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## Local Agenda 21: Traditional *Gemeinschaft* or Late-Modern Subpolitics?

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**ABSTRACT** Local Agenda 21 (LA21) is on the agenda. The question is how to view the grounds and results of this work? This paper argues that many of the Danish LA21 activities should be analysed by focusing on the anomaly of it being both an anti-modern movement and a late-modern movement. Being anti-modern here refers to attempts to overcome such repercussions of modernity as alienation from basic living processes and the way residential areas are drained of social activity. However, these activities may also be seen as core examples of subpolitics in the late-modern risk society. To investigate this anomaly, Giddens' notion of disembedding mechanisms, Tönnies' notion of *Gemeinschaft*–*Gesellschaft* and Beck's description of the late-modern risk society are presented and discussed. This is followed by case-studies from three residential areas that have worked with LA21. Based on an analysis of these case-histories, the paper concludes that the LA21 activities work with the ideal of breaking the disembedding mechanisms and the *Gesellschaft* relations of the modern society, while at the same time this work is heavily based on the late-modern tendencies of individualization and globalization. Copyright © 2000 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

**Key words:** ecology; environmental problems; Local Agenda 21; subpolitics; urban local planning processes

### Introduction

Local Agenda 21 (LA21) is a concept with international reference to the Rio Conference in 1992 (United Nations, 1993). However, in a Danish context, LA21 refers to a wide range of experiments and projects dating back well to the 1970s. It includes new ecological villages experimenting with urban ecology (see, for example, Dirckinck-Holmfeld *et al.*, 1994) and numerous projects supported by 'The Green Fund'. The Green Fund was established in 1994 by the Danish Parliament to involve people in promoting environment-friendly and ecologically sustainable development. The fund has supported more than 400 projects experimenting with different kinds of educational means (Gram-Hanssen, 1998). In addition, there are many LA21 projects, appearing in the 1990s, partly as a result of an LA21 campaign by central authorities directed at municipal authorities (see, for example, [www.agenda21networks.dk](http://www.agenda21networks.dk)).

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To summarize the grounds of these various projects, a 'local ecological dream' appears, though no project aims at it in all aspects, or actually carries it through. The following description is a caricature of the projects, exaggerated to present central aspects and ideas.

The underlying argument of the local ecological dream is global responsibility and local action as phrased in *Our Common Future* (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), and the two basic elements of the dream are closed cycles and local communities. Thus, within the local area energy, water and other materials should be recycled to avoid waste or pollution. This avoids energy waste from transportation and can reduce social alienation. What we see is that local recycling is an aim in itself in relation to environmental sustainability, while at the same time being a means to re-establish and develop local social community life, which is the other basic element of the local ecological dream.

This description shows how many of the projects and experiments focus on a simpler life with clear, close and manageable relationships between humans and the environment while still

being part of the global society. Accordingly, the local ecological dream could both be conceived of as a traditional reaction against modernity and as a late-modern movement. The dream is one element and the practical outcome may be something different. The focus of this article is on an analysis of the practical outcome of the local ecological dream in this anomaly of being both anti-modern and late-modern. The choice of theories is strongly related to this issue and the article does not give an overview of important theoretical work on local communities. It begins by considering some of the mechanisms that the local ecological dream could be a reaction against. Here focus is on Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft*–*Gesellschaft* notions (Tönnies, 1965) and on Giddens' disembedding mechanism (Giddens, 1990), both describing fundamental aspects in the process of modernization in relation to local communities. Next, the focus is on Beck's theories on late-modern society (Beck 1992; Beck, 1994), with emphasis on the descriptions of the individualization process and subpolitics. These theoretical discussions are then compared with three case-studies from residential areas that have tried to work with LA21.

### The disembedding mechanism

According to Giddens, the separation of time and space is one of the basic conditions for the process of modernization (Giddens, 1990). In pre-modern culture, time was always linked to space. You could not have 'when' without 'where'. The invention of the mechanical clock and standardization of calendars and the use of this in social organization in the past two centuries made the emptying of time possible. Today you can talk about 2 hours of work as an abstract category, without saying what the work is or where it is carried out. Abstract time takes away meaning from the local place, and place changes into space. With modern communication technology it becomes possible even to talk about an event in space, which has no relation to any physical place. In this way we see that the loss of meaning of locality is closely connected with the constitution of modernity. In

Castells' writings on the information society at the turn of the millennium, the network metaphors become a crucial anchor in the description of society, which may be another way to describe how locality loses importance (Castells, 2000).

Giddens introduces the concept of 'disembedding mechanisms' as a way of describing how social activity in the process of modernization is 'lifted out' from localized contexts and reorganized across large time–space distances. Giddens here distinguishes between two types of disembedding mechanisms. The first refers to the creation of symbolic tokens, with money as the most important example. The second disembedding mechanism concerns the establishment of expert systems. Both mechanisms seem important in order to understand how local communities are emptied of substance and strong social relations are replaced by abstract organizations (Giddens, 1990).

### *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*

In 1887, the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies developed the dual concept of *Gemeinschaft*–*Gesellschaft* to describe the difference between, and the transition from, life in a traditional local community to life in a modern society. In this dual concept, *Gemeinschaft* is a natural, unplanned and organic social unit. In contrast, *Gesellschaft* is an artificial, invented and mechanical social relation. *Gemeinschaft* incorporates love, hate and anger and these emotions are displayed directly and without premeditation—compulsion and maximal freedom at the same time. In contrast, in *Gesellschaft* everybody does what they choose as opposed to what they have to do. *Gesellschaft* is based on conflicts, though not the kind of conflict that ignites flames and scuffles as in *Gemeinschaft*, in *Gesellschaft* people are rational actors working in ideal economic competition (Asplund, 1991).

Tönnies distinguishes between different kinds of *Gemeinschaft*: *Gemeinschaft* by blood, of place and of mind, which means kinship, neighbourhood and friendship. Kinship relations where people live together under one protective roof are the most original and the strongest types of

organic *Gemeinschaft*. The neighbourhood is (or was) based on the necessity of cooperating on labour and order due to the proximity of dwellings and communal fields. Friendship is based more on chance and free choice and is the kind of *Gemeinschaft* that has the least organically and instinctively necessary character (Tönnies, 1965).

In light of the *Gemeinschaft*–*Gesellschaft* dichotomy, development of modern society could be seen as a process whereby *Gesellschaft* slowly replaces *Gemeinschaft*. However, Asplund states that this dual concept should be considered as a whole. *Gesellschaft* can never exist without *Gemeinschaft*, which means that modern society can never become purely *Gesellschaft* and neither can *Gemeinschaft* exist without *Gesellschaft*. The two concepts are connected and belong to modern society; they are interdependent and exist in the same place at the same time. Though the two concepts are connected, they are theoretical concepts and, therefore, they exclude each other as simultaneous descriptions. One way to understand this is to consider the two concepts as lenses or spectacles through which to interpret society (Asplund, 1991). A look at a given society through *Gemeinschaft* spectacles would show some aspects and a look at the same society through *Gesellschaft* spectacles would focus on others. Neither picture is more correct as different aspects of the same society are shown, though the two descriptions are mutually exclusive. A society cannot be simultaneously viewed as being both *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, though any modern society will always contain both aspects.

### The transition from modernity to late-modern risk society

The question of social structures in relation to local communities in late-modern society is treated by Beck (1992). One aspect of the late-modern risk society is the individualization of social inequality and the demise of industrialized life-forms, or, in other words, the disintegration of the fundamental social categories in industrialized society. Beck emphasizes that in-

dividualization does not mean isolation, loneliness or the end of all kinds of society. What it means is that the individual must produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves (Beck, 1994). First, the liberation (*Freisetzungen*) from family, class and community means a loss of stability; and, second, it leads to new forms of control. A growing dependence on the labour market causes dependence on a number of institutions, from educational to welfare institutions. This explains the paradox that the individualization becomes the most advanced form of societalization (Beck, 1992, p. 131).

In terms of local community, individualization means that the traditional neighbourhood dissolves and that new social relations and networks must be chosen, made and maintained individually. The individuals here also have to produce their own biographies. This may entail social isolation, but it can also entail new social relations and networks, also in local communities. These new networks in local communities are different from the traditional neighbourhood and community life, as the local context is not necessarily the setting for any essential social relations and, therefore, does not have the same necessity and inevitability.

According to Beck, the late-modern risk society also carries with it new forms of politics. The monopoly of the political institutions belongs to the classic industrial society. In the risk society, the individual returns to politics through a renaissance of non-institutional politics. What was previously political tends to become apolitical, and what was previously apolitical—the private sector, science, the city and everyday life—becomes political. Beck calls this kind of politics from below subpolitics, other theoreticians have used other words. In the last decade, there has been a growing amount of literature on governance, which, in many aspects, covers the same tendencies (see, for example, *International Social Science Journal*, 1998).

One of the most important differences between the political system in industrial society and what becomes political in the risk society is about rules of politics. In the political system of simple modernity there are fixed rules for how the different agents of the political system act. One of the important aspects of the political in



the late-modern risk society becomes to alter these rules for who acts and how to act. This also implies that we no longer have rational and 'right' solutions to any problems. The reflexive modern society, therefore, demands political systems that can handle ambivalence and go beyond old bounds. Which means dialogue methods that can mediate between expert knowledge and everyday life.

Beck also relates Giddens' notion of life politics to the notion of subpolitics. Life politics has its point of departure in how the intimate and the global in late-modern society are fully interwoven. Global tendencies can be found in the self-realization of individuals, which in turn has consequences for global development. Thus, what we find in subpolitics are individuals acting. We can identify them as, for example, a group of citizens, women or intellectuals, although it makes no sense to expect all citizens, women or intellectuals to act as a collective.

### Three LA21 plans for residential areas

In the following, I will describe three different residential areas and their work with LA21.<sup>1</sup> The three areas were all built in the 1960s and are located in Albertslund, a suburb of Copenhagen. Albertslund is known to be a pioneer municipality with regard to environmental aspects, due to the fact that they have established

- eco-accountancy for all residential areas and municipal buildings;
- a citizen group, *Brugergruppen* (Usergroup), with representatives from all residential areas, where all proposals concerning energy, water and waste are discussed before decision in the municipal council (and that the council actually does follow the recommendations from this citizen group);
- a local environmental centre (Agenda Center Albertslund, ACA), organizationally and physically separated from the town hall, with professional staff to help and prompt the citizen to live a sustainable everyday life; and

- for the past 5 years developed municipal LA21 plans, which also call for citizens to develop LA21 plans for their own residential areas.

Analysing these activities in relation to the local ecological dream, as described in the introduction of the article, it is clearly seen in the rhetoric of the initiatives that the municipality identified itself with the global responsibility from the Rio declaration. From interviews with, and writings from, one of the leading local politicians it is just as clear that thoughts of governance and development of local communities are also part of the ideology of the municipality (Aaberg, 1999).

The three residential areas described in the following have complied with the request from the local authorities and have started to prepare LA21 plans, partly initiated or helped by the ACA, though actually only one of them has finished the plan. None of the three areas represent the vanguard of LA21 work in Denmark<sup>2</sup> and this is precisely why a more detailed view is considered here. The three areas are ordinary residential areas, in the sense that their inhabitants generally do not belong to any kind of green movement, and they have not chosen to live in this area for reasons of ecology and the environment, in contrast to, for example, ecological villages, etc. Thus these three areas are case-studies of what could happen when the local ecological dream is introduced into mainstream society.

The three areas represent different kinds of residential area with regard to social status and ownership. As case-studies they generally cannot predict how the work with an LA21 plan for a residential area will turn out. The strength of the case-study is to show details and interrelations in these processes (Flyvbjerg, 1992) and, hence, they are able to show insights and raise discussions that are of general interest in the LA21 discussion.

The descriptions will focus on the different social conditions and histories in the areas, on the process of initiating the plan and on the roles of the different actors. All are described with a focus on how the idea of the local ecological dream is adapted and transformed in

the process. The first of the three studies will be more detailed than the latter two, as this is the only area that completed the plan.

### *High-density-low-rise housing*

The first of the three areas is a high-density-low-rise non-profit housing association of approximately 700 households. The residents comprise some families with children and approximately 10% immigrant workers and other 'new Danes'. In general, it is not a socially maladjusted area.

Being a part of the Danish non-profit housing association means that there should be a local board of residents selected at annual residents' meetings. The board is responsible for the economics and maintenance of a building and its surroundings. Many of the members of the local board in a building have been members for more than 10 years, some of them for more than 20 years, though there have been contested elections for the board on many occasions. The local board publishes a small newsletter *Arabesken*, distributed to all households, writing about the area and the decisions of the local board.

The members of the local board can be described as consisting of two groups, characterized as 'old labour' and 'local environmental activists', respectively. They have worked together for a long time and, according to themselves, work well together. Regarding environmental initiatives, this collaboration implies that the local environmental activists on the board for each proposal have to convince the rest of the board that the economics of the proposal is neutral or better than that, so that the monthly rent will not have to be raised. Both the existence of the two groups on the local board and the sensitivity of rising the rent relate to the history of the area.

In the 1970s the local board had to raise the monthly rent because the buildings had to change their flat roofs, which caused problems with damp. In this period, many residents who could afford to moved out and bought private houses instead. It was also in this period that some of the present members of the local board

declared the area to be 'free of nuclear arms'. A manifesto, which not all the residents or the local board members approved of, and this is still remembered in conflict situations.

When describing local democracy, it is noteworthy that many of the recent residents' meetings have only had an attendance of 5–10% of the households, and, apart from the members of the local board, only a few residents have participated in the work on environmental and resource-handling questions in the past 10 years. The members of the board describe in different ways the possible reasons for the low participation. Some arguments suggest that the organization covers too big an area with too many households to give a feeling of community. Conversely, it is argued that dividing the association in smaller parts would take the strength from the organization, for example in relation to local authorities. A specific reason for the very low attendance at the most recent residents' meetings is that there has been unpleasantness arising from conflicts and insults at former meetings. Problems that have nothing to do with the environmental questions though nevertheless influence the LA21 process, as residents stay away from meetings when there is too much unpleasantness.

Some of the less involved residents of the area express that one of the problems of local democracy is that the local board is a clique, whose members have been there for too long and who do not listen to the residents. Some residents also express that they have bad relations with the caretakers of the area. Caretakers who on their side express that they just do what they are told to do, and who do not participate in the decision process at all and express no wish of doing so in the future, though obviously many of the environmental questions, such as a ban on pesticides or new ways of collecting waste, strongly influence their work.

This account of the area sets the arena for the process of the LA21 plan. The idea of the plan comes from one or two of the environmental activists on the local board who have also done most of the work on the plan. Drafts have been discussed with an open environmental group of the area, with the local board and with the ACA, and it has been reported in the local

newsletter of the area, *Arabesken*. After this, the LA21 plan was adopted at a residents' meeting where 5–10% of the households were present.

There have been few big conflicts in this process, in fact, it has been almost too easy to get it passed, as one of the originators of the project expresses it. Actually, he is worried that there will be a reaction when parts of the plan are implemented—next winter, for example, when residents realize that there will be no salting of pedestrian paths. Without having had a broad discussion in the area, it is likely that most residents have not considered the consequences. Bearing in mind the history of the area, it is seen that this lack of discussions in the process does not necessarily relate to the subject of the plan, as much as to the history of local democracy.

Turning to the contents of the actual LA21 plan, in the introduction it is described with the usual reference to Rio that we all have a moral obligation to take a global responsibility and change our individual everyday lives. It is reported how this can be achieved in the local community through a development of local networks. Next, the plan states what has already been done in the area over the past 10 years with regard to resource handling and what is planned for the following years. The plan for the first year includes

- renewal of green open spaces;
- using grit instead of salt for pedestrian paths in the winter;
- collecting up to twenty different fractions (paper, glass, plastic, etc.) of reuseable waste;
- establishing a group of instructors in composting green waste; and
- establishing a co-driving scheme to reduce car traffic.

The plan is intended to function with the economic account for the area. This means that there should be long-term planning, with specific objectives for each year, and that the plan should be evaluated each year at the residents' meeting.

Analysing the plan and the process in the light of the local ecological dream, it is clear that the plan is based on the essence of the local ecological dream both with regard to

closed cycles and with regard to the development of local community. It is written explicitly in the introduction to the plan and it is clearly a part of the basis for the local environmental activists and their network. Looking at the actual content and at the outcome of the plan, however, it is just as clear that it does not, in practice, contribute to the development, or rely on the existence, of the local community. So what has happened?

In the writing process the local environmental centre (ACA) actually had some proposals about including the development of local democracy in the plan. The environmental activists on the local board, however, were concerned that this would inhibit the environmental aspects of the LA21 process. One way to understand this is to focus on the negative aspects of the local community as described in the notion of *Gemeinschaft*. What we then see is how gossip and other negative relations between different groups in the area (members of the local board, residents and caretakers) have been barriers of this process. To minimize the negative effect of these relations the originators have tried, as far as possible, to separate the agenda process from previous democracy discussions, with the implication that the LA21 plan has become the plan of the local board and not of the whole area. This is shown clearly in the interviews with residents, who, for the most part, knew nothing about the plan, though when told about it found it a good idea.

In this light, the outcome is a plan with which to rationalize and structure future work of the local board and which the board regards as helpful to keep the green line in their work. It is the plan of a few local activists and not of a local community. A plan that will probably be good for the environment and that will probably in no way strengthen the local community or have any influence on the daily life of the residents.

#### *Home-owners' association*

The second area is an owner-occupied area consisting of 74 link-detached houses with private gardens and a common green area with a



playground. The owners of the houses are in their late 40s–50s and most of them have lived there since their children were young. The home-owners' association has a committee of five people and usually more than 50% of the households participate in the annual general meeting. There are seldom weighty issues on the agenda for these meetings and the meetings have the character of a friendly get-together. Twice a year there are working-weekends at the common green area, where 20–25 people participate. There is a lending arrangement in the area with tables and chairs for social arrangements and with gardening tools. As one of the members of the committee expresses it, such things develop the area in a positive sense.

One of the members of the committee is also involved in the board of ACA and this might be one of the main incentives behind the proposal of an LA21 plan in this area. The proposer of the plan does not regard the plan worth mentioning and possibly never believed in the idea. It looks as if the proposal was as much a friendly gesture towards ACA, as it was a wish to develop the local environment.

The plan comprised the following three items:

- refuse collection every 2 weeks instead of once a week, made possible by more home compost (this proposal should finance the other parts of the plan);
- common garden compost; and
- refurbishing the common green area.

The committee rejected the plan, before it was even mentioned at a general meeting, due to the reduced refuse collection service. Because of this, the other aspects of the plan were also rejected. It is not immediately apparent if work on an LA21 plan will be taken up again, though probably the refurbishing of the common green area will be done, without any relation to LA21.

The main reason behind the failure of the LA21 plan is in the lack of strong involvement from the committee members. Though one of them proposed the plan, the idea of drawing up an LA21 plan in areas like the one they live in, is not really supported. The problem here is which field a home-owners' association can make plans for. In this area there is a common

green area, which is unusual for owner-occupied areas. However, what happens in this green area may not be of great importance. Most decisions concerning environmental problems are either to be taken on a higher level, such as sanitary and heating structures that are decided on the municipal level, or on the individual level, such as saving energy and water in households. According to the committee members and most of the residents in the area, the committee has no competence at either of these levels, since what happens behind the fence of the gardens or even inside the four walls of the home is not for the committee to interfere with. The purpose of the committee is not to make policies. Refuse collection is the closest that the committee wishes to involve itself in the resource behaviour and the life of individual families.

Analysing this account with regard to the local ecological dream highlights some important aspects of the case. It is seen that the promoter of the plan expresses the vision of the local ecological dream through his involvement in ACA and through his comments on the importance of both global responsibility and local social networks. In contrast, he also expresses, and shows in his actions, that he does not believe in the dream in his own area. Interpreting why he does not believe in the dream in his own area, two issues must be focused on. First, the local level in owner-occupied areas has little competence in decisions with relevance to environmental problems. Second, the local community in this area is something you can choose to be a part of or not, which means that the social life of the local area becomes a non-committal relation and by that it also becomes a casual relation. This again means that global responsibility and its connection to local actions becomes an individual decision.

### *Blocks of social housing*

The third area consists of blocks of approximately 200 flats. More than 50% of the inhabitants are immigrants, many from Turkey and Pakistan, and there are many pensioners and others on transfer income in the area. The area suffers from heavy social problems and is



characterized by vandalism and crime. However, work is being done to improve the area, among other things it is part of a government attempt to improve socially malfunctioning areas. Therefore, money is available for social workers, etc. Also the local board is active in this process.

Work with environmental problems and with the LA21 plan should be seen in conjunction with this social work. Environmental aspects are not in themselves given a high priority, though many of the people working to improve the area find it relevant to include environmental aspects in the social work. For example, the social worker talks about refuse collection systems and ways to reduce water consumption on visits to people's homes. It is also hoped that the agenda work will channel resources to the area, for example to bilingual LA21 staff.

Work on an LA21 plan has only just begun in the area. However, there are already signs of the various directions that the work might take in the future. To describe them, I shall mention two further types of actor in the area. First, there is one of the residents, a local activist, who works to bring environmental aspects into the discussion, including working for individual accounts of water consumption instead of a uniform price for all flats. Actually, this proposal would have considerable economic implications for the different types of resident, as residents with a foreign background often live with many people in one flat and, therefore, use much more water per flat. The proposal naturally causes discussions for this reason. The other group of actors, which might be relevant to the process, is the caretakers of the area. In contrast to the high-density-low-rise housing area, the caretakers in this area see themselves as a part of the process. Some of the caretakers even express that they see their work partly as a cultural and social process, which also includes the LA21 work. Though they are also realistic, or one may say pessimistic, about this process, as, for example, can be heard in the statement: 'Before starting a common compost-heap in this area, we have to teach the residents to hit the containers'. One of the problems in this area is that some residents just throw rubbish out of the windows.

With regard to the local ecological dream, it is obvious that the overall vision of the social project in this area is to give the area a lift through vitalizing local relations and, in this process, environmental issues are one of the means to strengthen the social relations. In this way it is an example of the local ecological dream, with a main emphasis on social problems and social solutions. The question is not whether there is a local community but how active residents, local authorities and government funds can act together to try to establish one. Global problems are not the main force in the work and they only enter the stage as a means of solving the local problems. Finally, we also see, however, that the environmental issues as introduced by a local activist could have negative social side-effects, such as in the examples of the individual accounts of water consumption.

### Reflections on the three case-studies

Here I will relate to the theoretical concepts presented previously, which is the *Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft* relation, the disembedding mechanism and theories on late-modern individualized subpolitics. Concepts and theories that in different ways describe the local society in transition from pre-modern to modern to late-modern society.

In the following, I will first use *Gemeinschaft*, and subsequently *Gesellschaft*, spectacles to interpret the first case and, in this way, reveal different aspects about how this area relates to the questions of modernity. Using the *Gemeinschaft* spectacles, the first thing to notice is that a local community always has a history with different relations between the local actors. You never start from scratch. The local actors may have positive or negative relationships with each other originating in fields that have nothing to do with the LA21 work, but these relations may nevertheless strongly influence the LA21 work. This is most clearly seen in the case from the high-density-low-rise buildings. The kinds of relations seen in this case have to be understood as *Gemeinschaft* relations. It is not rational actors promoting their own interest as much as

it is uncontrolled directly displayed emotions. In this way the case shows that *Gemeinschaft* relations in the residential area do not necessarily promote the LA21 work, as one of the barriers to the process was gossip and other negative *Gemeinschaft* relations.

Using *Gesellschaft* spectacles on the same case-study reveals another interpretation. What we see then is how the members of the local board manage to work together in spite of their different political motivations and in spite of a history of previous controversies. The way they handle the situation is by using first and foremost rational arguments about economy. The implication of this way of cooperating is, as we saw in the outcome of the LA21 plan, a rational plan where decisions are put into structure and system. The outcome of this plan may seem far from the vision of the local ecological dream, though the plan may very well be a positive contribution in solving global environmental problems.

In the owner-occupied area the degree of participation in the general meetings and working-weekends is higher than in the other areas, though the sphere of community may seem rather limited. There is no wish to expand the field of community in this area, at least not at the expense of privacy. In this way the community in this area may be described as an individualized option you could choose to be a part of and not a community with any necessity and inevitability, which is also why it does not make any sense to describe it as a community in either *Gemeinschaft* or *Gesellschaft* terms.

In the housing blocks we find yet another version of the *Gemeinschaft*–*Gesellschaft* relation. The whole idea in the lift of the area may be seen as an attempt to establish *Gemeinschaft* by means of *Gesellschaft*. Using professionals from outside to establish local social relations in the solving of social problems may be the best example of this.

To conclude in relation to the dual concept of *Gemeinschaft*–*Gesellschaft*, the three studies show that the concepts are relevant still, though the relation between them might have changed. *Gemeinschaft* is not just the remains of traditional village life, which is to be overruled by modern life and *Gesellschaft*, and the relation between the

two concepts is not as simple, as more activity on the local level means more *Gemeinschaft*.

Looking for the disembedding mechanism in the three studies, the technical infrastructure appears with its central support of water and heating and the central sewerage system. These structures imply that most of the decisions related to the production of energy and circulation of materials are made at a level higher than the local community. With the technical infrastructure many decisions have been 'lifted out' of their localized contexts. Local decisions to use, for example, solar heating or to establish local collecting of rainwater may be contrary to the municipality's plans for the area and, therefore, be counteracted by the authorities. In Albertslund this is actually seen in relation to solar heating. Here the authorities, in many respects, support and cooperate with the local areas, but not concerning solar heating systems, because the technical authorities find them meaningless in areas with district heating supplied by combined power plants. This might be seen as a *Gemeinschaft*–*Gesellschaft* conflict fought with technical means as rational technical arguments are used against local visions.

Whether there are decisions to make at the community level at all is closely related to the social structure of the area. In owner-occupied areas all the decisions in relation to supplies are made either at the municipal level or at the level of the private families, such as initiatives to save water or energy. In block buildings, in contrast, all the outside and maybe also the indoor maintenance is decided at the local level. This means that the basis for decision-making is typically much broader in block buildings than in owner-occupied areas. Though it does not necessarily mean that the social relations are more positive in apartment buildings.

In relation to the disembedding mechanism of the technical infrastructure, it is relevant to see aspects of the local ecological dream as an attempt to counteract this mechanism. If energy, water and waste are recycled locally, decisions, social activities and knowledge also stay within the local area and contribute to the development of the local. If the local area actually succeeds in counteracting these disembedding mechanisms, for example through local

resource handling, time must show to what extent the new social relations will be built on *Gemeinschaft* or *Gesellschaft* relations. As we have seen in the three studies, both relations are possible.

Finally, the three studies have to be interpreted in the light of Beck's theories. To what extent are the three studies expressions of late-modern subpolitics and what kind of questions and insights does this perspective release from the studies? The first characteristic of subpolitics, which seems relevant to note in these three studies, is the connection between the local and the global aspects. Obviously the three studies are examples of how global responsibility has been important as an underlying motive power.

Yet another, and possibly more surprising and interesting, aspect of the case-studies with regard to the notion of late-modern subpolitics is that it is individuals and not collectivities that are acting. None of the three studies show communities that are working together, on the contrary they show that where things happen we also find that the late-modern local activist has had a very important role to play.

The last thing to note with regard to late-modern subpolitics is the 'round table' model, which Beck describes as a way to handle the ambivalence of risk society. In the case-studies, this is seen in the interaction between local authorities, tenants associations and individual residents, especially in the study of the housing block area. In this area, subpolitics is the result of a conscious governmental policy aiming to raise the area and, in this respect, it is not politics from below, though in the process there are interesting examples of rule altering. Here we see, for example, how the caretakers of the area define themselves as actors in the social process of lifting the area. If we look at the LA21 process in the high-density-low-rise area, however, there is nothing that points at new forms of politics, new actors or other kinds of rule altering. What we see here is the classical representative democracy of the modern industrial society.

## Conclusions

The purpose of this article has been to analyse the actual outcome of LA21 activities in relation to a discussion of modernity. This relates to the fact that the local ecological dream, as described in the introduction, seems to lie behind many of the LA21 activities and that this dream contains both what could be termed anti-modern and late-modern tendencies. The intention of the article has not been to judge which activities are good or bad, rather the intention has been to point out the contrast between the actual outcome of the LA21 activities and the rhetorical point of departure, which are often used to convince foundations, authorities, citizens, etc.

In the article, this gap is outlined by three case-studies describing how the local ecological dream is transformed when introduced into mainstream society. As cases they cannot give the overall view of all LA21 activities, though they are able to point at relevant questions.

A common point in the three studies is that the *Gemeinschaft* relation is not very marked. The strongest *Gemeinschaft* relation is in the case where it is the shadow-side of *Gemeinschaft* that counteracts the LA21 process. Furthermore, all three studies show that a very important factor in these kinds of activities is the late-modern local activist.

The three cases express three different types of social conditions in residential areas and experiences with the implementation of the local ecological dream have to be understood in relation to these different conditions.

The first case represents a type of residential area that has a representative democracy of the type that belongs to the modern industrial society and has competence in fields that are related to resource-handling questions. The second case represents a type of area where the community hardly exists. Community is here a relation the individual can choose to be a part of and it is without any competence in relation to questions related to resource cycles. The third area may be the area where the local is most visible, because the inhabitants are bound to the local area to a higher degree than other citizens,

partly because of the lack of relations to the labour market. This implies that the social problems of the inhabitants appear as social problems of the area, which means that the area gets attention from society at large. Questions of resource cycles are introduced in the process partly as a means of the social work, as it is one of the fields where the community has common local competence.

The local ecological dream necessarily has to turn out differently related to which type of area it is implemented into. As we have seen in the case-studies, though, the local history of the area also marks the actual outcome of the activities. A common experience seems, however, to be that there is a considerable gap between the dream that lay behind the activities and the actual outcome. A gap between intentions and results with which the LA21 activities cannot survive in the long run.

## Notes

1. The case studies draw from an evaluation of Agenda Center Albertslund (Gram-Hanssen & Kaltoft, 1997). All empirical work with regard to the three studies was conducted in 1997 and includes:
  - 17 qualitative, open interviews of 45–90 min duration, half of them telephone interviews, all tape-recorded and transcribed;
  - door-to-door, semi-structured interviewing in three streets in one of the residential areas, encompassing 64 households resulting in 22, 5–10 min interviews;
  - 25 semi-structured telephone interviews with members of the citizen group *Brugergruppen*, covering approximately 50% of the members.
2. Actually, Albertslund does have a residential area that belongs to what could be called the vanguard of LA21 work. Hyldebjergområdet is well known in the Danish LA21 work and it often receives international visitors. Together with the municipality and the citizen group *Burgergruppen*, they were promoters for the ACA and have thus indirectly influenced the work in the three areas described here. For a description of Hyldebjergområdet, see Falkheden, 1999.

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