

How ICLEI was created

Maurice Strong created the Earth Council immediately after the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro expressly for the purpose of coordinating the implementation of Agenda 21. Earth Council sponsored a world conference in Rio, March 13-19, 1997, called Rio + 5, to measure progress toward implementation of the Agenda. The following interview was conducted by [Joan Veon](#) during the conference. The interview is with Jeb Brughmann, who is the Secretary-General of the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI). This interview first appeared in the [March/April, 1997 issue of Eco-Logic](#) magazine.



Joan Veon

JV: ICLEI was started in 1990, two years before UNCED. What prompted the creation of ICLEI?

It is a very interesting story. It is an American story. Throughout the 1980s, local government officials, about 600 of them, organized in a network called "Local Elected Officials for Social Responsibility" and their concern at that time was primarily addressing the local impacts and the international development impacts of American foreign policy. You may remember cities declaring themselves as sanctuaries for refugees from El Salvador and Guatemala, divesting from South Africa, establishing sister-city relations with the Soviet Union and this movement built and demonstrated the capacity of local governments to have an impact in international affairs so when the Cold War came to an end, we, in the movement decided that we had to identify the next phase of activities for local government involvement and it was clear at that time that we should focus on the global environment. In 1989, a group of 30 American cities gathered at the American Academy of Sciences and Engineering with Sherwood Rolands, who is a chemist who received the Nobel Prize for discovering the depletion in the ozone layer, and we held a meeting to determine how cities in the United States could implement the Montreal Protocol to phase out CFCs at a time when the Bush administration was unwilling to include language in the Clean Air Act to actually put the Montreal Protocol into effect. These 35 cities passed local ordinances to phase out CFCs in a very rapid time schedule. That hit the media. It was a front page story and the top evening news story in the national media one weekend. It happened to be the weekend that George Bush was making his announcement about the Clean Air Act and a kind of David-Goliath dynamic got set up where the local governments were saying, "Were willing to lead, if you're not, Washington." It had a real impact on the final outcomes in Washington. But that alerted the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) to the Potential of local governments and we got a call the next day by the head of UNEP in New York, inviting us to come to the UN to have a global meeting of local governments to determine how we could play a similar role in other global environmental accords, and that is the background story.

JV: Jeb, how did you get involved? You obviously have been there from the beginning. What was your role and were you surprised to get a call from the UN?

We were surprised, because we were aware that we were having an impact but we never thought of a direct relationship between local government and the UN which is an organization of countries. I got involved with local government in the early 1980s as part of this broader peace and human rights movement. I was actually the Director of the City of Cambridge, Massachusetts Peace Commission, a very unusual city agency. It was through that Commission that we were able to build this international network. But now the ICLEI is a worldwide organization. We have 250 city members from about 60 countries. They represent about 150 million people. What we have discovered is that through the concrete practical actions of the cities at the local level, we can have a real measurable impact on global environmental trends.

JV: You talked earlier about the cities doing a number of things - sanctuaries, sister-cities in the USSR, taking separate action when they did not agree with the political trends -- what kind of role did that play in the evolution of your organization?

That was the pilot test experience to determine if people acting locally could actually influence international policy of governments and could have an impact internationally. We found that we were having impacts. Cities divested 10's, if not hundreds of millions of dollars from businesses involved in South Africa. That had an impact. That brought it to the state level. From the state level, as they divested, it brought it to the Congress and eventually, Congress changed its policy. These sanctuary city policies, which in fact, in some cities still are in effect today, raised the profile of that issue and one and a half years later, the Supreme Court ruled that the Immigration Service of the United States was in violation of U.S. law in sending these refugees back. So in case after case, in concerted, local action, that we could have an impact on things that are supposed to be outside the domain of local concerns - foreign policy issues.

That was one thing to do in a period of great international tensions, but we were always hoping to have a positive impact in terms of being able to create something. What we have found since Rio, the Earth Summit, is that so many of the agenda items in Agenda 21 actually cannot ever be implemented without local governments and communities taking action. So that is what we are about today making sure this agreement among nations actually will get implemented after all the rhetoric is spent.

JV: It is really powerful as you speak. In 1990 you said you were approached by the UN; was it a surprise to understand the power you had?

Well, I am obviously a great advocate of local government. I believe that that is the level of government which will survive and has historically survived the crises, the revolutions in the world. The government in the Soviet Union in Russia has changed many times, but the Cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg have always been there. When we look at the environmental movement, people have always seen local governments as a part of the problem, but if we take a bigger perspective, it was in New York City, it was the

municipality, in the 19th century that was the first government in the United States to invest in making a major environmental infrastructure investment. That was to build a sewage and drainage system in New York City. Local governments over time, have in some way, been at the forefront of investing for environmental protection. Right now as we approach the end of the century, local governments in the United States account for 65% of the total public expenditures on the environment. So what we have realized is that there is a tremendous amount of resources and capacity to take action and not just to talk about policy.

JV: You have grown substantially. Let's talk about the United States and then internationally. You started, if you will, as a grassroots group a number of years ago. Now that you have been tapped by the UN, how has that influenced what you are doing; what do you see now as your mandate?

Now we are able to plan ahead a bit more rather than react to an international policy in figuring out what we can do with it. We get engaged in the design of that policy. As the United Nations is right now negotiating an international treaty of dealing with the climate change problem, the cities are at the table. In the U.S., 45 cities have joined an international "Cities for Climate Protection Campaign." Their commitment as participants in that campaign is to develop a local action plan to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. The U.S. EPA is giving full support to this activity financially. In fact, the cities are reporting to the EPA on their emissions reduction so the U.S. government can go to the international arena and claim that the U.S. is complying with its treaty commitments. So we are now at the starting point of engaging in a process with the United Nations and governments in actually designing the policies that we can implement locally in order to achieve global environmental accords. We will be doing the same with climate, Agenda 21, and we have endorsed a major international campaign called "Local Agenda 21" whereby now more than 2000 cities in more than 60 countries around the world are developing Agenda 21s for their cities with concrete targets, with concrete budgets on how they are going to implement these things and this is a movement that is now beginning in the U.S. Out of the 4000 or so cities and towns in the United States, there are now only 19 formally in this Local Agenda 21 activities.

JV: Can you give us the names of some of those cities?

Seattle, Santa Monica, San Francisco, Chattanooga, are some of the names you have heard before. I believe even Tacoma Park, Maryland is involved.

JV: As you expand in the United States, what other activities are you involved with? For example, you may not know that in Maryland, we have "Smart Growth" and the "Rural Legacy." Is that all part of this?

Actually, we end up having an urban bias in the way we are approaching problems for two reasons. First people don't realize that cities are an environmental opportunity. People traditionally in the environmental movement have seen cities as a problem. Environmentalists have always thought that saving the planet is about creating new parks,

protecting wilderness areas, things that are outside the lives of the average people in the United States. Most people don't get to go to these parks. The city, because of its concentration, allows us to economically invest in the infrastructure we need in order to protect the environment as well as social services. It is by creating high density that we can finance public transportation systems, recycling systems, all of these things so we want to reap the opportunity of the city to protect the environment. On the other hand, because so many resources are consumed in cities, it is at this level that we can have an impact. So we are looking at water management, solid waste management, air pollution issues in the context of the planet - the whole gamut of environmental issues.

JV: With regard to biospheres, that is a key part of Agenda 21; is that also a key part of what you are doing on the local level with The Nature Conservancy and other groups and organizations?

Some of the cities we work with, not so much in the U.S. Durban, South Africa is a city in a tropical area with great biodiversity. During the apartheid era, it was able to maintain a variety of parks, but as democracy has been established in South Africa, people who once were forced to live in townships have come to live in the city. They have established squatter settlements in many parks so there is tension between social justice and economic development in protecting natural areas. What they have done is engaged the squatter communities in actually being the people who are employed to maintain the parks and they have created a whole linking system to make sure that all of the different species who live within Durban are able to migrate and have a large enough territory in order to reproduce themselves. Cities, even where there is not a lot of natural area, are taking a great interest in the biodiversity issue. Coastal management, as you know from the East coast, is an area where municipalities have played a major role.

JV: At what point did you get involved with Agenda 21, and how do you see your role in its implementation?

We got involved during the process of the negotiation of Agenda 21's sustainable development action plan. Our job since the Summit has been to make sure that local development is aware of its responsibilities in implementing that plan and that it has the resources and the support

to do it. What does it mean? Local governments need to create a mechanism in which they work with the business community, the non-profit organizations, the civic sector to develop strategies to implement the different chapters of Agenda 21 -- dealing with issues like protection of the atmosphere, water resources, biological diversity, changing consumption patterns, sustainable agriculture all of these areas mentioned in Agenda 21. So what do we have to work with at the local level? First we have local law and regulation. Municipalities manage the infrastructure or invest in the infrastructure which is needed to deal with pollution control. Municipalities often times have a great influence

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over the public educational system amid spend a lot of money. The way they spend money in the markets can have dramatic impact on the kinds of products and services available to consumers. For example, local governments in the southwestern states organized together because they could not afford to buy recycled paper. So they aggregated their demand and jointly purchased large bulks of this paper to bring the price down. Now we at our local Xerox centers can get recycled paper made available to us. So the purchasing power of the local government is very influential as well.

As the international community identifies global environmental problems scientifically, develops policies, nations sign international agreements, and then they go back and pass national laws. All of these things eventually trickle down to us at the local level in our cities and in our households. And so, what ICLEI does, is looks ahead and tries to identify what are the new issues going to be on the agenda. And how can we build a capacity locally to be able to implement those things by the time they come around to us locally.

JV: With regard to the local level, the big buzz-word is "Public-Private partnerships." What is it and how does it affect the implementation of Agenda 21?

Well, as most people know in their cities, if there isn't a good relationship between the residents of the town or the businesses of the town and the local government, not much gets done. There's just a lot of rhetoric amid controversy. But things don't move forward. And, we in the local government community have also realized that we have limited resources. The federal government and state governments have been downloading responsibilities to us now for many years without providing the money to implement those things. So, things are tight in our local budgets. We're trying to overcome this by taking a partnership strategy to implementation in many cities, particularly those that are doing this local Agenda 21 process in the U.S. What they do is create multi-sectoral councils, or organizations, where local government representatives, business, the church community, the union community, the non-profit community meet together, flesh out a common strategy in areas where they can agree with one another, and make joint agreements to implement that strategy. What does that mean? The local government agrees that first it will get its own house in order. It will, if the strategy is in the area of energy, it will retrofit its buildings. It will promote energy efficiency in its operations. At the household level, households get involved by retrofitting their own homes and putting in energy-saving light bulbs and things like that. And its through these community-wide campaigns that we really see the results. If it's just one sector of government or industry working alone, we see sort of individual cases of good practice, but it doesn't add up to a change in the global trends. We like to say in ICLEI, when we ask ourselves if were being effective, has the earth noticed yet? Does the planet notice what we're doing? And so, ultimately it's through every sector being involved that we...

JV: And how will it answer that, Jeb?

We are now going from stage one, which is mobilization and getting yourself organized to stage two which is actually monitoring whether were having an impact. And, this year

were launching a new program. It's called Cities 21. We will be inviting our members from around the world to measure the change in their performance in key areas: energy, waste management, water resources management, from 1990 to 2000. In the year 2000, as the world looks at a scary new century, and asks itself, are we any closer to sustainability than we were in 1992, we will actually have aggregated the results of these cities to see whether we were having a positive impact or a negative impact. My guess is we will see that in the 1990s we got ourselves organized, but we continued to have a detrimental impact when we add it all up. But that will allow us to figure out what are the new measures that we need to put in place in order to be successful in the next century.

JV: How did the earth come this far without the measures that have been instituted since 1972 -- without self destructing?

The world, our planet, is extremely resilient, and our economies in the 1800's and even in the early 20th century were still small enough that we weren't having a dramatic impact on the biosphere of the planet. But economic growth is accelerating tremendously. Since 1992, 450 million new people have been born on this planet. So, as we speak, 10,000 new people will come into this planet. Population growth, economic growth, are accelerating to the point where the earth is noticing and we're stressing the limits of the balance in our eco-system.

Why we haven't done something sooner is an interesting question. I like to say, in a historical context that we spent most of the 20th century arguing over two doctrines of development. There is the socialist doctrine of development and the capitalist doctrine of development as we spent all our resources battling between these two doctrines. We had the Cold War, and we had real wars. I mean hundreds of billions of dollars. It wasn't until the Cold War came to an end, that the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development put forward a third doctrine called Sustainable Development which is about balancing social equity, the long-time socialist concern; economic vitality, the capitalist concern; amid the new concern that neither paid any attention to - environmental sustainability. We have a new concept for how to develop; now we're just beginning to learn how to put it into practice.

JV: Can you elaborate on those three for a moment?

It's clear that we all obviously want a vital economy. We were talking earlier about why the American public isn't more involved in the environment and how people are just stressed out - both parents working, people just trying to keep ahead and maintain their lifestyle. So we all want that, but the reality is that in our societies, and we see it in our inner cities in the United States, people have no reason to buy into what you'd call the social contract, to be part of the system. And that is the case in much of the United States. It's also true that if we use up all our resources and create polluted environments that there won't be an economy either. So we need at the local level to bring the interest groups for these three tracks of development, social well-being, economic vitality and the environment together with one another to negotiate out how to best advance all of those agendas. In the past, we've seen constant conflict between business interests and the

environmental community or even the unions have often times come out against environmentalism. What were realizing now is that sustainable development is an agenda in all of our interests.

JV: In Russia, they have been aware of sustainable development, perhaps not in those phrases, but of the environment, for much longer than we have. Are we just catching up to the rest of the world?

I think the United States, to be fair, has been a global leader on the environment. We have been a country that has led in major environmental legislation that other countries around the world have followed. I worked, as you know, through our sister city relationships in the Soviet Union during the communist regime. They had strong environmental laws, but because there is no distinction between business and government, those laws were never implemented. So, I don't think we can be that critical of ourselves. The world still has a lot to learn from the U.S.A.

JV: Where do you see Agenda 21, the Rio Summit, going? What is the next step?

Its got to be implementation, implementation, implementation. National governments have backed off from the agenda since 1992. We need more support from National governments. There's a lot of deregulation going on, not maintaining environmental laws, disinvestment from sustainable development. We need to reinforce the partnership between different levels of government. We can't all do it at the local level. ICLEI has two roles: to develop and maintain public - private partnerships and to continue to put pressure on state and national governments to be there as a partner as well. Not just to say, well, that's a local problem, well delegate it to the municipalities and well go concern ourselves with free trade, deficit reduction and other agenda items.