

Increasing government effectiveness using the SDGs

From Helsinki's first to second Voluntary Local Review

Mia Malin, SDG Project Manager, City of Helsinki; Johanna af Hällström, Team Leader, City of Helsinki; and Pirita Kuikka, Environmental Planner, City of Helsinki

THE PROBLEM: Getting the full picture of our city's efforts and progress towards achieving an inclusive and sustainable recovery is hindered by the wide range of municipal actors involved.

WHY IT MATTERS: Accurately identifying the grassroots actions that Helsinki is taking but also the gaps in our strategy helps improve and correct the course of our SDG strategy.

THE SOLUTION: Producing a Voluntary Local Review using the SDGs and a whole-of-government approach to map our activities has fostered collaboration between city departments and elevated expertise in the reporting process.

Cities are the key builders of a better world: achieving a sustainable and equitable recovery from COVID-19 will depend on their concrete actions. Helsinki has long worked towards sustainable development and is strongly committed to the United Nations Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Yet because many different parts of our government have responsibility for many different municipal activities, we did not have a full and clear picture of the progress we were making towards those goals.

In order to gain a full picture of how our efforts fit together to achieve our sustainability aspirations, in 2019 Helsinki undertook a Voluntary Local Review to show how the city's strategy reflects the SDGs and how our government's actions are helping achieve the SDGs. Lessons learned for this first report not only helped us improve our second report in 2021—it created a new kind of collaboration within the City government and strengthened the integration of sustainable development into the City's management system and operations.

How Helsinki conducted and learned from its first report on the SDGs

The announcement to publish the city's first [Voluntary Local Review \(VLR\)](#) in June 2019 came directly from Mayor Jan Vapaavuori. His personal commitment to the VLR added political weight to this process. We learned key lessons while undertaking our first SDG report:

Building a reporting team. To kickstart the review, the City Executive Office appointed a steering group and a working group. Both groups were small, with staff from the City Executive Office and the Urban Environment Division. The steering group was tasked to guide the overall work and approve the methodology. The working group was tasked to research and prepare the mapping. During the first reporting cycle, the process was smooth as the steering group was directly linked

to management and was regularly in contact with the working group. However, the members of the working group researched in addition to their normal daily work, which limited the amount of time available to prepare the VLR.

Scope of the reporting. Given the tight timeline and limited capacity, the report examined only the existing City Strategy and its flagship projects. The aim was to find areas where the City had been successful and where it needed to improve and increase transparency. The report only covered the focus SDGs selected for that year’s High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), the annual gathering at the United Nations (U.N.) to check on global SDG progress. For cities committed to report every year, aligning to the U.N. cycle can help narrow down the scope of reporting. However, since the City of Helsinki does not report annually, that alignment to the U.N. cycle felt too limiting.

Mapping the SDGs to the City strategy. The research included aligning the goals of the City Strategy and related projects to the SDGs. The first stage (“mapping 1”) involved examining Helsinki’s goals, indicators, and procedures and presenting the connections with the SDGs. During that process, 14 city objectives were identified and visualized (see infographic). Then, key actions and indicators were described under these objectives. The second stage (“mapping 2”) involved focusing the examination in reverse, starting from the SDGs and describing which of Helsinki’s goals were linked.

Limited sector-specific knowledge. Our first reporting emphasized monitoring and data expertise, but the working group lacked in-depth, sector-specific knowledge and experience with day-to-day operations. Various experts were contacted during the process, but no formal interviews, and research inquiries were conducted. The content for the report was collected from a targeted, but limited respondent group, which resulted in different levels of reporting from different parts of the city. As a result of the tight schedule and the limited sector knowledge of the working group, the report did not fully reflect the operations of different departments and services.

Improving our second Voluntary Local Review

To increase the impact and depth of our SDG reporting, we made changes to the process leading to Helsinki’s [second Voluntary Local Review in May 2021](#):

Getting the scope of reporting right: our second report went beyond the previous review and covered all 17 SDGs. Many of the targets under the SDGs are not directly appropriate for the local level and especially not for an advanced and prosperous city such as Helsinki, so efforts have been made to open up and describe the global SDGs from the perspective of Helsinki’s operations. The reporting work began by reviewing all the city’s key programs and strategies related to Agenda 2030. We aimed to link different programs into the VLR report and avoid duplication of reporting.

Figure 1. How Helsinki prepared its Voluntary Local Review



An “all-city approach” to reporting with dedicated time and staff. The range of the SDGs and the wider scope of our reporting required bringing in broader expertise from all divisions of the city. We hired a project manager to lead the effort and work closely with a broader working group of 20 members and core group of seven staff, which now covered the most essential parts of the city government (four divisions, three municipal enterprises and the City Executive Office). Key internal experts were also involved in the working group or otherwise produced or commented on the content. We also transferred the coordinating role from the Mayor’s Office to the strategy department, which strengthened the link between SDG work and the city’s basic services.

Closer cooperation with all parts of the city organization. Outside the core groups, close cooperation was established with various thematic experts. We also fostered collaboration between the collection of the city strategy database and the data collection for VLR reporting: Helsinki’s SDG indicators are partly aligned as Helsinki’s strategic indicators and are published internally on the same indicator platform. In addition, the Helsinki United Nations Youth Organization commented on the report. Also, the Prime Minister’s Office gave some comments to the structure at an early stage.

The second VLR has created a better overall picture, an easily updatable SDG webpage and indicator platform that better serve both the city’s strategic work and its communication to citizens. We can also better highlight the grassroots actions that Helsinki has already taken. Perhaps most importantly, city divisions better understand the 2030 Agenda’s objectives. A stronger link between SDG reporting and practical expertise of the delivery of city services as well as sufficient resources were essential to ensure a more accurate coverage.

This process resulted in a better partnership among different offices within the city government, and an institutional commitment to the SDGs which will continue after reporting and goes beyond the mayor’s tenure, which is due to end soon.