

# Sustainable development, international cooperation and local authorities

## Ruşen Keleş

*The author is a Professor of Local Government and Urban Studies at the Faculty of Political Science, Ankara University and Eastern Mediterranean University. He served as Director of the Ernst Reuter Center for Urban Studies as well as Director of the Center for Environmental Studies, Ankara University for many years. His numerous publications include The Politics of Rapid Urbanization: Government and Growth in Modern Turkey (New York, Holmes and Meier, 1985), Housing and the Urban Poor in the Middle East: Turkey, Egypt, Jordan and Morocco (Tokyo, IDE, 1986), Urban Management in Turkey (Ankara, Turkish Social Science Association, 1988), Urban Poverty in the Third World: Theoretical Approaches and Policy Options Tokyo (IDE, 1988). Dr Keleş has been a correspondent of Ekistics since 1965. He is a member of the World Society for Ekistics (WSE) and has also served as a member of its Executive Council. The text that follows is a slightly edited and revised version of a paper presented at the WSE Symposium "Defining Success of the City in the 21st Century," Berlin, 24-28 October, 2001.*

## The need and the concepts

Cities play an important role in meeting the goals of sustainable development. Worldwide, city-based producers and consumers account for most of the renewable and non-renewable resource consumption and waste generation as noted in the Brundtland Report. Meeting the current needs of urban populations should not acquire the dimensions to constitute a threat to sustainability of development.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the priority actions have to be centered on reducing both wastes on the global environment. Such initiatives may include reducing fossil fuel consumption through energy conservation, more efficient transportation systems, and reducing the amount of waste through pollution prevention.<sup>2</sup> There is no doubt that these longer term ecological concerns are relevant to all cities in the way of development, for as they grow and prosper, their consumption of resources and generation of wastes will rise accordingly unless action is taken now to promote the efficient use of resources and the minimization of wastes.

Sustainable urban development, sustainable urbanization and sustainable cities have become the concepts used frequently in the literature especially during the 1990s. It is assumed that sustainable development can be realized only when master planning is directed to minimize total needs, to promote public transportation, to conserve fertile agricultural

land, to avoid wasting other sensitive ecological resources, and to enhance energy saving in building designs and layouts. This would certainly require carrying out sustainability in city planning processes through regional resource inventories, vertical and horizontal coordination among all public authorities and private entities involved in regional resource management and development of renewable resource strategies. In other words, sustainable urban development may be understood as the maximization of the efficiency in the use of resources, maintaining natural resource stocks at or above their present level, social equity in the distribution of development costs and benefits and the avoidance of unnecessary foreclosure of future development options.

According to a definition of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), the ideal sustainable community is characterized by such factors as environmental integrity, economic vitality and social well being.<sup>3</sup> Urban sprawl, congestion, increasingly poor air quality, and the shortage of land for affordable housing are some of the symptoms of unsustainable urban development. Trends in population growth, physical expansion of the city compounded by the ideology of economic growth and increasing levels of consumption are some of the factors further intensifying these symptoms.<sup>4</sup> The Earth's non-renewable resources are being depleted, mountains of solid, liquid and toxic wastes pollute the air, water and soil, and threaten local and regional habitats. As these current trends persist, it becomes more clear that solutions to seemingly environmental, economic and social concerns are linked and require more holistic solutions. This is the reason why environmental, economic and social policies have to be integrated in order to ensure the compatibility of all these elements.

The urban physical environment is a complex mix of natural elements such as the air, water, land, climate, flora and fauna, and the built environment such as buildings, infrastructures and urban spaces constructed or modified for human habitation and activities, aesthetic and historical heritage. While social values, behaviors, laws and traditions influence physical development, the environment influences human behavior and social relations.

Two characteristics of urban areas give way to consequences that may be detrimental for sustainable development. First, inhabitants and enterprises depend on natural resources to live and on natural processes for breaking down or diluting their wastes. Second, urban areas can concentrate a large range of environmental hazards, such as biological pathogens in the air, water and soil, chemical pollutants and physical hazards.<sup>5</sup> In other words, city-related environmental problems abound as rapid urban growth proceeds.

Therefore, through an official planning process, it is necessary to provide a framework for guiding the spatial development of human settlements in such a way as to minimize the environmental costs. Implementation of such policies is a shared responsibility of different levels of government, particularly the local authorities, the business community and the local people, in an understanding of partnership approach.

The main policies targeted at ensuring sustainable development may be summarized in the following categories<sup>6</sup>:

- Conservation, protection and enhancing of natural areas and life forms;
- Promotion of compact community policies;
- Optimization of density potential of existing urban areas;
- Limitation of the use of the car through the maximization of the use of public transport alternatives, including commuter rail, buses, bicycles and walking;
- Promotion of a sense of community, and creation of opportunities for social interaction;
- Preservation of the coherence of the landscape;
- Ensuring that environmental considerations and the precautionary principle become an integral part of the plans, policies, programs and projects;
- Integration of the concept of "net environmental gain" in assessing development;
- Encouragement of the development of medium-sized cities as a network of complementary urban settlements to big cities, in order to develop a more balanced hierarchy of human settlements, which will be sustainable; and,
- Encouragement of the utilization of already built-up areas so as to limit urban sprawl.

It is a surprising coincidence that the European Urban Charter (1992) encompasses, in each of its chapters dealing with urban rights, principles of sustainable urban development that originate from the main philosophy of sustainable urban development. The rights connected with transport and mobility, environment and nature in towns, the physical forms of cities, the urban architectural heritage, housing, urban security and crime prevention, disadvantaged and disabled persons in towns, sports and leisure in urban areas, culture and health in towns, citizen participation, urban management and urban planning, economic development of cities are all regulated there with due regard to the principles of subsidiarity.

Particularly, the role of local authorities in ensuring sustainable development is carefully emphasized in the following terms:

- Local authorities should adopt policies to prevent pollution.
- Local authorities have a responsibility to protect nature and green spaces.
- City centers must be safeguarded as important symbols of identity, and of the European culture and historical heritage.
- The provision and management of open space in the city are integral parts of urban development.
- It is essential that the volume of travel, particularly the private car, be reduced.
- Multiculturalism and non-discrimination are fundamental aspects of urban policies.
- Citizen participation in political life must be safeguarded through the right to elect representatives, freely and democratically.

International Environmental Law, Environmental Politics, Urban Environmental Management, Local Government, are the major disciplines that constitute the general framework in which the goals of urban sustainable development can be addressed and resolved.

## International cooperation

There are numerous bilateral and multilateral international mechanisms through which sustainable development can be realized. Cooperation among Mediterranean countries is an example. The Mediterranean countries have already taken action through a policy of cooperation. Seventeen Mediterranean countries signed in 1976 the Barcelona Convention for the implementation of a Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP) under the auspices of the UNEP. In addition and since 1990, the World Bank and the European Investment Bank (EIB) have combined their efforts in the Mediterranean under the Mediterranean Environmental Technical Assistance Programme (METAP).

As a UNEP-supported initiative, the Mediterranean Action Plan is an action-oriented cooperative effort today involving 20 countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea as well as the European Union. Within the framework of this cooperative endeavor, the Mediterranean countries are determined to meet the challenges of environmental degradation in the sea, coastal areas and inland, and to link sustainable resource management with development in order to protect the Mediterranean Region. The Barcelona Convention with its six additional protocols constitutes the so-called Barcelona System which aims at curbing pollution, protecting the natural and cultural heritage, ensuring the sustainable management of coastal zones and integrating the environment and development.

The Mediterranean Commission on Sustainable Development, established in 1996, is in charge of serving as an advisory body to MAP on such issues as sustainable management, sustainable development indicators, eco-tourism, information, awareness and public participation, free trade and environment, industry and sustainable development, and urban management.

## The role of local authorities

Several programs exist in order to enable local authorities to play their role in ensuring sustainable development better. Agenda 21 reflects a global consensus towards integrated policy making concerning environment and development. In its Chapter 28, local authorities in each country are called upon to undertake consultative processes with their local populations in order to achieve a consensus on a Local Agenda 21 for and with their communities. Since 1992, in about 2,000 cities in more than 70 countries, local agenda 21 campaigns have been started.

The Istanbul Declaration (1996) adopted the strategy and principles of partnership and participation as the most democratic and effective approach for the realization of the commitments made during the Habitat II Conference. Paragraph 180 of the Habitat Agenda deals with decentralization and strengthening local authorities.

To increase local autonomy and participation in decision making, implementation, and resource mobilization and use, to support local authorities to acquire revenue-generating capabilities, to enhance the performance of local authorities, to enable them and their associations to take the initiative in national and international cooperation, and to share good practices and innovative approaches to sustainable human settlements management were among the recommendations of the Habitat II Agenda.

Moreover, various UN-supported urban environment activities, such as the Sustainable Cities Programme (SCP), Localizing Agenda 21s, the Urban Management Programme

(UMP), are all designed to improve the performance of local authorities to enable them to make sustainable urban development be established and persist.

## Legal framework for international cooperation at local level

It is assumed that most of the urban development strategies are designed by the central authorities. However, local governments will have an increasing role in ensuring sustainable development. As noted in the Brundtland Report, the institutional and legal structures of local governments in many developing countries are inadequate. The lack of political access to an adequate financial base and a growing centralization make local authorities weak institutions that could not gain the expertise, autonomy and credibility needed to deal with local problems. In order to be able to address the problems of urban development, city governments need enhanced political, institutional and financial capacity.

Four opportunities available to local authorities may be mentioned in this context.

### The European Charter of Local Self-Government

This convention was adopted by the Council of Europe in 1985. It has now been signed by 38 member states and ratified by 34 out of a total of 43 states. Belgium, France and Ireland are the non-ratifying EU member states as is Switzerland.

The Charter sets out the fundamental principles of local autonomy. The basic philosophy of the Charter rests on the belief that the degree of local autonomy enjoyed by local governments may be regarded as a yardstick for a genuine democracy. It aims to guarantee the political, administrative and financial independence of local authorities and it intends to commit the states that ratified the Charter to comply with its basic principles.

Local self-government, according to the Charter, denotes the right and ability of local authorities to regulate and manage a substantial share of public affairs, under their own responsibility and in the interest of local populations. They should be free to exercise this right through the decision-making bodies freely elected. In addition to the existence of elected councils, recourse to direct citizen participation (such as having assemblies of citizens, local referendums, etc.) has to be open to citizens.

The principle of subsidiarity is defined in the Charter in the following terms: "Local authorities shall have full discretion to exercise their initiative with regard to any matter that is not excluded from their competence nor assigned to any other authority. And public responsibilities shall be exercised by those authorities which are closest to the citizens. Allocation of responsibility to another authority will be allowed only depending upon the extent and the nature of the task and the requirements of efficiency and economy." The same principle is also enshrined in Article 3/B of the Maastricht Treaty.

Central control and supervision over local authorities is limited to the control of compliance with the law and with constitutional principles (legality control). State supervision with regard to expediency of the actions and decisions of local authorities is not allowed in principle. In order to be regarded as genuinely autonomous public entities, local authorities have to be provided with financial means which are commensurate with their responsibilities. The provisions of the Charter concerning their financial resources, equalization procedures and the safeguards for their political independence, all tend to strengthen local authorities in such a way as to carry out

their functions in an appropriate way.

Consultation is another element of local autonomy which requires that local authorities be consulted in due time and in an appropriate manner, in the planning and decision-making processes for all matters which concern them directly. A final component of the concept of local autonomy, which is considerably important from the point of view of international cooperation for sustainable development, is the provision entitling local governments to form consortia and to have the right to belong to a national or international association for the protection and promotion of their common interests.

### The Aalborg Charter

The Aalborg Charter is the second international document according to which nations can cooperate for the protection of the environment, through their cities. The First European Conference on Sustainable Cities and Towns gave birth in 1994 to one of the most important documents on sustainable development at the local level. Nearly five hundred local authorities coming from 35 European countries and representing more than 100 million European citizens have signed up to the Charter.

The Charter maintains that the city or town is both the largest unit capable of addressing the many urban architectural, social, economic, political, natural resource and environmental imbalances damaging our modern world and the smallest scale at which problems can be meaningfully resolved in an integrated, holistic and sustainable fashion. Therefore, it suggested that policies and the principle of sustainability be integrated into all policies. Thematic issues dealt with in the Aalborg Charter cover a wide range of spectrums from urban economy and social equity to land use patterns, urban mobility, responsibility for the global climate, prevention of ecosystem toxification and local self-governance. The Charter gives a clear message that economic development, social welfare and protection of the environment cannot be achieved separately from each other.<sup>7</sup> Perceiving citizens as the key actors and the involvement of the community in ensuring sustainability in addition to political, technical, administrative and economic tools and instruments for urban management towards sustainability characterize the basic philosophy of the Aalborg Charter.

### The Aarhus Convention

The Aarhus Convention is an important international legal instrument adopted in 1998 by the European Economic Commission for Europe, that is relevant to international cooperation for sustainable development. It is literally called the Convention on the Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters. Parties to the Aarhus Convention engage themselves in taking proper enforcement measures in establishing and maintaining a clear, transparent and consistent framework to implement the provisions of the Convention. States are also invited to make appropriate practical provisions for the public to participate during the preparation of plans and programs relating to the environment, within a transparent and fair framework.

It is beyond any doubt that a proper implementation of the Aarhus Convention will provide a unique opportunity to all concerned with environmental protection to contribute to the realization of sustainable urban development.

### Transboundary cooperation

Local authorities in Europe are encouraged by a convention adopted by the Council of Europe to establish transboundary relationships in economic, social, cultural, environmental

matters (Madrid, May 1980). This is the European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Cooperation between Territorial Communities and Local Authorities.<sup>8</sup> It has been recently strengthened by two subsequent protocols in 1995 and 1998, respectively. The matters to be dealt with within the framework of transboundary cooperation are urban and regional development, energy, nature and water conservation, protection of the atmosphere, mutual assistance in disaster relief and the like. There is room for European territorial communities and authorities to enhance their cooperation for sustainable development by ensuring flexibility in administrative procedures, to remove the legal objections before fruitful cooperation and to equip territorial communities and authorities with necessary financial and other means.

## Conclusion

In order to achieve sustainability and to meet the needs of rapid urbanization, international cooperation in both technical and financial fields is vitally important.

With respect to the institutional context for urban cooperation, the capacity and orientation of urban governments have to be changed. Local governments are not only responsible for urban policies and environmental management, but they also act as facilitators and enablers of action by all interests in the society.

States should remove all kinds of obstacles before the neighboring territorial authorities to develop transboundary cooperation. The Framework Convention for Transboundary

Cooperation provides broad opportunities for local and regional cooperation towards sustainable development. Participatory land use planning, pollution control, transport planning, environmental impact assessment, economic and financial matters, administrative reform and public education, together with all aspirations expressed in the European Urban Charter, may form a suitable basis for cooperation.

## Notes

1. World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 6.
2. The World Resources Institute et al., *The Urban Environment*, World Resources. A Guide to the Global Environment, Document II, June 1996. A special report from World Resources Inc., 1996-1997, p. 14.
3. Economic Commission for Europe, *Guidelines on Sustainable Human Settlements, Planning and Management* (New York and Geneva, 1996), p. 25.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
5. OECD, Development Assistance Committee, Working Party on Development Cooperation and Environment, 21st Meeting, Paris, June 2000, *The Urban Environment and Development Cooperation, A Resource Book* (Paris, 2000).
6. ECE, *Guidelines*, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-27.
7. Anthony Payne and Peter Löffler, "The Aalborg Charter: Cities and towns on the move towards sustainability," *Naturopa*, no. 89 (1999), p. 4.
8. Council of Europe, *European Treaty Series Nos: 106, 159, 169, 194*.