

# ENVIROMENT



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“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

“A world in which poverty and inequity are endemic will always be prone to ecological and other crises. ... Sustainable development requires that societies meet human needs both by increasing productive potential and by ensuring equitable opportunities for all.”

“Many of us live beyond the world's ecological means, for instance in our patterns of energy use. ... At a minimum, sustainable development must not endanger the natural systems that support life on Earth: the atmosphere, the waters, the soils, and the living beings.”

“In essence, sustainable development is a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development; and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations.”

(from the Brundtland Report, “Our Common Future”)

Recent scientific findings indicate that a changing climate has a significant impact on our planet. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued its Fourth Assessment Report, so far the most convincing assessment on the science and implications of climate change. This report concluded that only immediate and sustained action will stop climate change from causing irreversible and potentially catastrophic damage to our environment. The IPCC noted that climate change will manifest itself in various ways, including:

- a. Rising temperatures, droughts and desertification;
- b. Heavy precipitation, flooding and rising sea levels;
- c. Extreme weather events such as cyclones, floods and droughts.

Such conditions can impact diminishing water resources, causing increased malnutrition, waterborne diseases such as diarrhoea, and vector-borne diseases such as malaria. Floods and rising sea levels can cause drowning, injuries, and severe mental and physical trauma, particularly for communities living in small island developing states, settlements alongside major river deltas and low-lying coastal areas.

Evidence suggests that developing countries, already struggling with social, economic and environmental issues, will suffer most from greater weather extremes and the increasing incidence of droughts and floods. These areas include the Arctic region, Asia (major deltas, Bangladesh, China, India, Pakistan) and the Pacific, the Caribbean, Central Asia,

Gulf of Mexico, Latin America (especially the Andean region and Amazonia), the Middle East and North Africa, the Sahel zone and Southern Africa.

In 1992, the United Nations released a ground-breaking action plan for sustainable development called Agenda 21. Agenda 21 is a blueprint that sets out actions we can all take to contribute to global sustainability in the 21st century. It recognises that most environmental challenges have their roots in local activities and therefore encourages Local Governments to promote local environmental, economic and social sustainability by translating the principles of sustainable development into strategies that are meaningful to local communities. This process is called Local Agenda 21.

Local Agenda 21 is a program aimed at implementing sustainable development at the local level. A Local Agenda 21 program comprises systems and processes to integrate environmental, economic and social development. Founded on a strong partnership between local government and the community, the progress towards local sustainable development will be guided by the preparation of a long term strategic action plan that integrates existing policies and programs and an agreed future direction.

Local Agenda 21 provides the basis for debate on and awareness of sustainable development at the community level. The main focus of Local Agenda 21 is to involve all groups in sustainable development planning in the major areas of economic, social and environmental development. This focus on participation clearly sets Local Agenda 21 apart from other initiatives which focus more on the achievement of outcomes for sustainable development.

There are significant positive outcomes that should result from an effective Local Agenda 21 process; these include

- stronger community and local government partnership
- ongoing community involvement in the resolution of sustainable development issues
- integrated decision making which takes all foreseeable economic, social and environmental considerations into account
- development, implementation and periodic review of a long term, integrated action plan which incorporates sustainable development principles
- changes which promote a continual improvement toward sustainable development.

The Action Areas cover the basic activities of a Local Agenda 21, which include :

- Involving the entire community in preparing a long term sustainable development action plan through representative community involvement
- Determining the vision, goals, targets and priorities for action, taking an integrated approach
- Working in partnership with all stakeholders to achieve those goals
- Monitoring and reporting procedures, including the use of local indicators to track progress and to allow participants to hold each other accountable to the action plan.

What are some of the key principles of sustainability?

The following list of principles are based on our research, literature and experience of what is most applicable to local councils.

Integration - the effective integration of environmental, social and economic considerations in decision making.

Community involvement - recognition that sustainability cannot be achieved, nor significant progress made toward it, without the support and involvement of the whole community.

Precautionary behaviour - where there are threats of serious or irreversible environmental damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation.

Equity within and between generations - fairness and equal access to opportunities both in our lifetimes, as well as for future generations.

Continual improvement - the declining environmental situation means there is an imperative to take immediate action to become more sustainable and to make continual improvement.

#### Current Management Systems

The inventory could also include an evaluation of council's management systems. Criteria used should assess whether the operation of the management systems assist or hinder the achievement of sustainable development. Some criteria for judging this might include

- Are management systems aimed at providing solutions for the long term, rather than only solving immediate problems?
- Do they examine the long term impact and sustainable development implications of new proposals?
- Do decision making processes allow for social, economic and environmental factors to be taken into account? (for example, through cross-departmental communication)
- Does the current system encourage the development of innovative solutions that would assist in achieving sustainable development?
- Is there substantial community involvement and joint ownership?

#### Reporting to council on establishing a Local Agenda 21 process

The report to council is necessary to gain formal commitment and funding for the Local Agenda 21 process.

- Begin with an overview of Local Agenda 21 - What is it? Where is it happening?
- Ensure that examples of benefits to council and the region are included – for example, dollar savings, integration of policy, development of sustainable technologies, whatever is relevant to the council.
- Present the experiences of other similar councils (population, housing stock, urban-rural) showing what issues can be dealt with in a Local Agenda 21 - amalgamations, rural and urban integration, expanding urban fringe.
- Detail what council is already doing and emphasise how the Local Agenda 21 process complements the current programs in council and the added values it can deliver.
- Propose a Local Agenda 21 structure (see Action Area 2) and timeframe, detailing the cost and asking for council commitment.

Developing a community involvement strategy is about determining how and to what degree to involve the community in each of the stages of a Local Agenda 21. Issues include :

- how many people to involve
- how representative will they be
- what level of input they will have to decision making
- how involved can they be in implementation, monitoring and review stages
- what involvement or communication mechanisms to use.

Ideally, a Local Agenda 21 would involve as many people as possible and to the fullest extent that people are willing to be involved. Communication would be interactive and responsive, rather than just a one way stream of information from council to the community. It would be ongoing and not just consultation at a particular point in time.

However, in a diverse community, involvement of this degree can demand allocation of significant resources. This depends upon factors such as

- the number of distinct community groups
- specific cultural and language groups
- preferred means of presentation and information flow.

(This information should have been established in the community profile.)

A framework for achieving the vision: goals, indicators and targets

Just as important as determining the vision is the setting of goals, indicators, targets, and an Action Plan to achieve it.

- Goals represent the desired end point on specific issues
- Indicators measure progress towards goals
- Targets provide measurable commitments towards the achievement of goals
- Action plans clearly identify all actions necessary to achieve specified targets

When developing each of these, the sustainability principles mentioned earlier will need to be considered and included. This could be achieved by having an introductory session for those involved in determining goals, indicators and targets.

Involving the community is also an important aspect of this phase as it is about determining how the council and community intend to become more sustainable. Active participation of the community in selecting the goals and targets will enable people to feel commitment and ownership of them.

There are a variety of techniques to assist with group planning (determining goals, targets, indicators and actions). These include:

- brainstorming — to generate a large number of ideas
- role playing — enabling people to creatively remove themselves from their usual roles and perspectives and allowing them to understand choices and decisions made by others
- focus groups — using professional facilitators to solicit people's reactions
- force field analysis — identifying hindering and facilitating forces affecting the functioning of any situation, assessing the relative strength of each force, and planning alternative actions to overcome or promote these forces
- ranking — assigning qualitative and quantitative values to problems and comparing these in order to rank problems from low to high priority

- surveys — a relatively low cost method of directly obtaining information about people's attitudes, opinions, needs, perceptions, policy preferences, behaviours and characteristics
- SWOT analysis — considering strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of any proposed action.

#### Things to include in a local Action Plan

- A profile of the area - its physical form, the nature of the community that live in, work in and visit the area. Mention elements that make the area distinctive - elements to be proud of and elements that need improving
- A summary of what the council and community have done and are doing to improve the sustainability of the area
- A statement about where the Local Agenda 21 process sits relative to other council strategies and the corporate plan, and the commitment of council to Local Agenda 21
- The visions, goals and indicators (including a brief statement about the current state of affairs relating to each issue). Perhaps include suggestions of what individuals can do in their daily lives to help achieve the goals
- The proposed actions and the targets they are to achieve Details of who is responsible for undertaking the actions, their relative priority, budgets and timeframes for implementation
- Details of the Local Agenda 21 process to date - the process of determining the vision, goals, indicators, targets and actions
- Details of the ongoing Local Agenda 21 process - how progress will be monitored, how the Action Plan will be reviewed and the Local Agenda 21 process itself kept healthy
- Details of how people and organisations can get involved - for example, through the steering committee, helping to implement the nominated actions, and monitoring
- Contact details for inquiries – perhaps a web address

#### An Action Plan will need to address each of the targets and

- define actions to achieve the target
- rank these actions (eg using high, medium and low priority)
- assign who will be responsible for implementing each action (usually a position, department or organisation rather than a person)
- estimate capital and recurrent costs, and identify possible sources of funding — possibly applying cost sharing principles
- estimate the amount of work time needed to carry out the action, preferably including a timeline.

#### Some questions to ask when determining appropriate actions include

- Will the actions allow us to achieve the targets we have set?
- What are the actions' impacts — social, economic, environmental?
- Will the actions address identified barriers to Local Agenda 21?
- Do any of the actions conflict with one another or overlap?
- Do any of the actions have benefits in more than one area?
- Are there resources or might resources become available to implement the action?

- Is the action cost effective?
- Can the action be allocated a timeline and responsible lead agent?
- Does the action have the support of the community?
- Is there widespread support in the council for the action?
- Is there a person or organisation who will champion the action?
- As a set of actions, are they realistic and desirable for the council and community alike?

