



Information and participation within environmental management

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SUMMARY: This paper reviews the key components of processes for informed and participatory environmental management and planning in urban areas. These include techniques more commonly associated with external technical expertise such as environmental impact assessments, capacity studies and environmental audits and initiatives that place more emphasis on the role of the community in understanding the environment and helping develop appropriate responses. The paper also discusses how these fit within broader debates on "good governance".

I. INTRODUCTION

IF WE ACCEPT that nature on its own usually finds a long-term equilibrium, then most of the activities which undermine sustainable development are the result of decision-making behaviour of humans: individuals, communities, businesses and the state. At one level, therefore, urban environmental problems are largely the result of the huge number of decisions which in some way damage the urban, regional and global environment. Sometimes, these damaging decisions are made because of the poor information base, sometimes because political and economic systems reward the passing of costs on to others, sometimes because poverty drives decisions which favour short-term survival over long-term sustainability and sometimes because people have not thought through the full direct and indirect impacts of their decisions. In effect, most cities have inherited a legacy of political, social and economic mechanisms which, inadvertently perhaps, allow us to pass on the adverse consequences of some of our decisions to the environment, to future generations, to other sectors of society, or to other sectors of the economy.

To visualize this, simply think of which sections of a community tend to own the most cars and who bears the brunt of the resultant noise and air pollution, congestion, road-building and cut-off neighbourhoods. And, to make the link between poverty and environmental degradation more complex yet most clear, we should remember that the most dilapidated, and often therefore the most polluting cars, lorries and buses, are often the only ones which the poor can even begin to afford to use. Similarly, many urban low-income groups rely on the cheapest available fuels (biomass or coal), which reliance becomes a significant contributing factor to local air pollution. Wealth creates major environmental externalities then, but poverty too creates its own, more local, externalities. This said, it is important to emphasize how little environmental degradation is

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linked to poverty. In general, the poor have very low levels of non-renewable resource use (they have too few capital goods), very low levels of waste generation, low use of water, very low levels of greenhouse gas emissions – and a large section of the urban poor are engaged in activities which are important for resource conservation, for instance, in the formal or informal “reuse, reclaim, recycle” business or in urban agriculture.

Local and municipal governments are of critical importance in their ability to help shape people’s behaviour patterns in line with the demands of sustainable development by using appropriate forms of urban environmental management and planning. Alternatively, poor local government can be a strong factor in allowing the deterioration of the urban environment to continue. This is particularly true for authorities that lack the professional and administrative capacity and the financial resources with which to carry out adequately many of the environmental management tasks which they need to perform. This is important. Cities do not have to be the locations of major environmental degradation nor do they necessarily need to be “parasitic” on other areas as some writers would claim.⁽¹⁾ Rather, good management and planning of the urban environment can lead to major efficiencies in energy use, for instance, by altering the physical fabric of the city in terms of residential densities, zoning of activities, provision of public transport and so on. Similarly, building the capacities of local communities to identify environmental assets and problems is critical to building durable solutions, bringing local knowledge and commitment to bear in improving the urban environment. Local government has a role to play in this, as facilitator and enabler, avoiding the temptation to impose top-down, technocratic solutions which experience shows too often tend to work only in the short-term, be more expensive than other solutions and create unexpected adverse knock-on effects. Local government and decentralized state regulatory agencies also often have, or should have, a role in monitoring private sector compliance with regulatory standards, for instance, in air and water pollution and in the generation and disposal of solid wastes.

Environmental management and planning requires a necessarily multi-disciplinary, multi-tooled approach combining aspects such as land-use planning, environmental assessment, information and education, targeted anti-poverty work, economic approaches (e.g. pricing and taxing) and administrative reform (from improving community engagement to well-regulated forms of privatization) (see Box 1). Allied to this is a concern that, too often, the effectiveness of local government has been limited in terms of resource availability and in terms of adherence to inappropriate models of urban management (often imported from the North) which were technocratic and exclusive rather than inclusive in their attempts to plan for the urban majority. There is a compelling need to identify and work with processes which are more open, transparent and democratic, producing decisions which are widely accepted by all in the community.⁽²⁾ As such, improved environmental management and planning are as much about improved governance as they are about specific techniques. They are also about much more than achieving localized environmental improvements: good environmental management and planning can help to address poverty issues and can also help improve urban economic development. Urban economic health can benefit from productivity improvements (e.g. reduced congestion), and also create a more attractive environment for new investment based on good provision of environmental infrastructure (such as piped water and provision for sanitation and drainage) and a good quality living environment (as in cities such as Curitiba and Porto Alegre in Brazil).

1. See Chapter One in Haughton, G. and C. Hunter (1994), *Sustainable Cities*, Jessica Kingsley/Stationery Office for an overview of some of the anti-urbanist literature.

2. Harris, N. (editor) (1992), *Cities in the 1990s: The Challenge for Developing Countries*, UCL Press, London, pages 96-97. This is a report of a seminar in which Patrick McAuslan talks about the models of the North as being ones of containment, suppression and waste, where excessive “professionalization” of planning has divorced councillors and the public from active engagement in decisions which affect their everyday lives.

Different Aspects of Environmental Management for City Authorities

Box 1

Ensuring availability of infrastructure and services (both through public provision and setting a framework for private and community provision) with water, sanitation, drainage, garbage collection and management, transport, and protection and management of public space and cultural heritage being particularly important. There are many possible synergies between good environmental practice and improved provision – for instance, through buildings and layout designs which reduce energy demand (and thus fuel bills) and provision for open space which supports urban agriculture and is integrated into drainage and flood protection systems. Within waste management, the stress is on waste reduction and then on reuse, repair or recycle. One key issue is ensuring cross-sectoral linkages – for instance, so that land-use planning, transport planning and economic development policies complement each other.

Appropriate regulation and control of activities. This covers building codes that promote health and safety, planning norms and codes that ensure environmental aspects of land use (including avoiding urban sprawl) and regulations that influence the environmental performance of enterprises such as regulations on occupational health and safety, on gaseous and liquid emissions and on the generation and handling of solid wastes within enterprises. Inappropriate regulation needs to be avoided as it can impose unnecessary costs in terms of money, time spent waiting and social inequity. Within land use, mixed use planning (to avoid spatial separation of home and workplace) and planning mechanisms to ensure that inner-city redevelopments do not displace all low-income groups are more widely used.

Integrating economic tools within regulatory systems. It is now more common to combine regulatory standards and market tools – for instance, “polluter pays” and “consumer pays” taxes (within “full-cost” pricing), licence fees (which can include “pollution licences” that can be traded) and environmental taxes or subsidies (for instance lower taxes on unleaded petrol).

Facilitation. Embracing provision for participation and the development of Local Agenda 21s plus the access to information that this implies for citizens.

Planning for the future. This includes measures to encourage appropriate development of unused land within built-up areas, ensuring the availability of land and infrastructure for urban developments (especially land in locations and at prices that meet local income groups’ needs), measures to prevent or limit urban sprawl, measures to limit hazards from disasters and measures to assess the environmental impact of new developments.

Incentives and penalties. These may include greater emphasis on demand management that seeks administrative and technical solutions to reduce the need for investments to increase supplies – for instance, improved public transport and discouragement of private car use reduces the need for new roads. Similarly, promoting less wasteful patterns of water use and reducing water losses through improved system maintenance can remove the need to expand water supplies. Public policy can include incentives to encourage good practice in energy and water conservation and waste reduction; taxes and charges to limit private automobile use; and the removal of subsidies and government controls that distort decisions towards environmentally damaging results.

Environmental aspects of public sector operations including environmental audits of public policies and the operation of public agencies.

II. INFORMATION, PARTICIPATION AND DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

a. Access to Information

ONE IMPORTANT ASPECT of environmental management and planning is how to generate the information on which such management and planning should be based. Critical to this is access to information. This paper highlights some of the key components of information systems usually associated with environmental assessment. It begins with some of the techniques more commonly associated with external technical expertise

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and moves on to initiatives which place much more emphasis on the role of the community in understanding the environment. The list is not intended to be inclusive of all approaches since many of the techniques used in social planning, community action plans, needs audits and so on could also usefully be applied in the environmental field. It is, however, intended as a summary of the main approaches to be found in environmental management and planning – albeit recognizing that this field necessarily increasingly intersects with other areas of activity.

The overall thrust of the argument here is that, although there is an important role for the technical expert in identifying environmental issues and approaches, these must not usurp or undermine the role of community bodies. More than this, it is important that information is made widely available to all, not captured by those who commission pieces of research or by a technocratic capture of information by dint of its poor presentation for interpretation by ordinary citizens. Conversely, this imperative for openness and transparency should not be used to generate only superficial information – the need is, rather, to work with communities to enhance their role in collecting, collating and analyzing complex bodies of information.

The reason for this emphasis on information and access is two-fold. First, poor information on the environment leads to poor decision-making by all, state bodies, individuals, communities and businesses. Secondly, unequal access to information can be used by powerful groups in society to further undermine the less powerful. Whilst information access alone cannot overcome embedded asymmetries of power, it can be an important factor in trying to redress them. A central concern here is that those who have preferential access to environmental information and understanding can wield it to their own advantage. For example, Fuks demonstrates how emergent environmental consciousness in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil has been used by certain organizations to argue their position in key conflicts with authorities. But both environmental groups and low-income groups are reportedly little involved as yet in these new forms of protest mobilizations. Environmental groups tend to be poorly organized whilst low-income groups may lack information and not perceive environmental damage, as well as having limited organizational resources.⁽³⁾ So, whilst middle and high-income groups have mobilized well to defend against environmental damage, other groups have not. The net effect is likely to be a form of displacement, in some cases at least, from areas of opposition to areas of non-awareness or low concern.

This clearly resonates with US debates on environmental racism,⁽⁴⁾ as concern has grown about the systematic pattern of toxic facilities being located in poorer rather than richer neighbourhoods in the city. The usual reasons given for this pattern include: poorer areas may lack the resources to resist the location of such facilities; they are so poor that they feel obliged to accept them for the jobs created; or, possibly, that poor people can only afford to live in houses where noxious facilities already exist, depressing land, housing and rental values. The reverse side of this is that richer areas can use land-use planning restrictions to ensure that their areas are not considered for possible location, zoning out industry in the same way that residential densities can be set to exclude the kinds of higher-density developments where the poor typically live. The space of the city is not neutral then, nor are the participative systems which are used to deepen or consolidate divisions within the city, between rich and poor.

3. Fuks, M. (1998), "Environment related litigation in Rio de Janeiro: shaping frames for a new social problem", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* Vol.22, No.3, pages 394-407.

4. Bullard, R. (1990), *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class and Environmental Quality*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, USA; also Bullard, R. (editor) (1993), *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots*, South End Press, Boston, Mass.; Hofrichter, R. (editor) (1993), *Toxic Struggles: The Theory and Practice of Environmental Justice*, New Society Publishers, Philadelphia, USA, pages 67-75; and Heiman, M. (1996), "Race, waste and class: new perspectives on environmental justice", *Antipode* Vol.28, No.2, pages 111-121.

Several key issues emerge from this discussion. Poorer communities need access to information and knowledge if they are to lobby effectively against decisions which adversely impact on them. All communities need access to information if they are to influence the decision-making behaviour of state and private sector decision-makers. And a reminder that local participation on its own is no panacea: it needs to be linked to broader democratic systems and local considerations need to be set against wider regional and national considerations. Otherwise, we might end up with a lot of very successful local participation processes systems all agreeing that they do not want to host locally unwanted land uses (LULUs). This tends to result in a situation where poorer communities still end up with disproportionate exposure to LULUs as they are effectively bought off by the prospect of jobs and any offers of local compensation deals. Information needs to be used to help resolve difficult issues, not to turn away from them.

b. Environmental Impact Assessment

Environmental impact assessment (EIA) is perhaps the most well-known tool in the environmental assessment repertoire.⁽⁵⁾ Typically, an EIA is an independently conducted study commissioned to examine the likely impacts of a project proposal. It will seek to identify the key environmental conditions of a site (covering the natural environment, built environment and human impacts) to assess key aspects of damage likely to result from a proposed development including assessing alternative ways for diminishing adverse impacts. Social impacts are frequently found in EIAs, attempting in particular to look at the distributional impacts of costs and benefits. A non-technical summary is also usually provided along with an assessment of how a project is linked to existing environmental and land-use regulatory systems. A well-conceived and conducted EIA can be an important tool in deciding whether or not to allow a major project to go ahead. Because of the financial costs and the time delays involved in undertaking an EIA, the procedure tends to be used sparingly.

In recognition of the limits of a site-based approach to environmental impacts, in recent years there has been a growth of interest in *strategic* environmental impact assessment procedures. These typically embrace a host of projects or even a particular policy or plan (from an urban ring road to local land use or national transport plans). This approach has the advantage of addressing concerns about the additive effect of a number of projects on local carrying capacities (see below). As with EIA generally, in the context of the South, EIA procedures need to be established which combine the virtues of simplicity, low cost, speed, flexibility, incorruptibility and ability to make a difference to political decision-making.⁽⁶⁾

c. Capacity Studies

A related theme of work in recent years has been the development of capacity studies. These range widely in type and scope. For instance, in Britain, work has focused on urban capacity studies to examine the potential of regions to absorb more housing without irreversible damage to strategically important aspects of the environment. But capacity studies can be used more widely in forward planning processes to try to gauge the scope for introducing new forms of human activity to an area – for instance, a new industrial estate. In this sense, they are very much akin to

5. Barrow, C.J. (1997), *Environmental and Social Impact Assessment: An Introduction*, Arnold, London. This is a useful overview text, particularly Chapter Seven "Impact assessment in developing countries". This chapter highlights the potential value of assessment procedures for urban areas in the South. It also points out that according to one survey, only seven out of 121 developing countries had established frameworks for impact assessment.

6. See reference 5.

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strategic environmental impact assessments but with a greater concern for mapping out the quality of a local environment and its carrying capacity; that is, to what extent it is possible to harness nature's ability to provide resources, provide key services (for instance, the protective ozone layer) and act as a sink for wastes without damaging the overall integrity of its function and ability to continue to replenish itself.⁽⁷⁾ In effect, capacity studies attempt to identify when an area has reached its environmental limits, involving a range of technical, cultural and economic judgements.

A key role for capacity studies is the identification of critical and non-critical natural stocks. This moves beyond concerns with differentiating between renewable and non-renewable resources to a more focused look at resources in their local context and at possibilities for resource substitution. With this approach, there is a recognition that the value of a natural resource is not fixed and that it may depend at least in part on local context. For instance, preserving a particular stock of plant may be locally important where it is scarce and where the possibilities for moving to alternative locations are limited – alternatively, the same plant may be commonplace in another location and the removal of one part of its habitat would in no way impact on the overall survival of the species in that place. Thus, a capacity study would examine critical (not readily replaceable or substitutable) capital stocks and attempt to define these in terms of both the overall resource environment and their regional and local context. Other examples might be a park in the middle of a city or a field on the edge of a town which may have particular natural and social value over and above that which a similar area of land might have in a rural area surrounded by similar land, simply because it is in short supply locally, as both a natural asset in its own right and in terms of its higher “marginal value” to humans who wish to keep it for leisure, “green lung”, aesthetic or other reasons.

d. Environmental Audits and “State of the Environment” Reports

Environmental audit procedures are also increasingly common in large organizations such as businesses, universities and local government. They are usually conducted at the level of the whole organization, assessing internal procedures, including purchasing policies, against desirable policies for sustainable development – for instance, they might look at the use of energy efficiency devices, systems for waste minimization and the use of recycled paper. More ambitious audits would also question corporate policies, for example, the use of company cars, car parking provision and the possibilities of providing more spaces for cycles and travel allowances for those using bikes rather than cars. Similar procedures can be applied to domestic dwellings although more typical is the more focused use of energy audits to identify the potential for domestic energy savings linked to grants for improving energy efficiency.

It is also possible to undertake a form of environmental audit at the level of the local government area. This will usually take the form of a state of the environment report. Typically, these reports outline baseline conditions in a region, attempt to set meaningful targets for improvement, assess priorities and allocate lead roles for bringing about changes. Subsequent reports will review progress and be disseminated widely within a locality.

Linked to this work, there has been considerable effort in various parts

7. The best available summary of the role of environmental capacity studies in planning can be found in Jacobs, M. (1997), *Making Sense of Environmental Capacity*, CPRE, London.

of the world to develop systems of *indicators of sustainable development*. At their best, these involve the use of readily measurable indicators of local environmental conditions whilst also embracing issues of social welfare, health, capacity-building and so on. These indicators are often at their most useful when they include measures with an emotional as well as a technical value (for instance, the number of migrating salmon in local rivers is immediately meaningful to citizens of Seattle where the annual salmon run attracts many visitors to witness the spectacle; other indicators might be queues at public toilets or water points as proxies for poor sanitation). They should also be reported on regularly, with the results available to all. Most importantly, they should involve considerable discussion and education, and a role in selection for the community at large. Also, indicators of impact outside the immediate region as well as within it need to be included. At their most technocratic, incomprehensible and useless, indicators for sustainable development involve long lists of all the possible indicators of environmental quality, no matter how esoteric, often with data which is difficult or expensive to identify and only readily appreciated by experts.

e. Statutory Plan Consultation

An important part of any good statutory plan-making process is public consultation at various stages of design, from initial principles and broad concepts to final suggestions. These are often important decisions, so openness and transparency are central to ensuring popular support and a sense of legitimacy for the planning system. In the case of environmental planning, perhaps equally important is advice on developing priorities and obtaining a local sense of value attributed to different aspects of the built and natural environment. As such, statutory consultations are a necessary and usually helpful aspect of planning procedures, in land-use planning in particular but also in transport and other aspects of infrastructure planning. The narrow statutory system can be adapted in many different ways to try and bring the process closer to communities and businesses, for instance, with the use of visioning workshops to identify key themes and open meetings to try and reconcile differences before they become subject to the formal systems of approval and, if necessary, appeal. Naturally, these typical statutory processes are not the only means available for community engagement in environmental management and planning. Most importantly, they cover only a narrow range of environmental concerns, those which can be directly controlled by land-use planning and related legislation.

f. Participatory Approaches to Planning

There are a considerable number of approaches to improving systems for community engagement in environmental management and planning, with different approaches likely to be appropriate in different circumstances.

One of the most successful recent innovations for improving community consultation in planning decisions has been the emergence of “planning for real” exercises. This technique usually involves a close and intense working relationship developing over a period of time between planning experts with an interest in improving community participation and people in the community. Typically, the people running a “planning for real” exer-

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cise will spend a few days attempting to get to know an area and a community; they then draw up a series of plans and build or draw a series of "symbols" to represent key parts of the community's desired range of development possibilities, for example, parks, green spaces, a new clinic, work spaces, houses and community centres. Then, over an intense few days, open house sessions are held for members of the community to come and work/juggle with these pieces, almost like a jigsaw, trying to make the pieces fit together in workable ways with the experts providing advice and guidance when requested and recording the preferred outcomes of the different people who attend. Building on these different preferences, the "planning for real" exercise aims to conclude by drawing up a locally informed and generally agreed framework for development in an area.

A variant on the "planning for real" theme is the work of community planners, architects and designers who have rejected the role of the external "expert" as grand visionary creating technically perfect plans with no apparent need for consultation with the communities upon which they were to be foisted. Community architects, for instance, adopt a *modus operandi* which centres on working closely with the people who will occupy the buildings which they design, learning what people's needs and aspirations are, as individuals and as communities. Although time-consuming and therefore potentially costly, the advantages to be had are invaluable in terms of buildings in which people are comfortable living, which are flexible for future adaptation and which blend in with local traditions in terms of building materials and so on. Similarly, community planners focus on providing technical assistance to disadvantaged communities to empower them in their interactions with the formal state planning apparatus.

g. Local Agenda 21

Local Agenda 21 (LA21) represents an important milestone in recent attempts to create holistic local strategies for the environment, taking into account contemporary concerns with sustainable development. The origins of the LA 21 movement lie with the decision of the world's political leaders at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 to call for the production of national strategies for sustainable development into the twenty-first century, known as Agenda 21 statements. The same summit also committed governments to supporting the production of LA21 statements for every local government area in the world, to be undertaken by all interested parties, involving a central but not exclusive role for local government. The intention was to generate holistic plans covering environmental, social and economic issues which would be agreed upon by all the major players in a locality, local government, business leaders and community groups.

Although progress has been uneven in developing these plans, and the levels of consultation and public commitment to the resulting processes and plans vary enormously, in many cities, in the South as elsewhere, the LA21 process has served to galvanize local interest in environmental issues. To put this in context, whilst widely based, holistic local environmental plans were not previously unheard of, they were relatively unusual. An example of a long-standing community based environmental management approach is that developed in Ilo, Peru where progress on this front has built up steadily from initial concerns developed during the construction of an urban development plan in 1984. Since then, a number of committees have been formed to address specific, locally contentious issues by bringing together all the key players in an attempt to explore

8. Díaz, D.B., J.L.L. Follegatti and M. Hordijk (1996), "Innovative urban environmental management in Ilo, Peru", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.8, No.1, pages 21-34; see also Follegatti's paper in this issue.

9. Miranda, L. and M. Hordijk (1998), "Let us build cities for life: the national campaign of Local Agenda 21s in Peru", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.10, No.2; also Myers, G.A. and M.A.H. Mujahir (1997), "Localizing Agenda 21: environmental sustainability and Zanzibari urbanization", *Third World Planning Review* Vol.19, No.4, pages 367-84.

10. Velásquez, L.S. (1998), "Agenda 21: a form of joint environmental management in Manizales, Colombia", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.10, No.2, October, pages 9-36.

positive ways forward and to resolve their differences. Many of the decisions of the municipality are now effectively made at a cross-sectoral forum of this nature, with only unresolved issues going to the mayor for final decision-making.⁽⁸⁾ It is perhaps invidious to choose just this one example – there are certainly others. This said, it is really only during the 1990s that such work on local environmental plans has taken off and, central to this, has been the widespread commitment to LA21 preparation. Indeed, it is perhaps best to see LA21 as a natural progression for many localities which rapidly speeded up progress among key stakeholder groups in coming together around environmental issues.

The literature on the development of LA21 stresses the formative role of the process, that it is essentially about the processes of developing consensus not simply the production of a written plan: its essence is the coming together of different groups, the sharing of knowledge, the prioritizing of actions and the allocation of roles to take forward the agreed actions in the plan. Inevitably, some areas progress faster than others since they start with different institutional capacities and traditions, different economic, social and environmental problems, and different barriers to implementing successful policies. Problems can include conflicts between technocratic local officials loath to cede power and information to other organizations, lack of political will, lack of understanding of urban environmental problems, low levels of participation outside meetings, financial instability, and lack of commitment from community leaders and business people.⁽⁹⁾ It is important to recognize LA21 as being a learning process which does not finish with the production of a plan – it necessarily involves coordinated action for taking forward the plan, for evaluation and for refocusing. Whilst not that many LA21 processes are yet at the evaluation stage, there has been considerable work on establishing evaluation systems, often linked into the work on sustainable development indicators noted above. An excellent example of this type of work comes from Manizales in Colombia which has established a system of neighbourhood-level community environmental action plans and easy to understand indicators where scoring is based on traffic light signals (red is a problem, yellow is a warning sign, green is good quality). Central to this is an emphasis on engaging the community in monitoring and evaluation work, including the establishment of urban environmental observatories which are physical locations where the public can access environmental information.⁽¹⁰⁾

It is useful in this context to consider when discussing the lack of data, how widespread and regular consultations with all sections of the population can become a key alternative source of policy data as in, for instance, Manizales and Porto Alegre (within their participatory budgeting processes). This has the additional advantage that it is rooted in the expressed needs and priorities of citizens. What we begin to see in LA21 more than in any previous initiative in this sector is the operationalization of some of the principles for good governance and good environmental management practices, as outlined below.

III. BETTER GOVERNANCE: DECENTRALIZATION, SUBSIDIARITY AND THE ROLES OF LOWER AND HIGHER TIERS OF GOVERNMENT

MUCH WORK HAS been devoted to exploring the need for better governance in the South. This tends to focus on three areas. First, a concern for

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the effectiveness of state institutions in delivering some of their responsibilities effectively, efficiently and indeed equitably. Second, there has been a questioning of the appropriate areas for direct delivery by state bodies, seeking to identify areas where the state divests itself of this role in favour of taking on a role as purchaser of services, as planner, as facilitator or as regulator. Third, there is a growing recognition that the state increasingly does not have sufficient expertise or resources to address the problems it faces and, therefore, it needs to act increasingly in concert with others in the community and in the private sector. In consequence of such changes, it is the extended system of possible actors which, in effect, constitutes the governance systems which are the focus of attention here.

There is a widespread belief that improved democratic practices are a pre-requisite for improvements in many areas, based on analyses which focus on the potential of state bodies to be sometimes arbitrary and corrupt, remote from citizens and incapable of adequately performing key regulatory functions.⁽¹¹⁾ Linked to this is the neo-liberal critique of the appropriate role for the state in providing key services, as the effectiveness of state providers is challenged and the case for a reformulation of the roles of the state and private sector is advocated, for instance, involving a shift towards privatization. The World Bank is a leader in such debates, arguing for instance that "...an effective state can contribute powerfully to sustainable development and the reduction of poverty" and that this effectiveness can be promoted by democratic reforms and improved participatory mechanisms, in addition to institutional reform in the areas of regulation and performance.⁽¹²⁾ Increasingly, there appears to be a high degree of convergence from different ideological viewpoints around the need for improved allocation of responsibilities across the different tiers of the state, and a growing consensus that improved participatory mechanisms are required as part of better governance systems.

Decentralization of resources and powers from central to local government is a useful and powerful policy direction. However, this does need to be undertaken in ways which do not undermine essential and effective redistributive functions. In recent years, there has been considerable progress in decentralizing resources to local government,⁽¹³⁾ notably in Colombia, in the belief that this would improve the efficiency and responsiveness of local service delivery. However, progress towards decentralization has tended to be cautious and slow as central governments are often loath to cede power and tend to doubt the capacity of local government to manage the additional resources and functions effectively. Where decentralization does occur, it is often motivated by a desire to reduce federal spending. This is important in the environmental sphere, given the importance of integrated policies which recognize the external impacts of urban behaviour, the possibilities for transferring costs to other areas and the need for strong national-level actions in support of international agreements. In other words, both local and national policies are required to meet international responsibilities for promoting and moving towards sustainable development.

It is useful to consider some recent work on local and national constraints on the development of effective Local Agenda 21s in six case study cities in Uganda, Bolivia, Pakistan, Viet Nam, Benin and Burkina Faso.⁽¹⁴⁾ The most general constraint identified was weak local authorities. The research also stressed how the nature of constraints differs according to the extent of decentralization and of the space given to civil society involvement in environmental management. With high levels of decen-

11. See World Bank (1997), *World Development Report 1997. The State in a Changing World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford. However, Gilbert argues that in Latin America, local government is often effective given the constraints within which it operates and the scale of challenges it faces. See Gilbert, A. (1998), *The Latin American City*, Latin American Bureau, London.

12. See World Bank (1997), reference 11, quote from page 99.

13. Kyung-Hwan, K. (1997), "Improving local government finance in a changing environment", *Habitat International* Vol.21, No.1, pages 17-28.

14. See Wacker, Viaro and Wolf's paper in this issue.

tralization, there is a tendency to ask too much of local communities. In countries where there has been some decentralization, but where roles and responsibilities remain unclear, one of the main constraints concerns the conflicts between different sectors and departments within governments, as well as conflicts between urban administrations and elected leaders. This usually results from a decentralizing of nominal responsibilities without decentralizing concomitant powers or finances.

This links to the subsidiarity principle which calls for policy-making powers to be devolved to the lowest *appropriate* tier of government. Extending this slightly, it also implies the need for all tiers of government to examine the ways in which decision-making processes can become more open to beneficial forms of engagement with outside actors, accepting that governance is about more porous systems of power-sharing. Shifting away from more hierarchical and impermeable models of state action, governance debates highlight the importance of engaging with others around all key policy agendas, reflected in the rise of public-private partnerships in urban policy and also considerable work on building community capacity to ensure that a more bottom-up approach to informing policy-making can be successful. This emphasis on capacity-building is important – it is necessarily a continuous process rather than a one-off investment. Communities are fluid not static, they start with different capacities and can have different aspirations for integration into policy processes. In the case of environmental management, it is essential that communities gain access to appropriate technical expertise and also build up their own technical capacities. Perhaps most importantly, they need to feel that they can make their voices heard, influencing policy at the local level.

Whilst there is much rhetoric about commitment to public participation, too often the reality is that this is lacking.⁽¹⁵⁾ In part, this reflects unreasonable expectations of community groups and a reluctance by state authorities to invest in capacity-building for this sector – too often, attachment to participation reeks of seeking to off-load responsibilities without shifting resources, or of attempts at bureaucratic capture, keeping groups tied to small revenue streams without allowing them to build up the asset base from which they can develop their own revenue streams. Short-term expediency of this type can turn a community off participation when what is required is a much longer-term commitment to nurturing this sector's capacity.

There are many articles and books on improving participatory techniques and also useful critiques of their possibilities and limitations.⁽¹⁶⁾ In many senses, the underlying concerns in terms of environmental management are similar to those for participation in the areas of poverty, economy, housing and so on – this is hardly surprising as, central to the sustainable development debate is precisely the interrelation of these areas of policy concern. As such, all that needs to be stressed here is that improved participatory mechanisms must be central to reforms in environmental management and planning. In Local Agenda 21, in particular, we can see the beginnings of a major movement in cities of the South in this direction.

The important point being stressed in this article is that there is a need for power and resources to reside at appropriate levels in systems of governance, and that what is appropriate will vary from country to country and city to city. But, in general, there needs to be a rebalancing of power and resources in favour of the local rather than the national. This

15. Desai, V. (1996), "Access to power and participation", *Third World Planning Review* Vol.18, No.2, pages 217-42.

16. A good overview of the literature and critique can be found in Mitlin, D. and J. Thompson (1995), "Participatory approaches in urban areas: strengthening civil society or reinforcing the status quo?", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.7, No.1, pages 231-50.

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is not a case of either/or. Rather, it is looking to capture the benefits of local mobilization of resources and expertise without losing a sense of integration with regional and national priorities. There is a case, too, for re-examining the balance of responsibilities and resources between local government, NGOs, community groups and effective private sector providers.