INTRODUCTION PART TWO: LOCAL AGENDA 21

In Rio de Janeiro, June 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) agreed upon Agenda 21. This initiative, an international action programme for the next century, emphasised, among other things, co-operation between local authorities and groups in tackling environmental problems. About 2,500 actions were agreed upon in Agenda 21, two-thirds of which are to take place at the local level along the credo ‘think global, act local’. Taking this cue for action at heart, some 2,000 municipalities in 50 countries have started LA21 activities.

In order to start a LA21 programme in Europe, the European Commission invited the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) to prepare a first conference in the City of Aalborg. The invitation was accepted and therefore May 1994 saw the first European Conference on Sustainable Cities and Municipalities, a conference that counts as the ‘kick-off’ for the European Campaign for Sustainable Municipalities. The conference, with 600 participants - representatives from local authorities, international organisations, governments, NGOs, scientific institutes and consultants - resulted in the Aalborg Charter, consisting of a common statement, the campaign’s content, and the building of a Local Agenda 21. The Charter was unanimously approved and initially signed by 80 local authorities and 253 other participants at the end of the Conference.

After the conference a campaign office was opened in Brussels. The Preparatory Committee for the Aalborg conference had agreed that the co-ordination of the Campaign should be a collaborative effort involving relevant European networks of local authorities. In the European Campaign the following organisations are now involved: the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI), acting as the Managing Facility for the campaign in the first year; United Towns Organisation (UTO); Eurocities; Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR); WHO-Healthy Cities Project; the European Committee; and the city of Aalborg (committed to operate the Campaign Office until mid-1996, following up the ICLEI). The European Campaign has the objective of promoting development towards sustainability at the local level, through LAs 21, by strengthening both partnerships among actors and inter-authority co-operation within the field of urban environment.

Agenda 21 gives little guidance on how local communities should proceed with a Local Agenda 21 process, in the 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. Some would argue that LA21 can be seen as a new step in a continuum of initiatives to involve people more in the life and well being of their communities LA21 makes the (environmental) political agenda broader and more comprehensive than ever before. An
LA21 asks for more than participation for legitimacy purposes, it 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. The role of local authorities changes from director to facilitator and it introduces discussion on the central-decentral issue regarding environmental policy-making.

Further LA21 presents the idea that, in line with the principle of subsidiarity, certain issues in environment and development can be most effectively treated at the lowest level of governance. The general motivation for decentralisation is clear: local institutions are often in the best position to regulate and manage environmental activities, as ‘many of the problems and solutions being addressed by Agenda 21 have their roots in local activities’ and ‘local authorities construct, operate and maintain economic, social and environmental infrastructure, oversee planning processes, establish local environmental policies and regulations, and assist in implementing national and sub-national environmental policies’. Furthermore, local authorities can deal very effectively with public involvement because ‘as the level of governance closest to the people, they play a vital role in educating, mobilising and responding to the public to promote sustainable development’ (Both excerpts from UNCED, 1992: Chapter 28).

Agenda 21 deems wide participation in the development of national and local strategies necessary. This is because of various reasons. Agenda 21 sees public participation in the first place as instrumental. It should offer the possibility of articulating the interests of the different stakeholders. In the second place it could be considered system oriented. Participation gives local government the information necessary for decision-making. In third place public participation has an intrinsic value in itself because it will contribute to the social emancipation of certain groups.

The question of how public participation can contribute to the ‘quality’ of decision-making, as raised in the introductory chapter of this book, has been translated by the contributors to this part in the evaluation criteria of ‘fairness’ and ‘competence’. Both criteria are useful for evaluating LA21. Within the concept of LA21, the procedures to come to local action plans, as well as the content of these plans in terms of their contribution to sustainability, are stressed. To start with the procedure for preparing Local Agendas 21: the Aalborg Charter aims at extensive public consultation and a participatory process, thereby pointing to the idea of fairness - all sectors of the community should have a say in the decision-making process - but also to competence, in the sense that a systematic identification of problems and their causes should take place, and that alternative strategic options should be considered and assessed. So information and experiences of all sectors of the community should be involved in the process of preparation local action plans. Secondly, the local action plans should contribute substantively to sustainability and this contribution should be monitored and reported, including by means of local indicators.

The chapters in this part pay particular attention to the way LAs 21 are organised in the Netherlands, Germany and Great Britain. The Netherlands and Great Britain are leading the way in Europe, together with the Scandinavian countries. Germany, on the