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Local Agenda 21

***- The Importance of Environmental
Officers and Cross-Municipal
Differences***

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1 FOUR TRENDS IN LOCAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

The last ten years has seen the strengthening of *local* environmental politics in Norway. After the process of building a national and regional political-administrative apparatus was finished in the seventies and eighties, the building up of a municipal level of environmental responsibility has been an important project in the nineties. For a long time Norwegian municipalities have performed a number of functions with environmental consequences, like the handling of waste, sewage and water supply, and land-use planning. More recently, efforts have been made to strengthen and widen municipalities' role in environmental politics. The development has been characterised by four processes, to be described briefly below. We argue in this paper that the changes we have seen through these four processes have changed not only the relationship between "traditional" and "modern" environmental politics, but also between different types of municipalities' ability to cope with relevant environmental questions. Through analysis of regional and municipal characteristics, we discover systematic differences in local environmental policy, resulting in the new trends in local environmental policy becoming little more than "symbolic" catchwords in some municipalities, while actually leading to policy change in others.

To us, this is interesting for several reasons. First, we want to gain a better understanding of how the implementation of process oriented or "soft" policy instruments works when facing Norwegian municipal reality. This way we aim to contribute knowledge about under what conditions implementation of such instruments is effective and what obstacles it is likely to meet. Second, we think that an insight in the regional differences is important in a more practical policy context, as they may have implications for meeting challenges in different parts of the country in developing a policy for sustainable development.

1.1 The build-up of administrative capacity

In the years from 1991 to 1997, earmarked funding from the state was offered to all Norwegian municipalities that wanted to employ an environmental officer. The most important aim of this reform called "Environment in the municipalities" (EIM), was to build a local administrative apparatus for dealing with environmental questions, thereby strengthening administrative capacity and competence, as well as the focus on environmental questions in general. At the point when the reform was at its peak in 1996, about 96 percent of Norwegian municipalities had chosen to employ an environmental officer, either in a full-time position or half-time for municipalities with less than 3000 inhabitants.

However, a report published by ProSus in the winter of 2000 reveals that the administrative apparatus that was built up through the reform, by and large has been built down three years after the earmarking of the funding ended (Bjørnæs and Lafferty 2000). Since January 1st 1997, 117 out of Norway's 435 municipalities have removed the position as environmental officer and 134 municipalities have reduced the position or merged it with another position in the municipality (Bjørnæs and Lafferty 2000). This means that 58 percent of the municipalities have reduced or eliminated the position since 1997. In our opinion, this

has lead to a dramatic reduction in the administrative capacity and competence on environmental questions at the municipal level.

The report also reveals that the relative time environmental officers spend on environmental tasks as compared to other responsibilities within their positions, has fallen in the same time. There is also a decrease in the number of “pure” environmental positions, meaning positions where the environmental officer is responsible only for environmental questions. The number of such positions is now 91, which is the same number of municipalities that took part in the “Environment in the municipalities”-program from 1988-1991 when it was still a pilot program and not a full-fledged national reform.

One other important goal of the reform was to stimulate the municipalities to take on environmental planning through local environmental plans, preferably integrated into the mandatory planning based on the Norwegian “Plan and building Act”. The report reveals that, despite progress since 1997, 54 percent of the municipalities still have no form of environmental plan (Bjørnæs and Lafferty 2000). There is therefore, reason to question whether the intentions of the reform are fulfilled, especially concerning the permanent strengthening of the municipalities’ administrative capacity.

1.2 The turn towards sustainability. Symbolic politics or real integration?

The period which is characterised by the strong reduction in the number of local environmental officers is also characterised by an opposite tendency; the upsurge in Local Agenda 21 activity. Local Agenda 21 represents local authorities’ efforts to implement the recommendations from the Rio conference and the action plan Agenda 21, and in a recent study has been labelled “*the major driving force behind European local governments’ efforts to move toward sustainable development*” (Environment Daily, 2001). Agenda 21 recommends all local authorities to enter into a dialogue with their citizens, local organizations and private enterprises to create and implement a local action plan for sustainable development, a local Agenda 21. The LA21 approach has an explicit focus on sustainability, and hence a much broader perspective on environmental questions than what has been usual within local environmental politics¹ (Lafferty et.al. 1998:34). The changes from a more traditional environmental policy can be divided into changes in environmental *content* and changes in *political process*. On the level of contents, the most important development is that Local Agenda 21 focuses on how municipalities can contribute to solving *global* environmental problems. The question of whether local communities can ever be expected to do this in an effective way, is contested among experts on local environmental politics (for a short overview of positions see Aall, 2000:42-43), but there are now many good examples of municipalities at least engaging in global problems. When it comes to developing a policy for fighting climate emissions, some have even argued that this could most effectively be done at the local level, because of a lack of strong industrial lobby groups on the local and regional levels (Aall, 2000:79). In any case, some of the most ambitious plans for reducing climate emissions have been developed on the local level, and some municipalities, like danish Albertslund, can even point to substantial cuts in emissions. Local Agenda 21 has also lead to substantial changes in the way of thinking about the necessary

¹ With the exception of some smaller pilot projects, especially in rural communities.

political process for a transition to sustainable local communities, the most important key words being *information*, *participation* and *cross-sectoral integration*.

Norway has been characterised as a “slow starter” when it comes to the implementation of Local Agenda 21 (Lafferty 1999:246), but the LA21 efforts in Norway were strengthened in 1997, when a coordinating organ was established within the Ministry of the environment. At the same time Local Agenda 21 was established as an important goal for Norwegian environmental policy through a new government white paper called “Environmental policy for a sustainable development” [White paper 58 (1996-97)]. Later, signing the “Fredrikstad declaration”, which was the result of a large conference on LA21 in 1998, became the natural starting point for local authorities that wanted to take on work with Local Agenda 21. In May 2001 more than half the municipalities have signed this declaration. Also, on the regional (county) level there has been developed an apparatus to support the municipalities’ LA21 work. This is a result of a cooperation between the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities, the Ministry of Environment, the county (Fylkeskommunen) and the county governor (Fylkesmann). The task for these regional support positions has been to provide local authorities with sufficient information and knowledge about LA21 and to disseminate information on Local Agenda 21 experiences between the municipalities in the respective regions.

Many of the municipalities have not yet achieved much more in their LA21 work than signing the Fredrikstad declaration, but there are large differences between the pioneering municipalities and the ones lagging behind. When it comes to action, the municipalities can roughly be divided into three categories: about one third of the municipalities have done nothing, about a third have done only a little and one third have made some substantial progress. In this latter third we find that local authorities have taken steps to inform the public about Local Agenda 21, initiated different cooperative environmental efforts involving business and voluntary organisations, tried to involve the public more in environmental decision making etc. (Bjørnæs and Lafferty 2000). This means that we may begin to see the same development in Norway that has earlier been documented in Sweden (Brundin and Eckerberg 1999) with one third of the municipalities taking the lead, one third at ease and one third falling behind (or rather in the Norwegian case, never leaving the starting blocks).

When it comes to the hands-on projects that have been initiated in Norway, they cover a broad range. Still, many of the projects can be said to be concerned with “picking the low hanging fruits”, which is really not a surprise given the fact that LA21 activity has not been heavily funded. 23 per cent of municipalities with LA21 activity have received state funding (often earmarked for a project of mapping biological diversity) and 29 per cent have funding available for projects (Bjørnæs and Lafferty 2000). Many of the LA21 projects are focusing on information and mobilisation of the public, whereas only a few focus on more demanding tasks, involving for example infrastructure or transport.

Local Agenda 21 is a geographical approach which to a certain degree supports the notion that “the global equals the sum of the local”. In the government white paper 58 on an environmental policy for sustainable development, it is said that: “*Our point of departure is that the global environmental challenges can be seen as the sum of what is done locally*” (ch. 8, my translation). Whether this logic stands the test when it comes to the use of national vs. local policy instruments is of course open for discussion. Our research reveals that many municipalities find factors beyond their control to strongly influence the possibility for an effective local environmental policy. One frequently mentioned example is the pricing of different sources of energy (Aall et.al 1999). Still the municipalities themselves report that

there is room left for an autonomous local environmental policy on themes like spatial planning, mobilisation, information and education, internal routines and purchasing and in different sorts of cooperative projects involving local organisations and business (Aall and Bjørnæs 1999).

The underlying question in this report is what effect the “soft” policy approach Local Agenda 21 represents has on environmental policy. A lot of questions should be asked about why this kind of approach is becoming dominant compared to more regulatory or economically based instruments. The answer to the questions may differ between municipalities, and in this report we want to focus on the *effect* of the approach rather than speculate in the possible *motivations* behind it.

It is in our opinion relevant to ask whether Local Agenda 21 is mainly an example of what Murray Edelman (1985) refers to as symbolic politics, serving to create an impression of political action, but leaving the operant power structures hidden and serving to blur the fact that within politics, certain interests are systematically winning at the expense of others. Or, as Edelman states it: *If the regulatory process is examined in terms of a divergence between political and legal promises on the one hand and resource allocations and group reactions on the other hand, the largely symbolic character of the entire process becomes apparent* (1985:23). If the main function of Local Agenda 21 and other soft policy approaches lies in calming the impatient by creating an impression that action is taken while very small results are in fact achieved, Local Agenda 21 and soft policy instruments could be said to imply a weakening of local environmental policy, and could end in frustration for its adherents. However, seen as a supplement to what is already achieved within local environmental policy, Local Agenda 21 could imply a very important and necessary process of widening the perspective, of gaining local support for action, and also could be seen as a laboratory approach for finding practical solutions for integrating environment and other interests, leading to a more integrated and holistic sustainability policy. If we find indications that this is the main function of Local Agenda 21, it would imply a strengthening of local environmental politics. Seen in this perspective, a gap between rhetoric and political results in some cases seems more natural and can be explained in a less cynical manner, given the experimental and searching form of the Local Agenda 21 process. In our opinion, the real test for Local Agenda 21 lies in which of these two descriptions is most in accordance with political reality.

1.3 Delegation of environmental responsibility

Recently a new process was initiated to delegate substantial amounts of responsibility on environmental questions to the municipalities. The process was part of a program for “modernising the public sector”. The signals from leading politicians and officials are still not clear on exactly what tasks will be delegated, or exactly what this will mean in an economic, judicial and administrative sense. It could be said that state efforts to delegate environmental tasks to the municipalities is not a new phenomenon in Norway. During the 80s and 90s there was also a general delegation of tasks and responsibilities from the state to regions and municipalities in areas other than environmental policy. This delegation has been characterised by: (i) less binding of the municipalities through state regulations and state control, (ii) delegation of new tasks from the state to the municipalities, and (iii) delegation of the responsibility for cross-sectoral integration (Naustdalslid 1994:20-21). Within environmental policy however, only very limited tasks have been subject to delegation in this

process. The amount of responsibility to be delegated therefore seems larger this time than in earlier processes.

One important question is whether it is possible to identify the “right” level for different environmental decisions to be taken, and if so, what level this is. There are strong and differing opinions on this question. The most impatient often call for a stronger state effort, meaning more and stronger central political steering. At the same time many “idealists” accentuate that change must start with each and every one of us and that no environmental policy can become really efficient until it gains broad support in the public. Therefore, an efficient policy must be based on a “bottom-up”-approach. We find a lot of support for this view among supporters of Local Agenda 21. The more interesting discussion, however, is not concerned with the static topic of identifying the “right” level of steering, but rather what tasks and decisions should be placed on what level given today’s political and normative climate. Traditionally, the view of Norwegian authorities has been that local environmental problems should be handled locally and that national and global tasks is a national responsibility. The last few years however, both national authorities and front-runner municipalities have spurred municipalities to take more responsibility for global problems through Local Agenda 21. The question is whether this is possible. Earlier research has shown Norwegian municipalities to be mainly concerned with environmental questions with a local relevance. Traditional local questions like water supply, sewage and renovation have all maintained a strong position in the municipalities’ definition of environmental policy until this day (Hovik 1994, Lafferty and Aall 1998). The contested question is therefore whether or not municipalities should and could take more responsibility for questions of a global nature. Nevertheless, through the state support of Local Agenda 21, the municipalities have received strong political signals that this is expected from them in the future.

In relation to this process of decentralisation of responsibility for environmental questions, it is important to analyse how the reduction in the number of local environmental officers influences the process and the chances for it to succeed. Who will take on the delegated tasks when the municipalities reduce or remove their competence and capacity for handling environmental questions? At the same time, there are still many municipalities left that have an environmental officer with at least a certain responsibility for environmental questions. This means that there are now substantial differences in competence and capacity between different municipalities, and, we suspect, different regions. An interesting question then is what these differences imply. Potentially they can be very influential on the possibility to introduce new goals and policy instruments in local environmental policy. They may also influence the possibility to reach environmental targets in different parts of the country, in different types of municipalities and within different sectors of environmental policy.

1.4 Deregulation and the turn towards “soft” policy instruments

A driving force behind the changes described above, is what is popularly referred to as “globalisation”. Within politics, the catchword globalisation is a term describing several processes related to internationalisation and liberalisation of the economy and an increased importance of international treaties and international economic actors (Østerud 2001). These processes bring with them intended and unintended consequences, among which one of the most important is reduced possibilities for national political steering (Fuchs and Lorek 2001). In the long run, one possible consequence of the process of internationalisation is a stronger privatisation of the services provided by the public sector, through processes such as the

ongoing GATS negotiations (General Agreement on Trade in Services). This could potentially have a particularly strong effect on the possibility of democratic political steering at the local level, as this is where most of the services provided by the public sector are actually produced.

It is hard to estimate precisely what effects the processes of globalisation have on the use of policy instruments within local environmental politics. Still, we assume that they have an importance in two highly intertwined areas. First, globalisation contributes to making certain policy instruments being considered more legitimate than others in environmental policy and in the relationship between state and municipalities in general. This means less political steering through direct regulation, prohibition and control, more weight on management by objectives, setting general targets, frame funding as opposed to earmarked funding and more policy instruments inspired by the market, such as turning public service providers into profit centres, liberalisation and sale of municipal powerplants etc. Second, the development has led to a change in the state – municipality – inhabitants relationship with more use of “soft” policy instruments, of which Local Agenda 21 can be seen as a typical example. The two processes, or maybe aspects of the same process, go hand in hand, but can be said to consist of two components. First, *deregulation*, meaning that political authorities pull back from political steering, leaving more environmental responsibility to private actors like businesses, NGOs or private citizens, and second, what we can call the *softening of policy instruments*, introducing alternative ways of steering based on voluntarism, information and cooperation. The effectiveness of these instruments is an interesting question. An international study of 24 successful cases of environmental policy concluded that the use of traditional regulatory instruments were central to most of them, even though often supplemented by “soft” instruments (Jänicke & Weidner 1995).

It is not easy to draw the exact line between “soft” and “hard” policy instruments. However, on the one hand we find legal and administrative instruments such as direct regulation through law, prohibitions, control, fixed quotas for emissions etc. – which are not very flexible, do not give the regulated party much say and are judicially binding. On the other hand we find normative and information based instruments such as public information campaigns, environmental education in schools, Local Agenda 21, voluntary agreements and commitments etc. It can be argued that market based tools constitute an intermediate category. It may seem like part of the motive for the new “soft” approach to policy instruments is to protect business from economic strain, something that has become more important as the economy has become more and more internationalised.

The labelling of instruments as “soft” or “hard” can be said to be imprecise, as it does not really say anything about what divides the two groups of instruments. Within implementation theory it has become common to label the categories “top-down” vs. “bottom-up” or “process oriented” vs. “decision oriented” approaches (Kjellberg and Reitan 1995, Reitan 1998). The most important aspect of these conceptional divides is whether the instruments are (and should be) based on particular political decisions made at the top or on more continuous cooperative processes with more bottom-up involvement of stakeholders in decisionmaking and implementation. Instruments based on the latter actively involve business, organisations, the public and municipalities in the process of defining targets and tools within environmental policy and how they should be implemented. This may affect the results of the policy which is pursued. In this article, focus will be on one of the most common of these process oriented instruments; Local Agenda 21. We want to analyse aspects related both to the efficiency of

the instrument on the local level and what conditions must be fulfilled for this kind of tool to have a positive and discernible effect.

2 REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN LOCAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS

The starting point for the analyses is the data from our nation wide survey on Local Agenda 21 and local environmental officers, which indicates significant regional differences. To us, this raised the question: *What can explain such differences and what are the implications for implementing process oriented policy instruments for a sustainable development, like Local Agenda 21, in the municipalities?* To answer this, we needed to investigate the differences in a systematic way and examine the reasons for and the possible consequences of such differences. The survey included all the municipalities in Norway and was conducted by ProSus in collaboration with the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities in the period from February to July 2000. After a follow-up letter we received an answer from more than 70 percent of the municipalities. We then performed limited telephone interviews with the remaining municipalities, this way receiving an answer from all the municipalities for some of the questions. The survey data thus provides us with a fairly accurate picture of the situation in Norway when it comes to environmental officers and implementation of Local Agenda 21 in the run-up to the Johannesburg meeting. The first findings based on the survey were published in the report "Environmental officers and Local Agenda 21. What is the current situation?", (Bjørnæs and Lafferty 2000, Norwegian). In this article, the initial survey data has been supplemented with data from the Norwegian "Municipal database" from Norwegian Social Science Data Services/Statistics Norway.²

2.1 Regional differences in the status for environmental positions

Table 1 below shows how much reduction in the number of local environmental officers we have found in each of Norway's 18 counties since 1997³. Since the distinguishing criterion of the positions – the state financing – has disappeared, it is not possible to define an environmental officer by exactly the same criteria as in 1997 to make a direct comparison. This is why the question of what *change* has taken place in the status of the positions becomes important. We have asked the municipalities whether the position as environmental officer has been reduced, removed, increased, if any new position has been established or whether no change has taken place. The problem with this categorisation however, is that the category "no change" also includes the municipalities that have never had an environmental officer to begin with. When we control for this possibility, it turns out that only 9 municipalities report both *not* having anybody responsible for environmental questions *and* that this implies no change since 1996. We also know, according to information from the Norwegian Association of Regional and Local Authorities, that at a time in 1996, 96 per cent

² Though some of the data used in this article are taken from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSSDS) Municipal database, the NSSDS is neither responsible for the analysis of the data nor for the interpretations that are made here.

³ We have not included Oslo as a county, as it is a large *municipality* with county functions and 25 city districts. In addition to the environmental officer and his staff, Oslo has people working with environmental questions and Local Agenda 21 in the city districts, but these positions were not part of the EIM reform and are thus not directly comparable to the other municipal positions.

of the municipalities had an environmental officer employed. This means that according to the NALRAs numbers there were only about 19 municipalities out of 435 that never had an environmental officer. The reason for the slight difference between NALRAs number and what is reported in our survey *may* be that a few municipalities have interpreted the term we use to describe the position ("miljøvernansvarlig") as somewhat wider now that the defining criterion of state financing is no longer valid, than what they did in the survey in 1997. Thus, a few municipalities may retrospectively have defined a position as formally responsible for environmental questions that formerly failed meeting this criterion. Also, the difference between the NALRA number and our own is well within the expected level of error in the reporting itself for two studies carried out with three years between them.⁴

This means that most of the municipalities that report "no change in the status of the position" do have an environmental officer now, and did so at the onset of 1997. This applies for 164 municipalities. As mentioned, we only find 9 municipalities that report having had no environmental officer neither in 1996/7 nor in 2000. Bearing this in mind, the numbers below showing reductions in the positions give us a good picture of what has happened with the positions in the different counties since the earmarking of the state financing disappeared.

⁴ In addition, three municipalities report to have created new environmental positions in the same period. However, these are municipalities where an environmental officer was already in place, and two of the three also participated in the program stage of the EIM reform.

Table 1. Percentage of municipalities in each county that have merged, reduced or removed the position as environmental officer since January 1st 1997.

COUNTY	Percentage of county's municipalities that have reduced/rem. position
Buskerud ⁵	33
Akershus	36
Rogaland ⁶	38
Østfold	39
Hedmark	41
Aust-Agder	47
Møre og Romsdal	50
Telemark ⁷	50
Vest-Agder	53
Sør-Trøndelag	56
Vestfold	60
Hordaland	63
Oppland	65
Nord-Trøndelag	67
Troms	72
Sogn og Fjordane	73
Finnmark	74
Nordland	84

As we can see from table 1, we find four counties in which 70 percent of the municipalities or more have removed or reduced the position as environmental officer. These four are Nordland, Troms, Finnmark and Sogn og Fjordane. We also find some counties where the same numbers are all below 40 percent. These are Østfold, Akershus, Buskerud and Rogaland.

This means that the municipalities in the three northernmost counties in Norway, and in one county on the west coast, have been significantly less willing or able to keep the position as environmental officer than the others after the earmarking ended. These counties were also the ones where the position of the environmental officers was weakest to begin with. A study from early 1997 shows that in these four counties, only between 56 and 69 per cent of the municipalities had a regularly employed environmental officer shortly after the EIM reform (Laffery et.al 1998), meaning that many of the positions were only temporary positions.

⁵ Net reduction is 29 per cent if counting 1 new position.

⁶ Net reduction is 27 per cent if counting 3 increased positions.

⁷ Net reduction is 33 per cent if counting 3 new or increased positions.

Nordland is now the only county in Norway where a majority of the municipalities report that they have nobody responsible for environmental questions at all. The next on the list is Norway's fourth northernmost county Nord-Trøndelag. This means that there is a marked tendency that the further north you go, the greater is the chance that the municipality you are in has removed or reduced its environmental position over the last few years. At the same time we find that municipalities in some counties further south and west show dramatically better results. The question is why this is so. The fact that some counties are situated further north is possible to treat as a statistical variable, but is in itself not an explanation for the differences we have found. We also find that Sogn og Fjordane breaks away from the north-south pattern, as it is situated on the west coast and still displays a huge reduction in administrative capacity.

If we want to explain the results, we therefore have to take a closer look at the municipalities and look for clues as to what divides them. But before diving into the characteristics of the different types of municipalities in search for an explanation, I want to investigate whether we find the same regional pattern for implementation of Local Agenda 21 that we find for administrative capacity. This is interesting because it may help us understand how important administrative capacity really is for the ability to change local politics in the direction of sustainability.

2.2 Regional differences in the implementation of Local Agenda 21

It has been documented that the positions as environmental officers are disappearing from many municipalities (Bjørnæs and Lafferty 2000). The question of what this means for local environmental policy and the ability to take up new policy trends and instruments, like Local Agenda 21, is however contested. In a newspaper comment on the reductions, the Norwegian Minister of the environment found it "natural" that the positions disappeared, and saw it as a sign that environmental concerns were now so much integrated in the day-to-day activities of many municipalities that the positions were no longer seen as needed (Kommunal Rapport April 23. 2001). If this "mainstreaming" explanation of the findings were to gain support, we would expect to find the opposite regional pattern for Local Agenda 21 to the one we found for the status of environmental officers. It would be the municipalities with the most active and integrated policy towards sustainable development and Local Agenda 21 that tended to no longer see the need for a designated position as environmental officer. It should come as no surprise that we find this ideal condition not to be the case.

The main indicator we use for Local Agenda 21 is how many per cent of the municipalities in each county have signed the Fredrikstad declaration on Local Agenda 21, thus politically committing themselves to taking on the task of implementing LA21. To further evaluate the status on Local Agenda 21 activity, we include four additional criteria or dependent variables for LA21 activity, giving us a total of five variables. We have chosen these variables both due to the quality of the available data and because we see them as highly relevant when evaluating the process of implementing LA21 in Norway. For comparative reasons, we have included two somewhat overlapping questions specifically about participation (4 + 5). These were also asked in a survey in 1998, and thus give us an opportunity for a direct comparison over time.

1. Has the municipality signed the Fredrikstad declaration on Local Agenda 21?
2. Has the municipality entered into a dialogue with its inhabitants on LA21?
3. Has the municipality started actual LA21-projects?
4. Has the municipality taken action to actively involve citizens in environmental work?
5. Has the municipality taken action to actively involve organisations and businesses in environmental work?

To turn to the first question first, interesting enough, we find that even on a primarily moral obligation like signing the Fredrikstad declaration, there are large regional differences, as can be seen from table 2 below. The pattern is clearly *the same* as it was for the environmental officers. In Vestfold 86 percent of the municipalities have signed the declaration – in Nordland only 14 percent.

We also find that the five counties in which municipalities are most reluctant to taking on work with Local Agenda 21, are the same five counties that have reduced the positions as environmental officers the most. The county Nordland gets the worst result on both questions, which is something of a paradox as the county administration in Nordland was one of the first in Norway to produce a *regional* Agenda 21 document. In other words; we find the same regional differences when it comes to committing to Local Agenda 21 that we found for the willingness or ability to uphold the position as environmental officer. It is in the regions where municipalities have been keeping the environmental officers that we find the highest commitment to Local Agenda 21. Again, the trend seems to be that the further north you go, the lesser the chance of any Local Agenda 21 activity.

Table 2. Percentage of municipalities in each county committed to implementing Local Agenda 21

COUNTY	Municipalities committed to LA21, %
Vestfold	86
Oppland	77
Buskerud	76
Aust-Agder	73
Østfold	67
Hedmark	64
Sør-Trøndelag	58
Rogaland	56
Akershus	50
Telemark	50
Vest-Agder	47
Hordaland	47
Møre og Romsdal	45
Troms	43
Nord-Trøndelag	42
Sogn og Fjordane	33
Finnmark	32
Nordland	14

Table 3. Mean percentage of municipalities with activity on 5 LA21 criteria

COUNTY	Percentage of municipalities with activity
Hedmark	68
Østfold	60
Akershus	59
Buskerud	59
Vestfold	57
Oppland	56
Hordaland	55
Sør-Trøndelag	53
Rogaland	49
Telemark	49
Troms	48
Nord-Trøndelag	48
Vest-Agder	47
Aust-Agder	45
Sogn og Fjordane	35
Møre og Romsdal	33
Finnmark	29
Nordland	22

When including in the analysis all five criteria for Local Agenda 21 mentioned above, we find that the picture changes somewhat for some of the counties, but not fundamentally altering the regional pattern we have observed. We have calculated for each county the mean percentage of municipalities reporting activity across the five questions above. As can be seen from table 3 above, the rating changes for some regions, but still with mostly southern, central counties on the top and northern and western not so central counties on the lower part of the list.

Involvement of inhabitants and stakeholders is still increasing

It is also interesting to note that for the country as a whole, the trend towards increased weight on public participation in local environmental policy continues. In the survey from 1998, it was found that 39 per cent of municipalities had made some sort of special effort to increase citizens' involvement in their environmental policy (Lafferty et.al. 1998:78). Our

survey shows that when the same question is asked two years later, this number has risen sharply to 63 per cent. The data also shows that most of the increase in participation is due to Local Agenda 21, with LA21 municipalities clearly more active in promoting citizen participation than the others. 76 per cent of municipalities signing the LA21 declaration reply that they have made an effort to involve citizens. Still, it is also worth noting that as much as 50 per cent of municipalities *not* signing the declaration have made some kind of effort for increasing participation. This shows us that citizen participation, something that Aall argues has been re-invented over the last ten years, is not something that has been exclusive for the LA21 municipalities, but must be seen as part of a general policy trend.

Aall also concludes that one of the most important new elements being integrated in local environmental politics with Local Agenda 21 is the direct voluntary cooperation between the municipalities and business and organisations (Aall, 2000:38). In the 1998 study, the situation seemed rather positive in this respect, with as much as 49 per cent of municipalities having made some sort of special effort to increase participation from business and organisations (op.cit.:79). Now this trend continues. In 2000 the number of municipalities involving business and organisations in their environmental policy has increased to a rather solid 57 per cent. From this we can read that the largest increase in participation has come from citizen involvement, (usually both in planning and direct projects), but participation from other important stakeholders also constitutes an increasingly important element in local environmental policy.

2.3 The importance of environmental officers

The findings above raise a lot of questions. First, there is a need to investigate more closely the nature of the connection between the two main objects of study in this article: having an environmental officer and engaging in Local Agenda 21. This is very much a policy-relevant question concerning the efficiency of maintaining a specifically designated administrative capacity on environmental questions. As we have seen, it seems that the counties where the municipalities have reduced their administrative environmental capacity the least, are the ones most willing to engage in Local Agenda 21. In the following section, this connection will be analysed statistically to see if the connection is more than coincidental.

To decide whether there really is a significant connection between administrative capacity and Local Agenda 21, we need a more sophisticated measure than just looking at the differences between counties. In table 4 below, we have placed the municipalities in a two by two table showing the relationship between reductions in the position as environmental officer and signing the LA21-declaration. When using the statistical method of estimating the Chi-square, we compare the observed numbers to the ones we would expect to find if there was no correlation, and then estimate the probability that the differences between observed and expected results are coincidental. In this case, we find that the correlation is significant at least an 0.0001 level, meaning that there is a highly significant correlation between reductions in the environmental administrative apparatus and the will or ability to take on work with Local Agenda 21.

Table 4. Municipalities which have/have not reduced or removed position as environmental officer and have/have not signed the Fredrikstad declaration on LA21. Percentage. N=422

	<i>Status of environmental position</i>	
	<i>Not reduced pos.</i>	<i>Reduced/removed</i>
Signed Fredrikstad declaration	64	41
Not signed Fredrikstad declaration	36	59
Total:	100	100
(N)	(177)	(245)

One other way to indicate what environmental officers mean to the work with Local Agenda 21, is looking at the relationship between LA21 and whether the environmental officer works with environmental questions only, or if the position is split between environmental and other tasks. If we look at table 5 below and compare the group of municipalities without an environmental officer to the group with an officer working only with environmental questions (no other tasks), the result is obvious, even without the application of any statistical method. The group of municipalities with a “pure” environmental officer clearly scores higher on Local Agenda 21 than the one with no environmental officer. We also find that the 21 per cent of Norwegian municipalities with a “pure” environmental officer are much more inclined to support Local Agenda 21 than the ones with a position which is divided between environmental and other tasks.

Table 5: Other tasks than environmental? * Signed the Fredrikstad declaration? Percentage. N=420

	<i>Only environment</i>	<i>Other tasks</i>	<i>No position</i>
Signed the declaration	67	48	40
Not signed the declaration	33	52	60
Total:	100	100	100
(N)	(88)	(227)	(105)

We can conclude then, that environmental officers and administrative capacity is *strongly* correlated to LA21 activity in Norwegian municipalities. It is clearly the municipalities with a pure position as environmental officer that are most committed to taking on work with Local Agenda 21. With correlations as strong as this, we know that the numbers are not coincidental. What we do not now however, is to what degree reductions in the positions as environmental officers are the direct *cause* of the lack of commitment to implementing Local Agenda 21, or rather a symptom of some other underlying cause. The problem has two aspects: first, since surveys only provide a picture of reality at a given time, it can be difficult to decide the direction of causality, even when a clear connection is discovered between two variables, like in this case. This is a common problem with survey methodology (Bryman and Cramer, 1990:13) and in this case relates to whether having an environmental officer influences implementation of LA21 or the other way around. In this case, we know that the reductions in administrative capacity and increase in LA21 activity have been partly overlapping processes. Information from the labour union organizing many of the

environmental officers reveals that the reductions have not taken the form of a sudden sharp drop with people being told to leave from the 1st of January 1997. Rather, the pattern has been one where the positions are left vacant after the environmental officers have chosen to leave their position for other reasons. This development has been reinforced by the fact that many young people were employed as environmental officers. Over the last few years therefore, some municipalities may indeed have let the environmental officer go *after* signing the Fredrikstad declaration. This means that our data may conceal some municipalities that have signed the Fredrikstad declaration and then later sacked the environmental officer. However, this only adds to the strength of any causal connection between the two, as such cases would be counted in our material as municipalities without an environmental officer, but with LA21 activity – in the analysis weakening our hypothesis of a causal connection. Also, it is our impression that the direction of causality is from administrative capacity towards engaging in Local Agenda 21 and not the other way around. We do not believe LA21 to have influenced the status of the positions to any substantial degree, but we believe municipalities not to have engaged in LA21 for lack of administrative capacity.

Secondly, there is the more general problem of possible underlying variables. We can imagine several underlying municipal characteristics that can influence the interest in environmental questions in general, thereby influencing both the will to keep the environmental officer and to take action on Local Agenda 21. We will look more closely at this possibility in the following analysis.

2.4 The importance of other differences between municipalities

When trying to establish what can explain the differences we have found between municipalities in different parts of Norway, our initial selection of hypotheses is based on a combination of “common-sense” assumptions about what constitutes the relevant differences between regions, and the availability of data. Using background data from the Norwegian municipal database, it is possible to check the differences against hard facts and numbers about economy, municipal size, political variables and so on. What we do *not* find in the database however, is data on more culturally oriented differences in people’s perceptions of environmental questions, the relationship people in different parts of the country have with nature and so on. Any conclusions regarding such cultural issues must somehow be derived from combining more basic background variables, or by conducting additional studies on the topic.

The three northernmost and coastal counties that are overrepresented in the low end of the tables above, are in many ways rather different from some of the more central, southern “high achievers” in our survey, and may face different challenges in the transition to sustainability. We find important differences in the economic basis, in size and geographical distances within the county, in centrality and urbanity and in political culture and the relative strength of different political parties. In the remainder of this article, we analyse some of these factors and see if they are likely to explain the differences we have found on administrative capacity and Local Agenda 21.

To identify the most relevant of the potential explanatory factors, we will put forth and test a few broad hypotheses on what we see as possible explanations. Our main hypotheses are that the differences on administrative capacity and Local Agenda 21 are caused by:

1. underlying conflicts between certain economic bases and environmental interests
2. differences in the experience of a local environmental problematics
3. economic differences between the municipalities
4. local party politics
5. different size/relative costs for administrative capacity

Through analysis of a set of more specific variables we hope to reveal the relevant differences between municipalities and regions, so that we can explain the variation in administrative capacity and Local Agenda 21 commitment. Based on the general assumptions above and on earlier findings on what variables are likely to influence local environmental policy, we have chosen to focus on the following variables.

- local economic basis [fishing/agriculture, services, industry]
- municipal economy [net operating profit per capita]
- number of inhabitants in the municipality
- the municipality's centrality
- the mayor's political party
- population density
- geographical size [square km.]
- combined municipal typology
- reductions in administrative capacity

The main focus of the analysis is on what influences Local Agenda 21, but for each of our five broad hypotheses, we will also comment on how it seems to influence the status of administrative capacity through environmental officers. For each of the questions we have run first a series of bivariate analyses to discover possible correlations between variables. We then have controlled the potentially significant variables against the other background variables in a multivariate analysis to rule out any coincidental correlations.

Conflicts between agriculture/fishing and environmental interests?

Turning first to the question of economic basis, we raise the question of whether we find varying levels of conflict between different economic bases and environmental interests. We know that many of the northernmost and coastal regions in Norway are dominated by agriculture and fishing as the main economic basis. Our initial thought was therefore that we might find the reason for the different treatment of environmental officers and Local Agenda 21 in these regions, in that agricultural and fishing municipalities view environmental policy as more threatening to their economic survival than do service-providing or industrial municipalities. The recurring conflicts with environmental organisations focusing on whaling and hunting of seal and ending in a ban on all commercial whaling, may have helped create a situation where environmental protection is seen as in conflict with basic economic interests. Our analysis does not lend sufficient support for this hypothesis, however. As can be seen in table 6 below, local economic basis does not seem to be a very important variable in explaining support for Local Agenda 21 – at least not alone. Agricultural and fishing

municipalities are indeed slightly less positive to Local Agenda 21 than industrial and service providing municipalities, but the correlations are too weak to be statistically significant.

Table 6. Number of municipalities which have signed the Fredrikstad declaration after local economic basis. Percentage. N=419

	<i>Local economic basis</i>		
	<i>Agriculture/fishing</i>	<i>Industry</i>	<i>Services</i>
Signed the declaration	43	49	53
Not signed the declaration	57	51	47
Total:	100	100	100
(N)	(75)	(97)	(247)

We find the same pattern when it comes to the status of environmental officers. Again, agricultural and fishing municipalities have been slightly less willing or able to keep the positions as environmental officers than have other municipalities. The percentage of fishing and agricultural municipalities that have reduced or eliminated the position as environmental officer is 68, whereas the percentages for industrial and service providing municipalities are 57 and 59. However, again the differences are not large enough to be statistically significant.

Differences in the experience of a local environmental problematics?

The second broad hypothesis we wanted to investigate was whether people's perception of environmental problems may differ between regions. Earlier research has stated that the existence of locally felt environmental problems was a requirement for action to be taken by municipalities with respect to the traditional environmental problems focused upon in the EIM reform (Naustdalslid, 1994, Hovik 1994, Brox 1994).

We suggest that in certain types of municipalities, the sensitization to "modern" and global environmental problems like the ones pointed to by Local Agenda 21, may also be weakened by people's feeling of being surrounded by vast areas of natural resources, clean air, sea and fresh water. Though not having direct data on the question of attitudes and environmental understanding, we would expect certain findings in our data for this hypothesis to gain support. We would expect rural, peripheral and geographically large communities with few inhabitants to be less concerned with global environmental problems than urban, central, and geographically "crowded" municipalities. This would expectedly lead to less interest in taking on implementation of Local Agenda 21. If the hypothesis is also valid for the interest in environmental questions in general, we would furthermore expect to find a similar pattern when it comes to upholding local environmental officers.

And indeed, to take the question of the environmental officers first, when it comes to the status of these positions, it turns out that *central* municipalities are more inclined to keep the environmental officers than more peripheral ones. In the statistical analysis, we find a highly significant correlation between low centrality and cutting in the position as environmental officer, meaning that centrality is an important factor in explaining which municipalities are keeping their administrative capacity and which are not. This may help explain some of the observed differences between regions, as the northernmost counties and Sogn og Fjordane have a high percentage of relatively peripheral municipalities. If we look at the differences in

size, meaning number of inhabitants, it also turns out that *large* municipalities are more inclined to keep the environmental officers than smaller ones. The findings are further strengthened by the fact that *densely populated* municipalities are more likely to uphold their administrative capacity than more sparsely populated municipalities.

We mentioned earlier that there are now 91 municipalities with a “pure” environmental officer working only with environmental questions. If we take a closer look at these 91 municipalities, we find that there is a clear correlation between municipal size and having an environmental officer working only with environmental questions. In the large group of municipalities with up to 5000 inhabitants, we find that only one in ten (11 per cent) has a “pure” environmental position. The percentage rises with the size of the municipality, and we find that for municipalities with more than 30000 inhabitants, three out of four (74 per cent) have a “pure” environmental position.

We also find a clear pattern that it is mainly small municipalities that now has no person responsible for environmental questions at all. In our survey, one out of three (33 per cent) municipalities with less than 5000 inhabitants report that this is now the situation, whereas of the 23 municipalities with more than 30000 inhabitants, this is the situation in only two.

In an earlier survey, conducted in early 1997, it was found that all the municipalities in the northern counties Nordland and Troms without a permanent environmental position, were small municipalities with less than 5000 inhabitants (Lafferty et.al. 1998). It was also found that of the relatively few municipalities in Norway that had no environmental officer at all, 85 percent had less than 5000 inhabitants (Lafferty et.al. 1998).

The authors offered two possible explanations for this connection between municipal size and willingness or ability to prioritize an administrative environmental position in the municipality: 1) Small municipalities have relatively higher administrative marginal costs in comparison with larger municipalities. This means that when the municipalities have to pay for a position as environmental officer themselves, this takes a larger percentage of the budget in a small municipality than in a large. 2) Other factors, such as problems recruiting qualified personell for the position, may exert some influence.

Finally, we could not find any support for our idea of a negative relationship between the geographical size of the municipalities and the situation for environmental officers or LA21. In this respect, it is worth noting that even if the differences in size are considerable, this does not necessarily influence what kind of municipality we are dealing with. With its 9700 square kilometers, the municipality Kautokeino is more than one and a half *thousand* times bigger than the smallest ones, Kvitsøy and Utsira with their 6 square kilometers. Still, all three are peripheral fishing or agricultural municipalities probably sharing more characteristics than are dividing them.

In the multivariate analysis, we find that there are three of our variables that significantly influence whether municipalities take on Local Agenda 21 or not. These three are 1) the centrality of the municipality; central municipalities are more active on Local Agenda 21 than more peripheral ones. 2) whether or not the municipality has reduced its administrative capacity by cutting in the position as environmental officer, and 3) the number of inhabitants in the municipality. Larger municipalities are more active on Local Agenda 21 than smaller ones. Our data indicate that there is also a correlation between population *density* and LA21 activity.

To sum up, all these findings point in the direction of support for the idea that an experience of local environmental problems is still crucial for an active environmental policy in the municipalities. We now see the result in large differences in administrative capacity

between regions. The question is what the consequences are for the implementation of environmental policy in general, and for the attempts to “globalise” local environmental politics through Local Agenda 21 in particular.

Economy

One of our initial suggestions was that the differences between regions and municipalities when it comes to environmental officers and Local Agenda 21 activity were caused by some municipalities being richer than others. Our thought was that employing and keeping an environmental officer and engaging in LA21 is easier for rich municipalities than for municipalities with less resources. If certain regions have a weaker municipal economy than others, this could be an explanation for the regional differences we have found. However, we found no significant direct correlation between economy and engaging in Local Agenda 21. Also, we did not find any significant relationship between economy and employing an environmental officer. As pointed to earlier, it therefore seems that if the economic situation can be said to influence the outcome, it must be indirectly, in that smaller municipalities have higher marginal costs for employing an environmental officer than larger ones. This, however may be a very important factor, and the main reason why small municipalities perform less well than larger ones.

Party politics. The conflict between economic growth and environment?

Earlier research has ascribed little significance to political parties and differences in municipalities’ political “colour” in relation to local environmental policy. Instead it seems that what party governs locally is usually of relatively little importance. One reason for this may be the *local scope* of traditional municipal environmental policy. However, the same studies indicate that when focusing on the more general (less local) sides of environmental policy, the political aspects become more important (Hovik and Reitan, 1994:249-250). Seeing Local Agenda 21 clearly as an attempt to “globalize” local environmental politics, we found it interesting to analyse to what degree party politics has any implications for the level of LA21 activity. Potentially, LA21 could be the kind of impetus needed to re-politicize environmental policy at the local level. To investigate this, we focused on the political party of the mayor and divided the parties along a conflict line that has been seen as useful when it comes to environmental differences by electoral researchers in Norway – the “growth” / “environmental protection” cleavage⁸ (Aardal 1993:324-328). Our analysis, somewhat surprisingly, reveals a slight overweight of “growth”-parties signing the Fredrikstad declaration on LA21. Even if the differences between the two blocks of parties are too small to be statistically significant, it is interesting to see that the conservative party clearly scores highest with 51 out of 82 conservative municipalities signing the Fredrikstad declaration, whereas only two out of eight municipalities governed by “green” party Venstre have done the same. In the multivariate analysis however, party politics gives way to other characteristics like size and administrative capacity. The conservative party has its strongest base in larger cities, where the environmental pressure is most strongly felt. The same is the situation for the question of

⁸ My model is a slightly modified version of the model Aardal uses, merging his “environmental protection” parties (SV + V) and the “intermediate” parties (KrF + SP) into one category, something that seems natural from the results of Aardal’s study. The categorization is based on what attitudes voters of the different parties hold towards the importance of economic growth versus environmental protection in different cases. Defined as “growth”-parties are the Labour Party (AP), the Progress Party (FrP) and the Conservative party (H).

environmental officers. We do not find any indications of a relationship between what political party governs the municipality and the willingness to prioritise an environmental officer. Again, this finding strengthens the hypothesis about the importance of the administrative apparatus for a successful implementation of Local Agenda 21.

To conclude the discussion so far, concerning what may explain the differences in Local Agenda 21 activity, we have found that some of the same characteristics that influence the willingness to prioritise environmental questions in general also influence the willingness to take on Local Agenda 21. Since these factors are size, centrality and population density, and not economic or political factors, we think it is fair to interpret this finding as the result of a stronger experience of local environmental problems in large, central and densely populated parts of the country.

What is important is that this difference in perception of environmental problems contributes to increased differences in administrative capacity. Environmental officers are one of the most important factors in explaining the differences in Local Agenda 21 activity, even when taking all other factors into account. This means that municipalities reducing their administrative capacity because they do not feel that they have any environmental problems locally, in the next instance lose the ability to take up new policy signals and programs like Local Agenda 21 and to redefine local environmental policy as a global sustainability approach on the local level.

Also, the national environmental authorities lose an important channel of influence and information vis a vis the municipalities. As studies show that the real struggles on local environmental questions often stand between different sectors rather than political parties (Hovik and Reitan 1994:253), the importance of this latter point for the balance between environmental considerations and other interests should not be underestimated. As stated in a study of the EIM reform (my translation):

State information does not reach far if there are no relevant recipients for this information in the municipalities. If environmental interests are to win through in local policy they must therefore have points of access in the municipal institutions (Naustdalslid 1994:42).

So, what we find is that larger, more central municipalities in the southern part of Norway with an environmental officer in place, have taken on LA21 more often than the others. When it comes to the status of environmental officers, counties with a large proportion of central municipalities are more inclined to keep these positions than more peripheral ones. This can help explain the regional differences we have discovered also when it comes to Local Agenda 21. Our findings on the importance of municipal size are also strengthened by a recent report on Local Agenda 21 from the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR). The report concludes that 77 per cent of municipalities with more than ten thousand inhabitants have signed the Fredrikstad declaration, as compared to 49 per cent of municipalities with less than ten thousand inhabitants (Harvold 2001). NIBR also point to the regional north-south dimension in stating that in the central south-eastern part of Norway, 77 per cent of municipalities have signed the Fredrikstad declaration as compared to 48 per cent in the rest of the county, but without trying to explain this regional pattern any further.

All in all, these findings seem most compatible with our hypothesis about a lack of locally experienced environmental problematics, about differences in administrative capacity, and about different relative costs for differently sized municipalities. The experience that one is surrounded by vast areas of clean nature and space could make it more difficult to make people engage in “new” environmental questions. The fact that we have found the main

differences to be between small, peripheral municipalities in the north and on the west coast, and large, central municipalities in the south, could support such a notion. It could be that the perception of environmental problems in rural municipalities is more connected to classical preservation of nature rather than “new” and sustainability oriented environmental topics such as energy preservation, climate protection, transport etc., making these questions being seen as less relevant in municipalities where people are surrounded by vast areas of nature and space.

In an evaluation of the pilot project “Sustainable local communities”, it was said from the project coordinators in a municipality in Nordland that they felt that the other six participating municipalities and the coordinating State pollution control authority were too urban in their approach. It was stated that a small coastal municipality in Nordland *“faces other problems and challenges than central and urban municipalities, and that therefore other solutions were needed”* (Aall and Bjørnæs 1999:117). One example was the introduction of a modern system for reprocessing food-waste. This was seen locally as an urban type of instrument that was poorly adapted to the municipality in question. Letting the seagulls take care of the waste like they had done for centuries was stressed as more sustainable and an easier solution for people to accept than having it driven 250 kilometers by car to the city of Bodø for reprocessing (Aall and Bjørnæs 1999:123). The findings are also compatible with the stated argument that small municipalities have relatively higher administrative marginal costs in comparison with larger municipalities. This could help account for smaller municipalities cutting in their environmental administrative capacity, which in turn influences the Local Agenda 21 efforts negatively by reducing the ability for taking up new policy instruments and for organisational learning.

3 CONCLUSION

This report has demonstrated rather large and systematic differences between different regions in Norway both when it comes to environmental administrative capacity through environmental officers and when it comes to the implementation of Local Agenda 21. Whereas municipalities have dealt with traditional environmental topics like sewage, water and waste for quite a while, successfully integrating activities into existing sectors and departments, our findings indicate that this is not the case with Local Agenda 21. We find the upholding of administrative capacity and competence through a designated environmental officer to be a crucial factor in municipalities' efforts to turn from a traditional local environmental policy to a sustainability policy, focusing on global questions, holistic planning and the participation of citizens and stakeholders. One important factor here is the possibility for organisational learning (Aall, 2000).

Norwegian municipalities differ considerably particularly in size. Compared to, say, Sweden, we have half the population and almost twice as many municipalities. The smallest municipality in Sweden, Bjurholm, is with its nearly 2900 inhabitants more than ten times as large as the smallest Norwegian one. While Sweden have hardly any municipalities with less than 3000 inhabitants, Norway, according to our data, has almost 160. At the same time, maybe as a result of large value ascribed to local autonomy, there exists a tradition of treating municipalities in a rather uniform way, considering the very different challenges they face. An example can be taken from a Local Agenda 21 pilot project including seven municipalities. Whereas one municipality struggled against depopulation, another was seriously pressured for land for new living accommodations (Aall and Bjørnæs:1999:96;114). In the same way, whereas some municipalities have problems with local air quality, traffic and noise, others have an abundance of clean air and space available. The results of this study indicate that these differences are now leading to large differences in the implementation of local environmental politics, leading to even greater differences between different types of municipalities. It seems like the transition from a traditional local environmental policy to a sustainability oriented policy for different reasons is running into problems in the smaller and more peripheral municipalities. We have pointed to how the administrative capacity is built down, both weakening the position of environmental questions on the political agenda and reducing the potential for organisational learning and sensitivity to political signals on environmental policy, whether they come from the state, from international organisations, from other municipalities or from within the municipality itself.

We find two probable causes for this rural build-down of environmental capacity after the earmarking of the funding for environmental officers was terminated. First, earlier evaluations of the EIM reform have argued that small municipalities have larger marginal administrative costs than larger ones. This may be one reason why we find the pattern we do both on environmental officers and on Local Agenda 21. Leaning on this explanation, the lack of interest in Local Agenda 21 in regions with many small and peripheral municipalities may be a result of not wanting to engage in new tasks when not being able to uphold the administrative capacity to deal with them. However, our findings also point to another possible explanation, related to the understanding of what constitutes relevant environmental problems. It may seem that municipalities that are not themselves experiencing local

environmental problems, define environmental questions as local, both because they are less sensitised to environmental questions in general, and because they reduce or remove their environmental expertise and administrative capacity. We see the result of this in a lack of interest in taking up Local Agenda 21 as a new and more globally oriented approach to local environmental politics.

This means that our experience with the effectiveness of “soft” or process oriented policy implementation within local environmental politics in Norway, is somewhat ambivalent. It seems that in some municipalities, Local Agenda 21 can be a useful supplement to traditional policy measures. About a third of Norwegian municipalities have implemented, to different degrees, elements of a “soft policy” sustainability approach to local environmental politics. The most important strength of the approach seems to be flexibility, inspiring enthusiastic municipalities to do *more* than what is demanded – or even expected – from them by the state. This way, Local Agenda 21 releases a potential for local environmental action that would otherwise not be released, and in this sense can be said to be an effective policy instrument, especially when considering the relatively small financial resources that have been allocated to the LA21 work. Also, the thinking involved, based on the concept of sustainable development, contributes to a change in these approximately 150 municipalities’ way of defining what constitutes locally relevant environmental questions, and also what policy measures are needed to achieve their environmental goals.

As we have seen, this conclusion must be qualified by the fact that there are large differences between different types of municipalities and different regions. These differences pose a challenge to effective implementation that must be taken seriously.

The challenge is related to two questions: How can one create higher sensitivity to global environmental questions in municipalities where this sensitivity is lacking, due to a lack of a locally felt problematics? and; How can one ensure that the same municipalities safeguard some kind of administrative responsibility, knowledge and capacity on environmental questions? We think this report has shown the two questions to be closely related. To the first question, we think this report has proven the importance of upholding administrative competence and capacity through a designated environmental position. Without a skilled person formally responsible for environmental questions, we think the chances of organisational learning both on increasingly complex environmental problems and the highly complex social and economic processes that cause them are severely reduced. Unless compensated, this will also reduce the chances of successfully delegating environmental tasks to the municipalities, as is also pointed to by some parties in the parliamentary discussion on the question [Innst.S.nr.307 (2000-2001)].

Concerning the second question, of safeguarding administrative competence, the state has traditionally done this in one of two ways. First, it has been established by law that the municipalities are to inhabit the necessary competence on many tasks seen as particularly important. This way it has been established for instance that all municipalities must have agricultural competence in the organisation (lovdata a, b). Through detailed regulations, the state even establishes what type and length of education is deemed necessary (lovdata c). The demands however are connected to the competence itself, and not that it must be tied to a certain position within the municipality. The second instrument to safeguard municipal competence has been earmarked funding, as was the case with the environmental officers until January 1st 1997.

Both the above-mentioned instruments are now politically controversial in Norway, and to a certain degree in opposition with general goals for the future relationship between state and

municipalities. In a new white paper on the distribution of responsibility between the state and the municipalities [St.meld. nr. 31 (2000-2001)], the state argues that earmarked funding must be seen as a "hard" policy tool and that it wants to reduce the use of such "hard" tools. It therefore concludes that the state wishes not only to reduce the use of earmarked funding, but also to remove the existing statutory demands for formal competence within a number of areas. Instead the state wants a transition to "soft" policy tools based on "guidance and dialogue". The white paper particularly mentions a new system for municipality-state reporting on economy and service production, KOSTRA, the so called "letters of expectations" from the state to the municipalities and finally *consultations* between the state and the municipal sector. This means that some of the more obvious suggestions one may come up with on how to solve the problems posed by large differences between regions and municipalities regarding implementation of a more sustainable local policy, would most likely run in to trouble for political-ideological reasons.

Local Agenda 21 is an example of a soft policy instrument that has had success in that it has spread rapidly to many municipalities. In the beginning of this paper, we stated that the real test of LA21 was whether it primarily worked as a blurring, "symbolic" concept or whether it really contributed to actual policy change. We have pointed to large differences between the municipalities in this respect, and it seems clear that in most municipalities too little has happened beyond the realm of rhetoric. Some more "cynical" voices have even seen LA21 as yet another state initiated "fashionable" concept, meant to conceal the fact that nothing much really happens, thus echoing Murray Edelman's perception of the political process as a spectacle of symbolic action. Still, we think we are able to document that a very large part of what has happened in Norway concerning sustainable development after the Rio conference, has happened *locally*, and has happened through the attempts to interpret and implement the "soft" policy instrument Local Agenda 21. For instance, there has been no sign of a national strategy for sustainable development until very recently, with the Johannesburg conference coming up shortly, and the Agenda 21 document has never even been translated to Norwegian. Some of the most exciting attempts to come up with more sustainable and holistic solutions for housing, transport, energy use, involvement of business and changing public attitudes have been thought out as Local Agenda 21 projects. Also, it seems that Local Agenda 21 as a concept matters, in the sense that it contributes to changing the way municipalities think about what constitutes relevant environmental challenges and how they should be handled. In our opinion, this relative success of Local Agenda 21 has also lead to a tendency to overburden the concept and the importance ascribed to "soft" or process oriented policy instruments.

In Norway, Local Agenda 21 has been one of the very few things going on as a direct follow-up of the Rio process with an explicit reference to Rio and sustainable development. Still, it is in our opinion important that LA21 is seen in a realistic light as a useful supplement to implementation of national environmental goals. The fact that two-thirds of Norwegian municipalities have done little or nothing to use this tool, points to the conclusion that in many cases a stronger national effort is still necessary if the broader agenda of sustainable development is to be taken seriously, and local sustainability to become more than symbolic politics in most municipalities. The rightly celebrated and price-winning LA21 processes in Norwegian municipality Stavanger or Danish Albertslund both show us that change is indeed possible. With a twist on Dryzek (1997) we could conclude by stating: That change is possible is shown by these rightly celebrated cases. That change is problematical is shown by the frequency of their celebration in the literature as exemplary cases.

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