

Steering towards a sustainable future

How to integrate Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and navigate goal conflicts at the local level

POLICY BRIEF 2022:1



Nordregio



Introduction

Nordic front-runner municipalities in SDG achievement often have two things in common: committed leadership and a holistic steering process encompassing the Agenda 2030 framework. With 8 years remaining, the integration of the SDGs into local strategies will require leadership willing to revise budgeting systems, alter ways of working, transform conflicting interests into synergies, and serve the needs of the local community. Steering tools are an important foundation in many Nordic municipalities to govern sustainable development in a systematic way. Without them, efforts to address pressing social, economic, and environmental issues can be futile or, a minimum, difficult to monitor.

This policy brief is based on the first of Nordregio's three Localising Agenda 2030 webinars in 2022. It aims to highlight the shared experiences between Nordic municipalities and inspire local officials and decision-makers to invest in adaptive leadership and smart steering tools. During the webinar, municipal leaders from Finspång, Sweden, and Kristiansund, Norway, presented their tested tools and learnings, followed by a panel discussion with Kópavogur, Iceland, and Espoo, Finland, addressing several questions: How is sustainability work organised within the municipalities to achieve genuine progress? How do mayors and officials collaborate to build commitment and momentum around Agenda 2030 in all departments? Which are the main barriers and success factors to efficiently integrate the SDGs into local planning and budgeting tools – and turn goal conflicts into synergies?



Key Take-aways

There are several aspects to keep in mind for municipalities looking to strengthen leadership and integrate the Agenda 2030 goals into local planning and budgeting tools.

1. **Small municipalities can be major front-runners in SDG localisation.**

This is evident through the expertise provided by municipal leaders in different contexts such as Finspång, Kristiansund, and Kópavogur, each with fewer than 40,000 residents.

2. **Environmental, social, and economic efforts need to align—strategically and politically.**

According to leaders in Kristiansund, it is important to have everyone onboard to mainstream these three elements which, over time, enable efforts towards viable and fair communities.

3. **Developing a local SDG roadmap takes time, but political will can support the way.**

Finspång revealed that the kick-off was probably “the worst meeting we ever had.” It took years of dialogue and workshops with all municipal departments, plotting out the SDGs’ potential for each of them, until Finspång had translated the 17 goals into their local context and included them in the 2020 budget and strategic plan. Leaders in Kópavogur experienced a similar reality—it took roughly 3 years for the SDGs to become integrated into the strategic budget and steering system. Patience is required to encourage participation and support from staff, politicians and citizens towards a common vision involving the SDGs.

4. **“It is not about being the best in the world, it is about doing what is best for the world.”**

One municipality cannot do everything, but everyone can do something. SDG achievement should not be seen as an inter-municipal competition; rather, municipalities are working in tandem, and the capacity of one municipality to target or progress with a sustainable development goal may not look the same or happen at the same rate in another.

5. **Working with citizens is crucial to achieving the SDGs—including youth engagement.**

It is important to include the public in SDG localisation early on. Raise awareness and advocate for the active role of everyone in the process by focusing on local benefits of the global goals. For example, implementing the SDGs can help improve the local community's quality of life. As one leader in Finspång put it, “Give people hope, and underline that we can make a difference.” Another way to involve members of the community is to encourage teachers to integrate SDGs in their subjects to increase students’ knowledge and engagement with local and global SDG action.

6. **Build Nordic partnerships for knowledge exchange.**

Approaching other municipalities for ideas about how to localise the SGD is fruitful to avoid reinventing the wheel. Municipalities can do this within their own regions or across borders. A new collaboration network of six large Finnish cities, organised through Kuntaliitto, has proven useful to accelerate SDG achievement through knowledge exchange about steering tools, VLRs, etc. Team Finspång took a trip to Asker in Norway to learn from an experienced Nordic front-runner.

7. **To maintain progress, sustainable development efforts should be incorporated in both short- and long-term visions, steering tools, action, and monitoring.**

The 17 goals must be integrated into every aspect of municipal governance. This requires a transition away from a checklist mentality and towards the SDGs as a holistic disposition of governance that becomes inseparable from everyday work and life in municipalities. Start with an analysis of which municipal sectors could impact which goals, and discuss how the goals could be used to enhance quality of life and attractiveness of the community.

8. **Where is the most impact seen? Use metric systems to measure progress.**

Key performance indicators (KPIs) can be important as markers of action and progress, but local adaptation is the basis for determining which goals and actions are suitable for each municipality. Ultimately, it is about building knowledge and capacity about where the greatest and least impact is taking place. Leaders from Kristiansund suggest that identifying documented effects and tracking implementation through a smart steering system is important to sustain momentum, highlight impact, and celebrate progress.



Good Nordic practices

Why Finspång and Kristiansund?

When it comes to SDG localisation, many smaller municipalities have gained much experience in building institutional capacity for progressing towards Agenda 2030. Finspång, with approximately 22,000 inhabitants, has integrated the SDGs into their strategic plan in such a way that one cannot distinguish the plan from the SDGs — the two go hand-in-hand. In Kristiansund with a population of 24,000, the municipality has adapted sustainable development into the everyday lives of the people by embedding the sustainability goals into different local plans as well as the budgeting process. These municipalities have spent several years developing integration tools that work best for their contexts. A difference between the municipalities is follow-up measures and monitoring — here Kristiansund is a Nordic front-runner.

Finspång

- **Finspång has developed a two-by-two framework for evaluating and prioritising SDGs.**

Local politicians used this framework to plot each of the 17 SDGs according to their level of impact and resource necessities. First, they indicated the existing status of each goal within the work of the local authority. Then they added arrows to each of the plotted goals to demonstrate where they hoped to progress with that goal. The workshop activity enabled participants to comment upon why each goal was placed in its quadrant and further describe any ambitions for achieving that goal. The mapping also helped to identify low-hanging fruit as well as better understanding which goals might require a long-game perspective to achieve - an important basis for prioritisation of goals.

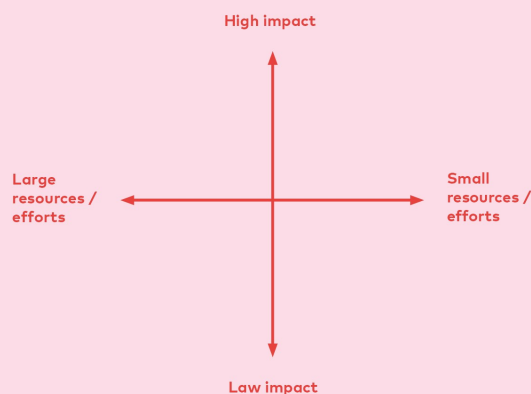


Figure 1. The two-by-two framework employed by Finspång for evaluating SGD localisation.

- **Establish a common understanding of Agenda 2030 and prioritize goals in all sectors.**

Finspång also used the two-by-two framework to discuss the status of and contributions to SDGs with staff from all municipal sectors. As an example, teachers in upper secondary schools have been encouraged to use it to determine how their subjects can be taught to be more in line with the SDGs and help students contribute to SDGs. The tool is versatile and can be used by any actors seeking to integrate the SDGs into their work or create a common understanding among different groups.

- **Translate the 17 goals into the municipal budget and strategic plan.**

After conducting workshops with all municipal departments, plotting out the SDGs' potential for each of them, Finspång was able to translate the 17 goals into the local context and include them in the [Budget and Strategic Plan 2022-2024](#). The plan specifies local targets and how to measure progress – from reducing poverty to clean water.

- **Conduct 'walk-arounds' in the city to promote the SDGs and local progress.**

These walks are inspired by Asker municipality in Norway to create more visibility around the 2030 Agenda, showcase local SDG initiatives, and explain how residents' sustainable lifestyle choices can improve quality of life for people and planet. The events also offer opportunities to hear directly from citizens of all ages how they view the local Agenda 2030 efforts.

Kristiansund

- **Kristiansund uses a diagram to interpret the three pillars of sustainability.**

The overlap of environmental, social, and economic factors shows the importance of involving all in SDG localisation. In Kristiansund, a social and environmental city will be tolerable, but not fair or viable; a social and economic city will be fair, but not tolerable or viable, and an economic and environmental city may be viable, but it will not be fair or tolerable.

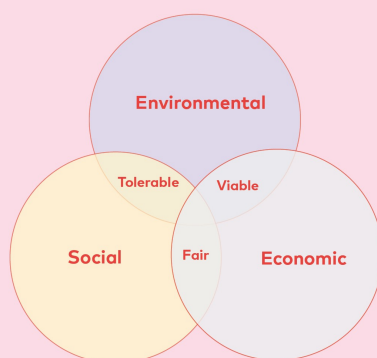


Figure 2. Venn diagram utilised by Kristiansund to emphasise the three-fold nature of sustainability

- **The municipality focuses on 10 SDGs and employs the United for Smart Sustainable Cities (U4SSC) taxonomy to measure these.**

Leaders use an internal management tool called Stratsys to track progress of the 45 economic indicators, 17 environmental indicators, and 29 social indicators defined by the U4SSC collection methodology.

- **Strong commitment to reporting and sharing results to sustain motivation.**

Kristiansund shares monthly reporting, completed activities, yearly planning, as well as comprehensive planning documents that all involve commentary on and guidance from the global goals.

- **Concrete KPIs specific to the local context have been identified.**

For example, the city states that it will reduce the GINI coefficient by 10 % (mentioned as one of the U4SSC core, structural indicators linked to SDG 10.2). They have also focused much of their work on identifying which actions are ideal for Kristiansund specifically to pursue.

- **Kristiansund also uses a model called the multiple criteria decision analysis.**

This provides an action portfolio for local politicians with goals which are measurable, have a documented effect, and are specifically suitable for Kristiansund. The model is a common research tool for analysing and identifying multiple, potentially conflicting choices for decision-making.

- **Adoption of a climate accounting process.**

The process tracks to which categories of consumption the municipality's climate footprint can be attributed. The process helps to identify which categories, need urgent attention and other areas that need to be addressed in the future. These methods are just some of the tools that have helped to make Kristiansund a front-runner in their local SDG integration efforts.

Further reading and resources

- [Finspång Strategic Plan 2022-2024](#): Adopted in November 2021, the most recent strategic plan and budget uses the 17 SDGs as its foundation and interprets the global goals in the local context of Finspång.
- [Kristiansund Sustainable development work](#): This website provides explanations for how Kristiansund integrates SDGs into their strategic plan, including details on KPI identification, with a reference collection of sustainability initiatives in the municipality.
- [US4SSC KPI Collection Methodology](#): This methodology from United for Smart Sustainable Cities (U4SSC) is used by Kristiansund to identify KPIs in line with the SDGs and evaluate progress through self-assessment work.
- [Sustainable Espoo programme](#): Espoo's main platform for sustainable development in the municipality, including the city's Espoo Story strategy, information regarding the sustainable steering group, and main programme goals for 2021-2025. See also Espoo's [Voluntary Local Review](#).
- [Sustainable Kópavogur](#): The local strategy articulating the municipality's mission and vision, influenced by Agenda 2030, and their 36 key goals connected to the SDGs.
- [SDG Synergies toolkit](#): Developed by the Stockholm Environment Institute, SDG Synergies enables municipalities to identify how multiple municipal goals overlap so as to develop more efficient strategies, targets, and actions.
- [Roadmap for Localizing the SDGs](#): This roadmap covers a range of strategies that can be adapted to the specific contexts and needs of different cities and regions. Not a prescriptive 'how to' it aims to support local and regional governments and their associations to implement and monitor the SDGs.
- [Global goals for local priorities: The 2030 Agenda at the local level](#): Nordic report providing local authorities guidance for implementing Agenda 2030 based on the work of 27 front-runner municipalities.

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About this Policy brief

This policy brief is part of the Nordic Council of Ministers' Localising Agenda 2030 in the Nordics initiative. It builds on a series of webinars produced by Nordregio since 2020 to foster dialogue and strengthen knowledge exchange among municipal and regional representatives, research institutions, and civil society networks working with the SDGs.

The three-part webinar series focused on the topics of steering and local leadership for SDG integration, developments of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) and indicator systems, and how to use public procurement to multiply sustainability efforts.

For more Agenda 2030 inspiration, visit: <https://nordregio.org/agenda2030local/>

See the webinar recording for Policy Brief #1 here: <https://nordregio.org/events/steering-towards-a-sustainable-future/>

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