



## Steppingstones to More Sustainable Public Libraries in Finland: From Individual Initiatives toward National Guidelines and Standards

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This is to be changed, hopefully serving as an example to readers' communities. The report presented current cases and current best practices on initiatives and concentrated on finding a broader common ground on sustainability work. Helsinki City Library will act as a nationwide accelerator and common voice promoting the step marks toward greener libraries. A nationwide expert network and community of practice is to be established as well. As one example of the development, the tight cooperation between public libraries and basic education in Finnish society will be discussed. For historical reasons public libraries operate to a large extent as school libraries, so the task of supporting curriculum on sustainability topics is a major task for public libraries as well. What does the future of this collaboration and its possibilities look like?

### To cite this article:

Pötsönen, U., Sonkkanen, L., & Sahavirta, H. (2020). Steppingstones to more sustainable public libraries in Finland: From individual initiatives toward national guidelines and standards. *International Journal of Librarianship*, 5(2), 78-83.  
<https://doi.org/10.23974/ijol.2020.vol5.2.179>

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# **Steppingstones to More Sustainable Public Libraries in Finland: From Individual Initiatives toward National Guidelines and Standards**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Public libraries in Finland have a strong history of cooperating and networking. Implementing SDGs and steering the action toward sustainability, however, has been so far carried out mainly out by individual libraries. A larger consensus or common guidelines are still missing, be it designing a new building, customer design thinking or rearranging internal workflows.

This is to be changed, hopefully serving as an example to readers' communities. The report presented current cases and current best practices on initiatives and concentrated on finding a broader common ground on sustainability work. Helsinki City Library will act as a nationwide accelerator and common voice promoting the step marks toward greener libraries. A nationwide expert network and community of practice is to be established as well. As one example of the development, the tight cooperation between public libraries and basic education in Finnish society will be discussed. For historical reasons public libraries operate to a large extent as school libraries, so the task of supporting curriculum on sustainability topics is a major task for public libraries as well. What does the future of this collaboration and its possibilities look like?

**Keywords:** Finland, Public Libraries, Sustainable Development Goals, Sustainability

## **CHARACTERISTICS AND OVERVIEW OF FINNISH LIBRARY SYSTEM**

Finnish public library system is praised second to none in many international reviews and comparisons. Strong legislative support and steady state funding as well as long tradition have made Finnish libraries an essential part of civil society, whether in education, entertainment or civic activities. Library services are viewed as basic services alongside healthcare and education.

Mostly for historic and geographic reasons, Finnish public libraries have a long tradition of networking. Finnish Library Act (2016) stated that every municipality should have a library. However, a big part of the country is sparsely inhabited, so most libraries are relatively small. Local and regional networks, consortiums and larger national networks support this grid and provide better services, as in material acquisitions, library systems and OPACs, professional expertise and collaboration.

When it comes to the environmental work of libraries, there are a few characteristic features in Finland. Libraries perceive themselves “automatically” as environmentally friendly because of their basic functions: recycling materials and loaning out goods, engaging in a sharing economy by providing facilities and ICT tools for shared use. Additionally, the adverse environmental impacts of libraries are perceived to be small. As a result, libraries have not been actively developing their environmental awareness.

The public libraries in Finland do not have their own criteria for environmental impact and have used general environmental criteria for buildings and office environments. As a rule, these are met thanks to a relatively well-functioning infrastructure because statutory waste sorting and recycling is organized at the municipal level. The climate in Finland affects the building industry and regulations, as the constructions need to tolerate different temperatures, frost, load of snow on the roof etc. Hence, the construction supervision concerning e.g. window insulation, foundation materials or air-ventilation is already strict. Nevertheless, library-specific indicators are missing.

These factors could easily lead libraries to conclude that they do not have to engage in any special environmental work. Also, it is believed that the environmental impact of libraries is not in the hands of the library itself but depends on other entities such as cleaning companies, property managers or publishers. Libraries do not have a lot of influence e.g. on what cleaning products or methods are used on the premises, what kind of paper the books are printed on, where they are printed or how they are transported before reaching the library.

The role of library professionals in obtaining reliable and up-to-date environmental information cannot be emphasized enough. The role of library professionals is to connect the users with the most reliable and current environmental information available. This is especially important today because of various misleading resources on the Internet and in social media. Libraries can help examine the information and offer high quality resources.

It is also essential to consider the real environmental impact of goods lending, shared facilities, and tools. These impacts should also be measurable and verifiable so that the real environmental impact of public libraries can be presented to the public and policy makers. So far there hasn't been such an impact measurement framework ready for Finnish libraries.

Levels of library sustainability could be evaluated based upon tiers from passive to active:

1. Awareness, staying up-to-date
2. Act internally, communicate and promote the actions and activities
3. Organize and facilitate external actions, involving citizens
4. Be a proactive agent of change

So far, ecological/environmental sustainability has been the driving factor behind actions. The other pillars of quadruple bottom line of sustainability (social, cultural and economic) should be addressed and processed as well.

Providing measurable wellbeing and a vast palette of services reaching almost all age groups with less than 1% of municipalities total budget can be considered *economically sustainable*.

*Social sustainability* in libraries is about providing equal opportunities and access to information. Libraries provide life-long learning possibilities such as support, materials, and

facilities (space, ICT, WIFI, etc.). Libraries can contribute cohesiveness and integration/inclusion, introducing new residents to official information, language training and meeting possibilities with local residents.

During challenging times such as COVID-19 pandemic, libraries can also contribute to communities' resilience and preparedness providing up-to-date information, self-help and services especially for vulnerable groups like children, elderly or immigrants. Libraries distribute governmental health information in different languages, offer communication channels of staying in touch with families and relatives in other parts of the world or promote literature regarding the relevant topics like stress management.

If needed, also a brief welcomed cultural escape from reality. Finally, a library is a cost-free place to spend time.

When it comes to *cultural sustainability*, libraries have already traditionally been playing an important role in maintaining language, cultural habits and heritage, local information etc. In a more culturally and linguistically diverse society libraries also embrace new residents and strive to serve them with their native language materials and cultural resources.

Finnish public libraries already possess all the elements required it takes to achieve excellence in environmental, social, cultural and economic sustainability:

- Solid funding
- Municipal and stately support
- Wide array of further training possibilities
- Extensive library facility network
- Professional and support networks, communities of practice
- Tight cooperation between schools and educational institutions

## **CURRENT SUSTAINABILITY OF FINNISH PUBLIC LIBRARIES**

Within the last 10-15 years, several environmental sustainability projects and initiatives have been taking place in Finnish libraries. Helsinki Municipal Library as the Central Library of public libraries has been carrying out projects that also have significant national importance, such as Green@Library 2010-2011. The project examined how libraries have taken into account other components of ecological sustainability in addition to their core operations and lending of materials. Other questions examined were for example, whether libraries already had extended their scope to include ecological sustainability in financial observations to give a true picture of the environmental impact of libraries or if the environmental effects had been measured?

In order to determine the state of ecological sustainability in public libraries, a survey was sent out in February 2012 to over 750 recipients during the Green@Library project. The response percentage was 18%, which can be considered an average result of response activity. Some of the largest cities were well represented with 14–17 responses per municipality; however, responses were only received from about 20 municipalities.

The survey was divided into five sections: environmental management, environmental economy, reduction of environmental burden, increase of environmental awareness and environmental communication (both internally between agencies and offices and externally toward the audience).

Based on the findings of the survey, the recommendations for the future were:

- Information must be distributed
  - Bringing out the best practices and introducing them to wider use requires an environmental guide and work methods that motivate people to participate
- Individual employees must be supported
  - Commitment and mandate of the management of the organisation for activities
  - Commitment at the city level: environmental programme and targets
  - Peer support network, for example through eco-support activities
  - Environmental training, tips for best practices and instructions on how to measure success
  - Encouragement
- Indicators and monitoring methods as well as cooperation between different operators should be developed
- Customer communication should receive more attention
  - Between agencies, for example with the engineering department of the municipality
  - The library can also encourage sustainability internally

The world and library landscape have been changing fundamentally during the past 10 years, so a new initiative *Environmental awareness of public libraries for the 2020s* was launched in spring 2020 by Helsinki City Library. It was clear from the initial planning stage that there was a lot of interest in this topic among public libraries. All 9 libraries with regional development responsibility joined the project, which represented the whole country quite well. Even before the start of the project, there were other parties also expressing their interest in cooperation.

The aim of this project will be to bring together library professionals interested in the environmental impact of libraries and create a discussion forum for them to share experiences and problems, much like the ALA Sustainability Round Table. Hopefully, this network will expand beyond libraries and the general public will learn about the results of the environmental impact of libraries. The main goal of the project is to study the environmental awareness of Finnish library professionals by repeating the previous survey from 2012.

Other interesting projects and initiatives are being implemented around Finland. Among others is Oulu City Library, who has published a Sustainable Library 2030 road map during their project *A Responsible library as promoter of environmental awareness*, that aligns with the city development program. The road map reflects on Sustainable Development Goals 2030 and highlights the connection between them and library actions. Examples from the road map included:

*Promoting environmental awareness* → SDG 3, 13

- Both internally and externally
- To increase the visibility of the library as an ecological actor  
*Sustainable library of the future* → SDG 1, 3, 4, 10, 11, 16, 17
- To take all pillars of quadruple bottom line into consideration
- Involve citizen of different age and background into planning
- Guarantee a continuum on the discussions and decisions

In addition to Oulu, browsing the national register of library projects showcases several libraries that have been implementing environmental and sustainable topics to their development projects last year (Finnish Public Library Project Register, n.d.).

As discussed earlier, part of sustainable acts carried out in Finnish libraries are not specific for libraries only, but they apply to all public buildings or organisations. Library-specific measures can include raising awareness, supporting the sharing economy as well as supporting learning and education on sustainability.

LoT (Library of Things) -thinking has spread throughout Finnish libraries and it is possible to loan for example sport equipment, BBQ grills, technical devices such as drills and also season tickets to several sport and culture events (sport matches, concerts, exhibitions, etc.). Load bicycles and moving load carts are for loan as well, especially in the densely populated capital area. The library establishes itself as a supporter and a part of the sharing economy on a broader scale than just books.

Supporting education and curriculum, libraries have a varied range of possibilities to promote sustainability:

- Acquiring relevant materials (physical and increasingly e-materials)
- Presenting library materials and services, reading programs and promotions focused on sustainability specifically or among other topics (book talks, trailers etc.)
- Teaching multiliteracy: information literacy and green information literacy, media literacy, source criticism
- Including sustainability issues into basic introduction of library use for school children: waste recycling, PC energy saving, teaching a careful way to handle books due to less book cover plastic, encouraging pupils to bring their own tote bag etc.
- Organizing activities, happenings, campaigns related to topic in collaboration with partners (municipal and state environmental authorities, nature/sustainability associations etc)
- Library serves also as an arena for debate and a platform for pupils' own initiatives, exhibitions and performances
- Other: e.g. library gardens, plant/seed exchange, LoT, supporting youth groups, associations and councils meetings, collecting feedback and involving young users to develop and plan library services in a more sustainable way.

## SUMMARY: HEADING TO THE FUTURE

Tackling sustainability issues is a huge and complex task for libraries. Being a part of municipal structure, libraries have only limited vote on the biggest decisions regarding building, maintenance, renovations and other infrastructural issues. Also the supply chain of materials and services is sometimes out of the library's hands completely. On a mindset level, a change of management and operation needs sufficient information, planning and time. All members of staff need to be involved and actively participate, so training is needed.

During the last years, a common awareness has been raised on sustainability issues in Finnish libraries. More and more projects or initiatives are implemented throughout the country. Individual practitioners, departments and libraries are doing wonderful jobs in order to promote sustainability and act proactively.

To reach the next level of systematic development, more information on the situation in the libraries and national collaboration is needed. The project *Environmental awareness of public libraries for the 2020s* aims to answer this call. Libraries have a stable position in Finnish civil society and therefore can take on a pivotal active role as change agents. The planned network among other measures will help lifting the awareness and widen the local acts of passionate individuals into structured and strategic progress.

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