

# MOVING TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE ADOPTION OF THE PRINCIPLES OF LOCAL AGENDA 21 BY LOCAL COUNCILS

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## Abstract

Having endorsed the policy of Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) followed by the ratification of the Earth Summit (1992) charter, Australia has embraced the principles of Local Agenda 21 (LA21). Our local councils are, consequently, required to include Agenda 21 aims into local strategies and planning [1]. This implies that local councils need to build up effective partnerships with the local community to establish strategies promoting an integrated and holistic treatment of the social, economical and environmental aspects of planning, in line with ESD objectives.

The paper reports on the findings of a currently on-going study of three local councils in New South Wales, to determine the factors affecting the adoption of Agenda 21. It reviews strategic policy documents to examine the councils' corporate commitment to sustainability and reports on preliminary findings regarding the attitude of planners in local councils towards ESD principles, Local Agenda 21 and community involvement requirements that LA21 entails.

**Key Words:** local agenda 21, sustainable development, community participation, and local government

## 1. Introduction

The 1992 Rio Earth Summit developed Agenda 21, which outlines the objectives and actions that can be taken at local, national and international level to make the required transitions towards sustainability to take us into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Chapter 28 of Agenda 21 focuses on the role of local government agencies in promoting sustainable development by working with local communities to achieve a local action plan [2]. By ratifying the charter, Australia has also embraced the principles of Local Agenda 21 (LA21) and is therefore required to include its aims into local strategies and planning (cf. Greene, 1994). As a stated objective of LA21, "(b)y 1996, most local authorities in each country should have undertaken a consultative process with their populations and achieved a consensus on 'a local Agenda 21' for the community" [3] The commonwealth government has also adopted an Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) policy in 1992 [4]

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This paper is an attempt to understand how local councils in New South Wales have implemented LA21 and sustainability at local level. The main objective of the paper is to develop an understanding of the factors that influence the way different councils adopt LA21. Such understanding is a prerequisite to removing obstacles that may impede the universal adoption of LA21 by local councils in Australia. The paper thus sets out to identify the characteristics of individual local planning authorities that could shape their approach towards promoting community participation in line with LA21 principles.

The paper begins with a discussion of the main elements of Local Agenda 21, highlighting the benefits of implementing it. It then briefly outlines adoption of Local Agenda 21 in European countries and discusses how its adoption has lagged behind in the Australian context. It then focuses on three local councils in western Sydney, reviews their strategic planning documents and presents the viewpoints of their council planners to identify the key factors influencing the extent of adoption of LA21 in these councils. Lastly, it draws conclusions from the findings and identifies further areas of research based on the case studies.

## **2. The main elements of LA21**

The basic elements of LA21 include the creation of a community *vision* that brings together the aspirations of all stakeholders; the establishment of a *partnership* between local authorities, communities, and businesses; the engagement in a community-based, inclusive process of *issue analysis*; the preparation of *action plans* based on formalized objectives; and processes installed for the *implementation, monitoring, evaluation* and *feedback* [5]. While commenting on its adoption in Europe, Raemaekers similarly notes that LA21 “tries to be bottom-up, inclusive, participative, and open to scrutiny.” [6]

Review of literature suggests that there are many benefits to the council implementing a Local Agenda 21 [7]. First, it provides enhanced opportunity to meet community needs, stay relevant to them and contribute to community cohesion. Second, it provides stronger communication and cooperation between different stakeholders to coordinate joint planning and action for sustainability. Lastly, effective policy integration and long term planning can realise cost savings to both the council and community.

## **3. The adoption of Local Agenda 21**

In face of growing environmentalism, local governments in many parts of the world have sought to improve their environmental performance. The focus has shifted from one-off measures or piecemeal approach to one that incorporates environmental protection and environmentalist values across all functions and activities of local government. Further, local governments have assumed the responsibility of promoting environmental protection among the various actors in their community [8]

While Australia hasn't quite met its commitment to adopt LA21 by 1996, the Federal government, supported by a number of State level initiatives, has adopted a number of policies supporting sustainable development. These are reflected in various legislative changes such as the enforcement of the Local Government Act 1993 in NSW and its

recent amendments, which consequently filter into the policy documents of local councils in NSW. Since 1997, councils in NSW are required to adopt corporate plans and management plans that address their commitment to ecologically sustainable development (ESD) principles. Councils and their staff are expected to implement sustainable development principles in carrying out all of their responsibilities. They are required to prepare an annual SoE report and ensure that its findings feed back into management processes [9].

In the absence of any comprehensive study to gauge the extent and level of adoption of Local Agenda 21 in Australia, there is reason to assume that its adoption by councils is limited. Even in case of the ESD requirements that are legislated, a recent review suggested only partial implementation of ESD principles by relevant Federal government departments and agencies. [10].

The fact that local authorities in Australia seem to lag behind European counterparts in matters relating to planning for sustainable development in general and the adoption of Local Agenda 21 in particular are causes for concern. We need to be mindful of the fact that complacency at the local government level in the implementation of LA21 could result in inequity and a general failure to achieve the goals of sustainable development. This makes it imperative to identify any hurdles that may retard the progress of LA21 implementation. As Davidson [11] suggests, one of the impediments to the adoption of LA21 could be the attitude of the councils towards community consultation. This could play a significant part in determining the achievement or otherwise of a council in pursuit of LA21 objectives.

#### **4. A study of three western Sydney local councils**

The study focused on three adjoining local councils of varying sizes in the western Sydney region, viz. Blacktown, Holroyd and Penrith. Blacktown (pop 254,817, area 247 km<sup>2</sup>) [12] is the largest of the three councils with much pressure for development. Holroyd (pop 80,000, area about 40 km<sup>2</sup>) [13] is a small council and is one of Sydney's established industrial areas. Penrith (pop 178,361, area 407 km<sup>2</sup>) [14] on the other hand lies towards the Sydney's outer fringe. With reference to Sydney's CBD, Holroyd is the closest (25 km) followed by Blacktown (35 km) while Penrith is the farthest (54 km). Blacktown is considered to charge its residents one of the highest rates in NSW and is considered to be a rapid growth area. Penrith, too, is experiencing development pressure but it is generally considered to be relatively lower than that at Blacktown. Among the three councils, Holroyd seems to experience the lowest development pressure.

Table 1 summarises the three council's commitment to ESD based on the content analysis of their strategic planning documents. Table 2 compares the viewpoints of planners working in the councils on selected issues relating to ESD and Local Agenda 21. They were based on loosely structured interviews soliciting open-ended responses to the questions on the relevant issues.

**Table 1: How councils describe themselves: descriptors/ statements adopted by the councils**

Issues	Council		
	Blacktown	Holroyd	Penrith
Descriptors used in presenting itself	An urban growth area; Central locality; “sustained and rapid” growth; “the most populous city” in NSW; “third-largest in Australia”; “eighth-fastest growing City in Australia”; The “largest quantity of zoned and serviced industrial and commercial land throughout NSW”.	It is “one of Sydney’s most established industrial areas”; It offers “competitively priced sites close to major markets and a variety of skilled local workforce”.	“distinguished by its natural setting”; “a place with a distinct character and identity”; “the capital of outer western Sydney”; “fortunate to contain much of the natural environment which remains in the Sydney Basin”; “a City where the harmony of urban and rural qualities give the city a relaxed yet cosmopolitan lifestyle”.
The Council’s corporate statements	<p><b>“The Mission Statement:</b> To provide our community with the best living and working environment through commitment to service.</p> <p><b>The Vision Statement:</b> To be a vibrant, healthy and safe City – ‘A CITY OF EXCELLENCE’.”</p>	<p><b>“Vision:</b> Council has a commitment to an enhanced quality of life in partnership with our community, together with an excellence in leadership and management with unity of purpose.</p> <p><b>Mission:</b> To satisfy the reasonable needs of our community and efficiently and effectively manage the community assets.”</p>	<p><b>“Vision Statement:</b> Council’s vision is one of a prosperous region with a harmony of urban and rural qualities and a strong commitment to environmental protection and enhancement. It would offer both the cosmopolitan and cultural lifestyles of a mature city and the casual character of a rural community.”</p>
Examples of Council’s policies, programs and projects	Community Pride movement, Environmental auditing Cities for climate protection program	Environmental management plan 2002-2006, State of environment report, local Environmental awareness program, Tree preservation order	Sustainable Penrith strategy, Biodiversity strategy, water conservation strategies, Sustainable street, Residential strategy, waste reduction strategy

**Table 2: A comparison of council officers' views on selected issues**

Issues	Council		
	Blacktown	Holroyd	Penrith
Community consultation in environmental protection initiatives	Scepticism based on two main grounds: firstly, the projects are nebulous, and secondly, it is often council-driven	It is essential – but overcoming the initial inertia within the community is a major task.	Community is aware – but can be confused at times. Need to be helped to sort out their priorities.
View towards urban expansion	The community is often interested in urban expansion as they can benefit financially from land rezoned from rural to residential.	The community is very concerned about environmental issues such as air, noise and water pollution.	A small but active minority favours expansion while the silent majority wishes to maintain the rural character and lifestyle.
Stance regarding the balance between development and conservation	The council seems to consider itself 'pro-development'. This is explained by the presence of a very high proportion of new residential releases.	The council seems to consider itself conservative and anti-development.	The council sees itself as favouring development fractionally over conservation. The mix of both urban and rural areas explains this.

## 5. Findings

Based on a content analysis of the three councils' strategic planning documents and semi-structured interviews with their planners, the following five factors appear to influence the extent of adoption of Local Agenda 21 and sustainable development principles by local councils. These factors are:

1. Characteristics of the councils and their location in the larger metropolitan region
2. Strong role of the state government in implementing local agenda 21
3. Governance structures and community participation mechanisms
4. Community support for sustainability
5. Commitment through innovative policies, programs, projects and action plans

These are only preliminary findings, however, which need to be further refined with more detailed case study analysis.

### 5.1 Characteristics of the councils

Councils' characteristics in terms of location and their roles in metropolitan region have an important influence on their nature and extent of involvement in implementing sustainability ideas and programs. Penrith, which is located close to Blue Mountains national park and further way from Sydney, does seem to have a much stronger commitment to protecting the environment and enhancement than councils such as

Blacktown and Holroyd, which have much stronger development pressure due to their proximity to Sydney. Penrith council's vision statement clearly emphasises the objective of harmony between urban and rural qualities of the council. Both Blacktown and Holroyd's vision statement, on the other hand, focus much more on community than the natural environment. Thus the nature of sustainability envisioned in the councils is different depending on the physical and locational characteristics of the councils.

## **5.2 Strong role of state government**

Sustainability agenda in the councils is driven by top down international, national and state government agenda rather than bottom up pressure from the community. Statutory requirements within State planning frameworks such as the requirement for preparing State of the Environment Report is having a major influence on how councils take up sustainability issues. For example, Blacktown city council has initiated an environmental auditing of its industrial premises under the new Environmental Operations Act 1997, which came into force in NSW. While the State-planning framework does facilitate council's move towards implementing the agenda, there is greater need for developing community support for the agenda through education, leading by practice and demonstration projects. Planners at Penrith Council consistently and repeatedly stated that they have gone beyond meeting the statutory requirements of community consultation in their major strategic planning initiatives such as the Rural Lands Study and Residential Land Review. The need to establish a dialogue with the community beyond the statutory minimum imposed by the State legislation was clearly recognised.

## **5.3 Governance structures and Community participation mechanisms**

Governance structures within the councils would play an important role in how sustainability agenda is pursued. How councils engage with the community, business and larger regional and state government agencies is an important consideration. Some council are more proactive than others due to their exposure to best practices on ESD, access to information and availability of resources as well as commitment to implement sustainability measures. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Penrith council is much more proactive than the other two councils in pursuing the environmental agenda partly as a reflection of their planners' younger demographic profile and greater exposure to ESD ideas and practices.

There is also an important role of politicians and development industry in facilitating or constraining implementation of local agenda 21. In the case of Holroyd, the current mayor's strong interest in integrating sustainability into council processes has played an important role in Holroyd's recent attempts in this direction. Some council such as Blacktown seem to be driven more by the pro-growth coalition of politicians, development industry and some landowners than councils. In areas where there is a stronger community support to maintain the rural character and life-style, such as Penrith, councils are more keen to protect the natural environment. This is evident from the diametrically opposed views expressed by the Blacktown and Penrith planners on the preferred role of the council in soliciting community involvement. Planners at Penrith Council were of the view that the council had a responsibility to not only engage the

community in the planning process but also to 'educate' them when their stance on a certain issue was inconsistent with their other demands. This was evident in their comments on the Rural Land Study experience, where they reported that a small but active minority sought to impose their views and pushed for allowing urban development on rural land. They felt it was the role of the council to explain to the community that it contradicted their objective of maintaining their life-style and the rural character of the area. Blacktown planners felt that community involvement can easily be construed as a means for a council to push its own agenda. They were of the opinion that some councils are prone to promote and facilitate community rallies to oppose State government demands.

Community participation and consultation are important mechanisms for implementing local agenda 21. As a part of community consultation, Holroyd city undertakes community surveys every four years to understand the residents' viewpoint about council activities (telephone surveys of 800 households across city areas in 1994 and 1998). These surveys are used to develop council's social plans and management plans and suffice the State requirements of engaging the community. The utility of these surveys, however, in actually engaging the community in a meaningful dialogue may be limited. These surveys helped the council identify 900 issues and concerns regarding the state of the environment, which was fed into the preparation of the brief for the SoE Report. When the council attempted to engage the community through public meetings following the surveys, the extremely poor turnout forced the council to shelve the initiative. Only recently, at the current mayor's insistence, has an attempt to revive the process of community meetings and inviting the community on to steering committees been taken up.

In the case of Penrith, there was extensive consultation for the Rural land survey with attendance of more than 800 people in five rounds of workshops to discuss community aspirations about the long term use of rural land. This study also used 5 mail outs to send 25 thousand letters to the community. Another consultation for Recreation and Cultural needs study was done by a telephone survey of 600 respondents. City wise mail-outs were sent to 60,000 households as part of PLANS 2002, and community was asked to have their say at seven workshops at various neighbourhood locations. A web page was also set up. The council planners regard their involvement in the Rural Land survey as a major learning experience for the council. It seems to have served as a pilot project in community consultation. The council has become much more aware of the various communities that exist and even learnt of the way the communities delineated their locality which at times was different to that perceived by council staff. Incidentally, the council also learnt about the ineffectiveness of the internet as a medium for dialogue with the community so far.

Considering the range of consultation techniques and number of people that need to be consulted, there is strong need for committing more financial resources and time towards community consultations.

#### **5.4 Community Support for Sustainability**

Penrith seems to be more focused on serving the local residents' interest than on attracting investment from outside. One explanation suggested by the planners points to the fact that most of the elected Councillors in Penrith reside locally and are easily accessible to the community. Another suggested reason referred to the absence of large-scale conflict within the elected Councillors of different persuasions.

In the case of Penrith, a perceived stronger community support to maintain the rural character and life-style seems to motivate the council to protect the natural environment. The planners seem to be more focused on what they perceive to be desirable to the local residents. This would account for the diametrically opposed views expressed by the Blacktown and Penrith planners on the preferred role of the council in soliciting community involvement. Planners at Penrith Council were of the view that the council had a responsibility to not only engage the community in the planning process but also to 'educate' them when their stance on a certain issue was inconsistent with their other demands. Commenting on their Rural Land Study experience, they reported that a small but active minority sought to impose their views and pushed for allowing urban development on rural land. They felt it was the role of the council to explain to the community that it contradicted their objective of maintaining their life-style and the rural character of the area.

Blacktown planners, on the other hand, maintain that community involvement can easily be construed as a means for a council to push its own agenda. They are of the opinion that some councils are prone to promote and facilitate community rallies to oppose State government demands, that is, use the community to put political pressure on State government. They were of the view that owners of rural land are keen to have their land subdivided and the environmental concerns that held back urban releases actually stemmed from the views held by certain State departments and agencies and sometimes their lack of capacity to undertake the tasks involved.

Holroyd seems to be in the initial stages of adopting LA21. They are reported to be going all out to engage the community in various ways. A series of public meetings and community events are on-going including community barbeques. They are concerned with finding effective means to increase community response to setting up steering committees. However, this is a fairly recent initiative and so it is too early to comment on results.

#### **5.5 Council's programs, policies and projects**

Councils' programs, policies and projects are a good indicator of their attempts at sustainability. Each of the councils demonstrates some innovative attempts at leading by example on sustainability. For example, Blacktown city council has number of programs such as Community pride movement, Environmental support program, and cities for climate protection program. Community pride movement program in Blacktown is a proactive program to involve the local communities to improve the quality of local environment by focusing on both graffiti reduction as well as improving community facilities, landscaping and community signage. Likewise, environmental auditing program is a partnership approach to environmental protection in collaboration with

number of government departments (such as EPA) and industrial owners to audit all industrial precincts within the council .

Holroyd has prepared annual Environmental management Plan 2002/2006, and has a number of strategies in place to protect environmentally sensitive areas and contribute to sustainable development of the area. Some of the strategies being implemented are preparation of State of environment report, education to primary school children under Council's Local Environmental Awareness program, energy assessment procedure for new major developments, industrial auditing of council areas and preparation of management plans for environmentally sensitive areas.

## **6. Conclusion**

To make the principles of sustainable development a reality, it is important that there is a much stronger focus on how the concept can be implemented at the local level. There is clearly a strong need to increase awareness and commitment of the community through support for community initiatives on sustainability rather than mere focus on top down approach to implement sustainability. More attention needs to be given to developing action plans of the councils, which demonstrate clear commitment of resources and manpower for promoting sustainable development. Likewise, there should be a greater focus on creating supportive governance structures and consultation mechanisms to implement Local Agenda 21. There is also an opportunity to learn from successes and failures of different councils in New South Wales, for example, in implementing local agenda. Statewide/nationwide database of community and council initiatives in sustainable development would be useful in setting up examples of best practices for similar councils to consider.

This study provides a springboard for further studies into the influence of the State planning system on a council's adoption of LA21. A study of the interface between the State government institutions and policies and the local council's strategic planning activities could explore possibilities of feasible means to strengthen the supportive role of State planning frameworks in the promotion of the agenda. Another area for further research is conducting a comparative study of councils from different states in Australia with their own unique planning systems to understand better the role of state and regional planning system in influencing the sustainability outcomes. As part of ongoing research, comparison of councils in NSW with that of Queensland is being planned for further investigation on this topic.

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