

Local Agenda 21; a democratisation reform in the Netherlands?

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Paper presented at NIG Conference “From Government to Governance”; Workshop Local Government

Enschede 23-24 November 2000

1. Introduction

'Local Agenda 21' (LA21) refers to the general goal set for local communities by Chapter 28 of the 'action plan for sustainable development' adopted at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992. Chapter 28 is an appeal to 'local authorities' to engage in a dialogue for sustainable development with the members of their constituencies. By nature LA21 is therefore a democratisation reform. What is unique in LA21 as a democratisation reform is that Chapter 28 of the Agenda was developed and authored at the supra-national level. The Netherlands was one of the respective 150 countries that signed the RIO-agreements.

This brings us to the first question this paper addresses:

How can we explain and evaluate LA21 as an institutional innovation, particular in terms of LA21 as a democratic reform, in the Dutch local government system?

Because LA21 is a supra-national initiative it leaves considerable room for cross-national variation as to how, when and why the LA21 idea becomes salient. The substance of any particular 'Local Agenda 21' will be relative to the specific nature of the local community in question (its geography, demography, economics, society and culture (Lafferty and Eckerberg, 1998)). In this respect Chapter 28 allows for the need to cope with diversity. This brings us to the second question this paper addresses:

To what extent, and how, is the Dutch local government implementation process exceptional, particular in terms of LA21 as a democratic reform, in comparison with other Western-European countries?

The paper is based on material from the SUSCOM ('Sustainable Communities in Europe')-project, a twelve country 'concerted action' within the European Commission research programme for Climate and the Environment that describes, compares and explains the implementation of LA21 in Western-Europe.

In section 2 we will define what a LA21 is and how it distinguishes itself from other policies and activities. Before we discuss in section 4 the shape that LA21 took in the Netherlands we first go into the motives for participation underlying LA21 in section 3. In section 5 we compare the LA21-implementation in general the Netherlands with eleven other Western-European countries and specifically the aspect of LA21 as a democratisation reform. In a final section we draw some conclusions on the meaning of LA21 as a democratisation reform.

2. Defining a LA21

Chapter 28 is addressed to 'local authorities' as one of several 'major groups' which the Agenda singles out as particularly relevant for achieving the aims of the overall Agenda itself. It is because '*so many of the problems and solutions being addressed by Agenda 21 have their roots in local activities*', that the participation and involvement of local authorities is viewed as 'a determining factor' in fulfilling the objectives of the action plan. As the level of governance closest to the people, local authorities '*play a vital role in educating, mobilizing and responding to the public to promote sustainable development*' (para. 28.1, A21).

It is within this focus, that Chapter 28 that we should read the first one of only four major 'objectives':

'By 1996, most local authorities in each country should have undertaken a consultative process with their populations and achieved a consensus on 'a Local Agenda 21' for the community'.

Chapter 28 of Agenda 21 is the shortest chapter in the 40-chapter action plan. Chapter 28 is a relatively simple appeal for a new time of dialogue and co-ordinated strategy for pursuing sustainable development at the local level. Agenda 21 gives little guidance on how local communities should proceed with a Local Agenda 21 process, in a sense that Chapter 28 does not offer an universal and general step-by-step guide. Each community has to find its own most appropriate way, dealing with the specific geographic, demographic, economic, societal and cultural nature of the local community in question.

However, several international and regional organisations have played a major role in following up, and filling out, the documentary signals provided by Chapter 28. Among these in Western-Europe the most important initiatives and organisations are the International Council on Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI¹), the European ‘Sustainable Cities and Towns Campaign’, and the so-called ‘Aalborg Charter²’.

Given this Aalborg Charter and other initiatives the SUSCOM project (Lafferty and Eckerberg, 1998) reached the following concise understanding of what ‘a Local Agenda 21’ is all about:

- A Local Agenda 21 is a local action plan for the achievement of sustainable development. It is to be worked out through a broad consultative process between local authorities, citizens and relevant stakeholder groups, and eventually integrated with existing plans, priorities and programs.
- The ‘consultation’ in question is clearly meant to be a new and different process from existing protective and remedial environmental activities.
- The process has a clear strategic intent. Though the actual content of ‘a Local Agenda 21’ is not spelled out, there is a clear presumption of both change and instrumental rationality with respect to a realisation of the Earth-Summit goals.
- The action plan should be implemented with due provision for ongoing input, monitoring and revision underway, and it should make special efforts to engage women and youth in all phases of the implementation process.
- Chapter 28 of Agenda 21 is specifically addressed to ‘Local Authorities’: The responsibility of national governments is primarily facilitative with respect to the LA21 process.
- The substance of any particular ‘Local Agenda 21’ will be relative to the specific nature of the local community in question (its geography, demography, economics, society and culture), and it should be expected to evolve dynamically over time.

In this paper the interpretation of LA21 as a democratic reform is the central issue. Chapter 28 gives a mandate to the local authorities to take responsibility for initiating and co-ordinating a dialogue among ‘citizens, local organisations and private enterprises’ which is necessary to determine the form and content of their specific LA21 initiative. This ‘consultation’ mandate given to local authorities is clearly meant to be a new and different process from existing public participation procedures. It’s especially this greater efforts to increase *community involvement* that is one of the important criteria that distinguishes LA21 from older environmental policy-making initiatives. (Lafferty and Eckerberg, 1997: 6-7) Before we discuss the shape that public involvement in LA21 took in the Netherlands and other countries we first go into the motives for participation underlying LA21.

3. LA21 and motives for participation

In general Agenda 21 (chapter 8) deems wide participation in the development of national and local strategies necessary. Participation is considered necessary in sustainable development decision making given both normative and functional arguments for participation. The normative perspective in Agenda 21 builds on arguments for direct democracy stressing popular sovereignty and putting emphasis on direct involvement in substantive decision-making on the part of the wider public. A LA21 aspires to 'shared responsibility' which means a redefinition of the role of government and societal actors. The local Agenda 21 represents at least an attempt to extend the civil society at the expense of the role of the state and the role of local authorities changes from director to facilitator. There is an inherent tension here with the elitist normative perspective on participation because elitists question the abilities of the public to participate in a meaningful way.

More important than the normative arguments are the functional arguments for participation in Agenda 21, because Agenda 21 sees public participation in the first place as instrumental. All functional arguments for public participation from literature (f.i. Coenen, Huitema and O'Toole, 1998) play a part in discussions on public participation in LA21. A LA21 should offer the possibility of articulating the interests of the different stakeholders. This is in line with a first type of functional argument that without participation decisions taken will not be seen as legitimate because they will not reflect the will and values of the people.

In the second place public participation is functional because it contributes to the quality of decision making. Firstly because participation gives local government the information necessary for decision-making. We recognise this argument in the Aalborg Charter stage model. Extensive public consultation is coupled with a systematic identification of problems and their causes and the consideration and assessment of alternative strategic options. In this way information and experiences of all sectors of the community will be involved in the process of preparation of local action plans. The Aalborg Charter also builds on the decision quality criteria of fairness that reads that all sectors of the community should have a say in the decision-making process. This is not only a normative direct democracy argument but also a functional argument from the perspective of efficiency. A fair decision making process will increase legitimacy and reduce the level of conflict.

In third place an argument for public participation in Agenda 21 is its intrinsic value for the participants. This functional argument stresses that participation is essentially about empowerment or learning democratic skills. Through participation, people will learn of the problems that society faces and how to interact with others that have different opinions or interests. This type of argument is particularly there in Agenda 21 formulated in terms of the intrinsic value of public participation has contributing to the social emancipation of certain groups, especially women and youth.

As an interactive planning reform Agenda 21 explicitly promotes a more communicative approach towards other actors in society (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).

4. LA21 in the Netherlands

Given these explicit participatory functions of LA21, we will discuss LA21 as an institutional innovation, particular in terms of LA21 as a democratic reform, in the Dutch local government system. We will give a short overview of the implementation of LA21 in the Netherlands based on the empirical material gathered in the Dutch part of the SUSCOM-project, and relate this implementation to the relevance of LA21 as a democratisation reform .

4.1 General characteristics of LA21-implementation in the Netherlands

In the first SUSCOM national report on the Netherlands (Coenen, 1998a) the Dutch situation for the implementation of LA21 was characterised as very fertile because the baseline conditions looked very promising. Dutch municipalities were well ahead with environmental policy, sustainable development had become a political issue and experiences with participation in environmental policy had been gained. These base-line conditions looked promising in that stage because they were in line with key characteristics of a LA21, identified within the SUSCOM-project as a set of criteria to distinguish LA21 from older already existing activities, and described above. For instance Dutch municipalities were already working on a more focused policy for achieving cross-sectoral integration and doing greater efforts to increase community involvement.

This following 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 30 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.

Apart from the Ministry for the Environment (VROM) and the Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG), the National Committee on International Co-operation and Sustainable Development (NCDO) is a key-actor on the national level. In this National Commission around 50 NGO's from all sectors of society participate to stimulate the debate on sustainable development at the national level. Within the NCDO all important NGO are represented. Other major key-actors players are of course the municipalities themselves and in some cases

regional intermunicipal network who work together on LA21, the Environment Inspectorate, consultancy firms and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

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'³.

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

- participation processes are very diverse and range from limited consultation to structural participation platforms;
- in general LA21 take the form of activity-agendas, visioning processes are limited to a very small part of the municipalities;
- the content of LA21 concentrates often on issues from the surrounding environment like dog dirt and litter or on concrete projects in areas like sustainable building or energy saving. The typical characteristics have some consequences for LA21 in the Netherlands compared with the SUSCOM-criteria for a LA21 given in section 2 (Coenen, 1999):
- integration of ecological, economic and social aspects of sustainability is very limited, LA21 is mainly concerned with the issue of environment;
- the global dimension gets relatively little attention in Dutch LA21's;
- links with existing decision making procedures are weak which makes LA21 often an isolated activity.

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 manpower, 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

Conclusion

If we evaluate LA21 as an institutional innovation in the Dutch local government system we have to conclude that LA21 was largely an isolated environmental policy related activity through the VOGM-funding. *What does this mean for the role of LA21 as a democratisation reform?*

4.2 LA21 as a democratisation reform in the Netherlands

How can we explain and evaluate LA21 as a democratic reform in the Dutch local government system? The interpretation of LA21 in the Netherlands has to be placed within the typical Dutch interpretation of communicative planning and the 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. 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 this 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 (NEPP, 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.

Together with the more general 'target group approach' a specific development in local democracy, the so-called 'political renewal', is particular relevant for LA21. The key motives for the so called political renewal ('bestuurlijke vernieuwing') were the low local election turn-out in combination with the disinterest of the voters with municipal politics. This disinterest was shown from voting behaviour, dominated by national issues and national parties voters preference and satisfaction with local government together with a lack of interest to get involved in local politics (Coenen, 1998a). In particular the low turn-out at the 1990 local elections (at 62 per cent) lead to many activities in the field of 'political renewal' Almost 96 per cent of Dutch municipalities took up initiatives under the flag of political and administrative renewal (Gilsing, 1995).

How does LA21 relate to these ideas for 'political renewal'? 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-funding⁴ (see before). A survey (Coenen, 1998) 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 political⁵ renewal, people should have the possibility to influence their immediate surroundings'*.⁶ 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.*

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 size 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.*

And the director of VNG Dordregter (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.*

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.*

Conclusions

On the basis of these exemplary statements by key-actors we may conclude that often LA21 is interpreted as closely linked or even an exponent of Dutch political renewal. The discussion on the value-added perspective of LA21 in the Netherlands has to be placed in this changing institutional context of local democracy. The argument for LA21 is linked with the need to overcome the crisis in local democracy. Further LA21 is interpreted as a specific local variant of interactive policy making with target groups. The surplus value of LA21 is seen as creating support for local sustainable policy, which is a basic premise for Dutch interactive policy making and the target group approach. However, it is questionable if the target group approach is equally relevant on the local level.

6. Comparing the Netherlands to other countries

6.1 Comparing the LA21-implementation in general

To what extent, and how, is the Dutch local government LA21 implementation process exceptional in comparison with other Western-European countries?

Firstly, we try to answer the general question by comparing implementation of LA21 in the twelve Western-European countries studied in the SUSCOM-project. In the table below the countries studied are ranked on the basis of the tempo and quantity of LA21 activity. Such a perspectives doesn't say anything about the quality of the implementation and individual cases.

Table 1 The timing and breadth of LA21 activities in 12 European countries (Lafferty, Coenen and Eckerberg, 1999)

Relative number of initiatives	Timing of active and broad-based implementation		
	Early (1992-1994)	Later (1995-1996)	Latest (1997-1998)
High (>60%)	Sweden	Denmark	
Medium (20-60%)	Great Britain Netherlands	Finland Norway	
Low (< 20%)		Austria Germany	Spain Italy Ireland France

On the basis of the two criteria we ranked the countries in four groups (Lafferty, Coenen and Eckerberg, 1999):

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

This ranking was analysed on the basis of six possible explanatory factors for the tempo and quantity in implementation (Lafferty, Coenen and Eckerberg, 1999):

- constitutional structure;
- baseline conditions;
- involvement in the preparations for UNCED;
- governmental reactions;
- local community reactions;
- the role of NGOs and the social partners.

We restrict ourselves here to explaining the position of the Netherlands as a fore-runner.

The three 'Early-and-many'-countries (Sweden, Great Britain and the Netherlands) have the similarity that they responded relatively quickly to the UNCED agreement, and could report a large number of local authorities involved in LA21 by the time of the follow-up meeting in New York in 1997. In the other categories these three 'Early-and-many'-countries are quite diverse in their central-local relations and the institutionalisation of environmental policy.

Both Sweden and the Netherlands are well known for their strong and well-institutionalised environmental policies, both at the national and local levels of government. The Netherlands was already at the time of the Brundtland report in 1987 working with sustainable development as a national policy priority. Typical for the Netherlands was, but comparable with Sweden, that national government helped spur the implementation by allocating special funds for LA21, and by supporting a national platform for co-ordination. The autonomy of Dutch municipalities is relatively weak, and local authorities rely heavily on national funding.

Conclusions

If we compare the implementation of LA21 in the Netherlands with the other countries, the Netherlands are among the fore-runners in terms of tempo and quantity of implementation. Explanatory factors for this position are financial support by the national government, a strong co-ordinating platform on the national level and well-established baseline conditions like the level of environmental policy and the attention given to sustainable development.

6.2 Differences in participation

Now we have seen that the Netherlands is among the fore-running countries in LA21-implementation in general we turn to the specific position of the Netherlands compared to the other countries in are

The experiences with public participation and the level of public participation were not addressed as a separate category of explanatory variables. Before we address the question *to what extent, and how, the Dutch LA21 as a democratic reform, is exceptional in comparison with other Western-European countries*, we first discuss the differences between the Netherlands and the other countries on the issues of:

- moment of participation;
- experiences with participation;
- willingness of citizens to participate;
- representativeness of the participation;

Moment of participation

Thinking in terms of meaningful or effective participation immediately reminds us of the concept of participation-ladders as made known by the work of authors like Arnstein (1969). It is clear that a LA21 consultation process aims high at such a ladder and would also mean being involved in an early stage of planning. The Aalborg charter as the representative stage-model for good LA21 practice clearly promotes participation in the early stages of the planning process.

In practice we see in the studied countries many different accents in participation in planning stages. In the Netherlands through the system of earmarked funding and the guidance of the Environmental Inspectorate the emphasis was on participation in concrete projects instead of strategic plans. In contrast for instance in the UK through the lack of guidance and resources many LA21 processes produced community visions that were in itself useful and inspiring but were not very likely to be funded or implemented.

Experiences with participation

In Northern-European countries there is a broader practice of public involvement in procedures in environmental and planning acts. The Netherlands are among these fore-running countries while countries like France, Spain, Italy and Ireland there is a relative lack

of experience with citizens participation. For instance in France public participation in terms of early involvement of the general public is new and experimental. The tradition of public participation limits public consultation to information processes. Partly of this experimental character French municipalities feel uncomfortable and hesitant towards early public involvement. They rather wait to face the public debate till plans have been formulated internally. And secondly there is a lack of capacity both in terms of means as in terms of knowledge. In Spain public participation has only recently been included in the political agenda. The first municipal elections date back to 1979 as an inheritance of the Franco-era. In Ireland because of this relative lack of experiences, as result of the heavily dependent relationship with national government and the overload of recent local government innovations, the challenge of community consultation is seen as a barrier rather than as an opportunity for LA21 implementation.

Experiences with existing participation procedures can be positive or negative. Negative experiences in urban planning, like with urban planning (Stadtentwicklungplanung, STEP) in Germany or traditional statutory planning consultation process in the UK, have frustrated many planners and made them hesitant towards participation.

Experiences and tradition in Northern European countries is broader than just having consultation procedures in environmental policy and physical planning. It has to do with democratic tradition and political culture. As we have seen in the Netherlands there is a strong tradition in consensus-democracy where LA21 could build on. And for instance in the Danish political culture there is a strong tradition in consensus seeking approaches and a tradition in 'people's enlightenment'.

Willingness to participate

There is another type of participation ladder of great importance for the interpretation of public participation in LA21. While the Arnstein type of ladder concentrates on performance constraints on public involvement there is a second relevant type of ladder that starts from the perspective of individuals aspiring to participate in LA21 activities. These second type of ladders are concerned with hierarchies of political involvement, ranking from less to more political involvement. For instance Milbrath (1965) made an analogy with gladiators spectacles in the classic era. Translated to the LA21 we would find lowest on the ladder participants who are *apathetic*. Their political role is passive and they have a general disinterest in local sustainable development and policies. Higher on the ladder we find a group that is minimally involved in the LA21 process. They constrain themselves to information seeking and discussing. In the analogy they are the *spectators*. Highest on the ladder we find the *gladiators* who really battle in the LA21 process by attending meeting, campaigning and fundraising. Political opportunity literature shows that this last groups is by far the smallest and that the roles participants take are relatively stable (f.i. Almond and Verba, 1965)

In LA21-processes we could see gladiators both as individuals or as a groups or NGOs. That a large part of the population in LA21 municipalities can be categorised as apathetic is a problem in LA21 implementation. For instance in the documented Finnish cases a common problem were passive citizens. In the Finnish interviews and questionnaires the level of citizen participation is generally experienced a being low and limited to a elite group used to participate in societal activities. Politicians doubt if citizens really want to participate. An indicator for the distribution among the apathetic, the spectators and the gladiators is the answer to the question how many people know about LA21 in there community? For instance in the Austrian Graz-case after five year of work, European awards and becoming a well-

known case all over Europe the general information in the Graz population about it's goals and measures remains catchy. In contrast in Sweden both grassroots activities and local politicians involvement have been high and unchanged in the last years while education on Agenda 21 is frequent and therefore concepts are wide spread.

Why do or don't want people to get involved in LA21?

A characteristic of many pioneering municipalities seems to be an active and politically mobilised population. For instance the well-known the Danish pioneer Albertslund has the special preconditions that Albertslund since the 70's attracted a particular kind of residents of whom a good part happens to be environmental conscious, which would explain for more 'gladiators' in Albertslund. In contrast if we look to the overall picture in Denmark the 1998 green NGO Naturfredningsforening survey shows that over 50% of active LA21 municipalities initiated LA21 activities without public consultation.

The reason that people get involved is probably related with the discussed themes in LA21. As we have seen in the Netherlands a major discussions in LA21 is if LA21 should be on the 'here and now' and attract citizens in discussions on liveability or should be on the 'there and than' and also discuss global and future problems.

There is a relation with non-controversial and positive themes and the potential level of conflict as is shown in the Norwegian Sustainable lifestyle project. The UK SUSCOM-study reports that many municipalities try to avoid the more difficult or innovative areas of sustainability. The other side to this coin is that participants want real influence. Involvement will go down if LA21 proposals don't find their way in land-use plans and budgets and community visions will not be implemented in any way.

Another reason not to participate is the capacity needed from the participant in knowledge and time. To participate in the early stages of the planning process means that more is needed than a single response to a draft plan. Constructively commenting on proposals already asks for a variety of 'skills', formulating alternatives and counter arguments even more. Finally a reason to get involved could lie in the participants role in the community.

In sustainable communities literature it is often argued that geographically-communities with citizens participating directly in decision making should be a key for sustainable development because their members share common interests and identities. Sharing common interest and identity has to do with community size and historical roots. In many of the studied countries bigger municipalities took the lead in LA21 implementation. This has probably to do with implementation capacity. In the Austrian study LA21-prioneering communities are comparatively big and urban, while in general many Austrian communities are relatively small. In France some of the prominent pioneers are suburbs of bigger cities were one would expect a lack of historical community roots. In the Finnish cases is noted that due to the large size of urban communities inhabitants are unfamiliar with each other and lack of commitment to the community. In Spain especially in the so-called DEYNA-initiative, the smallness of the municipalities is said to make participation easier.

Representativeness of the participation

The level of citizens involvement raises also the question of participants representativeness. In France LA21 steering committees bring together representatives of central government, local authorities, associations and experts while inhabitants are not directly associated or represented in those committees. In Spain public participation is often limited to organisations explicitly invited by the municipality.

Public involvement seldom represents a genuine cross-section of the community. In the UK a specific area of concern are minorities, the poor, youth and aged. In other countries it's the lack of business involvement or the overrepresentation of environmental NGO's that is an issue. In Finland it is the limitation to a elite group used to participate in societal activities. The UK chapter raises the issues of the tension between participatory and representative democracy. A typical critique from the representative local politicians is that the 'gladiators' in LA21 processes come from a narrow, unrepresentative groups. In the UK LA21-processes were probably the most dominated by NGOs of all studied countries. A high level of NGO involvement raises the question of whom NGOs represent.

Conclusion

If we compare public participation in the Netherlands with the other countries, the Netherlands are among the countries with a well-established tradition. However public participation in LA21 is still limited. The system of earmarked funding lead to an emphasis on participation in concrete projects instead of strategic plans and major discussed themes in Dutch LA21's are on 'here and now' and liveability. The tradition in public participation does not lead to a much larger willingness of citizens to participate or specific groups, like business, to get involved.

7. The impact of LA21 as a democratic reform

In section 4 we concluded that in the Netherlands LA21 is more or less absorbed a being one of the many initiatives to solve the crisis in local democracy. Several innovations influencing the modes of local democracy were in place at the same time. Here we asked the question if the impact of LA21 as a democratic reform was much larger in the other countries studied in the SUSCOM project.

The Netherlands are not the only country were there is a relation between LA21 and the perceived crisis's in local representative democracy. In many European countries there is a declining voter turn-out in local elections and therefore there is a call for new channels of citizens participation to replace traditional representative democracy. For instance for Finland it is concluded that successful LA21 processes might serve as pattern for citizens participation in general.

The Netherlands are not the only country were there is a relation between LA21 and other reforms. Especially in Ireland several reforms at the level of local government influence local democracy at the same time. For instance the reform programme 'Better Local Government' establishes new 'social partnerships' at the local level through the creation of Strategic Policy Committees which bring together elected, administration, interest groups and voluntary associations to assist in municipal policy formulation.

The key question in LA21 as a democratisation reform is what new forms of participation have emerged through the LA21 process. There are several aspects of this 'newness'. We could distinguish between (1) a change in procedures and modes of local democracy, (2) in forms of participation and use of techniques and (3) LA21 as a vehicle for new ideas on co-production of policy

Ad 1. A discussion on the influence of LA21 on local democracy has to start with the question of influence. To what extent was LA21 a cause that effected change and to what extent were this other causes? LA21 can also have wider impacts in a sense that it can

strengthen the effect of other activities that begun outside LA21. An example is given in the UK study by the 'Don't Choke Britain Campaign'.

The greatest impact of these reform we would expect among the late comers in the field of public participation. There is a problem with the criterion of newness with these relative newcomers in the field of public participation if interpret 'new' as 'new' compared to exiting procedures. LA21 represents an externally generated initiative. The Aalborg charter and other post Rio initiatives serve as a benchmark for newness here. In a particular country LA21 could lead to the extension of existing models of consultation by local authorities, but this could still be backward compared with what is aspired in the Aalborg charter.

Further there is a difference in willingness and practice. In the Irish case for instance the 1995 central government guidelines indicated that consultation and consensus-building in the context of LA21 required a movement exiting legislative provision for public consultation regarding environment and development issues. But Irish practice shows that however some of the Irish pioneers have experimented with new forms of consultation and consensus building, an extensive public consultation as envisaged in the Aalborg stage model has proved to be a great challenge for Irish local authorities. And that the majority of local authorities, although they do have public consultation procedures in the context of existing environmental policy obligations, did not engage in any public consultation in relation with LA21. However the influence of LA21 made many Irish municipalities to take the existing procedures more seriously.

Ad 2. In research and practice many techniques and methods have been developed to facilitate the community participation process. In the UK LA21 gets credit for being innovative in using techniques and procedures. If we look to the techniques and methods that have been frequently used in LA21, these are in the forefront of participatory technique use. In many LA21 cases the methods were copied from other LA21 process. Best cases can be path-breaking and be a model of inspiration for beginning municipalities. For instance the Modena Province-Municipality in Italy, the Barcelona-model in Spain and the Graz eco-profit model in German speaking parts of Europe. In some cases the pioneers themselves have been very active in promoting their innovative approach.

Ad 3. More important than changes in procedures and modes of local democracy and techniques and participation forms used, is the idea of LA21 as a vehicle for new ideas on co-production of policy. Here both participation ladders come together. Processes of stakeholder democracy, co-operative management regimes and co-production of policy aims high at both ladders. It involves both joint decision making and a high level of political involvement. Under very different labels like developing social capital, strengthening civil society, better and new dialogue, etc. the studied countries give signs of processes that mount both ladders at the same time. For all studied countries the evidence comes from a limited number of cases of democratic experimentation ranging from several tens of municipalities to only one or two. Whatever the number, these pioneering cases can show the potential in a country for innovative democratic processes.

Conclusion

A conclusion could be that the impact of LA21 as a democratic reform in the other countries studied in the SUSCOM-project is more positive. Especially among the late comers in the field of public participation the impact could be larger, although still backward compared with what is aspired in the Aalborg charter. Further LA21 contributed more to the

development and use of innovative participation techniques and procedures. And in most other countries there is evidence of democratic experimentation in pioneering municipalities with LA21 as a vehicle for new ideas on co-production of policy.

8. Conclusions

LA21 is by nature a democratisation reform. An essential characteristic of the LA21-initiative is greater efforts to increase community involvement, i.e. to bring both average citizens and major stakeholder groups, particularly business and labour unions, into the planning and implementation process with respect to environment-and-development issues. As a democratisation reform LA21 is more ambitious than just raising the level of public participation. LA21 and Agenda 21 ask for a 'new' social partnership to reach for sustainable development. Social partnership has to be understood as key social actors working together in joint co-operative efforts on sustainable development. Its about new forms of social learning, whereby key-actors seek to resolve potential conflicts through new forms of involvement and co-operation (Lafferty and Eckerberg, 1998).

How can we explain and evaluate LA21 as an institutional innovation, particular in terms of LA21 as a democratic reform, in the Dutch local government system?

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

The interpretation that LA21 strongly resembles existing reforms leads to doubts about the 'added value' of LA21. The new reform is widely seen as simply a 'new label for old wine'. The top-down implementation of the VOGM-funding of environmental policy – which included LA21 as a key option – was nonetheless viewed as a national, not a global, policy. Furthermore, until 1998, the funding of LA21 within the VOGM programme, made case LA21 as a reform for 'environmental protection', not sustainable development. The central funding led to an emphasis on concrete activities and projects, rather than to holistic change. After 1998, the LA21-process is increasingly perceived as an overly ambitious reform towards sustainable development. Many municipalities react by focusing on the quality of household living conditions as a step-up towards sustainable development. LA21 thus becomes enmeshed in existing policy and reform discourses, resulting in either fragmentation of the overall goals, or an association of LA21 with a need for innovation in local government in general.

The conclusions on the limited impact of LA21 in the Netherlands as a democratic reform has to be seen in the context of the Netherlands as a advanced country in environmental policy and sustainable development which at the one hand creates excellent baseline conditions for implementing LA21 but at the same time places heavy burdens on the interpretation of LA21 as a new and worthwhile initiative. This brings us tot the second question.

To what extent, and how, is the Dutch local government implementation process exceptional, particular in terms of LA21 as a democratic reform, in comparison with other Western-European countries?

If we compare the implementation of LA21 in the Netherlands with the other countries, the Netherlands are among the fore-runners in terms of tempo and quantity of implementation. Explanatory factors for this position are financial support by the national government, a strong co-ordinating platform on the national level and well-established baseline conditions like the level of environmental policy and the attention given to sustainable development. If we specifically compare public participation in the Netherlands with the other countries the Netherlands are among the countries with a well-established tradition. However public participation in LA21 is still limited. The system of earmarked funding lead to an emphasis on participation in concrete projects instead of strategic plans and major discussed themes in Dutch LA21's are on 'here and now' and liveability. And the tradition in public participation does not lead to a much larger willingness of citizens to participate or specific groups, like business, to get involved.

In the Netherlands the interpretation by key actors of LA21 as an initiative with an only limited added value to existing initiatives in Dutch political culture, lead to doubts about the value-added aspect and the confusion of LA21 with other (democratic) 'innovations' in urban governance. The conclusion about the impact of LA21 as a democratic reform in the other countries studied in the SUSCOM-project is more positive. Especially among the late comers in the field of public participation the impact could be larger, although still backward compared with what is aspired in the Aalborg charter. Further LA21 contributed more to the development and use of innovative participation techniques and procedures. And in most other countries there is evidence of democratic experimentation in pioneering municipalities with LA21 as a vehicle for new ideas on co-production of policy.

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Notes

¹ Established two-years prior to the Earth Summit, ICLEI played a major role in preparing and co-ordinating Chapter 28 of the Agenda. Working closely with organisations such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA), and the European Commission, ICLEI has taken a clear and forceful lead after the summit in sponsoring and promoting Local Agenda 21 initiatives.

² A three-part document outlining basic values and strategic options for sustainable development in European urban areas, and launching a broad-based campaign for sustainable cities and towns in Europe. Part III of the Charter made a specific commitment to following up Chapter 28 of the Rio Agenda, and also made a direct connection between the Charter, Agenda 21 and the European Union's Fifth Environmental Action Programme, 'Towards Sustainability'.

³ Many municipalities, especially the larger ones, choose for more than the obliged four out of nine VOGM action points. The voluntary chosen actions points were often shaped the same way as the chosen action points of other municipalities.

⁴ Pioneers were the municipalities that started with LA21 before the VOGM-funding started. Reasons to be an early stated were active Alderman, local groups or committed civil servants. For this group of about thirty pioneers it was logical to choose for LA21 as a VOGM action point (Coenen, 1998a).

⁵ We prefer the word 'political renewal' here for the Dutch 'bestuurlijke vernieuwing' to distinghes from administrative renewal

⁶ Interview with alderman Van der Putten, responsible for environmental affairs, June 5, 1997 (Andringa, 1998).