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## Local sustainability in Hungary – an analysis of the factors that determine the low number of LA21 strategies

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### Abstract

The concept of sustainable development is currently one of the most important concepts in the world. The implementation of the global idea is in the hands of local communities. The success of LA21 initiatives largely depends on two important factors: the bottom-up initiatives of the community based on voluntary participation and the support from the national government. In the case of Hungary we examine central government initiatives to date, as well as the factors that determine the success of bottom-up initiatives. As an illustration we present some of the findings of a survey we conducted in the micro-region of Gyöngyös.

### Keywords

sustainable development, local agenda, social participation, national government

### Introduction

In recent decades it became clear that the environmental polluting and energy wasting life-style of mankind leads to the degradation of natural resources and to an ecological catastrophe in the long term, so nowadays much more emphasis is put on sustainability and environmental friendliness. Sustainable development strategies are prepared at every level of government, at the local, regional, national and international level, and, as Kuti and Szabó explain: “nowadays a new form of macro level planning is sustainable development strategies” (Kuti – Szabó, 2003:1).

Even though the idea of sustainable development has been known for decades, and it has become an expression used in everyday life, the concept is still unclear: as it is used in a wide range of contexts there are a number of definitions and interpretations available. According to Daly (1991) it is not a problem as the debate about sustainability has led to the consensus that it is a mistake both morally and economically to see the world as a business enterprise. He also thinks that the elaboration of the idea of sustainability reflects society’s recognition that it is a necessity to stop the chase for growth. Even though there are a number of interpretations, it is very difficult to give a concrete definition of sustainability (Magda – Bozsik, 2010). The complexity of the phenomenon can be demonstrated by the interpretation given by Csete (2005), who states that sustainability is a way of life, thinking, production and consumption which embraces all dimensions of human existence: the relationship to natural resources, economy and society.

Since the notion was elaborated, several interpretations of sustainability have emerged. The most important ones are weak and strong sustainability, and also anthropocentric and ecocentric approaches. The main difference between these interpretations is how they evaluate the rearrangements between the different types of capital (natural, human and technical capital) supported by technical development, and inside natural capital. While the conditions of *weak sustainability* allow rearrangements between the different forms of capital, in the case of *strong sustainability* the elements of the different sub-systems cannot be interchanged. The aggregate value of natural resources cannot decrease with time. According to the *anthropocentric approach* mankind and nature can be

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separated, humans have command over nature, thus environmental limits can be neglected. According to the *ecocentric approach* mankind is an elemental part of nature and can only exist in harmony with nature, thus it has to pay great attention to the carrying capacity of the environment and must not overstep it, that is to say this approach does not allow interchanges among natural capital either.

The circumstances in which the idea was elaborated, and the environmental problems and disasters which occur more and more often nowadays, suggest that the interpretations which allow natural values to be changed for manmade values are not appropriate. It is becoming apparent that the destruction of the environment has led to changes which endanger the life circumstances of future generations and the future of our planet as well. It means that environmental interests must have priority over economic and social ones in almost every case, as we do not know what the irreversible level of environmental damage is, and neither do we know which environmental elements future generations will prioritise. Bearing this in mind, global environmental problems can only be handled with the principle of precaution, and still we can only hope that we have not reached the level of environmental damage which is irreversible. The principle of precaution is particularly important in case of those resources which are scarce. It means that such resources should come to the fore which are capable of reducing shortages, ones that are unlimited on the human timescale (Magda, 2010).

### **The objectives of the research**

Sustainable development aims to affect the future of mankind by reforming the relationship between economy, society and the environment, an aim which can only be reached with the active participation of the community. For this reason, Agenda 21 requires local and national authorities to prepare sustainable development strategies and to pay great attention to involving the community. It is essential to handle economic and social issues together with their environmental effects, to identify the problems and to work out possible solutions in accordance with the efforts of the community, and to choose and implement the most appropriate ones.

According to the *Treaty of Amsterdam*, sustainable development is a prominent area and also the overall aim of the European Union (EU), so the European Committee undertook the task of the propagation and distribution of the idea of Local Agenda 21 as one of the elements of the *Rio Agreements* (UNCED, 1992). In 1994 with the participation of several European municipalities the *Aalborg Charter* was concluded which commits the signatories to the Local Agenda 21 process and to the elaboration of long-term action plans aiming at sustainability. The *European Sustainable Cities and Towns Campaign* which was established together with the *Aalborg Charter* aims to build up networks between signatory municipalities and between existing networks of municipalities and to extend the number of participants of the Charter (CEC, 2006:40). However, there are only a few signatories to the Charter from Central and Eastern Europe, four of which are from Hungary. The situation is not very encouraging in the field of local sustainability in Hungary. Although there are initiatives that can be described as ones that were prepared in the spirit of local sustainable development, there are only a few municipalities which have working, formalised sustainability strategies (e.g. Szécsény Város Önkormányzata, 2010; Rév8 Józsefvárosi Rehabilitációs és Városfejlesztési Zrt., 2010).

One of the most important messages of sustainability is that the consultative process between the local government and the community can have far reaching consequences which can influence the municipality's life for a long time. In our paper we explore the inhibitive factors bearing this

duality in mind, as the lack of top-down initiatives together with the low number and the low support of bottom-up approaches have led to this unflattering image for Hungary. With the help of national documents and relevant literature we analyse the factors that describe the commitment of national governments: the role of the national sustainable development strategy and its possible effects, legal constraints that bind local governments to deal with sustainability, financial resources which are available for the implementation of initiatives related to local sustainability, and available guides and case studies.

In the case of local communities we examine the role of local governments and citizens, and the role of some other possible stakeholders such as the media. We illustrate our findings with some of the results of the questionnaire survey we made among local governments and citizens in the micro region of Gyöngyös. In a mainly rural area like this the topics of rural development and sustainable development are largely related and can only be interpreted together (Magda et al., 2009). The intent of our survey was the examination of the potential for local sustainability. The questionnaire concentrated on the following topics:

- The weight of economic, social and environmental factors in the life of the municipalities, the ranking of problems connected with these factors.
- The existence of the documents which could serve as a basis of local sustainability strategies.
- The extent to which the resident population can be mobilised, local citizens' role in the preparation of documents that influence the life of the municipality, and the extent of co-operation between the local government and the population.
- Initiatives related to sustainability at the municipalities, the opportunities and constraints of preparing local sustainability strategies,

In the first part of the questionnaire we gave information about the aim of the research and ensured respondents about confidential handling of the data they provide. We asked all local governments in the micro region to fill in one questionnaire, and 60% of them, (15 local governments), returned the completed questionnaire. We also received 184 evaluateable community questionnaires. We also aim to show in our paper how the inhibitive factors can be reduced.

### **The importance and aspects of local agendas**

Local sustainability strategies are crucial preconditions of sustainable development. The *Declaration of Rio* states that „environmental issues are best handled with participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level” (UNCED, 1992:2). In accordance with it *Chapter 28 of Agenda 21*, which is also known as *Local Agenda 21* (LA21), states that local communities play an important role in the implementation of sustainability as they are aware of the area's circumstances and requires local authorities to „undertake a consultative process with their populations and achieve a consensus on “a Local Agenda 21” for the community”. It goes on to say „Through consultation and consensus-building, local authorities would learn from citizens and from local, civic, community, business and industrial organisations and acquire the information needed for formulating the best strategies. The process of consultation would increase household awareness of sustainable development issues. Local authority programmes, policies, laws and regulations to achieve Agenda 21 objectives would be assessed and modified, based on local programmes adopted” (UNCED, 1992:285).

In short, when preparing a local sustainable development strategy the general aim is to work out and implement programmes with the active participation of local governments and the active

support of the community which are based on the principle of sustainable development (Szlávik – Pusztai, 2001). by examining countries which are successful in the implementation of local sustainability we can see that the distribution of power between the national and the local level and the appropriate relationship between the different levels are important elements. The success of LA21 initiatives depends on two important factors, one is the bottom-up initiatives of the community based on voluntary participation and the other is the high level of support from the national government.

### **The role and tasks of central government**

The commitment of central government to sustainability issues is essential as it determines the local level's attitude to local sustainability. The role taken by central government can be of different sizes. In many cases the success of local sustainability strategies is based on the high level of support from central government in the form of campaigns, financial support and the coordination of the process. Beside these it is necessary to alter the legal background: such laws are needed which support the process of local sustainability and it is also essential to allocate financial instruments for local communities to formulate and implement a new type of sustainability programme.

Some authors (e.g. Lafferty – Coenen, 2001) share the opinion that national governments have to deal with the local sustainability process but they must not strive to lead the process as it can lead to the dominance of national priorities over local ones, which can make the local community become uninterested and local initiatives lose impetus. It means that central government must be cautious about local sustainability: it has to support it but must not force local communities to act as it wishes them to do. Its role can best be described as a facilitator; it has to convince communities that the local sustainable development strategy serves the interests of the community, it has to provide information in the form of brochures and guides, which enable local communities to initiate local processes and to elaborate independent initiatives. It also has to provide financial instruments for implementing these initiatives. The best way is when top-down ideas and bottom-up initiatives are also present, and with a strategy acceptable for both sides communities manage to implement the elements in it.

Governments across Europe are aware that they have responsibility for the issues of sustainability. Their main tasks are the following (Lafferty – Coenen, 2001:277):

- Setting up an administrative focal point for coordination and information dissemination;
- Producing manuals, guidelines, books and training opportunities;
- Providing funding for research and pilot studies;
- Providing direct funding for promoting LA21 initiatives.

It is worth examining what steps the central government of Hungary has taken in these areas, and whether it intend(ed) to play the initiative role or just let, but not help, local initiatives emerge. Earlier, contrary to European trends, the Hungarian government did not show significant interest in the topics of sustainable development, although it tried to meet the expectations of the EU. However, in the last few years the process of sustainability has gathered momentum. In June 2007 the *Hungarian National Sustainable Development Strategy* (MKK, 2007) was prepared, in February 2008 the *National Climate Change Strategy* (MKO, 2008), and in October 2008 after almost a year of preparatory work the *National Council for Sustainable Development* was founded, the aim of which is to foster the implementation of sustainable development in Hungary. The Council also works for the propagation of local sustainability; in the course of 2010 it asked eight municipalities to prepare their own local agenda as a pilot project.



### **Administrative focal point**

An administrative focal point for coordination and information dissemination, where not only experts but also politicians at the highest level are present, has been set up: the task belongs to the Prime Minister's Office. Local sustainable development strategies can emerge under the auspices of the national sustainability document, and financial resources available for local sustainability derive from governmental organisations such as ministries, and ministerial or inter-ministerial committees. One of the most important tasks of the national governing body is the preparation of the national sustainable development strategy. The demand for it was officially drawn up by *Government Decision 2064/2004*. (MKK, 2004) in March 2004. The most important characteristics of a sustainable development strategy are the holistic system approach, objectives that bring in new ideas, long enough time horizon and interpretation as a learning process (Gáthy et al., 2006). The final version of the strategy was worked out taking these characteristics in view in June 2007 (MKK, 2007). The strategy specified 11 priorities in three areas.

The national strategy acknowledges the importance of local sustainability strategies but it *does not provide guidance to local communities*. The priorities and action plans of the national strategy can serve as a point of reference when making local strategies, but it does not dispose of the legal background and the financial conditions of strategy making. It stresses that it is important to make local strategies, but it does not give reasons to this statement and does not indicate the primary aims of strategy making.

### **Legal background and funding**

By creating the legal background of local sustainability strategies communities get some guidance about the requirements which derive from national initiatives and the rights and opportunities provided by them.

In Hungary after the change of regimes, the old laws which deal with the protection of the environment were gradually replaced by new ones. The most important requirement of the new laws was that they should harmonise with acquis of the EU. The most important of these from the point of view of our research is *Law 53/1995. on the protection of the environment* (MKO, 1995). One of the aims of the Law is the elaboration of the harmonious relationship of mankind and the environment, the high level, aligned protection of the environment, its elements and processes, and ensuring sustainable development. It also laid down the tasks of local governments connected to environmental protection. As a legal act which defines the tasks of local governments related to sustainability has not been worked out yet – current laws of the country only state that local governments can make local sustainability strategies (Government Decision 2064/2004) (MKK, 2004), but no financial resources are allocated for this task, – this law is the one which provides the most exact list of tasks about sustainability.

*The question of financing is also essential.* As local governments are underfinanced across Europe and the resources are bound by law, central government programmes can provide resources for preparing and implementing local sustainability strategies, for starting pilot projects and for the recognition of efforts in the form of applications and prizes. Although the application tenders of the *New Hungary Development Plan* (KEOP, TÁMOP, KÖZOP, GOP) pay attention to the harmonious, sustainable development of the environment, the economy and society, and contain several elements of sustainability as well as some flagship projects (e. g. „clear town – green countryside” programme), which can be connected to sustainability, we do not have information about starting pilot projects or applications and awards which aim for local sustainability.



### **Guides and case studies**

Another major task of central governments is the propagation of the process of local sustainability. We can find good examples for spreading the concept of sustainability, for making informative guides for the population and stakeholders of local sustainability in several countries of Europe: a number of books, guides, manuals and case studies are published, conferences and courses are organised for experts and interested stakeholders. It is highly important as the control of the process is the task of well-trained experts. The training of these experts is realised at professional conferences. These meetings allow networks of participants to be established which can make the exchange of experience and consultation possible.

In Hungary the situation in this field is not encouraging. A few guides and manuals were published, but beside these, only a few books and case studies, publications in scientific journals (e.g. Csete – Török, 2008; Vászárhelyi, 2003), some diploma works (e.g. Dankó, 2006) and PhD theses (e.g. Csete, 2009) deal with this topic. International literature is not or only indirectly available in Hungarian, which makes the stream of news harder. It also means that international trends and initiatives reach Hungary rather late. The number of conferences and trainings dealing with local sustainability is also very small.

The training of experts is a vital area, but the process of sustainability can only be successful if a great proportion of the local community supports it. Local governments – as the leaders of this process – must strive to involve the community in the process of decision making in as great a number as possible so that decisions would not reflect the preferences of a small group of people. Although papers are presented at several conferences in this topic, they only reach a small audience. So it is a common task for central and local governments to propagate the notion of sustainability for the community. It is central government's task to ensure that the population is informed about the idea and the priorities of sustainability, and it is up to local governments to inform the people about local problems and opportunities. The media can play a major role in this process, mainly public service national and local television – as beside the Internet they are the population's main source of information – and national and local newspapers. Local governments' own publications can also be the mediators of the topic.

### **Tasks at the local level**

Although the ideas and initiatives of national government in the field of local sustainability are important factors, *Local Agenda 21 is traditionally based on the participatory methods of the local community*, through the initiatives of the population local solutions are worked out to solve the global problems related to sustainability. Initiatives based on social participation are of great importance with respect to local sustainability, as the implementation of *Local Agenda 21* does not have a strict course put down in a standard, there is only an algorithm of implementation, which may largely differ according to the nature, the circumstances of the region and the timing of implementation (Szlávik, 2002).

The success of local sustainability strategies relies heavily on the participatory methods and initiative skills of the local level. Participatory methods ensure that the aims indicated in the strategy reflect the priorities of the public, while initiative skills help to establish innovative solutions for local problems. Communities choose a purposeful (goal-oriented) value-oriented action when considering the future development of their municipality (Hudecková – Pitterling, 2009:597). It is a requirement that local agendas should be worked out at the local level based on the consultative participation of the population.

Participatory methods are the condition of the bottom-up approach. There are many aims which can unite people and make them form different groups. Sustainable development is a complex idea, no wonder that several organisations are interested in sustainability, more precisely the future of the local community, the formation of the economy, society and the environment. These organisations are the motive powers of local sustainability. They work out concepts in their professional area which can be the basis of the sustainability strategy for the community. As democratic traditions are strong and social capital is high in many countries of Europe, there are several organisations for which the formation of the future and the environment is important. For this reason individuals are willing to take part in working out and implementing a sustainability strategy sacrificing their free time. These initiatives which are based on participation methods in the community put local sustainable development strategies in motion (Szlávik, 2002).

A minimal level of welfare is necessary in the society so that it could concentrate on working out solutions for global environmental problems. This economic security is missing in Hungary and this creates unfavourable conditions for the emergence of sustainability. Social tendencies are also unfavourable. In the economy there are only a small number of initiatives which point towards sustainability (support for more sustainable production methods, incentives for using alternative types of fuel etc.). Impoverishment of the population and the decay of people's health are the most serious contingencies for society. Environmental problems occur more and more often for example in the form of extreme weather conditions (such as the flooding across Central Europe in June 2010) Due to the restrictive economic policy the situation is not probable to improve, but a further decay can be expected.

Lafferty and Coenen (2001:278) listed five aspects which are necessary for the success of bottom-up initiatives. They are the following:

- an active and politically mobilised population;
- interested and motivated civil servants;
- local politicians with a particular concern for environmental issues;
- positive international contacts and networks;
- existing environment and development initiatives.

### **Social participation**

Regarding the active and politically mobilised population the question is how much local communities are sensitive to environmental problems, how much action they are willing to take against them and whether their initiative, skill and social capital are enough to handle environmental problems on their own. In case of strong democracies people are pleased to take part in defining the objectives of the community, which means that the efficiency of decision making and the quality of governance improve. Due to the political system before the change of regimes, democratic traditions in Hungary are still weaker than in Western Europe. In Hungary, where people got used to the fact that decisions were made above them by central government, it cannot be expected that the community has an opinion about and position on an abstract idea like sustainability. *The society lacks social capital, which is the basis of bottom-up approaches*, and as a consequence communities are unable to affect decision making significantly. While in other countries strategies are made with the participation of several organisations (such as environmental groups, trade unions, local media, universities and research institutes), and the initiatives derive from these, in Hungary there are fewer civil organisations in general, and in particular ones that are interested in and willing to work for sustainable development. The number of volunteers is not enough either. Altogether it means that civil

organisations have not yet managed to become a force which could influence common thinking.

Csath (2002) refers to the analysis of the Swiss *Institute for Management Development* (IMD) about social capital, in which Hungary belonged to the countries which were at the bottom of the list in all four categories – social cohesion, quality of life, business ethics and social responsibility. The reasons Csath gives are the following:

- The dramatic change caused by the change of regimes;
- Unclear privatisation affairs;
- The query of the neutrality of jurisdiction;
- The survival of the previous relationship networks;
- Old-new chains of relationships;
- The emergence of mafia groups;
- Distrust towards political parties.

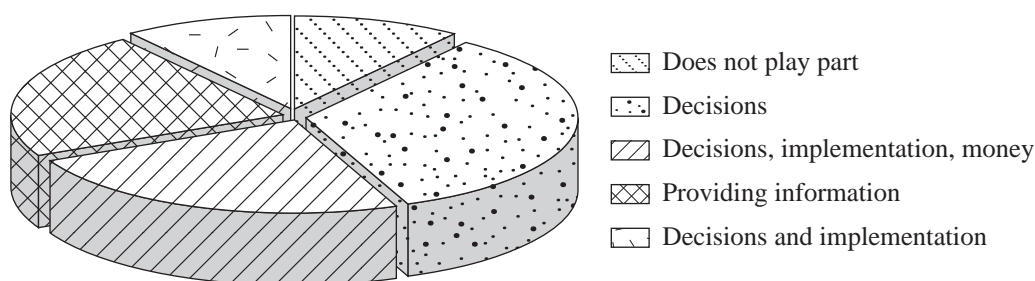
The statements in the study are still true even today, so it is not surprising that there is no real progress considering social capital, the initiative skill of the community and bottom-up approaches.

Regarding the active and politically mobilised population, it is worrying that it seems that people are interested in social problems only if they are affected by them personally. Similar things can be said about environmental problems; the difference is that people are less willing to work against them. There are some events (e.g. floods, Paks, cyanide poisoning on the river Tisza) which evoke public interest and indignation, but by now they have only temporarily allowed environmental issues to come to the fore. Maybe the toxic sludge catastrophe near Ajka in 2010 will reveal the importance of taking environmental aspects into account.

According to Kerekes (2007) the number of green party politicians indicates the priorities of society about the environment. At the first five Parliamentary elections since the change of regimes in Hungary in 1990, no green political parties managed to get at least 5% of the votes and thus get into the Parliament. Environmental protection was not an important issue in party politics and the values of the parties represent the values of society. In the parliamentary elections in the spring of 2010 neither environmental protection, nor sustainable development was mentioned as a main area of interest in the communication materials of the major parties. The appearance of the party LMP (Politics Can Be Different) on the political scene and its declared goals can bring in changes in this respect.

Another inhibitive factor is the lack of information. In the order of values of the society environmental issues fall behind, the reason of which is the lack of information. The media plays a huge role in influencing this order by introducing the essence of the vision of sustainable development. In Hungary problems concerning the environment – although their presence in the media is getting stronger – do not attract the attention of the media, environmental issues only manage to get into the media when there are sensational or scandalous events (such as the cyanide pollution on the river Tisza or German waste near Kecskemét). After public interest in these events decreases, there are no environmental reports for a long while, even though there are still a lot of environmental problems (Baják – Kuti, 2006). An example for this is the toxic sludge catastrophe near Ajka, which – because of its implications – may not allow public interest to be diverted from environmental risks. That makes the stronger presence of sustainability – its principles and values – in the media desirable, with special emphasis on the role of individuals and local communities. It is the only way to make people aware of the fact that even though sustainable development is a global notion, its implementation is in the hands of local communities.

To introduce the notion of sustainability to the public it must be shown how local solutions contribute to the improvement of global environmental issues, as well as that it does not require impossible efforts and financial sacrifice from citizens, but with a little attention to the environment significant improvement can be reached. In the micro-region of Gyöngyös we found that the most important role of the community is providing information, participation in decision-making and in the implementation of decisions. While all local governments say that the community takes part in the municipalities' life in some way, 12% of the citizens' questionnaires contain the answer 'the community does not take part in the municipalities' life' (Figure 1), which makes us believe that there are some social groups that local governments did not manage to involve.



**Figure 1: The role of the community in the life of the examined municipalities**

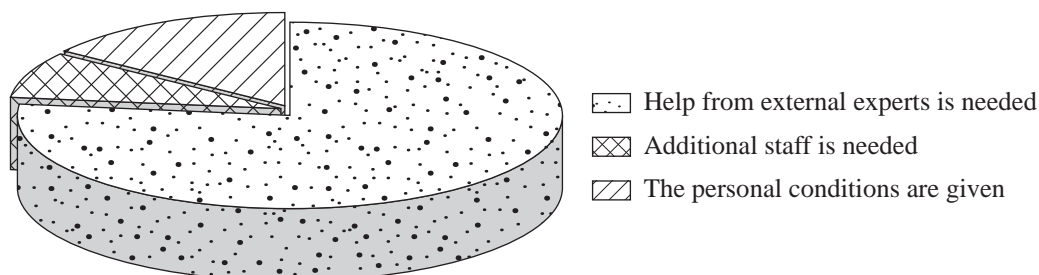
Source: our own composition

### Civil servants and politicians

Local governments (especially small ones) also have to tackle with the lack of expertise. Although they employ environmental experts, the number of civil servants who deal with environmental topics is low. Beside the required activity they hardly have time for their own initiatives, one of which for example the support of the process of sustainability could be. As a consequence, environmental programmes and development plans are prepared with the help of external experts (e.g. consultant companies), so the priorities of these documents are only partially in accordance with the real priorities of the community. These strategies contain several elements which are inadequate for people to adapt to.

In many cases local politics is an instrument of party politics, politicians sometimes support issues which are against the interests of the local community, although in affairs that affect the life of the community it seems to be easier for politically counter-interested parties to make a compromise – especially if the affair becomes the centre of the community's interest. Politicians are usually quite positive about environmental issues – it is not easy to explain a decision against environmental interests. In Hungary green parties do not have loyal voters, so their candidates only rarely manage to get into local government bodies. In a country like Hungary, where the number of local initiatives is minimal and almost all of the strategies emerge by the commitment of the mayor, the personal involvement of the mayor – as Szilávik (2002) describes seems inevitable.

About  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the examined municipalities in the micro-region of Gyöngyös would have difficulties preparing a local sustainable development strategy on their own; they would have to enlist the services of external experts (Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Personal conditions of local sustainability at the examined municipalities' local governments**

Source: our own composition

Among the local governments that do not want to hire external experts, there are some who would have to hire additional staff to be able to perform this task. It means that the proportion of local governments which possess the personal competences to prepare their own sustainable development strategy is only 14%. It demonstrates that the lack of expertise is a major inhibitive factor of local sustainability for smaller municipalities.

### International contacts and networks

Even though local governments have several cultural, economic etc. relationships with other municipalities, these relationships are not connected to sustainability, so the exchange of experience is not the aim of them. Only a small number of Hungarian municipalities take part in the work of networks related to sustainability. It is characteristic that among the signatories (more than 2700) to the *Aalborg Charter*, which is an important document of local sustainability, there are only four Hungarian municipalities, Aba, Kecskemét, Monor and Nagykanizsa (The Aalborg Commitments Secretariat, 2010). It is a small number if we take into account that there are 3152 municipalities and 174 administrative micro regions in Hungary.

The lack of national commitment has a bad influence on municipality leaders, who underestimate the importance of the topic. It can be connected with the lack of information, most Hungarian municipalities are not aware of the local aspect of sustainability, nor of the initiatives in this field, and thus do not take part in networking. As there are only a few manuals, guides and case studies about sustainability, the lack of interest from local governments and the default of local strategies can be experienced.

Taking part in such networks usually has a financial side, municipalities which take part in them have to pay an annual membership fee, which is – knowing the financial background of Hun-

garian municipalities – also against being a member. All Hungarian municipalities which are members of such networks either had a special aim (mostly they expected financial support) or there are some leaders or prestigious people at the municipality who are committed to sustainability, which made them undertake the requirements of the membership. As a result of all this there is only a small number of local governments which have been connected to the concept of sustainable development.

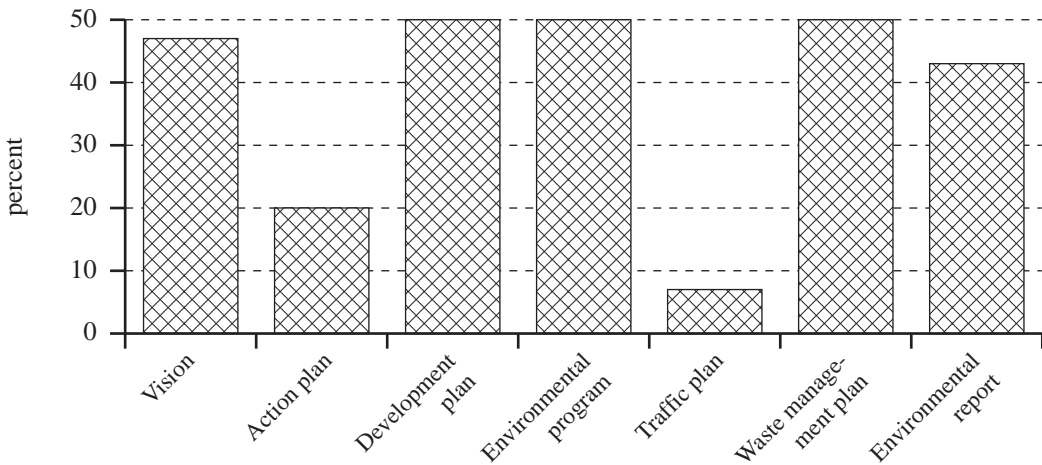
It is a positive fact that many municipalities have relationships with foreign municipalities who could take part in such networks or initiatives and can serve as a role model for Hungarian municipalities in this respect. Although the examined local governments of the micro-region of Gyöngyös have claimed for and won a lot of financial resources provided by application tenders of the EU, among the declared goals of which sustainable development can be found (e.g. the applications of Dél-Máttra 11 Leader+ Action Group, City Towards EU Compliance Award of the EU won by the municipality of Gyöngyös in 2001), none of the examined municipalities takes part in the work of international networks or initiatives the primary aim of which is related to sustainability.

### **Existing documents**

Existing development plans of municipalities can be used when working out a local agenda for the community. It is a positive fact that most local governments in Hungary have already worked out documents which could be used when formulating a local agenda. Since 1995 local governments are legally bound to make environmental programmes, and if they fail to perform this task they lose a small proportion of financial resources. Beside environmental programmes, economic and municipal development plans and waste management plans are common. Some municipalities possess traffic plans and health programmes as well. The initiatives related to sustainability which can be found in these documents are quite important, as they can form the basis of a future formalised sustainable development strategy.

In the micro-region of Gyöngyös we examined what proportion of local governments has documents which are related to sustainability (Figure 3). While about half of the municipalities have a vision type document, only 20% of them have an action plan which defines how this vision should be put into practice. *It means that municipalities are aware of their goals and targets but they do not know how to reach them.* The existence of action plans is quite important as the mobilisation of the community can be implied by them.

Development plans, environmental protection programmes, waste management plans and environmental reports are found at the municipalities in almost the same proportion: about half of the municipalities have worked out one. The only type of plan which is an exception is traffic management plan. It is easy to understand if we mention that the examined municipalities are rather small ones and no major road crosses them except for one, which is the seat of the small region, and because of the closeness of the motorway the traffic in the municipalities is not very high.



**Figure 3: Existing documents of the examined municipalities (our own composition)**

## Conclusions

*Firstly* we can say that local sustainable development is not treated according to its importance in Hungary. Although the slogans of (local) sustainable development have partly been built into central government materials, as there is no international pressure and there is no social pressure for local sustainable development strategies, the issue has been reduced in priority. The national sustainable development strategy was elaborated late, the legal background of local sustainability is not set and no financial resources are provided directly for that. There are only a few manuals, guides and case studies about local sustainable development.

*Secondly*, community leaders are not committed to sustainability. Many municipalities have documents which could form the basis of a local sustainable development strategy, but as the number of environmental experts employed by local governments is small, external experts are needed.

*Thirdly*, democratic traditions are weak in Hungary and social capital does not reach the level which is necessary for bottom-up initiatives. People are difficult to mobilise. There are few civil organisations and environmental groups are weak. Environmental interests usually fall behind economic ones.

Taking all this into account it is not surprising that there are only a few local governments where some leaders or prestigious citizens are committed to sustainability which have initiatives related to sustainability.

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