We analyse the Local Agenda 21 (LA21) implementation process in Western Europe from 1992 to the present day. The focus of our investigation is the value perceived by local governments when they have to decide whether to implement the LA21 management tool. Basing our work on a literature review and on our own direct observations we construct a theory that explains the development of LA21 processes. Our model differentiates three types of processes in terms of local government profiles and policy making at higher levels of government: (1) Isolated, (2) Supported and (3) Connected. And it attempts to make a contribution to: (1) LA21 literature and (2) policy network literature. Previous LA21 literature discussed factors that hold back and drive LA21 processes, but a comprehensive conceptual framework has not been constructed.

**KEYWORDS**

Local Agenda 21, Sustainable Development, European Situation, connected model, isolated model, policy networks
1. Objectives

Our research focuses on the European experience of implantation of Local Agenda 21 (LA21), a tool for designing and implementing strategies of Sustainable Development (SD) at a local level, from a governance perspective. There exists an important consensus that the environmental, social and economic targets of SD will not be met without the full involvement of Local Governments (LGs) and of civil society. Many of the problems and solutions relating to SD are to be found at a local level (concerning dispersed pollution, for instance). The United Nations proposal to push for local SD strategies, under the name of LA21, to be drawn up and implemented, and be harmonically integrated with strategies at higher levels of government, i.e. Agenda 21, was undersigned, at least nominally, by all the European countries participating in the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil, June 1992). 15 years later, however, LG response is far from generalised. Our investigation seeks to go into the causes of this failure and at the same time to indicate possible alternative routes towards a more extended diffusion of SD strategies within the local sphere.

In addition, we attempt to establish some order in the fragmented and relatively chaotic literature about LA21 in Europe. Most of the previous LA21 literature centred on case studies or studies in relation to specific States. Some exceptions are the studies by Coenen, Eckeberg and Lafferty (Eckerberg and Lafferty, 1998; Eckerberg et al, 1999; Lafferty, 2001; Lafferty and Coenen, 2001), the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) (ICLEI, 1997; 2002), and more recently the DISCUS European research project (fully reported in Evans et al, 2005), an investigation of local sustainability policy and practice in 40 European LGs, and the Federal Office for Spatial Development (ARE) report (ARE, 2005). LA21 studies have employed a variety of methods. Some quantitative studies of specific States have tried to evaluate the degree to which processes, their characteristics and their results have made headway and they have sometimes related survey results to LG characteristics or profiles (Eckeberg and Dahlgren, 2007; Sancassiani, 2005). But since there is no consensus-supported theory identifying variables that are dependent (size of municipality, for example, or degree of autonomy) or independent (the degree, say, to which processes are disseminated) and how they connect, and providing scales of measurement, surveys have been constructed ad hoc, based on a concrete situation and on researchers’ prior experience. The contribution we make is to identify the factors that cause LGs to get an LA21 process moving and which appear in dispersed form in the literature. So our work must serve as a base from which to pre-select factors and items for a quantitative study in the future at a European level.

Our thesis is that policy making for LA21 promotion in Europe has essentially been produced via three kinds of processes, which we term as: 1) isolated process, if LA21 implementation was left solely in the hands of the LG; 2) supported process, if LA21 was driven and supported to a degree by higher levels of government and by other actors; and 3) connected process, if a specific policy network was created to implant LA21. And we believe that the actual type of process is of great relevance for explaining the rhythm of LA21 implementation.

We develop a new model in which we include the three types of processes and demonstrate that the argument shared by policy network literature, that the most connected models are superior to those that are less connected, is right in terms of the diffusion of LA21 processes, but we also suggest that the most connected models run the risk of erring when trying to select the optimum tool and of standing in the way of progress towards higher quality tools. This constitutes a contribution to policy network literature, which, although it has argued broadly in favour of the advantages of networking, has provided little empirical evidence to show the superiority of networking over other disconnected alternatives. Thus, Kenis and Raab (2003a), state that policy network literature has assumed that policy networks are by definition a good way of policy making. But “this claim that policy networks are a superior form of policy making as such (if only properly managed), is, however, far from being proved” (Kenis and Raab, 2003a, page 6). Some authors have also recently demanded the development of an explicit theory that explains how particular policy network conditions imply particular policy results (e.g. Kenis and Raab, 2003b; Meier and O’Toole, 2003; Peterson, 2003).

Lastly, our analysis will be helpful for newcomers to LA21 processes because, by adopting a benchmarking focus, they will be able to proceed faster and with greater guarantees.
2. The model to be tested

Our model has its roots in LA21, policy networks and marketing/management literatures and is summarised in Figure 1. Kern et al (2004) explained LA21 diffusion using innovation diffusion models. Their analysis concentrates on the capacity of local authorities to adopt this innovation and on transfer mechanisms. Three factors play a key role with respect to variations in the diffusion of LA21 in different national and regional contexts: (1) direct LG capacity for action; (2) financial and political support from national and regional governmental organisations (induced capacities); and (3) the existence of agenda transfer institutions to promote the exchange of experience and support the diffusion of best practice.

Our framework extends this view. A special connection exists with marketing literature (Frels et al, 2003; Sawhney and Parikh, 2001), because we focus on local authorities’ decisions regarding adoption of the LA21 tool. Figure 1 shows the three key antecedents that, in our view, impact on the local authorities’ decisions: 1) the new stand-alone tool perceived performance, in our case stand-alone LA21 performance; 2) value added by the “producers” (e.g. central governments) of “value complements” (e.g. methodologies); and 3) the existence of a policy network. Antecedents 2) and 3) are explained by policy making. To gain clarity our conceptual framework adopts an initial approach in which only antecedent 1) is considered. We named this approach the “isolated process”. Then antecedents 2) and 3) are added, by which we obtain what we term the “supported process” and the “connected process”.

Following marketing literature (e.g. Kotler, 1999), within a stand-alone perspective, local authorities adopt a new management tool, such as LA21, when they perceive that the value/utility of adoption is greater than the value of other possible alternative options. Value perceived is equal to benefits perceived less costs and risks perceived. Value perceived depends on tool characteristics and particular LG characteristics. For example, as we will see later, government size, environmental and social culture, autonomy and political orientation, among others factors, impact on value assigned to environmental and social tools like LA21.

But elements external to the focal tool can also build additional value and drive its adoption (Frels et al, 2003; Lambkin and Day, 1989; Moore, 1999) by creating a compelling reason to adopt it (Moore, 1999, page 115). Thus value can be added in a “supported process”, in which some producers, such as higher levels of government or other actors, local NGOs, for instance, can decide to add value to the tool by offering “value complements” (e.g. financial support or training) to the isolated tool. The strength and characteristics of the complements impact on the value perceived by local authorities (Frels et al, 2003). Furthermore, the existence of different producers offers access to a second/alternative/complementary source (Farrell and Gallini, 1988). It is relevant because sometimes a producer cannot serve a complement at all or cannot serve it well - e.g. a regional government cannot offer financial funding, while a central government can (Conner, 1995; Robertson, 1993). Producers sometimes compete actively among themselves offering different complements to adopters.

In general terms, we assume that the more the quality and the quantity of producers and complements, the greater is the value perceived by local authorities. But, as we shall explain in detail below, with reference to the case of financing in Sweden, some complements can sometimes go against the objective of disseminating LA21 processes, even though their producers maintain this is not their aim. This happens because the producers do not take the opinion of LG sufficiently into account when they define the value complements or try to fulfil several objectives. Other weaknesses of the “supported process” are: (1) lack of comprehensiveness: some important producers (e.g. regional or provincial governments) may decide not to support the processes; (2) lack of density: there is a weak relationship between the producers and LGs; (2) lack of integration: an excess of some value complements may be produced (e.g. methodologies), while there may be a dearth of others.
This does not happen in the “connected process”. A comprehensive, dense and integrated policy network of relevant actors and complements runs as a “value network” (Bradenburger and Nalebuff, 1996) that offers significant additional value to adopters by generating network externalities (Frels et al, 2003; Kotabe et al, 1996; Srivastaba et al, 1998). Comprehensiveness refers to the inclusion of all relevant actors and complements; density refers to the number of interactions between actors; and integration refers to the suitability of complements and producers to the product. So, integration, comprehensiveness and density are additional values created by the policy network. Policy networks also imply a higher level of commitment from the network drivers and those who take part in them. Furthermore, the number and prestige of the adopters are, in addition, a main consideration for local authorities. Institutional theory has shown that increased adoption builds legitimacy in the institutional environment, accelerating the rate of adoption of new tools (Di Maggio and Powell, 1991; Meyer and
Rowan, 1991). Ultimately these innovations reach a level of legitimisation where failure to adopt them is seen as irrational and negligent. Network externality theory provides additional support by stating that the size of user network is the key driving factor behind adoption decisions (Katz and Shapiro, 1985). These factors will be explained in more detail when we analyse the cases of eco-municipalities in Sweden and the Basque Country in Spain. The following sections are devoted to explaining the three forms of policy making and their results.

3. Next steps

Based upon literature review we have built a theory identifying variables that are dependent and independent (the degree to which processes are disseminated) and how they connect. The contribution we have made is to identify the factors that cause LGs to get an LA21 process moving and which appear in dispersed form in the literature. The work developed must serve as a base from which to select factors and items for a quantitative study in the future at a European level.

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