 16 Amsterdam city districts. On the basis of the Inspectorate - survey (1999) about 80% of the municipalities that choose for LA21 as a VOGM-tasks had a so-called 'plan of approach', which was a formal requirement for funding. A least 26 municipalities that did not choose for LA21 within the VOGM-funding made or were making a LA21 'plan of approach'<sup>5</sup>.

The municipalities were asked in how far the following elements were part of there 'plan of approach' (Inspectorate, 1998):

- vision on local sustainable development  
63%
- relation with international solidarity 59%
- relation with policies within different municipal departments 63%
- the shape of the dialogue with citizens, companies and societal organisations 78%

About 60% of the VOGM municipalities and about 37 others had made a separate policy document for 'nature and environment education', which was a closely related task in the VOGM-funding.

It is difficult to get a complete picture of the implementation of these 'plans of approach'. At least 57% of the VOGM municipalities and about 22 others reported actual implementation of projects and activities from there 'plan of approach'. Within the framework of the VOGM-funding 'end terms' for an adequate level of VOGM-implementation were formulated. The Inspectorate concluded that 74% of the municipalities reached an adequate level at the beginning of 1998 and 21% would reach this level during 1998. 5% of the municipalities could be considered as serious laggards. Another 26 municipalities that did not choose for LA21 within the VOGM expected to reach an adequate level before or during 1998.

On the basis of literature (Coenen, 1998, CSTM, 1998, ERM, 1999a, Brijer, 1997) we summarise some typical characteristics of the Dutch LA21's:

- participation processes are very diverse and range from limited consultation to structural participation platforms;
- in general LA21 take the form of activity-agendas, visioning processes are limited to a very small part of the municipalities;
- the content of LA21 concentrates often on issues from the surrounding environment like dog dirt and litter or on concrete projects in areas like sustainable building or energy saving.

The typical characteristics have some consequences for LA21 in the Netherlands compared with the criteria for a LA21 (Lafferty and Eckerberg, 1998):

- integration of ecological, economic and social aspects of sustainability is very limited, LA21 is mainly concerned with the issue of environment;

- the global dimension gets relatively little attention in Dutch LA21's;
- links with existing decision making procedures are weak which makes LA21 often an isolated activity.

## **6 Future outlook and conclusions**

### **6.1 LA21 slowly fading away in the Netherlands?**

What is the short-term perspective for the further development and institutionalisation of LA21 in the Netherlands? In an earlier stage (Coenen, 1998a) the Dutch situation for the implementation of LA21 was characterised as very fertile because the baseline conditions looked very promising. Dutch municipalities were well ahead with environmental policy, sustainable development had become a political issue and experiences with participation in environmental policy had been gained.

In a recent national workshop (March 1999) in the Netherlands on the future of Local Agenda 21 (LA21) it was concluded that the body of ideas behind LA21 were widely supported by the directly involved key-actors on the national level for the implementation of LA21, being the ministry for the Environment (VROM), the Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG) and the NGO umbrella organisation, the National Committee on International Co-operation and Sustainable Development (NCDO). Outside this key-actors the body of ideas are considered vague and the implementation is a subject of discussion by others, among them a large part of the municipalities (ERM, 1999b). The discussion is largely about the added value of LA21 to already existing initiatives in the area of local sustainable policies and changes in local democracy.

Although still municipalities are entering the ranks of Dutch LA21 municipalities, under the influence of active NGOs and local sustainable developments platforms, there is always the serious threat of LA21 fading away slowly. Some municipalities are quitting the process but this is not the largest problem. A larger group is renaming or re-labelling LA21 for several reasons. Sometimes for political reason, an Alderman of another political party changing the political inheritance, sometimes just because of the negative tone of the label LA21.

Since 1999 the key-actors VNG, the Ministry and the NCDO have been negotiating about a new, joint strategy for a further diffusion of LA21 in the Netherlands. Because there was a deadlock in this process, several NGOs wrote a letter to the minister expressing the concern about the future of LA21. In a recent answer (September 2000) the minister places LA21 in several developments on local sustainable development and concludes that a separate policy document on the future of LA21 is less desirable at this moment of time.

However there are some parallel developments that could lead to new impulses for LA21 in the Netherlands. Firstly, there is new funding for provincial programs in the field of communication and education on sustainable development. Part of these policies could be stimulating LA21. Secondly national government is preparing a fourth national environmental policy plan. This plan will give new attention to the position of citizens in environmental policy.

## 6.2 Explaining the danger of LA21 fading away: three processes of re-labelling

Why is LA21 in danger of slowly fading away in the Netherlands? We will argue that the perspective that LA21 will slowly fade out in the Netherlands instead of further spreading is not because of the ‘classical’ implementation barriers we sketched above, although they are very important to, but because of the views that participants in the participation processes hold on the position of LA21 in local democracy and local environmental policy.

In the Netherlands LA21 was not a turning point in policy like it was in other countries like Great Britain. The national story line for the Dutch case is that the interpretation by key actors of LA21 as an initiative with an only limited added value to existing initiatives in Dutch political culture explains for a large part the current state of affairs. This has to be seen in the context of the Netherlands as a advanced country in environmental policy and sustainable development which at the one hand creates excellent baseline conditions for implementing LA21 but at the same time places heavy burdens on the interpretation of LA21 as a new and worthwhile initiative.

We will argue that LA21 is in a constant danger of being re-labelled to other initiatives that resemble LA21, but without a key identification characteristic namely a specific identification with (reference to) the Rio Summit and Agenda 21.

There are three processes of re-labelling LA21:

- LA21 as ‘political renewal’ or local target group policy;
- LA21 as an administrative innovation;
- LA21 as broad-based environmental policy.

### *LA21 as ‘political renewal’ or local target group policy;*

Firstly LA21 is interpreted as closely linked to or even an exponent of Dutch political renewal. LA21 is identified with the crisis in local democracy and the need for more interactive policy making instead of being an important part of the pathway towards sustainable development that asks from all societal actors collaborative efforts. This given the specific policy context of an advanced country in environmental policy and sustainable development.

The key motives for the so called political renewal (‘bestuurlijke vernieuwing’) were the low local election turn-out in combination with the disinterest of the voters with municipal politics. This disinterest was shown from voting behaviour, dominated by national issues and national parties voters preference and satisfaction with local government together with a lack of interest to get involved in local politics (Coenen, 1998a). In particular the low turn-out at the 1990 local elections (at 62 per cent) lead to many activities in the field of ‘political renewal’ Almost 96 per cent of Dutch municipalities took up initiatives under the flag of political and administrative renewal (Gilsing, 1995).

The discussion on the value-added perspective of LA21 in the Netherlands has to be placed in this changing institutional context of local democracy. The argument for LA21 is linked with the need to overcome the crisis in local democracy. Further LA21 is interpreted as a specific local variant of interactive policy making with target groups. The surplus value of LA21 is seen as creating support for local sustainable policy, which is a basic premise for Dutch interactive policy making and the target group approach.

#### *LA21 as just another administrative innovation*

Apart from this search for political renewal there are processes of administrative renewal where the position of the citizens is secondary to the improvement of the quality of policies and policy making processes. LA21 is sometimes labelled as nothing more than one of these innovations or LA21 is confused with these innovations. Important related innovations in local government that touch on certain aspects of LA21 are:

- social regeneration and major town policy;
- neighbourhood policies;
- visioning processes;
- innovations in (local) environmental policy.

One consequence is that some municipalities adhere to the idea that they already 'doing' LA21 because they are involved in several innovations with resemblance's to LA21-activities. A second consequence is that LA21 is narrowed down as just another innovation of equal importance and status, forgetting about its roots in the RIO-conference. Even the Ministry of environment has difficulties fitting in LA21 with all these other innovations and international innovations e.g. habitat-agendas (ERM, 1998a).

#### *LA21 as broad-based environmental policy*

The subsequent funding schemes in the Netherlands (BUGM and FUN-funding and its successor the VOGM-funding) between 1990 and 1998 had its impact on the local self-responsibility for the environment. At the one hand after all the new funded activities at the local level, municipalities claim that LA21 is already there because they implement local sustainable policies. The interpretation of LA21 is then restricted to its content in the form of a large number of local sustainable initiatives that municipalities were taking in various fields like energy, sustainable building and planning, traffic, etc.

At the other hand as we have seen before, because the VOGM-funding was in the first place environmental funding, it narrowed down LA21 to environmental policy. It was implemented by the municipal environmental department and seen by other departments as an 'environmental activity' (Coenen, 1998a). In the VOGM-funding LA21 was closely linked with environmental information and 'nature and environment'-education. According to the NCDO the VOGM-funding had a positive effect in raising attention in LA21 in the Netherlands but not on its content (speech 17 March 1999 Van der Stoel, chair NCDO). This is also related with a difference in ambition between municipalities and the NCDO. An aspect of the top-down national funded implementation was that LA21 became as an environmental and isolated activity (Coenen, 1998a). In the following phase of bottom-up implementation after the ending of the funding LA21 as a transition process towards sustainable development is seen as too ambitious. The VNG and many municipalities claim that

that LA21 should start from broad-based environmental policy directed towards concrete project on the quality of the ‘immediate surroundings’ before local sustainable strategies can be implemented. The substance of a LA21 should start with addressing the quality of the immediate surroundings as a precondition for sustainable development. LA21 gets a specific interpretation of it’s substance as an initiative that has at least to strike a balance between the quality of the immediate surroundings (the here and now) and sustainable development (there (global) and than (future generations)).

For LA21 as a particular type of global policy, the crucial characteristic to distinguish LA21 from other activities is a specific reference to RIO. If LA21 is to be understood as simply anything which resembles ‘environmental policy’, the idea will quickly deteriorate into a catch-all category with little potential for either evaluation or cross-national comparison and analysis (Lafferty, 1999). In the Netherlands as part of top-down VOGM implementation of environmental policy, LA21 gets interpreted as a national activity. Some municipalities view LA21 as a task they perform for the ministry and not on the basis of the appeal in Chapter 28. The difficulty than becomes that some municipalities start questioning the value-added aspect of doing something there supposedly already doing under a new name or label.

An important point of discussion between the key-actors in the balance between the quality of the immediate surroundings (the here and now) and sustainable development (there and than, referring to the global aspect and future generations. For the VNG the balance strikes towards the quality of immediate surroundings as a precondition for sustainable development. For the NCDO the balance strikes in the other way direction. LA21 is about the sustainable future of a municipality. The ministry tried to combine both perspectives in the NEPP-3 (1998).

### **6.3 Conclusions**

The Dutch LA21 diffusion process of LA21 shows the importance and restrictions of funding for a new policy innovation at the one hand and the importance of the interpretation step in diffusion processes at the other hand.

The current state of affairs and future development of LA21 in the Netherlands can be understood as a ‘filtering’ process, whereby the new innovation (LA21) is interpreted and acted upon within the context of existing policy discourses. From 1995-1998, LA21 was funded as a voluntary task within the VOGM-programme. Over 140 municipalities applied for this funding. During the 1990s, nearly all municipalities have been engaged in political renewal as a result of a widely perceived crisis in local democracy. Numerous municipalities have been experimenting with innovations in local governance.

The interpretation that LA21 strongly resembles existing innovations leads to doubts about the ‘added value’ of LA21. The new innovation is widely seen as simply a ‘new label for old wine’. The top-down implementation of the VOGM-funding of environmental policy – which included LA21 as a key option – was nonetheless viewed as a national, not a global, policy. Furthermore, until 1998, the funding of LA21 within the VOGM programme, made case LA21 as a innovation for ‘environmental protection’, not sustainable development. The central funding led to an emphasis on concrete activities and projects, rather than to holistic change. After 1998, the LA21-process is increasingly perceived as an overly ambitious innovation towards sustainable development. Many municipalities react by focusing on the

quality of household living conditions as a step-up towards sustainable development. LA21 thus becomes enmeshed in existing policy and innovation discourses, resulting in either fragmentation of the overall goals, or an association of LA21 with a need for innovation in local government in general.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The project's aim was to promote and gain experience in maintaining discussion between local NGOs, businesses, citizens and local authorities. The project is facilitated by a group of environment and development NGOs and is financed by the provincial government, the National Committee for Development Education and the environment ministry. This pilot project has resulted in a scheme for operationalising the LA21 VOGM action. A leaflet was widely disseminated through the 'Working Files LA21' of the Joint Platform for Sustainable Development. The pilot project has substantially influenced the schemes for LA21 and later publications.

<sup>2</sup> This led to 25 new platforms besides 13 already existing platforms. An important output was the learning process in co-operation between municipalities and NGO's and the publicity it gave (COS, Provinciale Consultschappen Natuur- en Milieu-educatie , 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Dominance was indicated on the basis of the two largest parties in the local council. Left-wing dominated are the PVDA, D66 dominated councils. Right -wing are the VVD, small Christian local parties dominated councils.

<sup>4</sup> This overview is based on surveys (Brijer, 1997), self-reports of the municipalities within the framework of the VOGM-funding (Inspectorate, 1997; Coenen, Seinstra and Teunissen, 1999), interviews with 15 'best' cases municipalities (CSTM, 1998) and policy documents from about 25 municipalities.

<sup>5</sup> Many municipalities, especially the larger ones, choose for more than the obliged four out of nine VOGM action points. The voluntary chosen actions points were often shaped the same way as the chosen action points of other municipalities.