

THE AGENDA 21 - MYTH OR REALITY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT ?

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Abstract

An unstable world economy and social unevenness, particularly in developing nations, demonstrates that a new development order is necessary to improve quality of life and the protection of the environment for the future generations.

The implementation of sustainable development may seem a simple concept when written on paper. However to carry-out long term actions put forward by the Agenda 21 (AG21) at the local level represents one of the main challenges as local governments in general do not have the capacity to effectively implement the process.

The allocation of regular and consistent financial resources is one of the main ingredients for the sustainable development process. But traditional plans and projects financed by national and/or international funds may not be sustainable in the long-term because they become dependent on external funding. In other words sustainable development cannot be solely through economic investment it is necessary to go beyond. This includes the 'need for political will', radical institutional reforms, social participation in the decision-making process and sustainable economic policy formulation. A comprehensive AG21 municipal environmental planning and management process is necessary not only to improve local institutional framework but also incentive continuous participation of local stakeholders at all levels of society.

Key Words: Sustainable development, Agenda 21, institutional build-up capacity, and local sustainability.

1 . Introduction

The 1980s saw a radical reappraisal of conventional international development strategies and raised questions about resource exploitation and the relationship between the environment, poverty and economic development (Clark, 1999; WCED, 1997). The need for change in present development patterns represents a deep challenge because the mainstream neo-classical economic development vision requires shifting towards more sustainability. Traditional development processes have focused on economic perspectives with gains in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) seen as the main indicator of development success. However, GDP growth cannot be considered as an ideal parameter because it is often linked to environmental degradation due to exploitation of environmental resources. Additionally even in many developing nations where the GDP is relatively high, it has not improved the human development index (HDI) and provided a better lifestyle, as in economic developed nations.

Although much has been discussed at mega environmental conferences such as Stockholm-72, Rio-92, Johannesburg in 2002, and more recently Rio + 20 very little has been achieved in comparison to what is required to reach sustainable development in the long run. This is evident from the United Nations Environmental Programme's (UNEP)

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Dead Planet, Living Planet that states that approximately 60% of global ecosystems are threatened by imbalances in productivity (Nellemann et al, 2010).

The philosophical vision behind the concept of sustainable development is that 'ideal' levels of sustainability would in principle not require laws or strategies to protect and control the environment because sustainability would already exist. It is a human based concept that is tailored to the social-economic context of development and environmental concerns. It has mainly been used as a broad international 'diplomatic' reference or 'future vision' of how the world should be developed.

Despite efforts there is poor guidance as to how new development styles can be implemented in practical terms through traditional institutional frameworks with permanent input of resources. However there have been several attempts to broadly define this process and also implement local sustainable development actions through the Agenda 21 plans and projects.

2. The Different Levels of Sustainable Development

The Bruntland Report Our Common Future, published in 1987 (WCED, 1997), defined sustainable development as "humanity has the ability to make development sustainable - to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987: 7). This definition is socially oriented and has a preoccupation with the future of world inhabitants but does not mention the natural system (e.g. animals, plants, biodiversity) integrated in this process.

The term sustainable development is defined according to the ideological views of how the development process should in principle be carried out. Turner recognises four sustainable development positions, that correspond to resource exploitation, resource conservation, resource preservation, and extreme resource preservation worldviews (see Table.1.)

Sustainability Position	Defining Characteristics
Very Strong	Resource preservation to the point where use of natural resources is minimised; anti-economic growth and human population perspective
Strong	Ecosystem perspective and resource preservation, recognises primary value of maintaining the functional integrity of ecosystems above human resource use
Weak	Anthropocentric and resource conservation; growth is managed for capital growth with concerns on negative environmental impact (e.g. ozone layer, and some natural ecosystems).
Very Weak	Anthropocentric and economic growth oriented and resources exploitative through economic growth and technical innovation.

Source: Turner, 1991
Table 1 Sustainability Positions

Based on the fact that individuals (people) acting collectively, represent the main actors to preserve the environment (the positive way), or degrade the environment (the negative way). And that sustainability is everyone's dilemma and must become part of every individual's conscience and action (Gardiner, 1994). This paper strongly endorses that the capacity to develop in the present without compromising future generations should be through a continuous process of engagement of individuals and organisations at all levels of society, for the improvement of social-environment conditions. It is essential that individuals act collectively to create a better world. OECD (2001) argue that many stakeholders' can engage in sustainable development actions through their existing jobs and roles in society.

One criticism however according to Clark (1999) is that the Global Agenda has set a broad plan for change without confronting the many barriers and economic interest which exist to achieve these goals and how to overcome them.

3. The Global AG21

The UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 established international agreements such as the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development and the Agenda 21 (AG21), a blueprint in 40 chapters on how to make development socially, economically and environmentally sustainable. It is the official document signed by the heads of government of 179 countries. The Agenda encompasses general strategies, recommendations and actions for fostering more informed decision-making, including strengthening capabilities and responsibilities in resource management, utilizing environmental assessment and suggestions for more effective approaches to implement sustainable plans and projects (Clark, 1999). Many actions outlined in AG21 are clearly best implemented at the local level (Cole, 1996). Indeed a significant proportion of the recommendations require action by local authorities.

The global agenda's chapters have guided many countries to establish their own national commissions and elaborate national agendas. However according to Hughes (1996), although the AG21 is certainly the most important document produced, it is still weak on guiding governments as to how to implement hard actions.

There are challenging levels of strategies that must be taken into account. The international level strategies through global goals, such as economic well-being, social and human development, and environmental sustainability and regeneration, including global conventions on environmental issues, sustainable development of globalization policies, and sustainability in trans-border and river basin management that involves more than one country. The national level strategies focus on development plans, sector-wide plans and cross-sectoral plans and strategies linking several institutions and organisations. And the local level that focus on specific plans and projects development.

3.1 Local Agenda 21 Implementation

Experience in several developed countries has demonstrated that the ability of municipal governments to implement participatory planning, management and administration schemes involving the local population has improved since the RIO 92 conference (ICLEI, 2000). The Box below describes the implementation elements for local AG21.

Box 1 Local AG21 Implementation Elements

- Cooperation between local and central government including local stakeholders;
- Equal Rights and Empowerment of society for better decision-making;
- Education and Personal Development of human resources;
- Planning the Agenda 21 development process;
- Training of human resources to introduce management capacities;
- Information availability for decision-making;
- Investments for Agenda 21 implementation.

Source: Kranz, 1999, ICLEI, 2000; Dalal-Clayton and Bass, 2002

The experience of ICLEI and the initiatives in a number of countries is important to note, but it is too early to draw to definite conclusions on how effective the above elements proposed by ICLEI are to achieve long-term sustainable development. This is because local AG21 implementation projects have been developed with some support from local governments but without major support from regional and national governments. Local projects have not succeeded in carrying-out sustainable development on a long-term basis, as in the cases of Rio de Janeiro and Niteroi who had little support from local government (Kranz, 2000). In general local AG21 implementation in Brazil still requires support from higher sustainable development programmes, and only recently the Ministry of Environment (MMA) and state governments have begun to implement local agendas in selected municipalities.

Another point to note is that local AG21 projects have not taken advantage of utilising strategic instruments such as regional planning and regional development data-banks, strategic environmental assessment (SEA), institutional analysis and institutional capacity building strategies, regional diagnosis and regional development planning procedures to formulate an integrated development process. Local AG21 has to consider not only what is being done at the local level but also be part of broader sustainable plans and programmes implemented by the government.

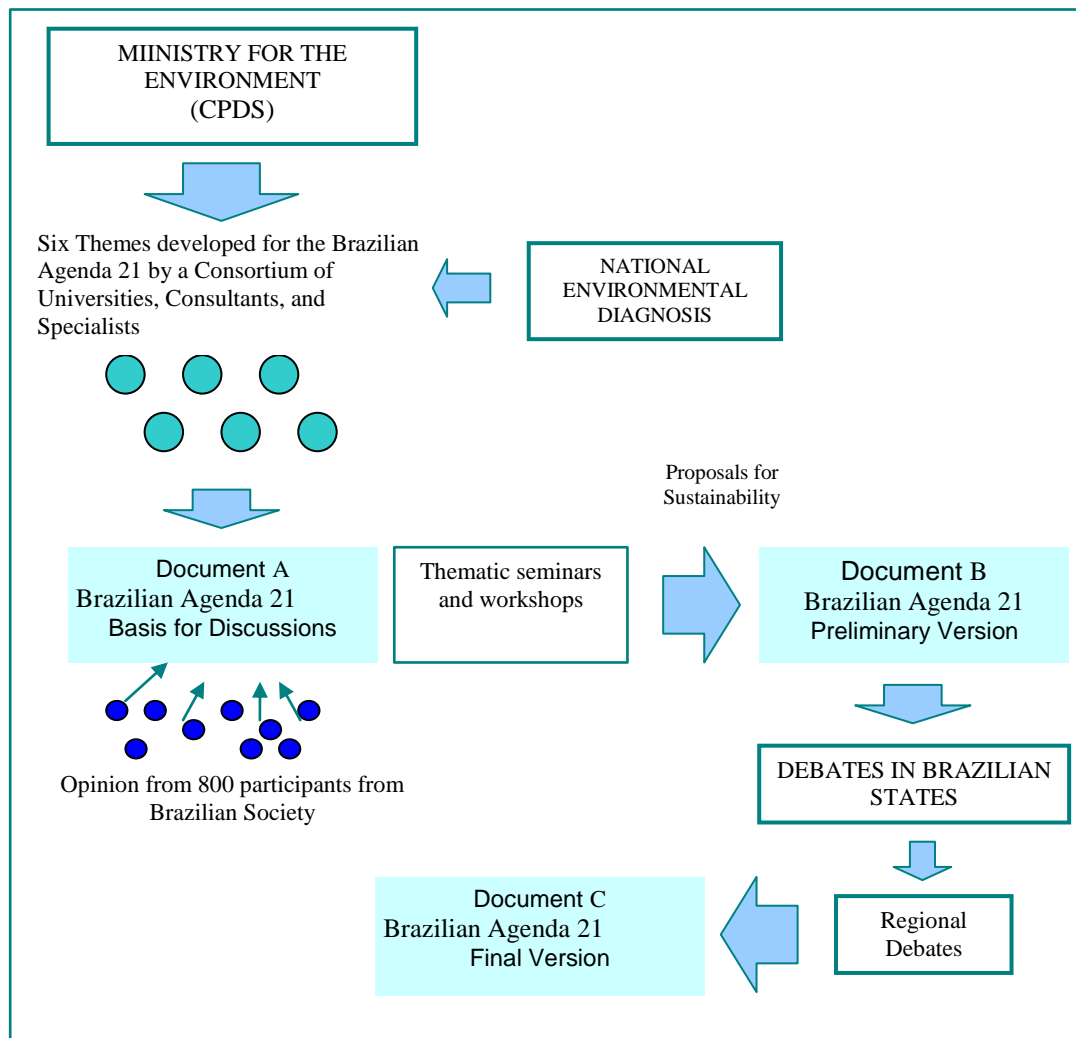
3.2 Brazilian Agenda 21 Implementation

The Brazilian Agenda was co-ordinated by the Commission for Sustainable Development Policy and Brazilian Agenda 21 (CPDS), which was created by presidential decree in February 1997. This commission is linked to the Ministry of Environment (MMA) and representatives of the Federal government (Ligação, 2000).

The elaboration of the Brazilian AG21 has evolved strategies for sustainable development put forward by UNDP Capacity 21 (OECD, 2001). It has been based on the results of participatory debates with several sectors of Brazilian society. The central themes in the Brazilian AG21 are: sustainable agriculture, sustainable cities, infra-structure and regional integration, natural resource management, reduction of national disparities and science and technology for sustainable development (MMA, 2000).

The Brazilian AG21 process has been strategically conducted in several stages. The scheme is presented in Figure 3.1. The preliminary base document (document A) of the AG21 was developed based on a national environmental diagnosis carried out by a

consortium formed by universities, consultants, and specialists that worked specifically on the above themes. The base document covered four main areas. The first is the challenge of implementing sustainability in Brazil, the second discusses the basis for constructing the Brazilian AG21, the third discusses obstacles to develop in a sustainable manner and the main problems due to the development model adopted and the fourth are proposals for constructing sustainability through 6 AG21 central themes, which represent the contribution of society to the process (Ligação, 2000).



Source: based on Ligação, 2000; MMA, 2000
Figure 1. Brazilian Agenda 21 Development Process

The base document is the result of discussions at seminars and workshops with 800 representatives from all regions and sectors of Brazilian society. The main objective was to consider proposals and consolidate the preliminary version of Agenda 21 (document B). This document was distributed to all Brazilian states for public debate. Participants were encouraged to discuss and reach consensus regarding proposals for inclusion in the final document. The final document (document C) was finalised in 2001.

4. Planning Procedures for Sustainable Development

The term 'planning' links to a wide range of different procedures and vast methodologies within the social-economic concept such as land use planning, regional planning, urban

planning, and strategic planning, but these have different objectives not all of which are relevant to sustainable development objectives.

The sustainable development vision has induced a new concept of planning, especially in relation to national agendas and strategies for sustainable development (MMA, 2000; Dalal-Clayton and Bass, 2002). This planning process seeks to integrate all levels of government institutions with stakeholders' involved in this process, especially in urban areas. In other words, planning has moved from formulating a traditional plan to a negotiated democratic plan, which involves participatory collective thinking and consensus.

Many urban centres report that they have developed local agendas. Whilst some have led to practical results and had positive impacts some are little more than documents with little consultation or simply conventional plans renamed (OECD, 2001). One classical example is the AG21 of Rio de Janeiro that was officially launched by the state government in 2000 but had very few public forums to guarantee effective participation of stakeholders', and almost no investment by the state government to implement the agenda's proposals. In the Grampian Region according to Cole (1996) the local AG21 developed in the 1990s has been basically a top-down process with little public participation.

Other AG21 experiences have been highly participatory and resulted in well-developed action plans, especially when they are developed at the local level, such as in Leicester in the UK (Hughes, 1996) and in Buga, Colombia (Kranz, 1999). But many times they have not been implemented because of the limited capacity of city authorities to work in partnership with stakeholders'. According to OECD (2001) they show that the most important challenge is harmonising national and local level regulations and standards. Unless local actions and regulations are supported by national policy and a sound regulatory framework, they cannot be effective.

It is argued that the local implementation of the AG21 (Kranz, 1999; ICLEI, 2000). should take advantage of modern municipal planning, management and administration approaches put forward by various authors (Jones and Thompson, 2000; Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). As mentioned previously the main challenge is to gain favourable political support for this process from start to finish and to guarantee that stakeholders' involved work efficiently towards specific goals in a participatory manner.

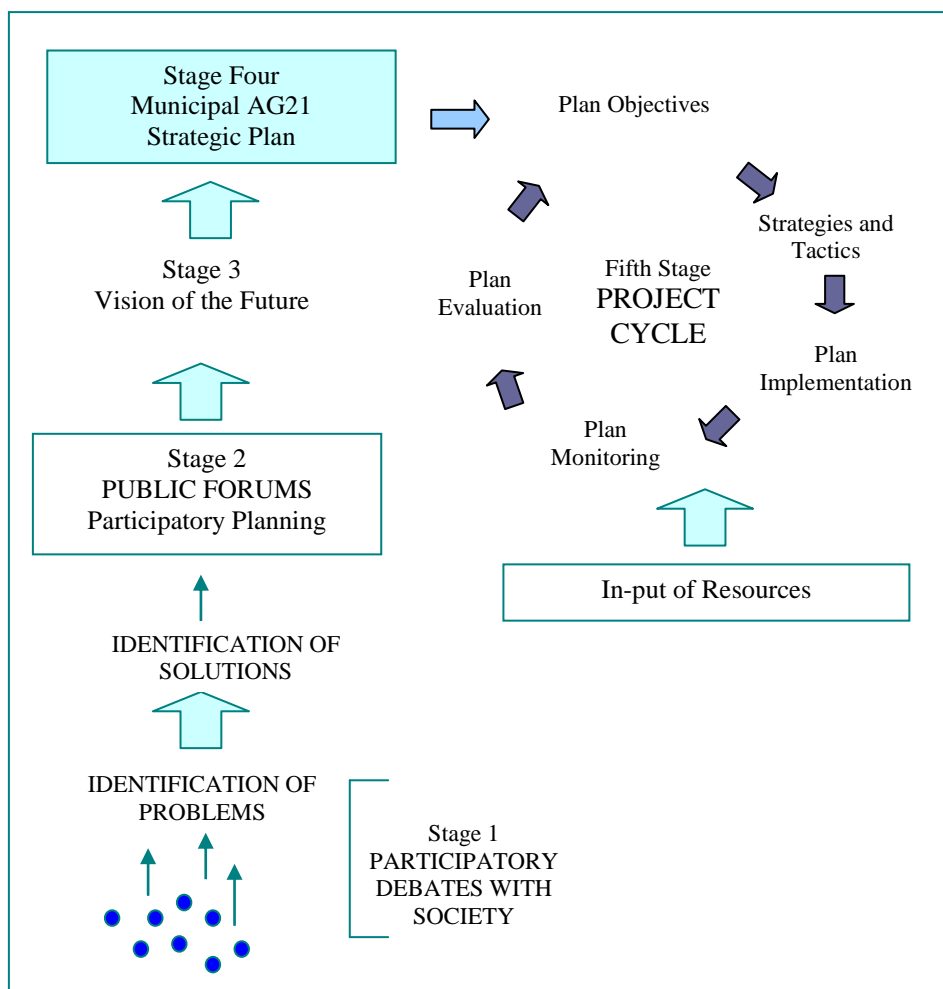
A sustainable development strategy, whether international, national, or at the local level, requires strategic planning and the implementation of several strategic mechanisms and a continuous improvement process (OECD, 2001). Strategic planning has been successfully used in many large enterprises and has been gradually implemented in municipalities in several countries since the 1960s (Jones and Thompson, 2000).

Pfeiffer (2000) notes that several cities in Latin America, including Brazil, have developed "strategic plans" but if analysed with care, these plans have very little or no relation to strategic planning. They can be characterised as an exercise to analyse the situation of the municipality in terms of existing problems and urban aspects (e.g. social, economic, ecological). In most cases there is only a general description of what to do without considering the viability of how to do it. This has to be taken into consideration when planning the AG21 at the municipal level.

Although strategic plans may have not been well utilised they have a great potential to assist the AG21 planning process. They should include allocation of financial resources, management change; negotiation and conflict management; participatory events, strategic

assessment, information systems, communication and awareness raising and financial objectives (OECD, 2001). This also involves improvement in human capital (people) to achieve more efficient results.

The implementation of the AG21 at the local level should follow a bottom-up approach that integrates several important strategic planning stages (see Figure X).



Source: based on Kranz, 1999; ICLEI, 2000; Pfeiffer, 2000

Figure X. Bottom-Up Agenda 21 Planning Process

The first stage is the debate within the society and is the starting point of the process and allows the identification of the main problems that a local community wants to solve in order to change environmental conditions to achieve a better quality of life for present and future generations. The second stage is the holding of public forums to discuss and define a future vision of community wellbeing and sustainable development. This stage is a democratic exercise that educates the local community in terms of what the Agenda 21 is proposing globally and how it can be adapted locally. The forums also represent a place to form alliances with government organisations and partnerships with stakeholders' for future actions. The fourth stage is the formulation of a municipal strategic AG21 plan based on public debate where the main strategies and tactics are established in order to reach long-term sustainable development. The fifth stage is the establishment of a project cycle management comprising of the plan's objectives, strategies and tactics,

implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. The final plan can be sub-divided into several AG21 environmental plans (e.g. AG21 promotion plan), which in turn is sub-divided into several specific projects (e.g. development of public forums, environmental education in schools) that demand the in-put of material, financial and human resources for their development.

There is a great difference when a 'plan' is elaborated by an independent team and when it is elaborated in a participatory manner. In the latter case the process is more transparent, communication is open with stakeholders' and problems can be discussed through direct participation. The participation of stakeholders' in public consultation provides the opportunity for people to express their opinions and feel part of the planning process (Braun, 2010).

In other words, local Agenda 21 implementation in several parts of the world (OECD, 2001; Kranz, 1998; Franca, 1998; ICLEI, 1997) has begun through a series of public forums, open seminars and meetings with the population to ensure they are an integral part of the sustainable development process. But as discussed previously, the planning process is not only about discussing problems and finding potential solutions. It is also critical to establish a set of priorities, organisational schemes and resource management options (human, financial and material). When a plan is ready the management exercise to support the development of planned actions begins.

Management practice can be very complex when it involves several government and non-governmental organisations working on plans to develop local sustainable development. The management practice for an environmental management system (EMS) and eco-efficiency management schemes of a large chemical plant are quite different from the management process of local Agenda 21 implementation. This in turn is also very different from the government management process of a national environmental programme, or a local management process of an educational project in a small village in the interior of Brazil.

According to Dalal-Clayton and Bass (2002) it often takes between 18 months and five years to set up and undertake a comprehensive exercise associated with national strategies for sustainable development. This consequently will require considerable time to develop sustainable actions at the local level.

5. Conclusions

Based on the literature review and critical analysis there are numerous concepts and experiences that focus on how sustainable development should be carried out theoretically. Most actions are still linked to existing institutional frameworks and few structural changes have been made by governments to effectively incorporate the sustainable development concept in national policies, plans and programmes, and their practical implementation at the local level.

A strategic approach to sustainable development requires new ways of thinking and tackling the environmental-development dilemma. The concept of sustainable development should not be considered as a classical social-economic and environmental "package" limited in scope with a beginning, middle and end. It is argued that sustainable development is a continuous process that requires commitments and the development of actions by a growing number of individuals, groups, communities, districts, municipalities, regions, states, and nations, progressively acting to achieve sustainability in the long-term.

In other words, sustainable development planning is not proposing major national sustainable development goals and letting things happen naturally, or relying solely on government actions. A national AG21 plan should guide the implementation of local AG21s and also guarantee that local institutional frameworks are capable of carrying on this process effectively.

Additionally sustainable development is not an exclusive process of governments and the private sector. It should represent an interconnected and systematic approach of social engagement involving all sectors and levels of society. For this reason sustainable development based on AG21 should incorporate stakeholders' perspectives of how this process should be developed locally. But it runs the risk of being different from government's development policies. Nevertheless, participatory discussion and public forums should be integrated in the planning exercise and help formulate a municipal AG21 strategic plan.

The non-utilisation of the Rio AG21 as 'the' national, regional and local development guideline, contravenes the Rio Declaration that emphasises the Agenda as the main approach by which sustainable development proposals, regional plans and projects should emerge. But although Agenda 21 can be considered a sustainable development guideline, the strategies and proposals from the AG21 once developed may also cause undesirable impacts on the environment (e.g. a large wind farm, which is a sustainable form of energy production, may cause disruption to bird migration routes, and have landscape and noise impacts). This means that if the AG21 is used as the main planning document at national, regional or local levels, it should also be submitted to an assessment process in order to predict environmental impacts and suggest mitigation schemes.

It is argued that a set of legal, institutional and technical instruments are required to structure a proper environmental management scheme in local municipal organisations to efficiently carry out the Agenda 21 implementation process. It is necessary to consider not only the formation of partnership groups to collaborate in this process, but also develop institutional capacity building to achieve efficient administration and management of AG21 planned actions.

Local AG21 case studies have demonstrated that the local implementation process has occurred in several ways, but many seem to be isolated initiatives which are theoretically linked to national AG21's, but in reality are not supported by national economic policies, plans and programmes as proposed in the Earth Summit Declaration. In general local AG21's have mainly been an awareness and education process for the local community and developed with minimum financial resources and institutional capacity building.

The implementation of local AG21 requires the need for efficient co-ordination, leadership, administration and financial control, harnessing skills and capacities and ensuring adherence to timetables. This must include improving technical skills and institutional, legislative and administrative aspects of local development capability.

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