

Local Agenda 21 and protected areas: the case of the Biosphere Reserve of Urdaibai in the Basque Country

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Abstract

Within the framework of sustainable development, Local Agenda 21 is arising as a very useful tool for the introduction into the local action of the principles concerning this concept. This acquires a higher relevance when it is related to special protected areas where unlimited human action can threaten the ecological equilibrium of the zone and seriously harm the biological and cultural richness that usually these kinds of spaces own. In order to analyse this possible good influence that LA21 can cause in Biosphere Reserves, we are going to focus our paper on a real study case: The Biosphere Reserve of Urdaibai. The hypothesis we want to prove is the utility that LA21 can have for the fulfilment of three basic objectives: firstly, for the coordination of all plans and programs developed in the region; secondly, for the enrichment of the cooperation among all the administrative levels that work in the area; and thirdly, as a tool of communication and citizen awareness.

Keywords: sustainable development, Local Agenda 21, Biosphere Reserve, UNESCO MaB program.

1 Introduction

Local Agenda 21 represents a significant tool for the promotion of sustainable development at local level. In the Basque Country, in the north of Spain, these ideas are arisen among both the administration and citizenship. An example of this is the bet made by the Basque Government for the accomplishment of sustainability through Local Agenda 21 and local partnership. This bet is consolidated through an innovative instrument: the creation of *Udaltaldes*



(groups of municipalities working together for the development of their respective Local Agendas 21 under the direction of a supra-local coordinator).

These sustainability is even more compulsory in zones of special environmental care such as Biosphere Reserve, that are protected zones, recognized internationally as such by the UNESCO inside the program “Man and Biosphere”, that include terrestrial and coastal milieu with natural and human values. They are integrated in a world network of conservation and management of ecosystems created in 1974 and are constituted principally with educational aim, for researching and as demonstration of good practices. Thus, they group examples of natural or scantily modified ecosystems together with other areas of diverse degree of conservation (UNESCO [13]).

Nowadays, more than 300 areas in 75 countries of four continents are recognized like such. We have to remind that it is the own local administration who have to request the denomination of Biosphere Reserve for the area and who have the full sovereignty for making the own regulation. In this direction, the main functions of these areas are the following ones: 1) Function of conservation since they must preserve the natural ecosystems, the biological and genetic biodiversity and the landscapes of the zone; 2) Function of development due to the pretension of promoting an economic, cultural, social and ecologically sustainable development making a rational use of the local resources and 3) Logistic function that guarantee a scientific research and an environmental education to widen knowledge about the ecosystems and to be able to preserve them in a correct way not only from local level but from a regional and international level.

In consequence, in this paper we study the application of Local Agenda 21 in the Biosphere Reserve of Urdaibai located in the Basque Autonomous Community, showing special interest to the recently constituted Udaltalde in the Area. We try to prove how this way of working can help to the introduction of Local Agenda 21 in a more significative way for the local population. For this, we will revise the diverse policies implemented in the area for the promotion of sustainable development for concluding which are the strength and weak points of the political performances.

2 Study area

In the Province of Biscay, is located the Biosphere Reserve of Urdaibai, the unique of this kind in the Basque Autonomous Community. This zone presents a very particular idiosyncrasy due to the fact that it has a high density of population but despite of this, the interrelationship between man and environment is not a problematic question. The Biosphere Reserve of Urdaibai is integrated by multiple valleys overturned to the sea across an estuary. It gives a complete representation of the typical environments of the Cantabrian coast. From the cliffs and beaches of the coast to the forests and rivers of the interior, passing through the marshes and fluvial fertile plains, we can meet the major landscape and ecological diversity of the Basque Autonomous Community. The RBU has 220 km² of extension, which supposes 10% of Biscay and comprises 22



municipalities of which 12 belong entirely to Urdaibai: Mundaka, Sukarrieta, Busturia, Murueta, Forua, Gernika-Lumo, Ajangiz, Arratzu, Kortezubi, Gautegiz de Arteaga and Elantxobe. The rest of municipalities (Muxika, Ibarangelua, Bermeo, Nabarniz, Ereño, Arrieta, Errigoiti, Morga, Amorebieta-Etxano and Munitibar), only are partially included within the Reserve. In terms of population, it has 45000 inhabitants, although only two municipalities (Bermeo and Gernika-Lumo) put together 80% of them (Federación Vizcaína de Montaña [6]).

During long time, as consequence of the fast industrialization since the decade of fifties, the region had been submitted to strong pressures that put in danger the ecosystema threatenning seriously the coastal wetlands. But despite of this, the major part of the zone has been able to conserve the rural character and to safeguard the culture of tradicional basque farms (caserío). In particular, in 1968, the Delegation of Biscay elaborated an expensive and enormous project of desiccation and urbanization of the valley and estuary of the river Oka, from Gernika up to Mundaka. The project that gathered different ideas of previous projects, tried to transform the estuary into a leisure zone, building several sporting harbour, artificial beaches, etc. not taking account the ecological richness of the milieu. This plan, which was never carried out, stimulated the construction of residential housings and diverse industries in areas not conditioned for such uses. At the same time, worried about the pernicious impacts of this projects, new ecologist groups arisen in the region in opposition to the project and in the decade of 70s they exerted an active roll denouncing the degradation that was suffering the region.

In the decade of 80s, a scientific team elaborated an integral study of Urdaibai's ecological wealth, by charge of the Basque Government. This report published in 1984 detailed all the variables and scientific and technical aspects concerning the region and served as basis for the request to the UNESCO of the inclusion of Urdaibai in its "Man and Biosphere" Program by part of the Basque Government. This application was accepted by the UNESCO on December of the same year, pushing the Basque Government to the redaction of a specific legislation for the area. Finally, in 1989 the Basque Government approved Protection and Arragement Law for the Biosphere Reserve of Urdaibai (*Ley de Protección y Ordenación de la Reserva de la Biosfera de Urdaibai*). We must remark that this law, more than searching a preservation of the natural resources, persecutes the attainment of a sustainable development and for this a serie of tools have been launched. We could say that Urdaibai is one of the zones that have better introduced to its legislation the principles presented in the Action Plan of the Biosphere Reserves.

Among the protected areas included in the Network of Biosphere Reserves in the Spanish territory, Urdaibai assembles some peculiarities that distinguish it from the rest (Serra del Pino [12]). Neither it is an isolated territory from human areas nor an area conserved virgin or in which is possible to eliminate industrial activities. Of all the Biosphere Reserves of Spain, Urdaibai is the space in which the presence of the human beings is more predominant. For that reason, one of the most important point that have to accomplish this Program was how to



protect the area having in account that approximately the 90% of the land was of private property. For this reason, the protection has constituted a hard task of negotiation among administrations and private sector (Murua et al [11]; Martínez Huerta [10]).

3 Local Agenda 21 through Udaltaldes

The Basque Government has instituted an innovative way for the promotion of LA21 between basque municipalities. Named as Udaltalde 21 projects (translated as Group of municipalities), this performances undertaken in partnership with IHOBE (Public Society of Environment Management) and EUDEL (Association of Basque Municipalities), consists on the implementation of LA21 by group with a common methodology and a continuous interchange of information among municipalities that integrate the same working group by mean of periodic meetings. Each group will be coordinated by a supramunicipal entity that frequently is a Mancomunidad or a Development Agency. Habitually, this entity employs external advisory of consultancies experts on LA21 (INGURUMENA [9]).

Udaltalde was planned in two phases: firstly, a pilot project was launched, in which IHOBE worked with nine Town Councils from the three provinces. Later, in 2002, new Commitments were signed with other groups of Town Councils, but here the groups of municipalities are grouped by communities, on the understanding that proximity helps create more benefits since there is a greater similarity between the municipalities involved. Nowadays, twelve are the new Udaltaldes and some of the Town Councils that participated on the first pilot project have been integrated to these new Udaltaldes. The pilot project, initiated in 2000, was formed by the municipalities of Laudio and Amurrio in Álava, Santurtzi, Erandio and Basauri in Biscay and Zarautz, Legazpi, Azkoitia and Azpetia in Guipúzcoa. For this, a Temporal Union of Enterprises was contracted formed by the Consultancies of Minuartia, Sayma and Ingurune. A Training Course was realised at the beginning of the Project, and later, other specific advisory courses in each municipality. Furthermore, periodical meetings were hold during all process. Forum of Citizen Participation was constituted and Internal Committee. An environmental diagnosis was elaborated for each municipality and based on the outlines of this diagnosis, targets and objectives were set up. After a hierarchization of these objectives, a list of performances was gathered in the Action Plan document. For measuring the progress achieved twenty common indicators were proposed with the aim of allow comparisons among municipalities and also from five to ten individual indicators were established by municipalities' own.

At the origin of the project, the goal persecuted was that by 2001, all these municipalities have finished the implementation of LA21, including the take off of the Action Plan. Later, they noticed that this goal was impossible, and for this reason, most of municipalities have been joined to the new Udaltaldes. In the new Udaltaldes, a coordinator body exists, that often is the Mancomunidad (an entity in charge of the supply of some public services for a group of



municipalities) or a Development Agency from the zone. The Land Planning and Environment Department of Basque Government, through its Public Society IHOBE, and the County Council of Guipúzcoa, assume functions of Technical Assistance. By their own, Town Councils are committed to acquire a Politician Compromise and to designate a Technician responsible of the process. Coordinator Body must supervise financial funds and divulgate their performances through a web page.

On November of 2003, it was resolved the constitution of the Udaltalde 21 Urdaibai Busturialdea. This Udaltalde is composed by 20 municipalities of which 19 belong to the Biosphere Reserve of Urdaibai. Besides, there are three municipalities (Arrieta, Amorebieta-Etxano and Munitibar) that belonging to the Reserve have been excluded from the group, though another municipality, Ea, which do not belong to the Reserve has summed up to this initiative. This project is also supported by the Urdaibai's Biosphere Board, the Department of Land Planning and Environment of the Basque Government by means of the Public Society IHOBE, the Delegation of Biscay and Behargintza (an Association for the Laboral Promotion of Gernika-Lumo). After the signature of the Agreement, the parts are committed to the collaboration for the implementation of the Local Agenda 21. Thanks to this, a great number of achievements are getting in the last years as Joseba Irazabal, coordinator of Udaltalde 21 Urdaibai-Busturialdea, suggests in a personnal interview that we hold with him last year.

In relation with the community involvement in the attainment of the aims set up by the AL21, at the beginning of this year it was presented the Scholar Agenda of the region. Along the present scholar year four primary schools have started to develop their own Scholar Agenda 21, especially focussing on the biodiversity. For the promotion of the citizen participation, an awareness campaign was carried out at the end of 2004 and a divulgative leaflet was mailed to all the inhabitants of the region. Nonetheless, according to a survey realized by the persons in charge of the Udaltalde 21, only 10.4% of the population knows about the Local Agenda 21 related actions that are carrying out in their municipalities. Also, recently a Conference titled "Experiences on sustainable production and consumption" have been organised where numerous experts suggests new ideas about the way in which the production and the private consumption can help to the conservation of the local milieu. Moreover, it is very outstanding the initiatives taken out by the EVE (Basque Entity of Energy) for the promotion of the saving of energy and stimulating the renewable sources of energy in the region.

In the economic arena, a Plan for the tourist promotion was launched in 2004 that had been assessed as a very positive instrument by Urremendi, an association dedicated to the rural development of the region. According to this association, the main target has been to improve the actual tourist resources and to create new ones for the activation of the regional economy. Among other actions, signals indicating 36 tourist attractions have been set up and they have installed a serious of cameras in some municipalities for the broadcasting of images through Internet. Also, in the village of Bermeo, the construction of a sporting harbour has been started enlarging the old fishing harbour and



rehabilitating its entrance, allowing the construction of commercial places and 450 parkings and establishing a health resort.

4 Performances in the Reserve

The Protection and Arrangement Law for the Biosphere Reserve of Urdaibai (Basque Government [1]) entrusts the Executive to institute a Governing Plan of Use and Management (PRUG) in order to protect the integrity and to promote the recovery of the ecosystems. Also, this special juridical regime must be developing through a Plan of Harmonization and Development of Socioeconomic Activities (PADAS) and sectorial plans. The PRUG was finally approved in 1993 with the principal objective of looking after the Reserve's ecosystem and paying special attention to superficial and underground waters, the autochthonous vegetation and the traditional uses of the soil. This preservation function must be compatible with the rural sustainable development and for this reason the PRUG (Basque Government [2]) is over the rest of municipal land planning instruments.

In this sense, the PRUG (Basque Government [2]) catalogues the soil in two different classes: rustic soil and soil to be arranged by the land planning legislation. The first one is considered as non-urbanizable soil and will be destined to protect natural resources and to community equipments of social and public interest. To this kind of soil, the PRUG re-classifies it under diverse areas, according to its nature, delimiting the different zones and fixing a regime of uses for the utilization of the soil and the location of activities in it. The restrictions fixed for every zone have a direct relation with the protection level of these. In general, the cattle and agrarian activities previously realized in the region do not be affected by the PRUG, whereas the forest activities suffer a major degree of restrictions.

In 1998, the PADAS (Basque Government [8]) was approved arising mainly as a tool for the economic activity. In practice, it can be considered as a sustainability model that constitutes the Regional Agenda 21 due to the fact that it assembles socioeconomic and environmental aspects. The objectives persecutes by this Program are the following ones:

- To develop a competitive industrial sector but respectful with the environment
- To develop the tourist sector for the attraction of visitors who assimilate Urdaibai's values and that this tourist activity can be materialized in economic and labour benefits for the population of the Reserve
- To achieve a territory with good infrastructures of communication for the promotion of activities compatible with the model of development chosen
- To achieve the extraction of the major productivity possible from their own resources within the framework established and with the maximum degree of cooperation among the different public administrations and private agents

Respect to the PADAS, Udaltalde 21 Urdaibai Busturialdea considers that it sets up the legal basis for putting into practice the concept and the contents of the Sustainable Development. That is to say, the model of working through a



collaborative way and the creation of partnership offer a set of suitable instruments of coordination among all the Plans and Programs developed in the region. This is especially promoted by the following entities:

- Patronage of the Biosphere Reserve of Urdaibai that assures the fulfillment of the Protection and Arrangement Law and the development of the managing plans recognized in the PRUG
- Council for Cooperation of the Biosphere Reserve of Urdaibai, that is formed by representative entities of social sectors that have showed interest in taking part in the development of the activities of the Reserve
- Commission for the evaluation of the PADAS that consists on an inter-institutional working-group whose principal function is to guard over the development and the coordination of the PADAS

5 Conclusions

The Biosphere Reserve of Urdaibai comprises two substantial qualities that convert it into a singular case. On one hand, we find a very specific ecosystem that shelter interesting species of plants and animals. On the other hand, unlike other Reserves, it is a zone in which the human presence is very relevant. Hereby, the area where is trying to put into action the Local Agenda 21 is an area marked by a clear duality. In this sense, we can emphasize the conservation of the ecosystems in compatibility with a socioeconomic sustainable development as main target of the LA21. If we consider at the same time the nature of Urdaibai and the methodology of the LA21, we can notice about the difficulties of reaching a balance between both of them, since we have to make compatible the requirements of the environment with the requests of the society.

Within this paper, we have analysed different actions carried out in the region, such as the impulse to the renewable energies, the development of legislation applicable to non-urbanizable land and the measures taken to preserve the dunes. These actions demonstrate that we are in the correct way to introduction of the Local Agenda 21 in the region. Nevertheless, citizenship and diverse social groups are worried about the excessive construction of new housings and the lost of agrarian and industrial activity. Once again, we find a manifest difficulty of compensating the first objective (the conservation of the ecosystems) with the second one (a socioeconomic sustainable development).

The rural milieu is probably the more relegated area in relation with the financial support by part of the Institutions for the development of LA21. In this sense, there exist a clear lack of coordination in all policies and plans articulated in rural areas among the administrations in charged of these powers. But, this kind of municipalities count with a higher degree of social cohesion and the high rate of informal relationship among the neighbourhood with respect to other bigger municipalities and all this benefits a more participative governance and a sharing co-responsibility and, at the same time, a sense of ownership of the performances that can derived from the Action Plan of the Local Agenda 21. The question is if LA21 can deal with the problems that arise in this kind of municipalities that frequently will be linked to their relation with the urban areas,



the continuous lost of population and the need of protect its self-reliance and multi-functionality. In the concrete case of Urdaibai, despite the complexity of interrelationships and interests that take part in the planning process, this discoordination is being alleviating thanks to the roll executes not only by the Patronage of the Reserve but also by the Commission for the evaluation of the PADAS and the Council for Cooperation of the Biosphere Reserve of Urdaibai.

Another remarkable aspect is the role that sustainable tourism can exercise as the motor of a more environmentally development. The tourist activity can generate wealth that repercutes directly in the zone and creates an atmosphere of self-consciousness among local citizenship about the necessary protection of local natural resources as the basic element for the attraction of tourism. This can be a way for the revitalization and diversify of the local economy due to the fact that in the latest year the region is suffering a continuous process of dis-industrialization that hauls a loss of employ in the zone.

In conclusion, we are able to evaluate in a positive way the Local Agenda 21 in Urdaibai if we consider it from a chronological long perspective. That is to say, we can not forget which the situation here was at the end of the 60s, when the enormous project of desiccation and urbanization of the zone was elaborated and which would be the actual scene we were now if this project had been carried out. In addition, though the results obtained for the present time have not been completely ideal, everybody hope that they goes on improving since established objectives are only attainable at half or long term. In this way, the citizenship and the social agents can guarantee with their impulse the correction of the deviations of the plan.

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