

The Local Level in Environmental Governance: A Promising 'Janus Face'

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'If the nation state in its present form is the only viable basis for governance, then the prospects for sustained environmental improvement appear to be very poor.' - Hempel, 1996: 156

1. Introduction

It may be seen as a special characteristic of environmental policy that, being a relatively new policy, it has to face 'the challenge of globalisation' (Dente, 1995). The well known maxim, 'think global, act local', stresses the multi-level character of environmental problems in a way that does not even mention the level of the nation state. Besides the challenge of globalisation, is there also something like a 'local challenge to the state' in environmental governance? In this contribution we examine the place of the local level in environmental governance.

There is an almost eternal debate between centralists and decentralists. The question of whether the local level should be considered a source of hope or a source of despair for environmental governance (Press, 1994) will receive a mixed answer in this contribution. Local governments and other organisations have both been the initiators of new environmental policies on several occasions, but have been hindrances to policy developments on others. The local level as such is not 'good' or 'bad'; it is probably as 'Janus faced' as all other levels of governance. Nevertheless, it is of special interest here. This contribution discusses a number of the characteristics of the local level in environmental governance. We conclude that the local level is an insufficient but essential part of a multi-level governance structure for achieving sustainability.

There is no clear-cut internationally acceptable division between the local level of governance and 'higher' levels. A mid-size town is 'local', but how should one label Amsterdam? Or London? And what about the Dutch Province of Zuid-Holland? Or the German *Land* Hamburg? As a working definition, the term 'local level' is used in this chapter to denote the level of governance at which a considerable proportion of the decisions in the field of environmental affairs that directly affect individual people and businesses are made. For instance in the Netherlands, with its three tiers of government, this implies that both the municipal level and the provincial level of government are considered to be 'local'.

1.1 The local level and environmental problems

When discussing the 'local challenge to the state' it is necessary to realise that environmental problems have different scales and relate differently to the various levels of governance. That creates the paradox that the same activity can sometimes be viewed as necessary for the environment at the local scale and detrimental to the environment from the perspective of a problem at a different scale. There is no such thing as one single environmental problem; there are various, relatively diverse environmental problems. Some environmental problems are of a relatively local nature, even if they are quite widespread, an example being soil pollution. Although it is true that the causes and effects of such environmental problems lie at a local scale, this does not mean that people there are sufficiently able to identify, analyse and deal with such problems. Other problems operate at the global level, such as the threat of global warming. For many environmental problems, the causes, distribution, effects and capacity to solve them are all located at different levels of governance.

'Political ecologists', as Hempel describes them, tend to see the political order as a kind of ecosystem involving thousands of human societies, over 180 countries, some two thousand international governmental organisations, tens of thousands of international conventions, the system of the United Nations and nearly eighteen thousand transnational non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Although the nation state remains the dominant 'species' within today's political ecosystem, political ecologists would say it is undergoing an evolutionary transformation toward 'global' forms of governance that anticipate greater interdependence between local, national, and supranational forms of authority (Hempel, 1996: 154).

Will this 'ecosystem' be able to sufficiently reduce the burden on the actual ecosystem? In view of the enormous task that emerges from calculations of what the 'sustainable' level for Europe would be, this appears to be a difficult task. Opschoor (1996) arrives at desired percentage reductions in emissions and raw materials consumption of 80 to 95% until 2040. Such challenges alone could be reason enough for a 'death-reflex of normality' (Beck, 1995: 49), denying the problem rather than facing up to the challenge. 'More of the same' seems to be insufficient, at any rate. In contrast to the continuing globalisation of the economy, of which it is difficult to say whether it is a good or a bad thing, but which at any rate appears to be indifferent to its social and ecological consequences, we are increasingly coming to view, not the nation state as the obvious 'countervailing power', but rather a developing global 'civic society' which also reserves a place for (networks of) local organisations.

The picture of the local level that is usually presented in this type of consideration is positive, albeit somewhat vague. At the local level people are supposed to care more for their surroundings, serve more as examples to one another, and resort less to ingrained modes of working when dealing with environmental problems than at the national level. This would seem to qualify the local level of governance for inclusion in concepts of environmental governance. But is this picture justified? Are local organisations the 'grass-roots' of all environmental defence, being more connected to the everyday environment than larger organisations? Or, to the contrary, do they represent short-sightedness and a narrow-minded interest in economic benefits even at the expense of both the local and the global environment?

1.2 The 'Janus face' of local government

Local government usually serves local interests. These interests are in part equal to the local people, who, after all, are the voters. But the issue at stake is not only a good quality living environment but also a prosperous local economy (see Williams and Matthey, 1995), and the interests to be served include those of firms and other economic actors (for example, in obtaining planning permissions and environmental licences). The tension that is felt between the interest of a liveable environment on the one hand and that of a prospering economy on the other hand often leads - even in open and democratically functioning local communities - to a kind of *Realpolitik* with a pragmatic attitude to environmental interests.

For nation states with an active environmental policy the local level sometimes seems to be an orphanage with problem children rather than a complex of lively communities which threaten to assume the initiative in the field of environmental protection. In the seventies and eighties a serious 'Vollzugs-defizit' was found to exist in the Netherlands and in Germany, among other countries. The 'local challenge' was still far from being seen in terms of a kind of competition for legitimate governance; rather it was seen as the problem of how to make local authorities take the environmental problem seriously.

In the Netherlands in the seventies, firms were found to have adequate permits in only a quarter of all cases, even where environmental laws had been in place for a longer period of time. And even after that discovery, policy implementation proceeded only with difficulty (Bressers & Hanf, 1995: 296-297). The Dutch central government responded to information such as this by the creation of encouragement programmes. First, municipalities were entitled to subsidies if they drew up an inventory of all firms in their municipalities that were required to have a permit, together with a plan of action to catch up on the backlog in issuing permits. Next, the municipalities received substantial subsidies to increase the number of environmental officials, on condition that they would proceed apace in reducing their backlog, improve enforcement and make a start with new environmental tasks which are often related to the external integration of environmental policy.

These schemes have at times been scornfully characterised as 'paying the local authorities to start observing the law'. It is not difficult to see that, from this perspective, one gains acquaintance with a different level of local environmental governance than appears to be intended by the advocates of 'glocalisation'. From this perspective, also the fact that even municipalities that are motivated to contribute to the reduction of global environmental problems do not actually display much activity in their day-to-day decision-making should not come as a surprise. Without a viable representation of environmental interests there is even the risk that, at the cost of environmental protection, local authorities engage in 'policy competition', competing for investments and jobs by lowering or corrupting environmental standards.

Most authors that have pinned their hopes on the local level as an essential and stimulating part of 'global environmental governance' do not automatically see local authorities as the main actors. Much is expected of NGOs and other bottom up initiatives. But this is done not unambiguously. Local opposition to economic and infrastructure development is often derided as being 'NIMBYism' (Not In My Back Yard), and a menagerie of acronyms has developed around this concept: LULUs (locally unwanted land uses), NIMTOO (not in my term of office, referring to elected officials' opposition to LULUs), BANANA (build almost nothing anytime near anywhere), and NOPE (not on planet Earth) (Belsten, 1996: 31). These acronyms all reflect the fact that local citizen participation is increasing and should be taken into account when economic and infrastructure works are undertaken. Still, they also reflect a weakness of the local level as a part of environmental governance. If the new activity affects the quality of the immediate living environment, any such activity will run the risk of becoming a LULU, irrespective of whether its positive aspect serves an economic purpose such as an industrial site or a new highway, or an environmental interest, as in the case of a windmill park.

The concept of local communities that protect their local resources better than anyone else, and that need to be protected rather than told what to do by higher authorities, is certainly not true in all cases (see for instance De Geus, 1993; Eckersley, 1992: 145-178; Ostrom, 1990). Does this mean that the concept of such communities is unrealistic? Not necessarily. In any case, many other municipal boards have highly motivated people who contribute to the reduction of the environmental problem. Oddly enough, this often involves initiatives that are likely to contribute to global environmental issues rather than to the local environment.

An example is the International Climate Union (Klima-Bündnis, 1993), the 1993 Annual Conference of which was chaired by one of the authors of this contribution. Here hundreds of local authorities from six European countries agreed on a programme which involved, among other things, reduction of CO₂ emissions by half in 2010, halting the production of cfk's and minimising the use of tropical hardwood. In fact, a Dutch study showed that the municipalities which endorsed this agreement adopted hardly any additional measures in respect of energy, traffic, tropical hardwood and waste processing as compared to other municipalities (Ham, 1994: 40). In the debate at the local level, global considerations usually do not appear to play a role of any importance. Several municipalities with a good record consciously decided not to sign the agreement because they felt the targets were unrealistic. Thus, participation in the Climate Union appears to be partly symbolic. This does not have to mean that it is also trivial, though. And the board members of the Climate Union are aware that the targets should not be taken as absolutes. What they feel is important is the impulse that this Union gives in the right direction, plus the exchange of ideas between the participants.

To assess the degree to which local governments and other organisations can be a force for achieving sustainability it is necessary first to elaborate somewhat on the various functions of the local level in environmental governance.

2 The role of local organisations in multilevel environmental governance

If the local level is considered as an important part of environmental governance because of the options and functional outcomes it can generate, it makes sense to look at the functions of the local level not in isolation, but in conjunction with the other levels of governance. One of the key propositions of this chapter is that although local issues naturally receive most attention in local policy processes, there is no convincing reason why policies at the local level should be restricted to local issues only. When the local level has a function in national agenda-setting then it is less obvious that local side effects of nationally desirable investments should inevitably lead to NIMBY stands by local participators. Policy and participation at the local level does not necessarily target only local issues, but rather will tend to address all issues that are dealt with by local governments and other organisations. The range of these issues is much wider than that of local issues only.

2.1 Different levels and their opportunities for local authorities and other organisations

Table 3.1 below presents several loci and foci for environmental action. The loci are the levels of governance. In addition to (a) the local or subnational level of activity, these levels are (b) the national level, (c) the international level and (d) the global level. The foci are the various functions of governance in the policy process: (1) public agenda-setting, (2) policy formulation, (3) policy implementation and (4) self-managed activities. Of course, these functions cannot always be clearly separated, but they do provide a framework within which various local activities, and thus the range of meaningful subjects for activities at the local level, can be situated. The table indicates the combinations of loci and foci in which activities of *local* authorities and other *local* organisations can play an important role. The activities of national or international organisations would of course display a different pattern of loci-foci combinations. What the table illustrates most prominently is that it would be a misjudgement to think that local authorities and other organisations are only involved in activities at the local level, but also that the higher the level ('locus'), the more limited their involvement.

Table 2.1: Functions of activities of local authorities and other organisations

Locus	Local	National	International	Global
Focus				
Public agenda-setting	X	X	X	X
Policy formulation	X	X	X	
Policy implementation	X	X		
Self-managed activities	X			

Note that all combinations of loci and foci mentioned in the table are (possible) functions of local governments and other local organisations. National and international organisations are not taken into account in this chapter, unless they are co-operative associations of local organisations. They fulfil not only the functions that are left open in the table, but also various functions in which local organisations also play a role. In practice, there are some restrictions to the role local authorities can play, for instance in the process of public-agenda setting and discussion at the global level. Nevertheless, local authorities and other organisations play a part not only at the local level but at almost all levels of governance. Many local organisations made themselves heard during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro (1992), at the level they manifest themselves most clearly as part of a new 'civic society'. The local organisations present at Rio and follow-up conferences regard themselves as clear promoters of a transformation towards a sustainable society. Perhaps this has to do with the fact that only advocates of environmental protection are active at this level.

2.2 Opportunities at the international level

At the international level, the range of activities is somewhat greater. NGOs often have a basis in local organisations, even when they target international environmental problems, and activities are not just limited to setting the agenda. The international activities of local organisations also play a part in the arena of policy formulation. These include international associations of local governments, such as the Climate Union. In the Climate Union hundreds of local authorities from six European countries have agreed on a programme which includes the reduction of carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions by 50 per cent in 2010, halting the production of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and minimising the use of tropical hardwood (Klima-Bündnis, 1993). While many of these goals are out of reach for local governments, the main role for these organisations may lie in the fact that they constitute a forum for the exchange of ideas on potential activities and projects that can be undertaken by local authorities in their own areas. The variety of ideas and activities they bring to the attention of others is a source of inspiration for what might be called 'international interlocal policy learning'. The importance of cross-national organisations, like IULA and ICLEI, is growing.

2.3 Opportunities at the national level

The role of the local level in the development of environmental policy at the national level varies. Von Weizsäcker (1994: 158) has high hopes that local environmental policies will play a pioneering role. He mentions Japan as an example where, in addition to the courts, local communities had a major influence on industry. Along similar lines, the national associations of local authorities in the Netherlands play a very important role, both in policy formulation and in policy implementation. The associations of municipalities, provinces and water boards are almost self-evident participants in policy formulation processes at the national level. They are important actors in policy implementation because they develop a variety of standard plans and approaches that serve as voluntary (but influential) co-ordination mechanisms and aids to their members. Nevertheless, Jänicke and Weidner (1997: 301) state that *'the impulse and general concept of environmental policy institutionalisation came from abroad and the initiative to react to it was then taken up by the politico-administrative system (top down initiative) in most industrialised countries'*.

2.4 Opportunities at the local level

Naturally, the widest range of activities is developed by the local authorities at their own level. Local Agenda 21 processes contribute to setting the agenda. In policy formulation, local green planning plays a major role in the Netherlands, although the extent to which these plans have an impact on subsequent concrete decision-making should not be overestimated (Coenen, 1996). Besides, local authorities take part in networks of organisations that are involved, for example, in the protection of natural conservation areas (Oosterveld et al., 1997), area-based integration of policies (in so-called 'ROM areas'; Glasbergen, 1995), and more generally, in various forms of external integration of environmental policies into other policy fields.

The role of the local authorities in policy implementation, for example in licensing and enforcement, is not always seen as a positive one. It must be noted, though, that in the Netherlands the stimulation programmes have had an effect and the local authorities certainly do not perform badly compared with central government, even though there is much room for improvement (Smits, 1995; Schuddeboom, 1994: 270-274). Local authorities also play a crucial role where environmentally relevant decisions with a spatial aspect are at stake. This is examined further in the next section.

Because local authorities not only carry out and enforce policy, but also take action themselves on a wide range of issues that have environmental consequences, the environmental behaviour of these authorities themselves is also of importance at the local level. This extends beyond the organisation itself and includes activities such as the construction of new residential areas. Some authorities have built 'ecological' residential districts which can have a major effect on the environmental behaviour of households. When looking at all these points one should realise, of course, that the autonomy and governing power at the local level may differ greatly from one European country to another; opportunities may be present in one country that are unthinkable in the administrative structure of other countries.

To conclude, many interesting initiatives are being developed at the local level. Nevertheless, at this level it appears impossible to escape the tension - whether or not correctly experienced as such - between economy and ecology, which seems to interfere with an adequate response to the ecological challenge at the other levels of governance as well. The variation in basic economic and business structure exerts a strong effect on the potential for local environmental problem-solving. If the local level is to assume a more influential position within an interdependent governance structure which includes all levels, a naive faith in the vitality of local communities is insufficient. In the next section three roles will be discerned and discussed in which the local level may fulfil a specially relevant function, and in which activities at the local level could play an important role.

3 Three special roles of the local level in environmental governance

Rather than raising the importance of one of the levels, improvement of the *interaction* between the various levels appears to be of great importance to an adequate system of environmental governance. This involves, among other things, the stimulation of *political modernisation* to enable a better handling of the environmental problems. Spaargaren (1997: 14) considers the integrated area-oriented approach and the target group approach in Dutch environmental policy as prime examples of a development towards political modernisation. Following his lead, in this section some remarks will be made about the interaction between the various levels, the spatial aspect and the aspect of the relation with target groups.

3.1 Local authorities and organisations as strategic players between the levels of governance

According to Von Weizsäcker (1994: 153), the city of the future cannot be compared to what is nowadays considered a well-run Western city. He paints a picture of the city as a parasite on the ecological capacity of the surrounding countryside and the rest of the world. Local administrators appear to profit from good transportation links to urban centres in the short run, but will eventually find that this makes even more uncontrolled expansion of these centres possible.

Local authorities participate in a game with other governmental actors, both local authorities and other organisations (Tjallingii, 1995), and depend on actors at other levels for a wide range of possibilities to protect the local living environment. Interaction with these other levels is essential to put a stop to locally undesirable developments. They may try to act strategically in this respect to utilise opportunities for breakthroughs as well as possible. An example of this is the protection of water resources. Some provinces choose to take an active position in the fight against agricultural pollution by implementing a policy in co-operation with the drinking water sector, which stimulates preventive measures in the agricultural sector. This is not the case in all Dutch provinces; in some cases interaction between the provincial council and other actors is less productive. In these cases, the provinces concerned are afraid that they will lose their administrative prestige if they transfer some of their tasks to others, and so do not make use of the opportunities to gain more extensive protection of the local environment (Bressers, Huitema and Kuks, 1995).

One conclusion is that the pursuit of a certain level of 'governmental prestige' can be a major stimulus to undertake action to protect the local environment. And in fact, local authorities are often sensitive to their role of providing an example to other local actors.

The other levels of government can, in turn, exert influence on the local level. Such influence is present even at the global level in the form of Agenda 21, of which it is sometimes said that of all the measures it mentions to make world-wide sustainable development possible, two-thirds have to be taken at the local level. Municipalities are often the first to be confronted by NGOs about their actions. This is also true when environmental problems of global importance are involved, such as the use of tropical hardwood. Moreover UNICEF, UNEP and other aid agencies have many field offices in developing countries where actual implementation of international agreements takes place. This is sponsored and monitored by the Global Environment Facility. Within the European Union there is increasing interest in a direct relationship with local authorities, and the new European guidelines for air pollution in cities calls for immediate action plans, whereas the previous guidelines first had to be translated into national guidelines. An evaluation has shown that these were largely ignored by the local authorities in the Netherlands, in part because, in contrast to the rest of national policy, the guidelines were based on ambient air standards and not emission standards (Booy Liewes, Ligteringen and Bressers, 1992).

Turning now to influences on local authorities from the national level, in a study on the acceptance of the Noise Nuisance Act, Potman (1989: 182-183) concludes that the municipalities that had to implement the Act did not fully accept it in several respects, and that this could be largely explained by the perceptions of those involved of the significance and consequences of the Act for the local situation. In other words, it was not the general objective of the Act, but rather the 'hindrance' the administration would experience when implementing it, that was the decisive factor determining its acceptance.

Much of environmental policy started life in the form of individual local initiatives. In a great many cases, though, these were considered insufficient for an adequate or co-ordinated handling of environmental problems, and environmental policy was withdrawn from the local level. Not only was there insufficient confidence in the priority given to the handling of these environmental problems at the local level, but arguments of specialisation, capacity, independence of government and uniformity also lay behind this decision. Very often, it is true, the (new) problem formulation and policy formulation were raised to a higher level, but once again the local authorities were charged with their implementation during which the real problems of support for policy often emerge. In a sense, therefore, it is also the 'most difficult' tasks that are left to the local authorities; subsequent stimulation from the national level can be seen as a form of compensation for this.

In his study on the stimulation of local-authority environmental policy by national government, Smits (1995: 357) arrived at the conclusion that many subproblems or subareas of policy are not suitable for such control by the national level. He argues that the financial stimulation schemes employed use one central steering concept to realise a relatively wide range of policy objectives. In his opinion, the diversity of the package, the municipalities and the objective-means relations between stimulation and behaviour make such an approach relatively ineffective. He also believes that particularly the more innovative issues involving co-operation between policies, such as 'sustainable building', local spatial planning, industrial settlement policies and entering into open Local Agenda 21 processes, are unsuitable for effective stimulation by the national level.

In this discussion about the extent to which the local level can be stimulated by the national level to engage in 'interpolicy co-operation', it should be realised that at the national level itself the (side) effects of other policy fields have in the past had a negative rather than a positive influence on environmental pollution (Ligteringen, 1996). Local authorities often claim to have a more integrated vision of public policy than the highly specialised branches of national government. Moreover, direct participation of a variety of local organisations in local policy processes can fulfil an important role because contributions made by the public can be assumed to be less structured according to different policy fields than government itself.

3.2 Local authorities and organisations and conflicts about space

The relationship with the spatial environment to a considerable extent determines the degree to which all kinds of activities cause environmental problems. It is not without reason that installations such as nuclear reactors are so often located near national borders. This relationship is very important to the local level because spatial aspects of environmental problems are felt specifically in the local community.

In many countries, the main influence exerted by the local policy level on society concerns the use of space. To illustrate his statement that virtually all local decisions have an environmental dimension, Von Weizsäcker (1994: 158) mentions the siting of new industry, new roads, the operation of public transport, energy supply, waste disposal, sewage and green spaces. These are almost all matters where the spatial aspect is important or even dominant.

At the local level, in addition to citizens and firms, the users of space in general (both inside and outside the built-up area) are the main parties which should be taken into account politically. This involves functions such as agriculture, water use, traffic and transport, and nature conservation. The degree of political organisation of the groups involved in these functions has a great influence on the extent to which the local authorities dare to oppose them or, alternatively, are able to co-operate with them if their objectives coincide. In the Netherlands, special area-based projects have been started (the so-called ROM areas) to organise processes of mutual consultation, problem-definition and, if possible, problem solving between a broad array of organisations.

In many cases, local authorities are faced with increasing and conflicting claims on space, in which there are not only conflicts between different local priorities but in many cases also clashes between local and national authorities, the latter often dismissing objections as NIMBYism. In such cases there is often a high level of mutual interdependence between different layers of government. In principle, central government can force local authorities to agree to major projects such as infrastructure facilities that traverse the local area, but this is not an easy matter. Conversely, in a number of cases, local authorities will need a national framework of legal or policy rules to strengthen their own local spatial policy, for example when imposing regulations for new farms in areas of intensive pig breeding. Again, the pursuit of 'governmental prestige' may often interfere with productive interaction between the various levels of governance.

The integration of spatial planning and environmental policy is a form of external integration, ideally involving interpolicy co-operation. In the Netherlands, with its strong tradition of spatial planning, the concept of the integration of spatial and environmental policy planning at the various administrative levels is now being given serious attention. Certain provinces (Drenthe, Flevoland) are already implementing integrated plans; some have decided not to strive for integration (Noord-Brabant, Noord-Holland) while others are still considering it. At the present time, external integration initiatives often take place at the national level through national policy documents in the areas of spatial planning, traffic and transport and water policy, after which they are translated into local plans and policies. The external integration of the various policy fields involving spatial aspects with environmental policy is of great importance. During the next few decades, environmental pollution caused by living, working and recreation will to a large extent be determined by the spatial structure and spatial measures, according to Bouwer (1997: 17). But he does warn that one should keep a close eye on what is being integrated and how this takes place. The question of how interests and power are distributed is unavoidable. Otherwise, it is doubtful whether the still relatively new environmental policy will remain intact after this integration. Little Red Riding Hood and the wolf were also integrated, but this also meant the end - fortunately temporary in this case - of one of the partners.

3.3 Local authorities and organisations and the target groups of environmental policy

Just as the local level is particularly relevant for the spatial aspect, it is also close to individual citizens and households. In studies that stress the importance of the local level in environmental governance, an important role is frequently allotted to individual citizens and households as a basis. A practical expression of this are Local Economic Trading Systems (LETS), which operate in a number of places. In these systems, part of production and consumption takes place outside the normal economic circuits and is a system of direct exchange based on the hours worked. In 1994 there were at least 486 LETS operating in Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand (Morrison, 1995: 261). The initiative has spread to other countries, including the Netherlands.

When focusing on citizens and households, one can see a number of aspects coming together which influence attitudes towards the everyday environment. Hempel (1996: 233) distinguishes three 'faces' that are present in most people at the same time: that of the 'consumer', who pursues mainly individual preferences; that of the 'parent', who is mainly concerned with the interests of his household and other relatives; and that of the 'citizen', who holds opinions and preferences with respect to the collective level. These orientations vie for priority in decisions that are relevant to the environment, such as the purchase of an (extra) car. Hempel advocates renewing the connection of human identity to a place. Apparently, he does not believe that the developing 'global village' of telephone, television, mass tourism and the Internet can provide people with a good alternative to being attached to, and caring for, a familiar local living environment.

For local authorities, the connection between environmentally relevant decisions taken by people and the places where they live and work implies a special responsibility and an opportunity. A responsibility because it is felt increasingly strongly that further improvement of the ecological efficiency of society does not only depend on technological innovation and the co-operation of large corporations, but also on the opinions and actions of people in their everyday living and working situations. After all, the issue in such cases is the environmental behaviour of people and groups of people in what the target group approach to environmental policy calls the 'inaccessible target groups', such as consumers, car drivers and small entrepreneurs (Kuks and Ligteringen, 1996). 'Inaccessible target groups' are sectors of society that are difficult to engage in collective negotiations, because they have numerous members and lack representative organisations that are capable of concluding legitimate and authoritative agreements on their behalf.

The issue of accessibility also provides local authorities with a special opportunity to contribute: these groups are less inaccessible to local authorities than to central government. Therefore, if in order to stimulate responsible environmental behaviour it is expedient to use a policy style which involves direct consultation, local authorities can play a major role in policy-making.

Situations in which direct consultation with the target group can be important occur, for example, in the following cases:

- policy-makers are insufficiently informed of the circumstances of the target group to be able to think of an effective approach; conditions in the various areas or subgroups may differ considerably, for example.
- a consensual approach is called for because the co-operation of the target group is required, perhaps because environmentally relevant behaviour cannot be verified or because such verification, or even the imposition of certain rules itself, is seen as an unacceptable violation of privacy or basic individual freedoms.

It is precisely at the national level that the problem of more or less inaccessible target groups hardly being represented manifests itself. This makes it impossible to involve these groups in policy-making in any productive way. For instance, in many countries there are motoring organisations, but the often large memberships of these organisations do not reflect a legitimacy to negotiate with the government on behalf of all motorists. It is true that national associations do sometimes assume this role - for example, in reaction to an increase in petrol prices - but one thing they cannot do is make promises on behalf of their members about their behaviour. They cannot 'deliver'.

Target groups that are difficult to reach are sometimes more accessible at the local level than at any higher level, reflecting a lower number of members and/or a better degree of organisation. Conversely, the local level offers a better opportunity for target groups to participate in policy-making. An example of smaller membership making target groups more accessible is that of local contractors, who can be engaged in discussions about aspects of energy-efficient construction (Kuks, 1992). Some local initiatives, for example neighbourhood projects for the monitoring and reduction of energy consumption in households, make use of local organisations such as shopkeepers' associations and neighbourhood groups. But this can also turn out differently. In the Dutch town of Delft, the shopkeepers decided that the attractive old town would benefit from being lit up in the evenings, and they drew up a plan to illuminate the whole town centre with floodlights. This would have meant an energy consumption equal to that of more than ten families in this self-proclaimed energy-conscious town, so the municipality turned the plan down. Two hundred or so shopkeepers then began to 'romantically' illuminate their own shop windows. Also, when the issue is reducing car traffic in inner city areas, shopkeepers' associations and local Chambers of Commerce often enter the arena as opponents rather than as supporters.

These examples might leave one with the impression that the contribution of the local level to the reduction of environmental pollution can best be compared to an Echter-nach procession (three steps forward and two steps back). It is precisely this strong representation of interests that shows that deals can be made in the other direction with these local organisations. Where physical measures are involved as well, such as facilities to reduce traffic, which basically do not require agreement on the part of the individual parties involved, the existence of possibilities for entering into negotiations with such parties is of great importance to the creation of a social support base. Without such a support base, measures which are really effective would in most cases not stand a chance in local policy-making processes.

3.3.1 Summary

When discussing the local level of environmental governance, it is necessary to realise that environmental problems have different scales and relate differently to the various levels of governance. Our key proposition is that, although local issues naturally get most attention in local processes, there is no firm reason to restrict activities at the local level to local issues only. By distinguishing several levels of governance (sub-national, national, international and global) and various functions of governance in the policy process (public agenda setting, policy formulation, policy implementation and own activities), we believe that local authorities and other local organisations can play a part at almost all levels of governance.

To consider the position of the local level, we identify three typical features of local environmental governance.

First, local governments mostly serve local interests, which might evoke a pragmatic attitude towards environmental interests. Without a viable representation of environmental interests, there is even the risk that local governments will engage in a contest of 'policy competition', at the cost of protecting the environment, competing for investments and jobs by lowering or corrupting environmental standards. However, since local authorities are competitors, 'governmental prestige' can also be based on the environmental performance of the local community and on being an 'environmental example' for other communities. The integration of interests at the local level even implies that local governments claim to have a more integrated vision of public policy than the highly specialised branches of the national government. Moreover, direct participation in local policy processes can fulfil an important function because popular inputs can be assumed to be even less separated into different fields than the organisation of government usually is.

Second, a close relationship with the spatial environment exists at the local level. Many local decisions have an environmental as well as a land use dimension, which mostly confronts local authorities with conflicting claims on space. This creates a high interdependence between the different layers of governance. Sometimes, for example, a national government wants to force the local authorities to agree with infrastructural facilities that traverse the local area, while local authorities, by contrast, often need a national framework of legal or policy rules to strengthen their own local land use policy.

Third, the local level also has a special closeness to individual citizens and households. In their role of car drivers, consumers, etcetera, citizens are considered to be rather inaccessible target groups when it comes to a policy style in which consultation of groups in society is needed to create support for environmental policy measures. Target groups that are difficult to access nationally are sometimes more accessible at the local level. This is then reflected in terms of a lower group membership and/or a better degree of organisation.

Three aspects of the local level of environmental governance have been discussed. In addition to interaction with other levels of government, these were the more direct links at the local level with the spatial environment and local groups. What has not yet been discussed is the temporal aspect. The various elements of environmental policy have different time spans, varying from the short to the very long term. Partly related to the fact that a large part of environmental policy involves very long time spans for politicians is the fact that a large measure of uncertainty tends to creep into policy-making - not only with regard to the extent of the problems and how they are likely to develop, but also with regard to the possibilities available to society to limit these problems. All that is certain is that we know less than is required for classical rational considerations, and that this is likely to remain so for the time being. Under these circumstances, a continuous learning process is essential. 'Learning our way out' may be the only path towards a sustainable society (Milbrath, 1989).

The large number of local authorities and other organisations offers a major advantage: that of variety. This background may well constitute the main aspect of the innovative activities that are being undertaken at the moment by a number of local authorities and other organisations and their mutual network associations. Variety is essential as a laboratory for future learning processes. In this era of the 'global village', learning experiences in the real villages of Europe can be disseminated at enormous speed and thus contribute to policy innovations, which give the local level the place it deserves in a system of governance that can meet the ecological challenge. This may, after all, be a decisive reason to give the participation of local organisations in environmental governance the 'benefit of the doubt'. The local level is insufficient, certainly, but nevertheless it might be essential.

The role of the local level as a laboratory for learning processes can be enhanced by supporting the learning processes of authorities and other organisations by scientific research. Important subjects to be studied include: the extent of participation in local policy processes and its influence on the quality of environmental decision making; experiments with local initiatives that try to change the environmental behaviour of 'less accessible target groups'; and the institutional arrangements that foster a responsible and thus sustainable use of natural resources by local communities.

Notes

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