

12. Finland: Preparing for the First National Sustainable Development Policy Evaluation after the Adoption of the 2030 Agenda

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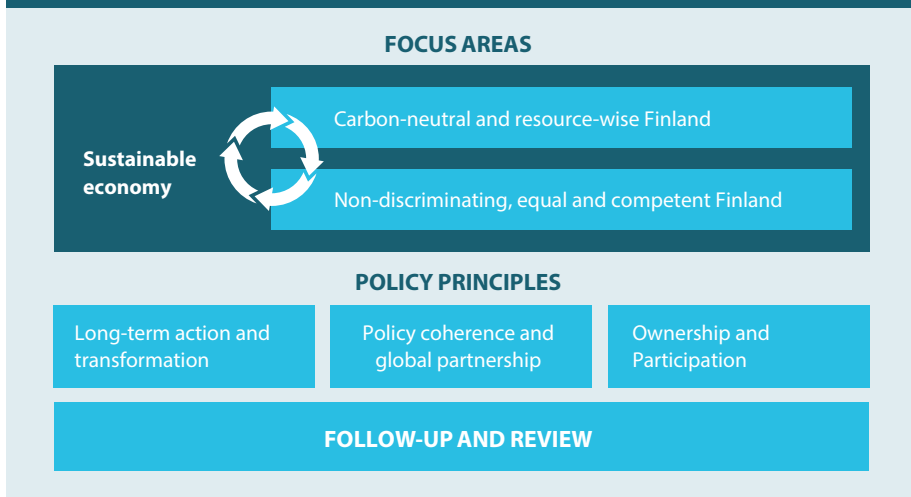
INTRODUCTION

Finland has a long tradition in promoting sustainable development. The National Commission on Sustainable Development (NCSD) was established in 1993 and has worked uninterruptedly since then, most of the time chaired by the Prime Minister. The NCSD made its first national strategy in 1995 and has updated the strategy several times over the years. The most recent update was made in early 2016, along with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by United Nations Member States. The national strategy, “The Finland we want by 2050”, includes eight national goals for 2050 and is well in line with the global 2030 Agenda.⁵⁰

As the 2030 Agenda was adopted at the United Nations, the Government of Finland commissioned an independent gap analysis to identify the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that require the most improvement in Finland, and also to identify themes where Finland could lead the way and share its expertise. The gap analysis assessed Finland in the light of international indicator comparisons, in relation to other member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and in the light of index-based international comparisons. It also included a consultation of stakeholder groups' views on Finland's situation. As a result, the gap analysis identified a strong education system and the related competencies and the general stability of the country's social systems as Finland's particular strengths. Combating climate change and the overuse of natural resources, as well as promoting economic development and employment, were identified as key challenges.⁵¹

50 'The Finland we want by 2050—Society's Commitment to Sustainable Development', adopted at the meeting of the Commission on Sustainable Development held on April 20, 2016. <http://kestavakehitys.fi/en/commitment2050>.

51 Lyttimäki and Lähteenoja, 'Finland aims to become a sustainable development leader', Government's analysis, assessment and research activities, Policy briefs, October 2016. https://www.demoshelsinki.fi/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/PolicyBrief_en_Finland_aims_to_become_a_sustainable_development_leader.pdf.

FIGURE 1. FINNISH GOVERNMENT'S IMPLEMENTATION PLAN FOR THE 2030 AGENDA

The gap analysis was an essential element of the Finnish Government's report to the high-level political forum at the first voluntary national review in 2016.⁵² It was also the starting point for the preparation of Government's 2030 Agenda implementation plan, which was submitted to the Parliament as a government report in February 2017.

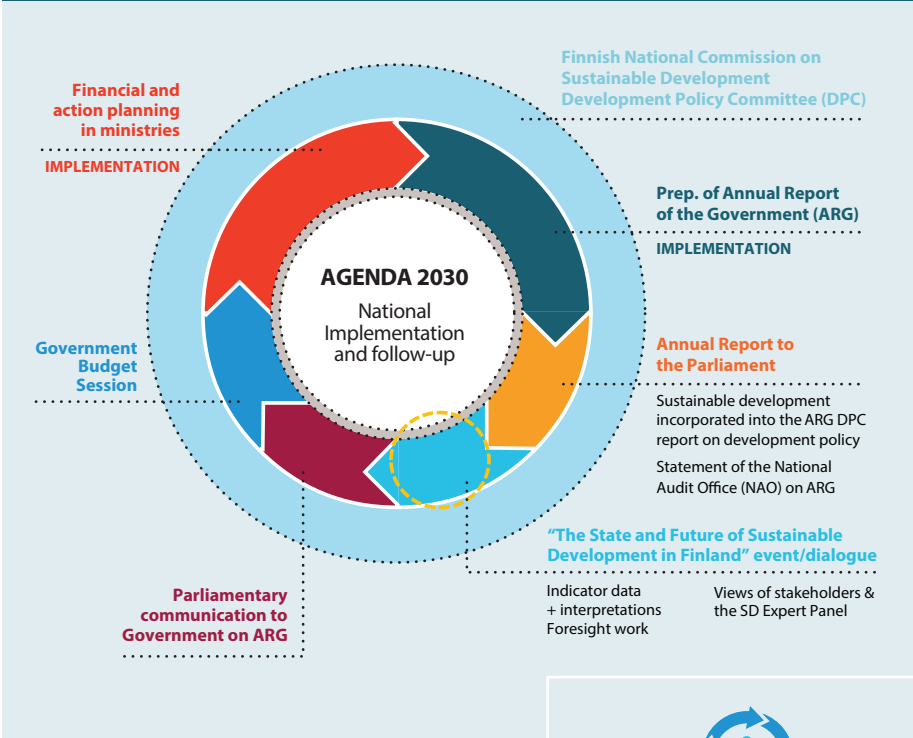
The Government's implementation plan for the 2030 Agenda is based on the vision, principles and goals set forth in the NCSD "Society's Commitment to Sustainable Development". The implementation plan consists of two focus areas, a set of policy principles and a specific chapter on follow-up and review. The focus areas are a carbon-neutral and resource-wise Finland, and a non-discriminating, equal and competent Finland. Policy principles include long-term action and transformation; policy coherence and global partnership; and ownership and participation. Both focus areas and policy principles include several concrete actions for all ministries.⁵³

The implementation plan includes a specific chapter on follow-up and review. This chapter specifies how the 2030 Agenda implementation and the promotion of sustainable development will be integrated in the existing processes and procedures of parliamentary and governmental decision-making. The key idea is that the implementation of the 2030 Agenda should not be approached as a separate policy issue, but as an integrated element of all

52 Prime Minister's office, 'National report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', Finland, October 2016. http://kestavakehitys.fi/documents/2167391/2186383/VNK_J1016_National_report_net.pdf/48be3fcf-d40c-407a-8115-e59b2c0683ee/VNK_J1016_National_report_net.pdf.pdf.

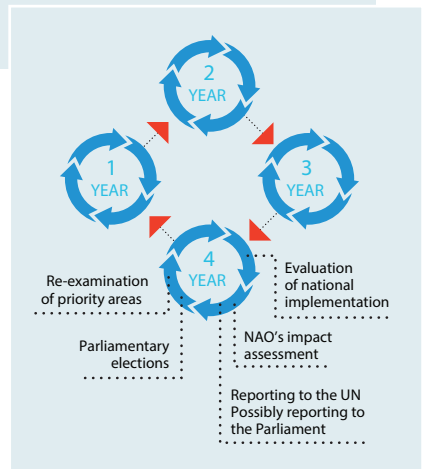
53 Prime Minister's Office, 'Government report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', Helsinki, 2017 https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/79455/VNK_J1117_Government_Report_2030Agenda_KANSILLA_netti.pdf?sequence=1.

FIGURE 2. INTEGRATION OF THE 2030 AGENDA IMPLEMENTATION IN THE EXISTING PROCESSES AND PROCEDURES OF PARLIAMENTARY AND GOVERNMENTAL DECISION-MAKING



policymaking. This chapter also includes a commitment to report on the state of sustainable development in Finland every four years, and to commission an external evaluation on national sustainable development policy once in every parliamentary election period, starting in 2019.

In the spring of 2017, the Parliament had an active discussion on the 2030 Agenda implementation in Finland, based on the Government’s implementation plan. The discussion included hearings of experts and representatives of civil society organizations in several committees. As a result, the Parliament gave a set of recommendation to the Government. Among the recommendations was a demand that the Government’s implementation plan for the 2030 Agenda should guide the government programme. These parliamentary recommendations are of specific importance since they extend over election periods and thus also guide the work of next Government.



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PREPARATION OF THE FIRST NATIONAL EVALUATION OF THE 2030 AGENDA IMPLEMENTATION

During the negotiations on the 2030 Agenda at the United Nations, specific emphasis was placed on follow-up and monitoring of the implementation. The high-level political forum was established to annually follow-up global progress, and global indicators were identified for that purpose.

The role of Parliaments was underlined to ensure the accountability of the work of Governments. To match these global ambitions, the Government of Finland deemed it necessary to include strong language on monitoring, follow-up and review in the national implementation plan. Thus, the implementation plan (Government's report to Parliament) includes the following chapter on evaluation:

"A comprehensive and independent assessment of Finland's sustainable development policy and the national implementation of the 2030 Agenda will be conducted every four years, starting in 2019. The implementation plan will be updated to ensure consistency with the recommendations made."⁵⁴

Now, based on this paragraph, the Government began preparation of the evaluation in the beginning of 2018. The national implementation plan includes also a chapter on conducting an assessment of the coherence of Finland's external policies in the light of the 2030 Agenda:

"An overall assessment will be drawn up of the different ways in which Finland's foreign policy can contribute to the achievement of goals across all administrative branches, and ways in which the coherence of practices and procedures to drive sustainable development outside Finland could be developed."⁵⁵

A decision was made to conduct this assessment as part of the overall evaluation. Thus, these two paragraphs constitute the mandate of the national evaluation.

The rationale behind conducting an evaluation every four years starting in 2019 comes from the national election cycle. Parliamentary elections are held in Finland in April every four years, and the next elections are scheduled for April 2019. The evaluation report will be published in February 2019, which will give political parties time to reflect its findings in their election campaigns. The key findings of the evaluation should also guide the next Government in the preparation of its programme and in the update of the national 2030 Agenda implementation plan. Further, the evaluation report works as an important reference as Finland prepares its next voluntary national review report to the high-level political forum in 2020.

54 Prime Minister's Office, 'Government report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', Chapter 4.5. Evaluate national implementation in 2019, Helsinki, 2017. https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/79455/VNK_J1117_Government_Report_2030Agenda_KANSILLA_netti.pdf?sequence=1.

55 Ibid. Chapter 4.5. Evaluate national implementation in 2019, Chapter B.1 Enhance policy coherence to support sustainable development. https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/79455/VNK_J1117_Government_Report_2030Agenda_KANSILLA_netti.pdf?sequence=1.

SCOPE AND CRITERIA

The evaluation will be conducted by an external evaluation team which will be contracted by the Government during the spring/summer 2018. Currently the Prime Minister's Office is drafting the terms of reference for the evaluation, with the support of a group of national evaluation experts. The NCSO expert panel on sustainable development has also supported the preparation of evaluation by providing recommendations.⁵⁶ The insightful briefing papers of the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and EvalSDGs on the 2030 Agenda evaluation have also provided theoretical backbone for the preparation of the evaluation.⁵⁷

At the moment the key issues under discussion are the scope of evaluation and the evaluation criteria.

Defining the scope of the evaluation has turned out to be more difficult than initially thought. The Government's implementation plan states that the evaluation should focus on Finland's sustainable development policy and the national implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Basically, this could be interpreted narrowly to mean only the policies and actions of the Government. However, taking into account the very idea of the 2030 Agenda, that the participation of the private sector, civil society and academia is a prerequisite for success (the whole-of-society approach), limiting the evaluation only to the work of the Government would do an injustice and even harm our understanding of what national implementation is about. The historically central role of the NCSO in Finland, and the fact that the Government's implementation plan is built on the strategy of the NCSO, also underline this point.

The NCSO strategy "The Finland we want by 2050" includes a practical tool for increasing ownership and engaging the whole of society in the promotion of sustainable development. This operational commitment tool should also be included in the scope of the evaluation.

Including the assessment of Finland's foreign policy's contribution in the 2030 Agenda implementation and the assessment of coherence of external policies add another dimension to the scope of the evaluation. The national 2030 Agenda implementation consists of three dimensions: national activities that aim at achieving the SDGs in Finland (internal implementation); Finland's activities that support the realization of the 2030 Agenda abroad (external implementation, mainly through foreign policy); and the effects (intended or unintended) of our policies to sustainability elsewhere (spillover effects / externalities). In a way the assessment of foreign policy's contribution and the coherence of external policies are linked to the issues of external implementation and externalities, but this relationship needs to be further clarified in the terms of reference.

One more issue that needs to be included in the evaluation is the national follow-up and review system, including national indicators. The system has been updated recently and it would be important to get information on its performance.

56 'Impact pathways and shared evaluations as drivers of change', 2018, <https://www.sitra.fi/en/publications/impact-pathways-shared-evaluation-drivers-change/>.

57 See <https://www.iied.org/effective-evaluation-for-sustainable-development-goals>.

TABLE 1. PRELIMINARY SCOPE AND EVALUATION CRITERIA

PRELIMINARY SET OF CRITERIA (based on OECD DAC criteria + national sustainable development policy principles)	SCOPE OF EVALUATION: Finland's sustainable development policy and the national implementation of the 2030 Agenda (consists of following elements)					
	National strategy, "The Finland we want by 2050"	Operational commitments tool	Government's implementation plan	Contribution of foreign policy	Spillover effects/externalities (global responsibility)	National follow-up and review system
Relevance	Evaluation questions					
Efficiency						
Sustainability						
Coherence						
Principles of the NCSD strategy						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperation and commitment • Creative use of knowledge and expertise • Broad-based cross-generational thinking and global responsibility • Capacity for renewal and good governance 						
Principles of Government's implementation plan						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term action and transformation • Policy coherence and global partnership • Ownership and participation 						

As comes to evaluation criteria, the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) lists five criteria for development evaluation: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability. Relevance refers to the extent to which the aid activity is suited to the priorities and policies of the target group, recipient and donor, and effectiveness measures the extent to which an aid activity attains its objectives. Efficiency measures the outputs—qualitative and quantitative—in relation to the inputs. Impact relates to the positive and negative changes produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended. Sustainability is concerned with measuring whether the benefits of an activity are likely to continue after donor funding has been withdrawn.⁵⁸

Even though these criteria are primarily used for development policy evaluation, it has been taken as a starting point in defining the criteria against which to evaluate Finland's sustainable development policy. However, since at the time of evaluation only three years had passed since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, and less than two years since the adoption of the Government's implementation plan, it might not make sense to evaluate effectiveness and impact, but to concentrate on the relevance, efficiency and sustainability of national policies.

Since incoherence of policies in different sectors can have a significant detrimental effect on the overall national performance, inclusion of coherence in the evaluation criteria might be appropriate. In addition, the NCS strategy "The Finland we want by 2050" includes some principles such as cooperation and commitment, creative use of knowledge and expertise, broad-based cross-generational thinking and global responsibility and capacity for renewal and good governance that could be used as evaluation criteria. The Government's implementation plan includes another useful set of policy principles, namely long-term action and transformation; policy coherence and global partnership; and ownership and participation. Some or all of these principles could be used as evaluation criteria, but this needs further reflection. Table 1 is a preliminary version of the evaluation matrix, illustrating the possible evaluation criteria and the potential elements of the object of the evaluation.

DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION APPROACH AND PARTIALITY CHALLENGE

The importance of feedback and learning during the evaluation process has been considered as an important aspect of the 2030 Agenda evaluation. The evaluation should not be regarded as a process in which there is communication between evaluators and policymakers only at the time of publication of the evaluation results. Instead, the evaluation should be a communicative process where learning happens at all stages.⁵⁹

58 OECD DAC networks on development evaluation, 'Evaluating development co-operation. Summary of key norms and standards', second edition, OECD 2010, <http://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/summaryofkeynormsandstandards.htm>.

59 See e.g., the report of the national sustainable development expert panel at <https://www.sitra.fi/en/publications/impact-pathways-shared-evaluation-drivers-change/> and the IIED and EvalSDG briefing, 'Five considerations for national evaluation agendas informed by the SDGs' at <https://www.iied.org/effective-evaluation-for-sustainable-development-goals>.

According to BetterEvaluation, developmental evaluation is an evaluation approach that can assist social innovators to develop social change initiatives in complex or uncertain environments. Developmental evaluation originators liken their approach to the role of research and development in the private sector product development process because it facilitates real-time, or close to real-time, feedback to programme staff, thus facilitating a continuous development loop.⁶⁰

Developmental evaluation might be a suitable approach in the evaluation of national sustainable development policies and the 2030 Agenda implementation, but this issue needs further discussion among national evaluation experts.

The question of approach relates to the question of partiality and the relationship between evaluators, commissioners of evaluation and the object of evaluation. When the Government commissions an evaluation of national sustainable development policy, the issue of partiality need to be considered. One way to approach this would be to minimize the role of government officials in steering the evaluation. However, the evaluation process can offer key officials and other key stakeholders significant information and insights on how to develop national sustainable development policy, so that isolating them from the evaluation process might just act against the very purpose of the evaluation. The developmental evaluation approach might help in tackling this challenge. Ideally the evaluation would be commissioned by the Parliament or the NCS.

THE NEXT STEPS

The Government of Finland is committed to realizing the vision and the goals of the 2030 Agenda. Evaluation of existing policies provides information on what works, and what does not, and makes it possible to adjust the policies accordingly. Further discussion is still needed over the issues of the scope, criteria and approach of the evaluation. Once these issues have been further clarified, the terms of reference will be prepared and the evaluation assignment put out to tender.

The results of the evaluation should help the next Government in adjusting national sustainable development policy to better match the challenges of the 2030 Agenda. The evaluation will help in developing comprehensive evaluation culture for the 2030 Agenda in Finland and continues the Finnish tradition of having open and evidence-based dialogue on sustainable development policy and its improvement.

60 See http://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/developmental_evaluation.