Consensus or Conflict?  
Experiences with Local Agenda 21 Forums


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Introduction

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

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

Perspectives on the forum-model

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

The discussion concerning local environmental questions can also be understood within the context of recent interest in new patterns of governance in western democracies, with the withdrawal of government from spheres of social life in which it had previously been active, and from the reform of administrative structures and practices to embody private-sector values (see for example Marin and Mayntz 1991). There may be a potential for a more successful management of sustainable development through interactive decision making. The approach involves drawing together partners from different sectors of the community, to collectively define and implement solutions to local challenges. The term “co-operative management
“environmental co-operate management regimes” (Lafferty and Meadowcroft 1996) has been used in connection with such negotiated environmental settlements, but their character might also be captured by phrases such as “collaborative co-management” or “environmental corporatism” (Meadowcroft 1998:21). These initiatives have been seen as a promising alternative to more “traditional” strategies. An “environmental co-operate management regime” differs from a “LA21 forum” with respect to at least one important element. The term “management” indicates that these mechanisms are practically oriented. These kind of co-operative regimes are focused on carrying out agreed solutions on a relatively clear defined problem in the environmental field. A LA21-forum -on the other hand- should have a much wider approach. The forum should focus on the local society as a whole and consider a much wider spectre of problems. Still there are many similarities between a co-operative management regime and a LA21-forum.

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

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

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

**Arguments for - and against – a forum-model**

As Meadowcroft (ibid.) points out, there are many potential advantages to different co-operative or collaborative forms of environmental management. One key element could be that they provide a structured framework for encouraging pluralist inputs to environmental policy-making. This is particularly important in a LA21-setting because of the complexity of the interests that may be affected by shifts in environmental conditions and management practices, and the difficulty in predicting medium term impacts both in the bio-physical and the politico-social realms.
An other possible advantage with a LA21 forum model is that it could provide a mechanism for building consensus and more especially for transforming interests. The concept of sustainable development may call into question deeply entrenched social practices, and an effective solution to a particular dilemma may only be possible through a gradual alteration of established patterns of activity. The LA21 forum model can be adapted to different circumstances and applied in different contexts. This can be appreciated in various ways. For instance, flexibility can exist in relation to the kind of groups involved, the forms of debate and decision procedure, the management time frame and the nature of the implementation stage. The forum model can also have the potential to generate more stable and legitimate policy outcomes. Precisely because many relevant groups are involved in concluding and enforcing an agreed solution set, policies may appear more authoritative in the eyes of the concerned publics – and there may be a greater confidence in policy continuity. This kind of organisation can also provide a context in which different groups can be introduced into the questions of sustainable development in a fruitful manner. The forum model can provide a framework which encourages learning as well. Collaborative structures can assure a context of interactive learning, as participant groups engage with each other within a structured framework in an iterative process of defining problems, identifying solutions and initiating practical reform (Glasbergen 1996).

There are in other worlds many potential advantages to the LA21 forum model. At the same time there are also some kinds of criticisms, which could be levelled at the these kind of approach. One type of critics argue that the power-element will create problems in such a consensus or co-operative oriented process (see for example Flyvberg 1996, Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger 1998). At the heart of this objection is the observation that real world politics is not about negotiation among equals, but power-centred interaction. Thus the mechanisms described in normative models of collaborative actions are in reality not “co-operative” at all: rather each party brings resources to the table, and the so called agreed solutions will ultimately reflect existing differentials of power. Furthermore, structural circumstances necessarily favour organisations of producers over consumers, business over labour etc. This type of objection can, as Meadowcroft also point out (ibid:33), be said to focuses on the “naive” or “idealistic” resonance of co-operative initiatives, and remains sceptical of the liberal pluralist assumptions behind the approach which do not appear to address seriously the structural inequalities and systematic imperatives which constrain reform.

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

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

**Table 1: Some possible advantages and disadvantages with the LA21 forum model**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide a structured framework for pluralist inputs to policy-making for a sustainable development</td>
<td>Consensus on important issues are impossible in a world of power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can provide a mechanism for consensus-building – and can encourages learning</td>
<td>“Anti-democratic”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>Inefficiency</td>
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**Some examples of experiences with LA21**

In Norway not many local communities –except from the two described later in this paper - have an experience with the forum model within the LA21 or the environmental field. Studies from other countries is therefore of particular interest. A short presentation of two such case-studies will be given here, one from the UK and one from Canada. Local authorities in the UK have come under pressure from central government both to adopt Local Agenda 21 and to advance participatory democracy. In 1996–97 the new unitary authority of Bath and North-East Somerset Council set up a LA21 Issue Commission to review its “sustainability” performance and policy development practice with the direct involvement of the community. Rowe’s (2000) study of the commissions work conclude that the way it was conceived and conducted resulted in difficulties in identifying and carrying out its task. Nonetheless, it kick-started significant steps towards LA21 within the council, and provided valuable insights into LA21 implementation, and the nature of meaningful consultation.
The commission steering group in Bath and North-East Somerset was formed in 1996. All in all the commission numbered 14 representatives. Due to lessons from other local authorities in the UK it was decided to involve a large number of elected members, "councillors", in the commission. Originally 12 councillors, but later nine when the considerable time pressures which would be involved became apparent, were selected by their political groups in proportion to the council’s political balance. In addition, four co-optees was included. These four had diverse backgrounds, but all were white, middle class professionals. A further co-optee, to represent rural interests, was sought from the National Farmers Union. Following Rowe (ibid:77) all the five co-optees had little direct experience of local government process.

Even though the commission was given an aim for their work, the purpose was much discussed; ten steering group meetings had taken place even before the inaugural meeting to try to resolve some main issues. The co-optees role in the commission was unclear. Issues of ownership and leadership arose from the outset between the various directorates engaged in the commission process. The commissions role in relationship to the council was also unclear. An information pack to inquirers was distributed by the council – rather than the commission – outlining the nature of Agenda 21 and the aims of the commission. Then physical arrangements were made by the steering group, which selected a range of times and “community” venues with a geographical spread. Time inputs by council officers, and costs to the council were much higher than had been anticipated by everyone involved in the commission process. The commission had difficulties in securing autonomy and independence in a process embedded in local council procedure. However, Rowe (ibid:87) also points out some notable achievements. The commission managed to over-ride most party-political considerations – and the co-optees with little experience of local government process, were able to act both as “outsiders” to the council and as neutral parties. In her concluding remarks Rowe (ibid. 89-90) points out that shared ownership, is essential if cross-sectoral consultation is to be achieved, adequate time-scales are required, issues of leadership need to be resolved and that limitations which will be imposed by resource availability should be made explicit to all actors, if further disillusionment with local government undertaking is to be avoided.

In an article about Agenda 21 and the role of the local government, J. Brugman (2000) has some reflections over the implementation of LA21 at the local and regional level in Canada. In the regional municipality of Hamilton-Wentworth a unified regional “Vision 2020” action plan was prepared through a relatively broad co-operative participation process. In the planning-process key municipal departments joined forces with main, local social and environmental stakeholders – as well as with those willing business representatives - to prepare a sustainable development strategy (ibid:43). Council authority over this process was granted to the councils planning and economic issues as well as political support. However, during the initial years of consultation and assessment, the community’s major business organisations pursued a separate strategic planning process for economic development and rejected the notion of sustainability as a foundation principle for
this strategy. In due time, this gap was bridged, and a unified, regional “Vision 2020” action plan was prepared. The regional municipality proceeded to integrate the Vision mandates with its policies and operations. For example, a working group of high-level professionals was established to review all departmental decision-making procedures, budgets and policies relative to Vision 2020. However, during the same period, the regional council approved the construction of a major roadway through an important, environmental sensitive area, in spite of vocal and organised public opposition. The project was a blatant contradiction of Vision 2020 objectives. Shortly thereafter, the council eliminated new bicycle lanes in response to complaints from private motorists. These actions were condemned by local organisations as demonstrations of the region’s lack of commitment to Vision 2020.

The cases of Bath and North-East Somerset in the UK and Hamilton-Wentworth in Canada, are no doubt quite different. Still they both illustrate the difficulties that municipalities and their stakeholders face in fully integrating sustainability criteria within their development and investment decisions. The two cases also indicate that LA-processes can be rather time consuming. The creation of new mechanism for policymaking, can also create uncertainties of the new organisations role in relationship to “old” established democratic elected councils in the communities.

**Local Agenda 21 in Norway**

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

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

The Norwegian experiences so far indicate that we have to separate between the ambitions of the municipalities and what they really do. For instance, few
municipalities have stared consultation or partnership-processes in connection with LA21-processes. Experiences from the LA21 activities so far, illustrate how municipalities have been pretty much left to themselves to sort out difficulties and problems of sustainable development within the framework of LA21 processes. As pointed out by many (see for example Lindseth 2001:8), there is a lack of policy co-ordination at the national level, and this lack of co-ordination is being transferred downwards by prescribing stronger co-ordination at the lower level.

**The experience from the two Norwegian cities; Bergen and Fredrikstad**

The experience with LA21 in Norwegian municipalities is relatively limited. Still, there have been some “front-runners” among the municipalities. Some of these local authorities started processes related to sustainable development issues in the early 1990s, and both Bergen and Fredrikstad can in many respects be characterised in as “front-runners” in environmental issues. Bergen was the host-city for a large international environmental conference in 1990 (“Bergenskonferansen”) as part of the UN-process leading up to the Rio-meeting in 1992. In connection with the 1990-meeting, Bergen presented itself as a “environmental” municipality, and already in 1991 an environmental plan for the city was put forward. Later in the 1990s the city has formed a climate action plan and a new environmental plan. Both Bergen and Fredrikstad - along with three other municipalities - have participated in a special designed environmental program (“Miljøbyprogrammet”) for some of the largest Norwegian cities, initiated by the Ministry of Environment.

As already mentioned, an important milestone in the introduction of LA21 into municipal environmental policy in Norway, was the nation-wide conference held in February 1998, where participants from 150 municipalities took part. The conference took place in Fredrikstad, and during the conference the “Fredrikstad Declaration” was adopted. The Declaration states a moral obligation to support the goal of sustainable development, and as the host city, Fredrikstad as a special obligation to support the ideas formed at the conference. In many ways both Bergen and Fredrikstad can be said to be “best-case” municipalities as far as environmental issues are concerned. As large cities (at least in the Norwegian context), they can not be characterised “typical” Norwegian municipalities. Bergen is the second largest city (ca 230.000 inhabitants) and Fredrikstad the seventh largest municipality (ca 67,000 inhabitants) in the country. The two cities choose to establish their own consensus-oriented co-operative organisations - or forums. I 1997 the Bergen Forum 21 (BF21) came in to action, after several years of preparation. The BF21 board had 10 members, and included representatives from different kinds of NGOs, business interests and the public sector. The leader of the board was elected in an annual meeting where representatives from all groups participated. In addition, a special hired co-ordinator acted as secretary for the board. BF21 was in principle separated from the formal municipality organisation, but the municipality was the only significant financial contributor (the co-ordinator got his salary from the municipality’s contribution). The Fredrikstad Forum (FEF) was established as early
as in 1992. The FEF board had seven members, and like in Bergen the representatives came from NGOs, business interests and the public sector. The board in Fredrikstad also (like in Bergen) had a special hired secretary.

Like table 2 (below) indicates, there are many similarities between the Forum-model in Bergen and Fredrikstad. The board in Bergen (10) was a little larger than in Fredrikstad (7), but the principle of representation was the same, with members from business interests, the public sector and the NGOs. In Fredrikstad the co-operation between the municipality and the forum was organised different than in Bergen. A political representative from the municipality-council, the vice-mayor, was included as a member of the Forum in Fredrikstad. In Bergen, on the other hand, there were little or no contact between political representatives from the Bergen municipality-council and the Bergen Forum 21. Both boards had a special hired secretary, and in both cities the forum was established with the municipality acting as an active partner. In both cities the guidelines and the goals for the forum were unclear.

Table 2: Environmental Forum in Bergen and Fredrikstad

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The cities total population</th>
<th>Participation and formal starting point of the forum</th>
<th>Organisation of the Forum/ goals</th>
<th>Relationship to the formal municipality organisation</th>
<th>Situation today (2002)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
The Forum-models in Fredrikstad and Bergen clearly have some of the “co-operative” elements that was presented earlier in the paper (following Laffery and Meadowcroft ibid.). As mentioned, one central feature of such mechanisms are that they involve participants from more than one sector of social life. This is indeed the case in two forum-models: They both include representatives from business interests, pro-environmental groups (NGOs), and the public sphere (the municipality). Another central element in these kind of models, are that they rest upon the representation of organised interest rather than on individual citizen participation. This is also the case in both the cities. The members of the boards in Fredrikstad and Bergen are representatives from organised group, and no members are included as “individual citizens”. Last but not least, the model depend upon processes of discursive consensus formation. It is through a shared experience of attempting to come to terms with complex issue and through exchange as well as interaction among participants from different backgrounds, that the groups may construct a common understanding of the problems to be addressed, and of the nature of potential solutions. In both the cities there were a clear understanding among the participants that the decisions should be formed through such a consensus oriented model. In the following, we will present the experience from Bergen and Fredrikstad in a little more detail.

From the starting point in 1992, the Fredrikstad Environmental Forum (“Fredrikstad MiljøForum”) (FEF) gave priority to information activities and to specific environmental questions, especial waste management and recycling. A lot of information-brochures were made, and distributed to the public. FEFs as an initiator to broad participation processes to ensure a sustainable development in the society was not given priority neither of the forum itself, nor by the local authorities. However, in the mid 1990s the forum was invited (by the municipality) to initiate a Local Agenda 21 –process, and a new forum was formally established in 1996. How the forum should manage its new and much wider tasks, was discussed at many board meetings in the forum – and the starting point of the LA21 process itself, was delayed several times. I 1997 the board leader resigned because of disagreement among the members of the board. At this phase the forum also used much time discussing economic and administrative questions. Because of these discussions, the real local Agenda 21-process in Fredrikstad didn’t start until 1999. At this point the FEF decided that the municipality should have the responsibility for making a proposal for how the process should be organised. The municipality did indeed make such a plan for the further process. Thereafter the FEF-board discussed - and agreed - on the municipality proposal. A key element in the process after 1999, has been to form a vision for a sustainable development for the Fredrikstad society. In this process the major groups (NGOs, private enterprises etc) have participated. Still the municipality, and especially the administration, has been an important “facilitator”. The forum have – to some extent – also been included in the municipality’s formal planning processes. An example of such participation by the forum, is the process of physical municipality planning for four different areas of the city (Lindseth 2000:86).
The FEF was involved in this process and had a special responsibility on informing the inhabitants about LA21 at an early phase.

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

The Bergen Forum 21 (BF21) formally started its activity in 1997, after more than a year of discussions and preparation. In spite of these preparations, several BF21-meetings were used to time-consuming debates concerning the forums mandate and its priorities. The BF21 also used much time discussing economic and administrative questions. The forums first special hired co-ordinator (who also acted as secretary for the board) resigned, due to disagreements within the forum. The board had 10 members, but at the board meetings all 10 seldom was present. The members had great difficulties in building a consensus on important environmental issues. Especially the NGO (from environmental organisations) representatives and the representative from the private sector had difficulties to come to terms. In addition, the representative from the municipality who had a seat in the board, seemed to give the BF21-work low priority, and in general the municipalities environmental work was separated from the BF21-agenda.

Like in Fredrikstad, the municipality of Bergen didn’t consult the BF21 in questions concerning economical planning. In contrast to Fredrikstad however, the BF21 was also excluded from all other kinds of municipality planning. Even when environmental planning was put on the political agenda within the city-council, there were no consultation between the municipality and the forum. During the fall of 1999 the municipality presented two important plans, a climate plan and a new environmental plan (both plans had very few references to the LA21-concept). The forum was not at all drawn into this planning processes. At this time there were a considerable degree of discontent within the BF21-board, not only because the lack of co-operation between the forum and the municipality. There were also conflicts between the different groups represented in the forum; some felt that there were little progress in the work, and there where also complains about the way the work was organised and led (PriceWaterhouseCoopers 2000).
At the annual meeting for the BF21, in March 2000, the conflict between different fractions of the forum reached a climax. During this meeting the representatives from the two environmental organisations (“Natur og Ungdom” and “Naturvernforbundet”) decided to leave the forum in protest. At a press release the following day the two NGO-organisations stated that the forum didn’t at all function as intended. Among the problems the NGOs listed in their press release, were too many representatives in the forum, in addition the NGOs felt that the representatives from the municipality gave too little priority to the BF21-work. In reality, the forum did not function after the annual meeting, and May 2000 represent the formal end for the BF21. At this point the Bergen municipality-council decided to end its involvement in the forum and at the same time the municipality withdrew all its financial support to BF21.

Both in Bergen and Fredrikstad, the forum was given a relatively vague mandate, and in both cities this lead to a difficult starting period. Discussions over the mandate and the priorities led in both cases to the resignation of important representatives to the forums. In both cities it took a long time from the establishment of a forum, to the actual start of a LA21-process. In Fredrikstad the forum was established as early as in 1992. Here priorities were given to information activities during the first years, and the forum didn’t receive any starting signal for a broad LA21-processes until the mid 1990’s, still the process didn’t start until 1999. In Bergen the forum was formed in 1997, and here no broad mobilisation-processes started up at all, in the three–year period that the forum existed.

BF21 board was somewhat larger (10 representatives) than FEF board (seven representatives). It is of course possible that the size itself led to larger co-ordination problems in Bergen than in Fredrikstad. However - a difference that probably was more significant - was the municipalities involvement in the to cities. In Bergen the municipality didn’t seem to give priority to the BF21. The municipality was in reality only represented at forums meetings at a low administrative level. In addition, the municipality made few (if any) attempts to co-ordinate its environmental work with the forums activity. In Fredrikstad, on the other hand, the municipality was represented at a high political level inside the forum (the vice-mayor). There was also – at least to some degree – co-ordination between the municipality planning activities and the work in FEF – even though the FEF –as the Bergen forum - was excluded from taking part in the economical planning.

Local Agenda 21 forum; success or failure?
The history of environmental forums in the two Norwegian municipalities have some similarities and some differences. The model for representation had similarities in the two forum-models, but the Fredrikstad Environmental Forum is still existing after nearly ten years in operation. The Bergen Forum 21, on the other hand, only functioned for a relatively short period. Both forums had their problems in defining mandate and priorities, but at least in Fredrikstad-case, there are some “success”-
stories to be told. It is more difficult to point out positive sides with the Bergen-case. Some may even argue that the Bergen Forum 21 generated more problems than it solved. Anyway, what can be learn from the two cases; is it reason to recommend the co-operative management model in the environmental field – or should this approach be labelled as a failure?

As indicated earlier, this question probably can’t be answered by focusing one element alone. There can be pointed out several potential advantages and disadvantages to the forum model. It may provide a structured framework for encouraging pluralist inputs to environmental policy-making, and because of the complexity of the sustainability development questions it’s in Meadowcroft’s (ibid.) opinion particularly important to employ collaborative models in this field. A co-operative system could also provide a mechanism for building consensus and more especially for transforming interests. The Fredrikstad-case illustrate that it indeed is possible to form a Forum that can exist for a considerable time. On the other hand, the Bergen-case clearly illustrate the problems that can arise within such a consensus-oriented model. Critics of this kind of collaborative processes will probably argue that the power-element is one important reason for the problems that occurred in Bergen. At the heart of this objection is the observation that real world politics is not about negotiation among equals, but power-centred interaction. Thus the mechanisms described in normative models of collaborative actions are in reality not “collaborative” or "co-operative" at all: rather each party brings resources to the table, and the so called agreed solutions will ultimately reflect existing differentials of power. Furthermore, structural circumstances necessarily favour organisations of producers over consumers, business over labour etc. This type of objection can, as Meadowcroft also have point out, be said to focuses on the “naive” or “idealistic” resonance of co-operative initiatives, and remains sceptical of the liberal pluralist assumptions behind the approach which do not appear to address seriously the structural inequalities and systematic imperatives which constrain reform.

The Bergen experience illustrates that such consensus-building indeed can be very difficult. Here the forum became clearly separated from the political decision-making that took place in the municipality’s council. As pointed out, there were little co-operation between the forum and both the political and administrative part of the municipality. In addition the municipality council made several important environmental decisions without consulting the forum. There were also considerable disagreement inside the forum itself, particular between representatives from the NGOs and the private enterprises. In the Bergen-case it seemed difficult to create a co-operative atmosphere at all. The discussions seemed to reflect already existing differentials, and this ultimately led to the break-up of the forum in 2000.

Even in Fredrikstad, where the forum still exist, there has been considerable problems. These problems included defining the forums mandate and, not least, its role towards the municipality. In reference to the economical planing process in Fredrikstad, sceptics could ague that the municipality in this case excluded the forum
from taking part in an essential question (the economical plan for the period 2001-2004). In other worlds; when a political important and controversial issue was raised, the decisions didn’t follow a collaborative consensus-oriented processes, but were moved over to a political arena. And politics is not about negotiation among equals, but power-centred interaction. In the Fredrikstad case the economical plan was decided in a “traditional” political way, by a majority vote in the municipality council.

Still the Fredrikstad-case tells a some what more positive story than the Bergen-case, but even the Fredrikstad example illustrates that there probably are limitations to the range of questions that can be solved within the co-operative management model. As earlier mentioned, environmental problems may call into question deeply entrenched social practices, and an effective solution to a particular dilemma may only be possible through a gradual alteration of established patterns of activity. The two case-studies seems to indicates that much time is needed before a consensus – oriented model can operate effectively. To establish the forum-model, turned out to be a “time-consuming” business in both Bergen and Fredrikstad. Considerable time was used to discuss mandates and priorities. In Bergen the representatives, after three years, never rely managed to form a consensus around the essential issues concerning the forums work. In Fredrikstad, as well, there was a deadlock-situation for a quite some time. When the forum finally could move on with its work, it was much thanks to the active role played by actors from the municipality. The two cases indicate that the working processes in LA21 forum indeed may be time-consuming, and that one should not expect to much progress from such an consensus oriented organisation at the first phase of its life.

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

Participating in sustainability – a difficult task?
The emergence of the environment as a substantive local and national issue has raised difficulties incorporating representative public views into decision-making
processes. As Selman and Parker points out (1997:177), this partly reflects the general limitations associated with contemporary “democratic deficit”, and partly the problems of incorporating environmental choice into party political systems. Representative democracy relies for its operation on political parties and regular elections. However, the choices associated with alternative environmental policy options seldom coincide conveniently with the cleavages which traditionally exist between political parties. Consequently, the public voice on sustainability matters is often being heard through protest and confrontation.

The forum-model, along with other co-operative and collaborative approaches represent and alternative to both the “traditional” representative democracy and protest and confrontation line. As mentioned earlier in the paper, the forum-model has been put forward as an especial fruitful way to implement Local Agenda 21 (LA21). The two Norwegian case-studies however, illustrates some of the problems with such consensus building models. The Bergen experience illustrates that consensus-building can be very difficult. There were considerable disagreement inside the forum itself, particular between representatives from the NGOs and the private enterprises. In this case it seemed difficult to create a co-operative or consensus oriented atmosphere at all - and the disagreement in Bergen ultimately led to the break-up of the forum in 2000. Even in Fredrikstad the forum-approach have had its problems, and in both cities the forum model appeared to be time-consuming. The creations of new mechanism for LA21 in the two cities also created uncertainties of the new organisations role in relationship to the “old” established democratic elected councils in the municipalities.

Many of these experiences seems to be common, not only for the two Norwegian cases presented here, but also for the cases discussed by Rowe (ibid.) and Brugman (ibid.). These cases illustrated the difficulties that municipalities and their stakeholders face, in fully integrating sustainability criteria within their development and investment decisions. In implementing LA21 a common experience seems to be – as Gram-Hanssen (2000:235) puts it – that there is a considerable gap between the dream that lay behind the activities and the actual outcome. This gap between intentions and results must probably be reduced, if LA21 shall survive in the long run.
References:


