

Local Agenda 21 and Culture: Lessons from the Czech Republic

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Abstract: Sustainable development represents one of the leading concepts of modern society. On the local level, sustainable development principles are implemented by Local Agenda 21 (LA 21), the most influential output of the 1992 Earth Summit. Although culture is not explicitly mentioned in its definitions of sustainable development, there are close links between culture, on one side, and the economic, social, and ecological dimensions of sustainable development, on the other. Culture is an important factor of social cohesion and economic development, and culturally led urban and rural regeneration projects may have also positive ecological impacts. Moreover, the efforts to maintain local culture may be the main impetus in accepting the LA 21 principles in culturally rich communities.

This article assesses the importance of culture in the LA 21 implementation process, with two municipalities from the Czech Republic as case studies. Findings point to complex links between LA 21 and culture. Uherské Hradiště is a culturally rich city that is progressive in the LA 21 implementation process; however, our findings show that LA 21 and culture live independent lives in planning processes. Zděchov tells a completely different story of the relationship between culture and LA 21: here, local culture has become the leitmotif of the LA 21 implementation process. The goal to maintain and develop local culture has been the prime motivation behind the decision to accept the LA 21 principles. The case studies share several common characteristics. In both cases, LA 21 has stimulated public interest in both municipalities, and ever more local actors are getting involved in the LA 21 implementation process. A combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches has been applied in this process. LA 21 is also perceived as a good brand for project management, and may be an incentive for innovations in strategic planning.

Keywords: Local Agenda 21, culture, sustainable development, Czech Republic, strategic planning

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Résumé : Le développement durable représente une des conceptions principales des sociétés contemporaines. Au niveau local, plusieurs des principes de développement sont inspirés du Local Agenda 21 (LA 21), un des pièces maîtresses les plus influentes du Sommet du Monde de 1992. Quoique la culture ne soit pas mentionnée explicitement dans la définition de durable développement, il y a un lien manifeste entre la culture et les dimensions économiques, sociales et écologiques du développement durable. La culture est un élément important de la cohésion social et du développement économique et les projets de régénérations citadines et du territoire qui sont conduites de façon culturelle peuvent également avoir des incidences positives au plan écologique. De plus, les efforts pour maintenir la culture locale peuvent être motivés par l'acceptation des principes de LA 21 dans les communautés.

Cet article évalue l'importance de la culture dans le cadre de la mise en oeuvre de LA 21, au sein de deux municipalités de la République Tchèque comme études de cas. Les constatations pointes en direction des liens complexes entre LA 21 et la culture. Uherské Hradiště est une ville riche sur le plan culturel et qui a progressivement mise en oeuvre les principes du LA 21; par contre, nous constatons que le LA 21 et la planification culturelle semblent malheureusement évoluer en parallèle plutôt que de se considérer respectivement dans les phases de planification. Pour sa part, Zděchov illustre une expérience de relation entre culture et LA 21 qui s'articule de manière complètement différente: ici, la culture locale est devenue un aspect central des procédés de mise en oeuvre du LA 21. Le but de maintenir et de développer la culture locale était la motivation première qui a favorisé la décision d'adhérer aux principes de LA 21 à Zděchov. Les études de cas partagent plusieurs caractéristiques communes. La combinaison des approches de haut en bas et du bas en haut a été appliquée dans le cadre de la mise en oeuvre, notamment. En somme, le LA 21 se distingue comme un bon indicateur pour la direction de projets locaux et peut agir comme agent d'innovation dans le développement de planifications stratégiques.

Mots clés : Local Agenda 21, culture, développement durable, planification stratégique, République Tchèque

Introduction

Sustainable development represents one of the leading concepts of modern society (see, for example, Scipioni et al. 2009). Traditionally, sustainable development is defined as the kind of development which satisfies the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Moreover, sustainable development creates a balance among economic, social, and ecological interests (Moffatt 1996; Winston & Eastaway 2009; Tanguay et al. 2010). These three dimensions of sustainable development are often complemented by the institutional dimension, related to the concept of good governance and wide public participation in development planning (Rey-Valette et al. 2007; Jörby 2002). Culture is not explicitly mentioned in most definitions of sustainable development. However, there are close links between culture and these four dimensions of sustainable development.

On the local level, the requirement to implement the principles of sustainable development was formulated in the 28th chapter of Agenda 21, the so-called Local Agenda 21 (LA 21), which was approved at the Earth Summit in 1992 (Feichtinger & Pregernig 2005). The interest of communities in LA 21 has increased substantially during the past 20 years (Evans & Theobald 2003a;

Sancassiani 2005; Jörby 2002). In this regard, specific local conditions influence the motivation of local authorities to join the LA 21 commitments. One of these local conditions may be a desire to maintain local culture, and this may indeed be the main impetus in accepting the LA 21 principles in culturally rich communities. However, the multidimensional character of LA 21 calls for a more complex picture. Our goal in this article is to assess the importance of culture in the LA 21 implementation process, with two municipalities from the Czech Republic as case studies: the city of Uherské Hradiště and the municipality of Zděchov. The article outlines the main findings of LA 21 in the Czech Republic and examines the relationship between LA 21 and culture, with special attention to planning processes and the role of local actors.

Local Agenda 21 and culture

On the local level, sustainable development principles are implemented through LA 21, the most influential output of the 1992 Earth Summit (Evans & Theobald 2003a). The LA 21 principles were elaborated in a number of subsequent documents, including the evaluation document prepared by the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives in 1998. This document formulated five fundamental LA 21 characteristics:

- balance of economic, social, and ecological interests;
- wide dialogue of various groups of actors to develop a common understanding of their interests;
- long-term character of implementation, considering the precautionary principle;
- global character of goals with interscale linkages; and
- sustainable resource management (ICLEI 1998).

Culture is closely related to these characteristics. From a social perspective, Greig (2002) and Barnett (2001) connect the term *culture* with the values and symbols through which people understand their world. In this way, culture creates territorial identity as a crucial feature of social cohesion (see also Hawkes 2001). Such territorial development based on social cohesion is of an endogenous nature, fully in accord with the institutional dimension of sustainable development. Altogether, relations between social cohesion, communication, and LA 21 are closely tied, and culture may be perceived as an intangible glue connecting them.¹

Culture has its impacts on the economic dimension of sustainable development as well and may be understood as a factor of territorial differentiation. The cultural uniqueness of a territory serves as a competitive advantage (see, for example, Sacco et al. 2009; Ray 1998), with cultural features increasingly important in territorial development strategies. In these strategies, culture is expected to create a unique territorial identity as a factor of development. A similar argument motivates the shift of European regional policy from a sectoral to a territorial approach. In this way of thinking, each territory formulates its own development strategy based on local resources, including cultural assets. Finally, the politically influential concept of *creative class* perceives culture as an important

¹ Sancassiani (2005) regards improvements in dialogue and information flows as the main positive outcome of the LA 21 implementation process in Italy. Consequently, these improvements helped to stimulate various forms of local partnerships. Evans & Theobald (2003a) provide similar findings from a comprehensive survey of LA 21 in Europe.

ingredient of creativity (Klamer & Petrova 2007; Duxbury 2004) and a major factor of economic competitiveness (see, for example, Florida 2002).

These considerations illustrate the relationship between culture, on one hand, and economic and social dimensions of sustainable development, on the other. The integration of these three dimensions of sustainable development through culture is most obvious in culturally led urban and rural regeneration projects (Barnett 2001; Tucker 2008), which also have important ecological impacts.

The ecological dimension of LA 21 is traditionally regarded as the most important one (see, for example, Jörby 2002; Feichtinger & Pregernig 2005) and the sustainable management of natural resources is the major sphere of activity in the LA 21 implementation process in Europe (Evans & Theobald 2003b). The relationship between culture and the ecological dimension of sustainable development is weaker than relationships with the other dimensions, and has resulted in the relatively less frequent involvement of culture in LA 21 (see, for example, Duxbury 2001; Sancassiani 2005).

Related to the aforementioned characteristics of LA 21, what is the impact of interscalar linkages on local culture over the long term? This question is generally integral to the discussion on the homogenization of cultural diversity and the suppression of local cultural forms (Archer et al. 2007; Ratiu 2009). Our position is that LA 21 should strive to maintain local cultural diversity (see also Hawkes 2001; UCLG 2009). Indeed, the current state of research on the homogenization of cultural diversity is ambiguous, with authors pointing to the coexistence of homogenization and heterogenization tendencies (see, for example, Greig 2002; Hollis 2009).

Political acceptance of the relations between culture and the traditional dimensions of sustainable development is a gradual process. Culture is mentioned only rarely in LA 21, as well as in the *Aalborg Charter of European Cities and Towns towards Sustainability* from 1994 (UCLG, 2009). Thus, the groundbreaking documents regarding culture and sustainable development, Agenda 21 for Culture and the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, were approved only at the beginning of the twenty-first century (see UCLG 2004; UNESCO 2005). The ‘culture as the fourth pillar of sustainability’ theoretical concept, formulated by Jon Hawkes, became an important source of inspiration in this regard. Hawkes (2001) claims that the debate on sustainable development is a debate on values or, in other words, on culture. In this way of thinking, culture represents an overarching framework for sustainable development planning/policies because it facilitates actors’ understanding of strategic goals and interventions. Altogether, the terms related to culture, well-being, creativity, diversity, and innovation form the fourth pillar of sustainability (see also UCLG 2009).

Local Agenda 21 and culture in the Czech Republic

The Czech Republic belongs to the group of countries that signed the Agenda 21 in 1992. However, the LA 21 implementation process was initiated much later through sporadic pilot projects in the second half of the 1990s. The Czech Ministry of the Environment introduced a grant scheme for initiation of LA 21 at that time: non-governmental, non-profit organizations, in cooperation with municipalities, were allowed to draw funds from this grant scheme (CENIA 2008). Furthermore, LA 21 was incorporated into national strategic documents related to the environment. Overall,

however, interest in LA 21 was rather limited at the turn of the century (see, for example, Kašpar & Petrová 2006).

Interest in LA 21 in the Czech Republic increased with the establishment of the Working Group for LA 21 by the Government Counsel for Sustainable Development in 2004. The main goal of the Working Group for LA 21 is to develop LA 21 as a common planning tool in the Czech Republic. The elaboration of LA 21 criteria in 2005 was the first step towards this goal. These criteria also define the capacity and quality of implementation for five LA 21 categories. Table 1 summarizes the criteria. It is necessary to meet all criteria of each category in order to graduate to a higher category. The shift towards strategic approaches and formal organization structures in higher categories is noteworthy. In 2006, LA 21 was accepted as the official method of evaluating the quality of public administration work (Kašpar & Petrová 2006). In 2008, the Ministry of the Environment introduced a new grant program (the Revolving Fund) for the LA 21 implementation process, from which municipalities and other cooperating organizations may draw financial support (CENIA 2008).

Table 1. Criteria for LA 21 quality categories

| Quality category | Criteria |
|------------------|---|
| Applicant | Officially declared interest of the applicant and assignment of a contact person |
| Category D | Establishment of an informal organization structure Public participation in planning and decision-making processes Presentation of activities and outputs |
| Category C | Approval of an official document and establishment of an official authority Establishment of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and of financial and education systems |
| Category B | Elaboration of sustainable development strategy documents Monitoring of internationally standardized LA 21 indicators |
| Category A | Introduction of a certified system of quality management |

Source: Own elaboration based on Kašpar & Petrová (2006)

This increasing interest in LA 21 is reflected in the increasing number of municipalities officially included in the LA 21 database. In 2006, there were only 40 listed municipalities, which had increased to 112 municipalities with more than 1.5 million inhabitants in 2010 (CENIA 2008, 2010). Furthermore, more municipalities have graduated to the higher LA 21 quality categories. There were only 12 municipalities in the D category or higher in 2006, compared to 55 municipalities in 2010 (CENIA, 2008, 2010). The participating municipalities are distributed across all regions of the Czech Republic. Although LA 21 is relevant for municipalities of different population size, municipalities with the lowest number of inhabitants are not represented in the higher LA 21 quality categories (see Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of officially participating municipalities according to the LA 21 quality categories and population size (situation in April 2010)

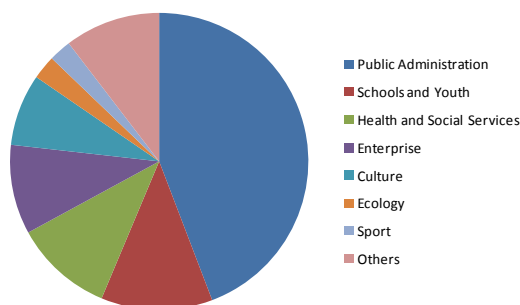
| Number of inhabitants | LA 21 quality category | | | |
|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------|-----------|----------|
| | Applicants | D | C | B |
| Less than 2,000 | 29 | 15 | 0 | 0 |
| 2,001-10,000 | 15 | 5 | 5 | 0 |
| 10,001-50,000 | 11 | 12 | 8 | 5 |
| More than 50,000 | 12 | 4 | 0 | 1 |
| Total | 57 | 36 | 13 | 6 |

Note: No entry in the A category.

Source: Own elaboration based on CENIA (2010)

In the Czech Republic, LA 21 is defined as a municipal or regional program which respects the principles of sustainable development and considers local problems. Wide public participation and strategic planning are generally emphasized. Culture is rarely mentioned in the official methodological documents. In this way, culture is regarded as a quality of life factor and protection of cultural heritage, including cultural events, is categorized as among the fundamental LA 21 activities (CEI 2001, 2003; Kašpar & Petrová 2006). Moreover, local cultural actors are members of LA 21 organization structures in municipalities, though their share is rather modest (see Figure 1). It is noteworthy, that more than half of local cultural actors are represented in the LA 21 organization structures of the smallest municipalities. Now, let us turn our attention to the findings from the qualitative research of the two case studies - the city of Uherské Hradiště and the municipality of Zděchov.

Figure 1. Members of officially enlisted LA 21 municipal organization structures according to their thematic focus



Source: Own elaboration based on CENIA (2010)

Local Agenda 21 and culture in the city of Uherské Hradiště

The City of Uherské Hradiště is located in the southeast part of the Czech Republic. Its population is approximately 26,000. Uherské Hradiště is one of the most culturally rich cities in the Czech Republic according to the number and quality of both organized cultural events and cultural ensembles (MEPCO 2007). Cultural resources of the city include:

- Cultural events of local, regional, national, and international importance (e.g., wine festival, summer film school, several folklore festivals);
- Several cultural organisations of regional importance (e.g., Slovácké Museum, Slovácké Theatre) and an extraordinary high number of fellowships in both traditional (folklore and crafts) and modern culture;
- A well-preserved historical core of the city, and a number of cultural monuments;
- The active participation of local citizens in cultural events, municipal interest in culture, and a project-oriented Cultural Fund; and
- An attractive cultural image of the city as a pull factor for tourists (summary based on MEPCO 2007).

Questionnaire surveys carried out in Uherské Hradiště confirm the importance of culture for inhabitants of the city. For example, in a 2007 survey, the highest number of respondents chose *local culture* as the greatest strength of the city. Moreover, when asked about the future of the city, *local culture* was the most frequently mentioned topic (TIMUR 2007). Despite its prominent position in Uherské Hradiště, however, culture has only limited links to the LA 21 initiative there.

The roots of LA 21 in Uherské Hradiště are related to the inclusion of the city in the National Network of Healthy Cities in 2005. This network brings together municipalities that strive to improve the quality of life of their citizens. LA 21 is the main method applied by these municipalities. The Uherské Hradiště city hall has organized a number of events under the label of 'Healthy City.' These included Earth Day, the European Day without Cars, and Health Day. In this way, the city government has gained direct experience in how to involve citizens in LA 21 activities. Further knowledge of the implementation process of LA 21 principles came with two projects co-financed by the EU structural funds:

- The project *Green* for the Zlín Region, initiated in 2006, has formulated and implemented a system of environmental education in the city.
- The project Community Planning of Social Services, also initiated in 2006, has formulated and implemented a strategy of close cooperation between providers of social services.

In addition, in 2007 Uherské Hradiště became a member of the network association Team Initiative for Local Sustainable Development. Through this step, the city committed itself to participate in monitoring the European indicators of sustainable development (Hrabalíková & Pavelčík 2009).

All these experiences formed the cornerstones of LA 21 in Uherské Hradiště. However, an overarching framework for these separate activities was still missing. In this situation, the Revolving Fund provided further impetus: the city gained financial support from the fund for the project 'Development of LA 21 in Uherské Hradiště,' realized in 2008 and 2009. The project helped the city to meet the LA 21 criteria of the D category. Furthermore, a new LA 21 organization

structure was implemented, which included a LA 21 Working Group consisting of public, non-profit, and private sector partners; the LA 21 coordinator; and the LA 21 politician. A number of activities were realized in the project, including:

- LA 21 events focused on environment and health,
- Further development of the local system of environmental education,
- Ecologically friendly management of public institutions,
- Public planning through city forums and roundtables, and
- Monitoring of selected LA 21 indicators (Hrabalíková and Pavelčík 2009).

The history of LA 21 in Uherské Hradiště shows that the environment is the main theme of activities. Not surprisingly, the cooperation of local authorities and ecological organizations played a decisive role in the initial phase of LA 21 in the city. Step by step, close ties based on mutual trust have been created between the representatives of local authorities and ecological organizations. To find a solution to problems has become the leitmotif of the partnership. Subsequently, the LA 21 coordinators have been able to increase the number of participants through the application of a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches. Regarding the top-down approach, the LA 21 coordinator contacts potential partners to create a partnership for projects prepared by the LA 21 team. Public planning through city forums and roundtables is a project of this kind. The bottom-up approach is characterized by the direct organization of projects by local fellowships and citizens. In this situation, unlike the top-down approach, the LA 21 team is not the leading partner of the projects. Local environmental groups are especially active in these projects and public attendance in LA 21 activities remains stable. LA 21 in Uherské Hradiště does not have a formalized long-term strategic plan, but this is now being considered in the activities of the project ‘Uherské Hradiště – City for LA 21.’ This project, initiated in 2010, is financially supported by the Revolving Fund. However, the relationship between the planned LA 21 strategic document and the existing Strategic Development Plan of the city has not yet been clarified.

Although Uherské Hradiště is a culturally rich city, culture is surprisingly not a theme of its LA 21. In addition, local cultural actors do not participate in LA 21. This disengagement stems from the idea that culture has such an important position in the city that additional support through LA 21 is not necessary. This point of view is held by the most relevant actors of local culture in the city, the Bureau Municipal and cultural fellowships. Historically, unique partnerships in culture have been developed which are crucial for the organization of cultural events. These partnerships include the local foundation Children, Culture and Sport; a number of private sponsors; and tourism actors. In this way, culture belongs to the key development themes defined in the Strategic Development Plan of the city, with strategic goals oriented in two directions: first, to the protection of cultural heritage, and, second, to the relationship between local culture and tourism (MEPCO 2007). In contrast, LA 21 partnerships consist of actors not involved in the cultural partnerships, and there are only a limited number of overlaps of the two types of partnerships. Strong ties have not yet developed because of the different phases of maturity of the two types of partnerships. If LA 21 is to be thematically extended in the near future, it will most likely be through the theme *family* (for example, awareness meetings for pregnant women or young families) and not through *culture*.

Local Agenda 21 and culture in the municipality of Zděchov

Compared with the limited links between LA 21 and culture in the city of Uherské Hradiště, the municipality of Zděchov tells completely different story. The mountainous municipality is located at the eastern border of the Czech Republic and its population is only 600 people. A rich cultural life is alive in Zděchov: a number of traditional cultural events are held in the municipality, including a spring carnival and a summer fair, and new cultural projects have been created such as *slivovitz* tasting or thematic trips related to culture. The Cultural Commission of the municipality and a number of local fellowships (volunteer firemen, Czech Red Cross, the sport organizations TJ Sokol and Avzo, local hunters and gardeners, Catholic Church) are the main organizers of cultural life. These cultural resources of the municipality are strengthened by its preserved urban structure, which has not been disturbed by subsequent construction. There are several traditional public spaces where cultural life is organized (local pub Koliba, church, elementary school, regenerated square). Altogether, culture represents a decisive feature of the social cohesion in Zděchov and creates its unique image. It is important, also, that sensitive groups of young people and newcomers take part in the events. On this basis, culture is linked to LA 21 in the municipality.

Zděchov officially declared its interest in LA 21 in 2009 in the D category. The decision was motivated by three factors. The first motive was to find an overarching framework for the cultural life of the municipality. It is expected that the LA 21 framework will contribute to a further development of local culture. The second factor was related to project-oriented activities of the municipality because the brand LA 21 was perceived to improve its position in evaluation processes. The same motivation stands behind Zděchov's participation in the competition for the best village in the region. The third motivating factor was the community's close socio-economic links to the city of Vsetín, a pioneer of the LA 21 implementation process in the Czech Republic.

The mayor is the LA 21 coordinator in Zděchov. He cooperates closely with members of the LA 21 Working Group consisting of public, non-profit, and private sector partners. In contrast to the Uherské Hradiště case, actors of the LA 21 partnerships in Zděchov are the same as the actors of the partnerships in culture. Thus, culture really represents an overarching framework of sustainability. The communication process in the partnerships is based especially on informal information flows between the Cultural Commission and local fellowships. Similar to the Uherské Hradiště case, the LA 21 projects are initiated by both the LA 21 team and local citizens and fellowships. Thus, a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches is applied also in Zděchov. The LA 21 coordinator stresses wide public participation in the decision-making process. Thus, public hearings and questionnaire surveys on development issues are conducted in Zděchov. Regularly high survey return rates confirm these strategies are successful. Innovative methods of public participation are sought as well. For example, children were asked to draw their dream school garden, and their suggestions were subsequently used in the garden reconstruction project.

The Program of Rural Redevelopment is the main strategic document in Zděchov. This document was approved in 1992 and is updated annually. Culture is stressed in the document because of its importance for the social cohesion of the municipality. LA 21 does not have its own long-term strategic plan in Zděchov, however, a complex strategic development plan is being elaborated currently, respecting the LA 21 principles. Development projects are generally financed

from various sources, including the municipal budget and regional, national, and European grants. The organization of cultural events is supported by the volunteer work of local citizens.

Conclusion

Although culture is not explicitly mentioned in the general definitions of sustainable development, there are close links between culture and the economic, social, and ecological dimensions of sustainable development. Culture is an important factor of social cohesion and economic development, and culturally-led urban and rural regeneration projects may also have positive ecological impacts. Not coincidentally, sustainable development strives to maintain cultural diversity on the local level and official methodological documents mention the protection of cultural heritage as a fundamental LA 21 activity (for example, CEI 2001 and 2003). In spite of LA 21 being an extremely complex concept, the Zděchov case shows that efforts to preserve local culture and self-identity may be the main impetus in accepting the LA 21 principles in culturally rich communities.

The case studies presented in this article point to complex links between LA 21 and culture. Uherské Hradiště is a culturally rich city and progressive in the LA 21 implementation process. However, the case study shows that the LA 21 process and culture live their own independent lives in planning processes because of limited overlaps between the LA 21 and cultural partnerships. Thus, the question arises: Would closer integration of LA 21 and culture bring fruitful results in the implementation of sustainable development goals? Current plans to update the Strategic Development Plan of the city and to create a new LA 21 strategy represent a challenge, but the strong position of culture in the existing Strategic Development Plan supports Jon Hawkes' concept – culture has the potential to become the fourth overarching pillar of sustainable development in Uherské Hradiště.

Zděchov tells a completely different story of a relationship between culture and LA 21. The small mountain municipality is characterized by the quality of its environment and rich cultural life. The overlapping cultural and LA 21 partnerships are the reason why local culture has become an overarching framework, or the fourth pillar, of sustainable development in Zděchov. The goal to maintain and develop local culture was the prime motivation behind the decision to accept the LA 21 principles in 2009. As in Uherské Hradiště, Zděchov does not have a long-term strategic plan for LA 21. However, the ongoing work on a strategic development plan offers room for further qualitative shifts in the Zděchov LA 21 implementation process.

The two case studies presented here share several common characteristics. LA 21 has stimulated public interest in both municipalities. A large number of citizens participate in the LA 21 events, public hearings, and questionnaire surveys. Moreover, increasing numbers of local actors are getting involved in the LA 21 implementation process, supported by a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches. Furthermore, LA 21 is perceived as a good brand for project management. Overall, LA 21 represents an important tool of good governance, and one that was officially certified in the Czech Republic in 2006. Culture may become an important motivation for LA 21, especially in small municipalities, and our future research will focus on characteristics of municipalities where local culture is the main pillar of LA 21.

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