

Local Agenda 21

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Some text taken from Neil H, Sansom G, Porter J and Wensing E (2002) *Australian Local Sustainability Initiative: An Achievement Recognition Matrix* Environment Australia www.deh.gov.au/esd/la21/framework/framework.html [Accessed 18 May 2006] and also from the ARIES portal www.aries.mq.edu.au.

Local Agenda 21 is a process which facilitates sustainable development at community level. It is an approach based on participation which respects the social, cultural, economic and environmental needs of the present and future citizens of a community in all its diversity and which relates that community and its future to the regional, national and international community of which it is a part.

Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government's 'Sustainable Development, A Strategy for Ireland' (1997)

What is the purpose of this section?

To introduce:

- the key themes of Local Agenda 21
- Local Action 21 as the new motto for Local Agenda 21
- the links between LA21 and Education for Sustainability
- the issues associated with LA21 processes in Australia.

What is Local Agenda 21?

Local Agenda 21 is a policy tool for implementing local sustainable development and at the same time it is also a learning process for both the community and local government. It was first described in Agenda 21, the global blueprint for sustainability that was agreed at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 (the Rio Earth Summit). Chapter 28 of Agenda 21 identifies local authorities as the sphere of governance closest to the people, and calls upon all local authorities to consult with their communities and develop and implement a local plan for sustainability - a 'Local Agenda 21'. By 2001 more than 6,400 local governments in 113 countries worldwide were developing and implementing LA21s.

One of the main supporters of the LA21 process is ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability, an international association of local governments and national and regional local government organisations that have made a commitment to sustainable development. See their website at www.iclei.org.

Local Agenda 21 (LA21) promotes a participatory, long-term, strategic planning process that helps municipalities identify local sustainability priorities and implement long-term action plans.¹ Local Agenda 21 processes aim at involving all stakeholders in the community in decision-making in sustainability planning and management at the local level. These processes offer great opportunities for participatory learning as groups debate their future direction based on working in partnership with government, industry and other community groups. Guides abound, aiming to support the community to integrate environmental, economic and social development in a long term strategic action plan that integrates existing policies and programs.

Local Agenda 21 ...

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Source: ICLEI

Local Agenda 21 as a learning process

The consultation and consensus building should be seen as a **two-way learning process**. Firstly, councils 'learn from citizens and from local, civic, community, business and industrial organisations and acquire the information needed for formulating the best strategies.' Secondly, it is intended that the process of consultation 'increase household awareness of sustainable development issues'.

Source: Chapter 28, Agenda 21

A number of international frameworks for evaluating LA21 provide a useful starting point for developing an LA21 framework. Key aspects common to all the frameworks are:

- the **integration of social, environmental and economic issues**
- the **participation of a range of stakeholders** from the community, non-government and government sectors
- a **long-term commitment** to LA21
- the **formation of partnerships** for developing, implementing and assessing progress.

Our Community: Our Future, A Guide to Local Agenda 21² is the latest Australian guide to LA21 and was published by the Commonwealth Government in 1999. It was intended to provide practical guidance on how to develop a LA21. The guide identifies five action areas for developing a LA21 process.

The five Action Areas in an LA21 process identified in 'Our Community: Our Future'

Action Area 1: Preparing the ground - identify council structures, strategies and resources to be used to develop a Local Agenda 21 with the support of the council, staff (including senior management) and the community.

Action Area 2: Building partnerships - establish an understanding of the community and develop ways and means of extending awareness and involvement in LA21.

Action Area 3: Determining vision, goals, targets and indicators - set out what the council and the community wish to achieve, ideally broken down into goals with indicators and targets.

Action Area 4: Creating a local action planning document - prepare a statement of actions that the council will undertake in order to realise each target; this includes timeline, budget and responsible officers for each action.

In 1999, the South Australian Government and the Local Government Association, in consultation with the South Australian Partnership for Local Agenda 21, produced *Local Agenda 21 The South Australian Experience*³. These guidelines also outline a process for developing an LA21 program and are based around the experiences of South Australian Councils involved in LA21. In 2000 a further document *The South Australian Partnership for LA21 – Identifying Future Directions Discussion Paper*⁴ was published which provides a good overview of the LA21 issues faced in Australia.

What will it mean for Local Agenda 21 to enter a new stage, Local Action 21?

In August 2002 during the Local Government Session at the World Summit in Johannesburg, local government leaders from around the world joined ICLEI in launching Local Action 21 as the next phase of Local Agenda 21 (LA21). Local Action 21 was launched as a motto for the second decade of LA21. It is a mandate to local authorities worldwide to move from agenda to action and ensure an accelerated implementation of sustainable development.

ICLEI suggest that moving from Local Agenda 21 to Local Action 21 will mean:

- **Pro-actively creating sustainable communities and cities**
Through Local Action 21 communities will be assisted to go beyond general sustainability planning and to address specific factors that prevent a great number of them from becoming sustainable, such as poverty, injustice and exclusion, unhealthy environment and vulnerability.

- **Protecting global common goods**
Local Action 21 will reduce cities' further contribution to the worldwide depletion of resources and environmental degradation, which have severe repercussions on cities and their inhabitants.
- **Participatory governance and municipal sustainability management**
Thirdly, Local Action 21 will ensure unwavering implementation of sustainable development action plans. ICLEI see the way forward in anchoring principles, policies and practices, and mechanisms in participatory governance and municipal sustainability management.

For more information on Local Action 21 see www.localaction21.org/ and www.iclei-europe.org/.

How does Local Agenda 21 link with Education for Sustainability?

LA21 can be thought of as a *collaborative process of Education for Sustainability*. Much of the process and content of EfS is clearly mirrored in an LA21 process.

In an LA21 program the community and local government work together to develop a **vision** for a sustainable local community and then **critically reflect** on the changes and actions required to move towards that future. The process is about **dialogue** and **consensus-building** between stakeholders. The process requires **systemic thinking** in order to identify the barriers to change for sustainability and linking local issues to global ones. The cycle of action and reflection is a learning process for both the community and the local government involved in the process.

LA21 processes seek to build stronger **partnerships and networks** between local government and their communities and to engage the community in cooperatively working towards solutions to sustainability issues. These **participation** and partnership approaches form some of the key principles of EfS. Various types of partnerships can be adopted in the LA21 process. ICLEI supports partnerships that are voluntary, multi-stakeholder, democratic and mutually beneficial, whilst the Australian Government recognises three types of partnerships found in LA21 programs across Australia⁵:

1. Community driven LA21 programs with resources from local government
2. Community as an equal partners with local governments
3. Community involved strategically or on a case by case basis.

Key outcomes common to both LA 21 and EfS processes

- stronger community and local government partnerships
- a more informed and pro-active community with increased skills for sustainability
- ongoing active community participation in decision making processes for sustainability
- integrated decision making which takes all foreseeable economic, social and environmental considerations into account
- participatory development, implementation and periodic review of a long term, integrated action plan for sustainability
- changes which promote a continual improvement toward sustainability,

Adapted from: Cotter & Hannan, *Our Community Our Future* (1999)

How is Local Agenda 21 progressing in Australia?

Throughout Australia it seems that there has been widespread uncertainty about the meaning, scope and value of the term 'Local Agenda 21'. One of the difficulties identified with the acronym 'LA21' is that its extrapolation doesn't mean anything without further explanation. Some councils have chosen, for a variety of reasons, not to call their initiatives 'LA21'.

In addition LA21 has largely been perceived as an environmental initiative rather than a cross-cutting strategy for embedding sustainability. If that perception is to be broadened to clearly embrace economic, social and cultural dimensions, it requires a better understanding of what sustainability is about and a 'whole of council/community' focus. In Australia, federal and state government endorsement of LA21 has been offered primarily through environmental agencies and, with the exception of South Australia, there has not been a rounded program for its implementation.

However, this is not to say that LA21 is not happening within Australia. On the contrary there is Local Agenda 21 activity in every state and territory⁶ and many councils are working on projects that have at their core the processes of LA21, although they may not necessarily be using that terminology. A survey of Australian councils in 1998 found that around 200 were involved in LA21, local ESD or other sustainable development initiatives (Cotter 1999). The highest level of commitment has been in South Australia where 34 councils (50% of the total) are undertaking an LA21 program.

It is clear that both Local Agenda 21 and Education for Sustainability processes within local government require a large and specific range of skills including:

- change-agent skills
- conceptual, systemic and strategic thinking
- facilitation and educational expertise
- an understanding of council operations and marketing expertise.

Some of these skills are uncommon in many councils, particularly small rural shires with limited staff and access to resources and so often these types of processes are contracted out and any project learnings within local government are therefore potentially lost or weakened.

In addition to this, the major responsibility for LA21 often lies with an officer whose primary training is in a discipline such as town planning or environmental health/science. In many instances those entrusted with this important role are expected to change corporate culture and mobilise the community⁷.

Salan suggests that the solution to the skills and experience dilemma is somewhat reliant on creating a demand for the profession through mandatory requirements. In the absence of this there is a clear need for capacity building projects within local government, so that officers have the confidence and ability to design, develop and implement these LA21 and EfS projects.



By Gary Eastman (from Salan R (2002))⁸

Where can I find out more about Local Agenda 21?

Cotter B and Hannan K (Environs Australia) (1999) *Our Community, Our Future: A guide to Local Agenda 21*
www.ea.gov.au/esd/la21/manual/index.html

This document contains many links to LA21 initiatives and relevant documents.

Environment Australia (2002) *Australian Local Sustainability Initiative: An Achievement Recognition Matrix*
www.deh.gov.au/esd/la21/framework/framework.html

This project undertook a review of LA21 across Australia and internationally and recommends the development of an Achievement Recognition Matrix to monitor progress in LA21 and sustainability within Australia.

[Environs Australia](http://www.environs.org.au), the Australian Local Government environment network www.environs.org.au

Government of South Australia
Department of Environment and Heritage (1999) *Guidelines for Local Agenda 21: The South Australian Experience*
<http://www.environment.sa.gov.au/sustainability/pdfs/la21text.pdf>

Government of South Australia
Department of Environment and Heritage (2000) *The South Australian Partnership for Local Agenda 21: Identifying Future Directions*
www.environment.sa.gov.au/sustainability/pdfs/la21_future.pdf [Accessed 26 May 2006]

This document contains a very good discussion on LA21 issues in Australia.

Hornsby Shire Council Local Action 21
www.hornsby.nsw.gov.au/environment/index.cfm?NavigationID=955

ICLEI Local Governments for Sustainability, www.iclei.org

Institute for Sustainable Futures (1999) *Action Research Project: Policy Integration, Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) and Local Agenda 21 – Councils in NSW*
www.isf.uts.edu.au/whatwedo/ARP.pdf

Joesph Rowntree Foundation *What's in a name? Local Agenda 21, community planning and neighbourhood renewal*, www.jrf.org.uk

Local Action 21
www.localaction21.org

Salan R (2002) *Why LA21 professionals are a rare and endangered species* Paper presented at the “Sustaining our Communities” International Local Agenda 21 Conference 2002
www.adelaide.sa.gov.au/soc/

South Australian Government website on LA21
www.environment.sa.gov.au/sustainability/la21.html

“Sustaining our Communities” International Local Agenda 21 Conference 2002
www.adelaide.sa.gov.au/soc/

WWF UK Mainstreaming Sustainability Resource Pack
www.wwflearning.org.uk/localmatters/download-centre/ms-resources/

This resource looks at ways of mainstreaming sustainability including workshop resources in integration of sustainability in the community planning process, route maps for developing local strategic partnerships and case studies. Although much of the jargon refers to UK policy instruments (e.g. Community Strategies) there is much of interest from a strategic perspective.

References

- ¹ ICLEI Local Governments for Sustainability
www.iclei.org/index.php?id=798
[Accessed 26 May 2006]
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- ⁵ Tilbury, D. and Cooke, K. (2005) *A National Review of Environmental Education and its Contribution to Sustainability in Australia: Frameworks for Sustainability p51*. Canberra: Australian Government Department of the Environment and Heritage and Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability
- ⁶ Cotter, B. and Hannan, K. (Environs Australia) (1999) *Our Community, Our Future: A Guide to Local Agenda 21*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra
- ⁷ Salan R (2002) *Why LA21 professionals are a rare and endangered species* Paper presented at the "Sustaining our Communities" International Local Agenda 21 Conference 2002
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