

## LOCAL AGENDA 21

*Agenda* [what needs doing] for the *21st century*, to achieve sustainable development. The focus of realization is intended to be at the local level, i.e. communities and regions are to play the main part.

### Historical development

In 1972 the "Club of Rome" drew attention for the first time, in their report "The Limits to Growth", to the implications for the planet Earth of environmental degradation and resource exploitation. Not until 1992, though, were the issues of resource allocation, sustainable development and initiating action in this direction discussed for the first time at a major international conference.

### Rio de Janeiro 1992

At the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 the discussions focussed on these issues. In the **final document**, the **Agenda 21**, the representatives of 179 states agreed that the interdependence of

- the economy (economic prosperity),
- ecology (ecological equilibrium) and
- social aspects (social justice)

needs to be taken into account for sustainable solutions to take shape.

In contrast to some earlier UN documents, the Agenda 21 rejects centralized, top- down political decision procedures out of hand. No off-the-peg procedure exists to conjure up sustainable development; instead, concrete solutions must be worked out on the spot, with all stakeholders taking part – ordinary citizens, entrepreneurs, politicians, administrators, NGOs and other institutions.

This involves resolving conflicts of interest, searching for possible compromises and identifying new possibilities of cooperation.

### Aalborg 1994

Following the Rio conference, the "European Campaign for Sustainable Cities and Towns" was launched in Aalborg in 1994. This conference was initiated by ICLEI, the >> [International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives](#).

On the basis of the Rio Agenda 21 the issue of realization at the local level was treated in greater detail and specifically for Europe. The **final document**, the **Aalborg Charter**, has since been signed by more than 2000 European communities, who have thus committed themselves to realizing LA21 processes.

### Subsequent conferences

Several more conferences have since been held (world- wide and within Europe), to develop the Local Agenda 21 further, to pool experience and give the process new impetus. Ten years after Rio de Janeiro the LA21 principles were reasserted at the World Summit in Johannesburg. To underline that **Agenda 21** should be aimed at actions and changes, the slogan Action 21 was coined.

### Key documents

Here you can find the following documents (important for the Local Agenda 21):

>> [Rio de Janeiro 1992 – final document on Agenda 21](#)

>> [Aalborg Charter](#)

## SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

Once a community or a region has decided to initiate an LA21 process, there are some **major changes** ahead: the community must alter the existing decision hierarchies to some extent, and let itself in for a process with unpredictable outcome.

Both the political hierarchies and the established administrative undergo substantial change in the course of dialogue with ordinary citizens, local firms, NGOs and other institutions. A new form of >> governance takes the place of classical political control.

So far experience with LA21 processes has revealed that the questions of how projects are **funded** and of the **political will** to do more than lip service to sustainable development are crucial. The reason is that, as and when the general public are more closely involved, politicians must relinquish some of their power. At the same time the community's or region's financial planning needs adapting to the requirements of the Agenda process.

But the LA21 is a learning process for everyone else involved, too. Ordinary citizens, NGOs etc. find that their rôles have changed: they can take on new responsibilities in connexion with developing their surroundings. So the LA21 process requires a combination of top- down and bottom- up structures, which need to be transparent and to allow a free flow of information.

### Sequence of events in an LA21 process

LA21 processes vary as much as the communities and regions that carry them out; so there is no single fixed sequence of events characteristic of all processes. However, LA21 processes usually include the following typical steps:

- **Identifying structures and sectors** that need changing for the sake of the community's or region's future. Catalogues of sustainability indicators are available as an aid to the necessary stock- taking and analysis; these can also be used to check progress later.
- **Starting a dialogue with agents.** Agents who are affected by the issues identified and who feel interested should be invited to take part in the LA21 process. Collaboration between the various agents can be encouraged with suitable >> [methods of participation](#), leading to a collective
- **search for possible ways** of promoting the development of the community or region. A key aspect here is for conflicts of interest to be brought out into the open and for the parties to seek a compromise.
- **Implementing the solutions arrived at** often turns out to be a considerable challenge. Usually uncharted territory is involved and there are no precedents in standard political and administrative practice. Several different areas of responsibility need to be unified, and a way of financing the measure in question must be found.
- As with other projects, **evaluation and controlling** are an essential part of an LA21 process.

## REALIZATION

### What can one legitimately expect from an LA21 process?

LA21 processes vary a great deal, depending on the problems involved, the specific aim and the regional context. The unifying factor across all such processes is the search for **more sustainable structures in daily life**.

Alongside the measures actually implemented and the positive effects these have, the **spread of awareness among all those involved** is a key element of success. A growing awareness of the sustainability issue is an important side- effect.

For society to develop satisfactorily in future, though, it is also essential to establish a new culture of interaction between politicians, administrators, ordinary citizens, entrepreneurs and other agents. That is a vital step towards unleashing the creative problem- solving potential in a community or region.

### Local Agenda 21 around the world

More than **6400 cities and towns in 113 countries** have carried out LA21 processes – but these differed widely in organization and in the sequence of events. There is also considerable variation in the issues that are tackled: in the industrialized world environmental issues predominate, whereas economic development, the fight against poverty and methods of empowerment are the most important issues addressed by projects in the developing world.

According to a study carried out by >> [ICLEI](#) in 2002 the dominant themes in LA21 processes around the world are:

- water supply
- educational systems
- the spread of awareness about sustainable development
- waste avoidance
- civic participation
- conserving energy

Europe has led the way in realizing Local Agenda 21 processes. Since 1992 more than 5000 European communities have launched Local Agenda 21 processes. However, they are marked regional differences in the rate at which the Local Agenda 21 are implemented. Increasingly, initiatives toward Local Agenda 21 processes are starting in the new EU member states in Central and Eastern Europe. You can find more details about this on the >> [website www.nachhaltigkeit.at](http://www.nachhaltigkeit.at).

### LA21 in Austria

As of 2003, **149 communities and 7 regions** in Austria were conducting LA21 processes. In that year the federal government and the Länder (provinces) signed a collective declaration on “Implementing the Local Agenda 21 in Austria”. This declaration points out that the Local Agenda 21 are intended not to take the place of initiatives such as Dorferneuerung (village renewal), the Climate Alliance, Gesunde Gemeinde (healthy community), Leader + etc., but to build on these and supplement them.



The website on participation and sustainable development is an initiative of the Austrian Ministry of the Environment; ÖGUT is responsible for its content. >> [Contact](#)



The hope is that the LA21 processes will strengthen social cohesion, and rural and urban structures, so that these can survive intact in a globalized environment and so that local opportunities of employment can be preserved / created. In regularly held LA21 summits experience with activities throughout Austria is pooled. Putting the LA21 idea on a firm footing over and above the purely local level is particularly important to support the communities in their efforts.

## LINKS ABOUT LOCAL AGENDA 21

The previous pages provided a brief introduction to the subject of Local Agenda 21. Below we list various interesting links to sites where the subject is treated in greater depth:

- [Website on sustainability in Austria](#) - the internet portal on sustainability in Austria surveys LA21 in Austria: historical development, background, examples from all parts of the country (LA21 process of the month!) etc.
- [Website gute- beispiele.net](#) – this website provides access to a large project database on Agenda 21 processes in Germany
- [Website of the United Nations Division for Sustainable Development](#) – extensive information about sustainable development at the international level, particularly ample documentation on international conferences such as Rio de Janeiro 1992, Johannesburg 2002 etc.
- [Website by ICLEI](#) - Local Governments for Sustainability - extensive information about sustainable development at the local level

### **LA21 website for one of the Austrian provinces:**

- **Vorarlberg:** [website “Unternehmen V”](#) – (enterprise V) internet platform for sustainable development in Vorarlberg (in German, summary in English)

Source: [http:// www.partizipation.at/ localagenda21.html](http://www.partizipation.at/localagenda21.html)