

IMPROVING URBAN PLANNING THROUGH LOCALIZING AGENDA 21 RESULTS ACHIEVED IN BAYAMO, CUBA



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LOCALIZING AGENDA 21**
RESULTS ACHIEVED IN BAYAMO CUBA

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ABBREVIATIONS

LA21	Local Agenda 21
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHABITAT	United Nations Human Settlements Programme





Traditional coaches in Bayamo
Photo © Bayamo Physical Planning Department

INTRODUCTION

This case study shows how municipal urban planning practices can be improved through a Local Agenda 21 approach. The results are presented by the city of Bayamo, Cuba. After five years of technical and financial support from UN-HABITAT and other partners, the city's urban planning practice has improved significantly: participation and communication have been enhanced, planning is more strategic and result-oriented, and a better understanding has been achieved in mediating urban conflicts and enabling harmonious urban development.

This case study focuses on three strategic issues: the Bayamo River, non-motorised urban mobility and municipal waste management. A brief background is given on each issue, followed by a description of the short and long term results: that is, institutional and attitudinal changes, and the impact on the project beneficiaries.

BAYAMO CITY

Bayamo is built on the remains of San Salvador de Bayamo, the second settlement founded in Cuba by the Spaniards in 1513. The city is situated in eastern Cuba on the banks of the Bayamo River.

While the city population grew steadily until the 1959 Revolution, since then it has multiplied fourfold reaching 146,600 inhabitants in 2006. The rapid growth has been driven by a strong political will to ensure a better distribution of services and jobs throughout the country. Massive investment has been made in secondary cities, which makes them much more attractive places to live and work. New administrative neighbourhoods were also created when Bayamo was designated capital of the Granma Province in 1976.

As urbanization could not follow the pace of population growth, the city has expanded in more spontaneous forms and a number of new problems and demands have arisen. These problems are more acute because Granma Province still remains under-developed in relation to the Cuban average.



Bayamo from the air (2003) Photo © UN-HABITAT/F.Saliez



TOWARDS A RIVER DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

Bayamo River is difficult to locate in the city's charming colonial center. Most visitors on their way from Havana to Santiago do not realize that a major river lies immediately behind the city's famous cathedral. It is as if Bayamo turned its back on the river that once supported its economic *raison d'être*. When the Localizing Agenda 21 (LA21) project started in 2002, the river and its banks were in poor condition, compounded by water pollution, made worse by its use as an informal dumpsite and by uncontrolled erosion.

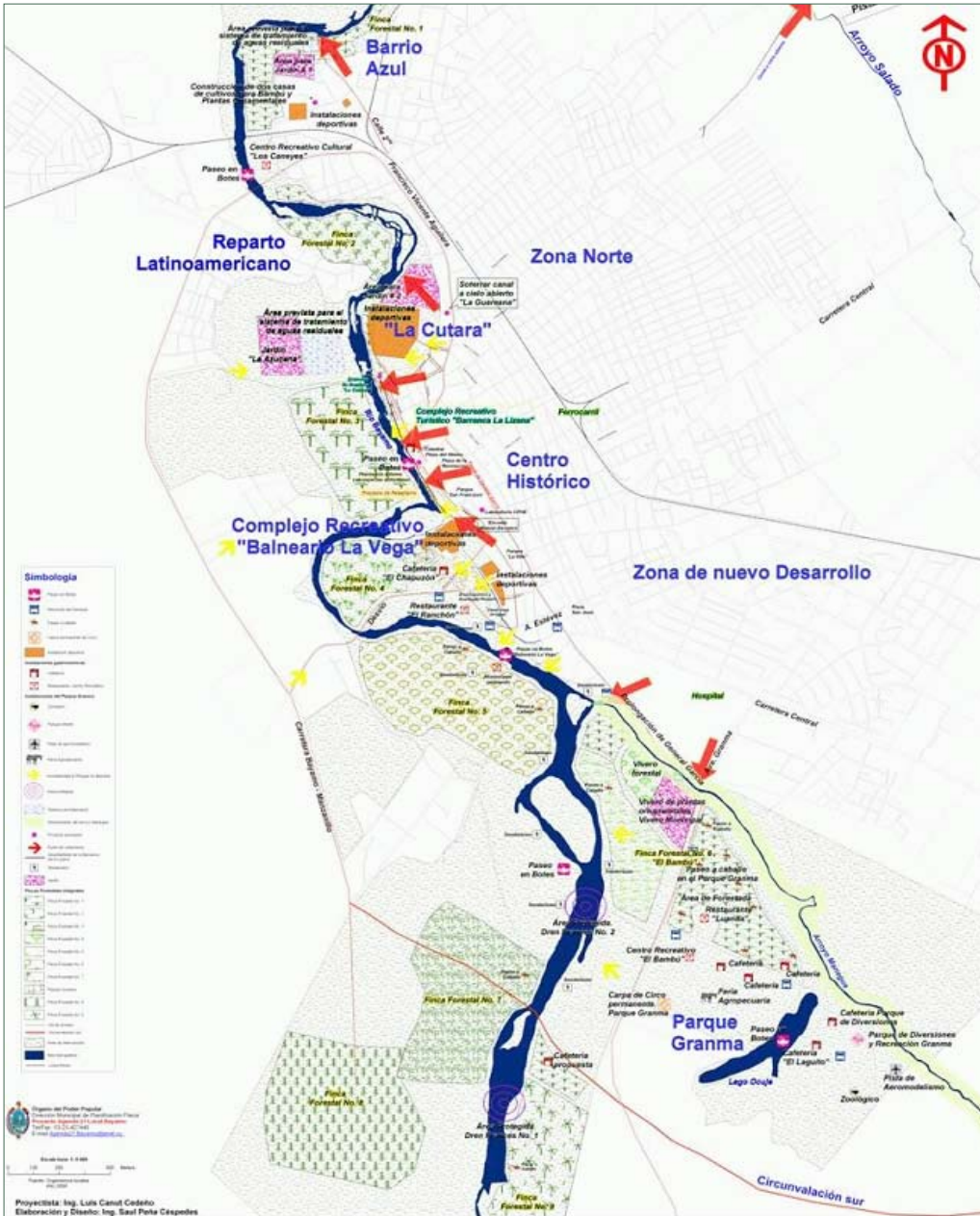
However, the river still played a critical role in defining Bayamo's identity. This was seen as a strategic area of intervention and at the heart of the project's success.

River pollution – an issue identified in the LA21 urban environmental profile – gained strong community and political support during the Urban Consultation held in 2003. Municipal and provincial authorities also demonstrated a growing interest in restoring the river banks with the intention to transform them into recreational areas accessible to all residents.

This political vision, however, was soon in serious trouble. An urban beach was established in an area where the water was polluted by an upstream hospital discharge, forcing public health authorities to issue a warning against bathing. Not only was there insufficient coordination and inadequate time-frames, but the vision was not fully understood nor supported by those who were supposed to implement it. This particular case fuelled interesting debates in the institutions sharing river-related responsibilities. It led to the organisation of cross-sectorial working groups that sought to resolve the problem, thus reinforcing the relevance of the LA21 approach.

The Bayamo Localizing Agenda 21 experience showed that environmental interventions, too often conceived on a sectorial basis, are not sufficiently connected to economic and physical development strategies. Environmental concerns have, over the past two decades, gained strong political support in Cuba. The country has adopted an ambitious environmental strategy which has called for integrated hydrographic basin management. Local authorities however are ill-equipped to deal with cross-sectorial challenges, particularly in urban contexts. It was revealed that they lack preparation for integrating river development approaches within urban planning and management frameworks. An important result of the LA21 project development was to raise this concern at the national level and to trigger constructive dialogue between senior officials of both the Ministries of Urban Planning and Environment. Environmental awareness has also dramatically increased at the local level, particularly in the need to deal with river pollution through comprehensive and integrated approaches.





THE BAYAMO RIVER STRATEGIC PROJECT

Source: Bayamo Physical Planning Department



FROM PROBLEM-SOLVING TO PROJECT-DRIVEN APPROACH

At the local level, the process resulted in important changes to mindsets and immediate benefits to the population. The most important shift in attitude was to recognise the Bayamo River as a project, not a problem. It meant that local authorities were less overwhelmed by day-to-day problems, and were more aware of the importance of looking forward. This was acknowledged by the Bayamo River Development Strategy adopted by the City Council in 2006. The vision of the river banks as recreational, productive and commercial areas gave meaning and integration to a large number of small initiatives. After five years of work, the need for a river-specific spatial coordination mechanism was also demonstrated. It led to the creation of a "Bayamo River Planning and Management" unit within the local government structure.

Another significant shift was achieved at the project planning level. Municipal officers, prone to easy-to-implement top-down technocratic solutions, learnt the importance of designing and assessing various technical solutions before long-term decisions can be taken. It made them realize that, although more complex to implement from an institutional point of view, decentralized technical solutions often were cheaper and more likely to be properly maintained over time.

A CLEANER RIVER FOR ALL

The quality of the Bayamo River water has improved due to coordinated action in eliminating direct discharge of domestic faecal waste and by convincing the five major local industries to implement environment management plans. In addition, a natural sewage treatment unit is under construction. Over a period of 15 months, river water analyses in the city centre have shown a significant drop in pollution indicators, as illustrated in the table below.

The river banks have significantly improved over the past few years. Twenty hectares have been planted with indigenous trees, while recreation areas have been restructured and renovated. The urban beach "La Vega" has been expanded over 15 hectares and can now accommodate three thousand visitors. Soccer and baseball fields have been established on low-lying areas and a fruit and vegetable market reorganised.

These physical interventions have improved urban dwellers' access to the Bayamo River that has once again become a feature in the urban landscape. These actions have had a noticeable effect on urban identity, on the sense of ownership and on the community's self-esteem.

Microbiological analysis of Bayamo River water

Agent	Nov. 2004	Feb. 2006
Faecal Coliform Bacteria	16,000	5,400
Pseudomona Aeruginosa	1,800	260
Faecal Streptococcus	130	2

Source: Bayamo Public Health Department - 2007



NO MORE OIL

When economic agreements with the former Soviet Union were suddenly cancelled in the early 1990s, urban mobility became one of the major day-to-day challenges facing Cuban households, administrations, local governments and state-owned companies. Since then, and despite the progress made, the growth of motorised mobility has remained constrained by the availability of fuel, vehicles and spare parts.

A combination of these important economic limitations, together with legal restrictions on private vehicle ownership, has favoured the development of non-motorised mobility options all over the country. Cuban streets, particularly in provincial cities, are typically full of pedestrians, bicycles, taxi-bicycles and horse-drawn collective taxis. The urban environmental profile and further analyses by the working group concluded that motorised transportation in Bayamo counted for less than 15% of all intra-urban journeys.

The lack of oil is, at the same time, a fantastic opportunity. Cuban cities have avoided the problems of traffic-jams and encroachment of private vehicles into public spaces. Air pollution could easily be reduced by improving the mechanical condition of the few circulating vehicles. Moreover, as urban mobility is largely based on non-motorised solutions, Cuban cities are already providing some response to the global challenge of climate change.



Traditional coaches in Bayamo

Photo © Bayamo Physical Planning Department



A NON-MOTORISED CITY?

Bayamo is well known and celebrated in traditional song as the City of Coaches. Nineteenth century-style coaches are still produced in the province and are a familiar sight in the city where they are operated as privately-run collective taxis, on specific routes.

Non-motorised mobility, however, receives little support from the local authority, which considers it no more than a necessary evil. Moreover, Cuban municipal planners are mostly influenced by spatial concepts that celebrate the supremacy of the car over all other means of transportation and have provided little room for non-motorised solutions, except in a few historical areas.

Through debates, demonstration projects and international exposure, Localizing Agenda 21 has succeeded in creating a fresh awareness of these issues, and has mobilised some political support for non-motorised approaches to urban mobility. The advantages of non-motorised mobility to vulnerable groups have been brought to the attention of urban planners and local leaders. The fact that road traffic accidents involving pedestrians and cyclists were recently declared the fifth highest cause of death in the country also contributed to bring non-motorised mobility back into the political agenda.



Cycling in Bayamo

Photo © Bayamo Physical Planning Department

AN UNUSUAL PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

Non-motorised transportation services in Cuba are run by private owners, an exception in a country where the private sector is almost non-existent. While bicycle-taxi operators are not organised, the Bayamo coachmen have a powerful union inherited from pre-Revolutionary times. The union is able to mobilize its members and has a say in political debates. This allowed them a prominent role in the large "Urban Consultation" forum and in subsequent working groups.

Dealing with privately-owned businesses was a new experience for Bayamo's authorities. Through this process, municipal and provincial officers gained an understanding of the potential as well as the limitations of public-private partnerships, not to mention the benefits of negotiating with a structured and well-represented private sector.



CHEAP AND SIMPLE SOLUTIONS

Less is more. Mobility is more than transportation and often can be improved through relatively cheap and simple user-friendly solutions, without the expense of new or hard-to-maintain technologies. This approach has been tested and promoted through the implementation of several small-scale projects.

The mobility of more than 67,000 inhabitants has been dramatically improved through the creation of new coach routes in the most deprived neighbourhoods of Bayamo. Clearer and fairer rates for taxi-bike services were also negotiated between the municipality and the service operators. This made the service more affordable while at the same time recognised the difficulty of topography and mileage on specific routes.

Transit security and flow improved by giving right of way to coaches at selected cross-roads, setting up cycle lanes and introducing traffic lights in certain locations. These measures contributed to a significant decrease in traffic accidents over the period 2004-2006.



Cycle lane along the main road

Photo © Bayamo Physical Planning Department



A CLEAN CITY

Cuba has a well-supported public health sector. Public health has been one of the main priorities of the national government and awareness is high within local administrations and at community levels.

Nevertheless sanitation and solid waste management are among urban services that have suffered most from the economic constraints of the past decade. Limited maintenance and lack of investment have resulted in poor waste management services. Mechanical breakdowns and lack of fuel supply, among other constraints, have forced municipal officers to lower their standards and to modify their waste management strategy. In some neighbourhoods, waste collection has been subcontracted to horse-drawn carriage owners who use unofficial dumpsites located close to the city. In the municipal dumpsite itself, proper landfill is, for the most part, no longer an option.

Local authorities are aware of the potential public health risks associated with poor waste management but legal and financial restrictions have left the authorities with little room for manoeuvre. Given the financial constraints and poor political support, implementing a comprehensive strategy for waste collection, treatment and recycling has not been possible. The LA21 project was nevertheless able to sensitise planners and political leaders to the urgency in supporting municipal waste management departments and workers. Thanks to a provincial “beautification” programme, the situation has slightly improved over the last few years, at least as far as waste collection is concerned.

The project has also helped municipal officers solve small bottlenecks and support workers’ enthusiasm. Waste collection and street cleaning has been improved and extended to vulnerable neighbourhoods (30,000 inhabitants) that previously were not serviced. Noise and traffic jams resulting from waste collection services have been reduced, and municipal workers are beginning to enjoy better working conditions.



Municipal Street Cleaning Workers

Photo ©UN-HABITAT/F.Saliez

CENTRALISATION OR DECENTRALISATION?

Centralisation and decentralisation are two sides of the Cuban system. While economic constraints justify the centralisation of resource allocation, it is acknowledged that local governments are better agents than the central state in supporting local economies and responding to citizens' priorities. The gradual decentralisation of services and the production of goods at local level are constrained by local groups' capacity to take over central government responsibilities. Most Cuban municipal governments are ill-equipped to carry out sound strategic planning and financial management. Decentralisation has been erratic which creates an additional challenge, as some sectors keep strong vertical structures that do not easily coordinate with newly defined local development strategies.

A policy of participation in decision-making is at the heart of Cuban society and the public administration system. Popular participation is highly organised and structured through a system of small-scale committees established at the street or even the building level. Similar mechanisms exist within the state's administration and state-owned companies.

This system though has its weaknesses. Experience has shown that, on occasion, efficient decision-making can be threatened by a lack of technical analysis, a lack of public mobilisation, poor communication, excessive centralisation, politicisation or bureaucratisation. High-level public officers are aware of these limitations and they are committed to improving participatory mechanisms.

MUNICIPALITIES COORDINATING INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

Cuba's Ministry of Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation (MINVEC) coordinates incoming international assistance and ensures its alignment with national policies. For the past 10 years, the Ministry has supported local governments in improving the local coordination of development efforts through the Human Development at the Local Level Programme, in partnership with the UNDP country office. This Programme enhances the local government's capacity to



Participants of the Urban Consultation at Bayamo central square, 2003

Photo ©UN-HABITAT/F.Saliez



define a development agenda and facilitate cross-sector coordination. It ensures smooth liaison with all development assistance providers at the local level and supports city-to-city cooperation.

The Localising Agenda 21 programme in Cuba is seen as an urban-focused component of Human Development at the Local Level Programme, under the leadership of municipal governments. The programme is an example of good inter-institutional coordination. It involves the three Ministries or Institutes in charge of Physical Planning (IPF), International Cooperation (MINVEC) and Environment (CITMA), together with the three United Nations Programmes for Human Settlements (UN-HABITAT), Development (UNDP) and Environment (UNEP). The Institute for Physical Planning and UN-HABITAT provide the main technical and financial support.

In addition to the 11 demonstration projects directly funded by UN-HABITAT under the Localizing Agenda 21 Programme, another USD 550,000 has been mobilised by the local government for concrete action derived from the LA21 process. This has been made possible thanks to the support of the Human Development at the Local Level Programme, which has facilitated city-to-city cooperation and access to other funding on the basis of the LA21 project's results.

The figures show below the value of investing in Local Agenda 21 and strategic urban planning processes as the enabling framework that has triggered other actors to more than double the initial investment. The strategic importance however, of the close and continuous technical support provided by the Physical Planning Institute, UN-HABITAT and UNDP should not be underestimated.

LA21 BAYAMO FUNDING STRUCTURE

	UN-HABITAT	OTHERS
LA21 Process	USD155,000	-
Demo-Projects	USD80,000	USD550,000
Total	USD235,000	USD550,000

Figures in US Dollars. Core support from UN-HABITAT, national activities and Cuban contribution in non-convertible pesos are not included.



Seminar Photo © Bayamo Physical Planning Department



IMPROVING LOCAL GOVERNANCE

The Urban Consultation held in Bayamo in 2003 was widely acknowledged as an innovative way of stimulating and structuring public participation at local government level. This event achieved unusual levels of participation, and gave rise to a diversity of opinion and freedom of expression. It also prepared the ground for further innovative agreements and partnerships among all the stakeholders.

The approach has been adapted by the Urban Planning Department and applied to the process of revising the Master Plan. The initiative received full support from the Ministry of Economy and Planning, which regards this approach as a way to improve the master plans guidelines at the country level.

The spatial coordination of projects along the Bayamo River has permitted better use of limited resources provided by various actors, including international cooperation. While all projects keep their own identity and visibility, and manage their own budgets and technical support, their integration within a common spatial framework has enabled the local authority to ensure better coordination, monitoring, support and follow-up.

Municipal officers have improved their capacity to think strategically, establish good communication with urban residents, design ready-to-implement projects, assess project costs, manage financial resources and identify bottlenecks in project implementation. The importance of exposure and access to national and international experience is also better acknowledged.

The LA21 project facilitated the building of new relationships between local authorities, business operators, the private sector and academic institutions. Within the limits of the issue-specific working groups, information sharing and coordination has been strengthened both horizontally and vertically. Although difficult to measure, the common assessment is that the project made a real contribution to the culture of negotiation and consensus-building. The Localising Agenda 21 project, therefore, represents a major step towards improved local governance.



The project is being replicated in other cities in Cuba with similar challenges – Holguín, Santa Clara and Cienfuegos – but less intensively supported by international agencies. It is hoped that these cities succeed in achieving similar attitudinal and institutional changes, as well as in attracting similar levels of external funding.

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Municipality of Bayamo, Cuba

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Physical Planning Institute (IPF), Cuba
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