

Science for Environment Policy

Environmental sustainability in urban planning: a Finnish case study

The complexity of environmental issues and a lack of co-operation or shared objectives between parties involved in urban planning are preventing promotion of environmental sustainability, a new study suggests. The Finnish research, based on focus groups with 32 professionals in urban planning and environmental sustainability, suggests that the short-term economic goals of local authorities, the complexity of environmental sustainability, and a lack of co-operation between different decision-making groups in urban planning were creating barriers to achieving sustainability.

Although urban environments only occupy around 3% of the Earth's land surface, they are responsible for around 75% of greenhouse gas emissions, and their 'ecological footprint' is many times larger than the land area they occupy. As such, transforming towns and cities into sustainable communities through urban planning is one of the key ways of facing global environmental challenges.

Local authorities are in a unique position to promote sustainability. Many countries actively promote sustainable urban communities as a policy goal, encouraging local authorities to contribute to environmental targets, such as climate change mitigation, through urban planning. In many cases, local authorities maintain a high level of autonomy and are responsible for approving such decisions.

However, some researchers have suggested that integrating environmental objectives into urban planning is complex and policy does not necessarily translate into practice. This new research examined how increased environmental awareness influenced urban land planning among professionals in urban planning and environmental sustainability in Finland.

The researchers carried out focus groups with a total of 32 individuals in three groups. Participants worked for a variety of organisations representing both the private and public sectors at either municipal or state level. The focus groups were designed to explore the participants' understanding of why sustainability is assessed in urban planning, how this affects decision-making and the role of urban planners in environmental sustainability.

Study participants believed that environmental sustainability in urban planning should be assessed for a number of reasons. These included promoting and enabling environmental sustainability, increasing the environmental knowledge of decision-makers and comparing the sustainability of different actions.

However, participants felt that environmental issues were complex to understand and quantify and simple, short-term economic considerations tended to dominate decision-making, especially in smaller cities where resources are more limited.

This complexity may reduce enthusiasm to be involved in environmental issues. The authors of the study suggest that improved communication between the scientific community and urban land use professionals could help improve and support urban planners' arguments for sustainability in decision-making.

Participants also noted a frequent lack of co-operation between stakeholders (e.g. councillors and planning committees) in urban planning. In the absence of joint environmental objectives, urban planners' ability to promote sustainability was limited. Participants felt that environmental aims should be included in the wider strategies of cities and political agendas of urban regeneration, rather than conflicting with them, as was sometimes noted.

Overall, the authors conclude that care should be taken to ensure that environmental policy objectives in urban planning are achievable, and supported, through all administrative and organisational levels involved.



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DOI: 10.3390/su6106622. This study is free to view at: www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/6/10/6622

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