



## Decisive factors in the creation and execution of municipal action plans in the field of sustainable development in the European Union

Isabel-María García-Sánchez\*, José-Manuel Prado Lorenzo

Universidad de Salamanca, Departamento de Administración y Dirección de Empresas, 37007 Salamanca, Spain

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 25 September 2008

Received in revised form

23 January 2009

Accepted 31 January 2009

Available online 25 February 2009

#### Keywords:

Sustainable development

Local Action Plan

Local Agenda 21

Local government

### ABSTRACT

The process of raising public awareness around the world concerning the need to apply criteria of sustainable development was basically set in motion at the Rio de Janeiro Summit in 1992. There it was decided that the most suitable context for fostering the process is the local level, and the Local Action Plan forms a basic element in this process.

Some preliminary studies have shown the evidence of great advancement in the creation of Local Action Plans in municipalities. However, their execution is frequently paralyzed by a lack of necessary resources and suitable State policies.

The aim of this paper is to verify the effect that different factors might have on the degree of progress made by the Local Action Plan in the municipalities of the European Union.

The results show that the public works policies of the EU and the governments of the member states fail to impact the level of commitment of municipal governments; however, when the supporting policy originates from administrations closer to the municipality and are made concrete in the form of economic support and technical advice, they prove to be relevant. Strictly political factors, such as stability, have a more limited yet significant effect on the execution of Local Action Plans.

© 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

### 1. Foreword

The uncontrolled use of nature to cover a growing demand for goods and services is relentlessly leading towards the gradual deterioration of natural resources and to an increase in problems and social differences. This situation jeopardizes the well being of future generations and is raising the social need to ensure sustainable development (WCED [1, p. 43]).

To attain sustainable development, the role of the public sector is essential. To be specific, in the declaration of the historic Rio de Janeiro Summit in 1992, it was asserted that the municipal administration must develop and implement Local Agenda 21, as an element which is pivotal to achieving sustainable development (Evans and Theobald [2, p. 781]).

Local Agenda 21 could be defined as a dynamic program which describes the bases for action, the goals to be achieved, the activities to be carried out and the means necessary for their execution to better integrate environmental, economic and social goals.

According to the International Council of Local Environment Initiatives (ICLEI [3]) and the Federación Española de Municipios y Provincias (Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces – FEMP [4]), the implementation process involves the execution of a set of phases or stages, which could be summarized as three: diagnosis and planning; action plan; and tracking plan, all of which are supported by a significant effort to achieve social participation.

The first stage, diagnosis and planning, entails a prior analysis and diagnosis of the municipality's situation, as well as the economic and chronological planning of Agenda 21. The diagnosis should serve to establish the objectives of the Action Plan, and the stages should be executed in an order that is suitable for correctly approaching the design and implementation of the Local Action Plan. Nevertheless, it is not absolutely necessary to carry out the first stage completely before beginning the second stage. In fact, many towns carry out the two stages simultaneously. The reason behind this would be that the volume of work and economic resources absorbed by the diagnosis and planning stage would lead towns to start part of the action plan even though it has not yet been given its final shape.

Moreover, the commencement of certain stages of the action plan is frequently linked to environmental actions supported by previous processes that the town has been carrying out before deciding to apply Local Agenda 21.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [lajefa@usal.es](mailto:lajefa@usal.es) (I.-M. García-Sánchez), [jmprado@usal.es](mailto:jmprado@usal.es) (J.-Manuel Prado Lorenzo).

Thus, the action plan is the basic element in the implementation process of Local Agenda 21. Its importance lies in the fact that it requires a definition of the environmental, economic and social actions which must be put into practice by town councils in order to achieve sustainable development.

The policy implementation process has been analyzed in depth by different authors, who are traditionally grouped according to their top-down or bottom-up perspective of policy implementation.

In Europe, the commitment to developing the Local Agenda 21 program through the Aalborg Charter begins with the signature of the chief politician which represents a personal commitment to the process. Therefore, the implementation of the Local Agenda 21 must be conceived from the *top-down perspective* where decisions are considered to be a result of a superior decision-making process by policy makers, found in the centralistic, formalistic structures for decision-making. In other words, a commitment to sustainable development originates from top-down; where the top (policy initiator) gives directives to the subordinates (implementers) to meet the objectives and standards of the policy.

Within conceptual work on the top-down process of policy implementation, the proposal of Van Meter and Van Horn stands out [5, p. 447]. They identified it as a process which “encompasses those actions by public and private individuals (or groups) that are the achievement of objectives set forth in prior policy decisions”. In their research they establish a conceptual framework for policy implementation and propose a model to determine the relations existing between policies and action.

This work is based on Van Meter and Van Horn’s conceptual framework, complemented by empirical evidence on factors which may affect the degree of development of Local Agenda 21, provided by later research work – i.e. ICLEI [6], Bond et al. [7], Kern et al. [8], and Evans et al. [9]. It analyzes the degree of implementation of the Local Action Plan in municipalities in the European Union that signed the agreement included in the Aalborg Charter on the application of Local Agenda 21.

The aim is to determine the effect that economic factors, strictly political factors and policies to foment sustainable development have on the design and execution of the Local Action Plan.

The results obtained have enabled us to statistically compare the proposal by Van Meter and Van Horn [5] on the existence of a direct impact of political resources, interorganizational communication and enforcement activities, and the economic, social and political environment, on the policy implementation process.

Moreover, an analysis of the potential differences between the priority of the economic, social and environmental objectives in each Local Action Plan shows that environmental aspects clearly predominate over social and economic aspects in all municipalities. This priority is almost regardless of the political ideology, municipal pressure and geographic and demographic characteristics of the municipality, and is more related to an advanced process of global awareness concerning the need to protect and defend our natural resources, especially in developed countries. Indeed, Agenda 21 itself calls the stages “environmental diagnosis” and “environmental action plan”.

We previously observed the level of execution of the diagnosis and planning stage and the relationship between this phase and the level of implementation of the action plan. In this sense, the analysis shows a strong relationship between the development of the two first stages of Local Agenda 21.

This paper is structured into another five additional sections. The second explains the contents of Local Agenda 21 and includes a synthesis of the state of research in this field. The third section analyzes the public policy implementation process, allowing, by means of its adaptation to Program 21, the research

hypothesis to be established. Section four expounds the analysis methodology, specifying and discussing the results obtained in the fifth section. Finally, the most important conclusions reached are outlined.

## 2. The Local Action Plan: the path towards sustainable development

Prior to the design and execution of the Local Action Plan, according to the recommendations of the FEMP [4] and the ICLEI [3], the municipality must carry out a planning process and diagnose the local situation in terms of sustainable development. Planning the process entails establishing a timetable for the implementation of Agenda 21, estimating the cost of the programme, and determining which individuals will be responsible for its execution.

The environmental diagnosis will enable the strengths and weaknesses of the town in economic, social and environmental terms to be determined.

The Local Action Plan can be defined as a coherent set of strategies and activities geared towards solving, in a combined fashion, the economic, environmental and social problems of a municipality or other local entities in a sustainable manner. It is established on the basis of the conclusions and recommendations in the diagnostic stage and must contain strategic lines and programs and projects or actions.

The effort made by municipalities to implement policies in the field of sustainable development is being analyzed in depth. In general, the types of research basically differ owing to the geographical area under study, so they can be divided into two work groups: work in restricted areas and global work.

The first of the groups focuses on analyzing the experience of one or more municipalities in a country, and they are based on case methodology. The most relevant research projects are those carried out in countries such as Scotland (Jackson and Roberts [10]); the United Kingdom (Kitchen et al. [11]; Scott [12]; Wild and Marshall [13]; Sharp [14]); Poland (Grochowalska [15]; Sobol [16]); Thailand (Tonami and Mori [17]); Ireland (Kelly and Moles [18]); Sweden (Jörby [19]; Rowe and Fudge [20]); Spain (Font and Subirats [21]; Etxebarria et al. [22]); the United States (Grewe et al. [23]); Switzerland (Corbière-Nivollier et al. [24]); Austria (Aistleithner and Hamedinger [25]); and the European Union (García-Sánchez and Prado-Lorenzo [26]).

Along these lines, a certain interest has recently emerged in comparing countries or continents in order to observe the differences between them, for example, Sardon [27] for the USA, Europe and India.

The aim of global work projects is to analyze the process for implementing policies on sustainable development in broad geographical areas. Within these, it is worth differentiating between research projects geared towards a joint analysis of the phases and those focusing on specific phases.

The most characteristic examples of this focus, applied to combined analyses of the series of phases in Local Agenda 21, are the works by Whittacker [28] for Australia; Avanzi [29] for Italy; Vallittu and Lehtimäki [30] for the European EUROCITIES network; and Lindstrom and Gronholm [31] for the Union of Cities of the Baltic. On the contrary, as examples of the work focused on specific phases in the development of Local Agenda 21, the following can be cited: the research by Mercer and Jotkowitz [32] and Cuthill [33] for Australia; Bond et al. [7] for the United Kingdom; Barrett and Usui [34] for Japan; Joas [35] for Finland; Feichtinger and Peregernig [36] for Sweden and Austria; Kelly and Moles [37] for Ireland; and Hernández-Aja [38] for Spain.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1746807>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1746807>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)