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## Between Local Agenda 21 And A "National Master Plan": The Sustainable Region

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**BETWEEN LOCAL AGENDA 21 AND A "NATIONAL  
MASTER PLAN":  
THE SUSTAINABLE REGION**

Paper presented at the 40<sup>th</sup> Congress of the European Regional Science Association  
ERSA, Barcelona (Spain), 29<sup>th</sup> August – 1<sup>st</sup> September 2000

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## **Abstract**

*The paper focuses on the differences between the local and the regional level when implementing the concept of sustainable development. It is hypothesized that a „Regional Agenda 21“ is more than the aggregate of „Local Agenda 21“ in this very region. The difference results from taking into consideration certain issues and varying actors on the local and on the regional level.*

*There are two kinds of issues concerning the regional level. For certain local policy tasks a regional system for equalization is required because of asymmetric dynamics in development between near-by cities and smaller communities. And second issue concerns the fact that certain public activities need a larger scale to handle matters effectively and efficiently.*

*Looking at the setup of relevant actors and agency, we recognize a difference between the regional and the local level. On the regional level organized interests (and interest groups) dominate much more broader participation of citizens which is a feature more of the local level. Secondly, the regional level acts as a platform where implementation of top-down policies of the national level meets bottom-up policies of communities and larger cities.*

*What then are the consequences for governance? The regional level as a policy arena is much more confronted with conflicts between special interests and hierarchies. At first sight, this fact does not seem to be a beneficial pre-condition for implementing the concept of sustainability.*

*The paper identifies the issues which are relevant for the regional level and depicts the political activities which go along with these issues. Further, we examine the debate about policy formulation, political steering and the way different actors can influence development on a regional level. Finally, the paper draws conclusions on regional networking.*

*Key words: Regional development, sustainable development, Agenda 21*

This paper is based on a book publication, which synthesises findings of research and consulting projects. Thierstein, Alain; Walser, Manfred (2000): Die nachhaltige Region. Ein Handlungsmodell. Bern: Haupt

## **Introduction**

As it can be seen in several cases in Germany a regional agenda 21 is treated like an aggregate of the Local Agenda 21's within one region. In these cases the actors on the regional level – mainly part of the hierarchy of the federal administration – collect the existing efforts and projects on the local level as a 'demonstration of activity'. Additionally the regional actors organise the exchange of ideas and establish a platform of information. Also a lot of effort concentrates on single projects to demonstrate 'best practices'.

Most of all these activities are accompanied by insecurity about what are the tasks on the regional level to promote sustainable development. Research on sustainability mainly takes place on the local level with its specific conditions. More and more methodological aspects comes into the foreground: how to organise the dialogue between decision-makers and organised interests, how to improve the involvement of citizens and so on. On the regional level the research concentrates on some thematical aspects. The focus depends on the discipline of the author and ranges between ecological problems, spatial issues and the economic chains of value-added.

## **Problems and issues on the regional level**

On the regional level two kinds of issues are important. For certain problems a regional system for equalisation is required. There exist asymmetric dynamics in development between centre and periphery, between near-by cities and smaller communities. An interwoven small-scale problem dominates and due to relations of competition between local communities on the regional level a balance has to be created.

On the other hand some public activities need a larger scale to handle matters effectively and efficiently. Such issues for example are problems concerning the material flow, which almost always has a dimension above the local level. From this point of view the vertically merged organisation of politics plays an important role. The focus is on co-operation between the federal hierarchy of administration and the local self-organisation under the concept of subsidiarity.

At first we list the relevant issues and problems concerning the regional level:

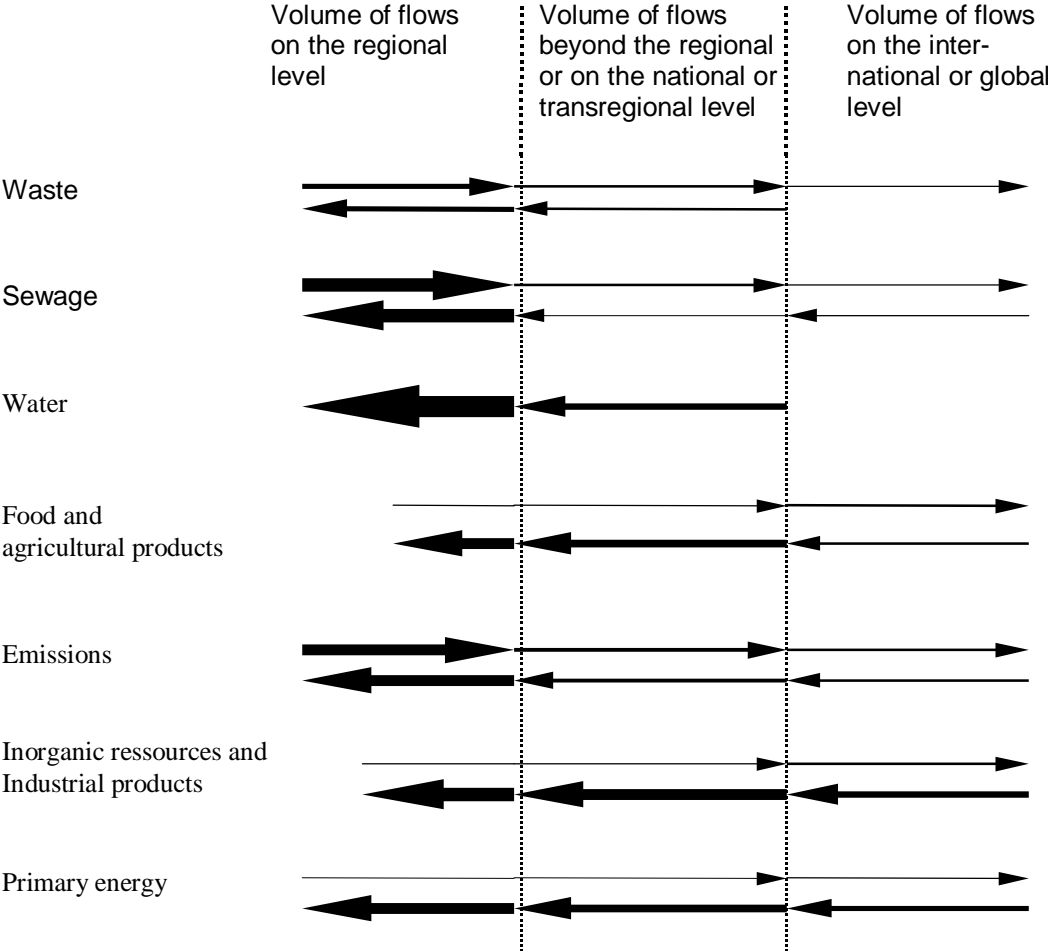
<b>issues</b>	<b>problems</b>
<p><b>Local supply, material flows</b> Regionalisation of material flows, questions of supply, development of the rural-peripheral space, mutual output and compensation</p>	<p>To decide the appropriate area of a 'region' as the case arises, to overlap the problem area with space of action, to decide the balance of performances in a co-operative way, to build up consciousness and to promote single projects</p>
<p><b>land use, infrastructure</b> housing and construction, zoning of commercial and industrial spaces, supply lines and networks (telecommunication, energy, traffic, water and sewage), green belt problems, large-scale projects with importance for spatial development</p>	<p>To work out guidelines for the patterns of land use and development, to improve the quality of co-operation, to negotiate equalisation between communities, to enable a public discourse on needs, to use methods of participative planning</p>
<p><b>Landscape, protected areas</b> Different types of landscape, ecological habitats and protection areas, material flows concerning the ecological balance, balanced functional regions or spatial division of labour</p>	<p>To develop a conceptual framework of environmental protection, to record the potential of natural space and the relevant material flows, to organise a basic discourse about the culture landscape, to develop the bases for the distribution of advantages and burdens</p>
<p><b>Regional identity</b> Historical and cultural identity, local and regional needs</p>	<p>To strengthen the consciousness of home, to motivate all kind of actors, to host processes of commitment, to work out common expectations on development, to promote a variety of lifestyles</p>
<p><b>Regional social potential</b> Visions and guidelines, endogenous regional development, innovation and networking</p>	<p>To use the potential of the social environment, to strengthen the 'soft location factors', to strengthen the specific path of development, to keep alive networks and an innovative environment</p>
<p><b>regional agenda 21</b> institutionalisation, promotion, best practices</p>	<p>To accompany institutions, to organise the exchange of ideas and experiences, to promote best practices, to improve public relations and the shaping of consciousness</p>

**Figure 1: issues and problems of a 'Regional Agenda 21' (Thierstein, Walser 2000)**

If analysing the above listed problems one can differentiate between two kinds of action: the mutual support with information and exchange on the one hand and the negotiation of conflicting interests on the other hand. The different issues and problems will be described more detailed as follows:

**Material flows and local supply**

Concerning the concept of sustainability an important element are the material flows. They influence ecological as well as economic and social issues. Different material flows have a different but distinctive impact on the regional level.



**Figure 2: Volume of material flows on a spatial scale (according to Adam 1997)<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> The figure is based on an analysis of the German Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning (Bundesamtes für Bauwesen und Raumordnung). The breadth of the arrows represent the relative volume of the material flow.

The above figure shows for example that in Germany the average export of food and agricultural products on the regional level is much smaller than the import from outside. With respect to the water supply on the other hand the global and above-regional scale does not play an important role.

With respect to the concept of sustainable development political measures to steer the material flows can be conceived fairly easily. But the political steering of economic determined flows is not an easy venture. Political goals depend on normative intentions and normative intentions can produce solution which are not satisfactory in an economic sense. Nevertheless to increase local supply and to support the labour market within one region a political strategy of uncoupling regions from international terms of trade concerning specific resources can be postulated (Fürst 1999) and it would be not fundamentally wrong. But a political rearrangement of the economic allocation has to communicate the targets in order to justify the intervention and has to stay within the rules of non-discrimination set by the World Trade Organisation WTO. To judge the efficiency of material flows a dynamic analysis is needed which takes into account the carrying capacity of spaces as well as the interwoven economic relations. The concept of sustainability is connected with a balanced relationship between ecological, economic and social goals. To implement the concept needs a set of measures of economic allocation, political planning and the equalisation of resources between different areas. The reasons for political measures needs an analysis which concentrates on 'bio-regions' rather than on political bounded regions (Verbruggen, van den Bergh 1999).

### ***Land use and infrastructure***

Problems of spatial planning covers a lot of questions exceeding the local level. This means patterns of land use as well as infrastructural supply: Zoning for construction and residential use, industry, utilisation of natural space and urban sprawl, 'sleeping villages' and commuting traffic, connections with long-distance traffic and large-scale retailing and recreational projects.

A lot of problems with planning patterns of land use and infrastructure go along with the sharing of advantages and disadvantages. The question about losers and winners is a sensitive issue. The intensification of the relationship between urban centres and green belts leads to a stronger importance of the regional level which

also means increasing communication and co-operation between localities (Schleicher Tappeser, Hey 1997). Appropriate concepts about the spatial 'division of labour' and measures of equalisation on the regional level can improve co-operation.

Some sections of infrastructural supply are of special interest according to the concept of sustainable development on a regional level. Particularly the topics of 'energy' and 'traffic' stick out, which have an increasing meaning for the global climate. Most of the topics of land use and infrastructure are problems of specialised planners. Some problems however – especially problems of traffic and large-scale project – can create a wave of involvement of a broader public even on the regional level. According to the concept of sustainability there is a chance to bring in and discuss citizens' needs also to the regional level.

### ***Landscape and protected areas***

Areas of protection easily become a political issue for the regional level, depending on the type of area or habitat. The classification of protected areas has also to take into account the material flows which can influence the ecological balance. At first it is a problem of agriculture on the one hand and sewage on the other hand. Protected areas must be interlaced in order to be able to serve as habitat for certain animals and plants. Ecological planning principles and the survey of the natural potential are necessary (Hersperger 1995).

Under the paradigm of sustainable development ecological goals have to be balanced with economic and social goals without restricting the spectrum of development for future generations. Therefore planning may not concentrate on the objective of protection exclusively. Planning must change from 'negative planning' based on prohibition to the management of resources and a strategy of 'protection by use'. It includes the discourse on ecological and social targets, the ethical foundation and the human lifestyle. Based on this the consideration takes place between different land use patterns and the respective suitable measures of compensation. Also the formulation of strategic goals and appropriate pilot projects can make an important contribution for regional development.

As it has been showed with the material flows the economic sphere may be influenced by political planning. The resulting structure of a region may be sub-optimal from an economic point of view. But it may be the appropriate structure from



the point of view of public goods, for example: to maintain a cultural landscape which is connected with small-scale agriculture holdings may be a political goal which can be reached by promoting locally produced goods. Other alternatives based on the idea of free markets either are to subsidise the maintaining of landscapes with public funds or to accept the scenic or aesthetic change.

### ***Regional identity***

In a 'Local Agenda 21' it is expected that all citizens concerned participate on the process in the long run. That corresponds to the political theory of the community as 'school of democracy'. The linkage of the local development with the individual experience of the citizens is important also on the regional level. It can produce motivation to take part in processes of development.

However what components determine a regional identity? On the one hand life-styles and economic behaviour are shaped regionally (Majer 1994), on the other hand the consciousness of regionalism at first grows in people's mind. With the perception of a global standardised 'Disney World' the need for an unmistakable regional identity arises (Lukesch 1994). To look beyond the horizon of one's own region enables most people to realise the existence of 'homeland' as a counterpart of the globalized world. The specific quality of 'homeland' results from the historical uniqueness of a place or region. The region's path of development can be shown best with historic buildings and customs from the past.

While emphasising regional identity there are clear differences between planners and citizens. The expert and planner knowledge often creates a tendency towards treating historical references like a museum. Among citizens a real development take place which more easily combines traditional and 'modern' references anew time and again. Culture plays an important role. The whole of the cultural expressions keeps the region alive. Expert knowledge is demanded as knowledge of coaching and mediation rather than as knowledge about specific action.

### ***Regional social capital***

The meaning of the social capital for sustainable regional development cannot be over-emphasised. The region is a product of physical space, historical experience and the samples of the social relations determining all processes of development (Keating 1996). As a base a common understanding of existing trends and the

overall goals of development is needed. 'Regional culture' as a term which connects a common perception about regional social capital and thus is a prerequisite and consequence of the regional development at the same time (Krippendorf et al. 1992).

Regional social capital includes the demographic components as well as social networks up to the 'sum out of competencies based on different kinds of knowledge' (Schubert 1999). It forms a special environment which can create innovation as social process depending on this social capital (AEIDL 1997). The regional social capital enables regional actors to influence the development in delimitation with the national and global development. Delimitation does not mean isolation but rather to develop intentionally a region's own development path which Lukesch (1994) terms 'independent country'.

Such development needs a basic cohesion within a region, based on a common vision or philosophy. Under this vision involved and initiative people from different fields of activity and a professional consulting company can form a network for a sustainable regional development. Forming an 'innovative environment' or 'milieu' as it is discussed in economic science networks can be important players in a region. But if networks are too closely connected they also can block development. They create a network of prevention to maintain the 'status quo' based on a common understanding and an established balance of power (Grabher 1992).

### ***Regional Agenda 21***

A regional agenda 21 means to institutionalise the efforts towards a sustainable regional development. It is a new quality of tasks and activities on the regional level combining the issues and problems listed above.

An important aspect of this process of institutionalising is the perspective: Actors from politics and administration have to agree on the concept of sustainability as a guideline for further public activities. Otherwise the danger exists that regional actors only "assemble" existing 'sustainability' projects and Local Agendas 21 under a common umbrella to use this 'Regional Agenda 21' for the marketing of the region.

The regional level is adequately used as a field of co-operation with mutual information about different issues and methods and the promotion of best practices. Such a supplement to existing projects and local processes may lead to a 'competition of the best ideas'.

But on the other hand an Agenda 21 on the regional level is confronted with much more conflicts as on the local level. While a Local Agenda 21 is able to deal with small-scale projects based on the interests of personally involved citizens, a Regional Agenda 21 is a much more abstract venture. On the regional level organised interests dominate. This often causes a struggle between different interests if the actors involved judge themselves representatives of these interests rather than a part of a common of problem-solving process.

The second reason which can cause conflicts are the above mentioned examples of competition. Material flows and patterns of land use often have to deal with co-operation and equalisation. In general, most regional topics of equalisation generate losers and winners. The balance between big cities and small communities as well as between neighbouring communities or regions is fragile. A lot of negotiation and co-operation is necessary otherwise spatial competition will produce a unhealthy level of tension on the regional level.

These kind of conflicts which are hidden on the local level are an important reason for institutionalising the co-operation between different interests under the label and the request of an 'Regional Agenda 21'. This means to start with old-fashioned planning and to arrive at regional change management

## **Regional Change Management – what does it mean for governance?**

There are different approaches to influence regional development (see Strati 1997):

- The 'approach of optimisation' stresses the important role of targets, which are exactly defined. A detailed analysis of the regions situation based on solid data is necessary. On this foundation goals of different policy fields can be formulated which are seen to be relevant for the development of this region. From that on, detailed measures have to be worked out. To implement the goals weaknesses are to be eliminated step for step. It is the approach of the 'classic' planning approach known since the 70<sup>th</sup> when the legitimacy of planning has been restricted to the political level.
- The 'rational approach' stresses the satisfaction of needs as overall goal of planning. The approach accepts incomplete information. Processes of

negotiation are the focal point to determine the goals and targets. There is no other reason for fixing the goals as the needs of the interests involved. Beneath politics and administration well-organised interests dominate this approach which often ends up as a legally fixed hearing.

- The 'incremental approach' is focussed on gradual and slight modifications. It is based mainly on qualitative information and subjective judgement. The goals change during the process of planning at least gradually. Therefore an accompanying evaluation plays an important role. This approach is used for example with the European Union community initiatives LEADER and INTERREG.

The three approaches differ according to their comprehension of planning as well as according to the people involved. On the regional level co-operation beyond institutionalised planning and politics increases (ARL 1993). Sustainable regional development can fall back upon a new consciousness, which becomes more and more established. It consists of elements of the rational approach as well as of the incremental approach.

In this understanding of planning two methodologies can be noticed. Fürst (1999) differentiates between two basic methodologies regarding sustainable regional development. First, the 'strategy of action' is the foundation of most of the Local Agendas 21. Pilot projects and best practices are said to enable a change in awareness towards sustainability as well as to start a process of empowerment based on the success of well-done projects. It is a bottom-up strategy but is limited through voluntary participation. But when a project creates winners and losers then the initial objective of the concept of sustainable development has been violated.

Second, the 'strategy of governing' aims at a scientific-based co-evolution of the basic structures in politics, economics and social systems. The strategy builds on a mix the co-ordination mechanisms of the market and public. It also involves approaches of innovation and self-help. This strategy is much more top-down oriented to introduce a structural change.

Both strategies have to complement each other. But due to their political structure and competencies the regional level has to follow the logic of action rather than the logic of governing. Regional policy mainly addresses the political-administrative

system itself as well as the private households. Public discourse, the assessment tools (Environmental Impact Assessment, eco-audit, sustainability indicators) and the concept of 'learning' (like in 'Learning Regions') serve above all as important instruments. With these instruments the three main spheres of sustainable development (ecology, social system, economic system) can be interlined (Fürst 1999).

The concept of regional change management (Thierstein et al. 1997) follows a similar, but somewhat wider grasped logic. It is the breakthrough of the clear rationality of 'if – then'. Structural change can be achieved if it is important enough for the players in the region to make a contribution. Personal commitment is the main resource of the region. Parallel to the regional analysis, first objectives will be formulated. An ongoing evaluation of all measures takes place during implementation; purposeful and reflexive (process orientated) approaches are used in parallel.

According to the 'St. Gall Concept of Management' three levels of management have to be distinguished: normative (justifying), strategic (accomplishing) and operational (implementing) management. All management activities, which are aimed at the transformation of social context, concern at the same time the organisational (structural) level as well as the level of projects and the level of individual behaviour. Therefore a superordinated philosophy is needed as a 'point of orientation'.

Regional change management uses these three levels: Normative, strategic and operational management. The degree of complexity of any given problems requires the same complexity of solutions, according to Ashby's law of variety, because "only variety can control variety" (see Schwaninger 1997).<sup>2</sup>

But what does it mean for governance? Autonomous decision-making hardly plays a role in regional policy. Autonomous governance is replaced by co-operation in many policy fields. Co-operation is the 'conditio sine qua non' not only with regard to

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2 See also another paper presented at the ERSA 2000 conference: Daniela Grabher, Roland Scherer, Manfred Walser: **One region, three networks**. Processes of self-organisation as a strategy for sustainable regional development.

sustainable regional development but also with regard to regional development in general – albeit in a different degree, depending on national political structures).

Two axis of co-operation can be differentiated. First, institutionalised co-operation takes place within political boundaries or by contractual linkages between administrative units. Second, voluntary co-operation is based on consensus, trust and responsibility. New forms of co-operation bring together regional participants not according to their function as member of a group or institution, but as committed citizens. They are inspired by the common philosophy of sustainability. A new form of a regional elite is not determined by their affiliation to certain social classes or party memberships. Rather they form a type of 'rainbow coalition' with involved actors coming from all angles of society. This kind of co-operation can be called a 'Regional Innovation Coalitions for Sustainability' (RICS; see Thierstein 1997) to promote 'sustainable innovations' on the regional level. The task of politics and public administration is to establish a supporting framework and to create agencies of development to accompany co-operation.

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