

Local Agenda 21 as a Challenge to Planning

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This is a research scheme aiming at Ph.D. in planning geography. Main interests are in Local Agenda 21, planning theory (participation and communicative planning) and urban studies. Study concentrates on Local Agenda 21 as a challenge to planning process. The purpose of the study is to find out if local Agenda 21 is renewing planning processes.

Background

Local Agenda 21 (LA21) is based on UN's Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro 1992 (UNCED 1992). In the Summit's action plan, Agenda 21, it was recommended to all local authorities in the world to initiate their own Local Agenda 21 process supporting sustainable development. ICLEI (International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives) estimated in 1997 that more than 1800 local governments in 64 countries have established a Local Agenda 21 process (ICLEI 1997). The Association of Finnish Local Authorities (1998) has announced the number of Finnish municipalities working with local Agenda as 252 (total number of municipalities 452), and in Sweden all municipalities (288) are implementing LA21 (Svenska Kommunförbundet 1995). Strategies for local sustainability are thus now dominated by LA21 (Selman 1996:107).

Different organisations have defined what local Agenda 21 could mean in practice. Also the municipalities which have been forerunners implementing LA21 have moulded general understanding of LA21. Irrespective of who has defined LA21, the importance of participation and communication between different actors is highly emphasized. During the interactive process people try to find a common view of the sustainable community. Sustainability is seen to be secured only if there is widespread popular involvement in the process. Justification for broad public participation is seen as a social justice and as a functional legitimation. If people feel that

they "own" the decisions made, then they are more likely to want to comply with them (Buckingham-Hatfield & Evans 1996:10).

Participation is seen as important also because sustainable development as a concept is not "easy". It is in principle both long-term and all embracing, and argues therefore for discussion about community's values (Buckingham-Hatfield & Evans 1996). Sustainable development tries to combine ecological, social and environmental factors. The fragmentation of the government on the basis of sectorial responsibilities has however reduced the capacity of the system to deal with issues that require cross-sectorial cooperation (Littlewood & While 1997). Therefore communication between different actors inside the administration is important too. In LA21 the question is therefore not only about *citizen* participation, but cooperation between all actors of the society. This means discussion and cooperation between different actors; community's administration, citizens, NGO's, as well as commercial and industrial life.

The sustainable development discourse has thus brought beside new substantial issues also requirements of democratic planning processes. LA21 as planning is on the one hand an action plan and on the other hand a process during which local Agenda 21 is developing. This study is going to concentrate on LA21 as a process. The crucial question is how municipalities have understood the LA21 process, how they have realized it and whether it possibly has had an effect on planning processes in regard of participation.

Communicative Planning Process

Participation has long been a central theme in planning theory. One reason why legitimacy of rational comprehensive planning crumbled in the 1970's was that it did not meet the demands for democracy (Pakarinen 1995:10). This discussion of democracy in planning has brought up a question of communicative relations in the planning process (Häkli 1997). Alternative conceptions of planning practices explored more democratic and collaborative planning processes (Forester 1989; Healey 1997). Call for solutions based on communicative rationality is named the communicative turn in planning theory.

Communicative planning criticizes comprehensive planning for being too objective, authoritative and hierarchic, based on scientific rationalism. Today's societies however face challenges, which need beside traditional expert-led planning a more interactive process, into which citizens, NGO's and other interest groups can participate. Communicative planning is based on interaction between different actors and it emphasizes continuous, open discussion from the beginning of the planning process. Communicative planning stresses the importance of civil society and moves from the paternalism of traditional representative democracy along to more participatory forms based on inclusionary argumentation. (Friedmann 1998, Healey 1995:49.)

Planning emphasizing communication is based on Habermas's idea on constructing a powerful public realm that reaches beyond the narrow instrumental rationality and the dominant interest of the economic and bureaucratic power. Habermas argues that one shouldn't give up on reason, but shift perspective to reasoning formed within intersubjective communication. Communicative practices are thus very central (Healey 1993:237, Pakarinen 1995:13).

LA21 as an ideal planning type emphasizes long-term vision in planning, holistic approach and importance of participation. These characters, especially importance of interaction, respond much to the qualities communicative planning calls for. Both communicative planning and LA21 are founded on principles of participatory democracy, and argue, that different interest groups should have the opportunity to take part in the discussion. Both stress also the importance of local solutions. Therefore communicative planning is a suitable theoretical background for studying LA21 and the challenges it brings to the planning process.

Purpose of the study and methods to be used

The subject of the study is LA21 as a challenge to planning. The purpose is to analyse the extent to which LA 21 brings new procedures to planning processes. LA21 as an ideal planning is very ambitious; it suggests substantial (sustainable development) and procedural (wide participation) changes in planning. As Littlewood and While (1997) put it: "Agenda 21 could provide the impetus for new trajectories in local decision making based on principles of participation, inclusion and sustainability." LA21 has a possibility to bring new elements to the planning process; it offers a holistic approach, could be long-term in nature and stresses communicative

action. How these ideals of Local Agenda 21 look like in reality, and if there actually has been changes in the planning in this direction, is studied through case studies.

The basic elements of the LA21 idea are founded on the UN's Agenda 21 document (UNCED 1992). There has also been other important contributions which have had influence on the general development of "good LA21", and which cities and municipalities have more or less tried to follow. Further definitions have been made e.g. in international conferences following Rio Earth Summit, by ICLEI (1996) and local authorities' associations. Also pioneer municipalities implementing LA21 have had an influence on the ways LA21 is done. In the LA21 process communities are also supposed to produce themselves their own view of a sustainable community. Especially interesting is how cities have understood LA21 and worked it up as a part of their other planning activities. Because the initiative to start a local Agenda 21 process has often come from the environmental sector of the administration, it is very interesting to study, how successful the interaction between planning and environmental sectors has been.

In order to study LA21 in the context of city planning, one must also have knowledge of the general planning activities in the city. In the first phase I will study two cities in Finland and develop the frame of research. Thereafter I will focus the thema of the study more and widen the empirical investigations to a comparative research between Germany, Sweden and Finland. In these three countries issues of sustainable development have been dealt with for a relatively long time. There is however differences in the implementation of LA21; Sweden is seen as a pioneer, Finland as adaptor and Germany as late-comer in a North European context (Lafferty & Eckerberg 1997).

The study will be made mainly with the help of qualitative methods. In the first phase however, a survey will be made including all Finnish municipalities in order to find out the general situation of LA21 in Finland, focusing on participative aspects of LA21. LA21 process of the chosen cities will be studied by analysing documents relating to general city planning and LA21, and by doing interviews with different actors (e.g. coordinator for LA21, city management, people working in

different sectors of the city, NGO's). After individual interviews I have also an intention to use the workshop method, where the theme will be discussed further together with different actors.

Phase of the study

This paper proposes a research scheme. Research is at present (February 1999) in the beginning. Evolving of the theoretical background is under way, as well as making of a survey of Finnish municipalities.

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