

# Local Agenda 21 Process Facilitation

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## Environmental Communication and Self-Experience Development in Latvia

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### Abstract

The university-municipality partnerships proved to be the main driving force behind enhancement of *Local Agenda 21 (LA21)* process in Latvia, particularly in terms of development and wide application of *incremental environmental communication* – four partite cycle of information, education, participation and environmentally friendly behaviour components – and *self-experience facilitation* as two basic LA21 process facilitation instruments and precondition as well. *LA21* application projects in Latvia has been designed, realized in practice (at different level of self-governance with various success and further continuity) and also studied as municipal case studies. Perceived understanding of the LA 21 process development until now and necessity to elaborate further steps ahead is leading us to formulate some *basic preconditions – principles and approaches, working models and instruments* – required to be fulfilled now and here in Latvia for any successful continuation.

### Introduction

Successful application of sustainable development principles is determined by its realization in the public administration level closest to inhabitants – in local municipalities. Local Agenda 21 (*LA 21*) or Sustainable Development Action Programs (SDAP) for local and regional levels are to be elaborated in municipalities for the integration of sustainable development's principles into municipal every days practice and promotion of cross-sectorial cooperation, and this is to be done in direct and compulsory community consultation process.

*Local Agenda 21* process in Latvia as the same elsewhere in Eastern Europe has begun later than in the Western and Northern part of Europe and occurs gradually and occasionally, notably because of the general lack of joint international and particularly state support as well as minor self-interest of municipalities – municipalities has been missing basic information and it was not in practice really clear what for and what exactly and through what kind of means can take

place for LA21. Nevertheless the growing experience of the most successful *LA 21* processes in Latvia does not practically differ in quality from the rest of the world. Activities which in substance correspond to *LA 21* content (int. al. elaboration of municipal environmental policy and action programs etc.), but are not respectively named as LA21 take place more widely and actively – energy management projects, national water and waste management upgrade implementation programs at the local and regional level etc. have to be noted as well. For the time being *Local Agenda 21* process has been started in relatively few municipalities in Latvia, i.e., 20 different level municipalities declare this for international inquiries, but since these are mostly town municipalities, including the capital city – Riga, then formally we can conclude that in the overall almost 50% of all inhabitants of Latvia live in these sustainable development approaching municipalities.

Municipalities of Latvia like ones from other countries participate in cooperation with different international organizations as well as successfully do realize various networking projects. Cooperation with International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI), Baltic Local Agenda 21 Forum (*BLA 21 F*), Union of Baltic Cities (UBC) and others, int. al. in elaborating sustainable development strategy for cities of the Baltic Sea region, shows good progress. Many municipalities are involved in the Alborg Sustainable development Charter process since its very beginning and have signed accession papers.

Experience gained from sustainable development pilot projects in Riga, Jurmala, in the Bartava and North-Kurzeme regions etc. [1, 2], allows a LA21 process evaluation to be made showing that several Latvian municipalities have practically passed through the first steps of experience and acquired the major skills needed for sustainable development planning:

- the first sustainable development concepts and strategies at the regional/subregional municipal level have been developed;
- methods for public involvement have been developed and tested, the recommendation for appropriate activities prepared, etc.;
- methods for the preparation of sustainable development indicators (bottom-up, top-down) have been developed, tested and applied;
- municipality level sustainable development strategic plans and action plans have been elaborated;
- the first models for sustainable development action programmes covering the various levels of local government have been developed and tested.

In Latvia as well as in other countries the *LA 21* process has been launched very differently, activities and number of local and regional municipalities varies as well, nevertheless, *LA 21* already puts the most active municipalities in a considerably better environmental and economical position than others. Sometimes

process realization is too formalized, without substantial changes in municipal administration and public participation.

Local Agenda 21 action programs are being developed not only in municipalities, but also in schools for example, which also acts as an important catalyst for local Agenda 21 development. However, it will take a much *longer time* and, most importantly, *innovative approaches and instruments*, to begin really full scale implementation of local Agenda 21, as significant changes are required in the everyday management of municipality activities and the organization of Agenda 21 work, the identification and involvement of major target groups, and the securing of necessary resources.

## **Chapter 1: LA21 in Latvia: Application Principles and Approaches in Practice**

*LA21* application projects in Latvia have been designed, realized in practice (at different level of self-governance with various success and further continuity) and also studied as municipal case studies. There is to be recognized step-wise LA21 process development in Latvia with following general governance level characteristics:

- preparatory stage at national level – neither real top-down nor bottom-up activities developed, however national strategy elaborated and implemented under monitoring as well as national Council established (at the Ministry of Environment);
- related occasional activities at regional/ district level (except full scale process launched at North-Kurzeme coastal region) – e.g. initiatives on healthy communities;
- local level – pre-dominantly a top-down approach is developing with very limited public involvement, initiated mainly by:
  - international projects (EU, Baltic region or bilateral) – “outside force” and financing facilitation,
  - active and for LA21 interested municipal employees looking for different options to initiate at least separate LA21 related activities,
  - few municipal LA 21 centers established.

Public participation and partnership development between the main interested stakeholder groups indeed characterizes LA 21 development in the country. We can list most active and process influential actors:

- Interested individuals – municipal administrators and specialists,
- Knowledge institutions (universities, professional NGO’s and also new consultancies),
- International project partners (municipalities and others),

- Ministry of Environment, particularly Environmental Protection Fund,
- Groups/ associations of neighbour municipalities (voluntary agreements as inter-municipal cooperation facilitation and also optional legal transitional stage within national administrative-territorial reform).

Actors in supportive roles, for the time being could be listed as follows:

- Local inhabitants – established local/ regional professionals (individuals/ non-formal groupings) interested and self-involved in local development activities (also searching for post-experience post-graduate interdisciplinary education);
- environmentalists, planners, governmentals, teachers, social and culture workers etc.;
- Latvian National association of municipalities (incl. all sub-associations);
- National NGO's, particularly those with regional/local chapters;
- First citizen groups established.

Perceived understanding of the LA 21 process development and the necessity to elaborate further steps ahead is leading us to formulate some *basic preconditions – some principles and approaches, working models and instruments* – required to be fulfilled now and here in Latvia for any successful continuation at all.

One principle appears out of a general notion of integrative and disciplinary realization of the possibility of LA21 process and its documentation. LA21's ongoing processes and the main actors involved clarifies the need for reconsidering the following *principle – mutual interlinkage of integrative and disciplinary LA21 approach models* [2] – to be done in both theoretical planning and in practical realization. Consequently, elaborations of sustainable development planning and SDAP guidelines (usually the first written material in Latvian municipalities at the beginning of LA 21) in particular, can be further developed, namely:

- elaborated as a separate document and process (*disciplinary model*) – LA 21,
- integrated in all existing plans (*integrative model*) and/ or used in elaborating new development strategy plans, projects etc.
- mutually integrated and interlinked processes and documents – integrating both approach models above (*mixed model*).

For municipality is still an evolving multifunctional system in the current conditions of general development in Latvia and taking into consideration existing LA21 cases of experiences, both sustainability implementation models shall be used as much as complementary and mutually integrative e.g. mixed model.

Also in the context of sustainable development planning in municipalities in general (in seminars with interest group participation in particular) the quality of the achieved results in LA21 elaboration was ensured by the elaborated integrated *methodology*:

- *integration* of strategic planning *and* action planning approaches
- mutual *integration* of the different, frequently separated *municipal operational sectors* in the planning process (in the seminar)
- elaboration of sustainable development *indicators* used for planning and measurement and later evaluation of the *achieved progress* in sectorial or LA 21 context (preferably visions and aims), especially realizing it in a community-initiated way.

Another principle that appears important nowadays in Latvia is related to all three LA21 process implementation models [2, 3] – the participatory process itself, the cross-sectorial and interdisciplinary content of LA21 process and also the action planning structure models. These implementation models for local sustainable development action programming are both exploratory/ explanatory for training/ education purposes of municipal specialists and understanding/ awareness development of the general public, but also can be successfully realized in practice if taken into account as a coherent whole for LA21 planning and management at local/ regional municipalities. There is following principle – complementarity of tripartite process, content and structure LA21 implementation models.

In Latvia there are already experiences of all three traditional LA 21 application approaches starting by top-down and bottom-up cases and continuing by LA 21 centre intermediation. Also there are the first elements of new innovative cases of LA21 application approaches – instrumental integration and disciplinarisation approaches, including 3 different and interesting sub-approaches taking into account existing conditions in Latvian municipalities. The following is the list of case studies developed and explored in Latvia and four Local Agenda 21 *process approaches* that have been formulated:

- Municipalities Pledging Approach – City Council Planning (Jurmala city LA21 top-down planning case),
- *Public Involvement Approach – Region Agenda 21 Participatory Process (Bartava grouping of municipalities LA21 bottom-up involvement case),*
- *Intermediary Facilitation Approach – Regional Agenda 21 Centre (North-Kurzeme coastal region LA21 centre case).*

Instrumental Integration and Disciplinarisation Approaches:

- Ecotourism and Local Integrative Development and LA21 (ecotourism as a tool and municipality development sector)
- Local School Agenda 21 for Municipality LA21,
- Cultural Heritage for LA 21 – Museum Involvement Case (approach, tool and centre).

Particular interest could be taken of the very last one mentioned as a perspective of culture environment to be used as a *cornerstone for LA 21* process development in comparison to the traditional European approach via environmental protection. It seems to be thoroughly embedded in Latvian culture heritage development traditions.

Also all four process approaches are by definition complimentary and the best possible application must be relevant.

A case study designed, developed and implemented in North-Kurzeme coastal region (Dundaga, Roja and Kolka municipalities) – “Livonian Green Coastal region 21” was realised as the LIFE ENVIRONMENT project – has been aiming to tackle most if not all eventual approaches, to apply some of the models and to widely use communication instruments and techniques [2]. The case study results permit us to conclude, that a combined version of all four LA21 process approaches has been tested successfully (however with different degrees of quality fulfilment) and proves to characterize the fifth process approach – *facilitation as structural network approach*.

Public participation in general and all stakeholders co-operation for sustainable regional development is to be facilitated via:

- separate innovative demonstration projects (particularly successful model in Latvia) or other type of activities, but shall be
- planned and participatory, implemented as a coherent networking program (also to be seen as demonstration network).

Components of this coherent whole approach were developed as a kind of regional sustainable development action program (structural network):

- conflict resolution and partnership practice as an overall framework,
- round table forum and public participation as a bottom-up process,
- council for sustainable development of region as a top-down process for collaborative and integrative decision planning,
- regional *Agenda 21* centre as an intermediary facilitation and partnership coordination,
- rural communication and information network as well as regional sustainable development implementation demonstration projects etc as an instrumental integration and sectorial development.

According to the North-Kurzeme case particularly but also taking into account other case studies it is to be concluded that university-municipality partnerships proved to be the main driving force behind enhancement of the LA21 process in Latvia, particularly in terms of *incremental environmental communication* development – information, education, participation and environmentally

friendly behaviour – and *self-experience facilitation* as two basic LA21 facilitation instruments (instrumental approach) and also preconditions.

When preparing and taking a decision on the *planning and practical implementation* (parallel processes!) of sustainable development in ones own municipality, it is vitally important to start with the *experience and ideas* that have been crystallized in different municipality development projects in Latvia. Likewise, work has to be started from scratch, as every municipality has their own forerunners even if they are called something else. However, in LA 21 work it is important to choose approaches and models corresponding to the needs of the present development level of the rural areas, to choose concrete first steps and projects for *every individual, i.e. subsequently different municipality*.

Our experience as one the initiators of LA 21 in Latvia shows that it is important to start LA 21 with *local initiatives* (int. al. those from the advisors) with situation study and evaluation, consideration of the community and interest groups opinions and their participation, as well as in creating initiative groups and project development, etc. Further we will separately deal with some of the theoretical, as well as practical approaches in local initiative creation and particularly with environmental communication and so called *self-experience* development (experience acquired by stimulated active work of the individual that at the same time is applied in the further acquiring of experience). It should be pointed out that the ultimate result is a “resonance and openness for action” and the most important conclusion drawn from our experience is to do everything that could promote creation of positive attitude towards innovations in municipalities so as to encourage the local experts and local population to accept the new ideas and opportunities, initially at least paying attention to and desirably considering them.

## **Chapter 2: Environmental Communication – four Partite Cycle Development**

Environmental awareness being one of the main preconditions for sustainable development, maintenance and improvement of environmental quality, in practice, for the general public and for every one of us can be expressed as environmentally friendly action in any field of life; work, leisure and social activities as well as active participation in decision making processes on sustainable development. Since environmental or sustainability problem solutions are strongly correlated to the level of knowledge, understanding of a situation and sense of responsibility then not only politicians and environmental/municipal specialists, but everyone of us, when in local areas and confronted directly with those problems, becomes the decision-maker – taking action or staying aside.

Sociological researchers in Latvia often have also shown [3, 4] that the public is not well enough informed on different environmental issues and also the role of

the state institutions and municipalities has been evaluated as quite low. Unfortunately information and education instruments are not always incorporated in the environmental management projects, the information process is traditionally fragmented and information is located at different institutions and organisations and the public does not know which establishment/ institution should be addressed and what the options are for involvement in decision making process. Also there is insufficient coordination between non-governmental environmental organisations and lack of purposive and positive sustainable communication programs. This hinders the development of effective environmental management and environmental friendly life styles. Subsequently, the development of different representation forms for promotion of dialogue and seeking compromise among official institutions and various public target groups is no doubts essential and so already perceived at the environmental protection development stage.

Results of the assessment of LA21 activities and also public environmental awareness development in Latvia indicate the need for an *environmental communication system and related process* development with involvement of all main actors in the field – Ministry of Environment and it's institutions, other ministries and institutions, municipalities, general public and public organisations, business organisations, mass media and educational establishments et al. Pretty often the application of information/ education principles is complicated as the cooperation between different target groups in the context of environmental policy implementation is just under development because of the continuing process of self-organisation of different target groups..

To encourage dialogue and development of a mutual agreement process and to ensure formal and informal cooperation and environmentally friendly behaviour of inhabitants, different target groups and institutions of public administration, not only the development of normative acts and other traditional instruments, but also innovative creation of the necessary preconditions, incl. complementarity of communication components/ steps and effective mechanisms of implementation are required.

Taking into account all of the above and after testing the effectiveness of new approaches elaborated during LA21 facilitation processes in Latvia environmental communication could be defined more comprehensive and extensive as traditionally used to, particularly including also action oriented part, aimed and created by “information and education flow” – public response and participation. Environmental communication is then viewed as multilateral information exchange and *cooperation enhancement process* based on and including four following components:

- information and
- public education (target groups oriented),
- participation and

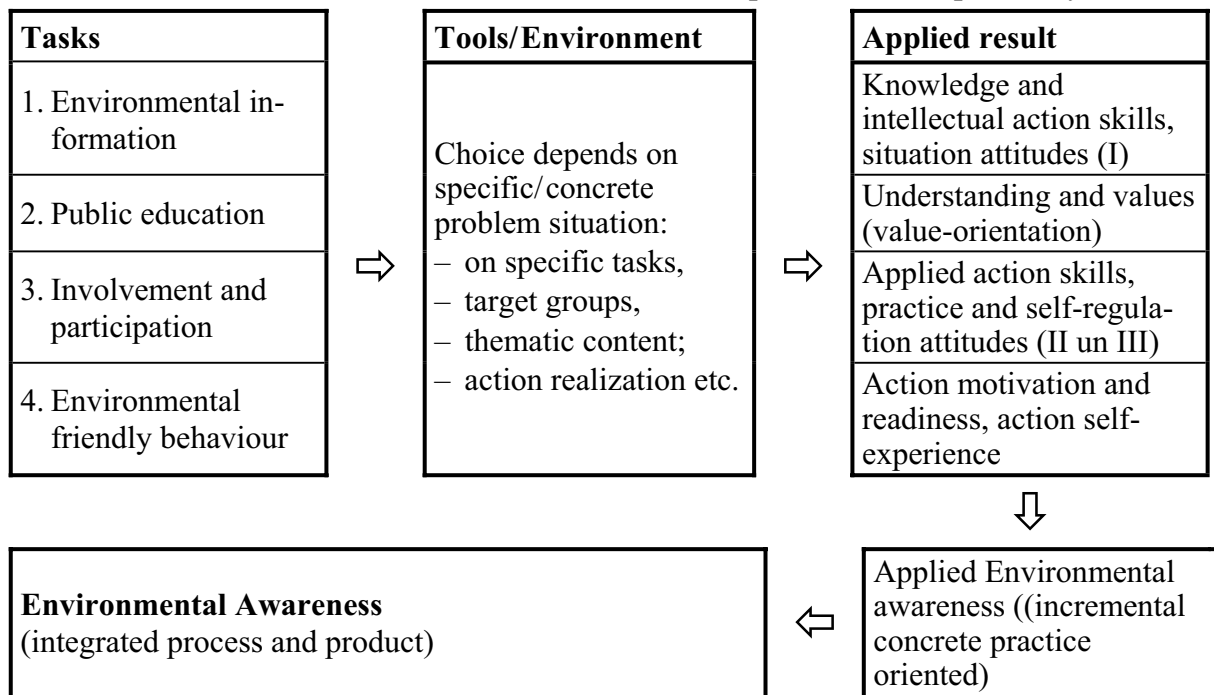


- environmental friendly behaviour,
- being required for successful development of identification, assessment, decision making and implementation phases of environmental management.

Hereafter we propose an innovative *model of incremental environmental communication cycle* [3]. This figure (see Table 1) demonstrates the linkage between environmental communication tasks or the cyclic basic steps of communication process and pedagogical/practical results that within the particular cycle ensure applied and concrete practical case oriented environmental awareness development. Within the multi-cycle integration – the process of repeating and inter-supplementary *self-experience* development is facilitating general environmental awareness enhancement.

Appropriate environmental communication results have been measured as knowledge and practical skills, understanding and ability to solve environmental problems, self-regulation attitudes, motivation and readiness for concrete action and obtained experience for case related target groups as well as each individual in general.

Tab. 5: Incremental environmental communication process – four partite cycle model



The four partite incremental environmental communication cycle model demonstrates the necessity for all *four basic elements and their direct and cyclic interaction* within the *environmental communication* process. This is identified in the definition and latter development of National Environmental communication and education strategy [4] which can be mentioned as one of the nation wide applications of this theory and practice based development.

### Chapter 3: Local Initiative and Self-Experience Development

Putting environmental communication theory developments into practice appears to be crucial for local population/ interested individuals and local experts/ specialists/ decision makers to create a further self-organized application working towards local municipality development [3]. If we pose simple questions on human cognition and perception, particularly in the process of learning and take a look at our capability to perceive information and learn practical activities, we can easily draw a conclusion that one of the most effective life long learning approaches is the “Learning By Doing And Doing By Learning”.

Elaboration and testing/ application of this approach in practice in Latvia turned out to be further designed into a complex of LA21 process facilitation activities for local interest groups and individuals as a kind of self-experience development tool-box. So successful LA21 process start-up and local ongoing facilitation, esp. in rural areas, depends directly on following *self-experience development tool-box components*:

- Self-active development,
- Project ideas,
- Community involvement wave,
- Interest groups,
- Facilitation team,
- Local experts involvement,
- Environmental communication emphasis.

#### Self-active Work Development

This approach of ‘learn by doing’ is advisable when working with Local Agenda inception in the local municipality. Far from always having to actually be done in real life, in many cases you can illustrate in a simple way or with a model and imitate self-learning in process, i.e. ‘play’ it in the learning room, e.g. with an advisor or self organised self-experience seminar on LA 21. For more than five years we have consistently applied this approach in praxis in municipality training, and particularly in Sustainable development projects. It has always yielded good results, even when working with ‘compulsory sent’ or initially negative oriented participants of courses, seminars, co-planning and discussion meetings. Needless to say there are active people in all municipalities at different levels.

#### Project Ideas

Even very specific training seminars, public discussions, planning meetings etc would have to be organised at the local level. Moreover, the self-experience work would have to result in concrete *local development ideas* that the partici-

pants could come up with on the spot and immediately publicly present, i.e. discuss. This would lead to already formulated, and most importantly, practical results, namely *project forerunners*. It gives people an opportunity to see the results of their work directly and serves as a motivation to continue to work on the further development of the project together with the associates immediately after the training activity. As the experience of the municipality projects indicates, the projects based on the ideas of local experts and local population and implemented by the same people are the most successful.

### **Community Involvement Wave**

The long term success of any municipality local development project, let alone LA 21 projects, depends on the *possession of knowledge and essentially involvement* of the community which does not require hundreds or thousands of people. It is enough in some cases to have 10-20 actively dedicated representatives of the community. Besides, sometimes it can be achieved during a one day seminar with the participation of some enthusiastic individuals or, for instance, by conducting a public survey (broad, but focused surveying of the community, i.e. families, etc.) with participation of local activists and an active feedback after it. In this way, step by step, and particularly through further work of the local activists after the seminar, a “community involvement wave” is created.

### **Interest Groups**

Community involvement and support and encouragement of separate active individuals is of great importance. However one has to work towards involvement of the main professional and other *public interest groups*. Participation of both formal and informal groups ensures a successful unfolding of the specific seminar, work team, discussion group or public forum, practical development of forerunners to be implemented in the municipality, resonance in the community (serving as a trigger for action at the local level in the municipality), as well as change in the local people opinions on *initiation of the community involvement process*. The theory and praxis in Latvia proves that most effective planning is carried out in a team, since the result achieved is more comprehensive and of better quality. Most importantly it is more creative and thoroughly discussed, besides the many local authors behind it usually carry it out as well.

### **Facilitation Team**

A team is a well organised *group of local activists* – motivated and active people with an initially determined and accepted common goal (work vision) – that works in a new quality. They work in close cooperation, and harmonious spirit, *complementing and supporting each other*, consequently achieving more than if working

alone. The team members highly value the results of the work and are collectively responsible for it. They achieve results of good quality applying new and often *unusual and original solutions* produced by joint efforts. When starting work with LA 21 creation in a municipality or when applying the well-balanced approach to a separate sector, problem topics or even simple projects one should try to form teams consisting of 3-7 active individuals, most importantly by encouraging and maintaining any *motivation* to achieve the planned results.

### **Local Experts Involvement**

We should also emphasize that for the municipality development projects that necessarily require involvement of external experts, i.e. different advisors and consultants, it is crucial to involve in the *preparation and execution of the commissioned work* local experts and activists, or representatives of NGOs too. Thus facilitating acquisition of highly precise knowledge on the local situation and implementation by their own efforts, as well as *local self-experience development*.

### **Environmental Communication Emphasis**

Irrespective of the involvement maturity level of the specific community in Latvia one would have to launch an environmental communication (information, education and involvement of the community, examples of environmentally friendly activities) and the specific communication forms. Municipalities that already have the experience have to develop it further as it is the main prerequisite for local development in general, and LA 21 development in particular. We have also to highlight a seemingly *unconventional* method for community involvement and interest creation – self-experience *seminars* – application for local community target groups self-experience and initiative development seminars in municipalities. This approach has proven to be effective not only in municipalities ‘beginners’, but also for project planning and development in already active municipalities where the involvement of the communities at large, individual activists and the main target groups, and/or interest groups is not widely developed – consequently all Latvian municipalities.

Some of the initiatives brought forward can be implemented rather simply, others will require a longer period of time (even several years). The latter can be an indicator of a certain degree of maturity of the society, and the seminars demonstrated that there are some realistic ways for implementation. Further implementation will chiefly depend on the cooperation between the local community initiative groups and the community target groups. In most of the cases the seminar has served as a real trigger to start initiative implementation.

In self-active work seminars in municipalities their creators and/ or leaders (independent experts) only suggest and open the main topics of the seminar, as well as organize teamwork of the participants, guide and stimulate discussions, generation and formulation of proposals. Most importantly all of the *seminar participants*, representatives of the main interest groups and target groups and local activists through interactive team work during the main part of the seminar have themselves put forward, evaluated and prioritised the specific *local ideas* and will do the further developing of the ideas and projects *during the seminar and later in praxis*. The seminar output is not only information acquiring and exchange, but also involvement and development of concrete ideas and projects, comprehensive self-experience and mastering of action means, finding of cooperation partners, which is also important for further development of the projects, deeper knowledge on the local activists and leaders/organisers.

The Latvian public opinion is concerned not merely with economic development. Elements and parts of local agenda for sustainable and democratic development in local and district municipalities (possibly not well enough structured yet) that joint local economic, social and environmental resources in the development of their territory and community can be observed.

## Conclusions

*LA21* application projects in Latvia has been designed, realized in practice (at different level of self-governance with various success and further continuity) and also studied as municipal case studies. *LA21* process development will take a much *longer time* and, most importantly, besides traditional also *innovative approaches and instruments* elaborated and applied. *Basic preconditions* (besides traditional resources necessary) are to be developed in Latvia – applied *LA21 principles and approaches* as well as emphasizing development of *incremental environmental communication – information, education, participation and environmentally friendly behaviour – and self-experience facilitation toolbox applications*.

There are in Latvia experiences with all three traditional LA 21 application approaches starting with top-down and bottom-up cases and continuing by LA 21 centre intermediation. Also there are elements of new innovative and really impacting cases of *LA21* application approaches – instrumental integration and disciplinarisation approaches as well as a combined version of all four *LA21* process approaches. This has been tested and proves to be characterized as the fifth process approach – *structural network facilitation approach*.

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