

IMPACT PATHWAYS AND SHARED EVALUATION AS DRIVERS OF CHANGE

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Proposal from a panel of experts for guidelines for an evaluation of sustainable development policy in Finland

Finland's sustainable development policy is being subjected to an all-encompassing and independent evaluation. The evaluation is expected to contribute to the parliamentary elections of 2019, government formation talks, the sustainable development policy of the next term of government and Finland's reporting to the UN. This paper compiles the views of the Finnish Expert Panel on Sustainable Development as guidelines for the evaluation.

The panel recommends that national and international impact pathways connected to Finland's activities on sustainable development policy should be recognised as focal points of the evaluation. In addition, it is necessary to evaluate how the ambitious goals set for the development of the national policy model for sustainable development in Finland have been implemented.

At best, both the commissioner of the evaluation and those taking part in it will be able to deepen their understanding of sustainable development in a manner that strengthens the commitment of different players in society to it. Instead of being merely a report produced by a solitary body that compiles follow-up information, the evaluation should be implemented as a broad-based process involving joint learning and shared interpretation.

Evaluation to support transformative, coherent and inclusive implementation

IN A GOVERNMENT REPORT on the national implementation of the global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,¹ three policy principles were set out that create a frame of reference for the implementation of sustainable development extending beyond government terms: a) long-term action and transformation; b) policy coherence and global partnership; and c) ownership and participation. The evaluation of sustainable development should also lean on these policy principles.

Long-term action and transformation. Sustainable development involves extensive systemic changes that are implemented in society, often over a long period of time. An extended time span can make it more difficult to establish the effects. However, through the evaluation it will be possible to strengthen the long-term and transformative approaches to the policy.

The evaluation can increase the understanding of how the effects emerge, what kinds of intended and unintended effects come about and what kinds of actions can bring about change. The evaluation can also boost the predictability of policy actions required for achieving the goals.

The object for the evaluation should be a collection of goals that is set for as long a period as possible, against which progress can be measured.

Society's Commitment to Sustainable Development,² approved by the National Commission on Sustainable Development, which broadly represents various players in society, sets out a vision and eight long-term goals for sustainable development in Finland. Regarding the state of sustainable development and the progress on the goals, the most suitable long-term frame of reference for policy evaluation specifically involves the comprehensive and broadly accepted long-term goals of the commitment.

¹ Government Report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Finland – Long-term, Coherent and Inclusive Action. Prime Minister's Office Publications 11/2017.

² The Finland we want by 2050 – Society's Commitment to Sustainable Development. Approved 20 April 2016 at a meeting of the National Commission on Sustainable Development.

The government report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda also notes that Society's Commitment to Sustainable Development serves as a long-term framework for goals, which extends beyond the terms of any government, against which policy coherence can be evaluated.

Sustainable development requires extensive collaboration across administrative and societal boundaries. Therefore, in addition to promoting the goals for sustainable development, a longer-term examination of the political and administrative structures and action models aimed at achieving change is important.

The government's report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda defines "*long-term policy principles that transcend government terms*" and defines the measures for implementing them. Consequently, they are a key target of evaluation with respect to the operating models of policy and administration. Motions put forward in Parliament concerning the report in question, as well as the proposed principles for implementing Society's Commitment to Sustainable Development, also support the long-term development of the national policy model for sustainable development.

Policy coherence and global partnership. The evaluation of effectiveness is generally based on an examination of the relationships between cause and effect. The traditional approach to evaluation leans on a linear causal chain model which examines the outcomes and impacts of interventions and policy actions with respect to predefined goals or indicators. The linear causal chain model can be applied to the evaluation of policy actions that are limited and simple. Few of the policy actions of sustainable development policy are like this.

A significant proportion of the goals for sustainable development are complicated or even quite complex.³ As a result, change towards a more sustainable society appears as an all-encompassing, integrated, multidimensional and content-sensitive process that can have many goals that are either mutually supportive or competing.⁴ Promoting one goal can, especially in the short term, complicate or even prevent the implementation of another. Moreover, in the examination of effects, it is necessary to consider multinational effects of national goals.

The more complicated the object of evaluation is, the more challenging it is to establish the relations between

cause and effect. An evaluation model based on a linear causal chain does not sufficiently take into consideration the systemic nature of interlinked goals.⁵ It simplifies complicated phenomena, and for that reason it is not applicable alone to the evaluation of the multiple causes and effects of sustainable development.

When evaluating change, it is important to choose the theories of change and the methods that best suit the context, and to identify the needs for knowledge that they require.⁶ We recommend that alongside the verification of linear causal chains, methods should be applied in the evaluation that identify and recognise the multidimensional nature and complexity of sustainable development. In addition, the impact of Finland's policy actions on sustainable development should be examined in a global context.

Ownership and participation. Changes emerge in networks formed by numerous different players and in the cumulative effects of their activities. Therefore, we recommend that the approach of the evaluation should take into account these different levels.

In the multilevel model the effectiveness of a policy is examined from the perspectives of different policy sectors, as well as from those of the different players in society. This also enables the examination of the progress of sustainable development in the activities of business and industry, non-governmental organisations, the scientific community and municipalities. Multilevel evaluation therefore reinforces the ownership and participation that is being aimed at in the policy for sustainable development.

Through Society's Commitment to Sustainable Development, Finland moved towards a more functional, participatory and conversational operating model. For instance, the commitment to action on sustainable development is a tool that offers organisations and active citizens a voluntary means of embracing the goals and of carrying them out in practice. The Government Report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development also places great importance on the participation of everyone in the implementation of the goals for sustainable development, even though the government holds primary responsibility. It is therefore important to be able to complement to both existing and new follow-up and evaluation material through the versatile involvement of stakeholders in the process.

³ Both complicated and complex phenomena comprise many parts that affect each other. In complicated phenomena the effects of these parts can be explained, while in complex phenomena the impacts of these parts are so multidimensional that they are difficult to explain or model.

⁴ Ofir Z. et al. (2016). Five considerations for national evaluation agendas informant by the SDGs. IIED, London. <http://pubs.iied.org/pdfs/17374IIED.pdf>

⁵ Patton M. Q. (1997). Utilization-focused Evaluation. Sage, Thousand Oaks.

⁶ Rogers P. (2008). Using Programme Theory to Evaluate Complicated and Complex Aspects of Intervention. Evaluation, vol. 14 (1), pp. 29-48. https://www.mich.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/u58/2015/Using_Programme_Theory_0.pdf

TOWARDS A COMPREHENSIVE POLICY EVALUATION

Finland has been implementing sustainable development policy since the early 1990s. A cornerstone of the current policies is Society's Commitment to Sustainable Development, (approved in 2013 and revised in 2016) and the Government Report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,⁷ approved in 2017.

Society's Commitment to Sustainable Development is a Finnish social innovation. It is based on a vision, principles and eight goals for sustainable development approved by the National Commission on Sustainable Development. It is supplemented using a web-based tool where different societal actors and citizens can make voluntary commitments to take measures to promote the goals.

The implementation of the Global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development⁸ began in Finland when the 2030 Agenda global programme for sustainable development took effect on 1 January 2016. In 2016, the long-term goals of the Society's Commitment for Sustainable Development were updated and aligned with the global 2030 Agenda goals, and in 2017 the government published a national implementation plan for the 2030 Agenda.

The Government Report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development defines the evaluation framework and evaluation

cycle of Finland's policy for sustainable development. The implementation of sustainable development is followed through indicator data and interpretations of it, evaluations and recommendations from the scientific community, and viewpoints expressed by civil society and business. The government examines questions of sustainable development in its annual report, which serves as a mechanism for the government's self-evaluation, and strengthens accountability to Parliament and the population. The annual "State and Future of Sustainable Development in Finland" event is a forum for discussing interpretations involving many voices.

A more comprehensive evaluation of sustainable development is carried out every four years. The implementation of national sustainable development policies will be evaluated through a comprehensive and independent assessment for the first time in 2018. The evaluation is scheduled to produce input for the parliamentary election of Spring 2019 and the government formation talks that will follow. The results of the evaluation will be reported to the government, the National Commission on Sustainable Development and the Development Policy Committee. The results of the evaluation also produce input on the implementation of sustainable development for reporting to the UN in connection with the High Level Political Forum.

From follow-up information to a critical evaluation of the policy model and impact pathways

FOLLOW-UP involves the examination of ongoing implementation and its results. The point of view is that of past development. For instance, situational awareness of sustainable development based on indicators is follow-up information. **Evaluation**, for its part, examines why set goals have or have not been achieved.⁹ The task of evaluation is to confirm and test theories and assumptions connected with impact, based on comprehensive material that can be gleaned from the follow-up. The evaluation therefore needs to go one step beyond the follow-up while also creating paths for the future.

Societal change and steps towards sustainable development can be framed in different ways, for example, through systemic transformations or transitions. An analytical approach to evaluation can be strengthened by identifying

theories of change used in the literature related to sustainable development. Thereafter, a conscious choice is needed on the approach to be used in framing the process of change in the evaluation.

Finland has plenty of national and international material available to support the evaluation of sustainable development policy. The material comprises evaluations of policy decisions and policy documents, follow-up information from indicators, and evaluations carried out in different branches of administration that can target either sustainable development policy as a whole or its separate goals. By its nature the available material nevertheless tends to be more follow-up information than evaluation material.

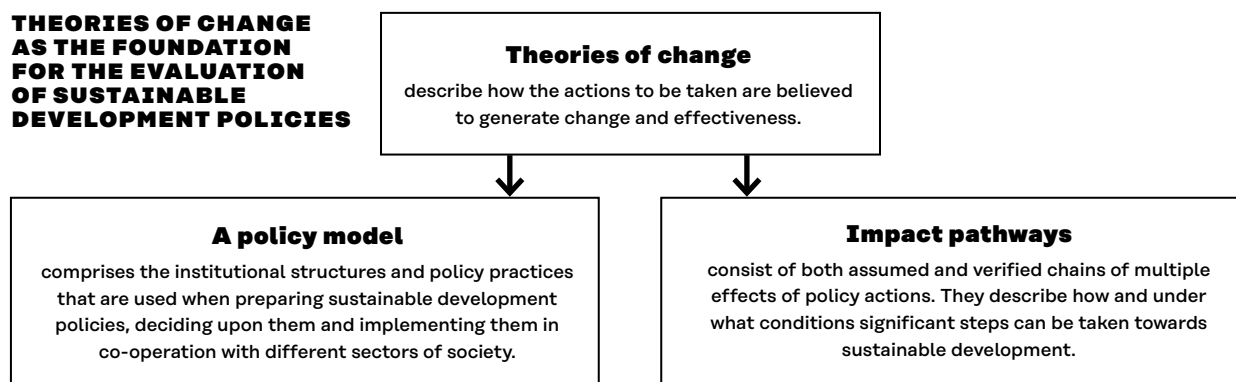
We propose that the national policy evaluation places special focus on the following angles of evaluation.

7 Government Report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Sustainable Development in Finland – Long-term, Coherent and Inclusive Action. Prime Minister's Office Publication 11/2017. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/1519VNK_J1117_Government_Report_2030Agenda_KANSILLA_netti.pdf

8 Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The UN General Assembly approved the resolution on 25 September 2015. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>

9 Schwandt T. et al. (2016). Evaluation: a crucial ingredient for SDG success. IIED, London. <http://pubs.iied.org/pdfs/17357IIED.pdf>

THEORIES OF CHANGE AS THE FOUNDATION FOR THE EVALUATION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT POLICIES



Evaluation of the national policy model. The evaluation should involve a comprehensive examination of the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities of Finland's policy model for sustainable development.

The policy model used in Finland for sustainable development has received much international attention and appreciation. The evaluation should nevertheless critically examine how much progress has been made in achieving the goals set for the development of the policy model, and why.

The government report sets very ambitious goals for the governance model and administrative practices, which continue to call for significant changes in the ways of working of all of government and society. In the implementation of the policy principles identified for sustainable development, special attention should be paid to how the goals for sustainable development are integrated systematically into the main process of policy and administration in different sectors.

In the evaluation of the policy model there is a greater need for expertise in governance and administration than in the content of sustainable development. Expertise can be brought into the evaluation through an international evaluation panel, for instance.

Recognising impact pathways of policy actions. The goals for sustainable development cannot be evaluated only with the help of backward-looking follow-up information; forward-looking evaluation based on the identification of impact pathways is also needed. What is important in this is not to compare the status quo or the development that has taken place with the goals, but rather to identify the mechanisms of impact through which the actions can be assumed to implement the set goals.

When indicators reveal how successfully goals have been achieved, an evaluation based on identifying the impact pathways indicates whether the right moves are being made. Is it likely, based on the best available information, that the selected actions are effective with respect to the desired results?

Identification of the impact pathways and their critical evaluation are especially important when examining

complex goals that are linked to each other in many ways. By identifying impact pathways it is possible to promote proactive and knowledge-based decision-making and integrated implementation of different goals.

In order to understand the effectiveness of policy we recommend that evaluation should aim at identifying impact pathways and assumptions about the impact of policy. One can employ methods such as process tracing and contribution analysis. When identifying impact pathways, it is important to not only rely on existing indicator data, but to also search for, identify and examine impact pathways that are not the focus of present policies. As the evaluation of sustainable development policy involves a new type of approach, both the development of the evaluation approach and practical experimentation are needed through, for instance, some concrete but significant phenomenon-based theme that serves as an example.

As points of view, we offer five key objectives which have already been identified by the Finnish Expert Panel on Sustainable Development¹⁰: 1) the environment as the basis for health and well-being; 2) socially fair energy and natural resource reform; 3) equality and inclusion as building blocks for a sustainable society; 4) rethinking approaches to work and the economy; 5) taking responsibility at all levels – by individuals and by the global community.

THE TWO FOCAL POINTS that we propose are in line with the Government Report on the implementation of the global 2030 Agenda. In the report, three points of view have been put forward as starting points for evaluation. These are: 1) progress made in the national implementation of sustainable development; 2) the effectiveness of actions taken; and 3) reporting on the state of sustainable development in Finland (see page 5).

The key evaluation questions can be built around these points of view, taking into consideration the policy principles described at the beginning, and the focal points of evaluation that we proposed.

¹⁰ The Finnish Expert Panel on Sustainable Development (2016). Five spearheads for sustainable development. Sitra, Helsinki. <https://www.sitra.fi/en/publications/five-spearheads-sustainable-development/>

Proposal for evaluation questions and targets of evaluation

The key evaluation questions and examples of supportive questions	The target of evaluation against which the evaluation questions are measured
<p>1. How has the national implementation of sustainable development progressed and why? (Evaluation of the sustainable development policy model as the focal point)</p> <p>Long-term action and transformation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. What is the ability of the Finnish sustainable development policy instrument to anticipate the future? b. What kind of role have different information sources and panels of experts had in the promotion of sustainable development? How should research, foresight and other types of knowledge be compiled to support sustainable development policy? c. What kinds of actions have been initiated for promoting the motions on sustainable development policy put forward in Parliament? <p>Policy coherence and global partnership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> d. To what extent has sustainable development been accepted as a principle that spans policy sectors? e. How has co-operation developed between the National Commission on Sustainable Development and the Development Policy Committee? f. To what a degree has attention been paid to the (unintended or negative) changes that the achievement of goals of the Finnish policy model on sustainable development might have on other countries? <p>Ownership and participation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> g. Do all important players have the opportunity to participate in the drafting and implementation of sustainable development policy in Finland? h. How have non-governmental organisations, the business community and the scientific community promoted sustainable development? 	<p>Government Report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, chapters: 3. Key policy principles of implementation; 4. Follow-up and review of implementation.</p> <p>Parliament's statement on the Government Report 1/2017 ("motions").</p> <p>The policy principles of Society's Commitment to Sustainable Development.</p>
<p>2. How effective are the national actions and why? (Focus on identifying impact pathways)</p> <p>Long-term action and transformation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Are the measures being taken in Finland that support the eight long-term goals of Society's Commitment to Sustainable Development effective and transformative? b. Have the voluntary commitments of action under the Society's Commitment for Sustainable Development brought about a change that enhances sustainable development in thinking and in action? c. Does the Finnish policy model for sustainable development contain thinking that promotes effectiveness, and if so, what kind? d. What kinds of impact pathways can be recognised in the implementation of Finnish sustainable development? What factors in the policy and action environments have blocked or delayed effectiveness? <p>Policy coherence and global partnership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> e. What kinds of positive or negative side effects have come from the voluntary actions taken by different types of societal actors under the Society's Commitment for Sustainable Development? Have the side effects been conscious or unconscious? What kinds of potential conflicts can be identified between the goals and their implementation? f. How has the work of the two bodies (the National Commission on Sustainable Development and the Development Policy Committee) advanced global sustainability? g. What effects have Finland's policy actions for sustainable development had at the international level? <p>Ownership and participation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> h. Through what kinds of paths, operational models and partnerships has impact been achieved? 	<p>The goals of Society's Commitment to Sustainable Development.</p>
<p>3. What is the state of sustainable development in Finland? (Collecting follow-up and review information)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. What is the direction of development shown by indicators in Finland, and how does this compare to international studies? a. What kinds of trends and developments can be identified from indicator information and its interpretation (short-, medium- and long-term changes)? What are the drivers of the indicators? a. What do the different indices that describe sustainable development reveal about Finland's international position and its changes with respect to the state of sustainable development? 	<p>National sustainable development indicators and their interpretations.</p> <p>Indices describing sustainable development in the 2030 Agenda in Finland: key questions and indicators of sustainable development report.</p> <p>The UN global indicators for sustainable development.</p>

Turning evaluation into a learning and interpretative process

AT ITS BEST, the national evaluation of sustainable development is a learning process in which both the commissioner of the evaluation and the parties participating in it succeed in deepening their understanding of the progress of the policy of sustainable development, its present state and its impact pathways in a way that already strengthens commitment to the implementation of sustainable development by different parts of society. Therefore, a key starting point for the evaluation is to understand it as a shared learning and joint interpretation process that brings together multidimensional information, and not just as a report by a solitary player. As a shared learning and joint interpretation process it is important to distinguish four areas of the evaluation that are very different in character.

1. Compiling follow-up and review information. The key findings of the existing multifaceted follow-up materials that are already now a starting point for the evaluation process need to be brought together. The task of collating the findings can be contracted out to an independent external expert. As part of the compilation of existing material, we propose the updating of the indices described in the [Avain2030](#) report.¹¹

2. Production and evaluation of new evaluation data. New evaluation information refers to points of view put forward earlier in this paper: evaluating Finland's sustainable development policy model and identification of the impact pathways. It would be important for some of this to be done by an international group of experts, because it would bring an outside point of view to the evaluation and offer reference points to evaluations carried out in other countries.

3. Dialogic interpretation of the results. Compiled follow-up and evaluation material needs to be handled and further refined through an expert-driven interpretation process. In such a process, a diverse but independent group of experts from different areas of sustainable development holds discussions on the results of an evaluation. The purpose of the interpretation process is not to produce a

definitive result or consensus on the results of the evaluation, but rather to deepen understanding of them. A significant factor for the success of the dialogic interpretation phase is that the interpretation process is carefully facilitated and that experts taking part in it are as independent as possible. In the interpretation phase expertise should be understood as broadly as possible, comprising academic expertise in addition to qualities such as experience, vision, insight or expertise stemming from holding a particular perspective¹².

4. Societal debate on recommendations. An open and active societal debate needs to take place on the recommendations proposed in the evaluation. The results of the evaluation will naturally be reported to the government and they will be discussed by both the National Commission on Sustainable Development and the Development Policy Committee.

As the purpose of the evaluation is to provide input for the next parliamentary elections and the government's policy programme, we feel that it is important that Parliament, possibly through the Committee for the Future, also actively takes part in the societal debate on the recommendations.

THE PARTICIPATION OF STAKEHOLDERS in the shared learning and interpretation process can be reinforced in all the phases of the evaluation described above: by including follow-up materials they have produced themselves in the evaluation (phase 1), by organising workshops that support the production of new evaluation data (phase 2), by also utilising the expertise of stakeholders in the learning interpretation process (phase 3), and by encouraging players to engage in active societal debate on the results and recommendations of the evaluation (phase 4).

In addition to stakeholders, everyone in society, especially young people, could be encouraged to take part in the evaluation through, for example, a social media-based tool, which would compile statements, views and questions on Finnish sustainable development and its future prospects.

11 Lyytimäki J., Lähteenoja S., Sokero M., Korhonen S. and Furman E. (2017). "Agenda 2030 in Finland: key questions and indicators of sustainable development". Publications of the Government's analysis, assessment and research activities 31/2016.

12 About different forms of expertise (in Finnish), see Jakonen M. (2017). *Vastatieto – Tulevaisuuden asiantuntijuutta etsimässä*. (Counter-information – In search for future expertise.) Publication of the Parliament's Committee for the Future 1/2017 (in Finnish).

MATERIALS THAT STEER AND SUPPORT THE EVALUATION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT POLICY IN FINLAND

Policy documents that steer evaluation:

The Finland we want by 2050 – Society's Commitment to Sustainable Development. (2015) Approved 20 April 2016 at a meeting of the National Commission on Sustainable Development.

Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. United Nations A/RES/70/01. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015.

Government Report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Sustainable Development in Finland – Long-term, Coherent and Inclusive Action. Prime Minister's Office Publications 11/2017.

Finland's Development Policy. One World, Common Future – Toward sustainable development. Government Report to Parliament, 4 February 2016.

Materials that support national evaluation:

National report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – Finland. Prime Minister's Office Publications 10/2016.

Committee for the Future memorandum on the Government Report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Sustainable Development in Finland – Long-term, Coherent and Inclusive Action. TuVM 1/2017 vp.

Lyytimäki J., Lähteenoja S., Sokero M., Korhonen S. and Furman E. (2016). Agenda 2030 in Finland: Key questions and indicators of sustainable development. Publications of the Government's analysis, assessment and research activities 31/2016.

Lyytimäki J., Lähteenoja S., Reinikainen T., Schmidt-Thomé K., Sokero M. and Vikström S. (2017). Sustainable development operational commitment tool: overall assessment and development opportunities. Publications of the Government's analysis, assessment and research activities 67/2017.

Follow-up and review of sustainable development in Finland. Secretariat of the National Commission on Sustainable Development. Prime Minister's Office of Finland 2017.

National indicators of sustainable development and the results of their interpretation process.

Materials from the annual discussion, "The State and Future of Sustainable Development in Finland", 2017.

Entries concerning sustainable development in the national budget of Finland for 2018.

Statement by the National Audit Office of Finland on the sustainable development section of the government's annual report and evaluation of the effectiveness of its actions.

Materials for international comparison:

UN (2017). The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2017. United Nations, New York, 2017.

Bertelsmann Stiftung & Sustainable Development Solutions Network (2017). SDG Index and Dashboards Report 2017. Global Responsibilities. International spillovers in achieving the goals. July 2017.

OECD (2017). Measuring Distance to the SDG Targets: an assessment of where OECD countries stand. OECD, June 2017.

In addition, much sector-specific follow-up information and evaluations are available.

Finnish Expert Panel on Sustainable Development

The Finnish Expert Panel on Sustainable Development supports and challenges policy on sustainable development while bringing the point of view of sustainable development into public discussion. Sitra is hosting and facilitating the activities of this independent panel.



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