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Review

From Rio to Rio+20: twenty years of participatory, long term oriented and monitored local planning?

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides the first comprehensive review of peer-reviewed journal articles on Local Agenda 21 processes worldwide between 1992 (Rio Summit) and 2012 (Rio+20 Summit). An in-depth analysis is carried out on 90 articles selected from an initial sample of 420, in order to determine their profile in terms of time, geography, authors' field and methodological approach, and analyze their content to: (1) proxy the gap between the ideal Local Agenda 21 model and real-world Local Agenda 21 practices in terms of participation, and long-term orientation and monitoring; and (2) identify the causes of this gap and ways to overcome it. Our findings show that real-world Local Agenda 21 practices are far from fitting the ideal Local Agenda 21 model. Progress in terms of participation is very limited and many of the reported processes fail in terms of long-term orientation and monitoring. This gap between purposes and real-world practices seems to be related with limited and decreasing resources and decision-making powers of local governments, a hierarchically oriented political-administrative system, and the top-down mind-set of many local representatives. However, even though a lot remains to be done and there is plenty of room for theoretical and operational development, Local Agenda 21 processes have made a lasting impact, deeply changing the way we understand and implement sustainable development today.

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1. Introduction

Sustainable development (henceforth SD) focuses on covering an integrated and systemic view of needs (environmental, economic and socio-cultural) in ways that are renewable or viable in the long term (O'Riordan and Voisey, 1998; Lindström and Johnson, 2003). While the SD philosophy is widely accepted, implementation is poor (Selman, 1998; Otto-Zimmermann, 2012).

A significant attempt was made to render the SD concept more operational, at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development where Agenda 21 (henceforth A21) was proposed. A21 was understood as a worldwide non-binding coordinated

action plan that should involve action at international, national, regional and local levels. In Chapter 28 of A21, the implementation of A21 at the local level was termed Local Agenda 21 (henceforth LA21). LA21 was granted a prominent role, owing to the proximity of local public authorities to citizens and local businesses and to their greater ability to understand and adapt to local demands, and influence the behavior of local actors.

On the basis of prior literature (O'Riordan and Voisey, 1998; Eckerberg and Forsberg, 1998; Echebarria et al., 2009), we define LA21 as a community-wide participatory effort driven by local governments to establish a comprehensive local strategic plan for tackling environmental, socio-cultural, and economic issues which leads to quality-of-life improvement.

There is not a clear consensus about the specific content of an LA21; and it is widely accepted that LA21 should be adapted to the specific context in which it is implemented. However, two tenets/components of LA21 have been particularly stressed in prior literature (e.g. Littlewood and While, 1997; Bell and Evans, 1998; Hoppe and Coenen, 2011): (1) pursuing multi-stakeholder engagement

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(i.e., an LA21 is developed with the full participation of the local community; it is a community strategy, a participatory reform); and (2) adopting a strategic perspective of planning which includes a long-term orientation, and monitoring through the use of indicators. Both of them are also core components of the methodological approaches proposed for LA21 implementation (e.g. Hewitt, 1995; ICLEI (International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives)/IDRC, (International Development Research Centre), 1996; UNEP (United Nations Environment Program)/ICLEI, 2003).

Important benefits are supposed to emerge from LA21 processes. First, participation is supposed to provide greater policy legitimacy and functional benefits, which include greater access to information and enhanced quality of decision-making, wider acceptance of policies, potential reduction of conflicts, and empowerment of citizens (Voisey et al., 1996; Selman, 2000; Coenen, 2009). Secondly, long-term oriented strategic planning is expected to provide an informed definition of strategies and initiatives (i.e., fitting the specific characteristics of the local context and the opportunities and challenges in the environment) and a range of performance indicators that local authorities could use to implement corrective actions at the right time (Bryson and Alston, 2011; Barrutia and Echebarria, 2013a). Finally, LA21 processes could have a significant impact on SD objectives by driving new projects, stimulating changes in regulations, and promoting sustainable production and consumption between local citizens and businesses (Bullard, 1998).

LA21 is, therefore, an ambitious and attractive proposal encompassing promises of participatory and long-term oriented planning that appear to constitute the mantra of good governance (Patterson and Theobald, 1995; Novy and Hammer, 2007; Otto-Zimmermann, 2012). However, it is not clear to what extent real-world experiences of LA21 fit the conceptual framework underlying the LA21 logic. Nor do we possess systematic knowledge of the variables and mechanisms could foster LA21 processes that match the ideal model. In consequence, our capacity to provide guiding insights to politicians and civil servants involved in the implementation of LA21-like processes is limited. Therefore, this literature review is primarily addressed to answer three related research questions: (1) to what extent do real-world experiences of LA21 fit the conceptual framework underlying the LA21 ideal model in terms of participation, and long-term orientation and monitoring?; (2) if a gap exists, what are the causes of this gap?; and, (3) what are the factors that could foster LA21 processes that match the ideal model?

This research is aimed at finding an answer to these questions by systematically and critically analyzing literature on LA21 during 1992–2012. This period coincides with the holding of the Summits known respectively as Rio (1992) and Rio+20 (2012). No prior research has attempted to provide a literature review on LA21.

To present our contribution the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a brief review of the two major dimensions underlying the LA21 concept: participation, and long-term orientation and monitoring. Section 3 describes the method used to carry out this study. Section 4 is addressed to provide an overall profile of the articles in terms of time, geography, authors' field and scientific approach. The major findings from the literature review are discussed in Section 5, which deals with the two major topics studied. The paper concludes with remarks on this literature, and indicates future avenues of research.

2. Theoretical background

This section sets out to briefly review the two major LA21 topics covered by this literature review. First, it deals with the concept of strategic (public) planning, which involves long-term orientation

and monitoring. Secondly, it addresses a distinguishing feature of the LA21 proposal: participation.

2.1. Strategic planning: long-term orientation and monitoring

Overall, the planning approach considered by LA21 researchers and practitioners is consistent with the strategic planning theory, which was initially developed in the field of business (Porter, 1980; Mintzberg, 1994, 2003) and subsequently extended to public and non-profit organizations and communities (Kaufman and Jacobs, 1987; Bryson, 1988; Bryson and Alston, 2011).

Strategic planning refers to an ordered sequence of activities which include strategic analysis, policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation (Hewitt, 1995; ICLEI/IDRC, 1996; UNEP/ICLEI, 2003). The list below briefly describes each piece of a strategic plan in the order that they are typically developed: (1) mission statement and vision statement, which are an overarching, timeless expression of the purpose and aspiration of the local community and the manner in which it seeks to accomplish the purpose or aspiration (mission), and a concise statement of what the community is supposed to look like in five or more years (vision); (2) values statement or guiding (perdurable) principles, which are enduring, passionate, and distinctive core beliefs; (3) an SWOT analysis, which is a summarized view of the current position of the community: specifically, its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats; (4) long-term strategic objectives, which span a three-year (or more) time horizon and fit the mission, the vision statement, and the SWOT analysis; (5) strategies, which are understood as the general umbrella methods that the community intends to use to reach its vision; (6) programs/initiatives/actions, which are addressed to make the strategy operational. They state what, when, and who, and are measurable; and (7) monitoring through the use of indicators, which enables the tracking of community performance against targets and leads to the design of corrective strategies/actions.

According to Kaufman and Jacobs (1987), the main distinctions between the strategic planning approach and prior conventional public planning are: (1) strategic planning is oriented more toward action, results, and implementation; (2) it promotes broader and more diverse participation in the planning process; (3) it places more emphasis on understanding the community in its external context, determining opportunities and threats to a community via an environmental scan; (4) it embraces competitive behavior on the part of communities; and (5) it emphasizes assessing a community's strengths and weaknesses in the context of opportunities and threats.

Through its ordered and strategic process, planning is viewed as a suitable tool for guiding municipalities according to a vision of the community (Hewitt, 1995; ICLEI/IDRC, 1996). Benefits of strategic planning for municipalities include (Bryson and Alston, 2011): (1) making today's decisions in light of their future consequences; (2) developing a coherent and defensible basis for decision-making and a range of indicators against which the municipality can be judged in the future; and (3) improving municipalities' efficiency and effectiveness (as actions have a deadline and a person/group responsible for their implementation, and are open to control by other political parties and the civil society).

However, the use of genuine strategic planning by municipalities is far from being generalized, and municipalities have received criticism for lacking a strategic view and for incremental and directionless policies that are often short-term in nature (Counsell, 1999; Carter et al., 2000; Selman, 1998).

Charter 28 of Agenda 21 does not provide guidance as to how local communities should proceed with an LA21 process. Rather, local government and the local community are supposed to agree

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