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We are committed to energising our decision-making processes through increased participatory democracy.

Effective governance processes support the implementation of local sustainability through innovative ways of managing the relationship between local governments and civil society, through Local Agenda 21 action plans or similar sustainable development actions.

We will therefore work to:

1. further develop a commonly shared long-term vision for a sustainable city or a town.

The long-term vision for local sustainability may, in many cases, be very clear, simple easy to understand, and even attractive. However, the path to reach sustainability often consists of numerous small steps and daily decisions that are not always easy to link to the 'big picture'. It is therefore of great importance that local government – both politicians and officers – have a commonly shared vision and are aware of the long-term objectives of local development whenever decisions are taken, even if they may appear to have no relevance to sustainability. It is crucial to find the courage to stand behind an ambitious but distant vision, whilst at the same time implementing it step by step. Patience and sensitivity are needed in order to ensure that local sustainable development steps go as far as possible; but at the same time it is important to respect the maximum change that citizens and stakeholders will accept at one time. ICLEI's website provides useful guidance on developing a vision and strategy, through for example Local Agenda 21: <http://www.iclei-europe.org/index.php?id=616>

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2. build participation and sustainable development capacity in the local community and municipal administration.

Public participation should not be perceived as a mechanism for local government to delegate the responsibility for sustainable development to citizens, even though it clearly requires their involvement. Local government must be the driving force that brings sustainability onto the local agenda, facilitates dialogue and manages planning processes. While input from civil society is needed, only local government has the legitimate authority to take incorporate the conclusions from participatory processes into within new policies. In order to build up credibility, local government must go further in proactively applying sustainability principles in its own management and activities, such as procurement and commissioning (see for example the Ecobudget project – www.ecobudget.com) energy and transport. Only then can other actors become convinced of the need to implement such principles themselves.

The integration of sustainable development into all government processes including policy formulation and operations is crucial in order to put sustainable development into practice. To do this it is important for local authorities to develop the skills, capacity and understanding of all of their employees (at all levels) on sustainable development through continuous training. The EU Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment highlights the importance of training municipality employees to create an understanding of urban environmental issues and their links with social and economic factors. All grades of local authority employees should have the opportunity to participate in training relating to sustainable development issues.

Education is a key tool in ensuring that future generations are fully aware of the sustainable development agenda. Local authorities should consider implementing a regular programme of awareness raising in schools on sustainable development issues. The content of the programme should include information about the core environmental, social and economic concepts in sustainable development (see the initiative in Northrhine-Westphalia, Germany where all schools are offered a school campaign for sustainable development. Guidelines for the preparation, implementation and monitoring of projects are provided.

www.agenda21schulen.nrw.de/page/content/aktuelles/aktuelles.html

Within the local authority there should be a cross-departmental working group on sustainable development. Cross-departmental implies that there should be a minimum of two distinct local authority departments involved in such a working group. Such a partnership will create the potential for the economic, social and environmental pillars of sustainable development to be addressed in an integrated manner.

Aalborg Commitment 2 (sustainable management) is also relevant to issues of capacity building within the local authority and in civil society.

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3. invite all sectors of local society to participate effectively in decision-making.

Even the most sustainable local initiative is worth little if it is not communicated properly to all citizens and interest organisations. While in a knowledge-based society communication is one of the most important means of making issues fashionable', sustainable development competes with many other issues that are marketed and communicated aggressively. Local government has to respond to this by being both out-reaching out and being reachable. This means using all available channels available to communicate about sustainability issues and activities to citizens and interest organisations; this is achieved, through by being visible at community events, continuously cooperating with the media, establishing information services, or training staff in information and communication skills. See for example Sustainable Communities: A shared agenda, a share of the action. <http://www.sustainable-development.gov.uk/publications/documents/sustainable-communities-guide.pdf>

The UN Convention on access to information, public participation in decision making and access to justice regarding environmental matters (Aarhus Convention - www.participate.org/convention/convention.htm)- is an agreement by many European countries to involve the public in government environmental matters. In this agreement countries promise to disclose government files containing environmental information and to let the public participate in governmental decision making. It states that when all statutory planning processes are 'open for public participation', it is then possible to influence a decision in a way that protects everybody's interest. Each country must make appropriate provisions for public participation in the preparation of programmes and plans and governments must provide necessary information to the public. In addition the SEA Directive (Directive 2001/42 EC: www.europa.eu.int/comm/environment/eia/030923_sea_guidance.pdf) applies to a wide range of plans and programmes, and it requires that the public, and also authorities likely to be concerned with the environmental effects of implementing the plan or programme, are consulted as part of the SEA (Strategic Environmental Assessment) process. The main purpose of this is to contribute to more transparent decision making.

Aalborg Commitment 9 (sub-section 2) also that Local Authorities should "ensure equitable access to public services, education, employment opportunities, training, information, and cultural activities and Aalborg Commitment 9(sub-section 3) states that local authorities should "foster social inclusion and gender equality".

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4. make our decisions open, accountable and transparent.

The UN Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision Making and Access to justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention) is an agreement by many European countries to involve the public in government environmental matters. In the agreement countries promise to disclose government files containing environmental information and to let the public participate in governmental decision making. It states that ‘in a democratic society, people should have the right of access to information’ and that ‘the public’s right to know is fundamental to democratic participation in government.’ This information may be in any form, such as written, electronic, visual, aural or other, but each country must ensure that environmental information becomes increasingly available in electronic format (including the Internet) easily accessible to the public. EC Directive 2003/4/EC on public access to environmental information requires in Article 7 that public authorities make available and disseminate environmental information relevant to their functions including local legislation, policies, plans and programmes, progress reports, monitoring data and impact studies.

Local authorities should therefore aim to ensure that 100% of the total private households within the municipality boundaries, are regularly informed of planned activities (for example: environment days or non-car usage days) and/or the environmental performance of the city (e.g. progress on recycling targets or air quality targets in the locality).

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5. cooperate effectively and in partnership with adjoining municipalities, other cities and towns, and other spheres of government.

Networking with other towns and cities both within and across countries creates a spirit of co-operation which that can help to inspire local authorities engaged in implementation of sustainable development – a process that may sometimes be slow and characterized by challenges rather than successes. Meeting with other local government representatives and learning from them reinvigorates local action for sustainability ‘at home’. Using national and international conferences as stages to present the experiences and good practices of a local authority builds up a positive image of a municipality externally, and a demand for the continuation of sustainability policies even if political will and commitment are not constant. In this case, networking with other local authorities can offer leading local officials and politicians a forum to present themselves as sustainable development pioneers. This, in turn, creates a greater sense of identity and confidence and thus strengthens the local process (see www.sustainable-cities.eu).

The Spanish Environmental Authorities Network is a forum for cooperation and coordination among the authorities responsible for the environment and the authorities responsible for the programming and management of Structural Funds and the Cohesion Fund (www.mma.es/polit_amb/fondos/redauto/index.htm)

To a large extent, regional and national government define the framework conditions and possibilities for local action towards achieving sustainability. At the same time, they can actively influence acceptance and awareness of sustainable development issues – for example, through taxation and legislation. While it is crucial for local governments to influence these framework conditions in order to successfully implement their sustainability strategies, regional and national governments depend upon the information and input received from the local level in order to design their funding and support programmes for sustainable development effectively, and to get support for the introduction of sustainability principles in legislation and taxation. Local governments must therefore have an interest in liaising with other levels of government in their promotion of sustainability.

To find further Resources relating to Aalborg Commitment 1, click here:
http://www.localresources21.org/theme_matrix.php?t=1