

LOCAL SUSTAINABILITY 2012

TAKING STOCK AND MOVING FORWARD

GLOBAL REVIEW SUMMARY



In June 2012 global leaders meet in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, known as Rio+20. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon announced it as “one of the most important meetings in UN history”, crucial for determining our collective future. With urban areas home to 50% of the world’s population and accounting for 75% of carbon emissions, it is increasingly clear that it is in cities that this collective future will be shaped.

The name “Rio+20” refers to the 20th anniversary of the UN Conference on Environment and Development, better known as the Earth Summit. The Conference ended, among others, with the adoption of Agenda 21, the voluntary UN programme of action for implementing sustainable development. This document contained a chapter initiated by ICLEI entitled “Local Authorities’ initiatives in support of Agenda 21” (Chapter 28), which gave birth to the global Local Agenda 21 movement.

Returning to Rio in 2012, the global community should take note of the unprecedented success of this movement, one of the most extensive follow-up programmes to Agenda 21, and discuss how to further support and scale up local action for sustainability.

TAKING STOCK...

Preparing for Rio+20, ICLEI has reviewed local sustainability processes worldwide and developed a typology of such processes, looking at the level of governance and the kind of organisation or system they originate in. Illustrated with many examples from all over the world, Local Sustainability 2012 global review identifies five types of local sustainability processes, based on their key initial drivers.

TYPE 1: LOCAL GOVERNMENT STRATEGY

Many local sustainability processes are initiated by local government leaders or employees who see the potential benefits such processes can bring to their own city or town. Facing structural economic changes, being affected by crisis or losing competitiveness on the global market, cities are no strangers to the idea of global interdependence. A radical redefinition of local policies and targets is seen as a solution in the face of the crisis, be it natural, economic or political. By re-orienting their development alongside sustainability criteria, the pioneers often set new, more sustainable standards for all local governments in their country.

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TYPE 2: CIVIL SOCIETY INITIATIVE

The civil society actors, such as community groups, non-governmental and religious organizations or science and research institutions, were among the first to pursue sustainable development activities, also at the local level. The education sector, both formal and informal, played a key role in supporting those activities. Compared to processes initiated by the public sector or international organizations, they are usually characterized by a higher degree of creativity and willingness to explore new solutions. The key question when discussing civil society initiatives for local sustainability is to which extent they are linked to official policy processes and the activities run by the local government.

TYPE 3: CONCERTED ACTION

Local government associations and networks, both on national and international level, have long been avid advocates of local sustainability processes. As membership organizations, they fly the flag for local governments' interests, understand their concerns and enjoy their trust. They support local governments by offering information services, trainings and guidance, as well as by organizing networking and exchange of experiences through regular events. The result of their activities is "concerted action" or, in other words, a voluntary movement of hundreds or thousands of local processes, which support and inspire each other. By participating in this voluntary movement, cities gain an opportunity to learn from others but also to showcase their successes, promoting themselves as frontrunners in the field of sustainable development and stimulating healthy competition among local governments.

TYPE 4: NATIONAL POLICY

In its essence Local Agenda 21 has been a call for action, spurring voluntary engagement beyond the legal duties of local governments. However, with further development of national sustainability policies and growing recognition of the importance of local action comes also a certain level of institutionalization of local sustainability on the national level. National governments have a whole variety of instruments to initiate and support local sustainability processes and strategies, as well as to create favourable conditions for local action. These range from a clear legal obligation for local governments through provisions such as the adoption of sustainability criteria in sectoral legislations or funding programmes, to the establishment of national campaigns for local sustainability.

TYPE 5: INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

For many local governments and communities, local sustainability processes came with the participation in international development cooperation activities. Local sustainability processes initiated by international cooperation programmes tend to follow a pre-defined common methodology with agreed process criteria, and failure in fulfilling them may endanger the further flow of financial support. This often results in well-prepared and well-managed local processes that deliver remarkable results in a comparatively short time. On the other hand, as soon as (project) funding ends, these processes have to prove that they themselves have been established in a “sustainable” way - which of the structures and procedures introduced can be maintained beyond the lifetime of the donor intervention?



AND MOVING FORWARD...

In the last two decades local governments have shown that they are able to drive the implementation of sustainable development and to initiate respective local processes - sometimes more effectively than national governments or international organizations. Sustainable development has been successfully localized and is no longer a distant, theoretical concept but one filled with meaning and evoked in everyday activities.

1. Local consciousness about global and future impacts of today's action has never been as high.

20 years after the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro local sustainability processes are not following any common methodology, but a common logic: The local contribution to global sustainability is a conscious and intended side-effect of actually pursued improvements of local living conditions. Local sustainability first and foremost means a healthy, diverse and resilient local economy; jobs; an attractive natural and built environment; good quality housing; access to healthy food, air and water; functioning social and political systems and public services; and increasingly also the (financial) independence from increasingly expensive fossil resources. The uniqueness of this global movement of local sustainability processes, unprecedented in history, is that all of this takes place under the paradigm and the acceptance of both the limits of global ecosystems and the global and future effects of local activities.

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2. A good local sustainability process combines various driving forces.

Local sustainability processes are characterized by their initial driving forces. The types described in the Local Sustainability 2012 global review show that these forces originate in different systems: Local government, civil society, networks, national governments and international partners each give local processes their unique energy and quality. It is important to understand that each of these qualities taken alone are invaluable, however not sufficient for a powerful sustainability process. Taken together they constitute a simple yet helpful set of mutually supportive forces: an ideal local sustainability process will thus be laid down in a local strategy; rooted in a civil society initiative; linked with others as part of a concerted action; embedded in a national policy; and enriched by international partnership at the same time.

3. The multi-local movement has prepared the ground for advancing national and international sustainability policies.

The fact that tens of thousands of local governments all across the globe dedicate local activities to the common value 'sustainability' and thereby influence national and international policies and standards represents a remarkable political innovation. Still, the outcomes of this political innovation cannot primarily be measured by any drastic changes in the physical conditions or energy and resource flows it has brought about, as many may have expected originally. Instead they can be found in many social innovations, which are crucial for the physical changes doubtlessly necessary in the near future to be anchored in and owned by the civil society. This potential of local sustainability processes must be recognized and further developed.

4. Local sustainability processes are hubs of social innovation.

The development of the local sustainability movement coincided with the massive expansion in the use of the Internet, personal computers and mobile phones world-wide. This opened completely new possibilities for civil society to organize itself, get and share information, and participate in political processes. It is however more important to see and better exploit the potential for social innovations coming with new communication technologies: new forms of self-organization such as carrot mobs, crowd sourcing, crowd funding, participatory GIS, guerilla gardening, pledges, etc. empower people to act instead of just participating in talks. In contrast, classic consultation methods usually employed in local sustainability processes rather aim at developing common ideas and positions. By combining classic methods of consultation and participatory policy development with new forms of spontaneous and collective action, local sustainability processes can strengthen their role as test beds of sustainable innovation.

5. Local sustainability was one of the first open source development processes - and this is one of its biggest strengths.

The local sustainability movement was not steered by any one particular organization that could have structured, standardized, documented or evaluated the local processes implemented world- wide. Still, at the same time a number of international organizations and networks have emerged, which bring together local governments and represent them in the international policy arena. Numerous international instruments for local governments to find orientation, recognition and ways to evaluate progress have been developed by many different parties and with varying intentions. In addition, more and more individual local governments started to engage and present themselves on an international level - mayors have indeed become global actors to an extent not known before. While the implementation of sustainable development became largely localized, local governments have at the same time globalized themselves.

6. Local governments have to deal with the effects of a deregulated globalized economy.

The development of the multi-local sustainability movement coincided with the globalization of the economy, granting large international corporations practically unlimited access to natural and human resources globally. The political response to this phenomenon, however, is environmental and social standards defined by national governments, and in competition with each other which effectively regulates these standards downwards. The negative effects of this vicious circle is visible on the local level world-wide: wherever people have no access to clean water, where products for the affluent parts of the world are produced under degrading conditions, where intact medium-sized companies are taken over and liquidated, where forests are chopped down and arable land is contaminated, where prices for corn, electricity, fuel or steel multiply, and so on.

For the people affected, as well as for international organizations that try to help them, the primary contact is with local governments: Local sustainability processes thus operate in a vacuum between globalized economic activity and an insufficient protection of natural and human resources through national and international policy-making. A way out could be internationally agreed environmental and social standards enforced through national legislation, which provide a reliable framework for both the global economy and local sustainability processes.

7. Greening the economy is a chance to address the crisis.

The focus on economy emerging during the preparatory process towards Rio+20 bears an invaluable potential for correcting the up to now unsustainable development on Earth at the source: by changing the conditions for human economic activities. For many internationally operating companies and some national governments 'Green Economy' may merely be understood as 'Green Growth' and booming technological innovations supported with public money: operating systems for urban infrastructure, large scale power plants based on renewable energy sources, genetically modified super-seeds or electric cars are only a few examples. This focus on technological solutions however is too narrow and leads to new risks: social innovations such as new forms of organization, new business models, basic income models, common welfare work, crowd thinking and others could make the Green Economy a true contribution to sustainable development.

Furthermore, the Green Economy will only have positive effects for the people if it is designed as a 'Green Urban Economy' - with components such as decentralized regional energy, waste and water management, and concrete improvements of local living conditions.

8. 'The future we want' requires a new definition of growth.

Many local governments around the globe have been experimenting with various indicators to measure their success or failure in moving towards sustainable development. As a result, many comprehensive sets of sustainability indicators are available but are difficult to communicate to the public. Others are experimenting with single aggregated indexes such as the Human Development Index, the Ecological Footprint or the Gross National Happiness index. At the same time, the single most popular indicator for measuring development world-wide still remains the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which however has turned out not to be suitable for measuring human well-being. With unsustainable and undesirable incidents like disasters, diseases and pollution potentially contributing to a growth in GDP, it becomes obvious that this indicator is strongly misleading our perception of the world as it does not measure the true progress of human development. It has to be replaced by a development index which is based on social wellbeing and environmental quality.

9. Sustainable development needs a multilevel governance system with a multi-sectoral approach.

Local governments are willing and able to achieve a great deal in moving towards sustainable development. However, where national taxation and subsidies incentivize, and legislation fails to sanction unsustainable behaviour, the best local sustainability process reaches the limits of its effectiveness. Therefore it is not enough for local governments to demand better recognition and support for their sustainability processes on the local level from national governments at the Rio+20 conference. Clearly it is the time to promote legal and fiscal framework conditions in all countries that (re-)direct investment and thinking towards sustainable solutions.

On the international level, world leaders are facing the task to improve the institutional framework for sustainable development, in order to formally involve all levels of government as well as further, non-governmental actors, each with their individual strengths: To create a multilevel governance system with a multi-sectoral approach. The future institutional framework for sustainable development of the UN should include local governments as governmental stakeholders and at the same time initiate national and international legislation that supports their efforts.

10. It's time to move from national interests to global environmental justice.

It may be helpful for the international community to move away from the practice of negotiating individual national reduction targets as a percentage of current emission levels. Instead, acceptance should be sought for globally applicable average per-capita limits for the extraction of natural resources and for the emissions resulting from their use. These limits could be calculated from the carrying capacity of global ecosystems and be universal for all countries. Provided that compensation for the very unbalanced use of resources in the past can be included, they could provide the basis for reduction targets and development corridors for any country, both in the North and the South, and could furthermore be broken down into targets for sub-national and local governments. Finally, this approach would facilitate the establishment of access and emission trading schemes between territories.

ICLEI'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE UN RIO+20 CONFERENCE



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Full versions of both Local Sustainability 2012 reports can be downloaded at:
www.iclei.org/local2012

ICLEI GLOBAL REPORT

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