

SDSN
Northern
Europe

March
2024

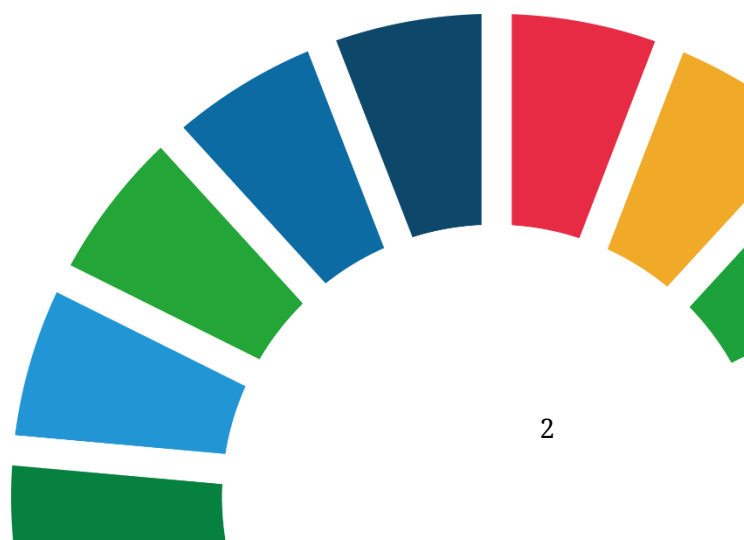
Application of the SDG Impact Assessment Tool in municipalities

Experiences and lessons from a pilot project with
five Nordic municipalities



Content

Key messages	3
Introduction	5
The SDG Impact Assessment Tool	7
Approach and method.....	8
Description of the pilot project	11
Application of the tool in the municipalities	12
Strängnäs.....	12
Botkyrka.....	13
Korsholm.....	14
Kungälv.....	15
Tjörn.....	16
Experiences and feedback from the municipalities	17
The SDGs as a framework for sustainability assessments in municipalities.....	17
Opportunities and challenges with using the tool in municipalities.....	18
Potential för continued use and dissemination to more municipalities.....	20
Recommendations for municipalities that wishes to use the tool.....	21
Concluding remarks	21



Key messages

This report presents experiences and lessons learned from a pilot project where five Nordic municipalities, during the period from May 2023 to February 2024, have tried out the SDG Impact Assessment Tool as a method for working with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in their operations. The main results from the pilot project, outlined in this report, are as follows:

- The SDG Impact Assessment Tool (“the tool”) is perceived as a simple, educational, and hands-on tool that enables a structured approach and provides a common starting point for identifying impacts on the SDGs. Several participants highlight that the approach in the tool stimulates discussion, critical thinking, and contributes to an increased understanding of various perspectives and dimensions of sustainable development.
- The tool is based on qualitative self-assessments, which several municipalities view as a strength as it contributes to internal learning within the municipality and allows arguments to be thoroughly analyzed and examined. In several of the assessments carried out by the municipalities, the process of conducting an SDG Impact Assessment in the tool resulted in that connections and impacts relevant for sustainable development that had not previously been reflected upon were identified.
- The tool is perceived to work well for analysis of projects or processes that are well-defined and clearly framed. When analyzing larger amounts of information, it may be necessary to divide what is being analyzed into several smaller subsets to create a manageable analysis, and it can sometimes be challenging to frame and delimit the subsets appropriately. It can also be a challenge to evaluate and weigh different types of, sometimes counteracting, impacts against each other when conducting an assessment.
- Several municipalities report positive experiences from carrying out SDG impact assessments in a workshop format, where municipal officers with diverse backgrounds and competencies and from different departments are involved. Establishing a broad working process around the SDG Impact Assessment Tool, where various departments within the municipality collaborate in conducting the analyses, has also proven successful. It has contributed both to increased knowledge about sustainable development, the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs and facilitated a cross-sectoral dialogue within the municipality, as well as increased the understanding of the work of other departments and how it relates to sustainable development.
- All participating municipalities see potential in using the SDG Impact Assessment Tool to enhance governance towards the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda in municipal operations. Suitable applications that have been highlighted include within physical planning, culture and recreation management, education, public procurement, as well

as in more general strategic work, such as for support in decision-making processes and as a basis for political discussions about sustainable development.

- A conclusion from the pilot project is that there is potential for more municipalities, as well as regions, both in the Nordic countries and internationally, to use the SDG Impact Assessment Tool as a resource in their sustainability efforts. This report presents practical experiences, lessons learned, and hands-on advice from five municipalities that other municipalities and regions who want to use the SDG Impact Assessment Tool can draw from.

Introduction

The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets, constitutes a framework for sustainable transformations of societies across the globe. The 2030 Agenda has been adopted by all UN member states with the aim that all countries should implement the SDGs and their targets by the year 2030. The framework is one of the most ambitious and important global agreements in recent history.

The 17 SDGs pinpoint major challenges in areas as diverse as poverty, health, education, equality, production and consumption, climate change, biodiversity, and peace, justice and strong institutions. A core principle within the 2030 Agenda is that the SDGs are indivisible and should be treated as a whole, meaning that the interlinkages and interdependencies of the SDGs are crucial to consider in their implementation.

Although the SDGs are to be implemented by nations, they can also be used as a framework for assessing sustainability aspects of various activities within the public sector, civil society, as well as the private sector. The SDGs are currently the most developed common framework available for describing sustainable development. In order to achieve progress on sustainable transformations, all actors in society need to strive in the same direction.

Organizations that use the SDGs to assess their operations, make necessary adjustments and align their policies or strategies with the SDGs, support the national implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Adding to this, actors using the SDG framework become relevant and comparable to others at the global level and can learn from each other as they are following up and evaluating their activities against the same overarching goals. The *SDG Impact Assessment Tool*¹ has been developed to enable organizations all over the world to gain better understanding of and assessing their impacts on the SDGs.

Municipalities are crucial actors in the transformation towards sustainable societies, not least in the Nordic countries which all have a high degree of local self-government in common. Without a transition towards sustainable development at the local level, it is not possible for nations to achieve the SDGs and their targets. Nordic municipalities are responsible for large parts of the services in society, such as education, social services, housing, and elderly care, but also spatial planning, health- and environmental protection, to mention a few. All these areas are highly relevant to the SDGs and of decisive importance for creating sustainable societies.

In the Nordic region, many municipalities and municipal associations work actively with the SDGs to integrate them and the 2030 Agenda in their operations. For example, both the Swedish Association of Local Authorities (SALAR) and the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS) have submitted Voluntary Subnational Reviews to the UN.^{2,3} In July 2024, at the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, the Nordic municipal

¹ <https://sdgimpactassessmenttool.org/en-gb>

² Voluntary Subnational Review – Localising the SDGs in Sweden
https://gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/sweden_2021_0.pdf

³ Voluntary Subnational Review – Norway
<https://www.ks.no/contentassets/05f449c9fb8943d999e42e0e6d20f7ff/Rapport-Voluntary-Subnational-Review-Final.pdf>

associations together with Nordregio plan to present the first ever Nordic VSR.⁴ In Denmark, 9 out of 10 municipalities work actively with integrating the SDGs in their strategies and plans or has appointed political committees specifically to address the 2030 Agenda.⁵ In Finland, the Association of Finnish Municipalities, *Kuntaliitto*, runs the network SDG46, a 2030 Agenda-network for the six largest cities in Finland. The network has, among other things, co-created the tool *SDG Analysis Canvas for Municipal Steering Documents* as a resource for working with the SDGs in Finnish cities and municipalities. The tool is based on the methodology in the SDG Impact Assessment Tool that has been further developed specifically for analysis of municipal steering documents.⁶

Although Nordic municipalities and the Nordic municipal associations work actively with the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda – only a few examples have been mentioned in this introduction – there is also a need and demand for more hands-on tools and approaches that municipalities can implement in their work. Sweden’s national coordinator for the 2030 Agenda has pointed out the need for testing and evaluating more methods and tools that can contribute to the transition to sustainable development in municipalities, and that experiences from such efforts are documented and disseminated.⁷ Therefore, the purpose of this pilot project, initiated and coordinated by the secretariat for the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Northern Europe, has been to let a number of municipalities try out the SDG Impact Assessment Tool as a method for supporting their work with the SDGs, and to collect and disseminate the experiences and lessons learned from it.

The background to the pilot project is the positive experiences from the Swedish municipality Strängnäs of using the SDG Impact Assessment Tool as an approach to work with the SDGs. Strängnäs municipality has several interesting examples of applications and valuable experiences that witness potential for the tool to be used more extensively in municipal operations. In this pilot project, four more municipalities have used the tool in various municipal projects and processes. The pilot project has been ongoing from May 2023 to February 2024.

This report aims to document and disseminate the experiences and lessons learned from the applications of the SDG Impact Assessment Tool in the Swedish municipalities Strängnäs, Kungälv, Botkyrka and Tjörn, as well as the Finnish municipality Korsholm, in order to facilitate for more municipalities to use the tool as a support for working with sustainable development in their operations.

⁴ Read more about the Nordic VSR here: <https://nordregio.org/research/nordic-cooperation-for-agenda-2030/>

⁵ Nordregio, 2023:4. *The Nordic Region and the 2030 Agenda: Governance and engagement (2021–2022)*, p. 10. <https://pub.nordregio.org/r-2023-4-the-nordic-region-and-the-2030-agenda/the-nordic-region-and-the-2030-agenda.pdf>

⁶ SDG analysis canvas for municipal steering documents <https://www.localfinland.fi/publications/2023/2252-sdg-analysis-canvas-municipal-steering-documents-handbook>

⁷ Swedish National Coordinator for the 2030 Agenda, 2022. *Utvärdering av SDG Synergies*, p. 13. (In Swedish) <https://agenda2030samordnaren.se/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/utvardering-sdg-synergies-samordnaren.pdf>

The SDG Impact Assessment Tool

The SDG Impact Assessment Tool is a freely accessible, online tool that visualizes the result from a self-assessment of how an activity, project, or organization impacts the SDGs. The tool has been developed at Chalmers University of Technology and the University of Gothenburg's joint centre the Gothenburg Centre for Sustainable Development (now merged into the collaboration arena Wexusus, West Sweden Nexus for Sustainable Development) in collaboration with SDSN Northern Europe.

The purpose of the SDG Impact Assessment Tool is to enable for organizations to evaluate their operations or part of their operations against the SDGs, thereby contributing to learning and increased understanding of how their activities relate to the global goals and targets. The methodology is based on qualitative self-assessment, where an impact on each goal is assigned as positive or negative, direct or indirect, if there is a knowledge gap, or if no impact can be identified.

Since the tool is based on qualitative self-assessment, the result from an assessment is dependent on the knowledge- and ambition level of those conducting the assessment. The tool offers a systematic and structured approach to address the SDGs and relate them to one's operations. Making an assessment in the tool also contributes to deeper understanding of the SDGs, their interconnections, and the opportunities and challenges of implementing them, as the process stimulates knowledge-seeking and learning.

The SDG Impact Assessment Tool is developed for many different applications. It is currently used across a wide range of actors and sectors, including universities and research institutes, businesses, entrepreneurs and start-ups, municipalities and regions, public authorities, and civil society organizations. The tool is used in for example university education, in entrepreneurship and innovation to evaluate business ideas, in planning and evaluation processes of businesses and public organizations, as well as in research and research funding to demonstrate connections to the SDGs.

As of March 2024, the SDG Impact Assessment Tool had more than 23,000 registered users worldwide, and the tool is available in seven languages: Swedish, English, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, German, and French. On the English website, a number of resources are provided including a user guide, a document with frequently asked questions, and three videos providing guidance on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs and how to work with the tool.

> 23 000 users

Approach and method

Making an assessment in the SDG Impact Assessment Tool is a five-step process, briefly described below. Step 1 is a preparatory step before conducting an assessment, while steps 2-5 are carried out within the tool.



Figure 1. The five steps of the SDG Impact Assessment Tool.

Step 1: Gather your forces

The 17 SDGs span a wide range of topics. Therefore, it is recommended to gather a group of individuals, preferably with diverse competences and backgrounds, to make an assessment together. Bringing together various types of expertise and professional roles when making an assessment is also beneficial for mutual learning and can be a way to develop new collaborations and counteract working in silo structures.

Step 2: Define, refine and draw the line

In the second step, the task is to describe the object that is going to be assessed in the tool, the purpose of the assessment, and relevant assumptions, conditions and delimitations that apply to the assessment. It might sound trivial, but agreeing on and specifying what is to be assessed and what should be included in the assessment is crucial. Some examples of conditions and limitations that may need to be formulated include the baseline for the assessment, i.e., if you compare against something (for example "business as usual" or some other scenario), and the scope of the assessment, for example if the assessment considers impacts occurring only locally or also nationally and/or globally.

Step 3: Sort the SDGs

Doing an assessment in numerical order, from SDG 1 to 17, is not always preferred. A more inspiring approach might be to take on the SDGs as you perceive their order of relevance for the object you are assessing. Therefore, in this step, the goals are to be sorted based on their perceived relevance for the object being analyzed, into the categories "Relevant", "Not relevant", or "Don't know". It is important to note that this sorting step is not part of the final result of the assessment. The purpose of this step is to provide a stimulating start to the process by enabling broad discussions and considerations of relevant links between the SDGs and the object being assessed in the tool. The SDGs are then sorted accordingly as a starting point for step 4.

Step 4: Assess your impact

In this step, a brief introduction to each goal, followed by its associated targets, is firstly given. Then, the task is to make an aggregated assessment of the impact on each goal, according to the following categories:

- Direct positive
- Indirect positive
- No impact
- Direct negative
- Indirect negative
- Don't know – more knowledge needed

”Direct positive” or ”direct negative” are defined as immediate impacts, whereas “indirect positive” or “indirect negative” are impacts that might arise as secondary consequences, for example caused by a direct impact. “Don't know - more knowledge needed” is chosen when the knowledgebase is too uncertain, or when knowledge is simply lacking in order to make an assessment.

The assessment is made on the goal-level, which may present dilemmas if the object being analyzed simultaneously has both positive and negative impacts on the same goal. For instance, there may be a positive impact on one target and a negative impact on another target within the same goal. The task then is to weigh these impacts against each other and determine which impact is more significant. “More significant” can mean various things, such as how substantial the impact is perceived to be, how urgent it is to address the impact, or other factors linked to the purpose of the assessment. Sustainable development is typically associated with compromises, and making a final prioritization in such situations is part of the methodology.

If no cause-effect relationship between the analyzed object and the SDG can be identified, or if an identified impact is considered negligible, the categorization “No impact” is selected. The question of whether an impact is negligible or not should be related to the purpose, conditions, and delimitations of the assessment.

For each goal, the impact categorization must be motivated. The motivation should include all identified impacts and an explanation of why the chosen categorization constitutes the overall assessment. In addition, cause-effect relationships should be explained, and, if possible, references be provided to support the reasoning.

Once the assessment is completed for all the goals, the results view can be displayed (Figure 2).

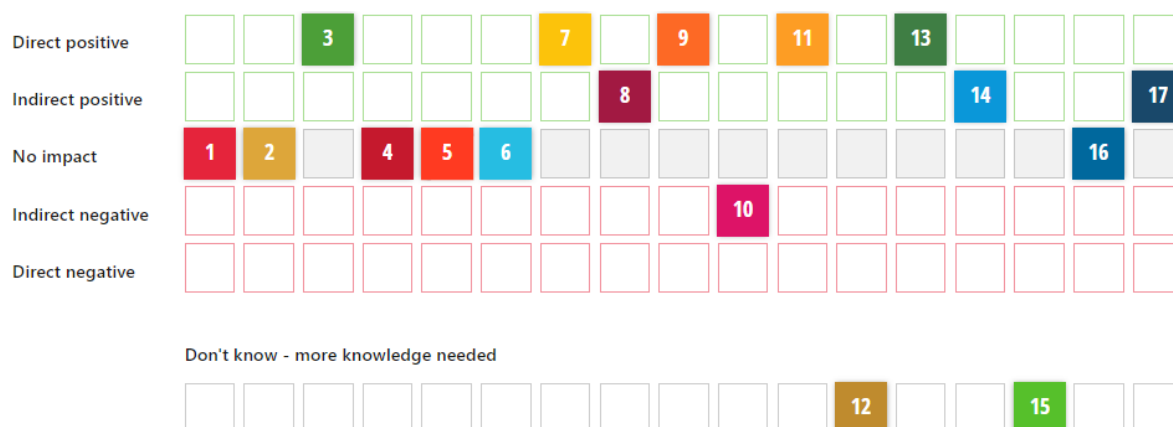


Figure 2. Example of a result figure from an SDG impact assessment.

Step 5: Choose strategy forward

Based on the results from the assessment, in this step, actions and measures to mitigate or

eliminate negative impacts, strengthen positive impacts, and/or fill knowledge gaps that have been identified are formulated. It is advised to focus both on what can be done here and now and what can be achieved in the longer term, as well as which additional partners or competences that may be needed to fill identified knowledge gaps.

As indicated by the arrow going from step 5 to step 1 in Figure 1, the method is iterative in the sense that sustainable development is an ongoing, continuous process where our knowledge is constantly improving. Hence, making a new assessment in the face of new knowledge or new preconditions can lead to different results.

Description of the pilot project

The idea for this pilot project was initiated in conjunction with a meeting organized by Nordregio in Stockholm in October 2022, where municipalities and municipal associations from the Nordic countries gathered to share experiences, approaches and tools for working with the 2030 Agenda. During the meeting, Martin Eriksson and Hilda Klingvall from the SDSN Northern Europe secretariat, together with Anders Härnbro from Strängnäs municipality, gave a workshop with the SDG Impact Assessment Tool. Municipalities attending the meeting were offered to take part in a pilot project to try out using the tool in their operations. Other interested municipalities have also been invited to participate through dissemination of the initiative in various communication channels during the winter of 2022/2023.

The municipalities that have participated in the pilot project are Botkyrka, Kungälv, Strängnäs, Tjörn, and Korsholm. The first four are located in Sweden, and the last one in Finland. Throughout the project, the municipalities have tested using the SDG Impact Assessment Tool in existing processes or projects within the municipality. They have also received guidance from the SDSN Northern Europe secretariat as well as peer-to-peer learning with the other participating municipalities along the way.

Five digital meetings were organized during the project. In the initial meetings, the SDG Impact Assessment Tool was introduced, and participants were engaged in joint exercises to enhance their understanding of how it can be applied in a municipality. Subsequent meetings focused on the progress within the municipalities, and the purposes, scopes, delimitations, and results of their work were discussed. During the meetings, notes on questions, challenges, successes, and conclusions were taken. Towards the end of the project, this material was supplemented with a survey to the project participants.

The project has been followed by Sara Gustafsson, professor at Linköping University, who's research is focused on municipal sustainability efforts and the role of municipalities in sustainable development and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.



Figure 3. The participating municipalities are Botkyrka, Kungälv, Strängnäs, Tjörn och Korsholm.

Application of the tool in the municipalities

Strängnäs municipality (Sweden)

In Strängnäs municipality, the SDG Impact Assessment Tool has been applied in three different municipal processes. The first application involved an assessment of a decision to construct a third highway exit to Strängnäs.

Two municipal officers were responsible for the process and facilitated two workshop sessions to conduct the assessment. During the first session, officers from various departments with a wide range of expertise, including environmental strategists, conservationists, public transportation managers, and infrastructure planners, gathered for a one-hour workshop. The goal of the first workshop was to bring forth all possible arguments regarding the potential positive or negative impacts that the new highway exit might have on the SDGs.

After the workshop, the two facilitators tested the arguments against existing

knowledge and structured the identified impact into the categories in the tool. Subsequently, a second workshop was held with the same individuals to review the processed material.

In this way, what the method refers to as step 4, "Assess your impact" (see subsection "Approach and method" above), was divided into two steps: a 'brainstorming step' aimed at collecting all possible arguments, and a second step where these arguments were either accepted or rejected based on whether they could be supported by facts, as well as categorized according to the method in the tool.

In addition to this application, Strängnäs municipality has also used the SDG Impact Assessment Tool in similar manners to conduct sustainability assessments of the public procurement of food within the municipality, and of the construction of a new old people's home.



Image 1. In Strängnäs municipality, the SDG Impact Assessment Tool has been used in three different municipal processes: a new highway exit, a new old people's home, and within food procurement. Photo: Canva

Botkyrka municipality (Sverige)

Botkyrka municipality has tested whether the SDG Impact Assessment Tool could be used to conduct sustainability assessments in the process of developing a new comprehensive plan for the municipality. The purpose has been to explore whether analyses carried out in the tool could broaden the sustainability perspectives in the planning process and constitute a way to continuously work with such perspectives throughout the process.

Current Swedish legislation only requires municipalities to conduct an environmental impact assessment of the proposals in the plan at the end of the planning process. A goal for Botkyrka municipality has been to establish a method to include sustainability analyses earlier in the process, allowing such analyses to form basis for decision-making and highlight knowledge gaps along the way.

At the start of the pilot project, Botkyrka was at the initial stages of developing a new comprehensive plan for the municipality. Using the SDG Impact Assessment Tool on actual planning strategies within the upcoming plan was hence not possible at that time. However, a test investigating if application of the tool could fit into the upcoming process was conducted. Two municipal officers initially applied the SDG Impact Assessment Tool to a part of the municipality's current comprehensive plan to familiarize themselves with the tool.

As a next step, a workshop was conducted where an additional 6-7 municipal officers applied the tool on one of the goals in the current comprehensive plan, specifically the goal "Live Climate Smart". The officers

participating in the workshop were all strategic urban planners or sustainability strategists with different focuses.

The workshop's approach was inspired by the method used in Strängnäs municipality, where the assessment for each goal began with collecting arguments to identify all potential impacts on the SDGs. The two officers facilitating the workshop had prepared the workshop by developing relevant discussion questions for each goal in advance.

Since the work with developing a new comprehensive plan was at its initial stages during the pilot project, it was not possible for Botkyrka to further test the use of the tool within the process during the pilot project's timeframe. However, after the test, the SDG Impact Assessment Tool was considered a possible tool for conducting sustainability assessments during the upcoming planning process.



Image 2. Botkyrka municipality has tested whether the SDG Impact Assessment Tool could be used as a tool for doing continuous sustainability assessment in the process of developing a new comprehensive plan for the municipality.

Photo: Holger Ellgaard

Korsholm municipality (Finland)

Korsholm municipality has analyzed the municipality's current climate- and energy strategy for the years 2021-2030 using the SDG Impact Assessment Tool. Two municipal officers jointly led the work with evaluating the strategy and coordinating the process of applying the tool.

Initially, a preparatory phase was carried out, where the two officers themselves made a preliminary assessment of the strategy using the tool. Subsequently, a series of in-depth workshops were organized in groups with selected representatives from various departments within the municipality.

Korsholm's climate and energy strategy consists of five parts – Energy supply, Land use and construction, Provision of services, Traffic and transportation, and Knowledge, attitudes, and behavior. A workshop was conducted for each part of the strategy, inviting representatives from the departments in the municipality with the primary responsibility for each respective part.

The workshops were based on the preliminary assessment carried out in the preparatory phase, which the workshop participants could then comment on, revise

and supplement during the in-depth workshop sessions.

Each workshop involved approximately 5–8 individuals per department and occasion, and participating departments included urban development, the municipal board administration, education, and municipal development, among others. Notes from the workshop sessions were collected and compiled, and the material was also presented to the municipality's Sustainable Development Team.

After all workshops have been completed, one last session remained at the closure of the pilot project, a summary will be compiled based on the information gathered during the workshop sessions. The summary will constitute a crucial material for Korsholm in the upcoming review of the climate and energy strategy that is planned for 2024.

The decision to review the strategy had already been taken before the pilot project, but according to the participants, this need has become even more clear during the work of carrying out SDG impact assessments of the strategy, as several new important perspectives and conclusions that had not previously been considered have emerged during the process.



Image 3. The Replot bridge is a well-known landmark in Korsholm that have assessed their climate and energy strategy with the SDG Impact Assessment Tool. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Kungälv municipality (Sweden)

Kungälv municipality has used the SDG Impact Assessment Tool to analyze how an in-depth comprehensive plan for the development of Kode, an urban area within the municipality with a stop on a regionally important train route, impacts the SDGs. The purpose of the in-depth plan is to develop and clarify the overarching goal for Kode of a sustainable station community and includes a plan for how the area should develop going forward.

A group of municipal officers have collaborated to conduct the assessment of the in-depth plan using the SDG Impact Assessment Tool. Since previously, the plan

included a brief outline of which of the SDGs that the plan relates to, and the assessment in the tool was hence carried out to facilitate a more detailed discussion and deeper analysis of which SDGs and targets are impacted and how.

The working group that collectively conducted the assessment in the tool comprised comprehensive planners, urban planners, a planning architect, and a traffic strategist. The assessment in the tool resulted in several revisions to the previous descriptions of the connections between the in-depth plan for Kode and the SDGs.



Image 4. Kungälv municipality has used the SDG Impact Assessment Tool to analyze how an in-depth comprehensive plan for Kode, an urban area within the municipality, impacts the SDGs. Photo: Google Maps

Tjörn municipality (Sweden)

Tjörn municipality has used the SDG Impact Assessment Tool to analyze impacts on the SDGs in several smaller processes within the municipality. This was done in order to explore whether the tool potentially could be useful to apply as a support in larger processes at a later stage.

One municipal officer has been responsible for coordinating the process of testing the tool in the municipality. Two major processes were underway in the municipality during the pilot project – the development of a new strategy for social sustainability and a new strategy for climate and energy.

One initial opportunity identified in the municipality was therefore to use analyses conducted in the SDG Impact Assessment Tool in the two upcoming processes. Since then, the work with a new strategy for social sustainability has been paused, but the development of a new strategy for climate and energy is still relevant.

To gain a better understanding of the tool and evaluate its suitability in the upcoming strategy process, the SDG Impact Assessment Tool was used to analyze a proposal of introducing a youth council in the municipality. Various functions within the municipality gathered to collaboratively assess the proposal in the tool.

The analysis shed light on several perspectives not previously considered, providing valuable input for the statement on the proposal.

Furthermore, the tool was used as a method and support in conducting an internal cross-sectoral sustainability analysis of material in an ongoing working process with the municipality's comprehensive plan. The analysis was conducted collaboratively by a small group of municipal officers, and it was perceived as a fruitful way to jointly discuss material connected to the comprehensive plan from various sustainability perspectives.

In sum, Tjörn municipality has started using the SDG Impact Assessment Tool in various municipal processes throughout the pilot project and foresees that the tool will be useful in larger processes going forward.



Image 5. Tjörn municipality has tested using the SDG Impact Assessment Tool to analyze impacts on the global goals in several smaller processes within the municipality.

Photo: Benreis, Wikivoyage

Experiences and feedback from the municipalities

The results in this chapter are based partly on documentation from the discussions during the five digital meetings held during the pilot project, partly on the results from the survey sent out after the project's completion. The survey was sent out to those who had been contact persons for the pilot project in each municipality. Korsholm municipality had two contact persons and one municipality did not submit a survey response, resulting in a total of five respondents from four different municipalities. The survey primarily consisted of open-ended qualitative questions. The questions addressed the following overarching themes:

- Advantages and disadvantages of using the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs as a framework for sustainability assessments of municipal operations.
- Opportunities and challenges with using the SDG Impact Assessment Tool to work with the SDGs in a municipality.
- Views on the potential of using the SDG Impact Assessment Tool as a way to work with the SDGs in the own municipality going forward and in municipal operations in general.
- Proposals for development in order to make the SDG Impact Assessment Tool more applicable in municipalities.
- Advice and recommendations for other municipalities that wishes to start using the SDG Impact Assessment Tool.

The SDGs as a framework for sustainability assessments in municipalities

Several participants highlight that it in many ways generates an added value to use the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs as a framework for sustainability assessments of municipal activities, operations, and processes. Some advantages several respondents emphasized are that:

- It is useful to be able to connect municipal sustainability efforts to a common, global framework as it provides a common language, making it easier to understand other municipalities' plans and strategies, and enables comparison and mutual learning between municipalities both within the same country and internationally. Using the SDGs as an analytical framework also enables to clearly demonstrate the connections between local sustainability efforts and their national and global implications.
- The SDGs offer a broad and comprehensive framework that enables to evaluate municipal work across all dimensions of sustainable development. Aligning strategies and plans with the SDGs is perceived to constitute a way to ensure that there is a thorough sustainability perspective integrated in the work carried out by the municipality. Several participants highlight that in this way, the SDGs serve as a support to identify and consider impacts on sustainability beyond the intuitive ones and enables thinking further and in more sustainability dimensions than is usually done in the municipality.
- The fact that the SDGs cover 17 sustainability dimensions naturally actualizes a cross-sectoral dialogue between different functions within the municipality and across

different areas of activity, thus providing a good starting point for working with sustainability in a horizontal way within the organization.

Disadvantages or difficulties that were highlighted include that:

- The SDGs can be difficult to relate to the local level, as they are formulated for nations and, in some cases, in a broad or general manner. Not all goals and targets are perceived as relevant in local or municipal contexts. Therefore, it may require some effort to “localize” or “contextualize” the goals in order to make them relevant at the local level.
- In some cases, a sort of competition between a municipality’s own sustainability goals and the SDGs can be an issue, as municipalities own sustainability goals, if they have such goals, are not always aligned with the SDGs. Therefore, some municipalities have highlighted a difficulty to prioritize which goals should be used primarily when it comes to for example monitoring, evaluation and documentation.

Opportunities and challenges with using the tool in municipalities

The municipalities that have participated in the pilot project are generally positive about using the SDG Impact Assessment Tool in their work. Several participants highlight that the tool is simple and clear in its structure, containing a moderate number of functions and steps, which makes it accessible and quick to get started working with.

Below follows some overarching opportunities that the participating municipalities have put forward, followed by some challenges or difficulties that they have encountered while applying the SDG Impact Assessment Tool in their operations.

→ Opportunity – A common starting point and platform for working with the SDGs

Several participants emphasize that there is a value of having a hands-on tool that can serve as a common starting point and basis for addressing the SDGs in municipal projects and processes. The tool’s approach is perceived as easy to get started with and as a good starting point to gather around. Such a hands-on tool is something several municipalities have been missing. With the SDG Impact Assessment Tool as a common platform, it becomes easier to create a discussion and common understanding, and to speak “the same language” when conducting a sustainability analysis. The tool’s results figure (see Figure 2 for an example) is also perceived as communicative and easy to comprehend, fitting well in decision-making material to demonstrate that a sustainability analysis has been conducted and communicate its overall results.

→ Opportunity – A method for conducting analyses covering all sustainable development goals

Several municipalities report examples of how using the SDG Impact Assessment Tool in various projects and processes has led to that new perspectives and aspects of sustainable development that had not previously been addressed have been highlighted. The tool offers a structured approach and a methodology to analyze sustainability in all its dimensions, which has resulted in that more impacts than usual have been identified and become visible. For example, in Korsholm municipality, the application of the tool in the analysis of the

municipality's climate and energy strategy revealed that the strategy did not include any risks or opportunities related to life below water (SDG 14), this despite Korsholm being a coastal municipality. Several municipalities have also highlighted that the discussions during workshops with the tool have addressed perspectives that was not foreseen on beforehand. The tool's approach is perceived to encourage critical thinking, and enables to demonstrate, for example, how a positive impact in one dimension simultaneously can lead to a negative impact in another.

→ **Opportunity – Breaking down silos and facilitating a cross-sectoral dialogue on sustainability issues**

Through establishing a broad working process around the SDG Impact Assessment Tool, municipal officers with professional roles within the municipality who may not perceive themselves as having to do with sustainable development, have in several cases been engaged in sustainability issues. This has resulted in new collaborations and identification of new collaboration opportunities. Working with the tool is also perceived as a good way to make different competencies and measures within the municipality that contribute to sustainable development but are not usually linked to it visible.

The SDG Impact Assessment Tool is considered a good starting point for organizing a cross-sectoral dialogue on sustainable development within the municipality and for working to break down existing silo structures. A working method can be built around the SDG Impact Assessment Tool that fosters a horizontal approach to the 2030 Agenda in municipal projects. Participants have also highlighted that working with the tool has stimulated a dialogue about sustainable development within the municipality.

→ **Opportunity – Contributes to internal learning within the municipality**

Several participants perceive the qualitative self-assessment approach of the tool as a strength as it contributes to internal learning within the municipality and allows arguments to be thoroughly examined and discussed. It is also perceived to foster critical thinking and re-evaluation of established relationships. For example, Strängnäs municipality has highlighted how the collection of arguments that they carried out before the assessment led to that cause-effect relationships that had become established within the municipality were questioned, and in some cases turned out to lack a proper knowledge basis. Their working process around the tool provided a neutral platform, allowing synergies and trade-offs to become visible and be discussed openly. Working with the tool is also perceived to have increased the knowledge about the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs within several municipalities.

→ **Challenge – Most applicable to well-defined and clearly framed objects of analysis**

A challenge that has been highlighted is that it can be difficult to conduct an assessment in the tool if what is being analyzed has a too wide scope or contains large amounts of information. This applies, for example, to assessing impacts from comprehensive plans. Several municipalities have signaled that the SDG Impact Assessment Tool provides the most significant value when applied to projects or processes that are well-defined and where the material to be considered is not too extensive. This is partly due to practical reasons, as it becomes challenging to handle large amounts of information within the tool itself, and partly since it is difficult to properly frame the analysis if what is going to be analyzed has a too wide scope.

→ **Challenge – Weighing different types of impacts and evaluating them against each other**

Another challenge that has been highlighted is that in some cases, it can be difficult to conduct the impact assessment on the goal-level, as the method in the tool requires. Step 4, “Assess your impact” (see subsection “Approach and method” for description”), requires selecting only one category to describe the overall impact on the goal. However, what is being analyzed can have different types of impact on the same goal, for example through counteracting impacts on different targets, and these are then required to be weighed against each other in order to decide on an overall assessment of the impact on the goal. A challenge raised in connection to this is the question of scale, and how one can and should weigh, for example, a perceived “small” versus a perceived “large” impact against each other. Additional support connected to this is something that could be further developed as a resource related to the tool.

Potential for continued use and dissemination to more municipalities

All participating municipalities see potential in continuing to use the SDG Impact Assessment Tool for working with the SDGs in various projects and processes within their municipality.

Regarding the general potential to scale up the use of the SDG Impact Assessment Tool in municipalities, the following areas have been highlighted as those considered to have the greatest potential:

- In strategic work in general, and particularly in strategic environmental work, in order to highlight all sustainability perspectives at an early stage.
- In decision-making, to show how and support why an activity or intervention involves opportunities or risks related to the SDGs.
- As basis for initiating political discussions about sustainability issues.
- In physical planning, such as infrastructure projects, construction projects, urban area planning, and more. This applies both at an early stage in the planning process and later in the implementation phase, given that there is still room to adjust the intervention according to the assessment result.
- In cultural and recreation management to continuously evaluate activities that the municipality runs, participates in, or collaborates with.
- In educational settings, such as in high school education for problem-based learning about sustainable development, the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.
- In public procurement, for example procurement directives could in many municipalities be updated to consider the SDGs more clearly, and the tool could be a support in this.

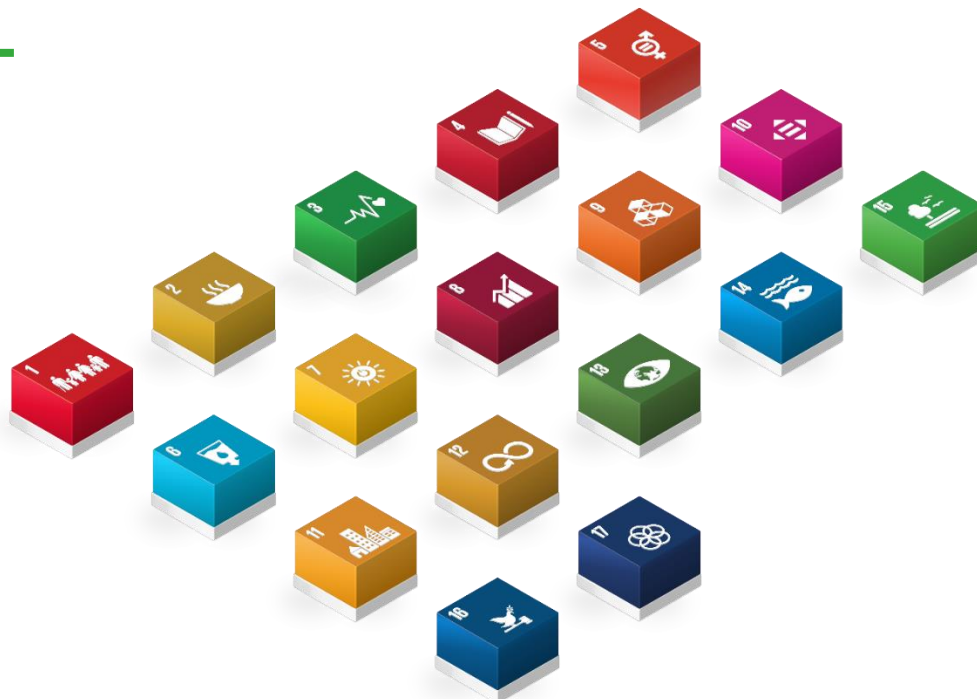
In general, it has been emphasized that it is beneficial to use the tool at an early stage in a process. A risk with using the tool at a too late stage is that it is used as a checklist for what should have been done. It is more useful to incorporate the analysis early in order to make the right decisions from the start and let the results from the tool guide the direction going forward.

Recommendations for municipalities that wishes to use the tool

Several hands-on recommendations and advice for municipalities that wish to start using the SDG Impact Assessment Tool have emerged during the pilot project:

- Workshops is a format that is generally perceived to work very well to set up a working process around the tool in a municipality. These workshops should preferably be clearly facilitated by one or a few individuals to ensure all participants are included in the discussions and that discussions do not risk getting stuck.
- It is beneficial to do some preparatory work before opening up a workshop to a larger group of participants. This preparation may for example include formulating relevant discussion questions for each SDG, and providing materials ahead of the workshop so that all participants have a common preunderstanding. As mentioned above, it is advantageous to appoint one or a few facilitators who can do the preparatory work and also be responsible for taking care of the output that the workshop results in afterwards.
- It is recommended to invite a diverse range of relevant expertise to participate in carrying out the assessments. The discussions that arise from conducting the SDG impact assessment are important and perceived as providing a significant added value. If the assessment is conducted by a too narrow group, it may lead to a limited interpretation of the impact on the SDGs and an opportunity for mutual learning and fostering of cross-sectoral dialogue may go lost.
- It is important to on beforehand clearly define what it is that is going to be analyzed. If the object to be analyzed has a too wide scope, breaking it down into manageable parts and conducting separate assessments for each part before creating an aggregated picture can be a useful strategy. It is also important that everyone in the group conducting the assessment agrees on the framing and scope of the analysis, such as which scenario is being analyzed and what baseline the assessment compares against.

Concluding remarks



The transition to sustainable development at the local level is crucial in order to achieve sustainable development for societies as a whole. According to estimates from the UN, 65 % of the targets in the 2030 Agenda cannot be achieved without implementation at the local and regional levels.⁸ Generally, Nordic municipalities work actively with sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda, and there are many examples of frontrunners among Nordic municipalities to share experiences and lessons from both within the Nordic region and internationally. At the same time, many municipalities seek more hands-on tools and approaches that can help accelerating the integration of sustainable development in municipal processes. The 2030 Agenda with its goals and targets, is a central framework that municipalities can use to ensure a holistic approach to sustainable development.

This pilot project demonstrates positive experiences from using the SDG Impact Assessment Tool to analyze how various municipal projects and processes impacts the SDGs, and through that enhance the alignment with the 2030 Agenda in municipalities. In addition to municipalities, which has been the focus of this pilot project, there are also known examples of regions, often with similar needs, that have shown interest in and applied the SDG Impact Assessment Tool, for example in regional policy development. This pilot project indicates a potential to increase the awareness among more municipalities and regions about the SDG Impact Assessment Tool and how it can be used as a support in working with sustainable development, both in the Nordic countries and internationally.



⁸ Sustainable Development Solutions Network Europe, 2024. *Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/24*, p. 5. <https://s3.amazonaws.com/sustainabledevelopment.report/2024/europe-sustainable-development-report-2023-24.pdf>