

Probing the essence of LA21 as a value-added approach to sustainable development and local democracy; the case of the Netherlands

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1. Introduction

In a recent national workshop 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 National Committee on International Co-operation and Sustainable Development (NCDO). In this National Commission Around 50 NGOs from all sectors of society participate to stimulate the debate on sustainable development at the national level

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.

The first generation of implementation research, dealing with the question 'does implementation matter' has showed us many factors that can hinder policy implementation in general (Lester a.o. , 1987). One complex of factors that determines the course of a policy implementation process are the beliefs that the participants of that process hold (Maarse, 1989). According to Scharpf (1978) policy implementation is inevitably the result of interactions among a plurality of separate actors with separate interests, goals and strategies. In the implementation literature much attention is given to the possible 'appreciative gap' between policy makers and implementing actors on the policy content as failure factor. But apart from the assent with the policy content the views on the implementation strategy that should be followed will influence implementation (Coenen, 1993, Berman, 1980)

In this paper we consider the views that the different participants in the Dutch LA21 implementation process hold, and especially their views on the position of LA21 in local democracy and local environmental policy, as a crucial factor that explains the state of affairs of LA21 in the Netherlands. Hereby we also consider the views of citizens on local democracy and local governance as an implementation factor.

The process of interpretation and meaning giving to LA21 is most crucial. Interpretation precedes implementation. 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. The thesis we start out this paper is that views about what LA21 is, should be and how it fits into local democracy and local governance more strongly influences the

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implementation of LA21 in the Netherlands than more classical implementation barriers like capacity of implementing agencies, information and power. Views that participants in the participation processes hold follow 'story-lines' like for example LA21 is just an exponent of political renewal or LA21 is in the first place about the quality of the immediate surrounding environment.

This brings us to the following question:

In how far can the current state of affairs and future development of LA21 in the Netherlands be explained on the basis of the views of participants in the implementation of LA21 in three discourse on respectively local democracy, local authority self responsibility in sustainable development and innovations in local governance?

2. Analysing the views of the participants in implementing LA21

Policy actors work from certain patterns of thought. In policy science and public administration literature we find several methods of approach to analyse the acting of policy actors from the perspective of the assumptions or patterns of thought these actors work from like 'policy theories (Hoogerwerf, 1984), 'belief systems' (Sabatier, 1987) and discourse-coalitions (Hajer, 1995).

We follow here the perspective of discourse-analysis to analyse the implementation process of LA21 in the Netherlands. Central are the views of participants of this implementation process on views on the position of LA21 in local democracy and local environmental policy. The choice for discourse-analysis is based on the necessity to explain why certain assumptions prevail while others are turned down as 'outdated' or unrealistic'. Discourse-analyses not simply analyses what is said, but also includes the institutional context in which this is done and which co-determines what can be said meaningfully (Hajer, 1995).

Actors try to impose their view of what LA21 is, should be and should be realised on others by using debate, argumentation, manipulation and the use of power. In this process coalitions are formed around specific interpretations of LA21. These coalitions determine how a specific interpretation of what a LA21 is gained acceptance and keeps validity.

This paper is an attempt to unravel the dominant discourses in LA21 implementation in the Netherlands. A discourse is defined by Hajer (1995) as an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorisations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices. In contrast to everyday speech a discourse is more than a discussion or a certain way of talking. 'Analytically we try to make sense of the regularities and variations in what is being said (or) written and try to understand the social backgrounds and the social effects of specific modes of talking' (Hajer, 1995, p. 44).

Our starting point is not a specific environmental problem but the interpretation of LA21. In our analysis of LA21 we try to follow this perspective of discourse-analysis to gain understanding about the way actors represented LA21 in a certain way and which coalitions on certain meanings of LA21 are formed.

Our thesis is that the coalescence of multiple so-called story-lines about how LA21 fits into local democracy and local governance in the Netherlands strongly influenced the perception of LA21. In Hajer's argumentative approach story-lines are a key element. Story-lines are narratives on social reality through which elements from many different domains are combined and that provide actors with a set of symbolic references that suggest a common understanding. Story -lines have at least three functions (Hajer, 1995, p. 62-63).:

- they have a functional role of facilitating the *reduction of the discursive complexity* of a problem;
- as they are accepted and more and more actors start to use the story-line, they get a *ritual character* and give a certain permanence to the debate;
- story-lines allow different actors to *expand their own understanding and discursive competence* of the phenomena beyond their own discourse of expertise or experience

We try to show that actors from different back-grounds in LA21-implementation adhere to certain story-lines. Story-lines are related to a second key concept in Hajer's argumentative approach the discourse coalitions. Story-lines are the discursive cement that keeps discourse coalitions together. Discourse-coalitions differ from traditional political coalitions or alliances. Story-lines form the basis for the coalition not the interests. We will try to demonstrate how alternative interpretations of LA21 within a particular institutional setting may have produced a specific 'discourse-coalition' .

Given the limited space in this paper we will illustrate statements of key-actors on the basis of official publications, news letters, speeches, web-sites that represent the opinion of the key stakeholders, interviews with key-actors and surveys. We realise that the views of some actors are difficult to represent. For instance local authorities as a whole and the key-stakeholders within local authorities being LA21 co-ordinators, local government officers and local politicians can hardly be seen as a homogeneous group (compare Selman and Parker, 1999). The same difficulties we engage if we take the views of citizens or business.

3. Implementation of LA21 in the Netherlands

We will give a short overview of the implementation of LA21 in the Netherlands based on quantitative and qualitative data. 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 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 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

This paper is not about these ‘classical’ implementation barriers, although they are very important to, but about the views that participants in the participation processes hold on the position of LA21 in local democracy and local environmental policy

4. Interpretation of LA21

In this section we are not going to follow the individual line of views of the different stakeholders in LA21 implementation in the Netherlands but their position in the distinguished discourses on LA21. The paper does not leave room for a detailed description of statements of the different stakeholders, reproduction can only be exemplarily. Neither do we have the space to go into detail in which specific context the statements were produced

We first shortly summarise what we try to attain with the concept of ‘discourse-analysis’ and what we ‘borrowed’ from this analytic approach to explain LA21 implementation in the Netherlands. The perspective of discourse-analysis means that we:

- we not just try to list *which* actors says *what* about LA21 but try to show with statements as examples *which* actors from different back-grounds in LA21-implementation adhere to certain story-lines on LA21;

- we will try to demonstrate how alternative interpretations of LA21 may have produced a ‘discourse-coalition’ around specific interpretations of LA21;

- finally we try to go into the question how coalitions on specific interpretations of what a LA21 is, should be and should be realised gained acceptance.

Our thesis is that the coalescence of multiple so-called story-lines about how LA21 fits into local democracy and local governance in the Netherlands strongly influenced the perception and implementation of LA21.

4.1 Discourse on local democracy and inter-active policy making

The discussion on the value-added perspective of LA21 in the Netherlands has to be placed in the changing institutional context of local democracy. 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. It's 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).

The discourse on LA21 and local democracy in the Netherlands is about the question if such a social partnership is not already there and if this already existing social partnership would not shape LA21 as it shapes other local policies. There are two story-lines that shape this discourse.

Firstly the story-line that LA21 is just another exponent of the changing institutional context of local democracy and one of the means to bridge the gap between politicians and citizens. 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 policies. 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).

Secondly the story-line that LA21 is 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 know Dutch target group approach. In the second story-line LA21 is labelled as a form of interactive planning with target groups.

We will first analyse who adheres to these two story-lines. 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).

In the most well-known Dutch LA21 pioneer The Hague the leading initiator, the alderman for environmental affairs gave two reasons for launching LA21 in his municipality. Firstly to encourage more involvement in environmental policy and its implementation. This argument is closely linked with the general argument for interactive environmental policy making; involvement of target groups should lead to implementation.

Secondly the alderman stressed the importance of public participation: '*also from the viewpoint of political¹ renewal, people should have the possibility to influence their immediate surroundings*'.² This was a reference to the recognised crisis in local democracy during the early 1990s.

The NCDO, the main NGO-platform, states that; *LA21 is a local plan to work jointly on a sustainable municipality. It is a combination of sustainable development and political renewal* (NCDO website). The VNG (1996) writes in its main publication on LA21; *The concepts of LA21 and political renewal have much in common. In both cases it's about renewal in method that is linked with renewal in content. As far as the aimed method of working is concerned LA21 and political renewal run parallel.* And the director of VNG Dordrecht (1995) stated: *LA21 doesn't mean something really new for the Netherlands. The relation between communication and dialogue, consciousness-raising and support, processes and environmental success don't have to be explained to the municipalities. My thesis: no environmental success without a dialogue.*

We may conclude there is a discourse-coalition between NCDO, VNG and municipalities regarding the story-line that LA21 is closely linked or even an exponent of Dutch political renewal.

The NCDO states under the heading of '*Surplus value of LA21*' that '*because citizens feel involved in the formulation of LA21 and have their own responsibility, plans for sustainable development take root. Further the municipality can have an advantage from the knowledge available within local groups.*

As a first aspect of the surplus value of LA21 the VNG (1996) sees '*the explicit attention given to the way policy is formulated, namely in dialogue with citizens, societal organisations and business. The surplus value of LA21 lies in reaching the difficult reachable target groups like consumers, neighbourhood inhabitants and small- and medium businesses.*

The VNG (1996, p. 16) states as aim of the LA21 dialogue:

- *the enhancement of the support for policy by connecting with the initiatives, needs and possibilities of the target groups;*
- *the use of knowledge and ideas from society;*
- *finding possibilities for co-operation in the implementation of policy.*

National government writes in the third national environmental policy plan (NEPP, 1998): *A municipality is as a layer of government most closely to the citizens and therefore has a specific responsibility to involve citizens in environmental policy, for instance through the means of a LA21 (p. 83).* And the first of three aspects of the 'surplus value' to the local environmental policy the NEPP (p. 70) reads: '*There will be explicit attention paid to the dialogue with citizens, societal organisations and business.*

We may conclude that there is a second discourse-coalition between NCDO, VNG, VROM and municipalities regarding the story-line that a surplus value of LA21 is creating support for local sustainable policy, which is a basic premise for Dutch interactive policy making and the target group approach. We can recognise the functional-analytic perspective on participation here (Coenen, Huitema and O'Toole, 1998).

To research the story-line that LA21 is closely linked or even an exponent of Dutch political renewal, and therefore a solution for this crisis in local democracy we have to go deeper into the aspects of this crisis in local democracy and its possible consequences for LA21.

One aspect of the crisis of local democracy mentioned before is *the nationalisation of local elections*. Research (Depla and Tops, 1997) showed that:

- only one fifth of the voters support a different party at the local level than at the national level;
- national issues determine the party choice of two third of the voters.

Small but significant differences are found on the basis of different parties and the size of municipalities.

A second aspect of the presumed crisis are *the ways of participation*. One can argue if voters turn out is a good indicator for local democracy, because voting is only one form 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).

Positive for LA21 could be the relatively favourable 'political-opportunity' structure for new social movements in the Netherlands (Kriesi et. Al., 1992). Research (SCP, 1996) shows that acceptance of political protest has increased considerably over the last ten years. 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).

A third aspect is the *attitude of the citizens towards local government*. Denters and Geurts (1998) performed research with great relevance for LA21. Firstly their study showed that satisfaction with local services is high. Secondly their survey showed that the respondents rated their own power in local politics as low (34 per cent) or very low (41 per cent). Intervening variables were education and gender, higher educated and men rated their political power significantly higher. But most striking was that people rated their political power in national politics higher than in local politics. This in contrast with a basic assumption in LA21 of the relevance of the local level of governance because of its closeness to the people.

On this aspect of political power people surprisingly enough see national politics as easier to influence. A second aspect of the people's perception of power is their confidence in the responsiveness of local authorities. This perceived responsiveness has to do with awareness of matters brought to the attention of local authorities and the feeling that the people's concerns were taken seriously. The confidence in the responsiveness of local authorities is considerably greater than confidence in responsiveness of national government. Intervening variables are age, size of the municipality and general opinion of the authority. Confidence is greater among young people, inhabitants of smaller municipalities and in municipalities with a positive general opinion of the authority.

A fourth aspect of the crisis in local democracy is the presumed '*gap between politicians and citizens*' caused by a decrease in political authority and trust. Politicians find this gap worrisome. But is the problem really there? Contact with local politicians ranks low as type of participation (18 per cent) but above public discussion (16 per cent), public actions (15 per cent) and contact with political parties (11 per cent). The amount of direct contacts with local politicians is affected by the size of the municipality; the smaller the municipality the more contacts. In recent years there has been a rise of local parties which could point to a gap between the existing established political parties and citizens. In general the support for (national) political parties is crumbling. Party membership has decreased considerably since the fifties. Political activism has gone partly to other social movements like for instance Greenpeace. The rise of local political parties could be negative for LA21 if it leads to 'trivialization' of local politics, with too many inexperienced politicians with limited time horizons (Hendriks, 1999).

Interactive policy making and planning

The second story-line we distinguish sees 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.

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.

The roots for interactive policy-making and planning can be found in the communicative approach to planning and policy-making. The communicative planning concept states that the problem with planning is not a problem of knowledge and control, as orthodox planners think; but the need for more civic consciousness, motivation, formation of political will, emancipation, and so forth. (Van Gunsteren, 1976). The intelligent and responsible participation of many people is seen as indispensable for planning. 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. This is important because it means that third parties will plan their own decisions and actions to fit in with the intended government policy in the plan (Coenen, 1998b).

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.

Conclusions

In the discourses on local democracy we identified two story-lines. The NCDO, VNG and many municipalities seem to adhere the story-line that LA21 is closely linked or even an exponent of Dutch political renewal. They form a first discourse-coalition we can identify. An analysis of the views of citizens on local democracy and local government shed more light on different aspect of the presumed crisis in local democracy. Some of the results of the views of the citizens are negative for LA21 like the tendency to nationalise local elections, the negative image of public discussion as a way of participation and most striking the perceived powerlessness in local politics. Positive for LA21 are the confidence in the responsiveness of local authorities, the favourable structure for new social movements and the increasing acceptance of different forms of political protest.

The second discourse-coalition was identified between NCDO, VNG, VROM and municipalities regarding the story-line that a surplus value of LA21 is to create support for local sustainable policy,. We concluded that this is a very specific functional argument for participation and a basic premise for Dutch interactive policy making. It is questionable if the target group approach is equally relevant on the local level.

4.2 The discourse on local self-responsibility in environmental policy

The second discussion on the value-added perspective of LA21 in the Netherlands has to be placed in the discourses on local self-responsibility in environmental policy. For the implementation of LA21 in a country local-authority autonomy is an important variable. The degree of local autonomy for LA21 action depends on (1) the general level autonomy of local government, (2) specific autonomy with regard to the LA21 policy area and legislation, and (3) the local capacity for action as measured by resources and competence (Lafferty and Eckerberg 1998, p. 247–249).

The constitutional position of Dutch municipalities is given by the Dutch Constitution (1848) and the Municipalities Act (1851). The Dutch constitutional system is generally labelled as a 'decentralised unitary state'. The unitary nature of this type of state is based on agreement between the three layers of government (central government, provinces and municipalities) and not on central government (Pot and Donner, 1977). The tradition of decentralisation and power distribution goes back to the times of the old republic of the Seven

United Provinces (1588-1795) which was a highly decentralised federation. The founding father of the Dutch constitution, the liberal statesman Thorbecke, designed the constitutional system as an 'association of mutually restricting bodies designed to work freely together'. A system of circumscribed independence of 'higher' and 'lower' authorities (Pot and Donner, 1977).

Local authorities have a freedom of initiative within the system of inter administrative relations. They have the constitutional power to deal with matters of local concern as long as the local authorities take account of legislation passed by higher authorities. A large part of local-authority activities is covered by legislation within a system of co-government. Dutch local authorities have relatively limited own tax revenues and depend largely on central government for their resources. About half of this central funding is in the form of specific transfer or earmarked funding. The rest of the central funding is in the form of a Municipal fund, depending on criteria like the number of inhabitants, which is an open-budget system with a budget ceiling.

Environmental policy in the Netherlands originates as local policy. City regulation in the Middle Ages already contained environmental rules. From the beginning of the 18th century till the beginning of the seventies the Nuisance Act was the most important environmental law. Until the seventies it were the municipalities that were mainly competent to give permits and control polluters. Alongside the Nuisance Act the municipalities, especially in the cities, developed environmental policy concerned with environmental hygiene like sewage measures, waste treatment and drinking water protection. With the recognition of the complexity and importance of ecological issues at the end of the sixties the environmental tasks of municipalities became more and more part of national regulation. Specific tasks, like licensing of larger and complex industrial installation, were given to the provinces.

The dissatisfaction of national government in the eighties and nineties with the way municipalities performed their environmental duties, and especially the implementation of the Nuisance Act, led to several (financial) measures to get municipal implementation to a more adequate level. In first instance these were measures to stimulate a more programmatic and systematic approach to local environmental policy by introducing (work)planning instruments (HUP and MUP). The HUP and MUP-funding programme were not meant to finance the implementation of the new programmatic planning instruments.

The implementation of the Nuisance Act was seen as a basic responsibility for municipality that had to be financed by the Municipal Fund. There was a basic discourse on responsibility and funding. The viewpoint of the ministry was that local environmental policy traditionally was a municipal task financed on the basis of general municipal funding; the so-called municipal fund. The discussion about who should pay what for local environmental policy was only solved after research that showed that municipalities had a severe deficit in funding through the extension of environmental tasks in the seventies. Starting 1990 the municipalities received ear-marked BUGM funding to bring their environmental policy to a basic and adequate level. The FUN regulation introduced in 1991 covered extra funds to help municipalities meet the targets of the National Environmental Policy Plan. It was originally intended that after 1995 the funding would no longer be earmarked for environmental purposes, but an evaluation during the funding period raised doubts about the degree to which environmental tasks had really been institutionalised within municipal organisations (Ringeling Committee, 1993). In response to this, the Ministry and the Association of Dutch Municipalities decided to introduce the so called 'supplementary contribution scheme for developing municipal environmental policy' (VOGM) to strengthen municipal environmental policy. This new earmarked funding for the years 1996 to 1998 allowed municipalities more

freedom to identify their own priorities. Municipalities could receive extra funding for four policy priorities out of a list of nine, of which LA21 was one. This was clear incentive for LA21 being one of the so-called 'task of choice'. 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. Funding was based on the number of inhabitants (about NLG 5 per inhabitant) and municipalities were expected to double this amount from other sources. In total, approximately NLG 100 million was available each year for the scheme. The Environment Inspectorate, the national environmental inspection and enforcement agency, audits the implementation of municipalities' environmental policy each year.

The BUGM and FUN-funding and its successor the VOGM-funding had its impact on the local self-responsibility for the environment. The discourse on local self-responsibility for environmental policy is a long-standing discussion between the Ministry of environment and the municipalities and is linked with the general discussion on local autonomy. The choice not to replace the BUGM- and FUN-funding with unspecified general funding but with a new way of specific ear-marked funding; the VOGM-funding was an exception in a period where national government tried to bring down the number of specific transfers under decentralising measures. These went down from over 400 different specific transfers in 1985 to just over 140 in 1995. The discussions were about the question if municipalities were ready to take their own responsibility the implementation of environmental policy and if environmental tasks were sufficiently institutionalised in the municipal organisation.

A great fear of the Ministry and environmental NGO's was that the positive effects of four years of specific funding on local environmental policy would disappear (Commissie Ringeling, 1993). The same discussion popped up during the VOGM-period (Coenen, Seinstra and Teunisse, 1999). For LA21 is especially the discussion relevant if local government would, without further specific financial incentives, make the step from traditional local environmental policy to local sustainable policy integrating sustainable criteria in other policy fields.

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 ear-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 *'Apart from the advantage of more policy freedom for municipalities, this makes municipalities an attractive partner for local actors with which will be co-operated in sustainable development'*.

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. 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)

Two story-lines appear here. The first story-line is that, certainly after all the new funded activities at the local level, LA21 is already there 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. The NCDO disagrees that local sustainability is already there. On their webpage a local sustainable test is available that gives citizens the opportunity to score there municipality on local sustainability. This test caused quite a dispute between the NCDO and the VNG in the beginning of 1999. The ministry of environment more critical than the VNG and recognises that some municipalities are doing better than others but still holds the opinion that at least the forerunners are progressing with local sustainable strategies. But the story-line dominates that LA21 as local sustainability is already there, or at least is partly there. We can identify a discourse coalition between the ministry, VNG and municipalities on the story-line that LA21 is at least already partly there in the Netherlands because municipalities produce local sustainable policies.

The second story-line 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. 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).

The second discourse coalitions we can identify between the VNG and the ministry adheres to the story-line that LA21 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)).

Conclusion

In the discourses on local democracy we identified two story-lines. The ministry, VNG and many municipalities seem to adhere the story-line that LA21 is at least already partly there in the Netherlands because municipalities produce local sustainable strategies.

The second discourse-coalition was identified between the VNG and regarding the story-line that LA21 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)).

4.3 The discourse on administrative renewal

The discourse on administrative renewal is closely linked with the discourse on political renewal. In the discourse on administrative renewal the added value of LA21 is doubted because it is seen as just another innovation in urban governance. An important part of these innovations, as we have seen before, were directed towards changes in the way politics were run, focusing on the position of citizens in decision-making.

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. Important related innovations for LA21 are:

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

LA21 is sometimes labelled as nothing more than one of these innovations or LA21 is confused with these innovations.

Social regeneration already came more prominent on the national and local political agenda at the end of the eighties. Social regeneration was an off spin of the more traditional urban-renewal policies that concentrated on rundown areas with poor infrastructure and social conditions. Since the mid nineties local regeneration is pushed forward within the so called mayor town policies which started with specific attention for the four mayor cities but now involves twenty five of the mayor cities. Mayor town policy is a combination of social, urban and economic revitalisation and concentrates on rundown urban areas with specific needs. The policy is funded and stimulated by national government on the basis of agreements with the cities. To receive funding the cities have to develop plans and submit these to national government. LA21 is sometimes confused as a specific variant of mayor town policy which stresses the living environment.

In recent years more and more municipalities started to reorganise part of municipal policy making and the municipal organisation along the lines of urban neighbourhood or districts. The idea was to bring basic services like waste treatment, road and green area maintenance and social services near the citizens. Sometimes this involves also decentralised decision making and budgeting and even structure plan processes with the involvement of neighbourhood or district councils or the general neighbourhood public. LA21 is sometimes organised on the basis of the same neighbourhoods and therefore confused as being just another form of decentralisation of local democracy.

The end of the twentieth century was a reason for many Dutch municipalities to start organising visioning processes. Often these processes focus very much on economic and infrastructural development. Sustainable development is secondary or the environment is considered to be the limiting boundary for development. Nevertheless if these processes are organised with participation of citizens and local organisations, which they often are, they draw on the same social partners (business, NGO's, social interest groups, etc.) as LA21. Forms of public debates on the future like scenario workshops, round-table discussions or broad-based public discussions also resemble LA21-processes.

The last innovation that LA21 is sometimes confused with are recent innovations in environmental policy. In the first place the 'city and environment' project that descends from discussions on the problematic character of realising environmental objectives in urban areas. Policies to restrict noise and other disturbances prescribe a certain zoning between (industrial) activities and housing. In practice of municipal urban planning environmental standards were often too rigid and formal application would severely hinder urban development. This becomes even more complicated by applying criteria for compact cities and mobility.

In the city and environment project 25 municipalities are allowed to experiment with their environmental and physical planning obligations to solve these kind of problems. Another example is the so-called 'MIG' project, which stands for 'Modernising Noise Abatement Policy Instruments' (*Modernisering Instrumentarium Geluidhinder*). The Ministry set this project up with the aim to draft the revisions to the act based. The outcome will be that municipalities have to make noise-plans with participation of citizens that allows them to set aside noise-levels at one place and find compensation elsewhere. Another example of these innovation is the Soil Remediation Policy Review (*Beleidsvernieuwing Bodemsanering, or BEVER project*).

Conclusion

The implementation of LA21 is hindered by a large number of innovations in local government that touch on certain aspects of LA21. One consequence is that some municipalities adhere to the story-line 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 innovations 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).

5. Conclusions

In how far can the current state of affairs and future development of LA21 be explained on the basis of the views of participants in the implementation of LA21 in three discourse on respectively local democracy, local authority self responsibility in sustainable development and innovations in local governance?

One of the lessons we can take from Hajer's (1995) work on discourse-coalitions in environmental politics is that environmental politics is as much a conflict over the language in which we define problems and solutions as over the state of the environment 'out there'. In the Netherlands LA21 was not a turning point in policy like it was in other countries like Great Britain. In this paper we argued that the current state of affairs and future development of LA21 can be explained on the basis of the views of participants in the implementation of LA21 in the form of their adherence to certain story-lines. These story lines explain a number of the typical general characteristics of the state of affairs of LA21 in the Netherlands.

We identified the following discourse coalitions of key-actors adhering to specific story-lines. In the discourses on local democracy we identified two story-lines. The NCDO, VNG and many municipalities seem to adhere the story-line that LA21 is closely linked or even an exponent of Dutch political renewal. The second discourse-coalition was identified between NCDO, VNG, VROM and municipalities regarding the story-line that a surplus value of LA21 is to create support for local sustainable policy.

In the discourses on local self-responsibility in environmental policy we identified two discourse-coalitions. The ministry, VNG and many municipalities seem to adhere the story-line that LA21 is at least already partly there in the Netherlands because municipalities are involved in producing local sustainable policies.

Another discourse-coalition was identified between the VNG and regarding the story-line that LA21 has at least to strike a balance between the quality of the immediate surroundings (the here and now) and sustainable development (there (global) and then (future generations)).

On the basis of discourses on administrative renewal we concluded that the implementation of LA21 is hindered by a large number of innovations in local government that touch on certain aspects of LA21. One consequence is that some municipalities adhere to the story-line that they already 'doing' LA21 because they are involved in several innovations with resemblance's to LA21-activities.

The coalitions formed around these specific interpretations of LA21 determine specific Dutch interpretations of what a LA21 is. Some of the story-lines, like a LA21 should start with the immediate surroundings as a precondition for sustainable development, get almost a ritual character in the Netherlands. It is difficult to show that the story-lines add to the understanding of actors, for instance the relation between LA21 and political renewal. The discussion about the added value of LA21 to already existing initiatives in the area of local sustainable policies and changes in local democracy is largely determined by these story-lines. The difficulty then becomes that some municipalities start questioning the value-added aspect of doing something there supposedly already doing under a new name or label. The explicit relations which are made with other innovations in local government only causes more confusion and doubts. Further some of the story-lines are linked with implementation barriers we identified in section 2 like 'LA21 is considered as an environmental and isolated activity'

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Notes

¹ We prefer the word 'political renewal' here for the Dutch 'bestuurlijke vernieuwing' to distinguishes form administrative renewal

² Interview with alderman Van der Putten, responsible for environmental affairs, June 5, 1997.

³ Letter to the parlement date 11-2-1997