The status of Local Agenda 21 implementation in the Netherlands

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1. Central–local relations in the Netherlands

The Netherlands is a decentralised unitary state with three layers of government: (1) municipalities and water boards, (2) the provinces and (3) central government. At the local government level there are about 600 municipalities. These have two functions: the implementation of national government policies in certain policy areas and the initiation of local policies in fields where they have responsibility. Both these functions and the relation between the municipalities and provincial and central government are laid down in Municipal Law. To fully understand the administrative position held by Dutch municipalities consideration must be given to the constitutional constraints on their activities. The mayor is centrally appointed and budgets and other important financial and planning decisions require higher approval. Central government also possesses the power to overrule any action by local government that is considered to be contrary to the public interest or illegal. There are also financial constraints on the activities of municipalities as more than 90 per cent of their income comes from central government. This can be in the form of an overall grant or payments for the provision of specific services or projects.

Municipalities implement a number of environmental laws and grant licences to smaller industrial premises. They are also responsible for checking compliance with licensing conditions and for refuse collection, and play an important role in dealing with contaminated land. In addition to these direct environmental protection activities they undertake activities in related policy fields, such as sustainable building, spatial planning, traffic planning and sewage treatment.

Since 1990 the municipalities and the provinces have been allocated extra funds to improve and expand their administrative capacity. These funds have been provided under the BUGM and FUN programmes\(^1\) (from 1990 to 1995) and their successor the VOGM\(^2\) (from 1996 to 1998). The targets to be achieved at municipal level of government were based on the notion of ‘added value for funds’ and laid down in the ‘Central Plan for Enacting the National Environmental Policy Plan (NEPP)’ for the municipalities. This implementation plan acted as a form of contract between the Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG) and the Ministry for Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment. To guarantee the minimum level of resources necessary for effective implementation, a population threshold of 70,000
inhabitants was set to qualify for funding. This meant that smaller municipalities had to enter into co-operative alliances to take part in the scheme. The Environment Inspectorate was responsible for annual inspections and for monitoring the licensing. The new funding scheme was designed to strengthen the role of municipalities in implementing the second NEPP for the period 1996 to 1998, and gave municipalities more freedom to set their own priorities. Among the choices available was an ‘action’ on Local Agenda 21 (which we return to below). From 1998 the funding is no longer earmarked for environmental purposes but is part of general municipal funding.

2. Baseline conditions

On the eve of UNCED, Dutch municipalities possessed certain basic qualifications for promoting LA21: they were well ahead on environmental policy compared with other countries, and sustainable development had become a political issue; experience with an integrated approach and participation in environmental policy had been gained; and there was a tendency towards political and administrative modernisation. Almost immediately after the publication of *Our Common Future* in 1987, the Dutch government adopted the concept of ‘sustainable development’ as the major guideline for overall Dutch government policy. This concept was then incorporated into the first National Environmental Policy Plan (NEPP).

There was great interest in the idea at the municipal level as well. Environmental issues played a major role during the local council elections of 1990, and sustainable development was an issue in many of the political programmes of the newly elected municipal councils. Considering the nature and scope of their environmental responsibilities, and also their own initiatives, Dutch municipalities were at that time clearly among the most environmentally advanced in the world.

The second basic qualification was the attention being given to an integrated approach to Dutch environmental policy. The ‘internal integration’ of environmental policy was meant to break down the sectoral compartmentalisation of environmental policy (air, water, soil) into either more general themes, geographical areas, flows of materials or target groups. This internal integration was shaped not only by plans but also in institutions and laws such as the Environment Management Act, which replaced several different environmental laws. In addition, ‘external integration’ or cross-sectoral policy integration is a key element in Dutch environmental policy. Many policies at all levels of government have significant effects on the environment and underline the importance of intra-governmental and inter-governmental decision making. Since the first NEPP, much more attention has been devoted to this ‘external integration of environmental policy’: matters such as transport policy, spatial
planning, agricultural policies, structural economic policy, water management, building regulations, energy policy and educational policy are to be harmonised with national environmental policy (States General, 1990), not only at national level but at the provincial and municipal levels as well.

The third basic qualification is the involvement of stakeholders in making and implementing environmental policy. The Netherlands has a highly consensus-based social structure. It has a long tradition of government consultation with various social groups, institutionalised in tripartite forums such as the Social Economic Council (Sociaal Economische Raad, SER) in which environmental questions are incorporated into social and economic issues. As a part of this tradition of consensus building, all relevant parties are involved in environmental policy planning.

A prime aspect of Dutch environmental policy in this respect is the ‘target group approach’. After a framework of national environmental objectives has been formulated in the National Environmental Policy Plans, target groups and their representatives are closely involved in all further stages of the policy process. Consultative structures between the government and the industrial organisations acting on behalf of the polluters (i.e. the target groups) have been established. They define the tasks for individual industrial sectors within this framework and formalise them in covenants (agreements) and other guidelines.

Target group policies can also play an active part in municipal environmental policy planning. The planning system set out in the Environmental Management Act proposed the concept of open planning, with ‘open’ referring to the involvement of the relevant stakeholders early on in the planning process. This is designed to increase the scope and recruiting power of planning, which in turn is related to the goal of ‘internalising’ environmental responsibility among the plan’s target groups. Before UNCED, it was not unusual to involve target groups at the municipal level when drawing up environmental strategies, but this occurred in only a minority of municipalities and involved relatively limited methods. The majority of the municipalities relied simply on consultations on draft plans (Coenen, 1998a).

The fourth important basic qualification is the trend towards the modernisation of political and administrative working methods, or the search for new ways of making policy which (presumably) are better suited to people’s demands. The dramatic drop in turnout for the March 1990 election prompted many municipalities to take action. This usually involved changing their methods of communication with the public. Social scientists refer to these methods as ‘interactive policy making’, ‘co-production of policy’, or strategic ‘bottom-up’ policy making. A generally accepted diagnosis of the problem was an over-formalised and closed municipal ‘policy style’ and an inward-looking public administration. The policy
style was found to be out of line with the more general changes in relations between municipalities and their citizens. Instruments were introduced to find out what people think and want, such as referendums or forms of opinion polling and market research. Through a more communicative approach to policy making people were brought into the policy-making process at the outset rather than when the draft plans have been completed.

3. **Antecedent role in UNCED**

In the lead up to UNCED, Dutch NGOs tried to stimulate and heighten interest within municipalities for global environmental problems and sustainable development. For example, in January 1991 Friends of the Earth Netherlands (*Vereniging Milieudefensie*) started a campaign against greenhouse gas emissions aimed at consumers and municipalities. In 1992 a similar campaign was dedicated to the UNCED conference, especially to the topic of climate change and local greenhouse gas initiatives.

A major step in the preparation for the Rio conference was the Brazil 92 campaign, which consisted of a large number of organisations, including labour unions, employers organisations, churches, consumer organisations and environmental NGOs. The goal of the campaign was to raise environmental consciousness in the Netherlands and to participate in the development of Dutch policy for the Rio Summit. The campaign organised a conference called ‘A Start for UNCED’ in which the campaign representatives presented their views to the prime minister and other officials. The conference also paved the way for the World Urban Forum. The campaign published a booklet (with the same title as the conference) as their contribution to UNCED.

A second main umbrella organisation, the Alliance for Sustainable Development (a grouping of environmental and peace organisations) also published a Dutch national NGO report for UNCED, entitled ‘It Can Be Different’. This report was explicitly presented as an NGO report alongside the formal national report to UNCED from the Dutch Government. Both umbrella organisations worked closely together during the preparations for UNCED; they also participated in the formal national delegation and the parallel NGO conference in Rio de Janeiro.

The majority of municipalities remained pretty much on the sidelines, with the exception of a particularly active but relatively small group, those involved in the ‘Working for Cleaner World’ campaign and active in the Climate Alliance. The Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG) participated in the preparations conducted by the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA) and in drafting the ‘Oslo Declaration’. The association also
represented Dutch municipalities in several of the initiatives and campaigns mentioned above. The Dutch delegation was actively involved in the Preparatory Committee meetings for UNCED (PrepComs). The communications and national governmental papers paid little attention to the position of the municipalities, but the environment minister did state that action at the local level was crucially important for sustainable development (PrepCom, New York, 2 March 1992).

4. Government reaction

The government reaction to Rio can be divided into four stages. In each stage the attitude towards LA21 is different. We distinguish here between the initial reactions up to 1995, a second stage which started with a national campaign and municipal funding programme, a third stage in which the campaign was expanded and strengthened, and a fourth stage in which local environmental policy enters a new era under the third NEPP and earmarked funding ends.

During the initial stage there was quite a difference between the reactions to Agenda 21 and Local Agenda 21. The initial communications and documents issued after Rio are mainly concerned with the consequences of UNCED at the national level. In July 1993, Parliament was presented with an overview of the changes deemed necessary in Dutch policies and law (States General 1992-1993, number 22031, 16). The departments responsible had compared present policies with the contents and prescriptions of Agenda 21. The main conclusion was that the goals and actions of Agenda 21 were, to a significant degree, already being pursued under current policies in the Netherlands. It was also pointed out, however, that there were numerous recommendations and actions that still had to be put into effect. On the whole, these documents and communications devoted relatively little attention to the role of the municipalities and provinces. Municipalities were mentioned as one of the several major groups which had an important role to play in implementing policy but were not given the same amount of attention as other groups (the young, for example). The complete version of Agenda 21 was translated into Dutch and disseminated with other information to the ‘major groups’.

The Netherlands did not establish a National Council for Sustainable Development because the policy planning procedures (NEPP) already involved various government and non-governmental actors and agencies. Moreover, there was no separate Dutch implementation plan for the Rio commitments. The second NEPP (launched in March 1994) can be seen as the post-UNCED document in which the government takes a close look at future Dutch
responsibilities with respect to Agenda 21. The second NEPP makes more direct reference to LA21 and to the role of the municipalities in its implementation. As a result, key aspects of the idea of a Local Agenda 21 were included in the VOGM funding programme as a separate action and in the second Central Plan for Enacting the National Environmental Policy Plan (March 1995). This change in attitude towards LA21 was marked by a conference held in March 1995 called ‘Working with Agenda 21’, which received considerable interest: besides the 400 municipal politicians and administrators attending 150 more were on the waiting list. This can be seen as the second stage in the implementation of LA21 in the Netherlands with earmarked funding for municipalities to set up an LA21. The total budget for municipalities carrying out a local Agenda 21 was about 94 million guilders. To be eligible for this financial assistance the following conditions had to be met:

- a dialogue with local target groups leading to concrete results had to be in place;
- an action plan must have been completed in 1995;
- nature and environmental education had to be included in the activity; and
- the activity had to add new elements to the action taken by the municipality.

More than 150 municipalities chose LA21 as a specific VOGM task. All VOGM tasks had to be performed to an adequate level by the reference date of 1 January 1998. For LA21 this meant that, in principle, the LA21 process should have started and that there should be a guarantee for continuation of the process.

As the third stage of implementation, we can identify a intensification of the VOGM campaign. There were two main reasons for this: (1) dissatisfaction with the processes already begun in the VOGM municipalities, and (2) a desire to further promote LA21 among the municipalities which had not chosen this action. This third phase can be characterised as one of clearing up bottlenecks. A large part of the work was taken up by the Platform for Sustainable Development, a new umbrella NGO (to which we turn again below) audited and subsidised by national government. New initiatives were also being taken by national government to resolve bottlenecks at the municipal level. A committee of representatives from the ministries for development co-operation, the environment and foreign affairs developed some new initiatives. In the second half of 1996 a major effort was put into developing a training programme for local government officers (IPP, 1996).

The end of the earmarked environmental VOGM funding on 1 January 1998 and the publication of the third NEPP ushered in a new era for LA21. Discussions between national government, the VNG and individual municipalities have emphasised the possibilities of LA21 as an integral framework for sustainable development by broadening municipal environmental policy to encompass wider sustainability issues (NEPP 3, 1998: 69, 83). During 1997 the environment ministry and the NCDO (the newest umbrella organisation)
established a new fund to help local NGOs become involved in LA21. Local groups, organisations or individuals who want to work on an LA21 for their municipality could apply for funding. And during the 1998 municipal elections the NCDO tried to raise interest in sustainability and LA21 as an election issue.

5. Local community reaction

The idea of LA21 was initially received with little enthusiasm by Dutch municipalities. One reason for this was the feeling that local government was already doing a great deal in the environmental area – to the point of leading the international field. There was a misconception that LA21 required little more than what Dutch municipalities were already doing. Local authorities could not immediately see the ‘added value’ of LA21. Second, the municipalities felt that they were already overstretched trying to fulfil the devolved regulatory tasks and responsibilities under the first NEPP. Little time, capacity and energy were left to develop new initiatives. Lastly, the general atmosphere of environmental enthusiasm had begun to decline in the Netherlands and media coverage, public interest and political attention were falling off before the final stage of the run-up to UNCED.

There were, however a number of pioneers among the Dutch municipalities. There are only a few cases where the initiative for an LA21 (usually related to the previously mentioned local campaigns for sustainable development) came from the bottom up (Roosendaal, Etten-Leur). In some cases, the pioneering municipality gave no indication of wanting to become involved in the initiative at all, whereas in others the first steps were taken by enthusiastic aldermen or local authority officers (The Hague, Schiedam). As a result of the VOGM funding more than 150 municipalities began an LA21 process.

The Dutch umbrella organisation for local authorities is the Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG). During the initial stage after Rio and until 1995 there was an ‘unwritten agreement’ between the VNG and the environment ministry that municipalities were not prepared to take on any extra tasks at that time. Before the March 1995 conference the VNG had taken other, less focused initiatives; one of these was a conference organised in June 1994, in collaboration with a society of environmental professionals, on the development of municipal environmental policy within the context of the second NEPP. A number of workshops were held at an environmental education and information conference, and LA21 was among the topics covered.

The VNG claims that Agenda 21 is not restricted to the municipalities that are formally engaged in LA21 under the VOGM funding scheme. In line with earlier views that Dutch municipalities were in fact indirectly complying with Agenda 21 (Dordregter, 1994), the
VNG maintains that a number of municipalities are working on LA21 without using the name itself (VNG, 1996). There are clear similarities with the policy formulation and implementation aspects of some of the other VOGM actions and in other aspects of municipal environmental policy making. Examples from the VOGM programme are sustainable building projects and energy conservation. Other examples include local mobility plans and neighbourhood policy making.

The VNG took on the role of auditor to the NGO umbrella organisations set up after UNCED (see below). They were actively involved in resolving information bottlenecks in the implementation of LA21 and encouraging municipalities to take up the process. Parallel to the training course mentioned above, the VNG published and widely distributed a book on LA21 in July 1996. This addresses not only the formal LA21 process but also working in the general spirit of LA21 based on collective experiences.

In general, the aim of decentralisation is to minimise the distance between government and the public. Municipalities have a certain freedom to formulate environmental policy for their own areas, but in the last year this has been reduced in scope by the new system of financing based on the principle of ‘value for money’. Funds for LA21 are tied to a highly specific definition of LA21 in the VOGM programme, with an accent of ‘concrete actions’ and raising environmental awareness.

6. **NGOs and the social partners**

After UNCED the two main umbrella organisations, the Alliance for Sustainable Development and the Brazil 1992 campaign (which was encouraged by the government), merged to form one national organisation, the Dutch Platform for Sustainable Development (PDO). This functioned as a forum for discussions between a wide variety of independent Dutch organisations with the goal of promoting and achieving sustainable development. The Alliance was an initiative by environmental, peace and development organisations. The Brazil 92 Platform was broader based, with members from NGOs and science, youth, employers and workers organisations. NGOs working in the areas of nature conservation, environmental protection and development co-operation work together in the PDO with consumer associations, churches, members of the peace movement, employers organisations, trade unions, youth and womens organisations; about 50 varied organisations in all.
Following on from UNCED, a number of youth organisations established the National Youth Council for Environment and Development (NJMO) which promotes sustainable development in the Netherlands through youth activities. The 40 participating organisations include youth organisations from political parties, environmental groups and trade unions. The NMJO tried to contribute to LA21 by simulating the foundation of a local youth council. Another major group, women, initiated activities to raise awareness of sustainability on a local level. The ‘Women assess quality of life’ project was one example. The Countryside Womens Association in particular is very active as member of the NCDO’s LA21 working group and in encouraging their members to get involved in LA21.

As mentioned above, sustainability is an increasingly important issue in the institutions set up for tripartite and bipartite consultations between government, employers and workers organisations. Both employers organisations and trade unions are incorporating environmental issues in their political agendas to a greater extent. The PDO viewed Agenda 21 as an important source of inspiration for its efforts to bring together representatives from ‘major groups’ in pursuit of the Rio goals. The Steering Group has members from a wide variety of NGOs, including youth groups, environmental, developmental and health organisations. The PDO has published two widely disseminated books on LA21 (PDO, 1993, 1994) and also published a newsletter.

At the beginning of 1994 the Dutch LA21 Steering Group was formed. It is aided and coordinated by the PDO. At the beginning of 1994 the LA21 Steering Group declared that its goal now was to achieve a broad-based LA21 process in all Dutch municipalities within the next five years (Duurzaam, 20 March 1996). In a progress report produced in December 1995 the Steering Group was also critical of developments in those municipalities which had opted for the LA21 action. LA21 processes were found to be slow in getting started. They often lacked sufficient political backing and support from outside the environment department, and so became restricted to environmental topics, and left out the global perspective and North-South dimension of sustainable development. In a new campaign, advisory teams were assembled to visit municipalities on request, and regional meetings were organised where pioneering municipalities could inform other municipalities about the added value of LA21. On 1 January 1996 the Platform for Sustainable Development merged with a similar organisation for international co-operation to form the National Commission for International Co-operation and Sustainable Development (NCDO). Around 50 NGOs from all sectors of society participate in this organisation to stimulate the debate on sustainable development at the national level. The Commission also consults with the government on issues concerning international meeting such as the CSD. Although the sustainable development and international co-operation fall under separate programmes and budgets, international co-
operation has become more prominent in stimulating LA21. First, through the creation of the new fund for local NGOs. Second, through a big evaluation conference combining two separate conferences, one on 25 years of international municipal government co-operation and one on LA21. Third, by starting the New World campaign which calls upon local NGOs to become involved in LA21.

7. Political and policy impact

Some of the pioneering LA21 initiatives substantially influenced later activities in the Netherlands. The Hague, which began its LA21 process in 1994, deserves a special mention, as does a pilot project in the province of Noord-Brabant where an LA21 initiative was launched by 20 municipalities in November 1994. Several sources provide information on where and how LA21 initiatives have made an impact:

- analysis of Action Plans ('Plannen van aanpak') (VNG, 1986; RIMH 1997);
- surveys (Brijer, 1997; Schultink, 1997; EPM a,b,c 1998);
- case evaluations (Ritsema, 1997; Andringa, 1998; Prent, 1998);
- evaluation conferences (NCDO, 1997);
- best cases and good examples (Juffermans, 1996).

This empirical material mainly gives a picture of the shape and form of LA21 and less of its specific impact. Pioneering cities show that it is very difficult to avoid LA21 becoming a separate process with weak links to ongoing planning and policy processes (Andringa, 1998). Some municipalities try to link LA21 with their non-mandatory environmental planning process, but this is then largely limited to environmental policy.

Some temporary observations can be made on the basis of the empirical material available. First, many good municipal sustainable development initiatives such as sustainable building and green transport often do not become, or become associated with, a Local Agenda 21 activity. The reason for this lies in a second observation: LA21 is still widely considered to be an environmental initiative. Third, the global dimension is very weak. Much attention is given to quality of life issues such as crime rates, litter and dogs fouling the pavement, and several organisations have raised serious reservations about a strong international dimension to LA21; global issues are considered ‘a bridge too far’.

In the run up to Rio, the issue of climate change played a mayor role in the NGO campaign aimed at municipal councils. Over 100 Dutch municipalities signed the Climate Alliance, which sets much more ambitious CO₂ reduction goals than those stated in Dutch government policy. Energy saving has been a municipal political issue since the energy crises in the seventies, but public interest has waned because of the low energy prices. Research (Centrum
voor Energiebesparing and Klima-Bundniss, 1996) has indicated that there is a risk that municipal energy policy, encouraged by the Dutch GEA approach and energy planning, will not become a fully integrated within LA21 but treated as separate areas of municipal responsibility. A number of the Dutch municipalities opting for LA21 activities have stated their involvement in international climate change projects as a reason for choosing LA21 from the VOGM alternatives (Coenen, 1997). Research in the province of Limburg has shown that joining the Climate Alliance did not mean that the municipalities involved took more substantive actions in policy areas such as energy, traffic, use of tropical hardwoods and refuse treatment (Vugts and Jorritsma, 1996). Biodiversity is a less of a big item in municipal policy and gets less attention in LA21s. The Biodiversity Action Plan (1995) and Nature Policy Plan also lead to important activities for municipalities such as habitat restoration, ecological corridors, sound environmental management and conservation of green space.

8. **The perspective for LA21 in the Netherlands**

What is the short-term perspective for the further development and institutionalisation of LA21 in the Netherlands? Both pessimistic and optimistic views of the future of LA21 circulate among policy professionals and can be found in the literature. The pessimistic view is based on the termination of the earmarked funding for municipal environmental policy in general and LA21 specifically. In this pessimistic view it is feared that municipal environmental policy in general, and LA21 specifically, is not institutionalised enough to survive the battle for budgets with other, often more established, municipal policy fields. It is too early to reject this hypothesis, but in a student project (EPM, 1998) three-quarters of 31 municipalities surveyed by telephone during May 1998 had maintained the levels of their manpower budgets, and a quarter had even increased this budget. The more optimistic view is based on the new ‘spirit of the age’ in Dutch government: LA21 fits in very well with the growing importance of interest groups at the local level. According to the third NEPP and high ranking officials at the environment ministry LA21 can and will become the integral framework for sustainable municipal policy.

In general we should not expect the Netherlands to move to a situation of 100 per cent coverage by formal LA21s within a period of five years. The new funding scheme for local activities and groups and the NCDO’s New World campaign will lead to new LA21 initiatives to add to the 170 initiatives already active.

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Notes

1 BUGM is a government-sponsored programme called ‘Contribution to implementing the municipal environmental policy decree’; FUN stands for ‘Funding the Implementation of the National Environmental Policy Plan’.

2 VOGM in Dutch refers to the government-sponsored programme ‘Supplementary contribution scheme for developing municipal environmental policy’.


4 Several symposia, conferences, committees and research projects have led to publications with different analyses of and possible solutions to the crisis in municipal politics.

5 In 1993 the National Youth Council for Environment and Development was established (a campaign for joint action by youth groups) and a ‘sustainable development treaty’ was signed.

6 The project’s aim was to promote and gain experience in maintaining discussion between local NGOs, businesses, citizens and local authorities. The project is facilitated by a group of environment and development NGOs and is financed by the provincial government, the National Committee for Development Education and the environment ministry. This pilot project has resulted in a scheme for operationalising the LA21 VOGM action. A leaflet was widely disseminated through the ‘Working Files LA21’ of the Joint Platform for Sustainable Development. The pilot project has substantially influenced the schemes for LA21 and later publications.