



## Sustainability hides in libraries

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### Meeting:

**184 — Libraries inspiring and facilitating change towards sustainability  
— Environmental Sustainability and Libraries Special Interest Group**

### Abstract:

*Services, buildings, logistics, IT-equipment and much more – that is the library of today. These items are normally viewed from an economical point of view in a library's yearly budget, but have you ever considered that these fields also have an impact on a library's ecological sustainability?*

*When you want to observe where and how ecological sustainability occurs in a library you should extend beyond just the economical analysis. Adding eco-efficiency as a measuring tool can assist in recognizing the sustainability of one's library.*

*The lack of standard indicators for measuring an organization's environmental impact creates challenges. However, the pressure to change standard operating procedures towards a more environmentally friendly direction, together with reducing the burden on the environmental load, is growing.*

*Libraries have a magnificent opportunity to be both actors as well as general promoter of environmental awareness. By creating guidelines, together with climate experts, and using best practices we can formulate positive actions for the benefit of our environment. The actions can vary widely. It is also apparent that while the level of knowledge is growing, more efficient actions can be applied to strengthen and maximize the benefits. The unfortunate fact is that the way of little steps is too slow for the environment. Therefore more powerful instruments need to be found.*

*The main target of the Sustainability in Public Libraries project is to improve and develop ecological sustainability within libraries. For this purpose the project produced a questionnaire this year in order to find out what is the dominant situation. We wanted to have an*

*overview of ecological sustainability in public libraries and how librarians see it, both in every day library routines as well as in management.*

*Environmental sustainability seems to play an important role in the daily operations of libraries, but how do libraries communicate their green goals amongst themselves or to their partners? Are all the functions thoroughly reviewed when monitoring and searching for improvements advancing the level of ecological sustainability?*

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## **Towards sustainability in broad terms scene**

Services, buildings, logistics, IT-equipment and much more – that is the library of today. These items are normally viewed from an economical point of view in a library's yearly budget, but have you ever considered that these fields also have an impact on a library's ecological sustainability?

When you want to observe where and how ecological sustainability occurs in a library you should extend beyond just the economical analysis. Adding eco-efficiency as a measuring tool can assist in recognizing the sustainability of one's library.

The lack of standard indicators for measuring an organization's environmental impact creates challenges. However, the pressure to change standard operating procedures towards a more environmentally friendly direction, together with reducing the burden on the environmental load, is growing.

These issues are not only the concern of any single library. It is the concern of the whole community and its citizens, who become aware little by little of the questions surrounding climate change, carbon footprint and an environmentally friendly lifestyle.

Sustainability challenges all policy makers towards environmental responsibility in the community. Decision makers must have the appropriate information and tools to implement environmental management and strategies, in addition to the responsibility of setting ecological targets for the activities and services of a community. By encouraging the footsteps towards sustainability, communities lay the groundwork for further ecological decisions.

Evaluating different services in order to find the best ways to produce them with minimal environmental impact is vital. Innovative communities can find many ways to promote climate friendly attitudes and provide a future where its organizations can move towards sustainability.

Libraries have a magnificent opportunity to be both actors as well as general promoter of environmental awareness. By creating guidelines, together with climate experts, and using best practices we can formulate positive actions for the benefit of our environment. The actions can vary

widely. It is also apparent that while the level of knowledge is growing, more efficient actions can be applied to strengthen and maximize the benefits. The unfortunate fact is that the path of little steps is too slow<sup>i</sup> for the environment. Therefore more powerful instruments need to be found.

### **What is ecological sustainability?**

Ecological sustainability is the capacity of ecosystems to maintain their essential functions and processes and retain their biodiversity in full measure over the long term.

Basic library services are environmental: we recycle different kind of materials from books to e-readers. The problem is elsewhere. It is the other functions that also matter and must be as eco-friendly as possible. Only then we can talk about libraries as being real ecologically sustainable actors.

So what should be taken into account when advancing ecological sustainability in libraries? How can greenhouse gas emissions be reduced in different areas? The following are some examples:

#### **Energy**

- energy efficient buildings; specified target levels for different types of public buildings; energy consumption analysis for preparations and planning; renewable energy; energy efficient technical equipment; lighting and energy efficiency applied to new buildings and renovations.

#### **Waste production**

- reduce the use of virgin materials by recycling and sorting

#### **Transportation**

- public transport; cycling and walking and their benefit to health and welfare; fuel consumption; fuel efficient driving habits and green vehicles

#### **Purchasing**

- eco-labeled and nature-friendly products

#### **Water**

- water efficiency by reducing the use of water; reducing the use of warm water; water-efficient products and monitoring water bills.

Beside these issues, management and economy are also factors when we talk about sustainability. Libraries must control their costs with material- and energy-efficiency and thus support the broader environmental work which then leads to real results.

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is a United Nations program which has set goals to integrate the principles, values and practices of sustainable development into education and learning. <sup>ii</sup> Libraries can also play a growing role as an educational actor in the matter of sustainable development.

When libraries are building and improving their sustainability, it is worthwhile to tell people! Customers, decision-makers as well as staff want to know what are the plans and results of environmental work. So communication is most important.

### **How we tried to assess the level of ecological sustainability in public libraries**

The main target of the Sustainability in Public Libraries project is to improve and develop ecological sustainability within libraries. For this purpose the project produced a questionnaire this year in order to find out what is the dominant situation. We wanted to have an overview of ecological sustainability in public libraries and how librarians see it, both in every day library routines as well as in the management. The questions were formulated by the project team, and some experts contributed by reviewing the factual data.

The project involved nine libraries from different parts of Finland: JJR-library, Kemijärvi City Library, Kotka City Library, Kuusamo City Library, Oulu City Library, Porvoo City Library, Rääkkylä Public Library, Vallila City Library and Varkaus City Library.

During the project, the project team has worked together in two different workshops. The intent was to get ideas for improving and developing not only each library's own ecological sustainability but also to widen the knowledge from the workshops. The project wanted to highlight the knowledge of environmental awareness and communication of environmental issues. One of the main topics was the focus on developing methods as a goal.

The outcome from this project, besides the general inquiry and corresponding results, was to put out some guidelines of ecological sustainability that libraries could use in their own organization. Not only this, but these same guidelines could also be used by the community's decision makers as well as the library's customers. In cooperation with the library's interest groups, the best results in improving and developing environmental issues can be brought forth.

Environmental sustainability seems to play an important role in the daily operations of libraries, but how do libraries communicate their green goals amongst themselves or to their partners? Are all the functions thoroughly reviewed when monitoring and searching for improvements advancing the level of ecological sustainability?

## Sustainability in public libraries in Finland

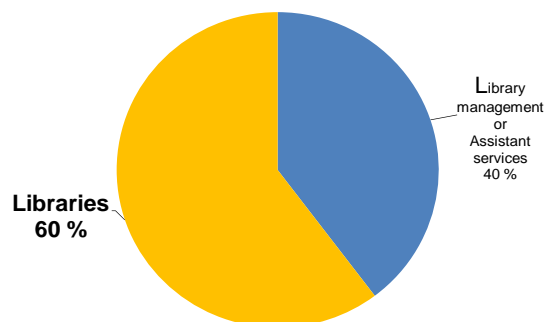
The inquiry was sent to the staff of public libraries and represents their perspective on today's situation on the state of sustainability in their library and community. Underlying many of the answers was the general impression that sustainability mainly involves individual actions. These actions are related to the staff's daily basic routines, for example the sorting of waste.

Results were most relevant when we asked about every day routines, but many of the other categories brought a surprisingly large amount of "I don't know"-answers. This shows that the respondents did not recognize the varying forms in which sustainability is present in libraries.

The lack of environmental management was striking. Over 60 % of the answers stated that it did not appear. This reveals either that environmental management exists but is not recognized, or that environmental management is not present in any way. Also the impression that strategic decisions are too far away from the general staff influences their possibilities to act.

Without a proper interplay, challenges of time resources and lack of guidelines lead to the situation where libraries suffer the same problems. Subsequently the work is dependent upon the activism and initiative of individuals.

The questionnaire was sent in an electronic form: 768 e-mail requests were sent in February 2012. The inquiry was open for ten days. We received answers from 127 different libraries, 141 replies in total. The response rate was 18 % which is within the limits of standard response rate. Approximately 59 % of the respondents are responsible for their library's environmental issues.



Position of respondent: library management and assistant services or in the library.

As we gathered responses about the inquiry itself, there were two different opinions: small libraries thought it was somewhat arrogant and didn't fit into their library's profile.

Larger libraries signaled to us that the questions served as a good basis and checklist for reviewing ecological sustainability. Some went even further in that they expressed the idea that the answered questionnaire should lead to some general guidelines for developing the ecological content of libraries.

There were five main themes on which we focused:

1. environmental management
  - organizational management with processes and practices that enable an organization to reduce its environmental impacts
2. environmental finances
  - the use of natural resources and the impacts of their use is considered in relation to a library's economic decisions
3. decreasing the environmental load
  - libraries daily based actions to reduce the environmental load
4. promote environmental awareness
  - recognizing the impacts of one's choices, i.e. environmental awareness, is a requirement for eco-friendly decisions
5. communication of environmental issues
  - organizational communication about environmental issues, promoting environmental awareness and sharing knowledge.

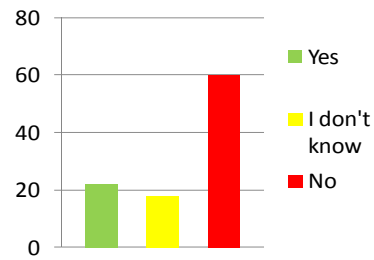
## **1. Environmental management**

In this area we wanted to know how different fields of environmental management are considered in the library. Answers showed that communities over 20 000 citizens have some guidelines and programs for environmental management or for energy efficiency. Also these communities often have named a specialized person responsible for ecological sustainability in the library.

The situation was quite equal in communities less than or over 20 000 citizens when asked about rewarding personnel for developing environmental issues. Only 10 % have had some actions.

**Single answers, where Yes or I don't know are > 50%**

- There are sustainable programs or -guidelines for the city or community
- There are guidelines for energy efficiency for the library
- There is mentoring for new employees about sustainability



**No-answers 60 %**

- The level of environmental management needs large improvements

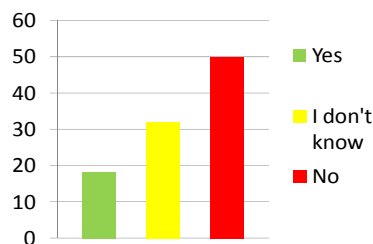
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**2. Environmental finances**

Half of the respondents thought that this area is not in use in libraries' decision making processes. Roughly 30 % did not know if it is used and less than 20 % said that their library has taken into account environmental issues when making budgetary economical decisions.

**Single answers, where Yes or I don't know > 50%**

- Cost are followed per service f.ex loan or opening hours
- In price quotations sustainability is one criteria
- Sustainability is one criteria for investing and projects
- Eco-efficiency is considered in renovations



**No-answers 50 %**

- In economical decisions environmental finances are not considered

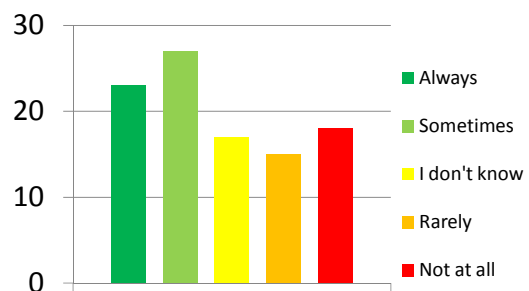
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### 3. Decreasing the environmental load

Every day routines such as sorting, energy saving and paper consumption were asked in this section. Variation between communities less than or over 20 000 citizens was narrow. Most actions seemed to be quite similar.

#### Single answers, where Always or Usually > 50%

- Sorting different wastes
- Turn off lights after 10 minutes and use of daylight
- Computers and other machines switched off at the end of working day and for the weekends
- Machines go to sleep mode when not in use
- E-mails are preferred
- Room temperature is max 21–22° C



#### Large needs for improvements (answers Not at all or Little/Sometimes > 50 %)

- Prefer laptop instead of desktop
- Double sided printing is assumption
- Library busses are used as promoting ecological awareness

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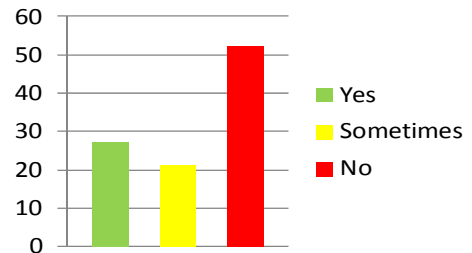


#### 4. Promote environmental awareness

Libraries have many possibilities to promote environmental awareness. The most common used methods are setting up an exhibition, organizing an event or making a book display. Nearly all the respondents said that electronic services like SMS or e-mail is in use.

##### Single answers, where Yes or Sometimes > 50%

- Library organizes environmental theme weeks and events
- Library offers electronic services e.g. SMS and e-mail
- Energy counters or other such kind of material could be loaned from library



##### Large need for improvements (No- answers > 50 %)

- Loans of environmental material are measured
- Sorting is also possible in customers areas
- Recycling of used books, magazines or batteries is possible for customers
- Library uses the methods of education for sustainable development in its work with children and youth

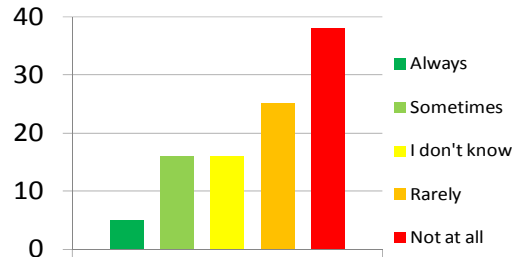
#### 5. Communication of environmental issues

The lack of actions is a clearly visible commonality. All the answers were under the 50 % line. Libraries do not tell about their environmental work in their annual reports, on their internet pages, nor do they send press releases.

The feedback from customers is also slim – 10 % of the respondents said that they have had feedback from their environmental communication or organized exhibitions or book displays.

**Single answers, where Always or Sometimes > 50 %**

- No actions broke the 50% line
- Large needs of improvement in environmental communication



**Large needs of improvement (single answers Not at all or Little > 50 %)**

- Annual reports includes environmental issues
- In the meetings environmental issues are on the agenda
- Library internet pages have environmental headlines
- Library communication reports about library's environmental issues
- Library cooperates with other organizations or non-governmental organizations on environmental issues.

## From hiding to finding

Developing ecological sustainability is about many things, but connecting them all together is the challenging task at hand. The answers to our inquiry show clearly that guidelines are needed when approaching issues of sustainability. Respondents wanted to enhance both communities and libraries. They also wanted to make a framework for ecological processes so that guidelines and methods can be put into efficient use, increasing the long-term benefits.

How then to improve and develop?

- sharing best practices, guidelines, and environmental programs and strategies for daily based routines including management
  - guidelines are needed because the level of knowledge may be relatively low
  - with sharing best practices the level of knowledge is raised
- measuring and reporting
  - for environmental finances, e.g. counting the amount of waste
  - economical support for development and investments
- cooperation
  - between libraries, customers, other organizations and non-governmental organizations

- communication and promoting environmental awareness
  - libraries have a remarkable position to improve customers awareness
  - environmental education for children and youth
- backup
  - the whole organization is engaged towards sustainability
  - improve personal involvement
  - network for eco-specialized librarians
  - time for planning and actualizing
  - education
  - support
  - share experiences.

When libraries report their ecological responsibility, exchange information with their partners, how do they indicate this to their partners? Together with examples of programs, actions and measuring they will stress the work for the environment and make it visible. This needs to encourage the public sector to establish communication channels to share this information and to address it in different sectors.

### **Sustainability could renew the role of the library**

Opportunities are just round the corner so I challenge libraries not to just pick the low hanging fruit but to also go deeper into their activities and services to improve their environmental sustainability in all necessary levels. Environmental management, finances, and communication together with every day routines makes the combined effort more effective.

If libraries now answer the needs of environmental sustainability, it does not affect only the library itself, but also the entire community, citizenry and society. The interest that has arisen towards ecological issues shows that even though it is somehow still an unknown area, the need of information and guidelines is obvious.

In the future sustainability can increase the role of the entire library institution and gives libraries the opportunity to be – once again – pioneers.

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<sup>i</sup> Ympäristötietoisuus : suomalaiset 2010-lukua tekemässä, ISBN 978-951-682-980-0 (2011) s.156

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-sustainable-development/>