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LASALA: SELF-ASSESSMENT OF LOCAL AGENDA 21 FOR LOCAL AUTHORITIES

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the findings of a recently completed EU research project entitled LASALA or Local Authorities Self-Assessment of LA21, focusing in particular on the difficulties and benefits of policy evaluation in this area, which themselves are a reflection of the nature of the process. The objective of encouraging and supporting 'soft governance', the attempt to foster capacity building and the need to encourage a process of 'thinking globally' whilst 'acting locally' are neither easily quantifiable nor accessible. The paper provides an evaluation of the LASALA methodology for evaluating LA21 (and more broadly local sustainable development processes, and considers the opportunities for monitoring of sustainable development policies presented by this innovative policy evaluation tool.

Biographical Information

Professor Bob Evans and Dr Kate Theobald are the UK partners in the EU funded project 'Developing Institutional and Social Capacities for Urban Sustainability' (DISCUS), and were in the consortium for the earlier LASALA project. Bob Evans is Director of the Sustainable Cities Research Institute at University of Northumbria at Newcastle and Kate Theobald is a Senior Research Fellow, currently based at the Centre for Local Environmental Policies and Strategies, South Bank University, London.

Evaluating policy processes and outcomes

The evaluation of past policy is of crucial importance to the policy process at all levels of government. Only through a process of regular feedback and policy review resulting from an evaluation of policy implementation can policy instruments and approaches be fine-tuned to ensure that objectives are achieved. Moreover, objectives and policy priorities change over time, therefore policy evaluation needs to reflect the continual shift in these priorities. However, in the field of UK local environmental policy, there has not been a systematic and qualitative evaluation of the Local Agenda 21 initiative. There have been studies, for example by the UK's Local Government Management Board (LGMB, 1995; 1996; 1997; 1998; Tuxworth, 1996), which have sought to assess which local authorities have participated in the LA21 process, which officers and members have been principally responsible, and the extent to which LA21 strategies link to other local authority policies and plans. Other countries, for example the Netherlands and the Baltic States have conducted similar exercises (e.g. Joas, 2000) and there have been several studies of LA21 activity and progress across Europe most notably Lafferty & Eckerberg (1998); Lafferty, 2001 and the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (1998; 2002).

However, although these studies collectively represent a valuable source of information on the LA21 project, there has been only limited monitoring of LA21 to assess the extent to which declared policy objectives have been secured, and moreover, to investigate the political, socio-economic, administrative and cultural contexts in which local sustainable development processes are developing. Research conducted has been by those in the academic or policy community, rather than by local policymakers and stakeholder groups themselves.

This paper now considers the innovative policy tool of self-assessment, used for evaluating local sustainable development policies, developed within the framework of the European Union funded LASALA project (Local Authorities Self-Assessment of Local Agenda 21). This firstly necessitates a brief review of the European LA21 initiative, to provide the context for the self-assessment of LA21 across Europe.



The Europe-wide Local Agenda 21 Initiative

More than 1500 local authorities across Europe (figures correct at April 2002) have endorsed the need to prepare LA21s, through joining the European Sustainable Cities and Towns Campaign. The Charter for LA21 (also known as the Aalborg Charter, after the Sustainable Cities and Towns Conference which took place in Aalborg, Denmark, 1994), specifically refers to the need for local consensus between all stakeholder groups in the production of a local sustainable development plan, and sets out key principles for this. These include extensive public consultation, the recognition of existing planning and finance frameworks, participation by all sectors of the local population, and long term local planning, supported by measurable targets. These ideas are reinforced by the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) 'model communities' programme. ICLEI (an association of local governments dedicated to the prevention and solution of local, regional and global environmental problems through local action) has set up a Local Agenda 21 Guidance and Training Programme, to support local authorities in developing and implementing LA21. Thus, much has been done, both by local government associations and by European organisations, in support of LA21. However, the focus has been on how to 'do' LA21, with comparatively little time spent on reflecting on the process and dealing with the problems experienced by local authorities across Europe in implementing policies for local sustainability. The LASALA research methodology presented in this paper is a reflection of the need to evaluate the process to date of LA21 and more broadly local sustainable development policies, across a range of national, regional, political and socio-economic contexts.

Local Authorities Self-Assessment of Local Agenda 21 (LASALA)

LASALA was funded by the European Union, under the Fifth Framework 'Cities for Tomorrow' programme. It was a 20 month project (conducted between March 2000 and October 2001) with six partners, covering the whole of the continent of Europe, and with ICLEI as the co-ordinator.

To date over 2,000 European cities are engaged in a LA21 process of some description, and although there are distinctive national and local contexts, it is becoming clear that there are substantial commonalities in experiences of developing LA21 processes and policies. This paper argues that if the main principles of sustainable development in towns and cities - eco-efficient urban management, and new models of urban governance (the 2 themes of LASALA) are to be achieved, it is essential to evaluate past practice and performance in order to ensure future policy is directed in an effective manner.

Eco-efficient urban management is a collective term used to refer to the use of effective management instruments, processes and practices in the pursuit of urban environmental sustainability, in particular the thrifty use of natural resources. This approach to environmental sustainability requires integrated and holistic approaches to policymaking, which may involve the erosion of traditional administrative and professional boundaries. Such changes are necessary to take account of emerging mechanisms for formulating, implementing, and evaluating policies such as environmental capacity, sustainability indicators, environmental impact analyses and ecological footprinting.

The adoption of new models of urban governance emphasises the importance of developing approaches to 'soft governance' which include those sectors of civil society that have been largely excluded from policy decisions. A particular aim of LASALA was therefore to evaluate whether new models of urban governance, for instance in the form of improved participatory mechanisms, inclusion of citizens, and the continuous flow of information between local authorities and 'stakeholder' groups can provide improved conditions for effective, eco-efficient city planning and resource management systems.

Before exploring the tool of self-assessment as applied to LA21 processes, it is appropriate to set out the aims and objectives of LASALA. The LASALA project had a number of key objectives, both for local authorities themselves in the development of their local sustainability processes, and for the development of LA21 across Europe.

The main aims of LASALA were to:

- i) provide a framework to help LA21 co-ordinators with reporting to their Local Agenda 21 Committee (or other appropriate sustainability Committee) on progress with local sustainability;
- ii) assist local authorities in reflecting on their Local Agenda 21/other local sustainability process and identifying problems and opportunities;
- iii) provide feedback to all local stakeholders as part of a regular evaluation of LA21



- iv) assist in the creation of new ideas for the development of the LA21 process.

In Europe, within the framework of the European Sustainable Cities and Towns Campaign (to which the development of the self-assessment tool is directly linked), the aim of LASALA was to:

- i) provide a common framework for the evaluation of Local Agenda 21 and more broadly of local sustainability across Europe, which can be fed into the Rio+10 process;
- ii) help establish a monitoring and evaluation process on progress with local sustainability processes throughout Europe;
- iii) assess progress and outcomes of the implementation of the Aalborg Charter commitments and additional health/social and economic issues;
- iv) enable the identification of 'good practice' across a diverse range of municipalities, and the dissemination of good practice to local authorities across Europe;
- v) provide feedback into the European Sustainable Cities and Towns Campaign and other international LA21 evaluations and help in their future development.

The project involved the recruitment of approximately 230 local authorities from across Europe, to take part in a self-assessment of their LA21 processes. Initially the 800+ signatory authorities to the Aalborg Charter (the number of signatories in March 2000) were contacted, to request their participation. This initial contact was supplemented by intensive networking with national local government organisations to encourage participation from local authorities, who, whilst not being signatories to the Aalborg Charter, did nevertheless have a LA21 process underway.

Self assessment through the World-Wide Web

A self-assessment module, with supporting information and guidance materials was set up by ICLEI on the web, to provide distance training for those local authorities participating in the LASALA self-assessment. The module used for self-assessment was based on a pilot module developed by ICLEI during 1999 to assist local authorities in evaluating their LA21 strategies. It was however revised substantially to meet the requirements of the LASALA project - specifically to deal with the demands of a large-scale, pan-European programme, and to incorporate the qualitative elements that represented a key element of this evaluation. The utilisation of such a distance-training tool, supported by 'tele-guidance' from each of the partners in their respective regions, represents a new and innovative approach to evaluating LA21 for two principal reasons. First, it provides a comprehensive training manual on-line, for local authorities to access and utilise, both for the purposes of the LASALA evaluation, and for regular monitoring of their LA21/local sustainability process. Secondly it supports local authorities in utilising web-based resources for the evaluation of policy processes.

The Self-Assessment Module

The LASALA Self-Assessment Module therefore contains two Exercises:

Exercise One

The first Exercise is in the form of a quantitative questionnaire, for the LA21 Co-ordinator or equivalent to complete (in conjunction with colleagues). This Exercise requires information relating to achievements in the local sustainability process, and is in two Sections. Section 1 focuses on both baseline, contextual information on a local authority and on the progress it has achieved in developing its Local Agenda 21/local sustainability process. Section 2 asks questions relating to a local authority's LA21 progress and process vis-à-vis a number of sustainability criteria (based on the 13 Aalborg Charter Commitments).

It was therefore intended that Exercise 1 provide both the local authority and the LASALA project team with a basic knowledge and understanding about the steps a local authority has taken in order to implement sustainable development policies, through, for example, Local Agenda 21 processes and other sustainability policies. It was also intended to assist in developing an understanding of the obstacles to, and potential for a local authority (town or city) to progress towards sustainable urban development.

A further aim was to learn about the role and capacity of a local authority within the wider community, that is the political, ecological, social, and economic base of a local authority, as well as the level of autonomy it enjoys. The information gained from Exercise One permitted the assessment of the overall level of progress towards sustainable development achieved by different towns and cities, taking account of the particular context in which they function. Underlining this was a recognition by the research team that there is no single correct way to develop a LA21 or local sustainability process.



Exercise Two

The second Exercise was also in the form of a questionnaire, but based solely on the 13 Aalborg Charter Commitments, and responses were required from stakeholders representing different sectors of the local community, including business, education institutions, community groups, utilities (gas, electricity, water), health authorities, trade unions, and the police. This Exercise was particularly important in the evaluation of a LA21 process, as it had to be completed through the conducting of a workshop, (this could be the LA21 Forum or other pre-existing LA21 grouping, or a workshop designed specifically for the LASALA evaluation) involving these stakeholder groups.

Stakeholders, led by a facilitator, were required to discuss the questions in the Exercise, under the headings for each of the 13 Aalborg Commitments. This part of the self-assessment process provided the qualitative data for the evaluation, and was cross-referenced with the Exercise One responses.

The findings of this self-assessment process were therefore intended to be of value to the local authorities themselves, in assessing the effectiveness of their LA21 policies and processes, and have been presented (in aggregate form) in the LASALA Evaluation report (Evans and Theobald, 2001a). A second report identifying cases of 'good practice' in 24 of the participant local authorities has also been published (Joas, Gronholm & Matar 2001).

Evaluating the Self-Assessment Method

One important feature of the LASALA project was the evaluation of the self-assessment method as a tool for monitoring local sustainability processes¹. To this end, a feedback questionnaire was devised, for participating local authorities to complete once they had returned both Exercises (or at the minimum Exercise One). The responses from the feedback questionnaires form the basis for the following section. In addition, each of the project's regional co-ordinators were required to maintain contact with the participating local authorities, and to maintain a record of comments on the self-assessment method. Where appropriate, these comments are also included. The key areas focused on for this evaluation of the method were the use of the LASALA website and distance training manual, and the experiences of local authorities in conducting the two Exercises. A broader issue of central importance to the project was the extent to which local authorities felt self-assessment as a method was useful to them in reflecting on past and current policy, and in developing future policies for sustainable development.

Local Authority Experiences with LASALA

The approach offered by the self-assessment method (SAM) was seen as beneficial both for individual local authorities but also for providing information to localities on how other local authorities (whether neighbouring, in the same country, or in another part of Europe) were developing their LA21s:

'We joined the LASALA process because we felt that comparative self assessment was an appropriate way to evaluate our LA21 process'.

Many of those participating in the LASALA project commented that the LASALA project had proved helpful in developing a local network for LA21s, through local authorities establishing or strengthening links with neighbouring municipalities. This related in particular to the conducting of the workshop for Exercise 2 – in a number of cases neighbouring local authorities assisted each other by providing facilitators for the workshops. This is clearly a positive outcome of this approach to policy evaluation and highlights the importance of local authorities working with and learning from other municipalities in addressing the requirements of local sustainable development.

The use of the SAM was particularly important for identifying both local authority and stakeholders perspectives on the nature of their LA21 processes and on what had been achieved. A view shared by many local authority officers and members (and summed up in the following response) was that:

¹ See Evans, B & Theobald, K (2001b) *Evaluation of the LASALA Self –Assessment Method*, ICLEI, Freiburg. Available at <http://www.iclei.org/europe/lasala>



'The results of this exercise may help me to promote the benefits of genuinely empowering the community'

Clearly this showed a recognition by many local authorities that both the process of self-evaluation, and the results from this would be useful in the future in developing more effective participatory processes.

Even for those local authorities that were only at the beginning of a process of moving towards local sustainable development, the evaluative workshop was perceived as beneficial in highlighting the complex process of incorporating sustainability thinking into all areas of policymaking:

'It did help to focus thinking on some areas which we had not covered in detail, and also reinforced the thinking that there is still much to do before Sustainable Development becomes mainstream in policy making'.

It was noted in a number of cases that the conducting of a workshop for Exercise 2 had assisted stakeholders in evaluating their local authority's approach to Local Agenda 21. It was regarded as beneficial to use Exercise 2 as a starting point, to encourage debate between stakeholders and the local authority about the development of an LA21 process, and more broadly about the concept of sustainable development. The method of self-assessment was also perceived as appropriate to link with other consultation mechanisms within local authorities.

Participating in the self-assessment offered by LASALA helped in many cases to bring LA21 back to prominence within a local authority policy process, and to assist local authorities in reflecting on their central role in moving towards local sustainable development. One comment sums up this achievement:

I have been able to convince the council to sign the Aalborg Charter, introduce a policy on Fair Trade and commence work on an Environmental System so even a questionnaire has far reaching consequences'.

There was a concern by some respondents that in general local authorities would tend to 'talk up' their achievements regarding LA21. However, as noted in the LASALA Evaluation Report (Evans and Theobald, 2001), it was equally common for LA21 officers to 'talk down' their achievements and to be self-critical. The central point of the LASALA method, was that it was self-evaluation *for* local authorities, *by* local authorities. Clearly it was important for local authorities to present an 'honest' picture of their LA21 process, as this would be valuable not only for the LASALA project findings, but for their own assessment of the progress and process of LA21.

Comments on Exercise 2

As noted above, Exercise 2 was based on the 13 Aalborg Commitments, and one issue raised by those taking part in Exercise 2 (both local authorities and other stakeholders) was the difficulty in understanding the complex language used in these Commitments. This is clearly an issue that needs to be taken into account, both in terms of the responses to the questions, but also for the possible revision of the self-assessment method for future use by local authorities across Europe. Nevertheless, the Aalborg Commitments provide a useful framework for assessing the level of political commitment of authorities to local sustainable development in their municipalities.

As noted above, the conducting of a workshop for Exercise 2 was intended to encourage local authorities to involve a range of stakeholders from different sectors of the local community. Responses in the feedback questionnaire did however point to the difficulty of involving some sectors, particularly in terms of the time and resource constraints for individuals to attend. However, a further obstacle to attendance was a lack of understanding both on the part of local authority representatives and other stakeholders, of their relevance to, and contribution to, the LA21 process. Local authorities were very aware of the importance of involving both organisations and individual citizens in the decision-making processes required to implement LA21 principles. However it was widely acknowledged that there are a number of excluded groups that are difficult to access. Those individuals taking part in the workshops for Exercise 2 tended to be those identified by local authorities as being the most active in the LA21 Forums. A further barrier to involvement was a lack of contact with



stakeholder groups. This lack of contact was suggested by one respondent to be indicative of an institutional barrier, in terms of communication between local authorities and the local community. These comments can only serve to emphasise the relevance and importance of Exercise 2, and the participation of stakeholder groups, in evaluating a local authority's Local Agenda 21 process.

Benefits of using the internet for distance training

The utilisation of the LASALA distance-training tool, through the LASALA website, has represented a new and innovative approach to evaluating LA21, and has indeed been recognised by participating local authorities as an effective approach to assessing both the progress and process of their local sustainable development programmes. The feedback from local authorities, through the feedback questionnaire, and from informal discussions between participating local authorities and LASALA regional co-ordinators, emphasised the need for a continuation and expansion of a web-based approach to regular self-assessment of LA21 and more broadly local sustainable development policies. Moreover, the central support mechanism of ICLEI was clearly identified in this feedback as important to the self-evaluation approach.

Linking self-assessment with policy development

It is appropriate at this stage to consider, based on LASALA findings, the benefits of self-assessment as a tool for evaluating both the process and progress of policymaking for local sustainable development. As noted earlier in this paper, the policy process and policy outcomes are inextricably linked, and evaluation of public policy should reflect this link. The key issues arising from the LASALA self-assessment method, and relevant both from the perspective of participant local authorities, and for future research, are as follows:

- Overall, there still appears to be an almost complete absence of formal evaluation mechanisms in local authorities, whether in relation to specific performance evaluation of the achievements of LA21 itself, or more broadly, across policy structures. Policymaking tends to be short-term in nature and many LA21 programmes do not have a long-term policy programme (although the overall 'vision' is often longer).
- Many LASALA respondents have been prepared to be critical and reflective of their LA21 process and of the administrative system in which this operates, although it is acknowledged by the researchers that the LA21 co-ordinators view does not necessarily represent that of other officers and members. A number of respondents have commented on the value of evaluating a process, and on having the tool of LASALA to do this.
- Self-evaluation has exposed or confirmed the complexities and problems for local authorities in attempting to involve a range of stakeholder groups in policymaking. Moreover, there is a concern amongst some stakeholders (and this is recognised by LA21 co-ordinators) that they may merely be legitimising decisions, rather than possessing the power to challenge or change decisions.
- The evaluation has nevertheless also highlighted areas where local 'partnerships' for sustainability are being developed, and in some cases are proving beneficial for policymaking on sustainable development. The reporting of this through the LASALA findings, in particular through the identification of 'good practice' examples (see Joas et al 2001) and through benchmarking reports produced for each participating local authority has been valuable in informing policy and practice in local authorities across Europe.

The Future Use of Self-assessment

According to many local authority respondents, LASALA has been an extremely useful exercise in terms of setting the agenda for the development of LA21 processes, and in terms of highlighting the need for progress in a range of areas. It has also highlighted the importance of self-assessment of local sustainability processes on a regular basis as an integral part of policy development. The self-assessment mechanism has assisted local authorities in being open and self-critical in their evaluation, and in communicating their findings to other local authorities – a sharing of information and of 'what works'. This networking of experiences could be particularly important in developing and improving policies for sustainable development, and is an aspect of self-assessment that requires support and investment by the appropriate local government organisations. This is already being addressed at a European level through the support from network organisations such as ICLEI and the European Sustainable Cities and Towns Campaign.

Conclusions

The results from the self-assessment exercise have fully justified the project's emphasis upon co-operative and reflexive working with local authorities in the self-assessment of LA21 and local sustainability processes. The extremely high quality of the responses to both of the Exercises indicates the validity of the self-assessment approach and of the supportive and reflexive approach adopted by the project team.



The LASALA experience suggests that self-assessment by local authorities of their LA21 processes is extremely beneficial and can provide an opportunity for critical reflection on current and past policies relating to local sustainable development. LASALA has provided a broad analysis of the process of LA21 across a geographically diverse area, and has permitted an exploration of the complex contexts within which local authorities respond to the demands of sustainable development. Self-assessment is an effective tool with which local authorities have been able to consider the wider governance issues that are integral to sustainable development, such as the nature of decision-making within local government, and the development of partnerships with different sectors of civil society.

LASALA has shown that local authorities recognise the importance of participating in a self-assessment exercise if this is effectively organised and supported, both within their own organisations, and through networks such as ICLEI and the Campaign. It has also highlighted the role that information technology can play in assisting local authorities with self-evaluation, through a distance training technique. Moreover, LASALA has led to an extensive database on the process and progress of LA21 across Europe, to which it may be possible for all European local authorities to contribute through undertaking the self-assessment exercise.

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