

EVALSDGs Insight # 11

Participatory evaluation as an approach to evaluating the implementation of Agenda 2030: The case of Finland

INTRODUCTION

Finland is committed to implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In accordance with Finnish Government policy, an evaluation of Finland’s national sustainable development policy, called PATH2030, was commissioned in 2019. The evaluation examined the sustainable development (SD) pathways across the whole of government with the purpose to improve coherence and enhance its implementation. The evaluation approach was participatory.

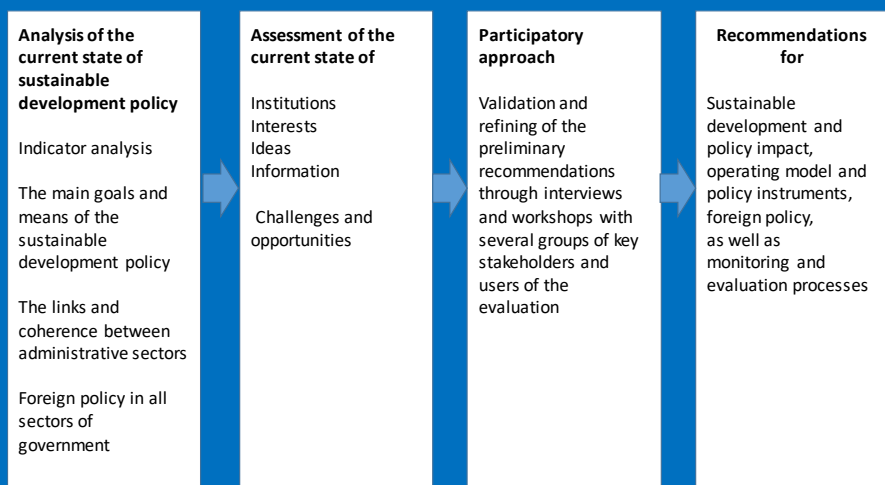
This EVALSDGs Insight aims to share Finland’s experience and lessons learnt as the first country in the world to conduct an independent national evaluation on achieving the objectives of the 2030 Agenda. It also aims to enhance awareness of the role evaluation, and particularly *participatory* evaluation, can play in government policy and programming aimed at achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Development Evaluation Unit of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland (MFA) prepared this Insight for an intended audience of evaluation commissioners, government officials, program managers, professional evaluators currently planning country-led evaluation of SD policy, and other interested parties.

EVALUATION CONTEXT AND PURPOSE

In Finland, the Prime Minister’s office (PMO) manages and coordinates the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The Government is committed to evaluate the progress at national level every four years.

The ultimate purpose of the PATH2030 evaluation was to create preconditions for coherent and long-term SD policy, strengthen the knowledge base of

Figure 1: Process of the PATH2030 Evaluation



implementation of the 2030 Agenda and produce concrete recommendations on the future directions of the policy. The evaluation focused on both systems and processes and achievement of the SDGs. The evaluation also considered how Finland's foreign policy promotes achievement of the 2030 agenda.

The main evaluation questions concerning the national sustainable development policy addressed:

- Extent to which its goals were achieved and the degree to which it has contributed toward the 2030 agenda; and,
- Strengths and weaknesses experienced in policy implementation across administrative departments.

In relation to foreign policy the evaluation explored:

- Relevance and coherence between Finland's foreign policy and the sustainable development goals; and,
- Extent to which Finland's sustainable development policy is based on human rights and is in accordance with the 2030 Agenda's principle of "leave no one behind".

EVALUATION APPROACH AND RESULTS

A multidisciplinary team of experts and scientists, supported by different ministries, conducted the evaluation. The series of steps involved, as shown above in Figure 1, include: 1) analysis of the current state of SD policy, 2) assessment of the policy focusing on most central documents, the operational model, key policy instruments and the views of representatives of ministries and other experts, 3) participatory validation of preliminary conclusions and recommendations, and 4) recommendations for the achievement of Agenda 2030 objectives.

In implementing this process, the evaluation team used multiple approaches. **Theory-based assessment** was used to understand both the preconditions and mechanisms of implementation. Attention was paid to the theories of change (ToC) of the impact pathways. The evaluation analyzed how *institutional* level societal structures limit or promote development, how the *interest* of stakeholders gives voice and how different interest groups engage with decision making. It also identified the *ideologies* guiding the action, how *ideas* have been accepted in politics and what type of *information* supports and guides the SD policy.

The following focus areas and policy principles made up the **evaluation criteria** used: *Carbon neutral and resource smart Finland; a non-discrimination, equal and competent Finland; long-term action and transformation; policy coherence and global partnership; commitment and participation.*

The evaluation team employed a participatory process, giving different stakeholders in the SD policy landscape the opportunity to contribute to the evaluation and learn from each other's experience. Stakeholders across administrative departments also actively contributed toward formulation of recommendations based on evaluation findings.

The main findings of the evaluation revealed that SD had become widely accepted in Finnish society. Strengths identified include strong institutions and a relevant administrative model that integrates different groups. There is still a need for improvement in the coherence and transformative potential of SD policy, with specific challenges related to climate change and consumption.

EVALUATION USE

To date, the evaluation findings have been used in a variety of ways including:

- Serving to update the national 2030 Agenda implementation plan in connection with the government's policy programme;
- Contributing to the preparation of Finland's White Paper on Sustainable Development submitted to Parliament;
- A resource in the development of Finland's Voluntary National Review to the UN;

- A source of reflection in proposing future evaluation approaches. The Government has decided that the National Sustainable Development Policy and implementation of the 2030 Agenda will be evaluated again in 2022-2023. Preparations for this evaluation have already started; and,
- Serving as a case, along with SDG evaluations in Costa Rica and Nigeria, in the internationally prepared publication, “Evaluation to connect national priorities with the SDGs Guidebook” (<https://pubs.iied.org/17739IIED/>). The publication shares experiences and global SDG capacity building purposes.

LESSONS LEARNED

There were many lessons learned from the evaluation, many of which related to the participatory nature of the evaluation as key to its success.

- Participation of key stakeholders in designing the evaluation contributes toward the use of a relevant method, which also increases the usefulness of the evaluation’s results.
- Clear understanding from the beginning about who will use the evaluation results, how and why leads to more effective evaluation.
- The recommendations become clearer, more concrete and realistic when they are formulated together with the ultimate users of the evaluation results, such as civil servants and policy makers.
- Allocating time for all stakeholders to share and reflect throughout the evaluation process is important.
- The implementation of recommendations is more effective if the evaluation contributes directly to ongoing reform. Timely evaluation affects the policy reviews, strategies and implementation of policies as planned.
- Participatory methods are highly recommended especially when the focus is on practical implementation of SD policy and its future directions.
- It is important to leave enough time and resources for communication and political influence after publication of the evaluation results.

CONCLUSION

A participatory approach enhances the usefulness of evaluation results at the national level. Therefore, to create tailored plans and approaches, special attention should be paid to stakeholder participation and learning throughout the evaluation. Designing inclusive processes is a crucial precondition for learning and evidence-informed decision-making. Strengthening capacity is instrumental in stimulating national-level ownership in evaluation and the use of evaluation results as well.

Please refer to the PATH2030-publications online in English:

Policy Brief: <https://tietokayttoon.fi/julkaisu?pubid=30301>

Report: <http://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/handle/10024/161601>

Did you know?

EVALSDGs is a global network formed to add value and learning to SDGs, made up of people with a shared interest in evaluation and sustainable development. EVALSDGs Guidance Group (GG) is an EVALSDGs sub-group focusing on strengthening capacity development for evaluation and the SDGs. The EVALSDGs ‘Insights’ are short, light and easy to digest notes presenting ideas and new information, and stimulate thinking to strengthen evaluation capacity.

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