

Background

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Focus on Agenda 21 Should Not Divert Attention from Homegrown Anti-Growth Policies

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Abstract: *Agenda 21, adopted at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, unabashedly calls on governments to intervene and regulate nearly every potential impact that human activity could have on the environment. However, Agenda 21 is non-binding; it depends on governments for implementation. If opponents focus excessively on Agenda 21, it is much more likely that homegrown smart-growth policies that undermine the quality of life, personal choice, and property rights in American communities will be implemented by local, state, and federal authorities at the behest of environmental groups and other vested interests. Preventing American implementation of Agenda 21 should therefore be viewed as only one part of a broader effort to convince U.S. government officials to repeal destructive smart-growth programs and prevent the enactment of new ones.*

Radical environmentalists, local business groups, and the ever-present Not in My Backyard crowd have been trying for decades to reshape American communities to conform to their preferred “smart growth” policies. These advocates work to impose land use regulations that would force Americans into denser living arrangements, curtail freedom of choice in housing, discriminate against lower-income Americans, and compel people to pay more for their houses and give up their cars in favor of subways, trolleys, buses, and bicycles.

Talking Points

- Among other priorities, smart-growth policies impose land use regulations that suppress housing supply and drive up home prices, in turn imposing unnecessary costs, especially on middle- and lower-income households. These policies contributed to and aggravate the real estate bubble by putting inflationary pressures on housing prices.
- Agenda 21, adopted by various nations after the U.N. Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, advocates changes similar to those of smart-growth advocates.
- Agenda 21 and similar smart growth policies greatly extend the government’s regulatory reach and impede economic growth, construction, consumer choice, homeownership, job creation, and flexible community development strategies.
- Agenda 21 represents just one part of the broader fight. The entire spectrum of crippling smart-growth policies, many of which predate the United Nations and Agenda 21, have already been implemented or are being proposed in American communities and should be opposed.

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<http://report.heritage.org/bg2628>

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These efforts—often described as “New Urbanism,” “sustainable development,” or “open land preservation”—have long been resisted by some members of the community due to their negative impact on economic growth, competitiveness, and the nation’s standard of living. As The Heritage Foundation has documented, communities implementing smart-growth policies have significantly higher home prices, which precludes moderate-income households from homeownership. In turn, these high home prices have forced buyers to take on excessive levels of mortgage debt, which has contributed to the default and foreclosure problems that have led to the current recession. Indeed, the foreclosure problem is at its worst in states with the strictest land use constraints: Florida, California, Arizona, and Nevada.¹

In recent years, however, many smart-growth opponents working at the local level have shifted their focus toward opposing the 1992 United Nations voluntary initiative called Agenda 21, which advocates many policies that reflect smart-growth principles. They should recognize that Agenda 21 is simply another facet of smart growth and not allow it to divert them from opposing the more ubiquitous, overarching agenda of homegrown environmental extremists.

Principles Outlined in Agenda 21 Are Smart-Growth Principles

Agenda 21 is a remarkably broad, ambitious action plan that was presented at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and adopted by the attending nations as “a comprehensive plan of action to be taken globally, nationally and locally by organizations of the United Nations

System, Governments, and Major Groups in every area in which human impacts on the environment.”² At well over 300 pages, Agenda 21 sets forth hundreds of specific goals and strategies that national and local governments are encouraged to adopt.³ These policies are presented in four sections:

1. Social and economic dimensions (e.g., international cooperation to accelerate sustainable development in developing countries, combating poverty, changing consumption patterns, promoting sustainable human settlement development);
2. Conservation and management of resources for development (e.g., protection of the atmosphere, planning and management of land resources, promoting sustainable agriculture and rural development);
3. Strengthening the role of major groups (e.g., women, children, indigenous people, workers and trade unions); and
4. Means of implementation (e.g., financing, technology transfer, promoting education and public awareness, international legal instruments).

In sum, UNCED was explicitly focused on getting governments to “rethink economic development and find ways to halt the destruction of irreplaceable natural resources and pollution of the planet.... The Summit’s message [was] that nothing less than a transformation of our attitudes and behavior would bring about the necessary changes.”⁴ Agenda 21 unabashedly calls on governments to intervene and regulate nearly every potential impact that human activity could have on the environment.

If implemented, the types of policies encouraged in Agenda 21 would significantly expand the role of government in economic decision-making, impede

1. Wendell Cox and Ronald D. Utt, “Don’t Regulate the Suburbs: America Needs a Housing Policy That Works,” Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2247, March 5, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2009/03/Dont-Regulate-the-Suburbs-America-Needs-a-Housing-Policy-That-Works>.
2. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Sustainable Development, *Agenda 21*, at <http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/agenda21/> (November 7, 2011).
3. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Sustainable Development, *Agenda 21*, June 1992, at <http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/agenda21/english/Agenda21.pdf> (November 7, 2011).
4. United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, June 3–14, 1992, at <http://www.un.org/geninfo/bp/enviro.html> (November 7, 2011).

development and economic growth, and undermine individual choice and policy flexibility for local communities. Opponents should be concerned about efforts by the U.S. government to implement these policies, both nationally and locally.⁵

If implemented, the types of policies encouraged in Agenda 21 would significantly expand the role of government in economic decision-making, impede development and economic growth, and undermine individual choice and policy flexibility for local communities.

However, Agenda 21 is non-binding; it depends entirely on national, state, and local governments for implementation and therefore poses little threat in and of itself. It is the policies endorsed by Agenda 21 that are of most concern, and these policies are not confined to Agenda 21. On the contrary, those policies undergird the smart-growth agenda that has gained widespread acceptance in many parts of the U.S. to the detriment of local economies.

Radical Environmental Principles Predate Agenda 21 Proposals

The smart-growth policies echoed in Agenda 21 originated among liberal European and American intellectuals and significantly predate the adoption of Agenda 21. In fact, the British version of these policies—which had a strong influence on American liberals and the international environmental activists that largely wrote Agenda 21—had its origins in the 1920s. As Britain's Prince Charles has written:

For more than eighty years, the Campaign to Protect Rural England has been leading the fight to preserve the remaining delicate fabric of the countryside. The foresight of the founding fathers was extraordinary—in 1926 Clough Williams-Ellis, whom I remember well and admire greatly, published *England and the Octopus*, an anti-sprawl polemic, and in the same year Sir Patrick Abercrombie wrote his paper, *The Preservation of Rural England*. The fight has continued since then and great successes have been won.⁶

These policies, embodied in the Town and Country Planning Act, enacted by a socialist government in 1947, which forced nearly all subsequent development into existing urban footprints, have been an economic disaster. The citizens of the United Kingdom now have the smallest and most expensive housing of any advanced country in the world.⁷

America's smart-growth movement emerged in force in the early 1970s when communities in California and Oregon began to replicate Britain's anti-sprawl policies through restrictive zoning practices to discourage suburbanization. Bit by bit, it spread around the country as more and more communities adopted polices to deter suburban growth for all but the well-to-do. Growth control efforts underway in these communities were driven not only by a distorted view of the environment, but also by the desire of those already in place to prevent newcomers from arriving and spoiling the rural ambience of their suburban communities.

By the 1980s, these policies led President George H. W. Bush to create a commission, overseen by Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Jack

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5. A number of conservative groups have expressed growing concern over Agenda 21. A grassroots effort has arisen to convince local U.S. governments to cease their endorsement of Agenda 21 and end their participation with its most prominent implementing partner, the International Council of Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI). All told, there are 1,196 "global members" of ICLEI, of which nearly half (562 counties, cities, and municipalities) are in the U.S. See Rachel Alexander, "Agenda 21: Conspiracy Theory or Real Threat?" Townhall.com, July 2, 2011, at http://townhall.com/columnists/rachelalexander/2011/07/02/agenda_21_conspiracy_theory_or_real_threat/page/full/ (November 7, 2011); ICLEI, "Members," at <http://www.iclei.org/index.php?id=11454> (November 7, 2011).
 6. Charles, Prince of Wales, *Icons of England*, ed. Bill Bryson (London: Black Swan, 2010), p. 13.
 7. Ronald D. Utt, "Will Obama's 'Livability' Program Bring Britain's 'Hobbit Homes' to America?" Heritage Foundation WebMemo No. 2601, September 1, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2009/09/Will-Obamas-Livability-Program-Bring-Britains-Hobbit-Homes-to-America>.

Kemp, to investigate the impact of these policies on growth and communities and make recommendations. Its report, *“Not in My Back Yard”: Removing Barriers to Affordable Housing*,⁸ was a powerful critique of policies now known as “smart growth.”

While recklessness was certainly a factor in the U.S. housing bubble, smart-growth policies played a major role in creating and exacerbating the bubble and the subsequent recession.

Nonetheless, smart-growth policies continued to advance in the U.S. As they became more prevalent and restrictive, their impact on housing prices and construction likewise expanded. An explosion of exclusionary zoning throughout the U.S. encouraged many communities to adopt zoning policies to ensure that they maintained a certain demographic “profile.” Such zoning limited real estate development to higher-cost homes in order to “price out” moderate-income households, which included a disproportionate share of minorities.

In the wake of the bursting of the U.S. housing bubble, Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne wryly noted that Britain escaped the sort of housing bubble and crash that staggered America because, whereas America recklessly expanded its housing stock, “We were saved by the fact that you can’t build anything in this country.”⁹ While recklessness was certainly a factor in the U.S. housing bubble, smart-growth policies played a major role in creating and exacerbating the bubble and the subsequent recession. In fact, the states and metropolitan areas with the strictest smart-growth land

regulations were the ones that suffered the greatest home price bubbles (notably in California, Florida, Arizona, and Nevada) and the most serious foreclosure problems once the bubble burst.¹⁰

Missing the Real Target

Opponents of Agenda 21 should not be distracted from the more tangible manifestation of the smart-growth principles outlined in that document. If they focus excessively on Agenda 21, it is much more likely that homegrown smart-growth policies that date to the early 1970s and undermine the quality of life, personal choice, and property rights in American communities will be implemented by local, state, and federal authorities at the behest of environmental groups and other vested interests.

Adding to the problem, the Obama Administration has warmly embraced smart-growth policies and, more broadly, increased environmental regulation and restriction of use of natural resources. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood is the Administration’s point man in selling smart-growth policies to the American people.¹¹ He and other key Administration officials are abetted by state and local elected officials and numerous interest groups, including the Urban Land Institute, local Metropolitan Planning Organizations, Smart Growth America, the American Public Transportation Association, the Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, and shortsighted local business associations.

Opponents of these policies have been very effective in their work. A good example is the state of Florida, where Governor Rick Scott (R) and the state legislature repealed a 25-year-old smart-growth law a few months ago.¹²

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8. Advisory Commission on Regulatory Barriers to Affordable Housing, *“Not In My Back Yard”: Removing Barriers to Affordable Housing* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991), at <http://www.huduser.org/portal/publications/RBCPUBS/NotInMyBackyard.html> (November 7, 2011).
 9. George Will, “In ‘Merrie Olde England,’ Economic Pallor,” *Free-Lance Star* (Fredericksburg, Va.), August 12, 2011, at <http://fredericksburg.com/News/FLS/2011/082011/082011/644603> (November 7, 2011).
 10. Cox and Utt, “Don’t Regulate the Suburbs.”
 11. Ronald D. Utt, “Obama Administration’s Plan to Coerce People out of Their Cars,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2536, July 10, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2009/07/Obama-Administrations-Plan-to-Coerce-People-out-of-Their-Cars>.
 12. Wendell Cox, “Florida Repeals Smart Growth Law,” *New Geography*, October 7, 2011, at <http://www.newgeography.com/content/002471-florida-repeals-smart-growth-law> (November 28, 2011).

If implemented, the types of policies encouraged in Agenda 21 would be detrimental to economic growth and prosperity. Thus, preventing American implementation of Agenda 21 at the national level and membership by U.S. counties, cities, and municipalities in the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI), now called Local Governments for Sustainability, is worthwhile. But this effort should be viewed as only one part of a broader effort to convince U.S. government officials to repeal destructive smart-growth programs and prevent the enactment of new ones.

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