

# International Awards for Liveable Communities 2010

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### What are the possible consequences for Municipalities of the outcome of the Rio plus 20 Conference?

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#### 1. The Rio 1992 Summit, Rio+20 and Agenda 21

The sustainable forces of the planet will gather in Rio de Janeiro on May 2012, twenty years after the first Earth Summit.

The decision to hold a new Summit was not an easy one. The first one to publicly launch the idea was the Brazilian President Lula, back in 2007. After a long negotiating period the UN General Assembly eventually adopted a resolution that called for the Summit on December 23, 2009. I personally took it as a very appreciated Christmas present. The idea of reviewing the Rio 1992 agenda looks not only stimulating but absolutely necessary and the idea of doing it going "back in the scene of the crime" gives the 2012 Summit a special symbolic aura.

The 1992 Summit was a pillar on building a global sustainable development strategy, with the launch of Agenda 21, an ambitious and comprehensive blueprint of action to be taken globally, nationally and locally by UN organizations, national governments, and major groups.

The concept of *major groups* as interlocutor of institutions at any level was introduced in Rio, formalizing the role and participation of stakeholders. As you know, *stakeholders* are entities that have direct or indirect stake in an organization. Key stakeholders in a business organization include customers, creditors, directors, employees, government, owners, suppliers, unions, and the whole community from which the business draws its resources. The 1992 Agenda 21 recognized the importance of engaging a diversity of stakeholders in policy development and implementation.

Chapter 23 of the Agenda 21 reaffirms that "One of the fundamental prerequisites for the achievement of sustainable development is broad public participation in decision-making". Trying to organize participatory processes, the Agenda 21 eventually defined nine stakeholder clusters called *Major Groups*:

1. Business and Industry
2. Children and Youth
3. Farmers
4. Indigenous People
5. Local Authorities
6. NGOs
7. Science and Technology Community
8. Women
9. Workers and Trade Unions

#### 2. The Local Authority perspective

In the UN scheme Local Authorities are considered as one of 9 macrostakeholders, the *Major Groups*. This classification is highly unsatisfactory in relation to their central role in the definition

and implementation of policies. In public administration Local Authorities represent the closest level to citizens and often the most trusted and influential. Central Governments might define the political guidelines and priorities, but those are put in practice at the local level. Local Authorities are a political subject, which makes a great difference between them and the other Major Groups. The Agenda 21 itself at Chapter 28 states:

*Many of the problems and solutions listed in Agenda 21 have their roots in local activities, so **local authorities have a key role to play in making sustainable development happen.***

*Local authorities, such as municipal governments, build and maintain such structures as drinking water systems and roads. They oversee the planning of housing and industrial development, set local environmental policies and help to implement national environmental policies.*

*As the level of government closest to the people, they play a vital role in educating and mobilizing the public around sustainable development. **By 1996, every local authority should have consulted with its citizens, and developed "a local Agenda 21" for the community.***

*Local officials should consult citizens and community, business and industrial organizations to gather information and build a consensus on sustainable development strategies. This consensus would help them re-shape local programmes, policies, laws and regulations to achieve Agenda 21 objectives. The process of consultation would increase people's awareness of sustainable development issues. (...)*

We must admit that giving a role and addressing Local Authorities as a whole is not simple. The political status deeply differs from place to place. In some countries, mostly in the developing world, mayors are nominated by the central government and not chosen by their citizens. In the western world they are generally elected, although sometimes directly from the citizens and sometimes by the city council. There are countries, like mine, where mayors have a maximum of two terms (10 years), others where in practice you can run a city for life.

Nevertheless, I find reductive considering Local Authorities only as a Major Group, *de facto* unrecognising their political status. Without meaning to diminish the role of the other *Major Groups*, Local Authorities are key players in the implementation of sustainable development

### **3. Local Agenda 21 and beyond, the European framework**

The Agenda 21 launched in 1992 called for a Local Agenda 21 to be developed by every Local Authority. The deadline, originally set for 1996, a mere four years after, was generally not met. However thousands of Local Agenda 21 were activated around the world. A Local Agenda is not a project itself, but a tool to guarantee civil society participation and good governance. Its success depends from many factors: the level of local democracy, the real involvement of stakeholders, the quality of the participatory processes and their conclusions, the real influence in local administrative decisions. A well performing Local Agenda 21 is the best antidote to the DAD syndrome (Decide, Announce, Defend).

Every community must shape its own model of Local Agenda 21. In Europe, where Local Agendas found their highest diffusion, the Rio 1992 documents were put into context with a conference held in Aalborg, Denmark in 1994. The participant Local Authorities approved the *Aalborg Charter*, a sort of continental version of the global Agenda 21.

In the Aalborg Charter the European cities recognize that "sustainability is neither a vision nor an unchanging state, but a creative, local, balance-seeking process extending into all areas of local decision-making". Other than including the Agenda 21 general principles, the charter focuses on issues that have deep relevance in this part of the world, where 80% of the population lives in urban areas: land use, sustainable urban mobility, ecosystems preservation. It also introduces the necessity of addressing climate change, largely ignored in the original Rio documents.

Today more than 2700 local authorities around Europe have signed the Aalborg Charter and many have started a Local Agenda 21. In Italy, following the wave already moving in Northern Europe, we founded a National Local Agenda 21 Association, building the first ever national network of local Authorities devoted to sustainable development. The LA21 Italian Network has now more than 600 members, including big cities like Rome and Milan but also many tiny municipalities. Among our activities 18 permanent working groups have been established, each one addressing a specific topic: climate change, waste, green procurement, mobility, city planning, etc. As past president of the Italian LA21 Association and actual member of its Steering Committee, I had the chance to test the necessity of finding new tools and methods to update the original Agenda 21 to the rapidly changing scenario of local sustainability.

European Local Authorities gathered again in Aalborg in 2004 to confront, discuss and verify the results of Local Agenda 21 and its regional declination, the 1994 Aalborg Charter. They felt one major demand: a tool built on the Local Agenda 21 framework but more concrete, with a selected set of targets and a timetable. So they launched the *Aalborg Commitments*, a document that contains 10 tasks, each declined in 5 actions.

The 10 tasks are:

1. Governance
2. Local Management Towards Sustainability
3. Natural Common Goods
4. Responsible Consumption and Lifestyle Choices
5. Planning and Design
6. Better Mobility, Less Traffic
7. Local Action for Health
8. Vibrant and Sustainable Local Economy
9. Social Equity and Justice
10. Local to Global

The Aalborg Commitments signatories agree to produce an integrated Aalborg Commitments baseline review and to enter into a local participatory target setting process that incorporates existing Local Agenda 21 or other local sustainability action planning and takes into consideration the results of the local baseline review.

The idea is to set individual local targets and to set time frames for their implementation. Signatories should also make a regular monitoring review of their achievements available to citizens. The Aalborg Commitments represent a step ahead in terms of practical result and demand a real involvement from local administrations. Up to date, 621 European Local Authorities have signed the document.

The same kind of practical approach has been introduced in the *Covenant of Mayors*, an initiative launched in 2009 by the European Commission to foster local initiative on climate change. The local authorities that sign the Covenant agree to produce a local Sustainable Energy Action Plan within a year and to implement it afterwards. This initiative has just reached 2000 signatories, including 25 European Capital cities.

The last European event on local sustainability was the 6<sup>th</sup> Conference of European Sustainable Cities and Towns, held in Dunkerque, France in May 2010. More than 1800 delegates from Local Authorities concluded their discussions with the adoption of a *Dunkerque Declaration on Sustainable Development in Europe*, with a view to reconfirm their strong commitment to creating sustainable cities and towns and to seek recognition of their roles. The Declaration highlights that the various programmes of the European Union have too often been oriented solely towards economic growth and competition, and that now there is an urgent need to seek a more equal balance between the three pillars of sustainable development, in particular in the EU Strategy 2020.

The Declaration also confirms that local and regional governments have an essential role in overcoming the current challenges resulting from the financial and economic crisis, hereby complementing Member States and the European Union. Moreover, greening our economy is recognized as a necessary way to further transform our cities, in order to ensure high quality of life, economic development and social protection. Local and regional governments, as essential actors with competencies in the field of sustainability and operating at a level closest to the citizens, commit themselves to respond to the challenges of urban sustainability. They do so by limiting urban sprawl and creating low carbon cities, implementing democratic urban governance, ensuring high quality public services, and by adapting to and limiting climate change. Finally, at the global level, strong cooperation is required with countries with emerging economies as well as developing countries. Decentralized cooperation between local and regional governments must be recognized as a key instrument of international solidarity cooperation.

### **Towards Rio 2012 and a Local Agenda 21 release 2.0**

In the process that led to the Rio 2012 UN Summit many stakeholders supported the idea of a global summit on sustainable development with the need to reshape actions in the light of the current financial crisis. Others underlined the necessity of concrete answers to climate change. These issues will be crucial on the Rio+20 agenda, but in my opinion we need a World Summit to cope with the speed of change, with the new challenges of the rapid growth in developing nations, with the aging and decline of the western world, with the necessity of finding new tools and updating our targets.

Climate change and financial crisis are obviously among the priorities. Climate change is stalling in endless negotiations, in which local authorities are sadly kept out of the decision tables. The Bali roadmap, intended to be concluded at COP15 in Copenhagen on December 2009, included many references to local authorities and their central role on mitigation and adaptation policies. This was the result of a continuous and pressing presence of our representatives at the UNFCCC sessions from 2007 to 2009. The political storm that took place in Copenhagen washed it all away. Now the process is slowly recovering and expectations for the Cancun COP16 are low. Someone predicts that the Johannesburg COP17 in 2011 will not be the end of the process and that the post-Kyoto world Climate Accord could be eventually sealed in Rio.

We strongly believe in Agenda 21, particularly on its local chapter. But we know that the 1992

Agenda 21 needs an update. Or better, a version 2.0. The new Agenda 21 will have to introduce new methods of implementation and target setting procedures in all resolutions and commitments. This applies particularly to the local level, where citizens and stakeholders can directly check the results and the spin-off for their community. We are talking about a serious and verifiable target setting process, nothing to compare with generic indicators like the one used in the Millennium Goals Declaration. Targets must be tailored for every level of government, taking into account the social and economical conditions. Targets must also be set on the basis of priorities set by audit reports.

As Local Authorities we believe in Integrated Urban Management as the basic tool of sustainable development at the local level. Only interdependency between economy, society, ecology and good governance can give us the holistic perspective to react in time to the speed of urban changes. The governance model based on the integrated approach is starting to be implemented in the wealthiest parts of the world, the challenge now is to foster its diffusion in developing countries. Good local governance and conflict prevention guarantee peace and stability.

A new World Summit will have to recognize the crucial role of cities and territories for sustainable development. Today cities house over 50% of the world's population. They only 2% of the world's land but consume 75% of its resources. National governments and the United Nations must consider cities and local authorities as a political interlocutor, rather than a stakeholders' *Major Group*. And this is not regarding only large metropolitan areas. Small and medium sized cities and towns are vital for a sustainable future of the planet, just as SME are for the global economy.