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# CONSENSUS OR CONFLICT?

Experiences with  
Local Agenda 21 Forums

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# Preface

The experience with local Agenda 21 (LA21) among local authorities in Norway varies. Some have relatively limited experience, and some have not yet started LA21 activities. Still, there have been some “front-runners” among the local authorities. Some of these started processes of addressing sustainable development issues in the early 1990s. The two cities Bergen and Fredrikstad can in many respects be characterised as “front-runners” in environmental issues. Both chose to establish consensus oriented forums for discussing LA21 issues. This working paper presents the two cities’ experience with the forum model.

The two case-studies are part of a research project focusing on how local authorities in Norway implement local Agenda 21. The project has been funded by the Research Council of Norway. This is the second paper reporting from the project. The first paper - in Norwegian - was published last year (“Mellom symbol, eksperiment og administrasjon”, NIBR-notat 2001:112).

Both papers have been written by Kjell A. Harvold.

Oslo, June 2002

Arvid Strand

Research Director

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# Summary

*Kjell A. Harvold*

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The forum approach echoes the language of “partnership” and “stakeholding” associated with international conferences such as the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 as well as the national sustainable development implementation efforts undertaken in its wake. Of special interest to the local level, is chapter 28 in Agenda 21, also called the Local Agenda 21 (LA21). This document states that each “local authority should enter into a dialogue with its citizens, local organisations and private enterprises and adopt a local Agenda 21. Through consultation and consensus building, local authorities would learn from citizens and from local, civic, community, business and industrial organisations and acquire the information needed for formulating the best strategies”.

This paper explores the potential of forum models for consultation and consensus at the local level, and focuses primarily on the experience of two Norwegian cities, Bergen and Fredrikstad. In both cities an environmental forum has been established, but the Bergen Forum and the Fredrikstad Environmental Forum have developed quite differently. In spite of some difficulties, the Fredrikstad Environmental Forum has managed to build consensus around some important issues, and the forum is still existing, after many years of operation. On the other hand, the Bergen case shows that the forum model also can generate considerable conflict, and in this case the Forum probably has created more problems than it has solved.

The concluding part of the paper discusses advantages and disadvantages with this kind of co-operative approach to LA21 issues in light of the experiences from the two case-studies.

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# 1 The forum modell

## 1.1 Introduction

It has been argued that there is a potential for a more successful management of sustainable development at the local level of a democratic system through interactive decision making. Many different models have been presented, such as co-operative management regimes, collaborative planning processes and different kind of forum approaches. The forum model has been put forward as an especial fruitful way to implement Local Agenda 21 (LA21), which emphasise participation and co-operation of different groups over a wide spectrum of local challenges.

This paper explores the potential of such forum models at the local level; what kind of advantages/disadvantages can be pointed out? A few case-studies with some comparative elements from other countries are presented in the paper, however, the paper focuses primarily on the experience with forum approaches in two Norwegian cities, Bergen and Fredrikstad. In both cities an environmental forum has been established, but the Bergen Forum and the Fredrikstad Environmental Forum have developed quite differently. In spite of some difficulties, the Fredrikstad Environmental Forum has managed to build consensus around some important issues, and the forum is still existing today, after many years of operation. On the other hand, the Bergen case shows that the forum model also can generate considerable conflict, and in this case the Forum probably has created more problems than it has solved. The concluding part of the paper discusses advantages and disadvantages with this kind of co-operative approach to LA21 issues in light of the experiences from the two case-studies.

## 1.2 Perspectives on the forum model

In many ways the forum approach echoes the language of “partnership” and “stakeholding” associated with international meetings such as the Rio Earth Summit (in 1992) and with the national sustainable development implementation effort undertaken in its wake (Grubb 1993). Of special interest to the local level, is chapter 28 in Agenda 21 from the Rio Summit. Chapter 28, also called the Local Agenda 21 (LA21). This document states that each “local authority should enter into a dialogue with its citizens, local organisations and private enterprises and adopt a local Agenda 21. Through consultation and consensus building, local authorities would learn from citizens and from local, civic, community, business and industrial organisations and acquire the information needed for formulating the best strategies” (Agenda 21, § 28.3).

The discussion concerning local environmental questions can also be understood within the context of recent interest in new patterns of governance in western democracies, with the withdrawal of government from spheres of social life in which it has previously been

active, and from the reform of administrative structures and practices to embody private-sector values (see for example Marin and Mayntz 1991). Baldersheim (2000:109) argue that the globalisation process can be seen as an new possibility for local democracy, and for movements both within states and across national borders. Some converging tendencies in countries, that includes the rise of local governance structures and community governance network, can be pointed out (see for example Amnå 2000:214, Gbikpi & Grote2002:18). On the national level, Bogason (2000:174) argues, that a decentralisation to localities has taken place, empowering groups of citizens in ways they have never seen before in relation to their status as users of public services.

The environment is in many ways a “laboratory” where new forms of governance are constantly invented (Theys 2002:213). Dorsey & McDaniels (2001:250-252) argue that there may be a potential for a more successful management of sustainable development through citizen involvement and interactive decision making. The approach involves pulling together partners from different sectors of the community, to collectively define and implement solutions to local challenges. The term “co-operative management regimes” (Lafferty and Meadowcroft 1996) has been used in connection with such negotiated environmental solutions, but their character might also be captured by phrases such as “collaborative co-management” or “environmental corporatism” (Meadowcroft 1998:21). These initiatives have been seen as a promising alternative to more “traditional” strategies. An “environmental co-operative management regime” differs from a “LA21 forum” with respect to at least one important element. The term “management” indicates that these mechanisms are practically oriented. These kind of co-operative regimes are focused on carrying out agreed solutions on a relatively clearly defined problem in the environmental field. A LA21 forum - on the other hand - should have a wider approach (as stated in Agenda 21, chapter 28). The forum should focus on the local society as a whole and consider a much wider spectre of problems. Still there are many similarities between a co-operative management regime and a LA21 forum.

A co-operative management regime is, according to Meadowcroft (ibid:22), a form of social regulation in which groups originating in different spheres of social life, and reflecting distinct perspectives and interests, participate in debate and negotiation to achieve a common understanding of a specific problem, and then implement a collective plan for its resolution. There are at least three features that characterise both a co-operative management regime and a LA21 forum,

both they:

- Involve participants from *more than one sector* of social life
- Rest upon representation of *organised* interest
- Depend upon processes of discursive *consensus* formation

The LA21 forum – as well as the co-operative management regime - involve participants from more than one sector of social life; they imply not just co-operation among business interests, or among pro-environmental groups, or among various government agencies – but rather collaboration across these areas of life. Another central element is that they rest upon the representation of organised interests rather than individual citizen participation. The co-operative management regime and the LA21 forum also depend upon processes of discursive consensus formation – it is through a shared experience of attempting to come to terms with complex issue, through exchange and interaction among participants from different backgrounds, that the groups come to construct a common understanding of the problems to be addressed, and of the nature of potential solutions.



### 1.3 Arguments for - and against – a forum model

As Meadowcroft (ibid.) points out, there are many potential advantages to different co-operative or collaborative forms of environmental management. One key element could be that they provide a structured framework for encouraging pluralist inputs to environmental policy-making. This is particularly important in a LA21 setting because of the complexity of the interests that may be affected by shifts in environmental conditions and management practices, and the difficulty in predicting medium term impacts both in the bio-physical and the politico-social realm.

The possible advantage with a LA21 forum model is that it could provide a mechanism for building consensus and more particularly for transforming interests. The concept of sustainable development may call into question deeply entrenched social practices, and an effective solution to a particular dilemma may only be possible through a gradual change in established patterns of activity. The LA21 forum model can be adapted to different circumstances and applied in different contexts. For instance, flexibility can exist in relation to the kind of groups involved, the forms of debate and decision procedure, the management time frame and the nature of the implementation stage.

The forum model can also have a potential to generate more stable and legitimate policy outcomes. Because many relevant groups are involved in concluding and enforcing an agreed solution set, policies may appear more authoritative in the eyes of the concerned public: There may be a greater confidence in policy continuity. This kind of organisation can also provide a context in which different groups can be introduced into the questions of sustainable development in a fruitful manner. The forum model can provide a framework which encourages learning as well. Collaborative structures can assure a context of interactive learning, as participant groups engage with each other within a structured framework in an iterative process of defining problems, identifying solutions and initiating practical reform (Glasbergen 1996).

There are in other words many potential advantages to the LA21 forum model. At the same time there are also some kinds of criticisms, which could be levelled at this kind of approach. One type of critics agree that the *power* element will create problems in such a consensus or co-operative oriented process (see for example Flyvberg 1996, Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger 1998). Lyngstad (2000) argues that power-studies are important particular in countries where local government is of significant importance to the welfare system. In his case study he concludes that the decision making process in a Norwegian city seems to validate that regime theory is a useful model also in the Norwegian context (ibid:342-343).

At the heart of this objection is the observation that real world politics is not about negotiation among equals, but about power-centred interaction. Thus, the mechanisms described in normative models of collaborative actions are in reality not “co-operative” at all: rather each party brings resources to the table, and the so called agreed solutions will ultimately reflect existing differences of power. Furthermore, structural circumstances necessarily favour organisations of producers over these of consumers, business over labour etc. This type of objection can, as Meadowcroft also points out (ibid:33), be said to focus on the “naive” or “idealistic” resonance of co-operative initiatives, and remains sceptical of the liberal pluralist assumptions behind the approach which do not appear to address seriously the structural inequalities and systematic imperatives which constrain reform.

Another type of argument, relates to the question of efficiency. What guarantee is there that the outputs that are agreed upon really will address adequately the issue they are intended to solve? Would not the negotiation process consume substantial resources of time and energy, in order to produce a “lowest common denominator” policy which soon will reveal its inadequacy – discrediting both the process and the participants? It can also be argued that the forum model has some “anti-democratic” implications. Most of the groups participating in these processes have weak democratic credentials; business organisations and some environmental action groups do not function on a democratic basis internally. It could therefore be argued that such group-based processes inevitably undermine genuine democratic government both by transferring important decisions from responsible officials to pressure group cartels, and by degrading the quality of public debate by emphasising parochial allegiances rather than the common good. A last type of argument is culture; co-operative models may have a place in certain types of societies, but not in other. Consultation and mutual agreement are perhaps more alien to some political cultures than others.

In many ways the advantages and disadvantages with the LA21 forum model presented here, point in quite different directions, as also shown in Table 1. Experiences with co-operative consensus oriented models from local authorities in different countries are also somewhat ambiguous, as the short presentation in the next section will show.

Table 1.1 *Some possible advantages and disadvantages with the LA21 forum model*

<i>Advantages</i>	<i>Disadvantages</i>
Provide a structured framework for pluralist inputs to policy-making for a sustainable development	Consensus on important issues are impossible in a world of power
Can provide a mechanism for consensus-building – and can encourages learning	“Anti-democratic”
Flexibility	Inefficiency

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## 2 Experiences with LA21

### 2.1 LA21 experiences from the UK and Canada

In Norway not many local authorities<sup>1</sup> – except from the two described later in this paper - have an experience with the forum model within the LA21 or the environmental field. Studies from other countries are therefore of particular interest. A short presentation of two such case-studies will be given here, one from the UK and one from Canada. Local authorities in the UK have come under pressure from central government to adopt Local Agenda 21 and to advance participatory democracy. In 1996-97 the new unitary authority of Bath and North-East Somerset Council set up a LA21 Issue Commission to review its “sustainability” performance and policy development practice with the direct involvement of the community. Rowe’s (2000) study of the commission’s work conclude that the way it was conceived and conducted, resulted in difficulties in identifying and carrying out its task. Nonetheless, it kick-started significant steps towards LA21 within the council, and provided valuable insights into LA21 implementation, as well as the nature of meaningful consultation.

The commission steering group in Bath and North-East Somerset was formed in 1996. All in all the commission numbered 14 representatives. Due to lessons from other local authorities in the UK it was decided to involve a large number of elected councillors, in the commission. Originally, 12 councillors, (later nine, when the considerable time pressures involved became apparent), were selected by their political groups in proportion to the council’s political balance. In addition, four co-optees were included. These four had diverse backgrounds, but all were white, middle class professionals. A further co-optee, to represent rural interests, was sought from the National Farmers Union. Following Rowe (ibid:77) all the five co-optees had little direct experience of local government processes.

Even though the commission was given an overall goal for their work, the purpose was much discussed; 10 steering group meetings had taken place even before the inaugural meeting, to try to resolve some main issues. The co-optees’ role in the commission was unclear. From the outset issues of ownership and leadership arose between the various departments engaged in the commission process. The commission’s role in relationship to the council was also unclear. An information pack was distributed by the council – rather than the commission – outlining the nature of Agenda 21 and the goals of the commission. Then physical arrangements were made by the steering group, selecting a range of community venues with a geographical spread. Time inputs by council officers and costs to the council were much higher than had been anticipated by everyone

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<sup>1</sup> A survey dating from 2001 indicates that all in all, around 10-15 Norwegian municipalities have – or have had – a LA21 forum (Harvold 2002).

involved in the commission process. The commission met difficulties in securing autonomy and independence in a process embedded in local council procedure. However, Rowe (ibid:87) also points out some notable achievements. The commission managed to over-ride most party-political considerations – and the co-optees with little experience of local government process, were able to act both as “outsiders” to the council and as neutral parties. In her concluding remarks Rowe (ibid. 89-90) points out that shared ownership is essential if cross-sectoral consultation is to be achieved. Adequate time is required, issues of leadership need to be resolved and limitations imposed by resource availability should be made explicit to all actors if further disillusionment with local government undertaking is to be avoided.

J. Brugman (2000) offers some reflections over the implementation of LA21 at the local and regional level in Canada. In the regional municipality of Hamilton-Wentworth a unified regional “Vision 2020” action plan was prepared through a relatively broad co-operative participation process. In the planning process key municipal departments joined forces with major, local social and environmental stakeholders – as well as with those willing business representatives - to prepare a sustainable development strategy (ibid:43). Council authority over this process was granted to the council’s planning and economic issues as well as political support. However, during the initial years of consultation and assessment, the community’s major business organisations pursued a separate strategic planning process for economic development and rejected the notion of sustainability as a foundation for this strategy. In due time, this gap was bridged, and a unified, regional “Vision 2020” action plan was prepared. The regional municipality proceeded to integrate the Vision mandates into its policies and operations. For example, a working group of high-level professionals was established to review all departmental decision-making procedures, budgets and policies relative to Vision 2020. However, during the same period, the regional council approved the construction of a major road through an important, environmentally sensitive area, in spite of voiced and organised public opposition. The project was a blatant contradiction of Vision 2020 objectives. Shortly thereafter, the council eliminated new bicycle lanes in response to complaints from private motorists. These actions were condemned by local organisations as demonstrations of the region’s lack of commitment to Vision 2020.

The two cases (of Bath and North-East Somerset in the UK and Hamilton-Wentworth in Canada) are quite different. Still, they both illustrate the difficulties that local authorities and their stakeholders face in fully integrating sustainability criteria within their development and investment decisions. The two cases also indicate that LA-processes can be rather time consuming. The creation of new mechanisms for policymaking, may also create uncertainties of the new organisations’ role in relation to established elected councils.

## 2.2 Local Agenda 21 in Norway

The Norwegian government remained relatively passive in implementing Agenda 21s Chapter 28 after the Rio summit in 1992 (Aall 2001). The government’s formal starting point of what can be called a “LA21 period” of municipal environmental policy is to be found in White Paper No. 58 (1996-97) on “Environmental Policy for a Sustainable Development”. In this White Paper from 1997, LA21 is included as one of four main target policy areas. It is further stated that LA21 is to be understood primarily as a planning process – and that such planning should be conducted as part of the mandatory municipal planning, authorised in the Planning and Planning Act.

A year after the presentation of the White Paper (on “Environmental Policy for a Sustainable Development”), the influential “Fredrikstad Conference” took place, with delegates from more than 150 municipalities. During the conference, a declaration was adopted. The declaration states a moral obligation to support the goal of sustainable development and signals the will to start LA21-processes. By late 2000, 241 (of the 435) municipalities had signed the declaration. However, looking at what the municipalities actually have done, we find that the range of local activity differs widely. A national survey conducted early 2000, shows that 69 percent of the Norwegian municipalities have *some kind* of LA21-activities going (Bjørnæs & Lafferty 2000:20). As a comparison, Tuxworth (1996) found that 91 percent of the local authorities in the UK were committed to participating in LA21 in 1996.

The Norwegian experiences so far indicate that we have to distinguish between the ambitions of the local authorities and what they really implement. For instance, few municipalities have started consultation or partnership-processes in connection with LA21-processes. As pointed out by many (see for example Lindseth 2001:8), there is a lack of policy co-ordination at the national level, and this lack of co-ordination is being transferred downwards by anticipating the co-ordination to take place at the lower level.

Growing public interest in environmental issues has been a significant element in political change in several European countries since the 1970s. The inability of the established political parties to respond adequately to these issues has been a prime factor underlying the emergence of new political parties, like the German Greens (Scharf 1994:50). In Germany – as well as in Sweden – the “Green” party has been quite successful and reached a high level of support at both national and local elections. However, in Norway the political picture has been little influenced by the “Greens”. As Bortne et al. (2001) points out: “Miljøpartiet de Grønne” have failed to be a significant political factor at both the local and national level. According to Jansen & Mydske (1998:186) most Norwegian parties have promoted themselves as environmentally oriented, in spite of an existing green, blue/red schism. Because of the strong support for environmental values in the population, political parties find it difficult to argue against environmentalism.

Jansen & Mydske also point out that in 1989, when environmental issues ranked as the second most important issue for the voters, the Green Party received only 0,4 percent of the votes in the national election. In reference to Aardal (1990) Jansen & Mydske argue that the major explanation for the failure of the Green Party is that there is no “vacant” position in the party system, for a new environmental, left of centre party. Both the Socialist Left Party and the Centre Party as well as the Liberal Party have to a great extent presented themselves as green parties, leaving little room for a new green party in the electorate.

### 2.3 The experience from the two Norwegian cities; Bergen and Fredrikstad<sup>2</sup>

The experience with LA21 among local authorities in Norway varies. Some have relatively limited experience, and some have not yet started LA21 activities. Still, there have been some “front-runners” among the local authorities. Some of these started

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<sup>2</sup> The study is based upon interviews with key representatives in the two municipalities (four in Bergen and three in Fredrikstad), as well as studies of planning documents, correspondence and written documentation.

processes addressing sustainable development issues in the early 1990s, and both Bergen and Fredrikstad can in many respects be characterised in as “front-runners” in environmental issues. Bergen was the host city for a large international environmental conference in 1990 (“Bergenskonferansen”) as part of the UN-process leading up to the Rio-meeting in 1992. In connection with the 1990-meeting, Bergen presented itself as a “environmental” city, and already in 1991 an environmental plan for the city was presented. Later in the 1990s the city has formed a Climate Action Plan and a new environmental plan. Both Bergen and Fredrikstad - along with three other cities - have participated in a specially designed environmental program (“Miljøbyprogrammet”) for some of the largest Norwegian cities, initiated by the Ministry of Environment.

The Fredrikstad Declaration states a moral obligation to support the goal of sustainable development. As the host city, Fredrikstad has a special obligation to support the ideas formulated at the conference. In many ways both Bergen and Fredrikstad can be said to be “best case” studies as far as the approach to environmental issues are concerned. As larger cities (at least in the Norwegian context), they can not be characterised “typical” Norwegian municipalities.<sup>3</sup> The two cities choose to establish consensus oriented co-operative organisations (or “forums”). In 1997 the Bergen Forum 21 (BF21) came in to action, after several years of preparation. The BF21 board had 10 members, and included representatives from different NGOs, business interests and the public sector. The chairman of the board was elected at the annual meeting where representatives from all groups participated. In addition, a commissioned co-ordinator acted as secretary for the board. BF21 was in principle separated from the (formal) municipality organisation, but the city was the only significant financial contributor, also paying the co-ordinator’s salary.

The first Fredrikstad Environmental Forum (FEF) was established as early as in 1992. However the forum was reorganised, and a new forum started its work in 1996. Today the FEF board has seven members, and like in Bergen the representatives come from NGOs, business interests and the public sector. The board in Fredrikstad also (like in Bergen) has a commissioned secretary.

The city *councils* in Bergen and Fredrikstad are in many ways (but not all, see also Appendix 1) like other local councils in Norwegian: All the large political parties are represented in the councils. In both cities the Labour Party and the Conservative Party are among the dominant parties in the municipality, but no party alone form a majority in the city council. Appendix 1 shows the political representation in the two councils compared with the country as a whole after the local elections in 1995 and 1999. The Green Party (“Miljøpartiet de Grønne”) has no representation in two councils.

Table 2.1 (below) indicates that there are many similarities between the Forum model in Bergen and Fredrikstad. The board in Bergen (10) was a little larger than in Fredrikstad (7), but the principle of representation was the same, with members from business interests, the public sector and the NGOs. In Fredrikstad the co-operation between the municipality and the forum was secured through a political representative; the vice-mayor was included as a member of the Forum in Fredrikstad. In Bergen the mayor played the same role in the Bergen Forum 21. Both boards had a special hired secretary, and in both cities the forum was established with the municipality acting as an active partner – and in both cities the guidelines and the goals for the forum were unclear.

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<sup>3</sup> Bergen is the second largest city (ca 230.000 inhabitants) and Fredrikstad the seventh largest municipality (ca 67.000 inhabitants) in the country. See also Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 *Environmental Forum in Bergen and Fredrikstad*

	<i>The cities total population</i>	<i>Participation and formal starting point of the forum</i>	<i>Organisation of the Forum/ goals</i>	<i>Relationship to the formal municipality organisation</i>	<i>Situation today (2002)</i>
Bergen (“Bergen Forum 21”)	230.000	1997 Municipality, NGOs, private sector	Board with 10 members <sup>4</sup> , Unclear/ general goals connected to LA21.	Financial support. Mayor represented the municipality within the Forum. The Forum had all LA21-responsibility.	Forum laid down (in the year 2000)
Fredrikstad (“Fredrikstad Miljøforum”)	67.000	1992/1996 Municipality, NGOs, private sector	Board with 7 members Unclear/ general goals connected to LA21.	Financial support. Vice-mayor represented the municipality within the Forum. Co-operation between Forum and municipality in LA21.	Forum still existing

The Forum models in Fredrikstad and Bergen clearly have some of the “co-operative” elements as discussed earlier in the paper (Laffery and Meadowcroft *ibid.*). Central features of such mechanisms are that they involve participants from more than one sector of social life. This is indeed the case in the two forum models: They both include representatives from business interests, pro-environmental groups (NGOs), and the public sphere, i.a. the city. Another central element in these models, are that they rest upon the representation of organised interest rather than on individual citizen participation. This is also the case in both cities: The members of the boards are appointed representatives from organised group. No members are included as “individual citizens”. The model also depend upon processes of discursive consensus formation. It is through a shared experience of attempting to come to terms with complex issue and through exchange as well as interaction among participants from different backgrounds, that the groups may construct a common understanding of the problems to be addressed, and of the nature of potential solutions. In both cities there was a clear understanding among the participants that decisions should be formulated through such a consensus oriented model. In the following, we will present the experience from Bergen and Fredrikstad in more detail.

From the starting point in 1992, the first Fredrikstad Environmental Forum (FEF) gave priority to general information activities and to specific environmental questions, especially waste management and recycling. A lot of information brochures were produced, and distributed to the public. However, the FEF did not initiate broad participation processes to promote a sustainable development, and this task was not given priority neither of the forum itself, nor by the local authorities. This changed in the mid 1990s when the forum was invited by the city to initiate a Local Agenda 21 process, and a

<sup>4</sup> In the first period, until September 1998, four more members participated in the board. In addition, a representative from the county level participated with observatory status in the board.

new forum was formally established in 1996. How the forum should address its new, much wider tasks, was discussed at many forum board meetings. But the representatives didn't reach an agreement on this important issue. Therefore, the starting point of the LA21 process itself, was delayed several times.

In 1997 the board leader resigned because of disagreement among the board members. At this phase the forum also used much time discussing economic and administrative questions. Because of these discussions, the real local Agenda 21 process in Fredrikstad didn't start until 1999. Then the FEF decided that the *city* should have the responsibility for making a proposal for how the process should be organised. The local authority did indeed make such a plan for the process ahead. The board discussed, and agreed, on the proposal. A key element in the process after 1999, has been to form a vision for a sustainable development for Fredrikstad. In this process major groups of NGOs, private enterprises etc have participated. Still, the city, and especially its administration, has been an important "facilitator". The forum has – to some extent – also been included in the formal planning processes of the city. An example of such participation by the forum, is the process of physical plans for four different areas of the city (Lindseth 2000:86). The FEF was involved in this process and had special responsibility for informing the inhabitants about LA21 in an early phase.

On the other hand, the Forum didn't play any part at all in the local authorities economic planning. For instance, the economic priorities for the four year period 2001-2004, was decided by the municipality council, without any consultation with the Forum. In many ways the economic four year plan plays in many ways a key role in the decision-making for the city, and it could be argued that such a plan will play a decisive role also for the local work for sustainable development. When neither the forum itself, nor the groups it represented, were included in the economic planning process, it could be argued that a vital part of the local decision-making process was excluded from the co-operative management model. However, the FEF is still functioning and the forum has played an important role in the broad LA21 process that was started up in 1999. The forum is also active when environment related issues in general, are decided upon in the local community.

The Bergen Forum 21 (BF21) started its activity in 1997, after more than a year of discussions and preparation. In spite of this, several BF21-meetings were spent in time-consuming debates concerning the forum's mandate and priorities. The BF21 also used much time discussing economic and administrative questions. The forum's first commissioned co-ordinator (who also acted as secretary for the board) resigned, due to disagreements within the forum.

During 1998 the board had 11 meetings, and information activities were given priority. During 1998 a brochure for BF21 was made. 30.000 copies were printed, and distributed. The forum set up its own web site ([www.bergenforum21.no](http://www.bergenforum21.no)). Members of the forum also participated in various meetings and gave lectures on LA21-related issues. In December 1998 the forum invited representatives from enterprises who had joined the so called "Bergen agreement"<sup>5</sup> to present them with diplomas as a visible proof of their participation in the LA21-process. BF21 was also involved in different processes in the city and in the "Terra-project" (at an economic forum where a main objective was to

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<sup>5</sup> Enterprises who joined the Bergen agreement ("Bergensavtalen") have a moral obligation to work for a sustainable development within their own organisation. In 1998 35 enterprises had joined the agreement. 27 of these were present at the meeting in December.



develop indicators for sustainable development). In these processes participants from the BF21 had consultative or advisory roles.

The following year (1999), the activities were in many ways similar to those of the previous year. Information through newsletters and internet was still an important task. During the year six new enterprises joined the Bergen agreement. Like the year before, representatives from BF21 participated in ongoing planning processes and projects like “Bicycle in the centre” and “Economic Forum for the Bergen Area”). BF21 was also engaged in the “Environment Lighthouse-project” in co-operation with representatives from public and private sector.

However, apart from the information activities, and participating in ongoing processes, the members showed great difficulties in building a consensus on important issues. Questions like what should be BF21 priorities and what environmental goals should be set, were discussed without reaching a conclusion. Especially the NGO-representatives (from environmental organisations) and the representative from the private sector had difficulties to come to terms. All the 10 members of the board were seldom present at the meetings.

Formally, the mayor of Bergen had a seat in the board, but he was seldom present at the board meetings and very often the local authority was represented at a low administrative level. Because of this, the other representatives in the board got the impression that the municipality gave BF21 low priority. In general, the local authority’s environmental work was separated from the BF21-agenda. This was clearly illustrated in the city’s planning procedures.

Like in Fredrikstad, the city of Bergen did not consult the BF21 in questions concerning economic planning. In contrast to Fredrikstad however, the BF21 was only marginally involved in other kinds of city planning. When environmental planning was put on the political agenda in the city council, there was little consultation between the council and the forum. During the autumn of 1999 the municipality presented two important plans, a climate plan and a new environmental plan, both with very few references to the LA21-concept. The forum was not at all consulted in this planning processes at the final stage. At this time there was a considerable degree of dissatisfaction within the BF21-board; partly because the lack of co-operation between the forum and the municipality. There were also conflicts between the different groups represented in the forum; some felt that there was little progress in the work, and there were also complains about the way the work was organised and managed (PriceWaterhouseCoopers 2000:2). The discontent led to an open confrontation at the annual meeting of the BF21 in 2000. The conflict between different fractions of the forum reached a climax and the representatives from an environmental organisation (“Bergen Natur og Ungdom”) decided to leave the forum in protest. In a press release the following day the NGO<sup>6</sup> stated that the forum didn’t at all function as intended. Among the problems listed in the press release, were the big size of the board. The NGO also felt that the representatives from the local authority gave little attention to the BF21-work. The organisation also expressed a clear lack of confidence to the leader of the BF21 and “her methods”.

In reality, the forum did not function after the annual meeting, and May 2000 represents the formal end for the BF21. At this point the Bergen city council decided to end its involvement in the forum and withdraw all its financial support.

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<sup>6</sup> The press release was issued at 29<sup>th</sup> of march 2000, by “Bergen Natur og Ungdom” and “Naturvernforbundet i Hordaland”.

### **Fredrikstad and Bergen; Similarities and differences**

Both in Bergen and Fredrikstad, the forum was given a relatively vague mandate. In both cities this led to a difficult start. Discussions and disagreement within the organisation led in both cases to the resignation of the forum's secretary. In both cities discussion around mandate and goals led to a long period of uncertainty. In Fredrikstad they finally managed to decide on starting a broad LA21-process in the local society, but this process didn't start until 1999. In Bergen the forum didn't manage to build consensus on what to do at all, during the three year period that the forum existed.

BF21 board was somewhat larger than FEF board. It is of course possible that the size itself led to larger problems of co-ordination in Bergen than in Fredrikstad. However, probably of more significant, was the *cities* involvement. Other studies seem to indicate that when the local authority's administrative and political representatives play an active part in new reforms, the projects have a greater chance to succeed (see for example Jensen et al. 2000s case-studies on internet in local democracy). The same seems to be true in this case: In the least successful case – Bergen - the representatives from the city gave little priority to the BF21. The local authority was in reality only represented at forum meetings at a low administrative level. In addition, the municipality made few, if any, attempts to co-ordinate its environmental work with the forum's activities. In Fredrikstad, on the other hand, the municipality was represented at a high political level, not only formally but also in practice (the vice-mayor). At least to some degree there was also co-ordination between the city planning activities and the work in FEF – even though the FEF, as the Bergen forum, was excluded from taking part in the economic planning

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## 3 Participating in reaching sustainability

### 3.1 Local Agenda 21 forum; success or failure?

Both forums experienced problems in defining mandate and priorities, but at least in Fredrikstad, there are elements of some “success” contrary to the Bergen-case. Some may even argue that the Bergen Forum 21 generated more problems than it solved (because of the high level of conflict between different fractions of the forum). What can be learned from the two cases; do they give reason to recommend the forum model in the environmental field – or should this approach be labelled as a failure?

As indicated earlier, this question probably can't be answered by focusing on one single element. Several potential advantages and disadvantages to the forum model can be pointed out. The forum may provide a structured framework for encouraging pluralist inputs to environmental policy making. Because of the complexity of the sustainability questions, Meadowcroft (ibid.) underlines the importance to employ collaborative models in this field. Such a collaborative system could also provide a mechanism for building consensus, and more especially, for transforming interests. The Fredrikstad case illustrates that a forum can exist for a considerable time. The Bergen case clearly illustrates the problems that can arise within a consensus oriented model. Critics of collaborative processes will probably argue that the *power* element is one important reason for the problems that occurred in Bergen. At the heart of this position is the observation that real world politics are not about negotiation among equals, but about power centred interaction. Thus, the mechanisms described in normative models of collaborative actions are in reality not “collaborative” or “co-operative”: Rather, each party brings resources to the table, and the agreed solutions will ultimately reflect existing differentials of power. Furthermore, structural circumstances necessarily favour organisations of producers over consumers, business over labour etc. As Meadowcroft also has pointed out, this type of objection can be said to focus on the “naive” or “idealistic” presumptions of co-operative initiatives, and remains sceptical to the liberal pluralist assumptions behind the approach which do not appear to address seriously the structural inequalities and systematic imperatives which constrain reform.

The Bergen experience illustrates that consensus-building can be very difficult indeed. Here the forum clearly became separated from the political decision-making that took place in the city council. There was little co-operation between the forum and the political and administrative part of the city organisation. In addition, the city council made several important environmental decisions without consulting the forum. There was also considerable disagreement inside the forum itself, particularly between representatives from the NGOs and the private sector. In the Bergen-case it seemed difficult to create a co-

operative atmosphere at all. The discussions seemed to reflect already existing differences, and this ultimately led to the break-up of the forum in 2000.

Even in Fredrikstad, where the forum still exist, there have been considerable problems in defining the forums mandate and its role towards the local authorities. In reference to the economic planning process in Fredrikstad, sceptics could argue that the city in this case excluded the forum from taking part in an essential question. In other words; when a politically important and controversial issue was raised, the decisions didn't follow a collaborative consensus oriented process, but were moved over to a political arena. In the Fredrikstad case the economic plan was decided in a "traditional" political way, by a majority vote in the city council.

The Fredrikstad case tells a somewhat more positive story than the Bergen case. Still, the Fredrikstad example illustrates that there probably are limitations to the range and types of questions that can be solved within a forum model. Environmental problems will address deeply entrenched social practices, and an effective solution to a particular dilemma may only be possible through a gradual alteration of established social behaviour. The two case studies seem to indicate that much time is needed for a consensus oriented model to operate effectively. To establish the forum model, turned out to be a time-consuming process in both cities. Considerable time was used to discuss mandates and priorities. In Bergen the representatives, after three years, never really managed to form a consensus around the essential issues concerning the forums work. In Fredrikstad, as well, there was a deadlock situation for quite some time. When the forum finally could move on with its work, it was much thanks to the active role played by actors from the municipality. The two cases indicate that the working processes in LA21 forum indeed may be time consuming, and that one should not expect to much progress from such an consensus oriented organisation at the first phase of its life.

A third element that should be focused upon on the discussion of advantages and disadvantages of the forum model is flexibility. This kind of co-operative system can be adapted to different circumstances and applied in different contexts. For instance, flexibility can exist in relation to the kind of groups involved, the forms of debate and decision procedure, the management time frame and the nature of the implementation stage. The Bergen and Fredrikstad cases tells quite different stories, also when we look upon the issue of flexibility. In Bergen the forum didn't work as intended at all, and can hardly be said to have created more flexibility. It can even be said that the forum generated more discussion and created higher tensions between the different groups, then in the time before the forum was formed. The Fredrikstad case shows us a somewhat more successful picture. Here the representatives, in spite of differences have co-operated for quite some time. Today the forum seems to work as a flexible organisation where different forms – but not all forms - of debates are raised.

### 3.2 Participating in reaching sustainability – a difficult task

The emergence of the environment as a substantive local and national issue has raised difficulties incorporating representative public views into decision making processes. As Selman and Parker points out (1997:177), this partly reflects the general limitations associated with contemporary "democratic deficit", and partly the problems of incorporating environmental choice into party political systems. Representative democracy relies on political parties and regular elections for its operation. However, the

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choices associated with alternative environmental policy options seldom coincide conveniently with the differences which traditionally exist between political parties. Consequently, the public voice on issues of sustainability is often being heard through protest and confrontation.

The forum model, along with other co-operative and collaborative approaches represent an alternative to both the “traditional” representative democracy and the protest/confrontation line. The forum model has been proposed as a particular fruitful way to implement Local Agenda 21 (LA21). The two Norwegian case studies however, illustrate some of the problems with consensus building models. The Bergen experience illustrates that consensus building can be very difficult. In this case it seemed difficult to create a co-operative or consensus oriented atmosphere at all. Even in Fredrikstad the forum approach have had its problems, and in both cities the forum model appeared to be time consuming. The establishment of new mechanisms for LA21 in the two cities also created uncertainties of the new organisations role in relationship to established democratic elected councils.

Many of these experiences seems to be common, not only for the two Norwegian cases presented here, but also for the cases discussed by Rowe (*ibid.*) and Brugman (*ibid.*). The Bath and North-East Somerset study clearly indicated that the process was time consuming: The commission had 10 steering group meetings before the inaugural meeting. Like the two Norwegian cases, there were problems in the English case, because the commission’s role in relation to the council was unclear.

The Hamilton-Wentworth case clearly illustrate the problems of co-ordination between different types of planning processes: An action plan (“Vision 2020”) was prepared, but at the same time the regional council approved the construction of a highway in clear contradiction of the action plan. The Norwegian cases also illustrate the difficulties of planning co-ordination between a forum and an elected council. In other words; it is not easy for local authorities and stakeholders to fully integrate sustainability criteria in their development and investment decisions.

In implementing LA21 a common experience seems to be – as Gram-Hanssen (2000:235) puts it – that there is a considerable gap between the dream that lay behind the activities and the actual outcome. This gap between intentions and results must probably be reduced, if LA21 shall survive in the long run.

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# Appendix 1

## Representatives in the city councils of Bergen and Fredrikstad

Table 1: Representatives in the city council; percent from different political parties for the country as a whole, for Bergen and for Fredrikstad after the 1995 local election.

	<i>Norway</i>	<i>Bergen</i>	<i>Fredrikstad</i>
Labour Party	32	28	33
Conservative Party	15	22	17
Progress Party	5	16	8
Socialist Left Party	5	6	5
Christian Democratic P.	9	11	6
Centre Party	20	4	3
Liberal Party	5	7	2
Other lists	9	6	26
	100	100	100

*Figures from "Kommunenøkkelen", 1998. The number of elected representative for the country as a whole were 12. 605, for Bergen 85 and for Fredrikstad 63.*

### *Comments:*

*1) Like in most other cities the Centre Party got considerable lower support in Fredrikstad and Bergen than in the country as a whole. As an agrarian party, the Centre Party got most of its support from the rural districts.*

*2) In Fredrikstad "Other lists" had a very high score, primarily because of a protest list ("Nei til storkommune" who got 15 representatives or 24 % of the seats in the council). Since the merger of five smaller city into the new Fredrikstad city in the early 1990s, the protest list had much support during the decade, especially outside the city core.*

Table 2: *Representatives in the city council; percent from different political parties for the country as a whole, for Bergen and for Fredrikstad after the 1999 local election.*

	<i>Norway</i>	<i>Bergen</i>	<i>Fredrikstad</i>
Labour Party	29	30	33
Conservative Party	21	21	17
Progress Party	12	19	11
Socialist Left Party	8	7	6
Christian Democratic P.	9	10	8
Centre Party	8	1	2
Liberal Party	4	3	2
Other lists	8	7	21
	100	100	100

*Figures from "Kommunenøkkelen", 2000. The number of elected representative for the country as a whole were 12. 253, for Bergen 67 and for Fredrikstad 63.*

*Comments:*

*1) Centre Party: See comments under table 1.*

*2) In Fredrikstad "Other lists" had a very high score also in 1999. Three different parties came under this category during this election: The protest list ("Nei til storkommune" with 6 representatives or 10 % of the council members ) still got a considerable support. In addition the Pensioners Party got 5 representatives (8% of the council seats) in 1999, and Miljøbylisten (environmental city list) got 2 representaives (3% of the council seats).*