Bob Evans, Marko Joas, Susan Sundback & Kate Theobald

Governing Local Sustainability

A Paper Submitted to the European Consortium of Political Research, Joint Sessions of Workshops,
Workshop 17 – Initiating Sustainable Development: Patterns of Sub-National Engagement and their Significance

Granada, Spain, 14-19 April 2005

Contact author:

Marko Joas,
Department of Public Administration,
Åbo Akademi University,
Biskopsgatan 15,
FIN-20500 Åbo, Finland

marko.joas@abo.fi
Introduction

One of the key propositions of Chapter 28 of the 1992 Rio declaration is that the process of ‘good governance’ is a precondition for achieving sustainability at the local level. The logic behind this proposition is twofold. Firstly, it is based upon the belief that the changes required to achieve sustainable development are of such magnitude that they cannot be secured by governments acting alone. It will be necessary to mobilise the energies and initiative of citizens, interest organisations and stakeholders – ‘local communities’ – if changes in attitudes, values and behaviour are to be secured. Secondly, the governance process is regarded as a key mechanism to involve and incorporate citizens and local organisations into the decision-making process, thereby increasing political engagement and levels of acceptance of what are often difficult decisions.

This commitment to ‘good governance’ has been a central feature of the local sustainability discourse throughout the last fifteen years, but the veracity of the proposition that good governance is prerequisite for sustainability has never been tested. Moreover, the assertion that ‘governance’ is unarguably preferable to ‘government’ has been equally uncritically accepted.

Drawing upon the recently completed DISCUS (Developing Institutional and Social Capacity for Sustainable Development) research project (Evans et al., 2004) this paper examines both these propositions and proposes a conceptual framework for local sustainable development, linking the concepts of institutional capital, social capital and governance to provide a model for understanding the governing of local sustainability. The DISCUS project, co-funded by the European Commission and outlined below, was undertaken during 2001-2004 and involved an in-depth study of 40 European towns and cities in order to understand the institutional and social factors and conditions that might contribute to policy ‘achievement’ or ‘failure’ in local sustainable development policy and practice.

Governance, government and governing

The concept of governance was central to this research but as the title of this paper indicates, our principal interest was in the process of governing for sustainable development. By this we mean that governing encapsulates two related and intertwined processes, those of government and governance.

We need to be precise in our use of these terms because, within the wide and extensive discourse of sustainable development, there has been a tendency to suggest that, first, governance is somehow unarguably a ‘good thing’ and that more of it should be encouraged; second, by implication, that ‘government’ is somehow less desirable; and, finally, that changes in the processes of local politics and administration can usefully be conceptualized as a continuum moving from government to governance with, as indicated above, a clear assumption that any movement along this continuum towards governance is both progressive and supportive of sustainability. To an extent, these positions reflect the analysis offered by the academic political science community (see, for example, John, 2001; Goss, 2001); but the sustainable development discourse, and the actors operating within it, tends to
be more normative in approach. Moreover, there is a tendency within this discourse to conflate government and governance, sometimes using the terms interchangeably. However, as will be seen, for the purposes of this paper and the research upon which it is based, it is necessary to be clear that these two processes have distinct identities.

Figure 1: Contrasting interpretations of governance

Figure 1 illustrates these contrasting interpretations. We have chosen to regard the sphere of local authority activity, the internal organization of local government, and the legal, financial and political processes therein as government. In particular, as will be seen below, we are concerned to assess what we term ‘institutional capital’: the knowledge, resources, leadership and learning that can make local governments effective and dynamic entities.

Governance, on the other hand, is the sphere of public debate, partnership, interaction, dialogue and conflict entered into by local citizens and organizations and by local government. Governing is the term that we will use to describe the interaction between these two processes.

In much of the literature reviewing sustainable development, the qualifier ‘good’ usually, and unnecessarily, precedes ‘governance’. For example, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2002) asserts that: ‘good governance and sound public management are preconditions for the implementation of sustainable development policies’, and the UN-Habitat and Global Development Research Centre websites both seek to define and outline the principles of ‘good’ governance (www.unhabitat.org; www.gdrc.org). Unsurprisingly, there is no generally agreed definition of governance; but there are common points of departure, which are reflected in the final choice of words comprising the many definitions. Thus, governance for an international organization is:

... the sum of the many ways [in which] individuals and institutions, public and private, plan and manage the common affairs of the city. It is a continuing process through which conflicting or diverse interests may be accommodated and cooperative action taken (UN-Habitat, 2002).

This contrasts with academic interpretations, where governance is:

... a flexible pattern of public decision-making based on loose networks of individuals. The concept conveys the idea that public decisions rest less within hierarchically organized bureaucracies, but take place more in
long-term relationships between key individuals located in a diverse set or organizations located at various territorial levels (John, 2001, p.9)

Or governance is:

… crucially about politics, both formal and informal … [it describes] emerging forms of collective decision-making at [the] local level, which lead to the development of different relationships, not simply between public agencies but between citizens and public agencies (Goss, 2001, p11).

As has been emphasised above, governance is central to the sustainability discourse. Christie and Warburton argue that:

the fundamental driver of sustainable development must be democratic debate – decisions reached through open discussion, consensus based on shared goals and trust. Sustainable development needs representative democracy that is trusted and vibrant, and new forms of participatory democracy to complement it that can inspire greater engagement by citizens in creating a better world. (2001, p154)

The document enigmatically known as Agenda 21 was instrumental in laying the foundations for what can only be described as a massive shift in governmental attitudes and practice towards the environment in Europe and worldwide over the last decade. Agenda 21 was the ‘global action plan’ for sustainable development that was agreed at the 1992 Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro, and Local Agenda 21 was the mechanism that emerged as the means of implementing much of this plan. The rationale behind this brief (less than three-page) document was simple. The changes implied in a move towards more sustainable societies are so immense that governments alone cannot impose them. Change of the magnitude envisaged by Agenda 21 can only be achieved by mobilizing the energy, creativity, knowledge and support of local communities, stakeholders, interest organizations and citizens across the world. More open, deliberative processes, which facilitate the participation of civil society in making decisions, will be required to secure this involvement.

Chapter 28 of Agenda 21, ‘Local Authorities’ Initiatives in Support of Agenda 21’, outlines the objectives of Local Agenda 21 (LA21) and the actions required. In particular, local authorities should enter a dialogue with their citizens, local organizations and private enterprises and adopt a Local Agenda 21. Through consensus and consultation, local authorities should learn from citizens and local organizations; in turn, this process of dialogue and consultation should increase local awareness of sustainability. Furthermore, local governments should foster partnerships with other organizations in order to both mobilize support and to promote knowledge and local capacity.

All of this may be broadly conceived as a process of local governance – local authorities reaching out to learn, to promote knowledge and understanding, to promote dialogue, and to mobilize resources and energy, and through these activities to generate policies and public actions that will receive consent and support. It is this relationship between civil society and government, this process of governance, which is the focus of this paper. However, in making this statement, and as indicated above, we are also clearly differentiating governance from government. As the discussion above has emphasized, the key agency for initiating change is local government itself, and as the history of LA21 in Europe over the last decade
has clearly shown, very little would have happened without the energy, leadership and commitment of local government politicians and officials (Evans and Theobald, 2001, 2003).

Local governments can exercise legitimate authority – legal, financial and political – within their defined geographical spheres. They can regulate, control, invest and promote within their legal and political remit and responsibilities; with effective leadership, both political and administrative, they may achieve objectives well beyond their formal duties. These achievements may only be realized through consultation, dialogue and participation (the process of governance); but in most cases this will only happen if there is also effective government. As will be explained below, one key element in government is what we refer to as institutional capital or institutional capacity – the organizational, knowledge and leadership resources of local governments, the possession of which may be a motor for change.

Institutional Capital and Social Capital

The starting point for the DISCUS project was the proposition that good governance is a necessary precondition for achieving sustainable development at the local level. Given the foregoing discussion on governing, a key issue for the research team was the nature of the relationship between on the one hand, local government and the other, the ‘local community’ as represented by interest organisations, stakeholder bodies and citizens. Two central conceptions in informing the research were thus institutional capital (or capacity – the terms may be used interchangeably) and social capital (or capacity). As will be seen, due to resource constraints, the research focused upon the first of these, but the subsequent model building outlined below makes reference to both, and also to the capacity building measures undertaken by local government.

The internal patterns of behaviour and ways or working, as well as the collective values, knowledge and relationships that exist within any organised group in society may be referred to as institutional capital. This means that the term covers intellectual capital, social capital and political capital, the latter being defined as the capacity to act collectively (Healey et al, 2002). Institutions that have high levels of such capital might reasonably be expected to act effectively and efficiently and to demonstrate institutional vigour, initiative and responsibility. In the context of sustainable development it might be expected that such institutions would be proactive and enthusiastic in the adoption of sustainability initiatives.

The complex ways in which sectors of civil society build and maintain capacity (economic, social and mutual support) for action to promote the needs of different groups is encompassed in the concept of social capital. The concept has achieved wide usage in social science since it was popularized by James Coleman (1988) and Pierre Bourdieu (1986), and further developed by Robert Putnam (1993; 2000) and Francis Fukuyama (1995: 2001). The concept can be broadly defined as: ‘those networks and assets that facilitate the education, coordination and cooperation of citizens for mutual benefit’ (Putnam, 1993, see also Van Deth, 2000). Social capital in this context therefore refers to the collective capacity that has been built or exists within a ‘community’ and within a local context.

Putnam (2000) makes an important distinction between what he terms ‘bridging (inclusive) social capital’ and ‘bonding (exclusive) social capital’. Bonding social capital is good for ‘getting by’.
However, bridging social capital is crucial for ‘getting ahead’ - that is, making links between groups/organizations in a more collective and cooperative sense.

More recently, Rydin and Holman (2004), reflecting on social capital in the context of sustainable development, propose an extension of Putman’s categories by suggesting a third, that of ‘bracing’ social capital, which:

... is primarily concerned [with strengthening] links across and between scales and sectors, but only operates within a limited set of actors. It provides a kind of social scaffolding (Rydin and Holman, 2004, p123)

Putnam (2000) and Rothstein (2001) both note that the level of social capital is positively correlated with the size of government – that is, the larger the scale of government or the greater the involvement of the public sector in areas of social life, the greater the existence of trust between civil society and government institutions. As a general trend, however, public participation in formal political activity is declining across modern Western democracies. In relation to Sweden, Rothstein notes that, in terms of political participation (time spent in established forms of political activity), there have been two opposing trends. There is an increasing interest in politics; but this interest is less in traditional channels and more towards ‘one-issue’ organizations. ‘Cooperative’ forms of behaviour have declined more rapidly than ‘expressive’ forms.

Effective democracy can occur, instead, through representative organizations or stakeholder groups, putting forward the needs and concerns of the individuals whom they represent. Civic engagement matters equally on the demand side – civil society expecting better government – and on the supply side (the performance of representative government is facilitated by the social infrastructure of civic communities and of officials and citizens). The interrelationship between the ‘demand’ and ‘supply’ sides is thus directly affected both by the nature and levels of social capital within sectors of civil society. It is also affected by the ways in which governments (of all levels) support and encourage the development of social capital.

Many of the terms associated with the notion of social capital have resonance with involving different sectors of civil society in decision-making processes, and creating the conditions where stakeholder groups feel that their views and concerns are adequately considered and incorporated. Arguably, social capital needs to exist for stakeholders to feel that they do have a stake in, and an impact upon, decision-making processes for sustainable development policy formulation and implementation.

The interplay between social capital and institutional capital

Both Maloney et al (2000) and Lowndes and Wilson (2001) have emphasized the role played by government institutions in the creation and function of social capital. Furthermore, Rothstein (2001, p207) notes that social capital can, in fact, ‘be caused by how government institutions operate and not by voluntary associations’. Lowndes and Wilson (2001) propose four interacting dimensions of what they term ‘institutional design’ within local governance that shape the creation and mobilization of social capital:
Relationships with the voluntary sector: this is about local government support and recognition of voluntary associations, and whether there is an instrumental rather than a democratic approach to local authority/voluntary-sector relationships.

Opportunities for citizen participation: the institutional design of local governance may influence prospects for the formation of new groups and new stocks of social capital. Well-designed political institutions are crucial to fostering civic spirit as they provide the ‘enabling’ conditions for this to develop. However, local authorities may, in practice, rank service improvement as the main purpose of participation, ahead of citizen development and building social capital. This is, perhaps, not surprising since for many local authorities the provision of key statutory (and non-statutory) services is their main function.

Responsiveness of decision-making: even where there are institutional arrangements to involve citizens and groups in policy formulation, social capital can only have an impact on democratic processes where policy-makers actually take account of citizen preferences. Even where high levels of social capital exist, government institutions may be structured in such a way that no ‘benefit’ from social capital accrues to formal democratic processes. The demand of social capital needs to match the supply for this within the political process.

Democratic leadership and social inclusion: public participation is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for democracy. Indeed, extending participation can mean more power for those already in advantaged positions. The relationship between social capital and democracy is therefore shaped by the capacity of governing institutions to listen to, and channel the range of, citizen demands.

This interplay between local government and the ‘local community’ independent of the formal processes of representative democracy – the processes of governance – is likely to result in tangible benefit both to the participants and policy outcomes. The central focus of the DISCUS project was to examine this process in 40 European cities in order to assess the impact both on policy outcomes and the formation of institutional and social capitals in the cities studied.

The DISCUS project

The DISCUS research project was funded by the European Commission and was conducted over a three-year period (2001–2004). Eight partners from across Europe undertook an in-depth investigation of local sustainability policy and practice in 40 European towns and cities. We refer to these herein as ‘cases’. Thirty of these cases were drawn from a group that had demonstrated their advanced standing in local sustainability in that they were either past winners of the European Sustainable Cities and Towns Award, or they had been identified as ‘good practice’ cases in the earlier LASALA research. These cases were selected on the basis that they had achieved tangible results in sustainable development policies and had some explicit forms of active governance process for sustainability, such as an LA21.

---

1 (The Local Authorities' Self-Assessment of Local Agenda (LASALA) project was conducted in 2000-2001. It involved a self-assessment exercise with 230 local governments across Europe (Joas, Grönholm and Måtar 2001), examining progress with their LA21 and local sustainability process, including the role of citizens and stakeholders. The research demonstrated the significant levels of commitment to the LA21 process among European local government, and some notable achievements during a very short space of time (Evans and Theobald, 2003).)
programme. They were thus expected to be useful cases for exploring the research questions outlined above. In contrast, the remaining ten cases were chosen as a control group. As far as the project team could ascertain, these cases had no programme for local sustainability, no known LA21 process and no membership of the European Sustainable Cities and Towns Campaign or other local sustainability networks.

In each town and city, researchers conducted an analysis of relevant documents, undertook interviews with key respondents from local government and civil society, and conducted a survey questionnaire again with local government and civil society representatives. The remainder of this paper draws upon the research findings of the DISCUS project, full details of which may be found in Evans et al (2004).

As indicated above, the starting point for the research was that good governance is a necessary precondition for achieving sustainable development, particularly at the local level. This, in turn, led to the project research questions:

- What constitutes ‘success’ in urban sustainable development policy and practice?
- What are the factors and conditions that permit or obstruct ‘success’ in local sustainable development policy and practice?
- What constitutes ‘good governance’ for urban sustainable development?

Our proposition was that existing institutional structures and existing social capital within a society impact upon each other. This interaction is a condition for all forms of democratic government, and even more in forms of governance where a society moves beyond the traditional mode of democratic rule. Furthermore, our assumption was that different forms of institutional structures lead to different levels of institutional capacities for sustainable development policy-making. In a societal setting where (local) government capacities are generally at a high level, we could also expect that this would be the case in the sustainable development sector. This approach builds upon the work of Jänicke and Weidner (1995). They list five factors that explain environmental policy success:

1. structures: political, economic and cultural framework conditions for policy action;
2. situations: specific situations steer the policy action;
3. actors: proponents and opponents of policy action;
4. strategies: capacities for planned and oriented policy action; and
5. time: important for investment and learning processes.

An assumption could also be made that a high level of social capital can be a basis for a high level of sustainable development capacity within civil society. Within civil society we can also find independent capacity-building measures, but we would expect this activity to be less important. However, joint capacity-building measures with (local) government may have a greater likelihood of leading to sustainable development policy success. The table below attempts to arrange these assumptions through setting out 4 different categories or ‘ideal types’ of governing arrangements for sustainability policy achievement. These categories provided the basis for our analysis of the findings in the 40 cases.
1. **Dynamic Governing** for sustainable development describes a situation where the higher the levels of both social and institutional capital, the greater the likelihood of sustainable development policy success.

2. In the second category of **Active Government**, it is assumed that better results can be achieved if the local government institutional structures have clearly included the goals of sustainability within their activities. This kind of *active government* can, from a theoretical point of view, be viewed as (eco-) efficient in that it is making clear attempts to implement some sustainable development policies – perhaps those that are less sensitive to the need for public participation.

3. The third case - **Passive Government** - would, in practice, mean policy failure for sustainable development policies at the local level. Even in this case local government would retain some routine tasks within the national setting; but local action would be restricted. This situation is likely to be stable as there seems to be low pressure from civil society for change as the social capacity for sustainable development is also very low.

4. Finally, a more problematic case to interpret and study is the situation where civil society is expected to act alone in order to reach sustainability. This situation would mean some form of **Voluntary Governing**. The functions of local government are only meant for routine tasks, although there could still be (fairly low) positive outcomes for sustainability. In addition, capacity building for sustainable development would, in practice, be somewhat limited and only distributed by and through civil society actors. To rely just on a high social capacity for sustainable development would present limited possibilities to secure policy achievement.

**Figure 2** The relationship between social and institutional capacity, capacity-building measures and sustainable development policy outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social capacity for sustainable development</th>
<th>Institutional capacity for sustainable development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Higher</strong></td>
<td><strong>Lower</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Dynamic governing</td>
<td>4 Voluntary governing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ Active sustainability capacity-building</td>
<td>→ Voluntary sustainable development capacity-building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ High possibility for sustainability policy achievement</td>
<td>→ Low possibility for sustainability policy outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Active government</td>
<td>3 Passive government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ Medium sustainable development capacity-building</td>
<td>→ Low/no sustainable development capacity-building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ Medium or fairly high possibility for sustainability policy outcomes</td>
<td>→ Sustainability policy failure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Using the four categories described above, we analysed both the individual city data, and aggregate data in order to examine the broad trends emerging in terms of local government capacity, capacity-building by local government, and policy achievement for sustainable development. As noted above, we were not attempting to make detailed comments on the nature and level of social capacity from our data, but were able to identify some factors of relevance in this area.

The four categories of governing are presented below in the DISCUS model (Figure 3). This figure illustrates how the various elements of governance and government interact to produce our four ‘ideal types’ of governing. We now focus on the components of the model – institutional capacity, social capacity, capacity building, and sustainable development achievements, as a vehicle to present the key findings from DISCUS.

**Institutional capacity for sustainable development**

We have used the term ‘institutional capacity’ to encapsulate the presence of those capacities or capabilities – human, organizational, learning, knowledge, leadership – that can enable and promote governmental action in the pursuit of sustainability. The research identified a clear association between the intensity and level of sustainable development achievement and high levels of institutional capacity. This capacity does not come about by accident. It is, in the main, generated as a consequence of conscious decisions taken by local governments who have been effective in supporting and maintaining new ways of working and innovative ways of thinking.

The findings have shown the importance of key individuals in driving a local sustainable development process forward. These individuals may be paid officials or politicians, and in the DISCUS cases it was executive mayors who were most often referred to as ‘entrepreneurial’ figures with the charisma and commitment to motivate others and to promote the sustainability agenda.

Successful local governments also have committed senior staff and politicians, who are prepared to prioritize long-term sustainable development goals and are linked to the political commitment and vision necessary to take often unpopular decisions. However, in relation to both officers and politicians, there is always the possibility that the impetus for sustainable development innovation will be lost, or at least slowed, when a key individual leaves the organization. The process of mainstreaming a sustainability ethos within institutional cultures is quite slow, usually extending far beyond a normal electoral term of office, although there are examples amongst the case studies where this appears to be happening.
Figure 3

DYNAMIC INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT POLICY ACHIEVEMENT

Categories of Governing
1. Dynamic Governing
2. Active Government
3. Passive Government
4. Voluntary Governing
Other examples of institutional capacity for sustainable development are investment in training for sustainability for both officers and politicians; the establishment of a ‘horizontal’ organizational structure that encourages cross-departmental working and a stable environment for sustainability policy-making; and the adoption of sustainable development principles for internal practices, such as eco-procurement.

Much of this process is about institutional learning, whereby organizations do not have to continually ‘reinvent the wheel’. This ensures that, as personnel change, knowledge remains locked within the structure and practices of the institution and can be built upon as circumstances change. Actions can be taken to support and nurture this process of learning, and the DISCUS research clearly shows that those authorities who have invested in this process are the ones who have achieved sustainable development achievement or ‘success’.

The process of institutional learning is not an easy one to summarize or to practice; but it is of crucial importance for sustainable development because of the innovation that is required to address the complex challenges faced. However, as Nilsson and Persson (2003) have pointed out, this process of institutional learning may be best understood as a ‘double-loop’ process. The first ‘loop’ involves learning within existing frameworks, whereas the second ‘loop’ of learning actually changes those frameworks.

Civil society capacity for sustainable development

In so far as the DISCUS research was able to draw conclusions about civil society or social capacity in the 40 cases, it appears that in those cases that exhibit sustainable development policy ‘success’, there are greater levels of civil society activity and knowledge regarding sustainability issues. The research did however focus more on stakeholder organizations representing key sectors of local society, based upon the premise that it is these organisations that constitute the ‘engaged actors’ in sustainable development policymaking, rather than individual citizens. Particular sectors that were found to be supportive of local authority sustainability initiatives (although clearly this support varies between each case, and to some extent between different countries) are the local media (mainly newspapers); universities and the education sector; business and industry; and, perhaps unsurprisingly, environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

In general, where the intensity of policy achievement is high, there appears to be a greater ‘buy-in’ to, and civic engagement with, local government policy-making and action. In these cases, it seems that local government recognizes the contribution that civil society groups can make to the process; in turn, those groups respond by recognizing that they can have some influence. While this is not strictly corporatism, it does exhibit some of its characteristics (Williamson, 1989). These findings reinforce the point made by Rydin and Holman (2004) about the ‘bracing’ social capital that exists between a limited group of actors – here, organisations with an interest in local sustainability issues, due to the goals of that organisation (e.g. environmental NGOs), or those with an interest in the economic development of a locality (e.g. business and industry). Thus, local social capacity is built through these organisations engaging in the process, but local authorities also recognize that they need to engage with these and enlist their support and knowledge. Where this activity exists, the local authority could be seen as falling into the category of ‘dynamic governing’.
A further finding is that where civil society has a tradition of being more active – for example, in terms of voluntary work, taking part in local decision-making and possibly voting – these cases are also the ones with the highest levels of sustainable development achievement.

We were unable to draw clear conclusions about the relationship between levels of ‘trust’ that exist between groups in civil society (as one element of social capacity), and sustainable development ‘success’. However, when considering the relationship between civil society organizations and local government, the indications are that where ‘trust’ in local government per se is stronger and more widespread, such local governments have a better chance of sustainable development success than where this trust is only related to a limited number of individuals in a local authority. This is discussed further below.

**Capacity-Building for sustainable development**

Sustainable development capacity-building efforts within the existing institutional structures, in our case local governments, can be defined as all measures that strengthen the governmental structures to meet the demands of sustainable development, as well as measures that create these capacities in cooperation with civil society. In the DISCUS research we expected to find a strong relationship between institutional capacity and social capacity, with local governments playing a key role in influencing the creation of both institutional and social capacity by affecting the mobilization of local-level agents within the sphere of sustainability policies. Thus, the institutional framework of sub-national (local or regional) government could be a crucial factor in determining the long-term prospects for civil society engagement in sustainability policy processes.

The research findings show that where there is evidence of strong governance processes for sustainability (including active engagement of civil society in local decision-making processes) and where there is also evidence of policy achievement in this field, those local governments also tend to have a high level of fiscal, legal and political autonomy. However, this is not simply a case of equating autonomy with achievement. What appears to be happening is that when local governments are granted higher levels of autonomy and independence, they respond to this by being more proactive and adventurous in their policymaking and implementation. Self-confidence, conviction and self-awareness seem to increase in line with levels of autonomy.

These findings concur with the point made in the first part of the paper that civic engagement matters equally on the demand side – civil society expecting better government – and on the supply side (the performance of representative government is facilitated by the social infrastructure of civic communities and of officials and citizens). In the case of sustainable development policymaking, the interrelationship between the ‘demand’ and ‘supply’ may be affected by the ways in which local governments support and encourage the development of social capacity.

The research has identified aspects of institutional design that Lowndes and Wilson have described within local governance (2001), and which shape the development and mobilization of social capacity. In the field of sustainable development, the DISCUS local
governments that are making progress with sustainable development do recognize the importance of working with stakeholder organizations, and are also making serious attempts to engage with civil society more broadly.

Committed politicians and officers are clearly important in terms of capacity-building for sustainable development, often acting as the key link between local governments and civil society organizations and bringing expertise and new ideas to the process. The issue here is that those local governments who show the widest range and greatest intensity of achievement are also those who have recognized their central role in taking action on, and promoting more widely sustainable development issues and policies. These local governments are setting the agenda and being proactive in establishing and maintaining partnerships and alliances both within the local authority itself and with external organizations. Thus the cases in the ‘dynamic governing’ category of local government could be described as ‘well-designed political institutions’ (cf Lowndes and Wilson, 2001), which are creating opportunities for citizen participation, but also are driven by the purpose of service improvement in terms of sustainable development achievements.

There is evidence from the 40 cases of what Stocker (2002) describes as ‘a greater willingness to cope with uncertainty and open-endedness on the part of policy-framers’ (p6). We found that confident local government was key to the development of institutional capacity and to institutional learning. One aspect of this is local authorities being equipped to address the longer-term issues and to have a strategic vision for a sustainable future. There were several examples where local authorities were taking a lead in the local community, and taking high profile policy decisions that may not be popular with citizens, but demonstrate the municipality’s commitment to sustainable development, and to taking action to achieve this. A number of these local authorities were also engaged in providing relevant and ‘user-friendly’ information to citizens on local sustainability issues and policies. Those cases showing clear evidence of sustainable development achievements are also those with capacity-building initiatives and approaches, and are making citizens aware of the progress and policies that are being implemented.

One particular case was clearly involved in capacity-building for sustainable development, both in terms of developing institutional capacity, engaging with key actors and organizations in moving forward with sustainability projects and programmes, and informing citizens about the process. Many incremental steps had been taken over a number of years, and had been generally accepted as beneficial. Yet a more ‘radical’ initiative (attempting to deal with the economic development aspect of sustainability) met with resistance by the local population and the political party in power was voted out of office. This seems to suggest that if local government has a ‘radical’ long term strategy for addressing sustainable development issues, capacity-building for this needs still to be achieved in an incremental way.

To some extent, local government may be able to achieve change on its own (our category of ‘active government’). However, those cases where there are high levels of achievement are also those where some level of social capacity and a relationship between local government and civil society organisations exist. Thus, in most cases sustainable development achievement requires local government to involve external organizations in partnerships, both formal and informal.
Governing for sustainable development

The research shows that dynamic governing patterns are most efficient in achieving positive policy achievements in an area where cooperation is essential. Results, but to a lower extent), can also be achieved if local government is active in terms of developing its own capacity for delivering sustainable development – but not taking civil society fully into account. Passive governments, only carrying out routine tasks, are clearly lagging behind in terms of policy outcomes. Active civil society can, to some extent, help this process; but progress is still marginal. In general, however, the civil society respondents appear more critical than local government with regard to the policy outcomes.

Effective, or dynamic governing for sustainability is most likely to occur when governments work closely with civil society agents in a process of governance, whether this is by stimulated by Local Agenda 21 or some other process. Moreover, ‘success’ or policy achievement is also directly related to the inventiveness, leadership, knowledge and skills of local government politicians and officials. High levels of institutional capacity or capital relate directly to sustainability policy ‘success’.

It is clear from this research that local government is the primary ‘mover’ for local level policies towards sustainable development. Our research has shown that in order to achieve policy outcomes we must always expect an active government. This active government can, in order to enhance possibilities for policy achievement, lead the way towards active cooperation with an active civil society – creating possibilities for civil society stakeholders to participate in the policy process. Active capacity building measures will, in addition, enhance their capability in participating in the policy-making process. This activity does not replace the normal representative democratic process; it seems instead to add an intensity dimension to the political representation.

Figure 5 below shows the ranking of the cases, according to their capacity and sustainable development achievements. The index used to identify these cases is created from the scorings allocated to each of the 40 cases, based on the qualitative material only (interviews and document analysis). All 40 cases were given a score for the capacity in local government; civil society capacity; capacity building; and policy outcomes (5 for very low, 7.5 for fairly low, 10 for medium, 12.5 for fairly high, and 15 for high).
Figure 4 Rankings from the qualitative material (Source: DISCUS database).

These cases were then located in one of the four categories of ‘governing’ described above. This provides the following division of cases between the four categories of ‘governing’:

- 10 cases (25 per cent) fall in the category of Dynamic Governing
- 19 cases (47.5 per cent) fall in the category of Passive Government
- Seven cases (17.5 per cent) fall in the category of Active Government
- Four cases (10 per cent) fall in the category of Voluntary Governing

The research found that to a large extent, the group of ‘reference’ case studies fell under the passive government category, while the majority of ‘good practice cases’ fell into the dynamic governing category. This suggests a clear association between sustainable development policy achievement at local level, and the development of capacity-building measures for sustainable development by local governments.

Conclusions

The current emphasis upon governance within the sustainable development discourse serves to conceal more than it reveals. The DISCUS research clearly demonstrates that governance and government are the two intertwined but distinct elements of the process of governing. ‘Governance’ alone cannot adequately convey the substance of the process of governing which, when it is effective, involves both the active involvement of local civil society and the leadership and commitment of local government. ‘Governance’ underplays the essential role that local governments have to play in innovating, supporting and nurturing sustainable development (and for that matter most local policies). In our terminology, ‘governance’ alone is unlikely (for it needs government to stimulate and support it), and ‘government’
without ‘governance’ cannot generate the local resources, support and energy needed to deliver outcomes in the complex policy environment of the early 21st century. As the DISCUS research has indicated, the two elements together can create a process of governing which can promote and sustain real policy progress.

The research also supports the proposition of Lowndes and Wilson (2001) and others, that governmental action, or the application of institutional capital, can support the creation of social capital. By the same token, it seems likely that the reverse is also true – that activity and action within civil society can support the building of institutional capacity. Thus, as with governance and government, institutional capital and social capital can exist in a symbiotic relationship, although, as has been seen above, this is not inevitably so. Nevertheless, in the case of sustainable development policy, the intensity of tangible policy achievement is almost always linked to a high level of dialogue between local government and civil society.

According to Agenda 21, local government is ‘the level of governance closest to the people’ and it is therefore best placed to pursue the sustainability goal of ‘thinking globally, acting locally’. To a large extent, the DISCUS research substantiates this position. Local governments in Europe have been remarkably proactive in their pursuit of sustainability – in many cases, in the face of national government apathy or even opposition. Certainly, on the basis of the 40 towns and cities studied, it is possible to conclude that local government has been the principle motor for change, mobilizing local agencies and resources to secure objectives. Although other local actors have also been active, little can be achieved unless local government is supportive, and in most cases, it is from here that the initiative has come.

The main point is that those local governments who show the widest range and greatest intensity of achievement are also those who have recognized their central role in promoting and taking action on sustainable development issues. These local governments are setting the agenda and acting proactively in establishing and maintaining partnerships and alliances both within the local authority itself and with external organizations. Local government may be able to achieve change on its own. However, those cases where there are high levels of achievement are also those where some level of social capacity and a relationship between local government and civil society organisations exists. Governance is certainly central to sustainability, but only as one part of a process of governing.

Note:

References


Goss S 2001 Making Local Governance Work (Basingstoke, Palgrave)


John P 2001 Local Governance in Europe (London, Sage)


