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**The Local Agenda 21 as a Planning Instrument
for Sustainable Development:
The case of Greece**

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**ΠΑΝΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΙΟ ΘΕΣΣΑΛΙΑΣ
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“The Local Agenda 21 as a planning instrument for Sustainable Development: the case of Greece”

1. Introduction

The objective of this paper is to examine the importance and the present or future role of Local Agenda 21 as a process of social dialogue and participation and as an instrument for implementing sustainable development. The subject is approached through a critical investigation of the participatory processes that have been implemented or are still being implemented (before and after the Conference of Rio in 1992), within the framework of physical and environmental planning practice in Greece. The experience of the last fifteen years and moreover of the last five ones, as regards legislation and planning studies constitute a sufficient material in order to evaluate the efficiency of the relevant institutional instruments and organisational processes. The paper comprises also a critical presentation of the most important planning programmes implemented during this specific period, namely the Urban Reconstruction Operation (URO), the Structure Plans of all Prefectures (districts), the Special Physical Planning Studies (SPPS), etc. Moreover, special emphasis is given to attempts developed during the last 5 years by greek local authorities in order to bring the Local Agenda 21 into operation.

2. Local Authorities and Sustainable Development

It is well known that, in the last two decades, a dominant issue of scientific and political concern is that of the environment in relation to development- in its modern version of sustainable development - as well as in relation to other basic concepts which are presently being revised (nature, social and scientific progress etc).

The environment, as a new area of cognition, as a new domain of theory and practice, thinking and action, drastically affects both the philosophy of science (new interdisciplinary approaches) and social practice. It is not an accident

that the protection of the environment is a fundamental goal of almost all social organizations and institutions of public or private character. This is so, because care for the environment must be considered as the other side of the process of development, its qualitative dimension. In other words it is the acceptance of a sustainable model of development. This is the approach and concept adopted by the International Commission on Environment and Development of the UN and by the relevant report this Commission drafted in 1988 under the well - known title "Our common future". According to this approach, development must be based on the ecological principles of solidarity between the generations, renewability of the (renewable) natural resources etc., so that it may include the environmental - qualitative parameter as its necessary and sufficient condition. Environment is not just an issue or an aspect of development, but a dominant dimension crossing the process of development horizontally.

Environment and Development are the two sides of the same reality. Yet, despite the fact that they have a common origin, they are experienced today as two separate concepts, practices and processes. Historically, this unnatural break between the protection and management of the environment on the one hand and the process of development on the other, occurred in the period of transition from pre-industrial (traditional) societies to industrial (and post-industrial) ones. An outcome of this process is what we call today environmental or developmental crisis.

In contemporary societies, the connection or unification of these two processes can only be achieved consciously, that is through planning, contrary to what has been taking place spontaneously and automatically in traditional societies when the two processes were organically interconnected. That is why today, the planning for development is a matter of urgency.

Yet, planning as an integral part of the political process, cannot be conceived without the appropriate institutions and without a concrete scope or area of intervention. Therefore, local authorities of which space and environment is by definition a fundamental dimension, are unquestionably if not the main, at least one of the main "natural" institutions of environmental and developmental planning, as all other political institutions (e.g. the central administration).

Following this reasoning, the role of local authorities must be examined from two standpoints:

- From the standpoint of developmental and environmental ideology and philosophy that determine the basic principles, the goals and the framework of action of the local authorities in that domain.
- From the standpoint of the creation of the appropriate institutional tools and mechanisms lacking today and demanded by local authorities, which requires a general and joint intervention of all actors involved in environmental management.

As concerns the first aspect, that of environmental ideology we should distinguish the following three points:

- a. The local authorities, as fundamental political, social and cultural institutions are by nature and position the competent actors for managing space and environment and therefore for managing development. The consolidation and recognition of their environmental and developmental role is necessary, not only in theory but also in political practice. Already at EU level, regarding the general role played by local and regional authorities in the process of European development, there is a vivid dialogue and concern around the principles of partnership and subsidiarity, which many things have been written for. The target is the upgrading of local authorities by means of these two principles. Thus, according to the partnership principle, local authorities are called to claim a seat in the negotiating table and the decision-making process as the third equal partner besides the Member States and the European Commission. This is a position which surely has not yet been recognized - at least in Greece. Now, as concerns the subsidiarity principle in its narrow sense, the Union has to deal with issues which Member States and local authorities are unable to undertake. However, in its broader and more essential sense, subsidiarity is identified with the concept of joint responsibility, which means not only choosing the appropriate administrative level of each action, but also combining the levels and institutions involved in the problem to be resolved, always starting from the lowest level. In other words, decisions must be taken at the level which is the closest possible to the citizens. After all, this is a basic imperative of the Maastricht Treaty.

- b. Environment is primarily a local issue and problem. And if many times this problem cannot be realized and understood at a local level, it can often be resolved and mainly be prevented at this level. Obviously environment has an international character and a global dimension. However, this dimension almost always appears at a second stage. The environmental problem is always manifested or rather is always generated at the local level, while its consequences appear or are understood at a higher level, be it regional, national or international. Typical examples here are the phenomenon of greenhouse effect and that of the ozone hole, where many local actions have caused a universal reaction of our planet, the "Gaia", according to the new terminology.
- c. It is widely accepted that environment and environmental policy aim mainly at common interest and social benefit and that therefore their social control is necessary. Local authorities, which by definition are closer to the citizen and to society, are able to guarantee social control through public participation, more than any other actor or institution.¹

Now as concerns the role of local authorities from the standpoint of institutional tools and mechanisms the following should be stressed:

The implementation of the above principles, mainly those of *partnership* and *subsidiarity*, demands efficient organizational structures, mechanisms and procedures, so that local authorities may participate at this "game" on a more equal basis, while respecting the rules of the game. This means that the question of the participation of local authorities at all stages and levels of environmental and developmental planning is posed point blank: participation in decision-making, in the implementation of decisions and in monitoring the results of the actions.

¹ Relevant to these above observations are the Declaration and the Action Plan (Agenda 21) of the World Conference of the UN on Environment and Development convened at Rio, in June 1992. Chapter 28 of the Agenda 21 starts with the following points as concerns the initiatives to be taken by local authorities for the promotion of the Action plan: "Because so many of the problems and solutions being addressed by Agenda 21 have their roots in local activities, the participation and cooperation of local authorities will be a determining factor in fulfilling its objectives. Local authorities construct, operate and maintain economic, social and environmental infrastructure, oversee planning processes, establish local environmental policies and regulations, and assist in implementing national and subnational environmental policies. As the level of governance closest to the people, they play a vital role in educating, mobilizing and responding to the public to promote sustainable development."

The problem posed here is centered on the difficulties and the obstacles arising mainly from the structural weaknesses of local authorities themselves. It is clear that the management of environmental issues presupposes the proper organization of local authority institutions. This constitutes the necessary condition for local authorities to be able to carry out their basic functions (political, administrative, economic and technical) with a relative if not an absolute sufficiency. If local authorities are not properly functioning and if they have not substantial territories, (organic geographical entities) then we cannot speak of resolving and radically overcoming these structural weaknesses and therefore we cannot speak of an efficient local environmental policy towards sustainability.

The lack of the appropriate mechanisms and the need to create them is seen in practice in the implementation of the environmental programs of the Community Support Framework or in the implementation of various programmes arising from Community Initiatives.

3. The experience of participatory planning for development in the period 1972-1992

In Greece, from 1972 to 1992, that is in the period between the Stockholm World Conference and that of the Rio Summit, physical and environmental planning followed a course which may be divided in two distinct stages: the first until approximately 1982 (covering the 1970s) and the second until 1992 (covering the 1980s).

From a point of view of political intentions, the type of planning adopted in Greece during this period was considered as the basic means to achieve a more *balanced and uniform development and pattern of growth* with the aim of acquiring better life conditions according to the values, aspirations and expectations of greek local societies².

Thus, the purpose of physical planning policy in Greece was to reduce inequalities between regions, aggravated by the economic growth system, which created two "Greeces" (centre and periphery) with *two different*

² For further information see the preliminary report of the "5-year National Plan for Social and Economic Development 1983-87", Introductory Remarks - Basic Political Choices, p.p. 7-14, Athens, June 1983.

*development pulse-rates*³. Moreover, inside the region, planning aimed to coordinate all social, economic and cultural activities in order to express them into terms of space, establishing a close relationship between physical, environmental and socio-economic factors. In other words, the kind of planning adopted was supposed to serve as an indispensable instrument in local and regional development process, much more useful than the financial measures and mechanisms as incentives etc.

In these two decades the role of the State and the local authorities, as to their involvement in planning, has considerably changed. During the first decade the role of local authorities was rather restricted compared to their west european counterparts and therefore participatory process was almost non-existent (despite the fact that in Europe this practice had emerged since the 60s). As a result, physical planning studies had a merely technocratic character and were almost entirely not implemented. This means that studies were produced but the proposals they contained were not implemented.

In the early '80s, as the main problem of physical planning in Greece was still the lack of a substantial and coherent planning system, the adopted policy was based on tackling all planning levels in appropriate ways and in accordance with the existing legal and administrative framework. In addition, there was a *pressing need* for more concrete policies and proposals on lower planning levels as well as the transfer of *responsibilities* and *competences* from the State to local government. So, the physical planning policy was formulated as follows:

On national level: The development policies and general proposals of the five-year plan 83-87 served as national planning guidelines.

On regional (district) level: The preparation of a "*structure plan*" in each district⁴ was decided for providing the necessary physical planning background to the district councils despite the absence of specific planning rules. The

³ Regional imbalance in early '80s was one of the main problems of socio-economic development in Greece. The regional policies introduced to face this problem during the period after the Second World War have found expression in various documents (plans, programmes, laws etc) which cannot be mentioned here. About this matter, see also the OECD report "Regional Problems and Policies in Greece", 1981.

⁴ In this text the term "district" is identical with "region" and vice-versa. In the early '80s, regions as administrative and planning units - immediately under the national level - didn't exist. They were established later in 1987. Consequently, districts at that period constituted the only "regional" structure of the country.

district council was a *regional public institution*, an indirectly elected body (but not yet a “regional authority”), which functioned beside to the prefect - officer appointed by the Government. This council, set up in each prefecture (district) since 1982 (L.1235/82), had the competence to promote the region’s socio-economic development. It had the authority to approve the *yearly expenditure programme* and the *five-year development plan* concerning its area. Consequently, the preparation of a “structure plan” was normally a prerequisite for the decision-making process in the council in order to express its opinion on development matters. It must also be noticed that the “structure plan” would play an important role in serving both as a *long term planning frame* and as a *programme for immediate action*. The level of specificity required in the plan was mainly governed by the need of the local community to comprehend the proposals and to be able to respond to them in a meaningful way.

The preparation of the “structure plans” in the 49 districts, needed a *tremendous effort* of all bodies involved with procedures ranging from staff meetings on ministerial level to residents’ meetings at local level. This operation was a task that had to be accomplished *simultaneously* in all parts of the country and within a short time period of two years (‘82-’84). In comparison with similar operations in other more developed countries⁵, it represented a large amount of work which in addition was carried out in *the absence of a specific statutory planning framework*. It must also be noticed that this operation led to a nation-wide mobilisation of all ministerial services, public and private agencies and local authorities.

During the elaboration of the plans, a close co-operation - under the co-ordination of the Ministry of Planning - was established between Ministries and central bodies on national level as well as between all local authorities Agricultural Co-operatives, Technical and Commercial Chambers, Labour Unions and other local agencies on district level. However, this co-operation was not without difficulties⁶. It is needless to say that very often, misunderstanding, disagreements and quarrels occurred between these bodies.

⁵ In Britain it took many years to cover the whole country (65 regions) with "structure plans", a similar planning "tool".

⁶ The principal cause for these difficulties was the traditional competition between ministries and other public agencies which were involved in the planning process. From an other point of view these problems are mainly due to the assumption that co-operation should function automatically and so there was no need to handle it.

Public participation and consultation (“*Planning from below*”⁷) was not a statutory requirement in the preparation of the “structure plans”. It was only a *democratic task* which had to be performed with a high degree of credibility in order to secure an adequate publicity of the survey material, the proposals and other matters included in the plan. So, a series of meetings were arranged in each prefecture for all local agencies, NGOs and the public in order to explain the nature of the plan. Besides, a very wide variety of central and local bodies were consulted and all these observations were taken into account by the planning authorities in the preparation of the final plan.

Other more specific remarks coming from this planning experience are the following:

- a) The need for a *close relationship* between physical planning and development policies was proved indispensable at any level.
- b) *Clarity* of policies and proposals is *essential* for planning in cases where there is a *weak* legal and administrative framework.
- c) The existence of a *coherent statutory planning system* is not as important in the preparation of the plans as in their implementation. For this reason, emphasis should be given to guarantee the *continuity* and *persistence* of the implementation procedures and thus ensuring the maximum *effectiveness* of the proposals as well as their revisions when it is necessary.
- d) The main asset of this planning effort, independently of its negative or positive effects is the *contact* of the people with the planning *concepts* and *procedures* which enabled them to understand the importance of spatial planning for sustainable development.

Contrary to planning at the district level, at lower levels and particularly in the cities, a serious effort was undertaken to institutionalize the public participation in the framework of the Urban Reconstruction Operation. A number of participatory processes were provided for in the new Settlement Act incorporated in greek legislation for the first time. Actually we refer to the provision of Article 30 (Act 1333/83) on the creation of a Neighbourhood Planning Committee (NPC) which would express its opinion before the local authorities (Town or Neighbourhood Councils) on all issues and problems raised by the urban planning study elaborated for the particular area. The

⁷ Public involvement and participation was actually a totally new experience in greek planning system and has positively influenced the whole planning process. It had an important educating role and showed the need for closer contact between public, NGOs and planning authorities.

Committee was to be elected by the individual inhabitants of the urban planning unit (neighbourhood) covered by the study. In the same Act (Article 3 par. 2) other processes were also provided for (public meetings, information through the press etc.) aiming at increasing the public participation in the development process of the area. Thus, for the first time the population was able to participate in the process of planning in an organised way.

Despite the fact that the competences of these new participatory bodies were advisory, their creation was useful, as they favoured conditions of transparency in decision-making and played an important educational role for the public taking part in a process which was an entirely new experience.

In general terms, this experience had positive effects despite the fact that things did not run as one would have expected. In order to take full advantage of the new institution all parties involved should have been properly prepared. Yet, as personnel and organisation were lacking at the level of the municipalities, the neighbourhood committees shouldered all the burden of the organisation of the meetings with the inhabitants and the local associations. As a result, they soon got tired and their role slackened.

The question of the participation of the public and local associations was also raised in the course of other planning programmes, in the second half of the 1980s, e.g. the Special Physical Planning Studies (SPPS)⁸ for the environmental protection of the countryside and the so-called Local Development Programmes (LDP) which, as to their content, touched upon the whole range of local development issues contained on Local Agenda 21. As regards the SPPS, participation of all local associations and organisations as well as of NGOs in the process of dialogue and negotiation was provided for in the ministerial decision setting the specifications of these studies.

⁸ Around the end of the 80s and under the pressure of the environmental and tourist policies of the European Union, and the Mediterranean Action Plan of the UN as well, the issue of the integrated management of the sensitive areas of the Mediterranean is put on a firm and systematic foundation. Thus, financed by community, two series of studies are being assigned, five years apart one from the other.

The first series of Special Physical Planning Studies (SPPS) is made in context of the Mediterranean Integrated Programmes (MIP). It includes 21 studies (assignment period 1986-1989) the elaboration of which is been completed for some time now.

The second series of Special Physical Planning Studies is financed by the community programme ENVIRREG. It includes 13 studies, still under elaboration (!) which have as their exclusive target the designation of land use zones for the development and the protection of the coastal area, that is of a 10 Kilometres wide zone starting from the sea, as determined by the rules of this programme.

From the experience of all programmes and studies in the 1982-1992 period, a general remark is that a very long time was needed for their elaboration⁹, which was not the case, at least to such an extent, in the 70s, when participatory processes were not as developed. The explanation boils down to the essence of what we call planning. Planning is not just elaborating studies but implementing them as well. The difference therefore is due to the fact that introduction of participatory processes, actually meant integration of procedures, foreseen for the planning implementation, into the stage of elaboration. In other words, the involvement of organizations and the public in discussions concerning the solution of local problems proposed by the study, led people(users) to a more reserved and negative attitude, either from fear that their interests may be harmed, or from an increased sense of responsibility in expressing their opinion and participating in the decision-making process. The result was that because of frictions and/or conflicts often arising, there was a delay in the approval of each stage of the studies and therefore in the overall of their elaboration. Thus, in the 70s, planning studies were not implemented because the opinion of all those who were to be affected by the proposed measures were not taken into account through participation. The result was that they resisted the implementation of those studies. Yet, once the importance of participation in elaborating a study was understood, reactions started causing delays almost since the drafting stage of the studies.

As a general remark, one could maintain that this process of social dialogue, independently of the impact it had on planning and on the promotion of local development, constituted a first *actual implementation of Agenda 21*, even before this concept itself was formulated.

Therefore the problem of public participation and the co-operation of local organisations which is the essence of Local Agenda 21 (from both its procedural and political aspects) was already raised, long before the programme of sustainable development was officially declared and initiated by the Rio Summit in 1992.

⁹ It should be noted that in 1992, ten years after the initiation of the Urban Reconstruction Operation, there were urban planning studies which had not been implemented or were not yet fully elaborated.

4. The (non) implementation of Local Agenda 21 in Greece

The most renowned subject and programme of Agenda 21, namely that of Chapter 28, unfortunately found a rather minor response and application in Greece. Agenda 21, the most important “product” of the Rio Summit, is a detailed Action Plan consisting of 40 chapters, which provides for special initiatives to be taken by the Member States of the UN. Through this plan, national governments are called upon to submit annual progress reports to the special Committee for Sustainable Development (CSD). Furthermore, the member states of the EU have the task to elaborate, apart from the annual reports, National Action Plans for the implementation of Agenda 21 which, it should be noted, is not a binding agreement like the international conventions. However, it has an important impact internationally and many initiatives have been taken by several countries.

Chapter 28 of the Agenda, known as Local Agenda 21, is dedicated to initiatives which the local authorities and other relevant organisations are called upon to take, for the implementation of the principles of sustainable development at a local level. In that respect, it constitutes a micrography of Agenda 21 and is essentially connected to all issues referred to in the other chapters of this document. It is simply referring to a lower scale of implementation. The central idea of Local Agenda 21, the key-point for its comprehension, is that under contemporary conditions it proposes an “opening” of the local societies to dialogue and negotiation, aiming at consensus-building for resolving the problems of local development. It is actually an extension of the idea of social participation which originated in the 1960s in most of the Western countries and in the 1980s in Greece. Now together with the public participation, co-operation and collaboration among local organisations is required, so that appropriate joint actions may be taken for the promotion of local development.

From a theoretical standpoint this is a re-emergence of integrated comprehensive planning at local level, aiming at sustainable development which is the new policy dogma of the 1990s. According to the timetable of actions of Local Agenda 21, by 1994 a high degree of co-ordination among local authorities, representing cities and other areas, should be achieved. Also by 1996, local authorities in each country should have achieved, through dialogue, a consensus on “Local Agenda 21” in their respective areas.

As was mentioned before, in Greece the implementation of programme of local Agenda 21 was not satisfactory. Mobilisation of local authorities in particular was very much delayed and when a first pilot implementation was attempted in 1996, deadlines set by the timetable had already expired.

According to a report of International Council of Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI), by November 1996, a number of 1812 projects of local Agenda 21 were under way in 64 member states of the UN. Of these, 1119 or 62% were being implemented in the 15 member states of the European Union. In Greece, despite the fact that from 1994 to 1997, national reports were drafted and submitted to the Committee for Sustainable Development (CDS) of the UN, the promotion of the programmes of local Agenda 21 was left to the initiative of the local authorities. Yet, the lack of information and the weakness of the greek local authorities were serious obstacles for the elaboration of these programmes. On the other hand, and for the same reasons, the Central Union of Municipalities and Communities (KEDKE) as well as the Local Unions (TEDK), did not play their executive role in time, so as to guide and assist their members in promoting the necessary processes. Thus, by the end of the five year period, set as a deadline by the UN, KEDKE took the initiative to support organisationally the programmes of Local Agenda 21 of two municipalities in the Athens metropolitan area (Halandri and Marousi) with the collaboration of ICLEI. The effort was undertaken in the framework of the Life programme which is the main source of financing of the project. National participation was covered by the Ministry of Environment Physical Planning and Public works (YPEHODE).

Furthermore, in November 1996, KEDKE and the two above municipalities organised a campaign for the sensitisation of local authorities on Local Agenda 21. Two years later, in March 1998, a similar congress was organised with considerable delay for the promotion of the programme HABITAT AGENDA, in connection with Local Agenda 21.

It is worth mentioning here that the sole initiative taken directly by a local authority was that of the municipality of Lavrion in Attica (1994), which however was not officially included in the programme of Local Agenda 21 but in the programme of the Local Environmental Charter of DG XI actually motivated by the same spirit.

It is obvious that the initiatives mentioned above can in no case be considered sufficient, or even the minimum required for a Member State of the EU, when in Britain, 75% of the local authorities have programmes of Local Agenda 21 under way. The main cause for this situation is not only the organisational inadequacy of local authorities themselves, but also the weakness of TEDK and KEDKE to play their executive role, partly arising from their structures and partly from the priorities they set for themselves. It is hoped that in the immediate future, when the new municipalities formed by the unification Act 2539/97 will start functioning, a fundamental disadvantage of the first degree local authorities will be overcome, namely their ability to undertake initiatives of Local Agenda 21 type.

However criticism of the failure of our country to promote the programme of Local Agenda 21 should also be focused on the competent Ministries of Environment and Home Affairs, which could have assisted local authorities much more, as well as on the prefectural authorities which are equally responsible for the implementation of Local Agenda 21. Indeed it is a mistake to consider that the Local Action Plan for sustainable development only concerns cities and first-tier local authorities. On the contrary, every local authority, which by definition is the political representation of a territorial unit, independently of its level, may have its own programme for sustainable development. However in Greece, initiatives on behalf of 2nd tier local authorities were entirely absent, mostly because this institution is newly born and still faces many problems.

5. Conclusion

The planning experience of the 1980s as well as of the last five years after the Rio Summit (1992-1997) regarding the implementation of Local Agenda 21, has shown that in the case of Greece, the main problems in the course of development are not of a financial character (lack of resources). What is missing is the organisational mentality and "culture", which constitute the "hard core" of planning. Actually, *organisational and methodological factors in planning do play a more significant role than the financial or economic means*. Consequently, any degree of success or failure in planning must be judged in relation with the existence of appropriate institutional framework, technical assistance, know-how and other similar parameters. In other words, the problem for a successful planning (especially in countries like Greece) is mainly "*procedural*" and therefore ultimately *political*, in the broadest sense of

the word. Therefore it is necessary to establish a *specific decision-making mechanism for physical planning matters* at all administrative levels, besides the existing development policy making bodies, in order to make possible a real "*process*" *planning* (continuous decision-making and implementation process).

Local Agenda 21 does not require any money, at least in the initial stages, but systematic cooperation and dialogue between all parties involved in the process of development, something which has not yet been conquered as a right and obligation by local actors. *Actually* there is a need for a *strong commitment* of all public bodies, local governments NGOs and individuals involved in the planning process, in order to achieve the major objectives to be accomplished. Consequently, one of the main tasks that must be undertaken by the above bodies, is to persuade people to change attitudes through examples of best planning practice.

Local Agenda 21 demands a continuous and consistent organisational effort in waging a sound dialogue and fostering partnerships to deal with all local issues. Something which is still called for and which is a prerequisite for the achievement of sustainable development in Greece.

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