

# Agenda 21 FAQs

*What Might it Mean for Your Community?*



## WHAT IS AGENDA 21?

Agenda 21 is a voluntary and nonbinding program that was introduced at the 1992 United Nations' Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. It was developed to address an inventory of sustainability challenges and opportunities facing UN member countries heading into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. President George H.W. Bush, along with representatives from 177 other nations, attended the gathering and signed the document. Agenda 21 was developed to serve as a guide to the alleviation of poverty, hunger, sickness, and illiteracy worldwide while encouraging sustainable development and halting the deterioration of the global ecosystems that sustain life.

The full Agenda 21 text is available here:

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/Agenda21.pdf>.

### *Read More*

The document's 40 chapters are organized in four sections including Social and Economic Dimensions; Conservation and Management of Resources for Development; Strengthening the Role of Major Groups; and, Means of Implementation. Chapters, for example, "22. Safe and environmentally sound management of radioactive wastes" are generally organized by:

- Basis for Action – Why should people and countries be concerned?
- Objective – What should be the goal?
- Activities – What sort of actions are needed to achieve the objectives?
- Means of Implementation – What financial, scientific, and capacity building resources are needed to complete recommended actions?

While the document sets up imperatives for action it is entirely voluntary. The only apparent mandate is in Chapter 38 which instructs UN staff to assist signatories in actions related to their voluntary Agenda 21 activities.

Even that direction is within the context of voluntary action as indicated by numerous recurrent statements including:

"International cooperation in this area should be designed to complement and support - not to diminish or subsume - sound domestic economic policies, in both developed and developing countries, if global progress towards sustainable development is to be achieved."

## WHEN MIGHT AGENDA 21 COME UP IN MY COMMUNITY? WHO SHOULD I BRIEF ABOUT IT?

It is most likely to arise with planning agencies and boards, especially regarding comprehensive plans, sustainability plans or code revisions. Capital planning and operational practices also can generate the attention of some activists.

All decision-making officials should be briefed on Agenda 21. The American Planning Association <https://www.planning.org/> is a good resource for further reading. Planning Boards and Commissions should be sure that consultants (including the municipal attorney) are familiar with Agenda 21 as well.

### **Example**

Capital planning and operational practices also can generate the attention of activists. There has been anti-Agenda 21 opposition to smart meters in Naperville, IL; energy efficiency investments in Texas; and facility decisions such as siting of energy generation over 25 MW

## **WHAT CAN I DO TO EDUCATE MYSELF ABOUT AGENDA 21?**

- Review full document online.
- Review opposition web sites to become fully informed of their concerns.
- Require planning consultants to demonstrate an awareness of Agenda 21 and their capabilities in assisting if it arises.
- Elected officials should be briefed to ensure they are aware of potential discussion points and issues.
- Consider scheduling a community discussion of sustainability separate from any specific plan or petition with sufficient notice to all interested parties. That may encourage a more balanced, calm and thorough review of the topic separate from any specific planning decision.

### **Read More**

- In addition to reviewing anti-Agenda 21 sites, do a web search of current groups and issues to see if there are local activists or hot button topics that may be characterized as an Agenda 21 initiative. Groups as diverse as the American Planning Association and the Southern Poverty Law Center published concerns about the opposition and their potentially disruptive effect on sound policy practice as well as intimidation of responsible policy makers.
  - American Planning Association, The Commissioner, <https://www.planning.org/thecommissioner/pdf/13sum.pdf>
  - Southern Poverty Law Center, <http://www.splcenter.org/>

## **HOW CAN I HELP A CONCERNED MEMBER OF MY BOARD OR COUNCIL?**

The key is to be open to dialogue and focus on factual information. The first question you might ask is: Have you read Agenda 21? If the answer is no, suggest that they review a copy (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/Agenda21.pdf>).

Emphasize that Agenda 21 has no mandates (as best evidenced by the lack of change since its adoption). Most of Agenda 21's guidance is consistent with good management and planning practices. Agenda 21 emphasizes open public processes. That may be a good place to seek common ground.

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It may be best to have a private conversation with concerned individuals before adding the stress of a public meeting debate where there is a greater potential for misunderstanding. This may help identify the focus of concerns and lead to a more civil and constructive dialogue

## **WHAT IS AND HOW DOES AGENDA 21 RELATE TO THE DURBAN ADAPTATION CHARTER?**

The [Durban Adaptation Charter](#) is another voluntary initiative whereby participating local governments commit to actions in their jurisdiction to respond to climate change. Goals are to reduce vulnerability to sea level rise, extreme weather, and related issues.

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By signing the Durban Adaptation Charter local governments commit to, among other things: Sharing information of all local government development planning;

1. Ensuring that adaptation strategies are aligned with strategies to lessen risks;
2. Promoting the use of adaptation that recognizes the needs of vulnerable communities and ensuring sustainable local economic development;
3. Prioritizing the role of functioning ecosystems as core municipal green infrastructure; and
4. Seeking innovative funding mechanisms.

This is another local authority initiative that is consistent with Agenda 21, but may be more relevant to the [UN Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) and the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Reports](#), which both offer predictions on anticipated impacts of climate change under different scenarios.

## **WHY IS AGENDA 21 SEEMINGLY CONTROVERSIAL?**

While some see Agenda 21 as a vague guide to sustainable development, others are concerned that it could threaten property rights.

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Statewide Legislation

Anti Agenda 21 legislation has been introduced in several states: Kansas, New Hampshire and Tennessee all passed resolutions condemning Agenda 21. Activists have worked to elect opponents of pro-sustainability elected officials and funding for groups supportive of sustainability.

## WHAT IMPACT HAS AGENDA 21 HAD?

Most members of ICMA's Sustainable Communities Advisory Committee had never heard of Agenda 21 until 2015. A 2012 poll by the American Planning Association found, among 1,308 U.S. residents aged 18 years or older, 6% opposed Agenda 21; 9% were in favor of it and 85% did not know enough about it to form an opinion (*source: [Planning in America: Perceptions and Priorities](#)*).

The Agenda 21 action has contributed to a broad global dialogue on sustainability issues. 130 countries (out of 178 original signers) have reported on actions taken to address issues raised by Agenda 21.

A number of organizations have embraced a dialogue on sustainability in support of Agenda 21 (e.g. ICLEI) or entirely independent of Agenda 21 (e.g. ICMA). A 2012 report by the UN, "Rio+20" concluded, "progress has been patchy, and despite some elements of good practice most Agenda 21 outcomes have still not been realized."

### *Read More*

A 2012 report by the UN, "Rio+20"

(<http://www.uncsd2012.org/content/documents/814UNCSD%20REPORT%20final%20revs.pdf>) on 39 Agenda 21 chapters and 27 Rio principles. Regarding Agenda 21 it concluded:

"Twenty years after the Earth Summit, Agenda 21 retains strong relevance, and remains the most comprehensive undertaking by the UN system to promote sustainable development. While there are some gaps in coverage, the issues that humanity is struggling with now are more or less similar those covered by the chapters of Agenda 21. However, while Agenda 21 has acquired considerable coverage amongst nation states, its implementation remains far from universal or effective. Progress has been patchy, and despite some elements of good practice most Agenda 21 outcomes have still not been realized."

#### ***The report's score card reported "Excellent Progress" on only:***

- o 28. Major Groups - Local Authorities - with many localities adopting sustainability policies and the growth of local government sustainability organizations, and
- o 38. International institutional arrangements – with the actions contemplated essentially complete but "... the arrangements are not ideal since they include overlapping mandates resulting from a process of negotiation and compromise. Experience shows that the institutional support structure is not coherent enough for effective and efficient implementation."

#### ***"Good Progress" has been made on:***

- o 19. Environmentally sound management of toxic chemicals,
- o 23. Major Groups – evidence of improved governance and public participation

- 27. Major Groups – NGOs - The status and importance of NGOs has increased tremendously over the last few decades. NGOs play roles as moral stakeholders, watchdogs, mediators, implementers, lobbyists, and experts.
- 31. Major Groups - Science & Technology - The process of sound scientific knowledge production has improved as science has become more interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary.
- 35. Science for sustainable development - Since 1992, virtually (all) countries have strengthened the scientific basis for sustainable management, often through the creation of specific science development institutions.
- 39. International legal instruments and mechanisms - Agenda 21 has been a significant catalyst for the generation and application of legally binding agreements in the environment and development domains. Multilateral environmental agreements have reporting requirements.

***“No Progress” or “Worsening Conditions” were identified in:***

- 4. Changing Consumption Patterns.
- 7. Promoting sustainable human settlement development.

***The rest of the chapters saw slight progress that was far from targets.***

## **WHERE DO I GET HELP?**

ICMA’s Sustainable Communities Advisory Committee can direct you to resources and members who have case study experience with the issue. Contact ICMA at [sustainability@icma.org](mailto:sustainability@icma.org)