

Policy Brief

Empowering Sustainable Futures: Cities Leading the Way in Finland's Sustainability Journey

Key Findings from the Five New Finnish
Voluntary Reviews 2025

7.5.2025

Executive Summary

Sustainability is essential for cities to ensure the long-term well-being of their residents and environment. This policy brief emphasizes the importance of sustainability as a foundational value guiding urban development. Key points include:

- **Foundation for Well-being:** Sustainability is crucial for achieving lasting well-being for both residents and the environment.
- **Guiding Principle:** Sustainability serves as a core value that directs cities' efforts and policies.
- **Long-term Impact:** Emphasizing sustainability ensures that cities can provide enduring benefits and resilience.

By integrating sustainability into their core strategies, cities can create a healthier, more prosperous future for all.

Introduction

Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) are comprehensive assessments by cities and municipalities to evaluate their progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These reviews help local governments align their strategies with global sustainability targets through data-driven management, enabling informed decisions that enhance sustainability efforts. VLRs evaluate performance across environmental, social, and economic dimensions, fostering a holistic approach to development.

VLRs build organizational capabilities by engaging stakeholders and fostering continuous learning, driving systemic change and achieving long-term goals. They provide a framework for accountability and transparency, ensuring progress is tracked and reported. Benefits include identifying best practices, sharing knowledge, and collaborating with other municipalities, fostering innovation, improving policy coherence, and enhancing stakeholder engagement.

A key finding from the five VLRs emphasizes the critical importance of adopting a holistic approach to sustainable development. This perspective highlights the need to enhance understanding and strengthen cross-sectoral leadership. By integrating a holistic viewpoint, we can

better identify the interconnections and cross-cutting impacts of various actions, ensuring that efforts in one area do not counteract goals in another. Additionally, involving stakeholders and residents more actively can bring valuable business perspectives into the discussion. This approach fosters comprehensive solutions and promotes multi-benefit outcomes that align with broader sustainability objectives.

Recent Finnish VLRs by Helsinki, Espoo, Tampere, Vantaa, and Turku highlight critical themes, underscoring successes and challenges in achieving sustainability. This brief summarizes key findings, emphasizing the pivotal role of local level in building vibrant, sustainable, and thriving cities.

Successes

1. **Commitment to Environmental Sustainability**

- Growth in sustainable innovations and industry
- Reduction of emissions generated in the area by 20 % within the last decade
- End of coal use and adoption of renewable energy solutions
- Increase in the number of nature reserves for preserving biodiversity
- Implementation of biodiversity action plans
- Reduction in wastewater pollution
- Increased awareness and readiness for climate change adaptation and preparedness

2. **Social Equity and Inclusion**

- Initiatives to increase community engagement in residential areas
- Increased participation in cultural services
- New local ways to reach and support vulnerable citizens
- Increased attention and action to halt the rise in inequality

3. **Infrastructure and Services**

- Investments in sustainable mobility and transportation
- Satisfaction with educational and municipal services

Challenges

1. Environmental Concerns

- Climate change mitigation and achieving carbon neutrality
- Over-consumption and excessive use of natural resources
- Low recycling rates and circular economy
- Balancing biodiversity promotion with urban growth

2. Polarisation

- Persistent inequality and social challenges, extremes becoming more pronounced
- Segregation
- Increased prejudices, especially affecting children and young people with immigrant and minority backgrounds
- Rising unemployment rates and long-term unemployment, particularly among young people, highly educated, and foreign-born individuals
- Differences in educational outcomes and declining literacy rates
- Economic inequality, increase in low-income households and child poverty, exacerbated by a weak national economy, inflation, and benefit cuts
- Lack of affordable housing, increased homelessness in some of the cities
- General decline in perceived quality of life
- Disparities in well-being and health
- Loneliness
- Increased stress among working-age people

3. Safety and Security

- Decline in perceived safety, though Finland remains a safe society on the global scale
- Sexual harassment and gender-based violence continue to be significant concerns

Conclusion

Conducting sustainability reviews is crucial for cities to understand their status and identify pathways for more sustainable development. VLRs and cities' sustainability indicators support the localization and implementation of the SDGs.

A holistic view of sustainable development integrates environmental, social, and economic dimensions, ensuring balanced and synergistic progress. This approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of various factors and the importance of recognizing both positive and negative cross-cutting impacts. Simply creating a VLR is not sufficient to address the complexities involved. It is crucial to highlight that everything is interrelated, and tackling individual challenges requires a comprehensive perspective that supports all actions without undermining our goals. For instance, creating jobs and building housing must be balanced with environmental objectives. Adopting a holistic viewpoint can serve as a strong incentive, as it promotes multi-benefit solutions that align with broader sustainability goals.

Cities emphasize the importance of all dimensions of sustainable development in their strategies. VLRs provide a concrete tool for evaluating progress and identifying areas for improvement, helping cities navigate complex challenges and achieve sustainable development goals more efficiently and inclusively.

The voluntary local reviews discussed in this policy brief underscore the pivotal role of cities and municipalities in promoting sustainability. Despite significant challenges, the successes achieved demonstrate the potential for positive change through concerted efforts at local, national, and global levels. Sustainability will continue to be a strong foundation and value base for cities, guiding their work as it is the only way to ensure real, long-lasting well-being for their residents and environment.

By embracing a holistic view and leveraging the insights gained from VLRs, cities can continue to advance their sustainability agendas, setting an example for others to follow and contributing to a balanced and resilient future.