

FROM RIO TO LOCAL AGENDA 21: LOCAL INVOLVEMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

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Overall, a shift from non-sustainable to sustainable production ranks high on the political agenda in modern politics, for example the shift from a brown economy based on fossil fuels to a green economy based on renewable energy sources such as wind and solar energy. An understanding of the political and cultural salience of sustainable development crucially depends on how far the public identify with the analysis and solutions promoted by any discourse and how far it appears as relevant to people's lived experience is therefore crucial.

20 years after the 1992 Rio Conference, the focus is again on trade-offs between economic and environmental goals. Thus, the Rio+20 Conference in June 2012 will especially focus on the main theme of establishing a green economy in the context of sustainable development. The concept of green economy focuses primarily on the intersection between environment and economy. This recalls the 1992 Rio Conference: the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development.

One main offspring from Rio 1992 was the UN action plan 'Agenda 21.' The implementation of Agenda 21 was intended to involve action at international, national, regional and local levels. Thus, community participation is a core part of Local Agenda 21 or 'LA21' where national and state governments have legislated or advised that local authorities take steps to implement the plan locally (as recommended in Chapter 28 of the document). Such programmes are often known as 'Local Agenda 21' or 'LA21'.

Our main research question is whether local participation is always optimal? Local participation may, in fact, not always improve decision making on sustainability issues. This is shown in a model that builds on delegation theory and suggests an optimal number of local decision-makers involved in the process of implementing sustainability issues under LA21. Thus, theory may challenge the LA21 view by arguing that the costs of deliberation are often ignored and no alternative costs considered. Rather, focus tends to be on benefits only from local participation. Here, a more comprehensive cost-benefit analysis is needed.

Whether individual countries will be able to foster investment in green economies thus depends on local participation but the price of delegation must be incorporated too. This means that countries that have faced difficulties in attracting green investments should consider bottom-up local participation at the optimal level in the setting of a cost-benefit analysis. According to Macnaghten and Jacobs (1997), the question of public support or identification is all important if sustainable development is to have a significant effect on policy. Is this true? Their main arguments are that major reductions in environmental impact will require concomitant changes in public policy: 1) improvements in industrial and consumer technologies; 2) a redirection of public expenditure and taxation; 3) shifts in the distribution of employment between economic sectors and 4) adjustments to individual lifestyles. It is inconceivable that such changes could be introduced without public acceptance.