

SUM MAR IES!

TOWARDS MORE SUSTAINABLE RESIDENTIAL AREAS: THE NEIGHBOURHOOD SUSTAINABILITY INDICATOR PROJECT

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The Neighbourhood Sustainability Indicator Project

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- Urbaria's neighbourhood level sustainability indicator project was carried out with **52 Finnish researchers representing over 20 different fields of science**. The researchers defined 29 different sustainability indicators, which are introduced in the edited volume (Vaattovaara et al. 2024).
- Sustainability indicators can provide information to support urban planning and decision-making. They can also help the **monitoring and evaluation of long term sustainability** of urban development.
- The neighbourhood level approach provides more **concrete information** and observations on urban sustainability in contrast to focusing on complete cities or municipalities.

Goals of the Project: Cross-disciplinarity and Impactful Scientific Research

The identification, monitoring and development of neighbourhood level sustainability elements remains in its infancy, although the importance of sustainable neighbourhoods is emphasised in studies, the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations and a plethora of planning and policy documents. Municipalities hold a lot of power over how cities are developed, and, in practice, questions related to urban growth, ecological and economic sustainability, social separation and segregation often go back to individual neighbourhoods, construction methods and related steering of land use.

Urbaria's neighbourhood level sustainability indicator project started in May 2023 to shed light on what sustainable development might require on the neighbourhood level of the Finnish cities and municipalities. To attain this, the project organised ten interdisciplinary round table discussions with leading Finnish scholars from the universities of Helsinki, Aalto, Tampere, Turku and Eastern-Finland. The project aimed to identify a set of indicators that could help cities evaluate and monitor social and ecological sustainability. The round table discussions started with the simple question: based on your research, what is the key indicator that should be monitored in Finnish neighbourhoods to promote sustainable development. In the course of these discussions, a total of 130 indicators were proposed. Out of these, 29 indicators that sparked the most interest and discussion, were picked for further analysis in an edited volume.

As a part of the statutory task of promoting the vitality of Finnish municipalities (section 1 of the Land Use and Building Act 132/1999), sustainable development needs to be supported by clearer content that pays more attention to the special characteristics of neighbourhoods and the needs of their residents. In general, it should be possible to test and evaluate neighbourhood-specific characteristics and concepts aimed at sustainable development, preferably in a way that also allows setting values to the presented evaluations.

Indicators

The 29 indicators are now collected in an edited volume Towards More Sustainable Residential Areas - Indicators of Neighbourhood and Block Sustainability. The indicators were categorised under four themes covering I) Communities and Inclusion, II) Wellbeing and Social Disadvantage, III) The State of Nature and Urban Green Space and IIII) Homes and Streets.

These 29 indicators cover many neighbourhood characteristics that measure either social or ecological sustainability of an area. To provide a few examples, the first chapter presents in-

dicators on perceived quality of living environment, neighbourhood vitality and equal accessibility to services, social cohesion, and diversity of housing stock and resident turnover. The third chapter takes a more ecological perspective on measuring neighbourhood level sustainability, and suggests indicators like air quality, amount of dead wood, tree canopy cover and ratio between impermeable and permeable surfaces.

Generally, there are already a lot of methods and available data for cities to start implementing these indicators, and some of the indicators would be quite easy to take into use. For instance, Arto O. Salonen suggests in his article that neighbourhood cohesion could be measured by asking residents to assess statements, such as “I can influence matters related to our block” on a scale of 1-10. Or as Marjaana Seppänen concludes in her article on experienced loneliness of older people, loneliness is relatively easy to study with surveys. However, some of the articles showed that more coherent data collection and standardisation is needed before implementing certain indicators. One example of such an indicator is crime. Statistics of crime can easily become skewed, as not all crime comes to the attention of the authorities, Kimmo Nuotio and Matti Näsi argue in their article.

The Work Continues

The goal of the edited volume Towards More Sustainable Residential Areas - Indicators of Neighbourhood and Block Sustainability is to initiate discussion on neighbourhood level sustainability with researchers, urban planners, policy-makers and residents of Finnish cities by compiling existing scientific knowledge in an easily readable format. Furthermore, it is facilitating research collaboration with Finnish cities and municipalities centred around the indicators presented in the book. A number of master’s thesis collaborations funded by Finnish cities are underway. The purpose of such collaborations is to allow the cities to choose indicators that they find particularly relevant with regard to achieving sustainability transformations, and match them with students of University of Helsinki that are interested in analysing the data provided by the city through the lens of the given indicator.

Furthermore, in 2024-2025 Urbaria will organise a number of science sparring events in collaboration with Finnish municipalities and the authors of the edited volume. Science sparring is a dialogue-based method that brings together scientific knowledge and the expertise of practical professionals. The aim of these events will be to both help the municipalities in developing their strategic understanding of the topical sustainability challenges they face, and also offer the researchers unique practical perspectives into current issues faced by professionals working with questions pertaining to their field of research.

References

Vaattovaara, M., Jännes, J. & Posti, M. (Eds.), Towards more sustainable residential areas - indicators of neighbourhood and block sustainability. University of Helsinki 2024.

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/587177>



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