



***Thinking Locally?
Act Globally!***

**Overcoming the barriers to
effective local action on
sustainable development**

***A Report from ANPED,
the Northern Alliance
for Sustainability
to the
UN Commission on
Sustainable Development***

April 2001

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Contents

Page:

2	Summary
3	Part 1: The 'Barriers' project
4	Part 2: The issues
	1. The Crisis of implementation
4	2. Awareness, Understanding and Action
	A new information initiative
	A global-to-local information service
	Good practice and its limits
6	3. Supporting local sustainability
	National strategies and local implementation
	Policy and legislation reviews
	The role of a National Forum
	Management for sustainability
	Confronting corruption
8	4. Working together: co-operation and partnerships for sustainability
	National government, local government, and the community sector
	Cross-sector and cross-disciplinary working
	Differences and Diversity
8	5. The Bottom Line – meeting basic needs
	A basic needs strategy
	Minimum standards for local sustainability
10	6. The Bigger Picture – local sustainability in a globalising world
	Economic growth and unsustainable consumption
	In search of 'smart growth'
	Globalisation and human rights
	The Global Agreement on Trade in Services
11	7. Developing sustainable communities
	Strengthening and developing communities
	Innovation to strengthen local economies

This report is published by ANPED, the Northern Alliance for Sustainability, April 2000. The report was written by Chris Church and draws on research and contributions from a range of NGOs from across Europe (see Appendix 1 for details).

ANPED, the Northern Alliance for Sustainability, works to empower Northern civil society in creating and protecting sustainable communities and societies world-wide.

We do this by:

- Building capacity among Northern civil society organisations through sharing of information, knowledge, and skills; and
- Enabling informed and effective democratic participation by civil society in local, national, regional and international decision-making on sustainable development policy and processes.

For more information in ANPED and this project see Appendix 1.

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Summary of key recommendations

This report looks at the political and institutional obstacles and barriers that are preventing many local sustainability programmes from achieving their full potential. It makes a series of recommendations for action by national governments and international agencies which would help remove those barriers. Those actions need a clear international framework. **We would urge those agreeing the agenda for the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development to set time within that event for consideration of how national and international action can enable more effective work at the local level.** This report makes 19 recommendations for action: principal recommendations include:

- Awareness of sustainable development is still low both amongst the public and those working in national and local government. **There is a need for a new internationally-guided information and awareness initiative to promote and support local action** (recc. 2.1).
- While many nations have strategies for sustainable development, there are in many cases conflicts between these and existing legislation. **Every nation and international agency should undertake an overall policy and legislation review to identify those areas where existing policy and legislation are working against the implementation of sustainable development strategies** (recc. 3.2)
- Sustainability cannot be achieved locally or nationally without the full participation of the voluntary and community sector. **Central and local governments need to accept that NGOs and community-based organisations are essential to making sustainable development a reality and develop clear ways of working with them on planning and delivering action plans, ideally through a national forum** (reccs. 5.1 & 3.1)
- Few national strategies provide guidance for work at a local level. **National governments should work with local authorities and NGOs to identify priorities within these plans and to agree how these can be helped by co-ordinated actions at a local level** (recc. 3.1)
- Any country where the basic human needs of the population are unmet will find it impossible to deliver long-term sustainability. **Such nations should be supported by international agencies to develop an initial strategy and a series of local priority action plans.** These plans should be linked to national objectives and should set out ways to deliver these basic needs, using both external resources and those within the local community (recc. 4.1).
- **The single biggest barrier to sustainable development, nationally and locally, is the failure of national governments to implement the international agreements they have signed up to, most notably those arising from the 1992 UN Earth Summit.** Governments have to tackle their own failure to act, otherwise their potential partners in NGOs and other sectors of society will lose faith in these processes (recc. 1).

Part 1 - Introduction

1. The 'Barriers' project

The 1992 UN Earth Summit has been largely responsible for the steady development in work on local sustainable development. Now, ten years on, many local sustainability programmes report that they face obstacles and barriers to success at institutional and national levels.

ANPED, the Northern Alliance for Sustainability, has set up the 'Barriers to Local Sustainability' programme in order to identify these barriers, to look at how they can be overcome, and to make recommendations for action by governments and international agencies. **We very much hope that the 2002 Summit will not simply be a chance to comment on work on local sustainability and congratulate those responsible: rather it must be used as an opportunity to deal with these barriers and create national and global frameworks within which local action can flourish.**

We are raising this issue with the UN and governments in the run-up to the 2002 World Summit. This first report is being presented at the meeting of the Preparatory Committee Meeting for the World Summit (in New York in May, 2001). **We urge governments to work with local government bodies, NGOs, and other representatives of civil society to use the 2002 World Summit process to develop a strategic approach to implementation of plans for sustainable development at a local level.**

2. The promise of local sustainability.

Agenda 21 set out a global action plan for sustainable development. While there have been successes on some of the issues, on many there has been little progress and indicators show that things have got worse. These major issues include tackling poverty, finance for development, and the need to transform unsustainable patterns of production and consumption, especially in the richer nations.

Local sustainable development has been one of the areas of success. Several researchers have suggested that this work, led in many nations by the Local Agenda 21 process, is the most successful outcome of the 1992 Earth Summit. This new focus was primarily the result of one sentence in one Chapter of Agenda 21. Chapter 28: *"By 1996, most local authorities in each country should have undertaken a consultative process with their populations and achieved a consensus on 'a local Agenda 21' for the community."* It has also been pointed out that over half the action points within Agenda 21 need action at a local level.

Local sustainability processes have developed in different ways across the world. In some nations local government bodies have developed major Local Agenda 21 programmes; in others there are still just one or two pilot projects; in others again there are programmes that do not use the phrase 'local agenda 21' but are otherwise broadly similar. Best estimates suggest that up to 6,000 programmes have been developed as a result of this proposal.

This report does not analyse the success of these initiatives: other researchers are doing this. This document is specifically focused on the institutional and political obstacles that such work is facing. Almost all practitioners agree that their work faces such obstacles, and that they have not achieved as much success as they might have done due to matters beyond their control.

It is likely that the 2002 Summit will acknowledge the success of Local Agenda 21 and similar work. If this work is to go forward and develop it is essential that governments review their own role and the obstacles that exist, and set out an international programme of action. In this way the second decade of work on local sustainability will be able to turn the promise shown by this initial work into common practice that can transform communities everywhere.

Part 2: The Barriers to Sustainability

1. The 'Crisis of Implementation'

The single biggest barrier to sustainable development, nationally and locally, is the failure of national governments to implement the international agreements they have signed up to, most notably those arising from the 1992 UN Earth Summit. Governments have signed up to many global and regional agreements on sustainable development issues, yet these are not implemented and remain nothing more than paper agreements. Governments have to tackle their own failure to act, otherwise their potential partners in NGOs and other sectors of society will lose faith in these processes.

Recommendation:

The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development and the Governments attending it must face up to the 'crisis of implementation'. There must be a frank assessment of why there has been this failure to implement on so many issues, and the agreement of a programme to address the reasons why governments have failed to act.

2. Awareness, Understanding and Action

In all our consultation the most universal issue, apart from the 'crisis of implementation', has been a continuing lack of awareness at every level of the principles of sustainable development and the issues related to these principles. There is a clear and paramount need to tackle this lack of awareness.

Any strategy to tackle the awareness gap needs to be based on good quality information, good access to that information and structures that permit that information to be put to use by local practitioners.

The nature of sustainable development

The very phrase 'sustainable development' is perhaps the place to start. The idea of sustainable development was not introduced to sow confusion: it evolved because the best analyses of the problems humanity faces require integrated solutions. At the most basic level it is not a particularly difficult concept, but the multiplicities of interpretation and the fact that the phrase does not translate well into many languages conspire to limit understanding.

The lack of promotion

Very few countries appear to have any strategy to promote the idea of sustainable development. Several clearly feel that since the idea is complicated and does not necessarily lead directly to action, then it makes more sense to promote basic environmental awareness. While this may have value in itself, the failure to link the environmental issues to the socio-economic aspects reduces the profile of sustainability issues.

The matter of the UN

Sustainability is widely linked with the Rio Summit. Those who have little faith in or even antipathy towards the UN may feel that this is not an issue they wish to address. This has been a clear problem for the development of Local Agenda 21 programmes in a range of countries.

2.1 A new information initiative

All these factors make it clear that there is a clear need for a new approach to promotion of the idea of sustainable development and the practice associated with it at national and local levels. Such a strategy must be led by an international initiative. The UN has taken a lead in addressing sustainable development: its agencies now need to take on a more active approach to promoting action. Passive information availability, notably through the use of electronic databases, is not getting the information to those who need it or can use it.

It is not appropriate, desirable or possible to set up one international campaign to promote the idea of sustainable development. This needs to be done in many different ways appropriate to national and local circumstances. However it would be very desirable for a suitable agency, most obviously UNEP, to take the lead on such work.

Recommendation:

We recommend that the UN, through UNEP and UNDP, address this issue through setting up an international working group, involving governments, NGOs and expert agencies, to reviewing current information and awareness working, and to develop some core materials with a 'back to basics' approach that could be taken up and used as the basis for local and national campaigns by agencies in those countries where awareness of sustainable development is still low. It is our impression that this would need to include most, if not all, the countries of the world.

Making this happen

The huge variation in local circumstances, even in the region we have considered, makes a uniform approach to awareness inappropriate, undesirable and even pointless. The core issues are the same but the national and local circumstances vary widely. There is also a need to respect national and local cultural diversity and to present information in ways that fits local cultural patterns. Such an initiative should be led by national government but should include other sectors.

While the powers and capacity of local government vary they will have a key role to play in making information available and disseminating it. Where local government is weak, support and training for this role will be an essential part of any new strategy.

Respect for voluntary sector groups also varies but they are often trusted more than local government as a source of information. This is due to many reasons not least that local government has far greater local responsibilities, but it does mean that the voluntary sector and its networks will be at the core of any awareness strategy. This must go well beyond those groups working on sustainability now and reflect the diversity of the non-governmental sector. The education sector also has a key role to play, helping with capacity-building as much as with simple education about the issues pertaining to sustainability.

Business also has the potential to play a positive role, firstly by taking a lead, improving their own practice, and building awareness amongst employees. From this base business can reach out to local communities. This is an especially important responsibility for those businesses who are marketing their products or services to young people.

2.2 A global-to-local information service

Effective local action needs to be informed by global action and processes, in order that it can support and contribute to such international action. Currently many local practitioners report that they lack good quality information, and miss opportunities to link local, national and global issues.

Recommendation:

UNEP should work with relevant departments in national governments to develop its 'unep.net' information service and to provide services for the use and benefit of those working at a local level.

2.3 Good practice and its' limits

During the last ten years many databases and publications have recorded good or best practice. Surveys suggest that little of this is in a form that encourages or enables such practice to be replicated: most of those interviewed have used this material as the basis for action rarely if at all. One problem is that the criteria for determining good or 'best' are often

set by specialists in a limited field, and that what is seen by experts as good practice may not seem so to those who are affected by the project. The definition of what is 'best' may be determined by the cultural and professional orientation of the assessor, and not by how far a project meets local needs. Other problems are that such practice may become out of date, and that success is often exaggerated. Local workers need formal and informal ways to share practice as it develops.

Recommendation:

Governments, NGOs and voluntary and community sector groups should co-operate in all sectors to identify practice that is genuinely contributing to local sustainability, should lead by example in adopting such practice, and should ensure that such practice can be shared through visits and exchanges rather than simply through publications.

3. Supporting local sustainability

National strategies and local implementation

A common concern of those working on local sustainability plans is the lack of support they receive within their own administrations and from national governments, in terms of advice, resources, recognition and back-up. An effective national support system should be a high priority. Support should be available both to those in local government and to those in the voluntary and community sector.

Such a support system will need the involvement of national government but could then be delivered through the most appropriate body, whether that be national or local government or a civil society initiative. Yet providing this support will not be enough to overcome the obstacles that are being faced daily by practitioners. There are a number of national initiatives that are needed to make such work programmes more effective.

3.1 National Strategies for Sustainable Development (NSSDs)

These NSSDs exist in some but not all countries. Where strategies do exist it is common that there is little consideration of local implementation measures within the strategy.

Recommendation:

Every country should have an NSSD, developed through a process of effective consultation. Where such strategies do exist these should clearly identify those issues where local action will be essential or a priority, provide guidance on both policy and local implementation, and identify those responsible for implementation.

3.2 Policy and legislation reviews

Such sustainability strategies also need to reflect major national policy issues. Several respondents commented on the way that national policies on some issues, such as transport, frequently cut across or contradict national strategies for sustainable development.

Recommendation:

Every nation and international agency should undertake an overall policy and legislation review to identify those areas where existing policy and legislation are working against the implementation of sustainable development strategies. Such reviews should be done in consultation with key stakeholders.

Guidance and leadership should be supplied by the UN and inter-governmental agencies such as the OECD: similar inconsistencies have been highlighted in the policies of these bodies.

3.3 The role of a National Forum

The need for co-ordination of work linking national and local levels should be clear yet in many countries such relationships are inadequate.

Recommendation:

UNEP and UNDP should work with national governments to promote the formation of a National Forum in each country where such a body does not exist to promote local sustainability and to ensure co-operation between national and local level working. Such a body should have a structure that ensures representation from NGOs and from the voluntary and community sector.

The work of such a body would be to oversee a policy review (as above) but also to set up training systems, to act as a focal point for discussion of the impact of new policies at a local level, to promote openness in work on local sustainability, to identify, promote and enable good practice, and to encourage effective participation work. The long-term aim should be the integration of sustainable development principles into all policy and practice. Such a Forum could play a role in developing co-operation for better working between individual local authorities where such mechanisms do not as yet exist.

3.4 Confronting corruption

One of the major obstacles confronting work in many countries on all aspects of local sustainability is corruption, and in the worst cases, organised crime. If powerful bodies fail to respect national and international laws designed to protect local people and their environments then the long-term potential for local sustainability is almost non-existent

Recommendation:

National Governments should press forward with legislation and practical action to confront and eradicate organised crime at national and local levels. International support for such work should be adequately resourced.

3.5 Management for sustainability

One of the best environmental outcomes of the LA21 process in some countries has been the introduction of effective environmental management systems such as EMAS (Environmental Management and Audit System). These operate with external review and performance improvement systems, and are leading to positive change. It has been suggested that a wider 'sustainability management system' should be introduced. In some cases 'check-list' systems have been introduced.

It is our perception that since management of sustainable development would require working on all issues facing a local government body a detailed system on the EMAS model is likely to be unworkable in practice at this time. However there is a need for a clear and practical system whereby a full, open and accurate assessment of sustainability impacts can be undertaken by local government and other major bodies of major decisions such as corporate or land-use plans, annual budgets etc.

Recommendation:

National and international agencies should co-operate to review existing practice in the use of management systems to promote sustainability at the local level and bring forward recommendations for a process that can be used by local governments and that will encourage and not hinder effective action.

4. The Bottom Line – meeting basic needs

4.1 A basic needs strategy

Creative approaches to local sustainability will only flourish in the long term if basic human needs are being met in conditions of equity and justice. A first step to local sustainability in any country should be to develop and implement plans to meet basic needs. We would not seek here to define such needs in full detail, but would suggest that they include the need for:

- Access to clean and safe drinking water
- Food security
- Adequate shelter
- Satisfactory health care
- Effective Education
- Recognition of basic human rights under the UN Declaration.

Recommendation:

Any country where such needs are unmet should be supported by international agencies to develop an initial strategy and a series of local priority action plans. Such plans should be linked to national objectives and should set out ways to deliver these basic needs, using both external resources and those within the local community.

National and local authorities should ensure that local sustainability programmes benefit the whole population. To that end they should ensure that excluded and minority groups are specifically targeted through appropriate organisations and procedures. International agencies should promote effective practice in this field.

4.2 Minimum standards for local sustainability

Such basic needs are a common 'minimum standard' for every nation. Within every nation there are also local, national and global priorities for action, ranging from anti-poverty measures to climate change targets. An effective strategy for local sustainability should recognise these priorities and identify ways in which local action can help deliver them and evaluate their success.

Recommendation:

Every government should work with local government and civil society to draw up and agree an initial list of 'minimum standards' – targets that could be part of any and every local sustainability action plan and programme. If such a process is done in an open and democratic manner it should improve practice and encourage local practitioners to consider how their local work links to global targets.

5. Working together: co-operation and partnerships for sustainability

National government, local government, and the community sector

Agenda 21 stresses the need for joint working; this idea has become central to much development work in both poorer and richer nations. But for joint working, whether in partnerships or informal arrangements, to be genuinely effective, there is a need for transparency, accountability, equity and above all co-operative management of the project between the stake-holders. There is also a need for clear structures and relationships to link the different players.

At the centre of this must be the relationship between national and local governments. This relationship varies widely in the cases we have considered during this report. Those nations where local government is very weak are experiencing many problems with developing work on local sustainability but a good relationship is no guarantee of success.

Equally important is the relationship between the local authority and the community. Most partners reported concerns: many of these relate to the tension between Representative democracy and Participative ways of working. It is clear that both of these are essential to a strong civil society, but there is still much to be done to encourage each side to recognise the role of the other.

5.1 The involvement of the voluntary sector

More fundamental is the fact that in many countries the contributions being made to work on local sustainability are not recognised; in some cases local and central governments actively resist efforts by voluntary and community sector groups to become involved.

Recommendation:

Sustainability cannot be achieved locally or nationally without the full participation of the voluntary and community sector. Central and local governments need to accept that NGOs and community-based organisations are essential to making sustainable development a reality and develop clear ways of working with them on planning and delivering action plans, through a national forum (as above, recc. 3.3) and by development of a set of agreed guidelines.

5.2 Decision-making and subsidiarity

If local sustainability is to achieve real change, then local people need the power to make decisions about planning and resource use as it affects their areas. It does not follow that all decisions should be taken locally, but there should be agreement between central and local government on the long-term devolvement of decision-making to the level that is most appropriate.

Recommendation:

Governments should adopt the principle of subsidiarity – that decision-making should be devolved as far as is possible and appropriate.

5.3 Cross-sector and cross-disciplinary working

Agenda 21 laid stress on the involvement of the 'major groups' within society. Yet within such major groups there are many different disciplines and professions, amongst which there may be only limited common ground. Local sustainability programmes may work to involve all sectors but will often fail to reach key disciplines within that sector. One example would be the failure of many European LA21 programmes to involve health groups and professionals, who work principally in the public sector. Since that sector is represented by local government, there has been little focus elsewhere, yet good health care is central to the sustainable development of any locality.

Recommendation:

Governments need to identify those disciplines which are central to but under-represented in work on sustainable development and take a lead in seeking to build their involvement at national and local levels.

Differences and Diversity

Co-operative working has been shown to be desirable and effective, but it is also the case that different organisations will have different approaches and viewpoints on how to deliver sustainable development. These differences may be political; they may also be cultural or religious, but where there is a core consensus on improving local quality of life, then different views can be an enrichment of the process. Any local sustainability process needs to have a clear agreement on being inclusive, in line with recommendation 4.1 part 2 above.

6. The Bigger Picture – local sustainability in a globalising world

6.1 Economic growth and unsustainable consumption

All those involved in this research recognised that effective action for local sustainability can and is being undermined by external pressures, primarily economic ones. There are NGOs and others who have stated that economic growth is a fundamental barrier to sustainability and is incompatible with sustainable development. We do not endorse that view point, but we certainly recognise that unsustainable approaches to production and consumption, particularly in the richer Northern countries, are, in the words of Agenda 21 *“the major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment”*.

There is no doubt that consumerism is a problem for local sustainability in richer nations, and aspirations to consumerism a problem in many poorer ones. Yet there has been very little work done by governments at international level (with exception of Round Table meetings held by the Norwegian Government)

Recommendation:

There is an urgent need to review the proposals in Chapter 4 of Agenda 21: as suggested there this is an issue where the richer nations should take the lead by addressing their own wasteful practices and seeking to ‘reinforce values that support sustainable consumption’.

6.2 In search of ‘smart growth’

If economic growth is incompatible with sustainable development then the prospects for sustainability are slim, as is the possibility of ending the poverty of those in direst need. It is perhaps more appropriate to consider what forms of economic growth are necessary in order to meet humans needs, and how such growth may be managed. The development of ‘smart growth’ programmes in many cities, notably in the USA, is showing how local communities can develop effective programmes that respect both the local and global environments while using the best appropriate techniques to meet local needs and generate economic security.

6.3 Globalisation and human rights

Many of those surveyed commented on the way in which external organisations, notably trans-national corporations, can have a serious impact on local communities, either through developments that damage the local environment or through shifting production and jobs from one community to another with little or no notice or consultation.

The need for adequate controls over globalisation of world trade is an issue that clearly needs to be addressed at the 2002 Summit. It is our perception that such controls can best be managed through international organisations within the framework of the UN, but that currently such organisations lack the powers necessary for effective regulation. One reason for this is that many multi-lateral environmental agreements (MEAs) are non-mandatory and lack legal backing.

Recommendation:

The 2002 World Summit should take forward plans to strengthen international regulations to protect livelihoods and the global environment. An important way to do this would be to take steps towards the global recognition of an inalienable human right to a safe and healthy environment.

ANPED is producing other materials that will suggest how this could go forward. We note that on April 25th 2001 the Commission on Human Rights, in decision L.79 (amended), decided to invite the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Executive Director of

the United Nations Environment Programme to consider the organisation of a joint seminar to review and assess progress achieved since UNCED in promoting and protecting human rights in relation to environmental questions and in the framework of Agenda 21.

6.4 The General Agreement on Trade in Services

We have noted with growing concern the discussions within the WTO on this new proposed new agreement, which is likely to have major impacts on the delivery of local services. At present the proposals are unclear, badly thought out, and there is no evidence that any consideration of how such developments might contribute to local sustainability.

Recommendation:

The GATS proposals are fundamentally flawed: we recommend that these are withdrawn and that any new proposals are preceded by a full debate on how local services can best be delivered.

7. Developing sustainable communities

Since the Rio Summit, underlying trends within global society have moved steadily towards a culture dominated by consumerism. Identity for many is more a matter of the clothes they wear than the place where they live, while global trade and marketing undermines many local economies and social structures.

Such trends make the work of those seeking to build more sustainable communities that much harder. They also make it more important than ever to accept and celebrate innovation and diversity within communities.

7.1 Strengthening and developing communities

All those taking part in this work stressed the need to strengthen communities, both as a way of mobilising resources to help deliver sustainability programmes and also as a way to counteract the destruction of local identity that erodes community spirit and values. Such work involves building the capacity and skills within communities, which will enable them to be more effective in solving the problems they face.

Recommendation:

Governments and international agencies should develop and implement structured community development programmes as integral parts of their strategies for national and local sustainable development.

7.2 Innovation to strengthen local economies

The best defence for any community under external economic pressure is a strong and diverse local economy, where people can trade amongst themselves for needs and services, allowing money to circulate within the locality rather than passing directly to an outside business. Strengthening local economies requires innovation and planning to help create new employment and diversify trading patterns.

Recommendation:

Governments and international agencies should recognise the need for stronger local economies, should provide advice and resources to support programmes for innovation and diversification, and should promote effective innovation as widely as possible.

Appendix 1 – the development of the Barriers project

This project has been developed by ANPED, the Northern Alliance for Sustainability. ANPED is a network of NGOs working in Western and Eastern Europe, the Newly Independent States, and North America. For six years we have been running a Local Sustainability programme that has worked to support NGOs working with their local government to develop local sustainability programmes.

The purpose of this report is to encourage governments to take a long look at work that is going on within their own borders; work that on the evidence of much research is being marginalised and under-funded.

This work has developed from other work in which we have been involved. This first report has been informed by many pieces of research, notably that done for the EU concerted action SUSCOM programme on *'Sustainable Communities in Europe: a cross-national study of the implementation of the Agenda 21 at the local level of governance'*, a project co-ordinated by the ProSus Centre at the university of Oslo, Norway. It is being developed in parallel with work by the UK Community Development Foundation, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, on *'Local Sustainability: lessons for policy from practice'*. It has also been helped by our involvement in the European Round Table on Local Agenda 21, run by ICLEI, the local government body to whom our thanks go for their work on the development of Local Agenda 21.

This first report is published as a contribution to an ongoing debate: we will be very happy to receive comments and contributions, which will be incorporated into a subsequent edition. Please address all comments to barriers@anped.org.

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- SOSNA, the Center for Sustainable Alternatives, Slovakia
- MAMA 86, Ukraine
- A range of NGOs and individual local government practitioners in the UK

The report was also informed by an international workshop involving NGOs from a further eight nations from all parts of Europe.

This report is part of ANPED's work on Local Sustainable Development. ANPED also works on Sustainable Production and Consumption, and on Environment and Health and Environmental and Human Rights.

**For more information on ANPED please visit our website:
www.anped.org**