

ISSUE 2:

# The Future of Local Agenda 21 in the New Millennium

*by J. Gary Lawrence*



UNED-UK

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# The Future of Local Agenda 21 in the New Millennium

Presented by J. Gary Lawrence at a UNED-UK/LGMB Seminar  
London, England on 29 June, 1998

*Gary Lawrence is one of the key thinkers on sustainable development, an advisor to the US President's Council on Sustainable Development and to US AID. He was on the US Government delegation to the 1996 Habitat II Conference and has also been Director of the Centre for Sustainable Communities at the University of Washington and Chief Planner in the City of Seattle.*

It is a pleasure to be back in the U.K. I am gratified to see so many here who are interested in ensuring a good future for Local Agenda 21. Before we begin I would like to thank UNEP-UK and the LGMB for challenging me to think about this important topic and for providing this forum for discussion. I would also like to thank British Airways for their generosity in making my trip here possible.

I have been asked to give you some thoughts on the future of Local Agenda 21 as we move into the next millennium. In my work I have to think about the future quite a bit. In doing some reading on the subject I came across Scott Adams' description of the future as found in *The Dilbert Future*.

*"The children are our future. And that is why, ultimately, we're screwed unless we do something about it. If you haven't noticed, the children who are our future are good looking but they aren't all that bright. As dense as they might be, they will eventually notice that adults have spent all the money, spread disease, and turned the planet into a smoky, filthy ball of death. We're raising an entire generation of dumb, pissed-off kids who know where the handguns are kept. This is not a good recipe for a happy future. The alternative is for adults to stop running up debts, polluting, and having reckless sex. For this to happen, several billion Individuals (ibid.) would have to become less stupid, selfish, and horny. This is not likely."*<sup>(1)</sup>

While a bit 'over the top', Mr. Adams' description of the present and a possible future seem to be close to the target. In spite of all of the information available to support the conclusion that it isn't very smart to exhaust our natural and monetary capital, to continue polluting and to continue

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## The Future of Local Agenda 21 in the New Millennium

the practice of unsafe sex, we continue to do all three. Our systematic failure to protect and educate children may lead to a lack of hope and civility in the communities of the future.

Local Agenda 21 (LA21) has been put forth by the signatories to the Declaration of Rio and Chapter 28 of the Agenda 21 Action Programme as a context for actions that improve the present, avoid the futures we don't want and move toward the futures that we would prefer. LA21 also suggests tools for use by local authorities to address these important economic, environmental and social questions about our present and future.

Chapter 28 describes its 'Basis for Action' as follows: *"Because so many of the problems and solutions being addressed by Agenda 21 have their roots in local activities, the participation and cooperation of local authorities will be a determining factor in fulfilling its objectives. Local authorities construct, operate and maintain economic, social and environmental infrastructure, oversee planning processes, establish local environmental policies and regulations, and assist in implementing national and subnational environmental policies. As the level of governance closest to the people, they play a vital role in educating, mobilizing and responding to the public to promote sustainable development."*<sup>(2)</sup>

The principle activity the authors recommend to meet this challenge is: *"Each local authority should enter into a dialogue with its citizens, local organizations and private enterprises and adopt 'a local Agenda 21'."*<sup>(3)</sup> The text goes on to describe methods, means and rewards associated with Local Agenda 21 (LA21).

Some places in the world, like the United Kingdom, have taken seriously the commitments made in Rio. Local authorities have made great strides toward completing and using LA21 as an education, planning and priority setting tool. These efforts have demonstrated great potential for helping many to improve their lives. In so doing, local authorities have proven the importance of another principle of Agenda 21 – the devolution of power from the nation-state to local authorities. I have been told that LA21 has played an important role in raising the profile of devolution discussion within the Government.

Other places have been much slower to adopt LA21. The reasons for this lack of progress vary widely. In some cases LA21 is seen as an attack on the power of the nation-state. In such cases, particularly when local authorities are dependent upon threatened nation-state resources and/or permission to enact new initiatives, LA21's aren't happening or are happening only as theater. In other cases, where there is civil war, epidemic and/or severe resource constraints, focus is necessarily on getting through today rather than consideration of questions like *"What will our lives be like a year or a decade from now?"* In the case of the U.S., our local authorities are engaged in planning processes consistent with LA21 but there is little interest in using the LA21

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## The Future of Local Agenda 21 in the New Millennium

brand. Participating in a UN advocated planning process would very likely bring out many of the conspiracy-fixated groups and individuals in our society such as the National Rifle Association, citizen militias and some members of Congress. This segment of our society who fear ‘one-world government’ and a UN invasion of the United States through which our individual freedom would be stripped away would actively work to defeat any elected official who joined ‘the conspiracy’ by undertaking LA21. So, we call our processes something else, such as comprehensive planning, growth management or smart growth.

In those communities where LA21 has been adopted as the preferred planning paradigm, some have found it useful and transformational. Others treat it as just another type of public involvement strategy. In many cases the process has brought people who have previously been or felt excluded into the process of community building. In some, the priorities set during the process have impacted project scope and spending priorities. In all cases it is far too early to judge the ultimate success, failure or utility of these efforts. LA21 is still a young effort and local experimentation is still taking place. It is not too early, however, to recognize some of the barriers to the fulfillment of the LA21 visions.

Today I’d like us to examine four themes critical to the future of Agenda 21. The way we address these themes will, in large part, determine whether LA21 leads to positive change or gets added to the list of planning methodologies that employed planners and consultants, consumed resources, and made little difference to those whom most need help. The odds, I’m afraid, seem to favor the latter outcome. It will be up to those who want LA21 to succeed to address these barriers.

I want to raise some critical questions for which I have no easy answers. My role today may be best described as that of the ‘pea’ in the fable *The Princess and the Pea*. I will be that slight irritant that keeps us from becoming too comfortable with the idea that doing LA21 is the same thing as succeeding in achieving the vision of LA21.

The problems I see and the questions I raise are not intended as criticism of Local Agenda 21 or any individual or group working to make Local Agenda 21 a success. I believe LA21 is a good model, perhaps the best model we have to work with at the moment. I also think that people of good intentions are diligent in their efforts to make this model work well in the best interest of their communities. Francis Bacon captured my intent when he said:

*“Of myself, I say nothing, but on behalf of the business which is at hand I entreat men to believe that it is not an opinion to be held, but a work to be done; and to be well*

*This segment of our society who fear ‘one-world government’ and a UN invasion of the United States through which our individual freedom would be stripped away would actively work to defeat any elected official who joined ‘the conspiracy’ by undertaking LA21.*

## The Future of Local Agenda 21 in the New Millennium

*assured that I am laboring to lay the foundation, not of any sect or doctrine, but of human utility and power. it is by no means forgetful of the conditions of mortality and humanity (for it does not suppose that the work can be altogether completed within one generation but provides for its being take up by another)."*<sup>(4)</sup>

As I view community-based efforts toward greater sustainability, and think about different measures of success that could be used, there appear to be some particularly difficult barriers to the long-term success of Local Agenda 21. Some of the barriers are inherent to any discussion of sustainable development. For instance, we haven't worked out the issue of TIME (can we actually anticipate the needs of infinite future generations?) nor have we resolved questions of EQUITY (and its partner, Redistribution of Resources). The book I am working on tries to address such basic sustainability issues. This paper does not. Today I focus on some of the organizational and communication issues that must be addressed.

The four areas I wish to explore are:

1. How does LA21 differ from traditional rational planning models?
2. How do we know that the problems/issues/opportunities we are addressing will be the problems/issues/opportunities we will actually face? How do we have confidence in plans that address probabilities rather than certainties?
3. Have we ignored or under-emphasized the institutional barriers to successful long-term LA21's and, if so, do we have the political skills to win intra- and inter-institutional struggles?
4. As we try to tell if what we are doing through LA21 is working, what are the right tools for which audiences?

*As I view community-based efforts toward greater sustainability, and think about different measures of success that could be used, there appear to be some particularly difficult barriers to the long-term success of Local Agenda 21.*

So, let us begin.

*What is LA21 and how does it differ from traditional rational planning models?*

LA21, like most rational planning models, attends to the process of designing stand alone and interrelated projects and systems to meet the present and future needs of anticipated populations. It involves defining problems and opportunities, optimizing efficiency and effectiveness in the use of available resources, and measuring progress against goals. For many planners, at first glance, LA21 seems familiar and comfortable.

## The Future of Local Agenda 21 in the New Millennium

On closer examination, however, LA21 can look unfamiliar and create discomfort, as it calls for a significant reorientation of the planners' role. It asks for a change of orientation from technocratic to political (not partisan). This fundamental difference has not been well recognized by the planning profession, or those who employ planners. Not too surprisingly, NGOs and individuals have expectations for changed institutional behaviors consistent with the principles of LA21. However, even among those progressive local authorities committed to making LA21 work, the public's expectation for different corporate and professional behaviors is seldom being met.

In its construction LA21 makes clear through its call for involvement, empowerment and devolution of power that planning is primarily a political activity that relies upon science and planning techniques. Most rational planning models assume the opposite that planning is primarily technical with political consequences. With this shift in emphasis, the customary relationship between planners and the planning profession, the public and politicians changes significantly. Planning done under LA21 should:

*It involves defining problems and opportunities, optimizing efficiency and effectiveness in the use of available resources, and measuring progress against goals.*

- Change community decisions about what can or will be discussed and who has a right to be at the table. LA21 threatens the role and power of traditionally empowered groups. Therefore, it increases political risk for elected officials and senior civil servants through empowerment of new constituencies with different and/or heightened expectations. The expectations of these new groups will often differ significantly from the expectations of more established constituencies. Revamping the local balance of power.
- Greatly increase professional risk for the planner if he or she appears to be eroding the political influence of traditional community powers by increasing the voice of those historically disempowered. As the shift from 'top down' the 'top' being institutions of government or community elite to 'bottom up' planning and decision-making occurs, institutional risk can also increase.

If new constituencies are asked to participate without a good understanding of the rules, it can:

- Even more confuse the planners and communities understanding of the legal, regulatory and constitutional constraints in which planners work. In particular, public empowerment can cause misunderstandings about the difference between the right to be heard, a basic tenant of LA21, and an obligation of local authorities to heed individual recommendations.

## The Future of Local Agenda 21 in the New Millennium

For LA21 to be successful, planning professionals will need different training than most are receiving today. While the technocratic professional will still play an important role, for this to work planners also will also the skills found in sociology, psychology, community organizing and organizational development. They also will need institutional homes that encourage the use of these skills. This is no small challenge, and one that doesn't seem to be a priority for the planning profession. This is a problem.

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*How do we know that the problems, issues and opportunities we are addressing will be the problems, issues, opportunities we actually will face? When is it possible to rely upon the information we use and ask others to trust?*

It is a fundamental principle of rational planning that we live in a deterministic world. Based upon the past and present, it is assumed that we can reasonably predict likely futures and plan for them. However, both historical evidence and chaos theory demonstrate that the past and present do not form a reliable basis upon which to plan for the future. William Sherden wrote, "Current science is proving this deterministic view of the world to be naive. The theories of chaos and complexity are revealing the future as fundamentally unpredictable."

If true, serious questions arise about the value of LA21's that are designed to mirror traditional planning by trying to be stable rather than dynamic. Current LA21's seem to be a more participatory and inclusive version of traditional rational planning models that assume that the future can be predicted based upon the past. Most are not designed to be dynamic documents that focus upon learning and adaptation.

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There are a number of reasons why elements of the plans today must be static even in chaotic environments. As currently conceived, capital facilities bridges, transmission lines and pipes, energy production facilities, etc. have long lead-times for development and life cycles of 50 to 100 years. Such facilities are not flexible except at costs that far outweigh the benefits of change. If it were technologically, economically and politically feasible to meet capital needs in different ways many small-scale electrical or water quality projects rather than large-scale plants then the adaptability of capital plans could be increased. In this scenario LA21 is dependent on technological innovation and changed patterns of thinking among engineers and regulators. We are not yet there, but we may get there.

Until we do, the planning profession will necessarily continue with the notion that we can not plan if we can not reliably predict. The profession



## The Future of Local Agenda 21 in the New Millennium

relies on predictive models and data extrapolation to determine the future for which we ought to be planning. In many cases, the future revealed through these models is erroneously thought to be the 'real' future by those who created it. Alternative or competing visions are, therefore, determined to be wrong, misinformed, or subjective. Through reliance on data and predictive models, institutions and individuals have learned how to protect themselves from blame if things don't turn out as planned. After all, the best available data was used and, as professionals, we were objective in the use of the data. Sherden has this to say about objectivity:

*"Although chaos and complexity theories alone are sufficient to doom prediction, there are other barriers that obscure our view of the future, such as 'situational bias': the phenomenon by which our thing is so obscured by present conditions and trends that we cannot begin to see the future."*

*"I.F. Clarke, a historian of future thinking, characterized situational bias well, as follows: "Traditional beliefs, professional attitudes, customary roles, inherited symbols, sectional and national interests – these make it extraordinarily difficult for all but the most original of minds to break away from patterns of thought and go voyaging on the unknown seas of the future. In consequence it is a rare forecast that makes any allowance for the essential waywardness of human affairs and does not insist on a strict continuity between self-evident present and the evidential future." (5)*

To Clarke's list I would add pressure for political correctness and the desire to avoid topics that are divisive and painful such racism and classism. Except in times of emergency, maintenance of the status quo seems safer than change for organizational beings. In many instances, continuing to do something that is familiar and accepted, even if it doesn't actually work, is deemed safer than trying something new that might work. In our rational minds we know that we can not know the future. However, in our emotional minds we desire the security of knowing what is going to happen.

LA21 is an opportunity to start breaking the habit of doing plans for some forecast future and following those plans even if the world has changed the week after the plan is adopted. It is an opportunity to redefine planning as a learning and adaptive system that reacts to new information in ways consistent with community values and objectives. LA21, if it is to meet its promise, can not be just something we do occasionally. It needs to become the way in which we learn how to live a more sustainable way.

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## The Future of Local Agenda 21 in the New Millennium

*Have we ignored and/or under-emphasized the institutional barriers to successful long-term LA21's and, if so, do we have the political skills to win intra- and inter-institutional struggles?*

LA21 calls for problem definitions that mirror the complexities of nature and human organizations. It also calls for more collaborative, cross-sector analysis and recommendations for action. Emphasis on an increased understanding of complexity and increased collaborative behaviours would represent a significant change in the behaviour of most public institutions. Organizational theory and practice have shown us that changing the process and expectations without changing the reward system means, in effect, that you have actually changed nothing. This raises some very difficult questions:

What does LA21 mean for the relationships between environmental departments and planning functions and the other, more powerful professions that dominate the local government institutional environment? It could mean:

- Perceived or real invasion of the tradition 'turf' of other professions.
- Challenges to traditional institutional power relationships within and between institutions.
- Perceived attacks on the basis of individual expertise and the right to have the last word.

What does it mean for organizational structure? It could mean: Conflict with organizations' existing reward system as new, more cooperative behaviours are encouraged, Breaking down sector and profession based structure and compartmentalization.

What does it mean for the way in which our colleges and universities train the professionals of the future? It must mean: Changes in curricula used in training of urban planning, operations and management to emphasize team approaches and outreach to other professions, and I think that one can generally predict the degree to which LA21 will matter over time by how closely its locus of activity is attached to the place where resource allocation decisions are made. If the activity is placed in the environmental division of the planning office (traditionally a place with little organizational power) then, I think, the chances for success are small. If it part of the City Manager's or Mayor's Office, and therefore integrated into regular decision-making processes, then the chances of success are far greater.

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## The Future of Local Agenda 21 in the New Millennium

LA21 processes, essentially, try to decide which issues matter most and how we can, collectively, address them most effectively and efficiently. Environmental planners do not make those decisions. They are made by budget and finance people, the Manager and the politicians. If there is disconnection between LA21 and these groups then the effort is in trouble. That is unless, of course, you are willing to organize political movements through which the public forces the institution to change its priorities.

LA21 asks us to increase the number of things we consider before we make a choice. What the public seems to want from their elected leadership these days are simplistic assessments and answers, not complexity. Unless there is an explicit and implicit recognition that LA21 begs questions of organizational culture and, in many cases, organizational arrangement, then it is unlikely that the effort will succeed. Running this process through today's organizational structures will probably kill it or, perhaps even worse, change it so that it is non-threatening to the organization.

For example, when, in 1994, the city of Seattle completed its comprehensive plan – *Toward a Sustainable Seattle* – it was very clear to Mayor Rice that plan requirements for consistency between the operating budget, capital budget and the goals of the comprehensive plan would not happen automatically. Seattle had for years been operating as though the Mayor and Council were overseeing a holding company within which were many independent businesses with both complementary and competing objectives. To ensure that the plan objectives would be carried out in a more coordinated fashion he merged the planning function with the group responsible for management and budget issues. This made it possible for the plan to be both visionary and strategic in its application.

*How do we know when we are effective?*

I have, with Sustainable Seattle and other organizations, been asking the question “Can you point to any particular decision or a adoption of funded priorities that are a direct result of community based indicators?” I have also been asking whether there is any evidence that institutions are tangibly more sustainable, open, self-critical and self-healing as a result of the indicators they have adopted to guide their internal affairs.

I haven't done an exhaustive review of indicator efforts, so there will undoubtedly be exceptions to what I have

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## The Future of Local Agenda 21 in the New Millennium

found. And, there certainly are examples of incremental and tangential effects and influences. However, no one seems to be able to point to successful examples of fundamental change except places like Alborg, which seems to be an anomaly and Chattanooga where they really had no choice but change, indicators or not. In Seattle, the indicators, though well done, have barely affected the margins of public consciousness. There is hope for greater impact, however, now that King County government is trying to integrate them into their decision-making.

I describe indicators as the tool which gives as regular people the ability to know, based upon information that tries to be objective, whether the things that matter most to them are getting better or worse. Indicators are an essential part of LA21's that appears to me to be very fragile at this time for the following reasons:

- Community-based indicator efforts are initiated by visionaries or the truly committed who don't have conscious succession plans in place. Once the strong personalities that initiate indicator activity move on to other things the effort wanes.
- Community-based indicator efforts, which I believe to have the best opportunity to result in positive change, are largely fuelled by volunteer efforts that will eventually run out of energy.
- Institutional indicator efforts are most often designed to be non-threatening to the established order and, therefore, will rarely be transformational within their own Institution.
- Institutional indicator efforts seem to take the form of past rational budgeting paradigms (measurement of effectiveness of expenditure against performance targets) and become obscure and bureaucratic (see bullet above).
- There is little work being done to link the matters that get reported upon in the media to the communities' and/or institutions' indicators.

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*I believe that every community needs both community-based and institutional indicators. It should not be an either/or situation.*

## The Future of Local Agenda 21 in the New Millennium

*So, if these are actually potential pitfalls, how do we address them?*

First and most obvious, community-based indicator efforts need financial support. Volunteerism will always be an important part of the effort, but without a financial base the continuity of the effort is in real danger. It is in any local authority's interest to have good information on what their constituents care about and how they describe the things that matter. Community-based indicators should be seen as a fundamental part of the budgeting and strategic planning processes, even if what they might indicate doesn't reflect well on the local authority.

I believe that every community needs both community-based and institutional indicators. It should not be an either/or situation. The various audiences for this information will be radically different and one size does not fit all. As Ludwig Wittgenstein said, "*Ideas are relata, i.e., entities that stand in relation to the persons who have them.*" We need different groups with ideas (indicators) that stand in easy relationship to themselves.

### **In conclusion:**

Wittgenstein concluded his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* with this corollary: "*My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as non-sensical when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.*"

I think it is time for all of us to take a look at LA21, and the sustainable development movement as a whole, and 'throw away the ladder'. LA21 is important as an ideal – an expression of the need for more functional democracies, better informed citizens, equal rights, giving people the opportunity to take responsibility for improving their lives, and sharing the power of the state with citizens of the state. To further these ideals, LA21 also must be an instrument of organizational change within both governmental and non-governmental organizations. Creating the position of LA21 Officer, engaging the community, holding the meetings and creating the plans are all very difficult and exhausting things to do. Sadly, completion of these tasks is not a signal to rest. It is, as Churchill said, "the end of the beginning." The next step is organizational transformation so that LA21 is not a process but a state of being.

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## The Future of Local Agenda 21 in the New Millennium

### Bibliography

- (1) *The Dilbert Future*, by Scott Adams; HarperCollins Publishers; p13; copyright 1997 by United Features Syndicate, Inc.; ISBN 0-88730-866-X. Please note that Mr. Adams is an U.S. author. In the U.K. reference would probably be to Cricket bats. Mr. Adams terminologies for those among us that he feels are not all that bright.
- (2) *Earth Summit – Agenda 21, The United Nations Programme of Action from Rio*, pp233 & 234. ISBN 92-1-100509-4; not copyright protected.
- (3) *Ibid.*
- (4) *Philosophical Classics*, by Walter Kaufman, from Bacon's *The Great Instauration*, Prentice Hall, p3; copyright 1961; Library of Congress number 68-15350.
- (5) *The Fortune Sellers*, by William A. Sherden, p7. Willey Publishing, copyright 1998.

*“Five years ago, the Rio Summit launched Agenda 21. Since then 70% of our local authorities have been inspired to ‘think global, act local’ through Local Agenda 21. But we must do more. I want all local authorities in the UK to adopt Local Agenda 21 strategies by the year 2000.”*

**RT Hon Tony Blair MP**

UK Prime Minister’s speech to the 1997 Earth Summit II

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