

Local Agenda 21 Processes - Lessons Learnt from Community Centres Promoting Sustainable Lifestyles

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Abstract

Local Agenda 21 (LA21) is a program that provides a framework for implementing sustainable development at the local level. LA21 aims to build upon existing local government strategies and resources - such as corporate plans, vegetation management plans, and transport strategies - to better integrate environmental, economic and social goals. Fourteen years after the Rio Earth Summit, nations are still grappling with the implementation of Local Agenda 21 possibly because not enough attention was focused on the development of the human dimension, i.e., creating enough consensus, developing the necessary skills and promoting participation in decision-making fora to sustain the initiative.

The University of Malta has just finished coordinating the three-year project *Community Centres promoting Sustainable Lifestyles* - a project that aimed to initiate, in partner countries, Community Centres that bring together the synergistic efforts and resources of formal educational institutions, NGOs, local councils and adults to promote sustainable living particularly in marginalized and disadvantaged communities. This was achieved by exploring specific community needs and by helping community members to design programmes that respond to these requirements. The project initially established a common research language and defined criteria for action by gathering research literature, examples of good practice and field data. During the experimental stage, when pilot Community Centres were to be set up, a concurrent formative project evaluation exercise was launched. The project documented the experiences gathered, related them within a European context and widely disseminated guidelines and training manuals for the setting up of similar Communities Centres in other countries. The relevance of the lessons learned from the *Community Centres* project for rural areas in Bethlehem will be explored.

12 Principles towards Creating Community Centres for Sustainable Lifestyles

1. “Whole” Human Beings

We all want to be regarded as “whole” human beings - with minds, souls and feelings – and not just as people whose “well-being” and “quality of life” is measured in terms of impersonal quantitative measures such as Gross National Product per Capita. To ensure that the endeavours towards Local Agenda 21 processes would be implemented as a holistic process^{2[1]}, the size of the communities needs to be kept on

^{2[1]} A “holistic process” is a lifelong process of the development of the whole person. It helps people grow in all aspects: in knowledge and skills, in health, in feeling and judgement, and in sense of responsibility. It stimulates and channels positively their creativity.

a “human scale dimension”^{3[2]}. This “human scale dimension” permits the development of the whole person, and is dependent on the quality of relationships within the communities. These relationships are founded on mutual respect and on care for the needs of others and the environment, where each person is valued equally, and encouraged to make a full contribution to the community to which he or she belongs. One possible reason why Local Agenda 21 has only had modest success is that not enough attention was focused on the development of the human dimension.

2. Active Participation

Agenda 21 emphasises that many of the world’s environmental problems can only be solved through active participation at the local level. A community must develop its own clear vision of sustainability in order to set goals that define that vision. Only the active “coming together” of citizens can create a vision of what a safe, liveable, healthy community might look like. Only the participatory efforts of the community members can subsequently design programmes and develop steps toward making these visions come true. The project animator’s task is to assist in this “community visioning process” since citizens are often unclear about a future course. However the full and unconditional involvement of community members is essential for the development of educated decision-making. Participation in environmental issues is also political since it recognizes the rights of local communities over their resources. Participatory mechanisms ought to be put in place at the very beginning of the setting up of the community centres, and ought to remain a central feature during all phases of the project.

3. Active Learning

Learning itself is an active process where learners become aware of their own development and identify for themselves how to extend the range of their understanding towards more sustainable lifestyles. They are able to control what, how and at what pace they learn. The project animators assist in this process rather than “control” or “deliver packaged knowledge and ideas”. In this sense responsibility for learning is shared – and hopefully brings a sense of achievement and is rendered enjoyable. Each community has its own story - and the preparation of a community resource inventory during the initial stages is both an acknowledgement of the local character as well as a celebration of the learner’s resources. In this sense the suggested pedagogy *is learner centred and aims at achieving learning autonomy*. Building a relationship of trust between the learners and the project’s animator(s) is crucial and negotiation is a tool worth learning and investing time in. The active participation and learning of the participants in the Agenda 21 process and the *intrinsic motivation of the participants* – though no guarantee in itself - provides the right conditions for member ownership of the project and for the initiative to continue beyond the life of the funding of the project.

^{3[2]} A “human scale dimension” refers to the size of the community group. Learners are more likely to flourish in small settings where they are known and valued as individuals.

4. From the Margins to the Centre

Everyone has the right to live out more sustainable lifestyles - justice and equity are fundamental in a civilized society. The conscious choice of setting up Agenda 21 processes with a clear focus on “disadvantaged” communities asserts this right to all, without exception and not pre-determined by experience or the lack of it. Addressing the needs of social groups that are either marginalized or disadvantaged *is not a secondary focus of an Agenda 21 process but a major target*. Marginalisation is often used as an excuse to picture the participants in educational programmes as at the receiving end. I suggest to refute this idea - rather the very nature of education is the creation of communities of greater solidarity and responsibility and the enhancement of more democratic relationships between people.

5. “Sharing” as a Methodology

One desired characteristic of an Agenda 21 process is the continuous transfer of knowledge and exchange of experiences among the communities. In this sense the success of this sharing methodology depends solely on the disposition of partners to exchange information and to find a suitable way of distributing it. In particular info point (electronic, real or both) can provide central access to comprehensive and up-to-date information relevant to the community centres working towards sustainability. I suggest to refute practices of duplication of work and the wastage of human and financial resources and rather encourage all participants to share ideas, techniques, experiences and advice with other participants through an adequate info point.

6. Political and Financial Support

The active support of politicians, civic leaders and businesses is often desirable. The positive involvement of people perceived to be in a position of “power” to carry things forward, or to help finance proposals, is often a factor that reassures and motivates members of community centres working for an improvement in their local environment. Innovative and constructive partnerships between different sectors of society often provide significant progress toward achieving sustainability. Community centres should actively ask for a variety of support activities that can develop and maintain the community's human resources.

7. Celebrating Diversity

Sustainability is both a state of mind and way of life. The current international situation based on conflict rather than mediation is in itself a reminder of the dominant unsustainable practices that serve as an unwanted backdrop to all our endeavours. Creating sustainable lifestyles starts by actually living out lifestyles that are an antithesis to the current dominant paradigm. In this sense individuals participating in local agenda 21 processes are encouraged to find common ground and peaceful solutions to problems – thus acting as seeds of hope for a more liveable future. A focus of the agenda 21 processes could be to generate change from within the individual through the promotion of sustainable personal lifestyles rather than through coercive extrinsic methods and for developing a regional alliance for the

environment by celebrating diversity rather than to homogenise it into a single "fit-all model".

8. Bottom-up

It is well established that creating and handing down plans decided upon by one group and imposing them on other groups rarely works. The project's "core" dimension is the bottom-up approach that will be adopted to promote sustainable development. An Agenda 21 process requires partners not to propose *a set of fit-all guidelines/rules determined by 'the experts'* but to bank upon *the experiences of people directly involved and affected by particular environmental issues and to explore ways of resolving them*. This "bottom up" dimension takes on a special significance when working with marginalized communities since it puts often ignored community members ... without official status or positions ... at the centre.

9. Acknowledging the Successes of Others

This project is in no way pretending to reinvent the wheel. Successful Local Agenda 21 initiatives can be taken as examples of good practice from which lessons can be learnt. Principles established during milestone conferences, such as the 1972 Tbilisi Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education ought to be acknowledged. Rather the project ought to attempt to apply "promising" good practices and established "principles of good practice" to new contexts – and in the process render them more relevant.

10. Environmental issues

For the purposes of Agenda 21 processes, environmental issues are not treated in a narrow scientific manner but rather in a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary manner, thus providing a more holistic understanding of the issue's various dimensions. Also people who define the environment broadly – to include a focus on the conditions of people's lives - are usually more willing to take on environmental problems than those who define the environment narrowly.

11. Process over Product

I suggest the project's emphasis to be on the **process** rather than on the **product** of the endeavour. Agreed core guiding principles render a work plan as a guideline of the project's itinerary rather than a rigid well-defined path to thread. In fact the *demarkations between each project phase are expected to shift according to the needs of the communities in which the project is implemented*.

12. Networking

Participants in Agenda 21 processes and coordinators are encouraged to identify and network with other community agencies – not only to ensure a wider scope for the project – but also because the success of the community centers themselves is dependent on the wider participation or involvement of relevant stakeholders. Local leaders, local authorities, technical experts, researchers, non-governmental

organizations (NGOs) and voluntary associations might be called in at times deemed appropriate to bring in skills and expertise in response to locally perceived challenges. It is essential to maintain stakeholder involvement over time – and this involvement could also contribute in providing the necessary supporting infrastructures to maintain the Community Centres functioning after the project is finished.

Problems Encountered in Setting Up Community Centres Promoting Sustainable Lifestyles

Setting up a Community Centre might sound simple. Facts – based on the experiences of twelve partners that form part of the *Community Centres for Sustainable Living* Grundtvig supported project - show otherwise. Although we know that Civil Society Organisations have a right and an obligation to enter into public discussions and dialogue, in particular in relation to environmental issues, a disturbing trend that has emerged globally is the practice of official bodies presenting only such information to a policy debate as supports their preferred outcomes. Thus even the starting point for setting up a Community Centre is often a hard upward struggle.

The problems encountered by the partners in the *Community Centres for Sustainable Living* project are summarised below.

Problems encountered in setting up Community Centres

1. Difficulties are often encountered in making the initial contacts. Who wants to participate? Who sees the importance of such a process? Who can be convinced to give a helping hand? Who are the stakeholders? Are there any conflicts of interest? Each situation is unique and enough time needs to be given to understand the situation. That is why the *Community Centres for Sustainable Living Project* started with a needs survey.
2. Limited financial resources illustrate the gap between what a community wants to do and what it is possible for the community to do. Limited financial resources also pose the question of what will happen to an initiative once the initial finances dry up. Some persons involved in the setting up of the Community Centres also consider financial reward as an incentive to participation.
3. Some communities experience a sense of isolation, either due to a geographical remoteness or due to a history of being ignored or due to both. This in some case is coupled with a perceived unwillingness of some persons to make themselves less isolated. In some Community Centres this has been interpreted also as a fear of change. In other cases youths were not interested in what was happening, and had other priorities. Even when youth are interested it is sometimes difficult to convince them to attend meetings regularly. Certain rural areas, due to their isolation may lack a number of relevant professionals in the region.
4. There are difficulties related to building trust among the various stakeholders. Suspicious communities wondering what might be the economical income of who is organising. It is not easy to build trust among isolated people. It is difficult to become a part of their everyday life. A central question is: “How shall we motivate people?” Certain Community Centres identified teachers as important stakeholders – which

however proved difficult to involve and engage, either through a lack of interest or due to the already immense pressure faced by the profession.

5. If not enough importance and thought is given to the process, Community Centres are bound to fail. Speaking with great words can actually create problems – it seems much easier for communities to participate if the general discourse focuses on concrete problems. Thus a central problem is how to organise people and to get them together. Related to this issue some centres had difficulties in involving a significant number of people in the process, while others experienced the opposite and a larger than predicted number of people was keen to participate.
6. Communication problems in the team will create wider problems and have a bearing on setting up the Community Centres. Problems also arise when there is concurrence among different stakeholders who want to be part of the team.
7. The role of Local Authorities seems to have a bearing on the initial phase of setting up Community Centres. Being important partners in such a process as identified by the project, what happens if they are not interested to make change, completely refuse to participate, or do not agree among themselves on who was going to participate? In some circumstances the composition of the local authorities changed during the various stages of the project, leading to a waste of time and effort and practical difficulties such as needing to explain the whole process from the start.
8. In certain Community Centres there were difficulties in engaging more senior staff among the stakeholders to support the process. Practical difficulties actually include finding the best way to involve senior policy makers within organisations.
9. A Community Centre also needs a physical place where to meet. In some cases this has proved to be a practical difficulty. This also has a bearing on how often can the persons that form part of a community centre meet. The time factor was also an issue since some of the keen participants were involved in various other activities.
10. A practical difficulty related to methodology is the limits itself of a bottom-up approach. What about issues related to the environment that the primary stakeholders themselves do not identify? What is a fair way of introducing something that is not mentioned by the primary stakeholders, in particular when access to information is limited?
11. The mentality in certain areas is not very conducive to the type of project envisaged in the *Community Centres for Sustainable Living* project. For example in certain areas corruption and a lack of transparency are the norm. In other areas the question: “Why oblige me to be educated?” was posed, underlining a different understanding of education.

12. Citizens might not see the immediate results and/or benefits of such a process. Some citizens requested action “here and now”. This in itself creates a problem in setting up such Community Centres, where process is the key.
13. Different people give different meanings to common terms such as education and the environment. Agreeing on a common understanding of terms was in some situations an initial hurdle.

A common trend that came out from all the experiences was that setting up a new process within an already formed community is much easier and quicker than actually setting up a community in the first place. This needs to be considered by all who want to embark on the difficult process of setting up community centres, in particular if there is a perceived lack of finances and human resources.