

**informed cities**

MAKING RESEARCH WORK FOR LOCAL SUSTAINABILITY

## **EUROPEAN FRAMEWORKS FOR LOCAL SUSTAINABILITY**

THE ROLE OF RESEARCHERS, POLICY-MAKERS AND EUROPEAN  
INSTITUTIONS IN SHAPING LOCAL COMMITMENT

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**PRIMUS –**  
POLICIES AND RESEARCH FOR AN  
INTEGRATED MANAGEMENT OF  
URBAN SUSTAINABILITY

## IMPRINT

This publication has been prepared in the framework of the Informed Cities initiative and is one of the outcomes of the EU FP7 Research Project PRIMUS (Policies and Research for an Integrated Management of Urban Sustainability), May 2009 to April 2012. It is a modified excerpt from the book 'Informed Cities' edited by Theobald, K., Joas, M., Garzillo, C., Kuhn, S., and published by Routledge, United Kingdom, 2012.

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<b>Layout:</b>	Rebekka Dold, Freiburg, Germany   <a href="http://www.rebekkadold.de">www.rebekkadold.de</a>
<b>Financial Support:</b>	European Commission, FP7, project No. 226814

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Freiburg, 2012

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# INTRODUCTION

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European Institutions play an important role when it comes to defining and managing evaluation and monitoring tools for local sustainability. Local sustainability also depends on local governments, which collaborate with the European Institutions to construct appropriate tools. Finally, research institutes are needed, which guide local policy-makers to make the right choices and identify new emerging local challenges.

At the same time, it is widely noted<sup>1</sup> that there is a lack of communication between researchers and policy-makers, and a lack of common understanding and common purpose: Policy-makers are very often not aware about or able to draw upon the findings of ongoing research, and researchers lack knowledge of the priorities and pressing issues of policy-makers.

The question of the most appropriate tools helping to deliver local sustainability has received continuous attention from researchers and policy-makers in the last decades. It is without doubt that local governments use tools and methods to support decision-making, and monitor and evaluate progress for local sustainability.

Tools can either be locally 'home-made', or consist in wider participatory schemes offered at the national or European level. Locally developed monitoring and evaluation tools usually reflect the policies and objectives agreed in a specific city, and offer little possibility to compare the local progress with that of other local governments. On the contrary, European schemes for local sustainability can go hand in hand with exchanging experiences with like-minded local governments, and might offer opportunities for promoting the participating cities vis-a-vis higher levels of government and other local authorities.



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Notwithstanding the challenges and disadvantages associated with both categories, it becomes clear that methods to improve cities' sustainability processes are needed and have been developed tremendously over the last years.



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The aim of this publication is twofold: First of all, it is to investigate the links between European frameworks for local sustainability and the phases of local sustainability management. It shows that no scheme supports all the management steps in the same way and explains why applying particular schemes at different points in time may be a wise decision to be taken by local governments.

The second objective is to describe how the co-operation between policy-makers and researchers can take place in practice, highlighting strengths and weaknesses and developing a structured and methodological approach towards designing and implementing policies and tools for urban sustainability.

The authors conclude that the European Commission's role in this cooperation is very timely and find strong support for reinforcing such activities and proposing solutions both by local policy-makers and researchers.

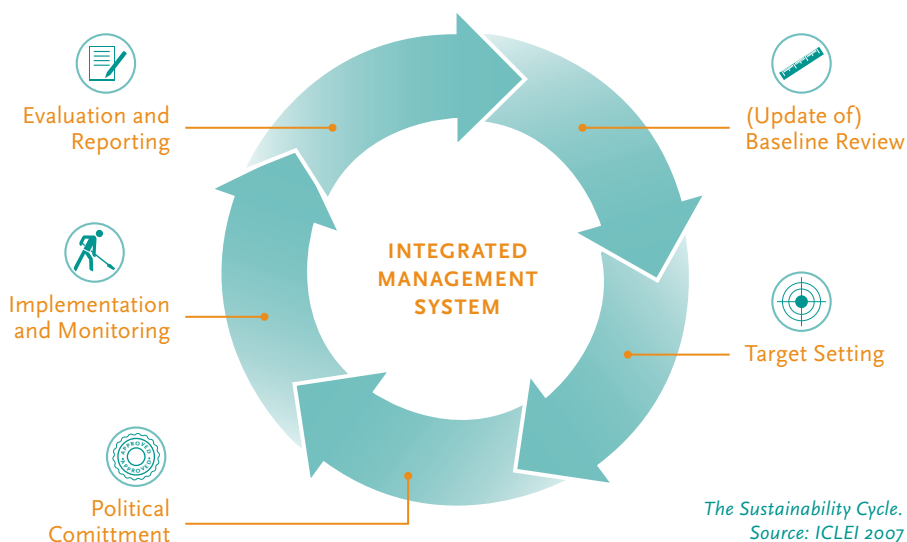
## CYCLICAL MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE OF LOCAL SUSTAINABILITY: HOW TO LINK POLICY-MAKING AND RESEARCH

Applying European monitoring and evaluation schemes provides a good starting point for the introduction of an integrated management of local sustainability. Alternatively, cities can consider such schemes as an additional activity to interact with other local governments already working with local sustainability management systems.

Integrated sustainability management typically comprises a logical cycle of five phases<sup>2</sup>:

1. A baseline review takes stock of the current situation and represents the starting point for improvement.
2. On this basis, the local government discusses, agrees, sets and ratifies individual objectives and local targets.
3. A council decision adds the political mandate to such objectives and targets and allocates resources for their achievement.
4. Various types of activities undertaken by various stakeholders, with various time horizons, constitute the phase of implementation of the objectives and targets agreed.
5. Finally, the timeframes related to these targets provide for a future review and evaluation of the process achieved.

Obviously, these five phases together form a cycle or spiral of continuous improvement and progress, and with in-built feedback loops.



## ESTABLISHING A LOCAL WORKING STRUCTURE FOR COOPERATION



Local sustainability cannot be achieved without a structured cyclical process, i.e. a system. On the other hand, a system itself cannot function without people behind it. The organizational set-up requires people who know their responsibilities and people who work together towards common goals in accordance with a certain plan. The system in which researchers and policy-makers define and elaborate strategies and

proposals must be carefully designed. This should happen from the earliest stages of the policy cycle, to get policy definition and strategic direction understood by both sides.

The cross-cutting cyclical nature of local sustainability management and governance can be reflected by establishing a *flexible working group* involving policy-makers, researchers, and practitioners, which should incorporate and make use of the existing structures in both municipal administrations and research institutes. Such a working group can, for instance, combine an already established cross-departmental coordination team, often arranged centrally in the administration, and interdisciplinary approaches set up in a number of universities as cross-sectoral departments bringing together different traditional fields. The group should be responsible for supervising the whole process and can meet regularly around well-defined issues of concern. Other appropriate external intermediary bodies could support the linkage between researchers and policy-makers, such as knowledge transfer organizations, networks, and agencies.



### STEP 1: BASELINE REVIEW

Once the decision has been made to work jointly towards local sustainability, a consistent and complete picture of the current reality has to be defined. It is important to have a clear insight into what the status of local sustainability is, and what is presently being done in all departments. An exhaustive inventory is therefore needed, compiling existing indicators and datasets. The identification and access to such data is fundamental. Databases need to inform the main issues of the subsequent policy debate - unfortunately in most cities they are fragmented and incomplete. In some cases, researchers can support in improving datasets

and managing inconsistencies and gaps. In other cases, a complete new data effort or newly developed indicators may be needed.

Second, the right choice has to be made as to the scheme, technique or approach to be used. As an example, the **Aalborg Commitments** may compose the recommended framework for the data collection in this phase of the cycle.

## IDENTIFICATION OF NEEDS

Once the current framework conditions are defined, a careful choice has to be made as to the identification of problems, needs and priorities. The media, or other public attention, is often an important factor in perceiving a problem to begin with<sup>3</sup>. In this phase of reviewing the current local situation the challenge of sustainability is very evident: Selecting priorities and handling boundaries between disciplines and sectors, not compromising all the concerns, but nonetheless taking them all forward (where possible), means finding ways to combine the different and transversal needs of actors.



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Researchers often face difficulties in understanding and reacting immediately to policy-makers' needs. In this respect, researchers need to build capacities in policy skills to increase their understanding about policy-makers' priorities and working methods. On the other hand, policies need to take on board the local sustainable development research agenda. One of the conclusions of recent research<sup>4</sup> is that the gap between what policy-makers need and what they can quickly obtain provides an opening for researchers to have their work make a genuine impact on society.

The role of an intermediary body would be in this phase to communicate research needs from policy-makers to scientists. Here the role of researchers can either be "challenging" - such that the needs and priorities can proceed on the correct path - or "authoritative", if policy-makers need independent and neutral research to back up their proposal.

Almost a third of local governments believe that the *use of the prestige of science* is an important means in terms of *marketing strategy*. Similarly, researchers identified their *academic credentials and neutrality* as significantly important with regard to *political struggles*. Referral to sound research, then, gives confidence to decision-makers and legitimacy to their decision<sup>5</sup>.





## STEP 2: OBJECTIVES AND TARGETS

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Objectives and particularly targets may be regarded as the natural meeting point of research and policy-making in the sense that political will is expressed by numbers based on scientific evidence. The decision on the direction and the appropriate timescale cannot be taken without a thorough and objective consideration of realistic options and possibilities to avoid deviations at a later stage. At the same time, proposed objectives and targets express very subjective ambitions of different stakeholders with dif-

ferent and very often contradicting interests. For this reason, setting targets has long been the step in the management cycle to be skipped or put on hold by local governments. Moving from the *Baseline Review* directly to the implementation of projects appeared to be a much more convenient strategy. In reality, however, working without a documented consensus of the local society on the foreseen developmental direction and just with a patchwork of so-called 'sustainability projects' might not be enough to achieve measurable and relevant improvements of the local situation.

Since the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *target setting* has therefore become the key element of some large-scale schemes for local sustainability on the European level. By signing the **Aalborg Commitments** for example, local governments commit themselves to set up to fifty targets in ten thematic areas and regularly report back to the **European Sustainable Cities And Towns Campaign** on their achievement. Other schemes implicitly lead participating local governments to adopt pre-set targets – such as, for example, a reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 20 percent when signing up to the **Covenant of Mayors**<sup>6</sup>, and the delivery of a **Sustainable Energy Action Plan** outlining how the city intends to achieve the target. It goes without saying that such Action Plans will most certainly have to include further objectives and targets for a range of policy areas.

### OBJECTIVES OR TARGETS?

Before moving to an analysis of the potential role of research in the process of defining objectives and targets for local sustainability, the main difference between these two steps should be highlighted. Whereas objectives are usually qualitative in nature (e.g. 'more climate-friendly mobility'), targets need to be measurable and quantitative (e.g. '20 percent less cars passing through the city centre per day'). For this reason, the objectives formulated by European cities may often read fairly similarly, as the example of the the **Aalborg Commitments** shows<sup>7</sup>. Targets, however, have to vary due to the very different specific local conditions in each local government. While consensus on objectives can normally be achieved easily across politi-



cal parties and civil society stakeholders, targets are usually the result of a fragile balance between *what is needed*, *what is possible* and *what is wanted*. It is this balance that requires a strong and sensitive mediation from research, as the following examples will illustrate.

## WHAT IS NEEDED?

*What is needed* might be extreme. Dividing, for example, the total amount of greenhouse gases the planet can absorb annually without heating up the atmosphere by the total number of citizens world-wide, the maximum annual per-capita emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> may well be at a level of about 10 percent of current emissions in a western European city - suggesting agreement on a target of minus 90 percent. Expressed by a political party or a group of stakeholders, such a target will certainly be turned down as too radical, totally unrealistic, or utopian. Researchers can support the sensitive negotiation process of finding the right target for a particular city by presenting the physical necessities in a long-term perspective, underpinned by scientific data, and being value neutral. They can help raise awareness of the magnitude of sustainability issues, move stakeholders to question their short-term interests and to go for more ambitious targets. By objectively explaining what is needed, they can push the local targets closer to what is possible.



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## WHAT IS POSSIBLE?

*What is possible* might be difficult to influence, but is important to know: While, for example, the inhabitants of a Spanish city might need to limit their daily per-capita use of freshwater considerably, Finnish citizens might not need to care that much about closing the tap while brushing their teeth. A town that hosts a number of old heavy industry plants might be able to arrive at presentable improvements of its air quality through technological modernisation, while a service based university town might have to fight hard for a few percent less emissions coming mainly from car traf-

fic. A fast-growing city might have much less margin for providing affordable housing than a shrinking one, but have more financial resources available to invest in this target. Common to these examples is that local targets for sustainability need to reflect the local topographic, physical and economic situation. Further than just compiling baseline data, researchers have to show the range of target values possible under given circumstances, helping to avoid both unrealistically ambitious and unnecessarily ineffective targets. Studies on the extent to which even the framework conditions may change, or may be changed, form another indispensable input from research into the local target setting process. By outlining to those involved in this process what is possible, researchers influence what is wanted by them.

## WHAT IS WANTED?

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*What is wanted* might change over time, but also in the short term through information and dialogue. Even under exactly the same physical and economic framework conditions, different cities may set different targets - for various reasons. First of all, political decision-making is about setting priorities. As 'sustainable development' touches upon a broad range of policy areas, no city can focus on everything at one time. Whereas the 'Solar City' might leave aside social segregation concerns, the council of the 'Inclusive Town' might accept a higher share of fossil energy production. Furthermore, different stakeholders usually have different opinions on what targets are acceptable or not. Still, hardly any target can be achieved without the contribution

of actors outside the local government, which suggests they should be involved in setting them from the start. Finally, what is wanted is strongly influenced by the current *Zeitgeist* – the spirit associated with each period as well as the general societal consensus – reflecting the overall progress of public awareness on the long journey towards sustainability.

Importantly, research (and researchers) can have a decisive influence on each of these three aspects: setting political priorities, changing stakeholders' positions, and attributing positive connotations to more sustainable lifestyles. In order to enhance the connectivity between research and policy-making in the target setting phase of the management process, a close and trustful cooperation between researchers and local governments' staff is crucial. Acting outside election terms and to a good extent independent from political interests, researchers and local government experts share the role of advisors and facilitators *vis-a-vis* both the political actors and civil society. They provide information and data needed by the others to make up their own minds, argue for their viewpoints and finally seek consensus. Because of their neutral appearance, researchers may be approached by different mutually opposing parties in the attempt to 'scientifically' underpin one of the party's viewpoints or to take managerial roles in political conflicts and tensions. In this perspective, adopting an attitude of neutrality and objectiveness towards positions is another important ingredient.

## TARGETS AND INDICATORS

Differently from qualitative objectives, targets require quantifiable units in order to be measured. Clearly no local government can measure all aspects of local sustainable development at once. Therefore, a selection of indicators will be made giving political decision-makers a fair idea of which aspects of the local development are in line with their sustainability objectives, and which are not. Any discussion on indicators must recognise two dangers: over-

complexity and over-simplicity. Between these two extremes, there is undoubtedly a useful working range of options for selecting an approach that matches indicators.

Some schemes for measuring local sustainability on the European (and national) level, such as, for example, the *European Green Capital Award*<sup>8</sup>, are based on a number of key indicators along which the applying city has to present its achievements, and which form the basis for comparison by the award jury. Unless a local government decides to participate in one or several of these national or European schemes, the process of indicator definition should ideally be conducted as a cross-departmental process and be decided based on the local situation.

Other schemes already include pre-defined targets, such as the target of the EU's *Covenant of Mayors* to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by at least 20 percent. This might be advantageous for the overall communication and presentation of the initiative - one common target for all European cities. However, as discussed above, achieving such a commonly set target might require one single measure from one municipality, and a whole long-term action plan from another, depending on what their respective starting points are.

Cooperation between local governments and researchers can help avoid signing up to the wrong scheme, and therefore leading to the uncomfortable point where the political system has to react to the up-coming problems of non-suitable requirements. At the same time, research can assist local government in making the right choice of locally relevant indicators, and in filling them with the data needed to define measurable targets.



## STEP 3: POLITICAL COMMITMENT

Decision-making for sustainable development requires legitimisation by the elected Council, especially if the decision to be made has an impact on the local budget. This is why measurable targets, although developed by a variety of local stakeholders, experts, officials

and researchers, should always be adopted by the political decision-making body. From the viewpoint of a researcher, this might represent an avoidable slow-down of the process, maybe even an unfavourable weakening of the ambition expressed in the targets through political debate and compromises.

Political decision-makers are however reliable seismographs of the local societal consensus. Consensus for sustainable development targets and measures is an iterative process of constantly updated information, raised awareness and changed behaviour. Political commitment for sustainability targets mirrors exactly such an iterative process.



## LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND RESEARCHERS IN THE COMMITMENT PHASE



Understanding the different arenas in which policy-making and research take place is therefore one of the greatest challenges while trying to enhance the connectivity between the two. Asked about the main differences in their approaches towards sustainable development, researchers and local government representatives shared the view that the two systems they are respectively embedded in function in very

different ways<sup>9</sup>. Researchers have to analyse long-term trends and recommend necessary action to be taken today, whilst policy-makers are bound to short-term election periods that require successes and achievements to be presented in four-five years. And while any recommendations made by researchers need to follow the evidence shown by the scientific analysis, policy-makers need to find the very fragile balance between representing the will to improve local circumstances, and taking their electorate with them on that path; otherwise they will simply not be re-elected<sup>10</sup>.

Scientific evidence (represented by the recommendations made by research) may not reflect the societal agreement (represented by the decisions finally made by the political body). Thus, it becomes evident that in the phase of creating political commitment, researchers and policy-makers have to stick to the rules of their respective systems. Only a credible, objective and scientific analysis of the situation will produce useful information that can lead to a shift in awareness of the local citizenry; only a responsible political decision, balancing the needs and fears of different community groups will create trust in political leadership towards sustainability. Hand in hand, policy-makers and researchers can accelerate the process of moving societal consensus towards more ambitious targets.

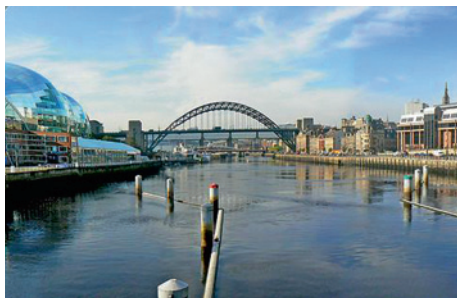
## EUROPEAN SCHEMES AND DECISION-MAKING

Some of the schemes available at the European level for local governments to enhance their ambition towards sustainability make use of the demonstrative effect of political commitment. For example, both the *Aalborg Commitments* and the EU *Covenant of Mayors* require a decision by the local council (or authorised politician) to join the scheme and adopt the related objectives and/or targets. Local governments may use such schemes to secure a “green” badge, i.e. as a form of sustainability accreditation. This can enable municipalities to catch the attention of European Institutions and national politicians - but also that of their own local citizens.



## STEP 4: IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING

Having taken stock of the above objectives and having an established clear political mandate, the next phase is the core of the sustainability management and governance cycle: activities and measures are carried out. The implementation is a demanding task in terms of organisation and coordination of all the parallel actions that will take place. A crucial condition is a solid communication and involvement



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approach within the working group described earlier. Cooperation with and between various stakeholders assures that the different actors buy in to the implementation process.

Therefore, implementation is based on the “foundation”, which is a combination of a good action plan, the preparation and review phase and above all, communication and involvement. The approval of the activities and projects by the city council in the step before is a determining success factor, as it legitimises actions and gives them a required priority.

### CO-ORDINATION OF MEASURES

In spite of the agreement on roles and responsibilities, there are numerous political and financial constraints that may limit or change the room for manoeuvre of policy-makers. At the same time, scientific expertise of researchers may be more solicited or demanded and in some cases contested. In addition, other stakeholders, such as enterprises and local utilities may have contrasting needs concerning the transformation of the planned activities into commercial successes. The three perspectives of policy-makers, researchers and operators are not mutually exclusive; rather they should focus on different aspects.

Co-ordination is a central requirement for making sustainable development projects and activities work. Deficits in co-ordination contribute significantly to other deficits. Therefore, it is extremely important to avoid creating segregated actions and projects carried forward with different time-tables by research institutions, city councils and enterprises (e.g. transport companies, waste and landfill operators, etc.), and argue for the need to encourage synergies.

However, responsibilities and schedules relating to common measures must be agreed upon between local administrations and research institutes by this stage at the latest. This is best carried out by the persons responsible in the individual municipal sectors and academic departments and then confirmed in a high-level round of talks between senior managers.

Self-imposed targets and voluntary commitments must be given a concrete form through announcement of all planned measures that are to be implemented in a certain period of time (e.g. the coming year). The announced measures do not have to be completed in chronological order. Instead, a strategic plan should be produced which sets out the priorities for implementation and all relevant information, such as responsibilities, contact partners, and obligations for communication and regulation.

## THE PROCESS OF MONITORING

In parallel, and for the purpose of being able to measure and report the results, the implementation of the planned activities and projects should be monitored in an appropriate way and fed back to the politicians.



Practically, once the preparatory stages have been laid down, the working group can start to record the events that have actually occurred. The group can do this alone or in collaboration with other knowledge brokers. This role may be undertaken by boundary or network organisations or collective bodies. In the policy context these might include “science advisory committees, governmental research institutes, consultancy firms, and think tanks”<sup>11</sup>.

This process allows the working group to see if actions are implemented with good results and anticipate future trends. If not, it allows for taking corrective measures while implementation is in progress.

Again, in order to be able to engage in monitoring, actions need to rely on targets based on indicators as defined earlier. This allows opening the original framing set up at the beginning of the process and its implicit and explicit assumptions, and requires a work of explanations, justifications, and probably reworking or putting projects on hold.

However, it is difficult to accommodate or anticipate surprises or discontinuities. New approaches are necessary to increase the use and relevance of foresight and predicting activities. Together with universities, local governments may be able to develop their institutional capacities to help prevent or mitigate impedimental events and adapt accordingly through better strategic foresights and appropriate forecasts of future scenarios.

## DEVIATIONS AND ADJUSTMENTS

Monitoring involves the exchange of information with external actors. This includes them providing information about the extent to which voluntary commitment targets have been adhered to or attained through the introduction of measures. Misunderstandings can occur at this point or an actor may no longer be willing to fulfil its voluntary commitments due to short-term economic interests. In this case, the academic partner can act as a moderator and suggest a solution to the conflict. This assumes a certain capacity and role of the academic partner which may not be the case in practice. However, regardless of the role, it is important for researchers to consider this as an opportunity rather than an obligation, and to maximise the benefits from this position.



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Sometimes deviations might be so serious that political leaders have to decide on the best way to continue. When this occurs, the cross-sectoral working group must inform the local council of the situation. Based on this information, the council determines the necessary corrective measures and, if needed, decides on a supplementary budget.

Of course, it is difficult to combine academic long-term thinking with a context that is driven by short term concerns. Typically, this is reflected in regular budgetary conflicts between different fields of interest and policy areas. Therefore, at this stage it is important to overcome barriers to long term thinking and policy due to compartmentalised structures of both local government and academia. Sustainability management and governance cuts across several policy areas, affects a multitude of actors and is multi-disciplinary. The objectives of different policy areas may therefore indeed prove challenging to reconcile with each other.



## STEP 5: EVALUATION AND REPORTING

Regular evaluation helps to learn from the past: It helps to improve the future process; it provides an assessment of planned and unforeseen effects; it supports in moderating conflicts; and it justifies the continuation or termination of a process.

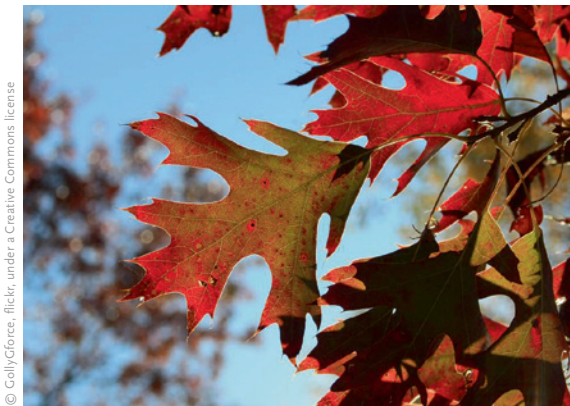
Evaluation is therefore not a one-off event, and should be done before, during and after implementation:

- Before implementation (*ex-ante*), evaluation is needed in order to assist in making decisions on how the overall sustainability management and governance system will be implemented, and to define the intended consequences of the planned targets and measures over a period of time.



- During implementation (*interim*) as a continuous process, evaluation enables local governments to progressively review and adapt the measures according to the changing circumstances in order to attain the desired targets and project objectives.
- After implementation (*ex-post*), evaluation is needed to retrace the planning and implementation process and results after the implementation of actions and measures. It might result in changes to the organisational set up of the local government, or it might result in changes to the future measures and targets.

## EVALUATION OF THE PROCESS



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The evaluation of the process is an important and critical step because, at this point, it becomes clear whether the co-operation has been a failure or a success. Co-operating researchers and policy-makers may have familiarised themselves with the complex process and management procedures, which should remain stable to a certain extent over time. However, evaluation of the process is about change.

Change has, in this case, something to do with changed ways of working, changed structures, changed cooperation strategies and organisational culture. Researchers and policy-makers are in a constant interaction and need not only to learn according to their own experience but also to adapt expectations, convictions and the already-acquired knowledge of others<sup>12</sup>. The re-organisation of structures and the positive reaction to new situations and organisational frameworks imply constant improvement and facilitate later management cycles.

## EVALUATION OF RESULTS

A second evaluation is more goal-oriented. It is an assessment against the planned objectives, targets and general perspectives. Comparing the planned targets and the actual values does not just allow comparisons between target and performance values, i.e. an appraisal of the entire cycle. More importantly, what has been achieved must be measured against the medium-term or long-term target, preventing the local government from losing sight of the planned route.

Both evaluations can imply changes in the political process and in the contents of the implementation programme because they question the established routines and actions. In fact, the first integrated sustainability cycle should lead to a general reflection about processes and activities. In addition, the implementation of specific activities has always implications on other activities. Therefore, it is fundamental to have a look at the relation between individual activities. Particularly in the management and governance of local sustainability, these intertwinements are important because cross-sectoral issues can only be solved through a wide-ranging co-operation between different traditional fields.



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## EVALUATION OF LOCAL SUSTAINABILITY ON A EUROPEAN LEVEL



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Also European schemes to support local sustainability action usually include evaluation activities, mostly based on a set of quantitative indicators, including the development of specific monitoring and reporting guidelines. The evaluation reports show the status and progress of sustainable development and related issues within a city. For example, signatories of the *Covenant of Mayors* need

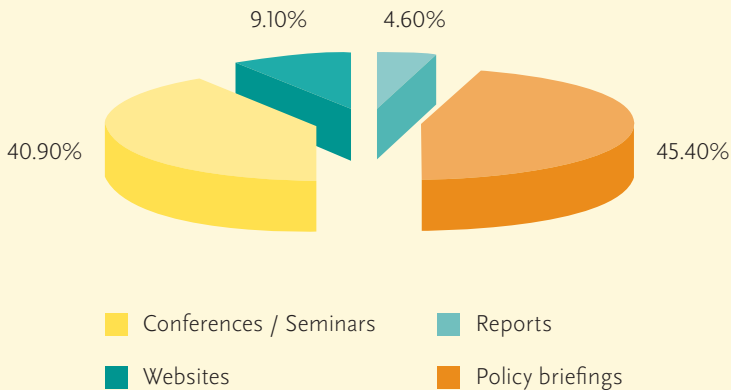
to “*submit an implementation report at least every second year after submission of Action Plan for evaluation, monitoring and verification purposes*”. The monitoring and evaluation processes vary among schemes, based on time frequency, format-template, benchmarking characteristics, quantitative versus qualitative, technocratic or participative.

## COMMUNICATION AND REPORTING



How can the lessons learned through the evaluation be made more accessible? How can the findings be reported and disseminated in an innovative way? Policy-makers have neither the time nor the experience to read scientific papers extensively. Therefore, there is a clear need for professional translation of research outcomes into a language that enables policy-makers and a

wider audience to identify its content and value. Accordingly, summaries, recommendations and key messages etc. are suggested in many studies<sup>13</sup>. As a matter of fact, both local policy-makers and researchers agree that either *policy briefings* or *conferences/seminars* are the best means to present project outcomes. In contrast, both *reports* and *websites* were not considered effective means of dissemination<sup>14</sup>.



*"What would be the most effective formats to present the outcomes of a project to a local government audience?" (respondents: local governments only)*

*Source: Informed Cities Forum Newcastle, UK, April 2010*

## EUROPEAN FRAMEWORKS FOR LOCAL SUSTAINABILITY: PRIORITIES OF POLICY-MAKERS AND KEY FEATURES FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

The practical experiences, and the feedback received from both local policy-makers and researchers during the activities and gatherings organised in the framework of the *Informed Cities* initiative suggest that there is a need for further development of the existing schemes for monitoring local sustainability at the European level. A promising approach for such further development would be oriented along the needs of the users of the schemes and tools, integrating the respective strengths of each of them: The comprehensive approach of the *Reference Framework for Sustainable Cities*<sup>15</sup> and the personalised and aggregated reporting of *Local Evaluation 21*<sup>16</sup>; the range of objectives of the *Aalborg Commitments* and the targets of the *Covenant of Mayors*; the integration of data of the *Integrated Urban Monitoring for Europe Initiative*<sup>17</sup> and the public recognition of the *European Green Capital Award*; and so on.



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What is clear is that none of the existing schemes and tools fulfils all needs, nor does it seem likely that the different actors responsible behind the various tools<sup>18</sup> will join forces and create a common *European commitment and monitoring scheme for local sustainability*. As a consequence, local governments have to decide carefully which schemes serve their needs best. In other words, they seek to develop their own individual framework derived from those schemes offering clear potential and practical benefits for different tasks and steps. In practice, many cities participate in several schemes and thus identify locally synergies and complementarities that have not been envisaged at the European level yet.

## 10 KEY FEATURES OF AN IDEAL EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK FOR LOCAL SUSTAINABILITY

What are therefore the most important priorities for policy-makers that European institutions should consider when further developing their frameworks for local sustainability in the future? The authors of this booklet recommend putting in practice the following set of 10 key features of an *ideal European commitment and monitoring scheme for local sustainability*:

### 1. FULL CYCLE SUPPORT

The European commitment and monitoring scheme for local sustainability supports local sustainability management and governance in all five phases of the management and governance cycle, i.e. in creating a baseline review, setting targets, obtaining political commitment, implementing actions to achieve the targets, and evaluating success and failure.

### 2. ADVANCED SET OF INDICATORS

The European commitment and monitoring scheme for local sustainability is based on a manageable number of indicators mirroring local environmental, economic and social development in a balanced way. Data for these indicators is relevant and available on the local level.

### 3. INTEGRATED APPROACH

The European commitment and monitoring scheme for local sustainability integrates the different aspects of sustainable development rather than just listing them and tackling them individually. The focus is on the nexus of protecting natural common goods and creating decent living conditions for all citizens.

### 4. COMMON QUALITATIVE OBJECTIVES

The European commitment and monitoring scheme for local sustainability includes and is based on a common set of qualitative objectives for any local government across Europe to commit to. The objectives are balanced and address the key sustainability issues.

## 5. TAILORED TARGETS

The European commitment and monitoring scheme for local sustainability offers a procedure for local governments to set measurable targets that are comparable between cities and towns across Europe, whilst still flexible enough to suit different existing environmental, economic and social framework conditions.

## 6. POLITICAL COMMITMENT

The European commitment and monitoring scheme for local sustainability requires political commitment and accountability. Participation is based on a decision by the local Council, and the commitments made through this decision are monitored.

## 7. BENCHMARKING

The European commitment and monitoring scheme for local sustainability awards well-performing cities and towns with political recognition and European-wide promotion. The focus of the performance criteria awarded changes regularly, and in a transparent way, in order to allow cities from various backgrounds to excel.

## 8. GUIDANCE AND RESOURCES

The European commitment and monitoring scheme for local sustainability is linked to a framework that provides technical guidance and access to resources to the participating local governments for the implementation of the commitments.

## 9. INDIVIDUAL FEEDBACK

The European commitment and monitoring scheme for local sustainability delivers individual feedback and results to each participating local government. The feedback is relevant to the city and facilitates further development of its local sustainability policies.

## 10. AGGREGATED EUROPEAN REPORTING

The European commitment and monitoring scheme for local sustainability delivers aggregated findings about the status of local sustainability at a European level. The monitoring system is set up in a way that does not require any extra efforts from the local level to deliver data; access is open to the public and not controlled by any particular actor, organisation or institution.



The aim of an ideal *European commitment and monitoring scheme for local sustainability* would be to discover and better understand changes in local sustainability. Accordingly, the check-list above may serve as a research agenda for the European Commission and offer a major opportunity for the development of common solutions to benefit all local governments in Europe.

After all, it is work in progress. The sustainability of cities is a collective effort requiring a joint initiative between EU agencies and institutions, clear coordination between actors in local government and research institutions, as well as critical inputs from citizens.

Coordination between cities, scientific community and European Institutions is a huge challenge in conceptual and practical terms. This is not surprising. However, we should not forget that all this is needed to reinforce the importance of sustainability issues and to develop solutions beyond those we are familiar with today.





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- <sup>18</sup> In particular, this relates to the different Directorate-Generals of the European Commission involved in various schemes, e.g. DG ENER for the Covenant of Mayors, DG REGIO for the Reference Framework for Sustainable Cities, DG ENV for the European Green Capital Award, etc.

## INFORMED CITIES

**Informed Cities** is an initiative which aims to enhance the connectivity between research and policy-making in sustainable development. This is done by encouraging interaction and face-to-face discussions between researchers and policy-makers, as well as through explorative application of research-based tools for sustainable urban management by local governments across Europe.

**Informed Cities** outlines how the results of research, if consistently applied, can help to achieve considerable improvements in governance mechanisms on local, national and European levels.



**Informed Cities** is funded by the 7th Framework Programme of the European Union under the name PRIMUS – Policies and Research for an Integrated Management of Urban Sustainability.

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