

LA21 as a new heading for sustainable urban planning? The case of the Netherlands

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1 Introduction

In June 1992 in Rio de Janeiro the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) agreed upon Agenda 21. This initiative, an international action program for the next century, emphasised co-operation and shared responsibility between authorities and groups in tackling environmental problems. About two-thirds of the 2,500 actions that were agreed upon in Agenda 21 are especially relevant for the local level.

Chapter 28 of Agenda 21 (UNCED, 1992) states as an objective that: *by 1996, most local authorities in each country should have undertaken a consultative process with their populations and achieved a consensus on a local Agenda 21 for the community.*

Agenda 21 gives little guidance on how local communities should proceed with a Local Agenda 21 process, in a sense that Chapter 28 does not offer an universal and general step-by-step guide. Each community has to find its own most appropriate way. The substance of any particular 'Local Agenda 21' will be relative to the specific nature of the local community in question (its geography, demography, economics, society and culture (Lafferty and Eckerberg, 1998). Chapter 28 does not state what an LA21 should consist of. It gives a mandate to the local authorities to take responsibility for initiating and co-ordinating this dialogue among 'citizens, local organisations and private enterprises' which is necessary to determine the form and content of their specific LA21 initiative (Matthews, 1994; Morphet and Hams, 1994).

The general objective of this paper is discussing the role LA21 can play in urban decision making to promote sustainable development, with a focus on the possible added value of LA21 to contemporary urban planning. Several international initiatives following Rio, like for instance the ICLEI-campaign, Sustainable Cities & Towns, ANPAD, etc. defined steps or basic elements for LA21- processes stating 'good practice'. Within this recommended steps we also find remarks on the relation with existing urban planning.

Evaluating the influence of LA21 on existing planning activities is ambitious at this moment in time. Many municipalities, even the pioneers in LA21, are still in a phase of preparing LA21's. Especially for drawing conclusions on the effect of LA21 on urban decision making it is much too early. What we can do at this moment in time is looking more systematically into the issue of LA21 influencing the mode of working at the local level.

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The Netherlands as a fore-runner in LA21 implementation with an already well established practice in local environmental planning looks as a good case to evaluate the potential influence of LA21-processes on local policy making and planning. The main question of the paper is: *How and to what extent have LA21 activities in the Netherlands affected discourses and debates on participation and influenced inter-active planning as a new mode of working?*

A second and related question is: *Did A21 influence local policy and planning in making steps from traditional local environmental policy to local sustainable planning?*

We will first define in section 2 the concept of LA21, distinguishing it from other policy initiatives. In section 3 we will go into the question what kind of influence from LA21-processes for local planning we could expect, and distinguish three influence relations. We will give a short overview of the implementation of LA21 in the Netherlands in section 4 followed by a sketch of existing local planning in the Netherlands.

In section 6 we discuss if LA21, as a new mode of working, intensified or reshaped traditional community involvement. And in section 7 we discuss if LA21 made existing local policy and planning initiatives more sustainable. To place the Dutch experiences in a European perspective we will compare in section 8 the Dutch situation with some preliminary experiences in other Western European countries. Finally we will draw some conclusions in section 9.

2. Defining a 'local Agenda 21'

In Western-European countries there is still considerable confusion as to just what the idea of LA21 signifies (Lafferty and Eckerberg, 1998). To be able to make any statement about the relation between LA21 and existing planning activities it is clear that an understanding is needed what is different and significant with the LA21 compared with older and existing activities.

For our understanding of LA21 we lean on work within a 'concerted action' entitled 'Sustainable Communities in Europe' (SUSCOM), funded under the Program for Climate and Environment of DGXII of the European Commission to bring together the diverse experiences of twelve Western European countries in a systematic, policy-relevant way.¹

The following characteristics are taken from the attempts within the SUSCOM-network to find a common understanding what 'a Local Agenda 21' is all about (Lafferty and Eckerberg, 1998, Lafferty, 1999):

- A Local Agenda 21 is a local action plan for the achievement of sustainable development. It is to be worked out through a broad consultative process between local authorities, citizens and relevant stakeholder groups, and eventually integrated with existing plans, priorities and programs.
- The 'consultation' in question is clearly meant to be a new and different process from existing protective and remedial environmental activities.
- The process has a clear strategic intent. Though the actual content of 'a Local Agenda 21' is not spelled out, there is a clear presumption of both change and instrumental rationality with respect to a realisation of the Earth-Summit goals.
- The action plan should be implemented with due provision for ongoing input, monitoring and revision underway, and it should make special efforts to engage women and youth in all phases of the implementation process.

- Chapter 28 of Agenda 21 is specifically addressed to ‘Local Authorities’: The responsibility of national governments is primarily facilitative with respect to the LA21 process.
- The substance of any particular ‘Local Agenda 21’ will be relative to the specific nature of the local community in question (its geography, demography, economics, society and culture), and it should be expected to evolve dynamically over time.

3 LA21 and local planning

Agenda 21 explicitly recommends the use of existing planning experience when drawing up sustainable development strategies. What follows from the characteristics given in the last section is that a Local Agenda 21 is a local action plan for the achievement of sustainable development. Two characteristics are especially important for the relation between LA21 and local planning:

- a broad consultative process between local authorities, citizens and relevant stakeholder groups;
- integration with existing plans, priorities and programs.

What kind of influence from LA21-processes could we expect for local sustainable planning? We distinguish three influence relations;

1. LA21 can introduce a new form of local plan which can and has to be integrated with existing plans.
2. Existing planning processes make use of public participation. LA21 could be seen as a new mode of working, intensifying or reshaping traditional community involvement.
3. There can be existing plans which have sustainable development as a planning task. LA21 could make existing local planning initiatives more sustainable.

Ad 1. Although the mandate of Chapter 28 does not explicitly demand that action plans or programmes should be the output of an LA21 process, it is clear that ‘the best strategies’ should be written down in some kind of document. An LA21 needs a framework for local sustainable policies. Local Agenda 21 could be considered as a procedure for preparing and implementing a specific type of local green plan (see ad 3 below).

For instance, the ICLEI (1993) defined an LA21 campaign in the context of their LA21 initiative as: ‘*any participatory, local effort to establish a comprehensive action plan for the sustainable development of that local jurisdiction or area.*’ And the Charter of European Cities and Towns Towards Sustainability (the Aalborg Charter, 27 May 1994) commits the signatories to preparing local action plans, which should contribute to the European Union’s Fifth Environmental Action Programme.

Ad 2. One of the important criteria that distinguishes LA21 from older environmental policy-making initiatives is the greater efforts to increase *community involvement*, i.e. to bring both average citizens and major stakeholder groups, particularly business and labor unions, into the planning and implementation process with respect to environment-and-development issues. (Lafferty and Eckerberg, 1997: 6-7). According to Agenda 21 local authorities can deal very effectively with public involvement because ‘*as the level of governance closest to the people, they play a vital role in educating, mobilising and responding to the public to promote sustainable development*’ (Chapter 28, Agenda 21).

LA21 and Agenda 21 ask for a 'new' social partnership to reach for sustainable development. Social partnership has to be understood as key social actors working together in joint co-operative efforts on sustainable development. Its about new forms of social learning, whereby key-actors seek to resolve potential conflicts through new forms of involvement and co-operation (Lafferty and Eckerberg, 1998).

Agenda 21 explicitly promotes a more communicative approach towards other actors in society. According to Agenda 21, (national) sustainable strategies should be developed through the widest possible participation (UNCED, 1992). It incorporates the idea that sustainable development is not possible without close co-operation with the community. To reach this communicative approach, participation in planning processes is stressed. Exponents of the communicative theory in the planning literature (e.g., Healy, 1992 and 1993; Fischer and Forrester, 1993) stress this communicative aspect of the planning process. In this view, public involvement in planning aims to build consensus around appropriate actions and a sense of ownership of the goals of the plan (Coenen, 1998b). This goal of community involvement will be more far reaching than in traditional local planning.

Ad 3. There can be existing plans which have sustainable development as a planning task. LA21 could make existing local planning initiatives more sustainable. For example, the first of the eight steps² in the preparation of a local action plan in the Aalborg Charter is *'the recognition of the existing planning and financial frameworks as well as other plans and programmes'* (*The Aalborg Charter, part III, 27 May 1994*)

Two types of plans are relevant spatial planning and the so-called green planning. Spatial planning can play a role in promoting the sustainable development (EU 1997: 21). Conceptually, spatial planning plays an important role in environmental protection by determining land-use patterns (ESDP 4/5/98), avoiding incompatible land uses, determining the permitted intensity use and regulating construction. The proposed European directive on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment (Strategic Environmental Assessment, SEA) aims to improve on this with the aim of ensuring environmentally sound urban development. It will provide for environmental impact assessment to be carried out earlier in the planning process to assist in the selection of the most sustainable options for urban development.

But it is questionable whether spatial planning, even if it is combined with strategic environmental assessment, can contribute to today's wide range of environmental issues; and it is even more questionable whether it can contribute to sustainable development without running up against institutional limits to change.

Green plans, or environmental policy plans, are drawn up to supplement spatial plans. . Green plans are a response to the dissatisfaction with traditional urban planning – especially statutory development plans – as a tool for sustainable development. Local green plans can contribute to giving full and appropriate attention to environmental and sustainability considerations in urban decision making.

Green plans range from very comprehensive green strategies that address all local government policy areas to sector plans, for example for waste or energy, and from strategic long-term visions to operational environmental action plans. These plans may include environmental status reports, assessments of the environmental impact of local government policy, and descriptions of policies, targets, specific activities and costs. The relation between local physical, land use or spatial planning and these forms of environmental or green planning is different in each planning system (Sustainable Cities Project 1994). In some countries these planning functions are combined in a one-track approach; in other countries they follow separate tracks.

Local Agenda 21 could be a procedure for preparing and implementing a specific type of local green plan. But LA21 can also be integrated in existing green planning and spatial planning. Sustainable development policies go beyond 'traditional' environmental policies, which are primarily designed to either conserve nature or improve and redress the environment. Sustainable urban development implies not imposing the costs of development upon the immediate city environment, surrounding rural areas, regions, the planet itself and future generations (CEC 1998)

4. Implementation of LA21 in the Netherlands

Before we will go into the relation between LA21 and existing planning initiatives in the Netherlands we will give a short overview of the implementation of LA21 in the Netherlands. 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.

The state of affairs of LA21 in the Netherlands is closely linked with the so called VOGM-funding. In 1996 the national government introduced a financial measure which provided municipalities with an incentive to work on a Local Agenda 21. LA21 was a so-called 'task of choice' in the 'supplementary contribution scheme for developing municipal environmental policy' (VOGM), run by the environment ministry (VROM). Municipalities could receive extra funding for four policy priorities out of a list of nine, of which LA21 was one. Over 140 municipalities chose LA21 as one of their four action areas, and about ten municipalities chose to draw up an LA21 on a 'voluntary' basis. The Environment Inspectorate, the national environmental inspection and enforcement agency, audits the implementation of municipalities' environmental policy each year. In the auditing process of the VOGM-funding the 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'.

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 their '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 general characteristics of the Dutch LA21's:

- 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 dogshit and litter or on concrete projects in areas like sustainable building or energy saving;
- the global dimension gets relatively little attention in Dutch LA21's;
- integration of ecological, economic and social aspects of sustainability is very limited, LA21 is mainly concerned with the issue of environment;
- participation processes are very diverse and range from limited consultation to structural participation platforms;
- links with existing decision making procedures are weak which makes LA21 often an isolated activity.

In Dutch literature and research several implementation barriers are identified that can explain these general characteristics of Dutch LA21's. LA21 officers (CSTM, 1998) of fore-running municipalities identified several implementation barriers within their municipalities:

- 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

5. The existing Dutch system of local sustainable planning

To see how LA21 relates to existing planning initiatives we will first sketch shortly the Dutch system of local sustainable planning. The Dutch system of government consists of three administrative levels, a national level, 12 provinces and over 600 municipalities. The Dutch planning framework contains two different tracks of policy planning at three levels of government which are historically related to the physical environment, but based on different planning laws. The oldest one is the law on physical planning (Wet op de Ruimtelijke ordening) and the more recent law on environmental protection (Wet Milieubeheer) contains a Planning Chapter since 1993, although since the seventies environmental law has known separate plans sectoral plans, like waste treatment plans.

Table one summarises the most important elements of the Dutch environmental and spatial planning framework. At all three levels of government some form of environmental and spatial plans are envisaged. On the municipal level both the environmental policy plan and the structural plan are compulsory. The table leaves out for this paper less relevant plans in both tracks. For instance other sector plans, like water and nature conservation plans on the national and provincial level and municipal sewage plans address contain parts of the environmental planning track.

Table 1 The Dutch environmental and physical planning system

Level of government		Environmental planning	Spatial planning
National		National Environmental Plan	National Spatial Plan
Provincial	Strategic	Environmental Policy Plan	'Streekplan' (provincial land-use plan)
	Operational	Environmental programme	
Municipal	Strategic	Environmental policy plan	Structural plan
	Operational	Environmental programme	'Bestemmingsplan' (local land-use plan)

In the spatial track the national level sets the broad strategic lines, which the provinces translate into specific features for their province preparing provincial plans according to the national strategies. Municipalities prepare detailed plans for land-use in accordance with the provincial plans. The plans allocate functions for certain areas like housing, industry, public services and lays down infrastructure like roads, canals, railway lines and parks. Regulations define for instance the height of buildings and the number, etc.

To achieve this a municipal land-use plan consist of the following mandatory parts:

- a map of the planned area;
- an explanation part with a description of the desired development and regulations;
- an overview of the environmental nuisance of various categories of business activities;
- an acoustic and soil contamination report of the planned area.

The local structural (struktuurplan) plans contains the strategic aspects of local development. The municipal land-use plans are very detailed plans defining the type and intensity of use of particular parcels of land within which the land-use plan concerns. The plans have to be approved by the province. Through the use of escaping procedures (art-19) in practice there is much more departure from these plans.

The role that physical plans can play in environmental protection is well defined in law and jurisprudence. The prime objective of the physical plan is 'good physical planning' which restricts the possibilities for conducting environmental policy through physical planning. Land-use plans include the environmental aspect of noise and soil in the form of obliged acoustic and soil contamination reports. But more and more municipal land-use plans contain 'green paragraphs' which deal with other environmental aspects within the objective good physical planning like ecological effects of spatial developments.

In the environmental track there is no formal hierarchical co-ordination mechanism between the plans at the different administrative levels. Of the larger municipalities (larger than 30.000 inhabitants) more than 80% has a strategic municipal environmental policy plan or a mixed strategic and operational plan (Coenen, 1996). These plans could be considered comprehensive in the sense that they involve a whole range of environmental sectors (waste, air, noise) and deal with environmental aspects of related policy sectors (traffic, housing, physical planning). The content of the specific plans differs considerably although there is always a mayor component of translation of national environmental policy for the local level.

There is also no formal horizontal mechanism in Dutch law to co-ordinate environmental and physical planning on the local level. For the national and provincial level a system were plans 'leap frog' over each other which means that when changes in one plan is introduced this will lead to changes in the other related plans. A same kind of system could be used on the local level, although not formally required. The problem on the local level is the difference in planning horizon (four against ten years) and the differences in juridical status and the weight of the plan changing procedures. There is at the local level a co-ordination mechanism on the operational or permit level between building and environmental permits.

The Dutch system for local municipal planning is a typical example of a two-track approach to the physical environment. This has its consequences for the three influence relations we distinguished in section 3. Let us first consider the question why municipalities took up the challenge of LA21 in the Netherlands. A national overview by Brijer (1997) showed that the arguments for drawing up an LA21 in the Netherlands are varied. Municipalities often see LA21 as an important issue because it is new, serves a useful purpose and can support and encourage more involvement in environmental policy (implementation). In some cases, municipalities see LA21 as a means of co-operating with other municipalities; in other cases LA21 is adopted because it complements existing activities such as nature and environmental education programmes (Andringa, 1988).

The choice to get involved in LA21 was for the larger part of the municipalities, except for the pioneers, linked with the VOGM-funding. A survey among the 43 largest municipalities that choose LA21 as a VOGM action point revealed that policy continuation and new possibilities offered by LA21 were the main motives to choose for this action point. Policy continuation means that 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. The motive 'new possibilities' means that LA21 was seen as an opportunity to apply innovative environmental policy. Innovation was especially mentioned in the context of dialogue and participation (Coenen, 1998a).

First of all the influence of LA21 that it introduces a new form of local plan which has to be integrated with existing plans. Many municipalities who finished their first LA21 chose for a separate document, although in environmental policy plans many cross references to LA21 are made. Two complicating factors are the planning horizon of existing local environmental policy plans and the fact that some of the 'pioneering LA21' were initiated and produced by local NGO's (for instance Roosendaal and Grave).

The second possible influence we distinguished was that existing planning processes that make use of public participation are influenced by LA21 as a new mode of working, intensifying or reshaping traditional community involvement. The dialogue within the framework of LA21 is used as a cornerstone for the local environmental policy plan (f.i. municipality of Den Bosch). In local green planning public participation was already very common (Coenen, 1998b). Research shows (Coenen, 1996) that if we arrange the municipalities that adopted real methods of participation on a participation ladder (Arnstein, 1969), 9.8% have a citizens consultation group as the highest form of participation and 43% hold at least hearings and information meetings as well as other forms of participation. In 33.3% of the municipalities, direct interviews with target groups formed the highest step on the ladder. These statistics show that it was not unusual to involve target groups when drawing up environmental strategies, but only a minority of the municipalities did this, and the methods employed were quite limited. The majority of the municipalities relied on consultation after drawing a draft plan. A common problem was getting businesses involved; all kinds of other groups would turn up to meetings and hearings. So there is still a potential for intensification or reshaping of public participation processes.

Thirdly in the Dutch case that are at least two types of existing local plans which have sustainable development as a planning task. LA21 could make existing local planning initiatives more sustainable. The local environmental policy plan is seen as part of a local agenda 21 or a first step towards a LA21 (for instance Tilburg). Complicating factor is the formal position of a local environmental policy plan. For instance the municipality of Breda writes in his new plan; the Second local environmental plan stays a municipal plan which only binds the municipality itself.

6 The influence of LA21 on community involvement in the Netherlands

Did LA21 change the mode of working with public participation? Or did it at least influence the discourses and debates on community involvement? Two developments in the Netherlands account for the relative limited influence of LA21 as a new mode of shaping participatory processes. First of all LA21 is not seen as something new influencing the mode of working but at its best as just another exponent of the changing institutional context of local democracy and one of the means to bridge the gap between politicians and citizens similar to the so-called 'political renewal' (Coenen, 1999). Secondly LA21 is seen as just another example of the typical Dutch interactive planning approach. A main feature of Dutch society is its high consensus-based social structure and a long-standing tradition of government consultation with various social groups. This is expressed in environmental policy making through the well known Dutch target group approach.

The discussion on the value-added perspective of LA21 as a participatory approach in the Netherlands has to be placed in the changing institutional context of local democracy. The low turn-out of the last four Dutch local elections caused serious doubts about local democracy being in a crisis. 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) led 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).

A direct influence of LA21 could be a change in the ways of participation. Research (Denters and Geurts, 1998) shows a large variety of participation in Dutch local governance. Voting is the most common form of participation in the Netherlands (77 per cent), followed by contacts with administration (31 per cent), addressing letters or complaints (24 per cent) and submitting petitions (23 per cent). For the implementation of LA21 the relatively low score of public discussions or formal consultation at a public meeting (16 per cent) is relevant. This position is explained by the high effort this form of participation asks and the perceived low returns by the participants. Closer investigation into the social representativeness of the different forms of participation ranks public discussions the lowest (Denters and Geurts, 1998).

The desire for more say in subnational government has constantly been between the 60 and 70 per cent in the last twenty years (SCP, 1996). Voters survey research (Denters and Geurts, 1998) shows that satisfaction with local services is high but respondents rate their own power in local politics as low (34 per cent) or very low (41 per cent). But most striking was that people rated their political power in national politics higher than in local politics. This is in contrast with a basic assumption in LA21 of the relevance of the local level of governance because of its closeness to the people. Intervening variables were education and gender, higher educated and men rated their political power significantly higher.

The second problem with the influence of LA21 as a variant of the appearance of joint policy-making and interactive planning on the local level, especially in environmental policy. The political system in the Netherlands is characterised as the most clear example of the consensus model of democracy (Lijphart, 1984; Anderson and Guilroy, 1997). This is not only based on the way formal institutions express democratic relations but even more through informal institutions. Well known is the Dutch (neo-)corporatist economic system that is based on formal co-operation between employers, employees, and government. Through its formal institutions, the Dutch system is organised relatively, but not extremely, consensual (Hendriks, 1999). But informally consultation, compromise and compromise dominate the political and administrative culture of dialogue.

The philosophy that environmental problems are best solved through consultations with the polluters, the target groups, have already been developed in the Netherlands in the eighties. This philosophy fits very well in a main feature of Dutch society as a highly consensus-based social structure with a long-standing tradition of government consultation with various social groups. In the beginning of the eighties the ideas from the Dutch Scientific Advisory Council to the Government (WRR) on 'open planning' were very influential in pointing out that government should leave its 'administrative centred position' and give more attention to the 'external dimension' of government planning (Den Hoed et. al., 1983).

The first Dutch National Environmental Policy Plan (1989) assigns responsibilities to the various target groups, which are comprised of companies and individuals. The Netherlands has chosen the target group approach because the achievement of sustainability is an enormous task which cannot be carried out by a single ministry. In fact, the entire country has been asked to participate in the realisation of this national objective. The NEPP states that sustainable development can only be achieved through partnerships and co-operation between all members of Dutch society. Consequently, the Dutch environment ministry (VROM) initiated and prepared the first NEPP, but four ministries contributed to its content and four ministers signed it, while provincial and municipal authorities also participated in its development.

The target group approach is a key element in the implementation of the NEPPs. This means creating a consultative structure encompassing the government and the representatives of these target groups to internalise environmental responsibility. Provincial and local authorities are seen as playing a critical role in encouraging target groups to realise their objectives. The second NEPP supports the notion of self-regulation more strongly as this provides target groups like industry with more room to fulfil their responsibilities. The government is responsible for the formulation of environmental objectives and the target group is responsible for meeting these objectives. Usually these arrangements are laid down in voluntary agreements called 'covenants' and other forms of guidelines and incorporate targets.

There are relations between the 'target-group approach and LA21 but there are also limitations to the use of a target group approach on the local level (Coenen, 1998c). 'Target groups' have a resemblance with the 'major groups' from Agenda 21 but are definitely not the same. Mayor groups like women or youth would be part of target groups like consumers. According to the Dutch national environmental planning framework, local authorities should also involve target groups in their planning, and there are some specific advantages and disadvantages to a target group approach at the local level. The main thrust of environmental policy is largely determined by the state and executed mainly by the provinces and municipalities. There will be less need to formulate a common policy at the municipal level as a consensus will usually already have been arrived at by the time the municipality is confronted with the problem. At the municipal level there is always tension between what has already been decided by central government and a particular branch of industry (Coenen, 1998c). It is also a question if target groups at the local level have an adequate level of organisation to address them as is the case on the national level.

6.2 The influence of LA21 on sustainable local policy and planning

Did LA21 influence local policy and planning in the direction of making steps from traditional local environmental policy to local sustainable policy integrating sustainable criteria in other policy fields (Coenen, Seinstra and Teunisse, 1999).

Again two developments limit the influence of LA21. First of all there is the doubt about the added value of LA21 because there is the general opinion among municipalities that they are already implementing local sustainable policy. Secondly the influence is limited because of the popular idea within municipalities is 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

First the doubt about LA21 as a added value because municipalities implement local sustainable policy. As minister den Boer (address to IULA-conference The Hague 1995) stated; *When LA21 was introduced to the local authorities in the Netherlands, the first reaction was oh ..., but we are already doing all that.* The interpretation of LA21 was restricted to its content a local sustainable strategy. When the director of VNG Dordregter (1995) stated that : *LA21 doesn't mean something really new for the Netherlands*, he was not only referring to processes of communication and dialogue, consciousness-raising and support but also to the large number of local sustainable initiatives that municipalities were taking in various fields like energy, sustainable building and planning, traffic, etc.

In the fall of 1996 the ministry exchanged views with municipal administrators on a large scale, involving about a quarter of all municipalities, about the future of local environmental policy³. As a follow-up a discussion was organised with representatives of several layers and organisations of government, business and NGO's. The aim was to gain an insight in the ambitions of all involved organisations concerning local sustainable development and the surrounding environment.

In the period of ear-marked funding the municipalities felt restricted in their own priority setting in local environmental policy. Priorities were set through era-marked funding and the 'value for money'-principle for money. Not surprising that in the discussions the municipalities asked for a new arrangement of responsibilities between government layers in environmental policy focusing on a balance between freedom (of acting by the municipalities) and commitment (within the limits set by national government).

In a letter to the municipalities the former minister De Boer (11 February 1997) stated that municipalities would be left more freedom of choice of means within goals set by national government. The view of the then minister De Boer on the future position of municipalities in environmental policy and local sustainable development was laid down in a next letter to the municipalities (13 November 1997). *I expect from all local organisations, business and municipalities, that they will jointly give shape to sustainable development on a local level, wherefore increasingly more joint local goals on sustainable development will be formulated. This goals need in good deliberation between and given each own responsibilities to be concretised into activities of the local partners. The local partners can address each other on their activities and responsibilities. Municipalities play in this process as directors and partners an important role. I consider a Local Agenda 21 as a good framework for this process'.*

In the NEPP-3 (1998, p. 68) LA21 was labelled as the whole set of discussions around immediate surroundings-and sustainable issue and on the formulation of assessable local goals and concrete local actions. This interpretation of LA21 was criticised by the NCDO.

The NCDO is the National Committee on International Co-operation and Sustainable Development (NCDO). In this National Commission about 50 NGOs from all sectors of society participate to stimulate the debate on sustainable development at the national level. According to the NCDO is LA21 about the sustainable future of a municipality. The result is a local agenda for the future with broad goals (Secretary LA21 working group on LA21, Sikken, April 1998). The NCDO disagrees that this local sustainability is already there.

The second limitation for the influence of LA21 is the idea 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. 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). 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. In recent factsheets of the VNG (1998) on environmental policy, LA21 is only found under the heading of 'environmental communication and social instruments' together with environmental information and 'nature and environment'-education. 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.

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 then, refereeing 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 the other way around. LA21 is about the sustainable future of a municipality. The ministry tries to combine both perspectives in the NEPP-3 (1998).

7 Comparison with other countries

Before we draw conclusions we will make some short remarks how the Dutch situation related to other European countries. The Netherlands can in 'track-and field'-terms be seen as a fore-runner in LA21 implementation. Recently in the SUSCOM-project an initial attempt is made to categorise the 12 countries studied in the project according to two dimensions: (1) the 'timing' of the overall initiative within the national context; and (2) the 'relative number' of individual LA21 efforts in place.

On the basis of the two criteria we can construct four groups:

- 'Early-and-many': Sweden, Great Britain and the Netherlands
- 'Later-and-many': Denmark, Finland and Norway
- 'Later-and-few': Austria and Germany
- 'Latest-and-least': Spain, Italy, Ireland and France

In section 3 we discussed three influence relations between LA21-processes and local planning. In the first place can LA21 introduce a new form of local plan which can and has to be integrated with existing plans. The relation between LA21 and existing forms of planning very much depend on the approach to the physical environment. In a one track approach like in the UK attempts have to be made to link LA21 processes to strategic and local planning if it wants to influence decision-making on land-use and development (Doak and McLoughin, 1998).

In France LA21 is thought to have a potential role in revitalising spatial planning in three ways (Di Pietro, Larrue and Deschamps, 1999):

- co-ordination of existing initiatives, for instance different processes of vision development;
- reshaping public participation;
- finding the appropriate governmental level of planning.

The idea that LA21 could lead to a comprehensive way of community planning is also found in Austria (Narodoslawsky, Grabher and Sage, 1999). In some countries the relation between LA21 and spatial planning is formalised through funding (Sweden) or in the planning act (amendment May 1998 Denmark).

The second influence relation was that in existing planning processes that make use of public participation, LA21 could be seen as a new mode of working, intensifying or reshaping traditional community involvement.

This very much seems to depend on experiences with public participation. In some countries (f.i. Spain and Italy) intensification of public participation builds on a total other exiting situation than in some northern European countries. Sometimes experiences in spatial planning (f.i. STEP in Germany, Lustig and Weiland, 1998) can negatively influence LA21.

Thirdly there can be existing plans which have sustainable development as a planning task. LA21 could make existing local planning initiatives more sustainable.

In Germany similar doubts are risen about the added value of LA21 to existing initiatives. This seems to be the case for more countries who are among the fore-runners in sustainable development like Austria, Germany and Norway. An intervening variable is the problem that LA21 is restricted to environmental issues or at its most the environmental dimension of sustainable development. Also in this respect the Netherlands are nor unique.

8 Conclusions

We identified four developments that limit the influence of LA 21. The answer to the question; *How and to what extent have LA21 activities in the Netherlands affected discourses and debates on participation and influenced inter-active planning as a new mode of working* is that two developments in the Netherlands account for a relative limited influence of LA21 as a new mode of shaping participatory processes. First of all LA21 is not seen as something new influencing the mode of working but at its best as just another exponent of the changing institutional context of local democracy. Secondly LA21 is seen as just another example of the typical Dutch interactive planning approach.

The answer to the second question; *did A21 influence local policy and planning in making steps from traditional local environmental policy to local sustainable planning*, is that the influence of LA21 on sustainable development is limited for two reasons. Firstly there a doubt about the added value of LA21 because there is a general opinion among municipalities that they are already implementing local sustainable policy. Secondly the influence is limited because of the popular idea within municipalities is 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

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Notes

¹ The full title of the project is 'Sustainable Communities in Europe: A Cross-National Assessment of the Implementation of Agenda 21 at the Local Level of Governance' and is funded for two years beginning in December 1997. As a 'concerted action', the principal purpose of the project is to try to synthesize and enhance the policy relevance of ongoing research within the general area. The 'work programme' for the project is available at: <http://afux.prosus.nfr.no/la21/eu/program.html>.

- ² recognition of the existing planning and financial frameworks as well as other plans and programmes;
- the systematic identification, by means of extensive public consultation, of problems and their causes;
- the prioritisation of tasks to address identified problems;
- the creation of a vision for a sustainable community through a participatory process involving all sectors of the community;
- the consideration and assessment of alternative strategic options;
- the establishment of a long-term local action plan towards sustainability which includes measurable targets;
- the programming of the implementation of the plan including the preparation of a timetable and statement of allocation of responsibilities among the partners;
- the establishment of systems and procedures for monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the plan. (Aalborg Charter, Part III)

³ Letter to the parlement date 11-2-1997