Local Agenda 21 (LA21) processes have 2 central goals. i) On the basis of some of the empirical evidence in this study, the primary goal is to improve democratic (environmental) policy-making processes in such a manner that a larger share of the population will be able to participate in planning and decision making and will also be able to understand the consequences of these decisions. ii) The LA21 processes seek to improve (at least indirectly) the broadly defined environmental situation locally in a manner that takes into account both the local and the global contexts. The first part of this article discusses the concept and methods of LA21 and sheds light on the different action areas that are central to the Baltic LA21 processes. In addition, the study will describe and display the LA21 situation within one network of cities, the Union of the Baltic Cities (UBC). Networking, including transfer of information, models and ideas, has been among the main tools for the diffusion of LA21 ideas especially into newly democratized societies. Finally, the article will conclude with an overall assessment of the LA21 situation on the Baltic rim.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AS A POLICY GOAL

When environmental issues were placed on governmental political agendas during the 1960s and 1970s, the main solutions were seen as national, and traditional point-source pollution abatement was the central tool to handle these. In the Western industrialized countries this notion meant that entire pollution abatement sectors and institutional structures at regional and national governmental levels were built almost from scratch in a shorter period of time (1). The cross-border character of the environmental problems, especially the pollution problems, also created international institutions. For example, treaty mechanisms and an increasing number of control institutions were created mainly within the framework of the United Nations (2).

The general awareness of the limitations of these methods became evident during the 1980s. At the same time the intertwining of individual behavior, local actions and global environmental problems also became evident, and new approaches to tackle the problems were discussed within the international environmental policy community. During the 1970s, scholars saw this problem as a confrontation between the economy and ecology (for example in the influential Club of Rome report, The Limits to Growth, by Meadows et al. (3) This view was subsequently changed during the 1980s towards a win-win solution when the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1987 published its highly influential report Our Common Future (4). Ever since, the new policy discourse has been sustainable development, at least in the Western democratic societies. In Our Common Future, sustainable development is defined as development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. The concept of sustainable development has been used to promote new development in modern societies. As Richardson (5) says: “Sustainable development is a political fudge: a convenient form of words, [...] which is sufficiently vague to allow conflicting parties, factions and interests to adhere to it without losing credibility. It is an expression of political correctness which seeks to bridge the unbridgeable divide between the anthropocentric and biocentric approaches to politics.”

However, this political fudge is a clear step forward from the worldwide environmental confrontation in the 1970s. As an integrative approach instead of a conflict-raising tool, sustainable development gives modern societies enough freedom to move and improve their performance in small steps. Several researchers have praised this aspect as the most significant element in environmental governance since the 1960s (6). However, the concept has also been roundly criticized due to its vagueness concerning the level of commitment and the freedom of choice it allows vis-à-vis the tools and pace of change. This criticism, as also the critical view regarding the win-win combination of economic growth and sustainability, can be traced back to the deep ecology movement and neo-Marxism, among other ideologies (7).

Agenda 21 should be seen as a set of tools or guidelines that societies can use to approach sustainable development. These guidelines were created during the follow-up conference WCED, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) that was held in Rio de Janeiro 1992. The conference embraced the importance of the concept of sustainable development and required all nations to work toward it by following the Agenda 21 Action Programme. The programme was adopted by more than 200 nations at or after the UNCED conference. The local level was introduced as a key element in Chapter 28 in the Action Programme (8). The main responsibility for the implementation of Agenda 21 has been given to the local and regional levels in our societies, through the so-called Local Agenda 21 (LA21) activities or processes.

LOCAL AGENDA 21 AS A POLICY TOOL

LA21 is a rather recent phenomenon, and its core features are still evolving on account of variations in local-level implementation. Local governments often see it as a single, to a large extent independent project, even though the Agenda 21 document sees it as a process that still includes some common elements, for example drafting and re-drafting of a local sustainable development plan.

The local level goals for Agenda 21 are in many aspects different from the national and international overreaching Agenda 21 goals. Sustainability in local level Agenda 21 terms means the introduction, support and motivation of a broader and a more sustainable approach to ordinary everyday and political decision-making processes in our societies. This means that LA21 activities can be seen as a policy tool for improving the existing sustainability work, not as a new area of environmental activities. This is evident in societies that already have existing environmental protection institutions that are more than able to handle traditional abatement problems, for example Scandinavian societies. The goals for LA21 in countries with less-developed traditions of environmental administration may be more directly oriented towards traditional environmental protection.

The common intentions of this improved environmental administration are: i) broader participation (increased democrati-
zation); ii) a more holistic preparation and decision-making process (greater involvement in economic and social matters); iii) improved information, teaching and education of ordinary citizens; and finally iv) awareness of both local and global problems and aspects.

The Agenda 21 document does not give any clear rules for LA21 activities. It is a very general document without any legal force. As a result there have been wide differences in the interpretation and the local possibilities for adapting the Agenda 21 document as a tool or framework in local conditions. Empirical studies show that the political choices by local governments are different regarding both the organizational and policy aspects of local Agenda 21 processes. This study bears this out.

LA21 WITHIN THE UNION OF THE BALTIC CITIES NETWORK

Data: The Survey

The Union of the Baltic Cities is an organization for cooperation between local government units in 10 states along the Baltic Rim: Russia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Germany, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland. The UBC has been growing throughout the 1990s. In late 2000, it had a total of 99 active member cities in all 10 countries surrounding the Baltic Sea. The UBC member cities are rather diverse in terms of size, position and role. Most of the members are larger cities. The smallest UBC members have less than 5000 inhabitants, whereas the largest one, St. Petersburg, has more than 5 million inhabitants. Many of the UBC members are administrative capitals and the largest cities in their respective countries (for example Copenhagen, Stockholm, Tallinn, and Helsinki). Others are large provincial cities with a great influence on their neighborhoods. Membership in the UBC is voluntary and up to the single cities and their own initiative for participation.

Most of the empirical data used in this article were obtained through a questionnaire – The Union of the Baltic Cities Local Agenda 21 Survey – that was sent to all contact persons in the UBC Commission on the Environment. All 81 member cities (as of spring 1998) were included in the survey in the summer and autumn of 1998. The recipients were asked to forward the survey to a person responsible for LA21 activities in their city – or answer it themselves if they were sufficiently involved in the matter. Most of the items in the survey dealt with the scope and timing of the LA21 processes, as well as with the support systems for these activities. If necessary, two to three reminders were sent to the recipients by mail or delivered during the Sustainable Cities Conference in Turku, September 1998. Some additional responses were also received by phone. The response rate was 73%, which means that 59 UBC member cities of a total of 81 returned the survey (Table 1). The empirical aspects of this study are based to a large extent on 2 project reports prepared by the authors (9–11).

The geographical distribution of the responses was satisfactory. The response rates following a geographical division of the cities did not reveal major problems. Two thirds of the eastern Baltic UBC member cities—in Russia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland—answered the inquiry. Of the western Baltic members—in Denmark, Germany, Finland, Sweden, and Norway—more than three quarters did so. The answers represent the personal opinions of persons working closely with LA21 activities within the UBC member cities. We therefore assume that the reliability of the answers is sufficiently high.

The LA21 Activity Level

Local Agenda 21 activities are rather common among the UBC members that answered our 1998 questionnaire. It seems, however, that there are clear differences in the level of activity among all countries involved.

For example, all UBC members in the Nordic countries had started an LA21 activity in 1998. In the western group only one member city said that it had no such activity (Table 2). More than 85% of the western members had an LA21 action plan. Of the eastern member cities only about one third had started an LA21 activity, but as many as two thirds said that they had an LA21 action plan or some other type of sustainability plan. Another third of the eastern cities planned to start LA21 activities in the near future (10).

Content of the LA21 Processes

LA21 can be seen as an umbrella for widely differing processes aiming at different goals.

In our study, we analyzed the different activities conducted in various environmental sectors within the UBC member cities.

Overall, it seems as if LA21 processes are more concentrated on matters closer to the people, cognitively oriented approaches, than traditional, technically oriented environmental administration. Educating citizens to environmental awareness seems to have the highest priority in these cities. This is closely followed by nature conservation activities and waste-management projects. Activity areas in which LA21 projects have had less influence are traditional pollution-abatement activities and activities undertaken in cooperation with the industrial sector and the trade and commerce sector (Table 3).

If these activity areas are compared with the respondents views on the level and urgency of the local environmental problems within the same areas, no real connection can be found. The only truly significant correlation in our data material was found between waste as a problem and the activity level within the commerce sector. As the sample size is too small, we will not explore this topic in any great detail.

The Agents in the LA21 Processes

In this part of the article, we analyze the agents that according to our survey constitute the basic driving forces behind the LA21 processes. Above all, we wanted to find out who was involved in the first phase of LA21 implementation and what existing
processes were seen as models for the local activities.

The basic institutional features of the LA21 processes vary from one local government to another, as does the involvement of different agents. According to a worldwide LA21 survey by the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) in 1997, 68% of the projects were utilizing intersectoral working groups, and 59% included civic activities of some sort. In as many as 64% of the responding municipalities, various civic inquiries were made in order to get an overview of the local problems. The involved parties and stakeholders are generally similar, as the planning process often involves the business sector (83%), community organizations (82%) and nongovernmental organizations (79%). In addition, schools and universities are well represented. Our findings were similar (12).

As our goal was to determine the impact of different internal and external agents, we chose to concentrate on the initiation phase of the LA21 process (Fig. 1). One key feature of LA21 work is its character as a relatively voluntary activity for local government. All these cities are members of the UBC network and can use the network infrastructure, persons, and experiences in order to gain new or necessary information. We can here make a distinction between internal and external actors who should be involved in LA21 activities.

The level of involvement of local insiders (that is city officials, politicians, and the like) and the local civic society (organizations, businesses, schools, and the like) in LA21 processes seems to be high in both eastern and western Baltic area. National agencies and organizations are clearly less interested in participating in local activities. In western Baltic countries, where there is a long tradition of local government autonomy, the cities are expected to plan and carry out LA21 activities rather independently. Influence from other cities—neighboring cities or other partner cities—is almost as low as foreign influence in the western UBC member cities. Partner cities and other foreign influences seem to play a far more significant role for the eastern members. This, together with the fact that national and regional environmental administration is still a rather new phenomenon in many of the countries within the Baltic sphere, has left the field open to several nongovernmental and intergovernmental organizations. This input from the type of organizations UBC represents, as a part of the external input for LA21 processes in the eastern Baltic members, is clearly visible in our data.

The Diffusion of LA21 Models

By definition we can identify 2 major types of LA21 models. Some LA21 cities have developed their own solutions, and others have imported models. We can also find different models depending on the societal levels: local models, regional models, national models and international models. Most cities within the UBC network did in fact mention that the models they have used are either their own (5 cities, 11.9% of all valid answers) or that no predefined model exists at all (17 cities, 40.5%). Several cities reported that they have adapted external models for their own purposes (20 cities, 47.6%).

Of the models used, most are from the Baltic Sea region, and they are mainly Nordic models. The reason that we mainly find models from the Nordic countries is that in the most cases these countries are in the forefront of LA21. There are, however, other models to be found, including active twin-city cooperation with countries outside Europe, participation in regional activities (as for example the UBC network or the Baltic LA21 Forum), and finally participation in nongovernmental organizations (NGO) training activities and campaigns, such as those provided by the ICLEI and the European Sustainable Cities Campaign, for example.

We have only a limited picture of the existing models. Many models have probably been presented for cities by other networks than the UBC. The situation today is probably changing, as the LA21 processes in the Baltic States and Poland are in progress and can benefit from their own experiences. Therefore, in explicating the data in Figure...
in the western Baltic group and 10 in the eastern Baltic group. One third or 27 of the cities (21 West Baltic, 6 East Baltic) also received some form of economic support as well. Twenty of the cities received support from 1 or 2 organizations and 15 from 3 to 4 organizations. Only 8 cities received support from 5 or more organizations. The eastern member cities received support from more organizations (on average 3.7 organizations) than their counterparts in the west (3.2), but they received more know-how than economic support (Table 4).

DISCUSSION: LA21 IN THE BALTIC SEA AREA

ICLEI found that 64 states around the world were involved in LA21 activities as defined by the ICLEI criteria at the end of 1996. This was the original deadline to complete local action programs. More than 1800 municipalities were involved in LA21 activities at that time. In more than half of these municipalities the activities were already under way, while in less than half of the surveyed municipalities the activities seemed to be at a preliminary or an early planning stage (12). Based on information gathered on a European level, the scope of LA21 has expanded farther since then.

A general trend for LA21 is that it is being implemented in the rich, industrialized and developed parts of the world. An overwhelming proportion of the LA21 projects can be found in western European countries, but the number of participants outside this area is also growing due to networking activities. Although the Baltic Sea area has been one of the most active areas for starting new LA21 processes, it does not present a uniform picture. Whereas during the Cold War the dividing lines were mainly political, today the differences are more economic. The divide between East and West is also visible in sustainability policies.

The Nordic countries have traditionally been considered as forerunners in environmental policies (13). This observation is also valid concerning LA21 activities. Although to some extent the Nordic countries can even be called innovators regarding LA21, variations can also be found between and within these countries. Eckerberg and Lafferty (14) pointed Sweden out as
being clearly one of the pioneering LA21 countries. At the same time they assumed that especially Norway and Finland could be expected to follow the example of Sweden. In Sweden, economic investments from national agencies and supporting know-how have led to the initiation of LA21 activities in all 288 Swedish municipalities to some extent. In most municipalities, specific staff have been appointed or employed for LA21 coordination (15) (Fig. 3).

The level of LA21 activity in Norway and Denmark has been somewhat lower than in Sweden. Local-level voluntary involvement in Norway and Denmark has also been lower than in Finland as well. The relatively late start for LA21 activities in the Nordic countries except for Sweden can be traced to the rather recent reforms within local environmental administration and to both the locally and regionally based environmental administration in Denmark. In Norway, the local-level reform of environmental administration, the MIK reform that included all 435 municipalities and was carried out in the first half of the 1990s, was considered to constitute a sufficient contribution. As in Sweden and Finland, Norwegian cities have initiated separate LA21 processes that go beyond municipal environmental administrations. In 1997, it was assessed that there were about 60-70 such processes in Norway (17). The level of LA21 activity in Denmark was also rather low during the mid-1990s. This was probably due to the fact that environmental decision making was decentralized at an early stage, including a high level of regional and local autonomy. In 1998, up to 187 out of 275 Danish municipalities indicated that they were active in LA21 work, (i.e. 68% of all municipalities). This is a considerable increase from the figure of around 50% in 1996 (more than 84% of the population of the country live in these municipalities)(18). The late start in Finland can perhaps be explained by the lack of governmental support for LA21. The LA21 processes in Finland can be seen as totally voluntary and are structured by outside forces to a rather low extent. About 60% of Finnish municipalities had started LA21 activities before the summer of 1999 (19). All larger cities are active in LA21 and more than 80% of the population live in these cities.

The picture is not so clear concerning the total LA21 figures for the rest of the Baltic Sea countries. LA21 is a relatively common phenomenon in Germany, at least in some of the regions. The number of municipalities that are involved in LA21 activities is clearly lower in Russia, Poland, and the small Baltic states. Our data show that only 4 UBC member cities in Russia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania had started LA21 work, and an additional 4 members in Poland in 1998 (10).

The LA21 activities in the Baltic Sea region have a clear common goal that can be found in the original Agenda 21 document. The slogan “act locally – think globally” is being transformed into concrete substance which legitimates the LA21 work. As the basic opportunities to act vary greatly from one local setting to another, we must strongly emphasize the fact that we have seen LA21 above all as an administrative policy tool that aims to stimulate a higher degree of environmental consciousness within local communities, and we have not seen it as an action program for directly reducing anthropogenic impacts on the environment. While LA21 is more directly policy-related in some of the Baltic area countries, in others it is seen as a complementary policy tool, e.g. in the Nordic countries. LA21 is a rather new initiative for all municipalities. This has led to a need for internal and/or external involvement and support – information, know-how, experiences and other resources. Sub- and transnational networking through different channels such as the Union of the Baltic Cities, is clearly taking place, perhaps to an exceptionally high degree, within the field of sustainable development. A large number of organizations and networks are involved in LA21 processes. These activities and initiatives – information, advice and support – also overlap between the different organizations. As a result, much of the responsibility is still vested in municipalities and cities. They need to know what they want and how they can activate themselves in order to reach their goals.

With the help of networking, LA21 activities seem to be relatively highly developed in the Baltic Sea region. The opening of the former Soviet republics has resulted in a large demand for new democratic institutions, and the need within the field of sustainable development is evident as well. From the environmental point of view this cooperation is highly important and will probably lead to faster implementation and integration of the former Soviet republics into the Western environmental policy sphere and its standards of regulations. However, this remains to be examined in the future, as sustainability policies always mean time-consuming and never-ending processes.

References and Notes


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