

# Sustainability Watch



## Agenda 21

2009

### Foundational Strategy Charts Course for Sustainable Future

#### Watch List

- National, regional and local governments will continue to pursue the sustainability vision outlined in Agenda 21 with varying degrees of commitment and success.
- The United Nations General Assembly is considering a proposal to convene another major worldwide sustainability summit in 2012 to assess the effectiveness of Agenda 21 implementation.
- The document outlines hundreds of specific actions to be taken in order to support sustainable development on a global basis. Many issues covered in Agenda 21 affect the business community.
- Implementation of Agenda 21 takes place primarily at the local level, often through organizations participating in the Local Agenda 21 or Local Action 21 campaign.

#### Key Takeaways

- Agenda 21 is a comprehensive sustainable development plan, specifying actions to be taken by local, regional and national governments, working in partnership with the business community, non governmental organizations (NGOs) and other stakeholders.
- The United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) is responsible for reviewing progress made on the implementation of Agenda 21. The CSD includes 53 elected members and meets annually.
- Agenda 21 was adopted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (also known as the Earth Summit or the Rio Summit) on June 14, 1992. The "21" in the title refers to the 21st century.
- Agenda 21 is being implemented at a slow and uneven rate around the world, yet the document remains a cornerstone of the sustainable development movement. Since its approval in 1992, other major sustainability initiatives including the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation and the UN Millennium Development Goals have been established. All seek the same end—a sustainable future for humanity, characterized by economic prosperity, social justice and environmental responsibility.

#### Related Sustainability Watch Reports

- International Environmental Regulatory Changes
- Global Reporting Initiative
- Non-Governmental Organizations



### Executive Summary

Agenda 21 is a roadmap for the global sustainable development movement. Conceived as a strategy for the 21st century, the document was written by representatives from United Nations member states over a four-year period (1989-1992). It was endorsed by the UN General Assembly at the Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992. Despite its age, the document is considered a viable strategy for building sustainable societies.

Agenda 21 is comprehensive and detailed. At 300-plus pages, it includes four major sections and 40 chapters, each devoted to a specific aspect of sustainability. The overriding theme is that sustainable development is the most effective way to prevent poverty, end environmental destruction and secure a safe and prosperous future for humanity.

Agenda 21 was designed to be implemented at the local level, led by local governments. Thousands of governmental bodies worldwide are putting the plan into action through organizations called Local Agenda 21 or Local Action 21 groups. National governments are also involved in implementation, often through National Councils on Sustainable Development.

The business community is viewed as an essential partner in the achievement of Agenda 21. Companies are encouraged to work with others in their communities to support development projects that generate economic returns, enhance social equity and prevent or reverse environmental degradation. They are also challenged to improve sustainability in their own operations by doing

things like designing environmentally-friendly products, modifying production processes to reduce environmental impact, developing social and environmental codes of conduct, setting sustainability objectives, measuring performance and reporting outcomes.

Responsibility for measuring progress made on Agenda 21 rests with the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development. The commission meets annually. They acknowledge that implementation has been slow and uneven since 1992, but believe that some progress is being made, particularly in reducing the number of people in developing countries outside of Africa living in extreme poverty. The global recession of 2008-2009 has had a negative effect on Agenda 21 implementation.



Smog Over Los Angeles Getty 1999



### Background

Agenda 21 is a broad-based action plan for achieving sustainable development on a global basis. (The UN defines sustainable development as development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”) The document was written between 1989 and 1992 by representatives from United Nations member states. It was approved in 1992 at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Proponents of Agenda 21 view it as a visionary, yet action-oriented document that charts a course toward a sustainable future. Critics reject it as an attempt to establish a centrally managed global society.

### Agenda 21 Overview

Agenda 21 is a 300-plus page document that covers virtually all aspects of sustainable development. The content is divided into four sections and includes 40 chapters, each focused on a specific topic.

**Section I**, titled “Social and Economic Dimensions,” describes the negative consequences of unsustainable development and resource use as “worsening poverty, hunger, ill health, illiteracy, and the continuing deterioration of ecosystems.” It calls for international cooperation to accelerate sustainable development and advocates the formation of strategies that eliminate poverty, abolish wasteful consumption and production patterns, and stabilize worldwide population. Other priorities identified in Section I include protecting and promoting human health; improving quality of life in both urban and rural environments; and encouraging governments to use decision-making processes that integrate economic, social and environmental factors.

**Section II**, “Conservation and Management of Resources for Development,” devotes 14 chapters to the specific natural resources that must be managed

more effectively to ensure sustainable societies. Topics range from climate change and air quality to land use, forestry, desertification and mountain ecosystems. Sustainable agriculture, biological diversity and biotechnology are also covered in detail, along with ocean protection and freshwater management. The challenges and risks associated with toxic chemicals and hazardous, solid and radioactive wastes are also discussed.

**Section III** is called “Strengthening the Role of Major Groups.” It identifies all the key stakeholders that should be engaged in sustainability initiatives. Separate chapters delineate roles and responsibilities for women, children and youth, indigenous people, and NGOs, as well as local governments, trade unions, businesses, scientists, technologists and farmers.

**Section IV** focuses on “Means of Implementation.” It outlines funding challenges and defines the conditions under which environmentally sound technology transfers should occur between countries. The need for additional scientific research is also discussed, along with the importance of educating children, youth and citizens about sustainability. Related topics include capacity building, institutional arrangements that support sustainable development and international legal issues. The section concludes with a discussion of information technology, emphasizing the need to improve the way sustainability information is collected and disseminated.

### Major Themes

While each chapter of Agenda 21 has a unique message, several themes run through the entire document.

- **Population growth and excessive consumption are the leading contributors to environmental degradation.** Each country



should know its population “carrying capacity” (the ability of the resource base to meet human needs without becoming depleted), and set population goals based on this knowledge. At the same time, wasteful and inefficient consumption and production patterns must be reduced and eventually eliminated.

- **Development is not harmful in and of itself; it is *unsustainable* development that threatens our future.** Sustainable development is actually the most effective way to prevent poverty and environmental destruction.
- **The way we measure the success of development projects (based on economic results achieved) should be modified.** The full costs and benefits of development—including the economic, environmental and social impacts—should be assessed and reported.
- **Industrialized countries have a larger role to play than poorer nations in the drive to implement sustainable development.** Developed countries generate more wealth, use more resources and produce more pollution, and are therefore responsible for helping other nations develop in a sustainable manner.
- **Helping developing countries build the expertise or capacity to make sustainable development decisions is also the responsibility of industrialized nations.** Raising capacity requires engagement of the local community, respect for traditional knowledge and practices, education, skill development and technology transfer.
- **Governments are accountable for creating sustainable development strategies and leading their citizens toward more sustainable societies.** Implementation efforts should be led by local, regional and national governments, with the involvement of many stakeholders including the business community,

academia, scientists and technologists, NGOs and citizens’ groups.

- **Global partnerships are essential to achieve worldwide sustainability objectives.** International cooperation is necessary in order to secure a safer and more prosperous future for all nations.

### Implications for Business

Agenda 21 calls on business leaders to be key players in advancing sustainable development. Members of the business community are encouraged to work with local, regional and national governments, as well as other stakeholders, to support development that generates economic returns, enhances social equity and conserves natural resources. While the entire document has implications for business, some issues covered in Agenda 21 are especially relevant.

- **Free, fair trade.** The document urges national governments to halt and reverse protectionism, reduce subsidies that threaten competition, eradicate corruption and foster the development of private businesses.
- **Local employment.** Businesses of all sizes are viewed as essential partners in stimulating employment and ending poverty.
- **Sustainable production processes.** Manufacturers are challenged to develop new production processes that conserve resources, reduce energy usage, eliminate waste, and improve employee and environmental health and safety.
- **Responsible resource use and environmental protection.** Conserving and protecting air, water, land, forests, oil and other natural resources is considered a critical priority for business owners and leaders in every industry.
- **Product labeling and information exchange.** Businesses are encouraged to keep employees, customers and citizens well informed about the environmental impact of their products, services, production processes and facilities.



- **Integrated decision making.** Businesses, like governments, are asked to make decisions based on the “triple bottom line,” balancing environmental, social and economic returns.
- **Research and development.** Agenda 21 invites the business sector to join with scientists and technologists to advance research that improves public health, ends poverty, reverses environmental degradation, generates renewable energy sources and helps achieve other sustainability objectives.
- **Technology transfer.** Research institutions and businesses are encouraged to share newly developed technologies with poorer nations, while finding ways to capitalize on effective indigenous technologies.
- **Pollution penalties.** Agenda 21 proposes that polluters pay for the environmental destruction they cause. It also recommends rewarding excellent environmental performance.
- **Hazardous waste management.** The document advocates setting high standards for hazardous waste disposal in every nation, developing new industrial processes that minimize the creation of hazardous waste, and holding producers responsible for hazardous waste disposal and cleanup.
- **Solid waste management.** Businesses are asked to design products and processes that generate less solid waste and adopt aggressive reuse and recycling policies.
- **Design for the environment.** Engineers are expected to develop products that use less material, require less packaging, contain fewer toxins, can be manufactured with less energy and environmental impact, last a long time, and can be reused or recycled.
- **Employee engagement.** Agenda 21 urges companies to create work environments in

which employees are inspired to contribute their talent and expertise to solve sustainability challenges.

- **Environmental auditing and reporting.** Businesses should evaluate environmental and social performance in the same rigorous way they assess economic performance: Setting objectives, measuring progress and reporting results.
- **Global consistency.** Businesses are expected to set and pursue the same high standards for economic, social and environmental responsibility, regardless of where they operate.

### Implementing Agenda 21

Agenda 21 was designed to be implemented by governments with participation from business leaders, academics, technologists, NGOs and other citizens. Those who created the document envisioned a “bottom-up” implementation process with local governments assuming primary responsibility for change.

To lead that change, Local Agenda 21 (LA21) groups were formed in more than 6,400 communities worldwide following the Rio Summit. Each group made a formal commitment to engage a full complement of stakeholders in a comprehensive planning process aimed at achieving sustainable development at the community level. These teams were renamed Local Action 21 groups in 2002, signifying their desire to accelerate implementation. LA21 groups are part of a larger global organization called ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability. (ICLEI once stood for International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives, but now serves as a non acronymous name for the organization).

While most Agenda 21 work takes place at the local level, governing bodies at the national level also oversee implementation efforts. These groups have many different names, but are referred to generically



as National Councils for Sustainable Development (NCSDs). Their roles and functions vary, with some serving as decision-making bodies and others providing advice or creating opportunities for idea exchange.

At the global level, the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) is accountable for overseeing implementation of Agenda 21. Fifty-three member states are represented on the CSD; one-third of them are elected annually. The group meets yearly to review progress made on Agenda 21 and other sustainability initiatives launched since 1992, including the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation and the UN Millennium Development Goals.

### Measuring Progress

Although progress on Agenda 21 is tracked annually, the CSD has completed several in-depth reviews since it was introduced.

- **1997.** At a special review session held five years after the unveiling of Agenda 21, the CSD determined that progress was “uneven”; the global environment was continuing to deteriorate and additional action was needed.
- **2002.** Ten years after the Rio Summit, at the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg, South Africa, Agenda 21 was called “a good plan with weak implementation” in a report issued by the Secretary-General. Results were “far from satisfactory,” but the document remained a “powerful long-term vision.”
- **2008.** The most recent major assessment of Agenda 21 was completed just prior to the worldwide economic downturn. Successes include:
  - 40% reduction in the number of people from developing countries (excluding African nations) living in extreme poverty (1990-2004);
  - Substantial increase in the use of renewable energy resources in all regions of the world;

- Growth in developing countries’ share of world industrial production (20% to 26% from 1995 to 2006);
- Rapid growth in rates of recycling for household and industrial materials, plus significant increase in international trade of recycled materials;
- Increase in tourism in developing countries (share of total tourist arrivals increased from 25% to 35% between 1990 and 2006);
- Increase in developing countries’ share of global trade (29% to 37% between 1996 and 2006).

On the negative side:

- The number of undernourished people worldwide remains essentially unchanged;
- Higher energy prices and climate change represent growing threats to sustainability;
- Malaria and AIDS continue to inflict a heavy toll on public health;
- More than 25% of the world’s school-age children do not attend school regularly;
- Consumption and production patterns remain at unsustainable levels;
- Biodiversity and habitat loss, particularly through forest degradation, continue to occur at a high rate;
- Energy usage is increasing;
- Municipal waste generation is growing steadily.

Since the global recession began in 2008, it has become even more challenging to make progress on Agenda 21. At the 63rd General Assembly of the United Nations, held in 2009, a proposal was made to host another global sustainability summit similar to the Rio de Janeiro and Johannesburg gatherings. If the proposal is accepted, world leaders will convene in 2012 with a goal of reinvigorating Agenda 21 and accelerating implementation on a global basis.



## Regulatory Environment

Agenda 21 is not a legally binding document so no regulatory body monitors or controls its implementation.

## Acronyms

CSD: Commission on Sustainable Development

ICLEI: Former acronym for International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives, now the standard name for the organization

LA21: Local Agenda 21 or Local Action 21

NCSD: National Council for Sustainable Development

NGO: Non Governmental Organization

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