
SPECIAL FEATURE

The Making of Local Agenda 21: An interview with Jeb Brugmann

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Jeb Brugmann

Before 1992, local authorities had little input into the international environmental policy process. As a matter of course, national governments would regularly meet, negotiate, make agreements and commit their countries to international policies without involvement by local authorities. Things have changed since then.

Today, local authorities play a significant and meaningful role in the international environmental movement. Why? Because global policies have a direct impact on communities and local authorities are in the best position to effectively apply these policies. For these reasons, local authorities now have an acknowledged seat at the global environmental table. The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the

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Earth Summit, changed the way nations looked at local authorities and the way local authorities looked at themselves. With the resulting references to Local Authorities in Chapter 28 of Agenda 21, local authorities were given a legitimate voice at the international environmental level.

This new status, which is the result of the efforts of many, can be traced to the initiative of Jeb Brugmann, the founder of the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) and the man who conceived the idea and the term Local Agenda 21. Brugmann was one of the central figures in bringing local government concerns to the attention of the United Nations (UN). He also was one of the architects of Chapter 28. ICLEI's mission is to transfer the experiences of successful urban city programmes within countries and across borders to shape a new understanding of communities, the relationship between cities and global environmental issues, economic production, and society itself.

Brugmann, now **Principal of City-States**, an urban strategies consulting practice, spoke with Leslie Hom about the role of Local Authorities during the 1992 Earth Summit process.

LH: How were local authorities involved with the preparatory process to the Earth Summit in 1992?

JB: To my knowledge, this was the first time that **local government engaged with the United Nations** and actively represented itself in a summit process. This was the first time local government even *aspired* to represent itself. The UN had to figure out what we, as local governments, do. Fortunately, **Maurice Strong**, the UNCED Secretary General, had a deep commitment and extensive background in bringing major elements of civil society into United Nations discussions. Without this vision and leadership of Mr Strong, I think local government would have remained on the sidelines, regardless of its efforts.

The legacy of Earth Summit is that it institutionalised the idea that **'Major Groups' of civil society**, including other spheres of government such as local government, have a legitimate claim to participate in UN policy forums. The sanction for Major Group participation has held to this day. A real and vital debate continues within the UN about the appropriate degree and mechanisms for civil society participation in different kinds of forums. **On the one hand, the United Nations has recognised that its success in forging and implementing new international policy, particularly in highly contested areas, depends upon the prior development of consensus positions and partnerships between conflicting elements of civil society.** So the UN must embrace civil society or it will increasingly fail. The recent experience at the racism summit in Durban is a case in point. However, on the other hand, the United Nations is a body of nation states, and to preserve its integrity and legitimacy it must retain the distinctive authority of nation state members.

As with the other Major Groups in the UNCED preparations of 1990–91, local government had to demonstrate its indispensability in any efforts towards sustainable development. At the time, this was a very foreign idea to most national government representatives in that process. There was considerable defensiveness. But eventually, the UNCED recognised the dependency of both

nation states and the international community upon action at the local level. Chapter 28 was 'chapter one' in this process of recognition.

LH: What was the process leading to the UNCED?

JB: Within the UN, the process was the standard one: a series of preparatory committee meetings to develop text for conventions, UN strategy, the summit declaration. But Maurice Strong was very experienced with these things, so he launched an intensive process of research and NGO participation to strengthen the governmental activities. To support this, he had a very large secretariat of experts and experienced people from different countries.

At that stage, those of us in local government were not very familiar with these processes. At the time, the UN still only recognised central governments. The UN recognised 'NGOs' but had no precedent of recognising other spheres of government. Government, in the UN's framework, was central government. End of discussion. Mayors and municipalities had never been seriously considered. The attitude towards both cities and local government was generally very negative. Cities were viewed largely as environmental problems. The focus of debate was on how to stop the growth of cities. All the development experts had spent most of their careers on rural development. Local government was seen as parochial, if not corrupt.

Maurice Strong and his senior people—in particular Nitin Desai¹ and Joe Wheeler—were in this way visionary in responding positively to my proposals, in November 1990, to create a parallel Local Agenda 21 process. Another very helpful person in the UNCED secretariat was Yolanda Kakabadse, the co-ordinator of NGO involvement. She was a supportive coach and door opener ... and later became the Environment Minister of Ecuador. She is now the President of the World Conservation Union.

Maurice Strong agreed to my November 1990 request for a meeting, and we scheduled a date in January 1991 in Geneva. ICLEI had only been established a few months earlier, in September 1990. It was at ICLEI's founding congress in September that I first floated the idea of Local Agenda 21 to the local government community. I remember calling ICLEI's first Chairman, Sir John Chatfield, in late 1990 to secure his support for a meeting with Mr Strong. When I explained my intentions regarding the Local Agenda 21 proposal he said, "Yes, but Jeb, just what is this Local Agenda 21?" I think that he, like many, had doubts about the name and its implications.

In the meeting, Strong gave the 'green light' to develop the Local Agenda 21 (LA21) idea and to work with his team to find a way to integrate it into the UNCED and the draft Agenda 21. Some of the people who were in that meeting are still very much involved today, like Yolanda Kakabadse or Pietro Garau of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS). The LA21 idea would not have gone very far; however, had Strong and his team not been working on a whole section of Agenda 21 dedicated to the roles of different 'Major Groups'. During the meeting, we started the process of convincing him to include local government as a Major Group. This meeting was followed by meetings with the head of International Union of Local Authorities (IULA) and the Mayor of Montreal (representing some other local government organisa-

tions). I think after these meetings Strong directed his team to figure out how to add local government into the agenda. By the time Strong participated in the IULA World Congress in June 1991, he was fully promoting the important role of local government. My point here is that if the UNCED had not been headed by a person so dedicated to civil society involvement in the UN, I don't think we would have made progress.

LH: This highlights the role of individuals, but how did other municipal associations respond?

JB: Following this, the different local government associations tried to work together, but in reality they spent most of their time in positioning and competing. The intensity of their distraction with issues of status like 'who truly represents local government' left ICLEI to handle the substantive inputs into the UNCED process. In this regard, the more established local government associations were alternately threatened by and disinterested in the Local Agenda 21 idea and did nothing to support it—and some tried to obstruct it.

Just before the UN Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) meeting in August 1991, the Quaker UN Office in New York office invited me to participate in a pre-PrepCom briefing with heads of key government delegations that they had organised at a retreat in the mountains outside of Geneva. I made a presentation on the role of local government and the LA21 idea, and this was positively received. As a result, the idea of a Chapter 28 was generally endorsed at that PrepCom.

Following this meeting, I worked with Joe Wheeler at the UN Secretariat to develop a mandate for LA21 that could be incorporated into Agenda 21 as Chapter 28 text. He and I sent drafts of the key paragraphs for Chapter 28 back and forth to each other by fax, so that the next preparatory committee would consider the text. The text as it reads today was endorsed at the last PrepCom meeting. The only major change was that the other local government associations had ICLEI's name removed from the list of organisations to follow-up and added their own names. Suddenly everyone wanted to have a 'piece of the action'.

I saw this as a positive development. At a meeting of all the associations I stressed the importance of Local Agenda 21 being a 'public domain' concept. This approach has been fundamental to its success. Most important has been the ownership and leadership of national associations of local government. There was been a shift in attention to urban issues and local initiatives and LA21 provided a ready vehicle for new programme support.

While all this was taking place, Strong arranged for ICLEI to be contracted to organise a Local Government Honours Programme—a sort of UNCED 'best practices' programme. So ICLEI managed this part of the local government involvement as well. So, you can see that Chapter 28 emerged without much difficulty. Strong already had the idea of 'Major Group' chapters. ICLEI provided a practical, concise, adaptable concept of what local governments could do—LA21. We worked with each other behind the scenes and convinced key delegation leaders. And this was adopted without controversy.

At the last two PrepComs, I began introducing proposals, via selected friendly national delegations, to include references to the role of local government in the chapters on waste, water, and sustainable human settlements management. But we were not experienced enough or prepared enough to make major strides here. So much basic work had to be done just to get delegations to take local government and urban issues seriously. By the time that the UNCED was over, a group of actors, including the Urban Development Division of the World Bank (Michael Cohen, Carl Bartone), Mayor Jaime Lerner and his World Urban Forum in Curitiba, ICLEI and the UK Local Government International Bureau, among others, succeeded in placing urban sustainable development high on the international agenda. In a matter of years, particularly as national governments retreated from commitments made in Rio, supporting 'local initiatives' became everyone's business.

LH: Can you describe the representation of local authorities in environmental discussions at the international level?

JB: Before ICLEI, local governments were largely represented by two umbrella organisations: the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA) and the United Towns Organisation (UTO). But neither of these organisations had a very prominent environmental focus, which is why ICLEI's founders thought the ICLEI idea made so much sense. Now IULA and UTO are merging, and ICLEI is proposing to serve as their policy and programme branch on sustainable development. So unity comes at last. In this way, local government should be able to present a much stronger voice in Johannesburg 2002.

LH: What are your thoughts about the upcoming 2002 World Summit in Johannesburg?

JB: There is a pressure on ICLEI to come up with new initiatives with the same kind of potential as Local Agenda 21. If governments are not ready to commit to substantial new investments and policies, then the Summit's success will depend upon commitments by 'Major Groups'. Already there are indications that the Summit organisers are pressing for this. But this again raises the question of the status and degree of participation of the Major Groups at the WSSD. How can local government, for instance, be brought in as a truly 'Major' party to the discussion—and not just as part of a 'dialogue' side show—and do so without threatening the negotiating protocols of an inter-(nation) state process?

I think the whole Rio process will unwind—and the Johannesburg Summit will fail—unless central governments, with Major Groups, begin to seriously address the need for much closer coordination and partnership between the spheres of government; that is, between national, sub-national and local governments. In other words, a real 'summit' of governments is required. As a start, therefore, the sub-national governments need to be brought into the discussion.

Let's face it: local strategies for sustainable development are not viable without a supportive policy and fiscal framework at the sub-national and national levels. Likewise, the 'higher' levels are both unwilling and incapable of implementing Agenda 21 without intensive engagement at the local level. The UN has to take a substantial leap beyond its old 'Government' and 'Non-Governmental Organisations' paradigm in Johannesburg.

Whether the UN wants it or not, Johannesburg is a discussion about government. And I mean about *government*, not this mushy thing called ‘governance’. Sustainable development requires the rebuilding and strengthening of government institutions and inter-governmental partnerships, at all levels, to provide and protect public goods and to address market externalities. Government needs to rediscover itself and its purpose in Johannesburg, and stop letting itself be overshadowed by this 1990s demi-god: the market. Johannesburg is about basic human purpose and development, not about money or growth or ‘efficiency’. Government has to make the market work for these basic human purposes. Poverty eradication. Sustainability. Equity. Government, in the form of the United Nations, needs to show some courage and mettle. Otherwise, sooner or later, people will—and should be—taking to the streets.

Note

- [1] Nitin Desai is the United Nations Secretary-General of the Johannesburg Summit 2002 and Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs.

