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## **Advocating Public Libraries by the SDGs**

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### **Abstract:**

*The library world has recognized the importance of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the fact that they can be taken as a starting point when considering ecologically, socially, and economically sustainable libraries.*

*The SDGs are general in nature, though they approach sustainability from many angles. In virtue of many-sidedness, they balance the debate on sustainable development, which, incidentally, is prone to focusing solely on carbon neutrality or emission reduction. However, because of the generality, they do not offer a ready-made action plan. Thus, the SDGs should be clarified and interpreted in the library framework. In addition, the SDGs are interlinked and show how sustainable development depends on factors that are interdependent.*

*A national project (2020-2021) Bringing environmental awareness of public libraries to the 2020s investigated the environmental awareness of Finnish public libraries. The project included a survey on public libraries' environmental work and values but also the SDGs were worked on workshops. The project showed that the SDGs can be used to broaden and deepen the environmental awareness of libraries. However, they also offer a visually well-designed and internationally accepted tool for marketing public libraries by clarifying how diversely libraries have adopted sustainability and promote the SDGs.*

**Keywords:** *Public libraries, Environmental sustainability, Sustainability, The SDGs, Marketing*

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### **Introduction: Bringing environmental awareness of public libraries to the 2020s project**

Many countries and even municipalities – like the city of Helsinki – are committed to pursuing general environmental objectives, like carbon neutrality, but also to report on the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Moreover,

citizens are concerned about the environment and wish to use environmentally friendly products and services. For (environmental) sustainability, there is a top-down push but also down to top demand.

Therefore, public libraries cannot ignore sustainability or environmental objectives but should promote them and make their commitment on these principles clear. Environmental objectives, like carbon neutrality and the SDGs, can support and further libraries environmental and social awareness and work. Moreover, public libraries' commitment to these objectives is a question of image and, thus, a tool for marketing library services. Libraries should inform their users that by using libraries they can decrease their carbon footprint while the library implements the SDGs. The aim is clear, but it is not always easy to say how, action should be taken.

*Bringing environmental awareness of public libraries to the 2020s* was a Finnish national project, which focused on the environmental awareness of libraries. The project was the largest research, education, and development project in the library sector on this subject so far and funded by the Ministry of Culture and Education. The project was led by Helsinki City Library but in addition 7 city libraires across the country participated it. During the project, new information was obtained through a survey and carbon footprint measurements in 13 libraries. Also, the carbon handprint of libraries and how libraries could meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) were outlined. The SDGs were discussed in a workshop which was used to select key SDGs for public libraries. In addition, three webinars on environmental issues were organized and Green Library pages and social media groups were established.

The starting point of the project was to find out what kind of environmental work libraries have done and what kind of new tools are needed to advance this work. This work was begun by a survey that investigated the level of environmental awareness of public libraries (2020). A total of 166 libraries from all around the country replied to the survey, so the results can be considered quite reliable. The survey was complemented by an additional value survey for library staff, which focused on environmental values. These surveys provide a good picture of the values and expectations of library staff regarding the future of the library, but also of the environmental work and environmental management of libraries. The results were compared with a corresponding survey carried out in 2012.<sup>1</sup>

With respect to the SDGs the work was only begun. Nevertheless, the role of the SDGs should not be underestimated since they turn out to be suitable tools for environmental management and work in libraries, but they are also effective instruments for advocating environmental values to library staff (internal marketing) and libraries green image for public (external marketing). The SDGs offer a compact and visually well-designed tool for libraries to declare their sustainability and environmental values. A surplus value consists of the fact that the SDGs are launched by such a well-established organization as United Nations and are internationally accepted.

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<sup>1</sup> A link to the English summary of the project report can be found here: [Summary Bringing environmental awareness of public libraries to the 2020s.pdf \(kirjastot.fi\)](#)



## **SDGs' instructive function: Environmental work in Finnish public libraries**

### *General remarks: Environmental work in Finnish public libraries*

At the very beginning of the project, the need to clarify some of the central concepts was recognized. The environmental objectives of libraries are often based on the concept of *sustainable development*, which is, however, ambiguous. Sustainable development tends to be divided into economic, social, and ecological sustainability, but the conceptual consensus ends there, and it is not clear what, for example, economically sustainable development means. Sustainable development is also often defined in such a general way that no measures can be derived from it. According to Sitra's dictionary of future terms, sustainable development takes into account the environment, people and the economy equally in decision making and operations and aims to secure good living opportunities for future generations.<sup>2</sup> Also the SDGs are quite general, and it is not clear how to interpret them in the public library context. It may be asked, for example, if the Finnish public libraries promote the first goal *No poverty* by offering free library services<sup>3</sup> – or is something more required. In the same manner, libraries contain information on several themes, but does that mean that they promote, for example, goals 14 and 15 *Life under water and Life on land*.

Another aspect of this conceptual confusion become evident when the results of the value survey were analyzed. According to the survey, the values of sustainable development are considered very important, but the exceptions were social responsibility and the sharing and circular economy – even though both are key factors for the sustainability of libraries. Hence, it seems that sustainability is appreciated but it is not clear what it consists of.

Despite of this vagueness, libraries have usually placed themselves with the 'good guys', invoking two arguments. The positive argument is that libraries have circulated their materials throughout history and represent the circular economy in its original form. The negative argument has been the fact that libraries do not consume non-renewable raw materials or cause high emissions. The emissions from libraries are indeed relatively low, as the carbon footprint measurements carried out by this project showed.<sup>4</sup> However, the argument is weakened by the fact that libraries often operate in old buildings which are not energy efficient. In addition, traditional materials are printed on paper. Libraries, however, have no significant influence on these factors: they fall within the remit of other actors. This point was noted by many survey respondents.

This state of affairs can easily lead to passivity. It may be thought that libraries have already done everything in their power and there is nothing more they can do. However, the current situation calls for more active and positive action that can be shown to have an impact. We need further calculations of the carbon footprint and handprint of public libraries, as well

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<sup>2</sup> The Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra: [Dictionary - Sitra](#)

<sup>3</sup> According to the Finnish public library law, the public library services are free for all.

<sup>4</sup> See Leila Sonkkänen 2022.

as roadmaps to achieve the SDGs. Public libraries environmental thinking should be broadened, and the SDGs are a fine tool for this. They just must be adapted to this function.

Another related point here is that the environmental work of public libraries has been obscured by the origins of the *Green Library movement*. The movement was launched by architects, and its focus has been on library buildings. The debate has thus focused on energy efficiency and the technical characteristics of buildings, such as water consumption and air conditioning. In addition, the *Green Office* principles, mainly sorting and recycling of paper and waste, have been examined. The carbon footprint measurements carried out by this project showed that buildings are indeed the largest emitter of public libraries, while the *Green Office* principles play a relatively minor role.

However, the environmental work of public libraries is not just about energy efficiency of buildings or recycling and sorting. Back in the day, I made this point by saying that we cannot rebuild all libraries, but we can be more environmentally conscious in our buildings. At the same time, I called for green library services, which include easy access to reliable and relevant environmental information and, for example, shared facilities and equipment.<sup>5</sup> At that time, the SDGs were not launched, and the approach to libraries' environmental work was much narrower.

### *Sustainability in practice: Environmental work in Finnish public libraries*

The 2020 survey for Finnish public libraries indicated a major change. In addition to the increase in quantity, the environmental work underwent vast qualitative changes during the 2010s. One such change was the understanding of the economic aspect of sustainable development. In the 2012 survey, the focus was solely on environmental sustainability, i.e., purchasing, investments and building maintenance, meaning that the environmental work of public libraries was perceived as the purchase of environmentally friendly products and energy-saving of buildings. In addition, the emphasis was on one specific economic aspect, namely, how to reduce energy bills, waste management fees or even paper consumption. As suggested above, the importance of buildings and economic aspects should not be underestimated. Energy-efficient buildings and the principles of the *Green Office* are the basis for environmental work, and economic decision-making where these environmental aspects are considered is the first step towards a sustainable library.

However, in 2012, there was still a lot left to do in this respect: about half of the respondents estimated that environmental impacts were not being considered and only one in five knew that they affected decisions made in the library. On the other hand, energy saving, waste sorting and the reduction of paper consumption were taken account relatively well. These practices were used in about half of the libraries.

The change to the 2020 survey is significant. To begin with the survey had to be reformulated so that it looked at sustainability in the broader meaning but also paid attention to new premises and ways to decrease energy consumption. Let us take some quantitative examples. Currently, approximately 90% of the equipment has automatic power saving modes and is turned off overnight (which was quite rare in 2012). Nearly 70% of libraries have paid attention to library lighting (and had LED lights). In other words, libraries have taken further steps to reduce their negative environmental impact. Libraries also recycle and sort more than they did a decade ago. By contrast, the use of renewable energy is still very limited.

However, the most significant change has been qualitative. Borrowed equipment and goods as well as shared equipment and facilities – in other words, the emerging *circular and sharing economy* – have become remarkable elements of the environmental work of libraries.

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<sup>5</sup> Sahavirta, Harri 2012.

The survey revealed that most of the libraries have equipment and goods people can borrow, as well as spaces that can be booked for shared use – and their use is closely monitored.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, sustainable economy and environmental considerations are increasingly taken into account in purchasing and investments and even the UN SDGs have been adopted by some public libraries as parts of their environmental strategies. Hence, there has been a remarkable qualitative change.

### *Environmental management in Finnish public libraries*

In the survey, the aspects of environmental management of libraries were determined by asking what kind of environmental programs or objectives the library has in use. The programs and objectives were divided into the environmental programs of the municipality and library, as well as general environmental schemes or indicators, such as the UN SDGs and environmental certificates.

Based on the survey, it seems that environmental objectives are not too well known: Some 20–30% of the respondents could not say whether the library has a specific environmental program.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the number of negative responses was quite high, which is probably explained by the fact that there is often only one environmental management system in place and that few libraries have adopted several environmental programs or objectives.

The environmental programs are alternative, and thus, when interpreting the result, the answers should be added together, which gives a much more positive picture of the environmental management of public libraries. Naturally, this also increases the margin of error. Roughly speaking, many libraries use the environmental strategy or program of the municipality (50%), while the municipality's carbon neutral roadmap/climate program has been adopted less often (25%). However, the options overlap in part, and the library may have only one or both. Thus, it may be estimated that more than half of the libraries follow a municipal environmental program and almost one-fifth utilize several environmental systems.

The use of libraries' own environmental programs is less common. A tentative estimate would be that about 10% of public libraries are active in environmental work and they use several environmental programs, while about one-third of libraries use an environmental system of their own. These rough estimates are based on the views of the survey respondents, so the margin of error is high.

The result is interesting if compared to the 2012 survey. At that time, it was noted that there was a lot of room for improvement in environmental management: only 20% of the respondents knew that their municipality had an environmental program or that the library had guiding principles for increasing energy efficiency. Hence, the increase has been tremendous.

Environmental awareness and management in Finnish public libraries have thus clearly improved considerably in less than ten years. One reason for this – along with the changes in general opinion – is that municipalities have launched their environmental programs. Hence, there has been push from two directions. However, at the same time, some ready-made principles and objectives, like the SDGs, have been introduced. This means that the adoption of sustainable objectives is much easier and requires less resources than ten years ago.

In this respect, it is worth mentioning that municipalities have often included the SDGs in their environmental programs (like in Helsinki) but that some small municipalities may use them directly as environmental objectives. The same holds for some small libraries: a small library may not have resources to create an environmental program of its own but may adopt established objectives.

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<sup>6</sup> However, there is a slight tension here. In the survey these were recognized as constituents of sustainability but according to the additional value survey, these are less valued than other sustainable values. Hence, it seems that Finnish public libraries are more sustainable than what they are aware of.

<sup>7</sup> In 2012, the number was even greater: the strategic level has remained quite unfamiliar for library staff.

An important further remark is that environmental management is an essential constituent of marketing sustainable libraries. Unless libraries have environmental strategies and objectives, there is nothing to market. From this view point it may also be noted how valuable compact and well-designed sustainable objectives, like the SDGs, are for small libraries which do not have resources for creating an environmental program of their own, nor of producing marketing materials.

## The SDGs' value function

### *Finnish public libraries' future trends and values*

The survey also examined trends that are expected to have the greatest impact on the future of libraries and the importance of environmental factors in this respect. The topic was approached through Sitra's Megatrends 2020.<sup>8</sup> These included five developments:

- (1) Ecological reconstruction is a matter of urgency,
- (2) The population is ageing and diversifying,
- (3) Relational power is strengthening,
- (4) Technology is becoming embedded in everything,
- (5) The economy is seeking direction.

The assumption was that the ageing and increasing diversity of the population will have a major impact on the provision of library services and that digitalization will change not only the nature of work in libraries, but also the behavior of the customer base. The importance of the economy, power structures or ecological factors could not be predicted more specifically. The responses to the survey formed a picture that largely corresponded to these preliminary expectations, but the modest role of environmental aspects came as a surprise.

Technological development and digitalization are expected to have the greatest impact on the day-to-day activities of public libraries – about a third of respondents expect them to revolutionize library operations. As the materials become digital and their production and distribution take on new forms, the basic operations of libraries will undergo a transformation. Technological developments also have an impact on the tools used to carry out library work.

The ageing and increasing diversity of the population is also an identified challenge. The ageing population needs new kinds of services. In addition to ageing, the population is also growing more diverse, and the services of libraries can no longer be tailored to the needs of the homogeneous majority. However, increasing diversity is not considered to revolutionize library operations: libraries already take into account different age groups and different customer groups. Diversity is not a challenge but creates anticipated possibilities to libraries.

*Relational power* and the *economy seeking direction* are quite abstract trends, and it is not necessarily clear what they refer to. However, libraries have understood that the economy is an important factor – no matter where it seeks direction. The same applies to power – power structures have a huge impact on a service that is financed by tax revenues.

Public libraries identify these critical trends well, but the situation is different with regard to environmental factors. Fewer than a quarter of respondents considered the megatrend related to the environment as a significant change factor. This may be due to the wording: *ecological reconstruction is a matter of urgency* could be interpreted as referring only to the repair of damage that has already been done. Thus, the result might have been different if the wording

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<sup>8</sup> [Megatrends 2020 template - Sitra](#)

of the trend clearly referred to, for example, preventing climate change. Nevertheless, in the light of the megatrends, it seems that environmental challenges are not thought to affect the operations of the library any more than they do the rest of society.

In addition to the megatrends, the survey also asked about themes related to sustainable development considered important by libraries. In practice, these themes referred to values, but they also reflected many of the SDGs. These themes included equality and non-discrimination which represented the social aspect of sustainable development.<sup>9</sup> Learning and environmental education referred to the appreciation of knowledge and the environment<sup>10</sup>, while resource wisdom and the sharing and circular economy referred to economic values<sup>11</sup>, but also to environmental values. Carbon neutrality and biodiversity were purely ecological values.<sup>12</sup> In addition, digitalization was included the themes since it can be considered as increasing environmental sustainability, although is not a value in itself.

The responses to the question were in line with the megatrends. In both cases, the technological (digitalization) and social aspects, as well as the economy, were judged to be significant, but ecological values received less recognition. Carbon neutrality and biodiversity were clearly lagging after other thematic areas – only around 20% of respondents considered them “important”. However, when evaluating the result, it should be noted that the questions could perhaps been framed better: the themes are ambiguous and partly overlapping.

The result that public libraries value not only social sustainability but also technological and economic values, was so surprising that the project carried out a small-scale, additional value survey in autumn 2021. The survey listed several values and asked whether they were relevant for libraries. A total of 184 responses were received, so the results can be considered reliable.

The additional value survey refined and corrected the first survey result, as the respondents did not appreciate technological progress as such: progress was considered important, but only 12% of the respondents considered it to be a core value of the library. By contrast, technological competence, i.e., digital and civic competence, rose considerably higher, as 55% of the respondents considered it a central value for the library. Economic values were even less popular and mainly associated with service design – although they were not essential even in this respect. Economic efficiency was considered a core value by 33% of the respondents and productivity by only 4%.

In the end, the most important values for the staff of libraries are equality and non-discrimination as well as democracy. More than 80% of the respondents considered these to be core values of the library, and they were somewhat unexpectedly valued above the typical values of libraries – like freedom of expression – most notably, they took precedence over social responsibility. Furthermore, all respondents considered the accuracy, reliability and accessibility of information and materials to be either significant or very significant, and most also highlighted them as core values of the library. The accuracy of information is, of course, very strongly associated with collections, but also with services and events. Accessibility of information, in turn, relates to all aspects of library operations.

In the values survey, environmental values also took precedence over economic and technical values. However, they were far from reaching the level of social values. Half of the respondents regarded environmental awareness as a core value. A little unexpectedly, it was valued higher than the sharing and circular economy (48%). The result of the value survey confirms the conclusion drawn from the first survey – about half of the library staff are very environmentally conscious. On the other hand, it should be noted that only less than 10% of

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<sup>9</sup> SDG 5 gender equality & 10 reduced inequalities.

<sup>10</sup> SDG 4 quality education.

<sup>11</sup> SDG 11 sustainable cities and communities & 12 responsible consumption and production.

<sup>12</sup> SDG 13 climate action.

the respondents stated that environmental values are not significant. Thus, the environmental values of library staff are significant, although not necessarily the most important values.

### *SDG workshops – selecting the relevant SDGs*

The results of these two surveys may be summarized by saying that the SDG 10) *Reduced inequalities* pops up with the goal 4 *Quality education*. In addition, there were some core values which do not correspond directly to any of the SDGs, like accessibility, accuracy, and reliability of information as well as democracy and freedom of expression. Otherwise, social and environmental sustainability was found important but not as libraries' core value. Technical elements seem to have only instrumental value. Hence, there is work to be done with social and environmental sustainability – and the SDGs might offer efficient tool for that.

The survey results were not linked to sustainable development goals and the work with them was begun from a clean table. The *Bringing environmental awareness of public libraries to the 2020s* project worked on SDGs through workshops. The aim was to choose suitable SDGs for public libraries. Six SDGs that can be considered relevant for all Finnish public libraries were selected. Next, the SDGs were concretized and adapted to the framework of public libraries: for example, *quality education* was identified with *promoting reading for all ages and supporting lifelong learning*. The work was discontinued at this point and from here on, individual libraries must consider how to support reading and lifelong learning in practice – and what the local conditions are. Figure 1 presents the selected SDGs.



Figure 1. The main SDGs for the Finnish public libraries

The selected goals strengthen the earlier result that SDG 4) *Quality education* (literacy and lifelong learning which includes access to accurate and relevant information) and 10) *Fighting inequality* (democracy and equality) belong to the core values of public libraries. It may be said that the value survey and SDG workshop shared a starting point. However, there are also some new emphases. Workshop participants wished to bring out libraries' significance for goal 3) *Health and well-being* and that libraries do take climate actions (goal 13). Finally, goals 11) *Sustainable cities and communities* and 12) *Responsible consumption* were



recognized belonging to the core of public libraries sustainability. After all, public libraries participate the municipal promotion of sustainability and follow the accepted sustainability principles. Approach through SDG also helped to recognize the role of circular and sharing economy which belong to the basic level library activities.

The work did not go further, but it can generally be said that the SDGs broadened Finnish public libraries' view of sustainable development and how libraries could contribute to it in a variety of ways. Hence, the SDGs have given some new perspectives on sustainability – and the workshops begin to define what these might mean in the public library framework. Starting from the top (abstract goals), the work went downwards: the goals were concretized.

At the same time, however, it seems that the understanding of the SDGs remained somewhat superficial. The project's work remained purely qualitative, and the project did not develop, for example, indicators which would enable to calculate the impact of the libraries' work on the SDGs. Libraries' understanding of the interrelationships between the key SDGs should also be deepened. It should be examined how different SDGs could support each other in the public library framework. For example, it may be claimed that if libraries promote literacy and reading, they also advance related or parallel goals, like well-being and equality, since literacy and reading increase well-being but also opens new (social) possibilities. In the Finnish framework, this might mean that public libraries should especially promote young boy's literacy skills, since it is the illiterate boys who are in danger of marginalization and social exclusion – whereas in some other framework the emphasis should be on young girls. It should be reminded that the library framework is not universal but differs in accordance with the local culture.

Therefore, the SDGs should not be only concretized but also the several interrelations between them should researched in the local public library framework. On other words, one should examine what can be done by doing something else. This could be done by using, for example, the tools of systematic change. Thus, there are future challenges.

One of the original aims for the project was also to inform library users about the fact that the SDGs belong to the core of library services: public libraries promote actively several of the SDG goals (and offer information on all the themes). Hence, the SDGs can be used to broaden libraries' environmental awareness but also to clarify the image of libraries. This aspect gained weight during the project and forms another future challenge. Ultimately, the SDGs offer new and effective possibilities for marketing sustainable libraries. The core of public library services is sustainable and in accordance with the SDGs. Public libraries are building a better future equally for all by offering well-being, good education, and several climate actions. In addition, public libraries are an essential part of the sustainable municipal infrastructure which advances and enables circulating and sharing. These facts offer splendid tools for marketing public libraries.

## **Acknowledgments**

This paper is based on the national project *Bringing environmental awareness of public libraries to the 2020s* project in Finland (2020-2021). A link to the English summary of the project report can be found here: [Summary Bringing environmental awareness of public libraries to the 2020s.pdf \(kirjastot.fi\)](#)

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