

COMHAR – the National Sustainable Development Partnership

Comments on the Revised Draft Guidelines for Local Agenda 21

1. COMHAR welcomes the opportunity to respond to these draft guidelines. The following comments are given in the light of the Local Sustainability, Participation and Education working group having engaged with various actors working on Local Agenda 21 over the past year. This included in particular holding a roundtable in February 2000 on the links between Local Agenda 21 and the reform of local government process.
2. The Local Agenda 21 process in Ireland has fallen well behind its original timetable of having Local Agenda 21s prepared by every local authority by 1996 (this is acknowledged in the draft guidelines). The reform of local government currently underway is a most significant step forward in implementing Local Agenda 21 as it aims to achieve the type of community participation necessary for this process making the publication of these guidelines opportune.
3. There is much to welcome in the document. Indeed its mere production indicates a welcome step forward towards Local Agenda 21, particularly as it recognises the importance of linking in to the new local government structures. The document also highlights the fact that Local Agenda 21 is much more than a purely environmental initiative, particularly in relation to addressing social exclusion and the importance of community participation. The importance of making Local Agenda 21 part of the culture of local government is also highlighted, as is the need for resourcing the process of Local Agenda 21 within local government.

4. To achieve the objectives of local sustainable development Local Agenda 21 must become a corporate approach within each local authority rather than a list of projects and initiatives. It must be based on meaningful participation and partnership, which applies to all aspects of local government such as housing/accommodation and planning as well as environment.
5. While acknowledging the work done to date by Local Agenda 21 officers, most of whom are based within the Environment Section of their local authority and often carrying Local Agenda 21 as an 'add-on' to their main job, the process of Local Agenda 21 requires more meaningful resourcing. This requires commitment from city/county manager down and at least one fulltime high-level member of staff responsible for driving the process. A Local Agenda 21 Unit within each local authority, made up of members from each section, should support this staff member. In particular, the office of the Director of Community and Enterprise, the Social Inclusion Unit (when such exists in all local authorities) and the social inclusion/anti-poverty cluster of the Community Fora should be represented on this unit.
6. However, resources also need to be made available to those social partners outside of the local authority to enable them to participate fully, in particular those sectors of the community with least access to resources. Recognition must be given to the amount of commitment required from the community sector in order to participate in initiatives such as Local Agenda 21 and the particular difficulties faced by certain sections of the community.
7. Despite the positive features of the document there is a lack of sufficient focus on certain aspects of Local Agenda 21, especially the building of proper participation and addressing social exclusion.
 - The fact that groups such as COMHAR are being invited to comment is most welcome, as is the acknowledgment of the role to date of the community and voluntary sector, various NGOs and others in implementing Local Agenda 21

type initiatives. It is important that the role of these in drafting guidelines, especially at a local level, be acknowledged and facilitated.

- The suggested actions in the document tend to be aspirational and non-committal, e.g. *'Each local authority could consider ...'* (p.25). Words such as 'should' and 'must' ought to be used, especially in areas where EU or national legislation has laid down obligations.
- The paragraph on page 15: *'Democratic legitimacy: The creation of an integrated framework should recognise the role of local elective participation given that it is the only universally based participative model outside the Dáil and the Presidency'* is an attempt to paraphrase the principle of Democratic Legitimacy as presented in the Task Force report but confuses representative and participative democracy. The local elective process is a representative model, not a participative model. COMHAR suggests the following might be a more appropriate text: *"Democratic legitimacy: The creation of an integrated framework should recognise the democratic legitimacy of local government while building on the opportunity for more effective participation by local communities based on the partnership model."*
- With reference to the suggestion that *"SPCs should serve as the key consultative mechanism"* (p.20), COMHAR acknowledges the important role of SPCs in implementing Local Agenda 21 but feels that the process should be proactive in promoting participation and should involve other groups where appropriate (e.g. Community Platforms).
- The Community and Voluntary sector have a vital role in briefing both the Community and Enterprise Development officers and Local Agenda 21 officers on their views of Sustainable Development and of the guidelines, and in fact these officers should actively seek inputs and advice from the community sector.

- The point made that *'The Corporate Planning process should, therefore, be the Local Agenda 21 internal process in the local authority'* is very important. It is, however, worth noting that this remains a major challenge. A review of local authority Corporate Statements carried out in 1999 as part of an M.A. course in Local Government Administration, involving the Institute of Public Administration, shows:

*'Only one local authority set a corporate objective relating to Sustainable Development. Twelve others made reference to Local Agenda 21 in their strategies for achieving mainly environmental objectives. Of these, only seven made specific address to the implementation of Local Agenda 21.'*¹

- The addressing of social exclusion and poverty is not listed under the Key General Aspects of a Local Authority Agenda 21 (p.24). This is a serious gap, as this is both a major aspect of Local Agenda 21 and an area that local authorities are obliged to address, for example under the National Anti-Poverty Strategy. This will become even more relevant in the future with the setting up of local social inclusion units. The section on Social/Community Development (pp.26-27) also displays a poor understanding of the nature of social exclusion. It refers to assisting targeted groups find employment rather than the need to support the empowerment of these groups and developing their participation in local development processes. This participation must be in all aspects of development that these communities see as of concern to them, not those that the local authority decides are relevant.
- The recognition of the need for local authority staff to obtain training is most welcome. Unfortunately the need for training in participative methods of working, and how to build participation amongst socially excluded

¹ Desmond Paige: Social Inclusion: A Challenge for Local Government

communities such as Travellers, disadvantaged women, lone parents, long term unemployed, asylum seekers and refugees, is not listed.

- The Examples of Best Practice provide no analysis or justification of why they are seen as best practice and appear more as a list of projects carried out by local authorities. This is in no way to undermine the projects listed nor to imply that they are not examples of best practice, merely to point out that the case is not made in the document presented. Further analysis needs to be carried out on such issues as community participation in identifying, implementing and in monitoring and evaluating projects.
8. In general, it would be useful if the document offered more detail on what is meant by participation as this is a term that is frequently misused and often refers to tokenistic measures. True participation involves the community engaging in joint analysis and decision-making and participating in all aspects of projects including identification, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. It also requires the community having access to independent resources to allow it to develop its own agenda and policies. As always particular attention must be paid to ensuring the equal participation of disadvantaged communities. COMHAR recommends that local authorities, as part of the Local Agenda 21 process, develop and adopt a code of practice on supporting real and effective participation by the community sector.