

Stories of European Cities

Clarity within complexity, story for a thriving city



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Photograph: Johanna Taskinen



Stories of European Cities

In an era marked by climate urgency, lagging competitiveness, security threats, biodiversity collapse, and deepening societal divides, European cities are not just expected, but required, to lead the way. Achieving bold ecological goals while ensuring long-term social and economic resilience demands more than political will. It requires systemic and collaborative renewal.

The journey towards thriving European cities must be powered by both: innovative, future oriented and entrepreneurial mindset, and at the same time systemic, structured, and pragmatic ability and approach to take care of everyday services. Cities need to maintain and develop existing services while fostering learning, building cross-sectoral competence, and cultivating leadership capabilities that inspire action, enable bold experimentation, and drive impactful outcomes that connect to everyday life.

Yet, despite growing ambition and well-acknowledged needs, and all the information policy makers from different levels can think of, the gap between policy and governance is real. Bridging this gap calls for stories that move beyond strategies and vision, stories that reveal what transformation looks like in action. This book brings forward such stories. From the hearts of European cities, mayors and city leaders share how they are navigating complexity, engaging communities, and turning shared challenges into opportunities. These lived

experiences offer insight, encouragement, and pathways for cities across Europe and beyond.

Stories of European Cities is a book about urban leadership. It captures the shared journey of Espoo and its European peers, cities that are navigating the complex art of leading by example. This is not a manual or guidebook. It's an invitation to understand urban governance, and an invocation to build the story of your city in your own words. Through the different sections and narratives in this book, the aim is to inspire colleagues, inform policy and influence governance at all levels, and share what it requires to lead transformation, from the mayor's seat and from the perspective of civil servants.

Now, more than ever, we need to hear directly from mayors, the leaders translating ambition into action. This is a book about their voices, values, and victories. This is not a science or policy document, but a practice based narrative. A story of what it means to lead a European city toward a thriving, sustainable future. We invite you to join us to this journey toward thriving urban futures with stories from the cities of Europe.

Mr. Kai Mykkänen
Mayor, City of Espoo



Photograph: Elias Metsämaa

Prolog



Photograph: Joni Kuusisto

On October 1st, 2019, I began my role as project manager for a six-year initiative, the SDG 2025 project, aimed at advancing 2030 UN Agenda and the SDGs (sustainable development goals) in the city of Espoo, Finland. My expectations for the first day were modest: I hoped to meet a few of my future colleagues, maybe find a spot in the city's open workspace, hopefully locate the cafeteria, and, if fortune favored me, get my hands on a computer and a mobile phone. To the credit of Espoo's sustainability team, much of this went smoother than I anticipated.

What I wasn't prepared for, however, came that afternoon, just as my first day was winding down. Around 4 PM, moments before the mayor's office was set to close, Mr. Jukka Mäkelä, the mayor himself, approached me. His question took me by surprise: *"Are you the person who has joined the team as responsible for the 2030 UN Agenda and the SDG work in Espoo?"*

Caught off guard but managing to stay composed, I replied something along the lines of, *"Yes, yes, I am... (I think)."*

"Very good," he said, his tone both encouraging and direct. *"Tomorrow at 9 AM, you will meet the vice mayor, and you will get started on concrete SDG work. The first focus is education. Here is my business card. Give this to the vice mayor and tell him that you are representing me and have my authority to act. And Ville, I want results. Have a good rest of the day, and welcome to Espoo."*

That was how my first day unfolded. Now, nearly six years later, I can confidently say that the journey has been much the same ever since: a continuous cycle of growth and learning, supported by extraordinary colleagues and the broader community within Espoo, Finland, Europe, and beyond. Together, amidst ambiguity, complexity, and the grand challenges of our time, we have worked toward building a better, more sustainable future.

In Espoo,
Dr. Ville Taajamaa

Introduction:

Stories That Inspire Action

Stories that connect facts with emotional resonance have the power to inspire action. Transformation begins locally, within us and our communities, and reverberates outward to connect with other individuals and communities on similar journeys. Data and knowledge act as tools in this process, while strategy, values, commitment, motivation, and the story of your city form its core.

This book is an invitation to craft and live out that shared story. A story that motivates you and your community to commit, collaborate, and thrive. By doing so, we build cities that are not only vibrant and thriving but also sustainable, resilient, and capable of inspiring change on a global scale. It is cities and their communities that conceive, design, and implement ecological, sociocultural, and economic sustainable development in practice. Literally from birth, to organizing “Frozen” -themed dresses to kindergartens that are municipally ran but globally acknowledged, to managing a holistic and constantly developing world-class education and vocational training system, to a lean social care system, elderly care, sports, culture, employment services, libraries, palliative care and beyond. Not forgetting managing and fostering our environment. When creating a sustainable future, it is in cities where the rubber meets the road. No wonder that European cities, and Espoo amongst them, find 2030 UN Agenda and the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) a good fit to describe their present and future work. Cities and SDGs are a match

forged in every day pragmatic work to serve our citizens. It all starts within you.

Cities are also a fertile ground for innovation. They provide both the mental and physical spaces where talent converges to make sense of global challenges and collaboratively solve them. In doing so, cities drive learning, innovation, and prosperity. In this role, cities are not only colleagues and partners but also test beds for groundbreaking, and world changing ideas. European cities are well-connected and possess the potential to punch above their weight globally. Their success lies in functioning as reliable systems and trusted partners, committed to shared goals and collective progress.

The future will be shaped by cities that embrace their dual identity: grounded locally yet influential globally. To thrive in this dynamic context, cities must work together leveraging their unique essence to create a sustainable, inclusive, and prosperous future.

The introduction of this book sets the stage by exploring the context of urban governance. The second chapter presents perspectives from European forerunner mayors and thought leaders. The third chapter highlights Espoo’s journey with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasizing the collaborative efforts between the city organization and the local community. The concluding chapter distills the main learnings and reflects on their potential implications for cities across Europe.



Photograph: Kerttu Penttilä

Thriving in the Urban Jungle: A Journey of Clarity and Community

This book delves into finding clarity and flourishing within the complexities of urban life. Rather than presenting itself as a playbook, checklist, manual, or guide, it embraces a structure grounded in subjective and intersubjective observations, reflections, and, most importantly, stories.

Subjective refers to personal experiences, feelings, and perspectives unique to each individual: what we perceive, feel, or understand through our personal lens. These experiences are shaped by our emotions, beliefs, thoughts, and even biases. Intersubjective, on the other hand, captures shared understandings such as agreements between individuals about concepts, events, or phenomena. It focuses on what is mutual, how we collectively interpret and agree upon the world.

In practice, this book draws upon both individual insights and collective learnings from groups, networks, and institutions. It emphasizes knowledge formed through shared meaning, collaboratively negotiated to resonate with a community or group. If subjective experiences are deeply personal, intersubjective experiences represent the collective understanding that transcends any single perspective. Reason for this approach is that this interplay reflects how cities function, are built, and are continually developed.

This is not a book of rules, data repositories, or policy prescriptions. Instead, it is rooted in the belief that meaningful change begins within us. The question is not what policies should be adopted but how we choose to implement them. The challenges of urban development do not stem from a lack of data, information, or knowledge. Instead, they arise from the absence of shared commitment and vision, a unifying story we can all believe in and act upon.

Local vs. Global: Recognizing the Power of "Glocal"

In this context, a city is more than just a geographical location. A city is a local entity deeply intertwined with global phenomena. Cities as organizations and as networks function both vertically and horizontally. From a civil servant or city organization perspective it is the vertically organized and locally provided services that encompass and enable the day-to-day lives of citizens, transportation to work and to hobbies, schools as infra or as educational service, other family-services, nature and beyond. All largely confined within city boundaries and enabled by municipal services. Horizontally, cities face and address challenges that transcend borders, such as biodiversity loss, climate crises, security threats, macroeconomic shifts, immigration, and political realities, even tensions. These global issues directly impact local realities, compelling cities to collaborate with citizens, local communities, other cities, regional bodies, national governments, and international institutions. Cities are much more than just points on a map, they are each unique and possess context driven opportunities and challenges.

Many cities host businesses, research hubs, and educational institutions that operate within global networks, yet remain

rooted in the city's ecosystem. A city is thus both a defined geographical area and a complex socio-cultural entity. It is characterized by its population, legal frameworks, historical context, and economic infrastructure, but also by its unique personality, culture, and story. A city is far more than a mere point on a map; it is an evolving physical and mental space of opportunities and challenges.

Amidst the accelerating pace of change and a growing array of ecological, social, and economic challenges, cities represent something tangible. They are structural and systemic entities embedded within broader national and international systems. In Europe, cities operate within a democratic framework, where trust among stakeholders forms the foundation of governance. This trust materializes in the dualistic governance model, enabling cities to tax, take loans, develop infrastructure, and address social, ecological, and economic responsibilities locally but connected to national and international contexts.

Cities are more than governing bodies, they serve as platforms for connection. They create the environment in which businesses thrive, research flourishes, and ideas flow freely. In this role, cities are enablers. They provide the canvas upon which stakeholders: citizens, businesses, and institutions, can innovate and grow. Cities are where ideas and thoughts connect with people.

The Essence of a City

Yet, is that all a city is?

When Picasso was asked why he paints the way he does, he answered he doesn't paint what things look like, he paints the essence of them. If we apply this lens to cities, what is their essence? Are cities defined by their buildings, infrastructure, people, nature, companies, or universities? These are vital components, but they represent the **city as a system** or the **city as an artifact**.

The true essence of a city lies in its community and culture. It is the shared ethos and story, rooted in who we are, where we come from, and where we aspire to go. Cities are dynamic networks, constantly evolving through the interactions of their citizens and institutions. This is **City as a Community**, alive and unfolding in the present moment, connected to local community, connected to global community and within its own organization.

A city that embodies, lives out and communicates its essence actively, seeks to co-create the future with its community, which is both local and global, expressed with one word: **Glocal**. It unites a learning mindset with an innovation mindset, bridging research and business, sustainability, and solutions. A city is not merely a passive platform but an active partner, fostering the invention, scaling, and sharing of ideas that carry local significance while generating global impact.

Photograph: Elias Metsämaa / Filmbutik Oy



The Power of Narrative: Connecting Data, Emotion, and Action in Urban Transformations

A city's transformation isn't just about facts and figures. While data and abstract concepts lay a vital foundation for both transformative policy building and urban governance, they lack the full potential to inspire and connect unless paired with a compelling narrative. A well-crafted narrative, turned into a story or stories, bridges the gap between logical understanding and emotional commitment, uniting people across organizational hierarchies and community networks. In essence, it's about "talking the talk and walking the walk". This happens by combining data-driven insights with emotion-driven storytelling to forge a shared vision of progress, and to implement it.

Narratives are a way to exchange and distribute information, and to create shared knowledge. It is how humans are built to adopt and exchange ideas, through storytelling. And as cities, communities, and different national and other global networks, are in dire need of transformation, stories are what connect us beyond material values.

As a definition narrative is here understood as something providing broader structure and context. They align individual stories with a shared vision or purpose, shaping how people interpret and connect with those stories. Narratives are strategic, helping to guide perception, decision-making, and

Photograph: Kerttu Penttilä



action at a systemic level. Stories are tools for communication and connection. They create emotional engagement, simplify complex ideas, and make information relatable. Stories often serve to illustrate specific examples within a larger narrative and aim to evoke emotions and create empathy. It allows individuals to see themselves in the characters and situations, building a personal connection. Narrative on the other hand could, for example, be city's overarching vision about being a leader in climate action, highlighting the alignment between government policies, community support, and individual entrepreneurial success. All in all, stories and narratives work in tandem. Urban and transformative governance is about data, facts and figures but must also inspire, inform, and transform perceptions, decisions, and actions. This is why narratives and stories are so needed.

Why Stories Matter: The Human Connection

As mentioned, stories and storytelling processes are fundamental to how humans share, adopt, and internalize ideas. They transcend material values, connecting people on a deeper, emotional and transformative level. In today's rapidly changing world, where cities, communities, and global networks face complex challenges, narratives, and stories serve as a tool to foster shared understanding, transformation and collaboration. A city's story should not and cannot be a piece of fiction; it's always grounded in facts and reality, but it is composed and told in a way that makes those facts resonate emotionally, aligning individual and collective actions toward a common goal.

Within a city's organizational framework, stories serve two primary roles:

1. Motivating Understanding

Stories help people grasp the meaning of a city's strategy, not only at an intellectual level but also on a value-based, emotional level.

2. Sharing Meaning

They convey the city's purpose and vision to both internal stakeholders and the broader community, fostering acceptance and commitment.

The difference between fictional stories and city narratives lies in their origin. Fiction is the product of imagination, while a city's story is built on factual foundations. For example, the 2030 UN Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) didn't emerge from myth or mysticism; they were grounded in scientific evidence, shaped through political dialogue, and refined through collective decision-making. Similarly, a city's strategy must be rooted in facts while remaining adaptable, ensuring it reflects current knowledge and values while making sense of future needs, and adapting to those.



Photograph: Kerttu Penttinen



Photograph: Elias Metsämäa / Filmbutik Oy

Localizing Stories and Strategies

When observed and analyzed with smaller granularity and focus on city organization, stories have two important roles; one is to motivate us to understand what the meaning of our strategy is also at the value and emotional level, and the other is; sharing this meaning inside and outside the community. Acceptance of, and commitment to the story is of paramount importance for it to be successful. The difference between a fictional story and a city narrative, strategy and story is, that where fiction is an invented legend, city story is fact based. City stories, like SDGs, are not immutable. They are meant to evolve, adapting to local needs and contexts while maintaining transparency and traceability. Localizing the SDGs involves tailoring them to a city's specific challenges while preserving their connection to the global framework (please see Localizing SDGs – A Process of 'How to...' on page 194). The same principle applies to city strategies, which should remain open to review, conflict, and iteration throughout their journey. This openness ensures that strategies stay relevant and reflective of the community's evolving needs and values. To sum up, for a city's story or strategy to succeed, it must foster both rational and emotional commitment at all organizational levels, from strategic planning to operational implementation. It should resonate both top-down and bottom-up, creating a shared sense of purpose that drives tangible action. The result is a strategy that becomes a lived reality, shaping decisions and behaviors across the community.

From Inspiration to Action

A motivational story without tangible action is merely empty rhetoric. A city's narrative must be rooted in actionable realities: education infrastructure, social services, economic initiatives, or environmental projects. In these contexts, the need for addressing the real needs of citizens come to surface and materialize. Stories that inspire motivation should drive intention, and that intention must channel into meaningful action.

At its best, a city's story connects three key elements:

1. Fact-Based Data

A foundation of credible, knowledge-driven insights.

2. Local Community Needs

Addressing the immediate concerns and aspirations of residents.

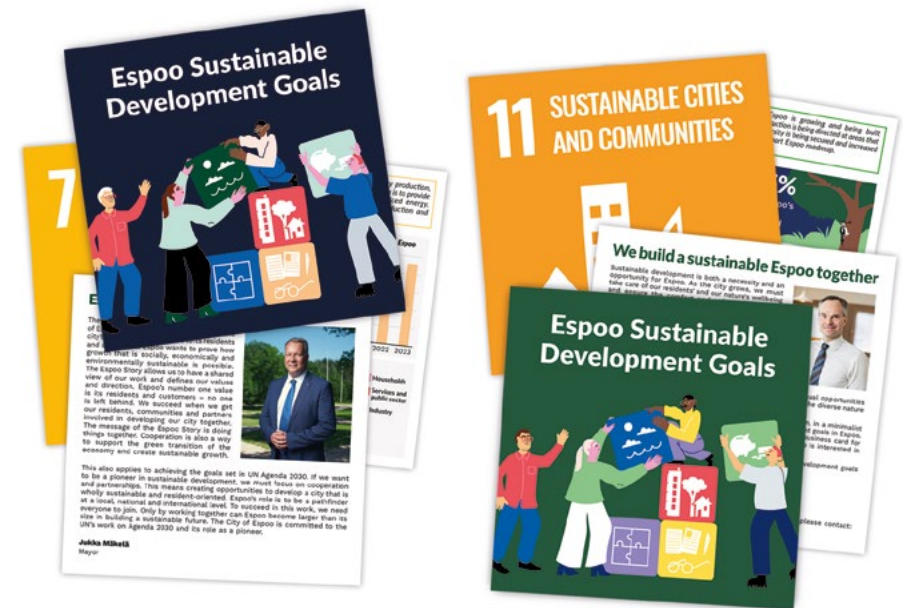
3. Global Challenges

Acknowledging broader issues like climate change and inequality while contributing to solutions.

This interconnected approach ensures that the narrative isn't just aspirational but transformative.

The Transformative Power of Narrative

Ultimately, the true test of a city's narrative is its ability to drive change. A story that connects data to emotion and translates vision into action becomes a powerful tool for transformation. It fosters collaboration, motivates action, and builds a shared sense of identity and purpose. By "talking the talk and walking the walk", cities can inspire their communities to address today's challenges and co-create a sustainable, thriving future.



Picture 1. Espoo Voluntary Local Reviews (VLR) years 2023 and 2025

Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) help to engage with the local community, fostering shared ownership of sustainability goals. Narratives must be grounded in verified data sources, such as Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), to ensure credibility and alignment with both local realities and global sustainability frameworks.

The Power of a Shared Story

Without the courage to change ourselves, we cannot hope to transform our environments. That courage requires motivation and calls for substantial commitment from a civil servant working in a large and bureaucratic organization built to preserve stability and security. More importantly, courage and motivation aren't enough. For change to happen, the whole community is needed on board. Change begins within, but the journey need not be a solitary one. True transformation happens when a community embarks on an adventure to create urban spaces, mental and physical. A shared story serves as the foundation of this community. It unites individuals under a common purpose, motivating intentional action, and fostering a collective vision that can be turned into real world, with value-, and fact-based development.

A thriving city is more than sustainable, it is resilient and vibrant. Sustainability here extends beyond the ecological. It encompasses a robust community of citizens, schools, businesses, academia, non-governmental organizations, civil servants, and global networks of like-minded cities. Only by collaborating with others who share a similar desire to thrive, lasting transformation can be achieved, resulting in a thriving city. Cities do not exist in a void.

Photograph: Elias Metsämaa / Filmbutik Oy



The Untold Story of Governance Innovation

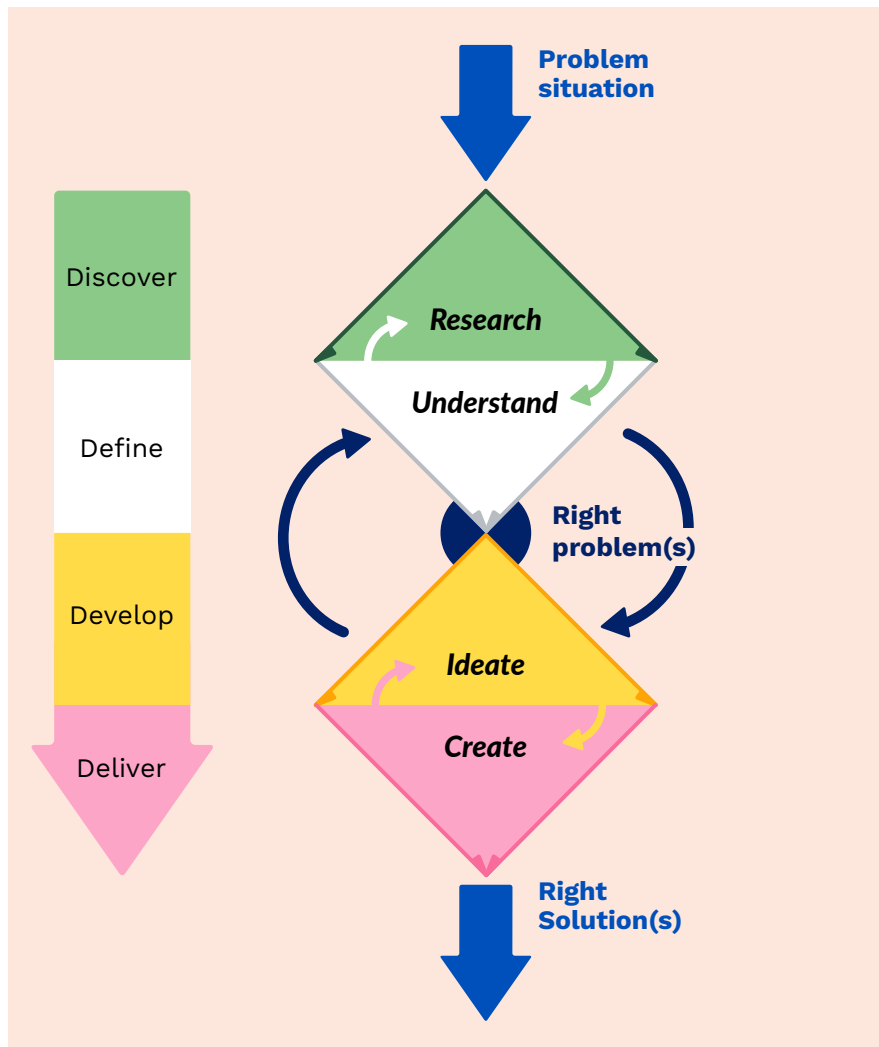
The call for more human-centered and context-sensitive approaches to urban governance and sustainability is growing louder. It resonates not only among civil servants and urban practitioners but also within academia, consultants, political circles, and the broader literature. The discourse surrounding this need can be distilled into two fundamental questions: 1) why is change important, and 2) what should be done. However, these questions alone are insufficient. Without addressing the third, perhaps most critical question: How can change be actualized, meaningful action and learning remain surface level.

This chapter approaches urban governance not as a one-dimensional problem demanding a quick fix but as a complex and layered issue that requires systemic understanding. We adopt a holistic lens, examining governance through the interlinked dimensions of context, organizational structure, and capacity building. Imagine trying to save time by running with a broken bicycle. It might seem expedient in the moment, but stopping to fix the bike first allows you to travel much faster in the long run. Similarly, by focusing not just on surface-level outcomes but on understanding the deeper, context-driven root causes of challenges, we can design sustainable and transformative solutions.

Urban challenges, whether ecological, social, or economic, demand an integrated approach. Solutions must consider the system while accounting for the people who observe, conceive, design and ultimately resolve these problems. Only by adopting such a dual perspective can we craft strategies that are both innovative and effective. This requires moving away from one-size-fits-all solutions and instead observing, conceiving and accepting the unique nature of each problem. It's crucially important that this process balances divergent and convergent thinking, blending logical analysis with empathy and intuition. [Please see Picture 2.]



Photograph: Elias Metsämäe / Filmbutik Oy



Picture 2. Double Diamond Design Process

Divergence, convergence cycle adopted from Design Thinking process is similar to urban governance needs when solving future oriented and complex challenges.

From a governance perspective, this shift demands a move away from rigid hierarchies toward more networked and collaborative models. Teams must be empowered to delve into the underlying needs driving each challenge. Balance between hierarchical structure and networked collaboration is essential for fostering innovation while maintaining organizational coherence.

Development and consultation literature often highlight these principles, but one crucial aspect is frequently overlooked. Successful governance innovation requires serving two masters' simultaneously: the forward-thinking need for foresight-driven solutions and the pragmatic necessity of engaging and committing all stakeholders. Achieving this balance demands robust network, team, and knowledge management.

However, embracing innovation in urban governance is fraught with challenges. Public organizations are inherently risk-averse, particularly when innovation threatens established hierarchies. Pioneering new solutions can feel like sticking your neck out, only to have your efforts stifled by those tasked with preserving order. In worst cases, failed attempts at innovation can erode trust and social capital, leaving organizations more entrenched in their resistance to change.

Yet, these "gatekeepers" of bureaucracy play an essential role. They ensure that the wheels of administration: payrolls, budgets, and public services, continue to turn smoothly. While their caution may seem like an obstacle to progress, it is, in fact, a safeguard against instability. Without their efforts, the foundation of urban systems would crumble, making any attempt at innovation unsustainable.

To succeed, governance innovation must respect and work within these administrative boundaries. This requires creating solutions that align with the pace and capacity of siloed bureaucracies while gradually shifting the balance toward more integrated and adaptive governance. It is a delicate dance: every innovative idea introduces shifts in the equilibrium of the urban system. As a result, transformative governance must not only account for the creativity of innovation, but also for the structural realities that enable long-term success. Through continuous learning the organization will gradually become better and better at this. It is worth it. It will create a culture of development that can survive both inside pressures such as personnel change, lack of resources and the plethora of outside challenges; local, national and geopolitics, changing economic situations, environmental challenges to name a few.



Culture of development is the resilient and robust element, resource, and reserve, that leads to a thriving and sustainable community behind any successful city.

By respecting the balance between order and change, we can craft solutions that are both radical and rooted. True progress in urban governance lies in harmonizing these seemingly opposing forces, ensuring that innovation is not just possible but sustainable within the complex city administration, much like the Chaplin-like machinery of “Modern Times”. [Google “Chaplin Modern Times”]

Photograph: Elias Metsämaa / Filmbutik Oy



Embrace Your Silos: A Balanced Approach to Urban Governance

Understanding the balance between network-driven development work and the routine operations of hierarchical bureaucracies requires a nuanced, multi-level approach. At its core, this balance recognizes that cities thrive on collaboration across domains while also respecting the critical, domain-specific expertise that keeps essential services running. Let's explore this balance through three progressive levels of thinking: 1) breaking down silos, 2) helping silos dance, and finally, 3) embracing silos.

Level One: Breaking Down the Silos

The most commonly heard refrain in urban development and consultancy circles is the call to **break down the silos**. While this perspective champions collaboration, it often overlooks a key reality: silos exist for a reason. Each domain: education, infrastructure, social welfare, administration, etc; has specialized expertise that is essential for a city's functioning. For instance, would you trust a service designer or a teacher to engineer a district heating system? Of course not. Some challenges are best addressed within the confines of domain-specific knowledge and expertise.





Photograph: Elias Metsämäki / Filmbutik Oy

Yet, the rhetoric of “breaking down silos” goes beyond a practical misstep; it carries emotional consequences. When developers and consultants insist on this narrative, they risk adopting the very narrowness of perspective they criticize in others. By framing bureaucrats as the antagonists and developers as the heroes, they perpetuate division, erode trust, and undermine collaboration. This “us versus them” mindset widens the gap between the visionary aspirations of developers and the operational realities of practitioners, whose work keeps the city running. It is healthy for a developer to ask a question from oneself: *“If I stop working on this project now, will the city collapse? Will the heat of houses and learning of children stop, etc?”*. If the answer is no, please refrain yourself from forcing siloes to break, and instead adapt on alternative approach.

Level Two: Helping the Silos Juggle

The second level of understanding reframes the relationship: instead of dismantling silos, developers seek to make them “juggle”, or “dance”. At this stage, practitioners are encouraged to adopt a design-thinking mindset, incorporating divergent, open-ended thinking alongside their technical expertise. This approach recognizes the need for cross-domain collaboration while still valuing the specialized knowledge that each silo brings to the table. This approach is better, but not enough.

While this mindset is more inclusive, it often separates development work from core processes. Development becomes an add-on, a parallel track disconnected from the essential daily work of bureaucracies. Without integration, even the most innovative ideas risk becoming isolated pilots that fail to take root in practice.

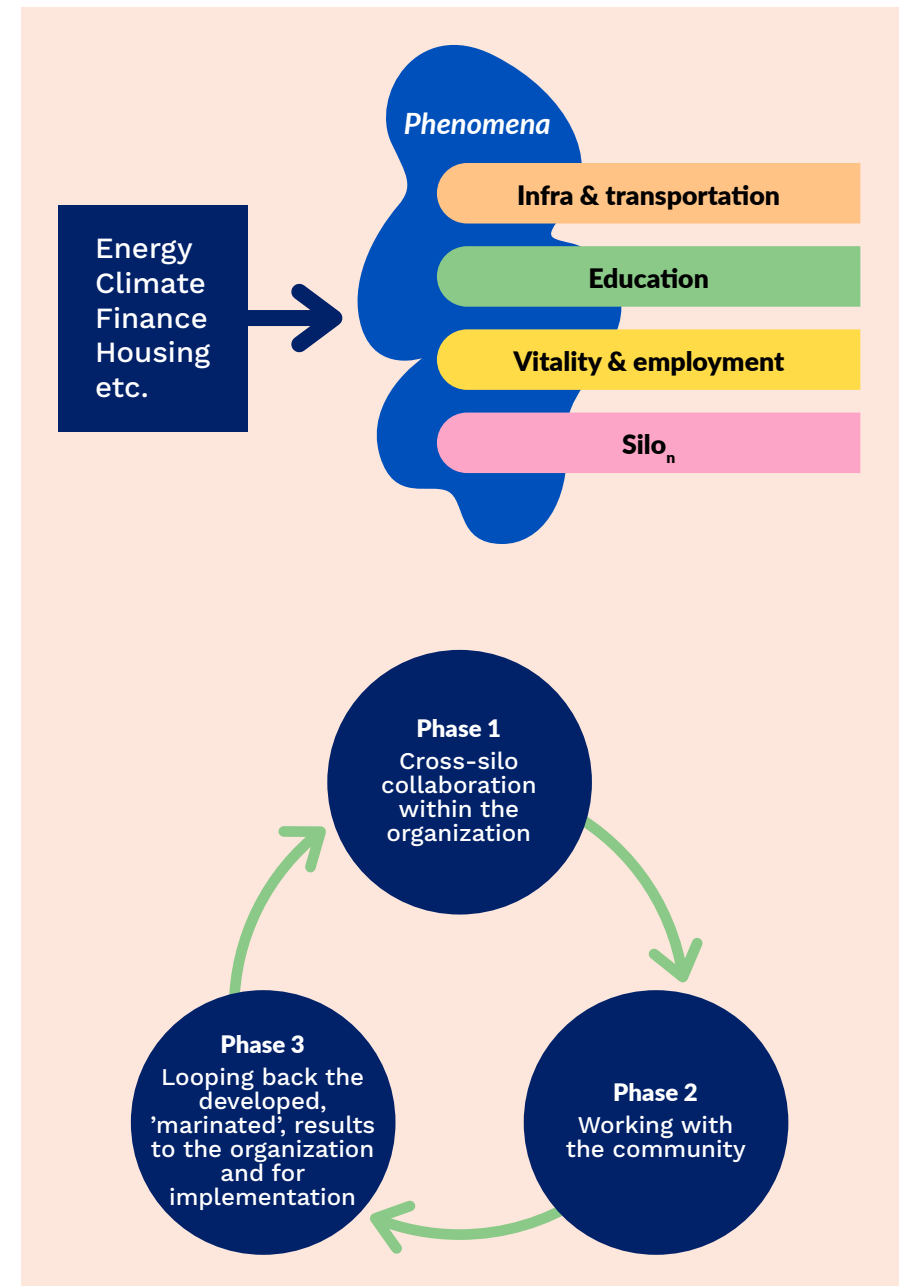
Level Three: Embracing the Silos

The third level: **embracing silos**, is where true progress begins. Here, developers and practitioners cultivate a deeper understanding and appreciation of each other's roles. "Embrace" might even be replaced with "love" to emphasize the emotional commitment this approach requires. "Love your Silos", that's a T-shirt right there. By actively listening to the realities, needs, and aspirations of their bureaucratic counterparts, developers can foster trust and mutual respect, leading to courage and action.

Bureaucrats, often viewed as rigid gatekeepers, play a critical role in maintaining the city's operational stability. Their caution and adherence to structure may seem inflexible, but this is precisely what ensures continuity in services and governance. Just as the flexibility of dancers contrasts with the strength of wooden poles in a tent, the rigidity of bureaucrats provides a necessary foundation for stability. Starting from this baseline of respect, developers can create impactful collaborations that honor both visionary goals and operational realities.

To move forward, it is essential to establish shared understanding across silos. Development cannot happen in isolation; future-focused initiatives must be seamlessly integrated into the daily routines of city governance. Picture this: silos working within their domains for much of their tasks yet connecting meaningfully when cross-administrative, even community-driven collaboration is required.

Picture 3. Level 3, where future-oriented initiatives are developed with the community included. →



Don't Go Hunting Alone: Governance Requires Teamwork

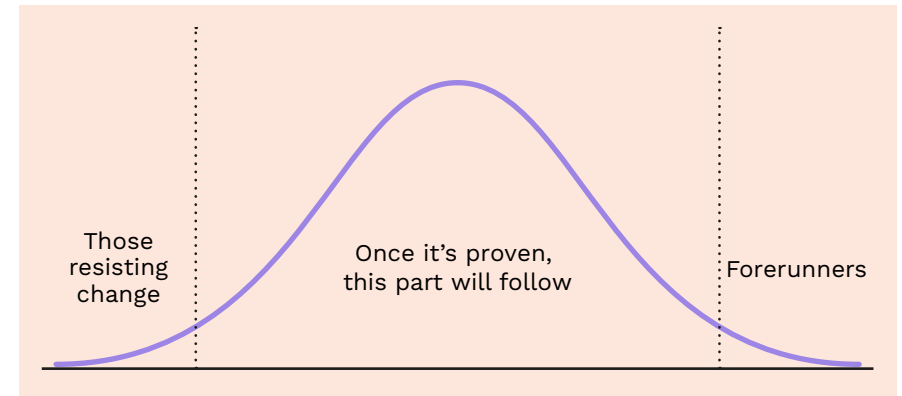
Effective governance isn't a solo venture, it's the very definition of a team effort. While we can map, plan, and theorize individually about building better organizations, cities, or communities, lasting change only happens when we work together. Collaboration is the foundation of transformative governance. As the old Nordic proverb states:



Don't go hunting alone. You hunt alone and you survive, you hunt together and the whole village prospers.



Photograph: Olli Urpela / Pintalittidesign



Picture 4. Change process follows a normal distribution curve

Every community comprises a spectrum of perspectives, ranging from enthusiastic supporters to cautious skeptics and outright dissenters. This dynamic can be visualized as a normal distribution curve: At one end, we find the forerunners: the visionaries eager to embrace and champion change. At the other end are the resisters, those firmly opposed to any shift. In the middle lies the majority, waiting to see evidence before deciding whether to follow (please see Picture 4).

Understanding the motives of both extremes is critical. The forerunners propel the process forward, but the resisters can drain energy and focus. Sometimes, the best option with persistent dissenters is to let them step aside, allowing the majority to engage with and sustain meaningful change. This might seem harsh, but focusing energy and resources, often limited in a project, to positive is more impactful.

Anchoring Change: Balancing Innovation and Stability

For governance design to endure, it must bridge two critical elements: the innovative energy of networked, future-oriented development and the structured stability of hierarchical systems. Without this connection, results risk being fragmented and isolated brief flashes of progress that fail to take root in daily practice.

Anchoring change requires more than visionary ideas; it demands linking them to core processes within the administrative and governance system. This balance ensures that governance innovation resonates with both the network of change agents and the hierarchical structures tasked with maintaining order. True innovation in governance emerges when we create an environment that allows change to occur naturally. This involves cultivating physical and mental spaces optimized for creativity. Key elements include:

- Flexible spaces that encourage collaboration and experimentation.
- The absence of rigid processes, allowing ideas to flow freely.
- Institutional practices that promote change, rather than trying to force it.

The paradox of governance design is clear: **to make change happen, you must let it happen.** Creativity thrives in spaces where structure and openness coexist, enabling new ideas to emerge and integrate seamlessly into the organization's fabric.

Governance design is not just about problem-solving, it's about crafting a shared journey. Through storytelling, prototyping, and an unwavering commitment to collaboration, we can inspire change that is not only innovative but also deeply rooted in the systems that sustain our communities. By balancing vision with pragmatism, we can let change happen, and ensure it endures.



Photograph: Elias Kerttu Penttinen

Prototyping to Learn

To manage change effectively, we need tools that foster deep learning and engagement in projects, other urban experiments, and pilots. Storytelling and prototyping provide such tools by creating collaborative, creative environments that allow change to happen in a chosen context. It doesn't directly mean transformation of a system but both experimental and experiential processes. Storytelling transforms abstract ideas into relatable narratives, helping participants connect emotionally and intellectually. Prototyping turns that into action and artifacts. This chapter will investigate the power of prototyping, coupled with storytelling, to run development projects, pilots, and processes. Especially in early phases of projects where things are often unclear, even ambiguous.

Prototyping fosters hands-on problem-solving, enabling participants to explore and share explicit and implicit knowledge. Explicit knowledge meaning formal, structured, and easily communicated or documented knowledge. Something that can be written down, stored, and shared systematically. For example, manuals, textbooks, and protocols. Implicit knowledge meaning knowledge that a person has but has not yet explicitly articulated. It is often practical and gained through experience, but it could be made explicit with effort. Prototyping methods thrive in both domains of knowledge and in informal, dynamic settings where creativity can flourish. In many ways, prototyping and storytelling work in tandem. We prototype to learn and communicate about complex

governance and other topics, resulting in stories. And we create stories, which we use as prototypes. And we prototype in order to turn stories to reality. Caveat, however, exists: for learning and change to occur, the process must account for team composition, interaction dynamics, and the emotional and linguistic cues that arise during collaboration.

Governance design isn't just about implementing new ideas, it's about fostering an environment where change can thrive. This requires intrinsic or inner rewards for participants, such as the satisfaction of learning and growth, as well as extrinsic. And also factual rewards like clear mandates and institutional support.

However, flexibility within institutional processes is paramount. Municipal organizations, often designed to maintain stability rather than foster disruption, face a unique challenge: they must learn to not just tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty but actively promote and facilitate them. Successful governance design depends on embracing these traits:

- a) Tolerance towards ambiguity,
- b) Self-discovery,
- c) Personal growth,
- d) Storytelling, and
- e) Prototyping as a learning tool

These are more than methods or skills, they require intentional, conscious effort to embed in organizational practice, and they need to be supported and promoted from bottom up and form top to bottom within the organization and community.

Inspiring Bureaucrats to Dance with Ambiguity

The challenge of impactful governance lies in inspiring bureaucrats, who understandably prioritize balance and safety, to embrace uncertainty and engage with ambiguity, corner- and capstones of innovation, while maintaining their critical daily routines. How to achieve this? The answer lies in storytelling and prototyping.

Through storytelling, the prototyping process becomes more than a technical exercise; it transforms into a journey of growth and learning. Instead of focusing solely on the final prototype or project outcome, storytelling shifts attention to the development process itself. This approach draws from centuries-old philosophies of continuous development but makes them accessible, contextual, and impactful. Storytelling provides a transparent, scalable, and traceable framework that engages individuals at multiple levels of the organization and community.

Photograph: Jakim Diaz / MySome Oy



By using storytelling to contextualize prototyping as a growth process, bureaucrats can step beyond their comfort zones. This method fosters trust, cultivates creativity, and enables practitioners to engage constructively with ambiguity. The result is a governance model that blends stability with innovation, a model where silos are not barriers but essential components of a dynamic and collaborative urban system. As professor L. Leifer from Stanford University, USA coined, this requires ability to “Dance with Ambiguity”.

In the journey toward contemporary urban governance, the goal is not to dismantle silos or force them to fit into a single mold. It is to appreciate their unique contributions, foster meaningful connections between them, and create a shared vision that embraces both routine and innovation. Only by honoring the balance between these forces can cities evolve to meet the challenges of today and the uncertainties of tomorrow. This is discussed in detail in the coming chapter about balancing hierarchy and networks, but first more on governance design.

Governance Design: A Journey of Sensemaking, Problem Forming, and Problem Solving

Governance design, thrives on a seamless interplay of sensemaking, problem forming, and problem solving. This journey often begins with a profound focus on sensemaking. A phase where challenges are identified and framed. Although closely tied to problem forming, sensemaking demands special attention in settings, where the complexity of the challenge, the diversity of stakeholders, and the long-term implications amplify its importance.

The deeper the complexity, the more critical the identification phase becomes. Whether navigating social phenomena, negotiating technical challenges, or envisioning the future, the emphasis must remain on understanding the multidimensional landscape before advancing toward solutions.

Governance design is inherently human-centered, drawing from disciplines such as social and human-centered sciences, business, arts and design to address multifaceted challenges. Its practical essence is manifested through conceptual, rough, and rapid prototyping, a method discussed previously in this chapter, and which brings ideas to life and guides progress through iterative exploration. Prototypes and pilots, far from being static representations, evolve alongside the process, reflecting the dynamic and interactive nature of governance systems while catalyzing communication about and within the topic.

Choosing the right prototype or pilot for the right phase is critical. Each step requires focus, whether on system exploration, process refinement, or communication of purpose to users or stakeholders. In this context, prototyping is more

than a tool, it's a methodology, a skill, a mindset, and an enabler of governance innovation. It helps teams embrace uncertainty and ambiguity, fostering creative thinking in the pursuit of viable, feasible, desirable, and sustainable outcomes.

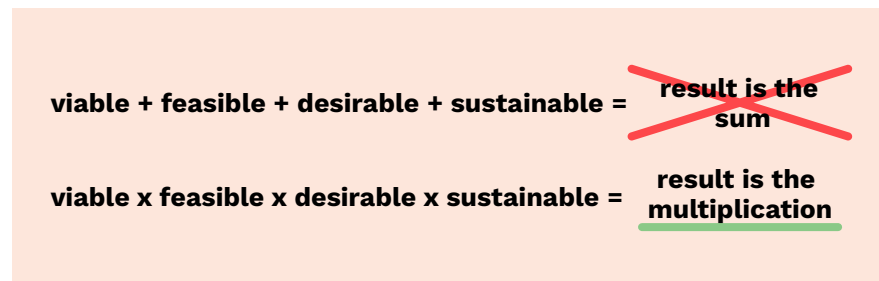
In governance design, the early stages prioritize finding the right questions over rushing toward solutions. This approach acknowledges a fundamental truth: in complex challenges, there are often many valid answers or feasible solutions. Keeping the solution space open encourages teams to explore holistic approaches, integrating social, technical, and systemic demands into their work.



Photograph: Pekka Rousi

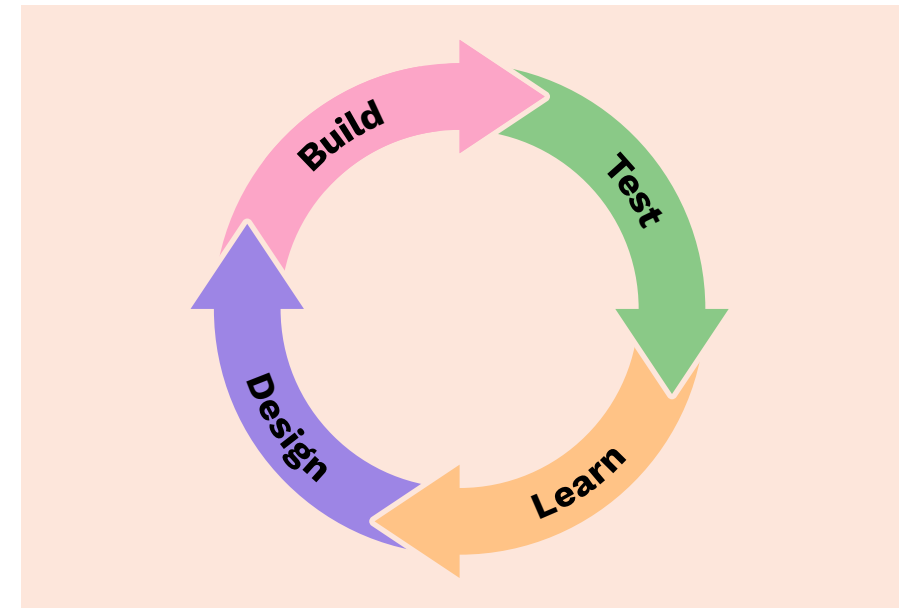
By focusing on what a prototype represents rather than just its features or functionalities, teams can better define pilots and processes that clearly communicate purpose. Prototyping, with its emphasis on leaving space for ideas to develop, accelerates learning in sequential, iterative cycles. These cycles, though abstracted for clarity, mirror the non-linear nature of governance design.

In governance design, failure is not a setback, it's a catalyst for learning. Unlike projects such as building roads or schools, where precision and accuracy are paramount, tackling complex, interconnected challenges requires a different approach. The iterative nature of prototyping allows teams to test ideas, uncover limitations, and refine solutions before full-scale implementation.



Picture 5. Mathematics of governance design

A common misconception in sustainable development is the belief that holistic sustainability is merely the **sum** of its individual components. This interpretation, however, is inaccurate. Holistic sustainability should be understood as the **multiplication** of its interdependent dimensions: ecological, social, and economic. The same principle applies to governance design. The value and usability of governance innovation are not additive; they emerge as the **multiplication** of all contributing elements, viability, feasibility, desirability, and sustainability.



Picture 6. Visualization of a typical Do-Test-Learn cycle that helps sensemaking

The mantra of “*fail fast to learn fast*” ensures that winning ideas emerge through iterative cycles of trial, error, and discovery. Radical innovations, compared to classical urban development, demand these iterative processes, with divergent and convergent phases spiraling toward effective solutions (Please see Picture 6). These cycles of: **design-build-test, do-test-learn**, focus on sensemaking: understanding how to navigate toward a viable solution space.

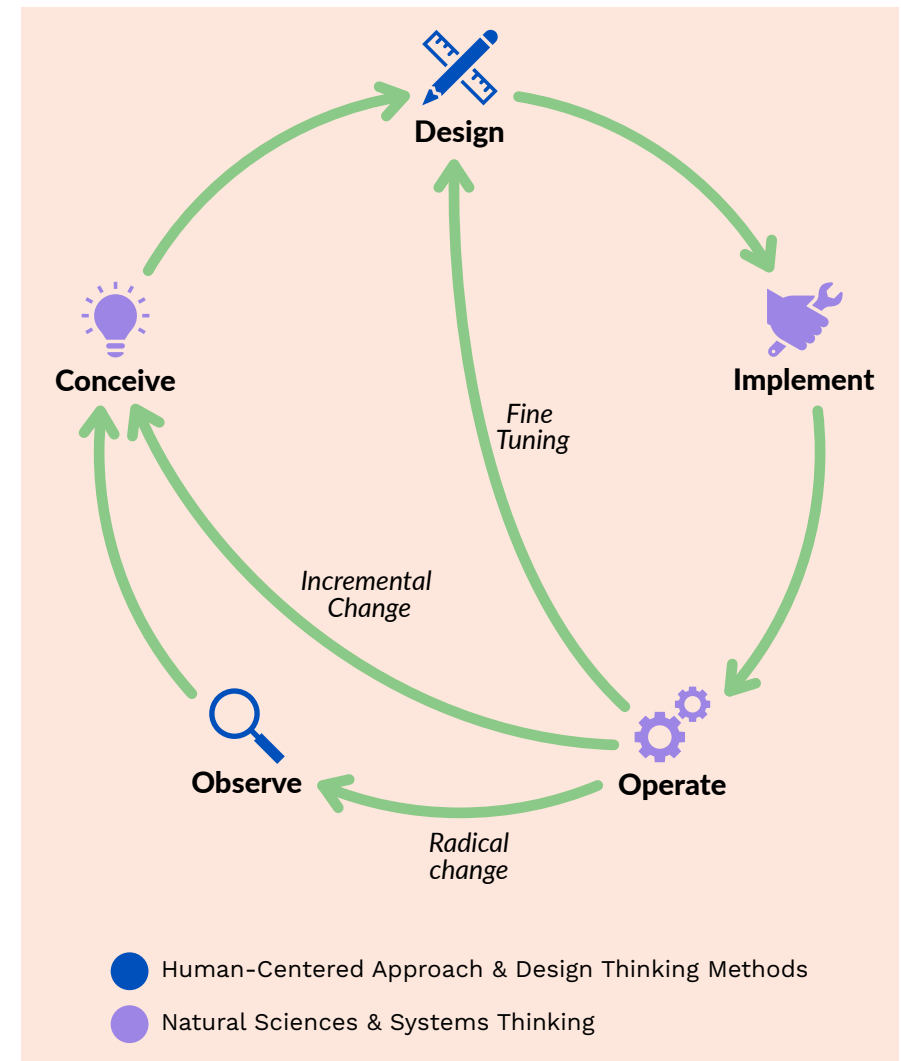
Bold Governance for Complex Challenges

The heart of governance design lies in its adaptability and focus on people. The process is inherently spiral, emphasizing iteration and continuous learning. Each phase builds on the last, integrating lessons into the next, and shifting the focus from solution-driven approaches to problem-centric exploration. This human-centered methodology ensures that designs are not only innovative but also impactful, with user needs and experiences woven into the very fabric of the process.

By embracing uncertainty, celebrating failure, and fostering iterative learning, governance design transforms challenges into opportunities. It's a dynamic and agile approach, rooted in sensemaking and empowered by prototyping. It offers a pathway to navigate complexity with creativity and resilience.

In urban governance, addressing complex issues, demands a thoughtful and deliberate approach to sensemaking. Whether the topic is in healthcare, education, climate, energy, or social cohesion, developers tackling such wicked problems should devote more than a third of the total time to the early phase of sensemaking. This significant investment in time and resources is a hallmark of bold and forward-thinking governance. Very difficult to, however, achieve in practice when majority of EU-finance instruments and urban and other public project management processes and tools set emphasis on outcomes.

Unlike hierarchical governance, which emphasizes optimization, cost reduction, quality, and reliability, the early phase of sensemaking requires tools and processes tailored to exploration, creativity, and understanding. These methods are vital for spanning and fully comprehending the problem space. The more complex the challenge is: climate, biodiversity, social cohesion, etc., the more important is the sensemaking phase.



Picture 7. O-CDIO cycle

Governance design needs to be context sensitive and process varies depending on the complexity of the challenge in question

Prototyping in Storytelling

To iterate more on problem exploration and creating an engaging story that makes sense of given phenomenon, and can be communicated, the role of prototyping plays a pivotal role. It sets focus on activities that prioritize discovery and insight generation, such as:

Need Finding

Identifying and understanding the true needs of users.

Bodystorming

Physically acting out scenarios to explore user experiences and interactions.

Storytelling

Crafting narratives to contextualize and clarify challenges.

User Testing and Enactment

Engaging with users directly to gather feedback and refine understanding.

The primary challenge is uncovering the real needs of known users, and stakeholders, while accurately identifying who the actual users, customers, and stakeholders are. This demands an open-ended approach where the challenge scope and goals are broad enough to encourage exploration, not constrained by overly detailed specifications.

Effective sensemaking requires governance that supports ambiguity, trust, and invests in processes designed to illuminate the full scope of the problem. It is in this phase that developers explore the unknown, challenge assumptions, and lay the groundwork for innovative solutions. By dedicating substantial effort to this early stage, urban governance can move beyond surface-level solutions, creating strategies and interventions that are truly responsive to the needs of communities. This approach highlights the critical importance of sensemaking in agile urban governance, where thoughtful exploration, creativity, and user-centered approaches lead to meaningful and impactful change.



Photograph: Elias Metsämaa / Filmbutik Oy

Balancing Hierarchy and Networks: The Hidden Duality of Urban Governance

In the realm of urban governance, a recurring battle emerges: control versus creativity, or more specifically, the tension between hierarchical and network-driven governance models. This dynamic mirrors a famous saying by Peter Drucker: *“Culture eats strategy for breakfast”* by turning it into: *“Hierarchy eats networks for lunch and dinner”*. It encapsulates the challenge of reconciling these two governance approaches, each with distinct rules, values, and goals.

Stories play a pivotal role in this balance, serving two primary functions within a city community. First, they inspire individuals, groups, and entire societies to progress, aspire, and seek greater truths. In the spirit of Star Trek, they push us to venture towards and beyond the boundaries of possibility battling the headwinds of internal and external demands. And these demands are abundance: organizational resistance to change, citizens and community needs, rules and conditions set by national governments, EU, and finally, our environment, to name a few.

But stories also serve a second function: maintaining order. Like the relentless machinery of a Chaplin film *Modern Times*, they enforce structure, preserving the stability necessary for large-scale systems to function. Hierarchical city organization is set on systems and structures not designed to volatile change and constantly changing needs from external demands.

This duality is intrinsic to urban governance. Bureaucracy, often criticized as a barrier to thriving cities, originated as a tool to manage and control the flow of information in complex systems. Oxymoronically hierarchy is both needed and the biggest obstacle for change. Its emphasis on control can stifle creativity and disrupt the dynamic processes essential to innovation. Yet, it provides the structural process, and the psychological needed for stability. In contrast, network models prioritize creativity, future-oriented thinking, and the self-actualization of individuals and communities, concepts rooted in humanistic values that stem from ancient Greek philosophy of thriving.

From a governance perspective, the sensitive tension between these two approaches shapes how cities can foster and sustain change.



Photograph: Elias Metsämaa / Filmbutik Oy

A closer look at bureaucracy versus network models

Hierarchy and bureaucracy approach provides structure, stability, and safety to the organization, to partners, and to the community. It operates from binary perspective, and through measurable processes where outcomes are predictable. One plus one, ($1 + 1 = 2$), is always and without exceptions two. From a developer perspective this can be challenging since changes are viewed as threats to order. View towards time is past and present. This prioritization ensures that actions are rooted in everyday operations.

Networks and Creativity approach on the other hand encourages wide and open collaboration, innovation, and future-oriented thinking. In its DNA is the thinking that since it is value driven, one plus one results in infinite possibilities. Rationale being that since it is based on human interaction, the outcome is either re-design of old or new design altogether ($1 + 1 =$ endless stream of ideas from human interaction). The only constant in network approach is change, which is embraced together with opportunistic views on disruption as an opportunity for growth.

Hierarchy and Bureaucracy



- Provides structure, stability and safety.
- Operates on binary, measurable processes where outcomes are predictable ($1 + 1 = 2$).
- Changes are viewed as threats to order.
- Prioritizes the present and ensures that actions are rooted in everyday operations.

Networks and Creativity



- Encourages collaboration, innovation, and future-oriented thinking.
- Values the potential for infinite possibilities born from human interaction ($1 + 1 =$ endless stream of ideas from human interaction).
- Embraces change as constant and views disruption as an opportunity for growth.

From governance perspective, the tension between these two approaches, and how that is negotiated, managed and resolved, shapes how cities can foster and sustain change.



Photograph: Elias Metsämäa / Filmbutik Oy

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Governance and Symbiosis

The hierarchical model aligns with the foundational layers of Maslow's hierarchy, ensuring security and psychological safety. In contrast, the network model aligns with the pursuit of self-actualization and transcendence. Thriving cities require both: the creative foresight to imagine a better future and the structural integrity to anchor those ideas into reality.

While these models seem to exist in opposition, they are, in fact, symbiotic. Successful urban governance requires a balance between the two. Piloting innovative ideas in a networked context can catalyze change, but without integration into hierarchical systems, these ideas fail to take root. Conversely, hierarchical systems need the creative disruption of networks to prevent stagnation, foster resilience and to create a vibrant community. This is how thriving cities are built.

For example, many EU development projects aim to drive change through prototypes and pilots designed to demonstrate the need for transformation as discussed in the chapter "Prototyping to Learn". However, even when successful, these projects often struggle to integrate with the operational culture of hierarchical organizations. Without anchoring in the bureaucratic framework, their impact is fleeting. For example, for an EU project to be successful and root to the core processes of a city organization it has to find the rhythm of the hierarchical system and adopt to that. This is where storytelling comes into picture. Development happens in an interactive and dialogue driven process where colleagues and other protagonists are actively listened both at cognitive and emotional level. This is turned into stories that connect all stakeholders at motivational level and even act as 'artefact' that can be developed together.

The Role of Storytelling – A Tale of Balance

As described earlier the key to bridging this divide lies in storytelling. Stories can connect the structured, control-driven world of hierarchy with the fluid, creative world of networks. They provide a shared narrative that aligns both approaches, fostering a common purpose and motivating collective action.

To thrive, cities must embrace both models:

- Networks: to ignite innovation, creativity, and future-oriented thinking.
- Hierarchy: to provide structure, stability, and scalability.

Through storytelling, these dual approaches can coexist, enabling cities to navigate the complexities of transformation. By balancing creativity and control, chaos and order, cities can navigate a path toward vibrant, sustainable, and resilient futures.

Urban governance is not a choice between hierarchy and networks but a process of harmonizing their strengths. Future-focused, creative processes must be anchored in structured systems to ensure lasting impact. Together, they form the foundation for thriving cities and communities that are capable of adapting, innovating, and sustaining change for generations to come.

From another perspective stories connect both cognitive and emotional management, development and leadership process. In other words, both systemic and individual development. For change to happen, and especially for it to root both are needed. Storytelling is not a secret science. It does require capability for vulnerability and courage but can be achieved through explicit processes and methods.

| Working in a Network model | The Hierarchical model |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Break rules and dream | Excel at your job |
| Open doors and listen | Be loyal to your team |
| Trust and be trusted | Work with those you can depend on |
| Seek fairness, not advantage | Seek a competitive edge |
| Experiment and iterate together | Do the job right the first time |
| Err, fail and persist | Strive for perfection |
| Pay it forward | Return favours |

The accompanying list illustrates the complementary rules of engagement for hierarchical and network models. While hierarchy provides balance and structure, networks fuel creation and disruption. Together, they form the foundation for sustainable transformation.

The Urban Developer: A Master of the Four Elements

The art of urban development calls for a unique mastery. Metaphorically it can be described through a balance of qualities akin to the classical elements of Earth, Water, Air, and Fire, as defined by Aristotle and philosophers before him. An effective urban developer must harness these elements to navigate the multifaceted challenges to drive meaningful transformation in their communities.

Let us imagine the urban developer as a steward of these four elements, each representing a critical dimension of their work:

Earth: The Foundation of Stability

Earth embodies solidity, stability, and physical matter. For the urban developer, this represents the ability to work effectively within their own organization. It is about grounding themselves in the practicalities of administration, systems, policies, and the infrastructure of governance. Mastery of Earth ensures that the developer can build a stable foundation for progress.

Water: The Power of Adaptability

Water symbolizes fluidity, adaptability, and the capacity to flow around obstacles. An urban developer channels Water when facilitating development and fostering collaboration within their community. Steaming head on, and in a linear way easily leads to collision with the hierarchical organization, which is threatened by the need to change. Instead, this element allows them to listen to diverse perspectives, adapt to shifting circumstances, and navigate the complexities of differing views to find pathways forward.

Air: Vision and Intellect

Air represents intellect, communication, and the perspective that comes from rising above. For an urban developer, this means taking the high-level or drone -view, understanding grand challenges, engaging with geopolitics, and anticipating the future. By adopting this “drone’s-eye” perspective, they can identify emerging trends and connect their community to broader global currents.

Fire: The Energy of Transformation

Fire is the element of energy, transformation, and passion. It signifies the drive to produce impactful outcomes and to be resourceful in all contexts. The urban developer channels Fire when they bring vitality and focus to their work, inspiring others to commit to the shared vision of a thriving, resilient city.

Each of these elements is essential on its own, but true mastery lies in balancing all four. The urban developer must draw upon Earth to provide stability, Water to ensure adaptability, Air to maintain foresight, and Fire to energize and inspire.

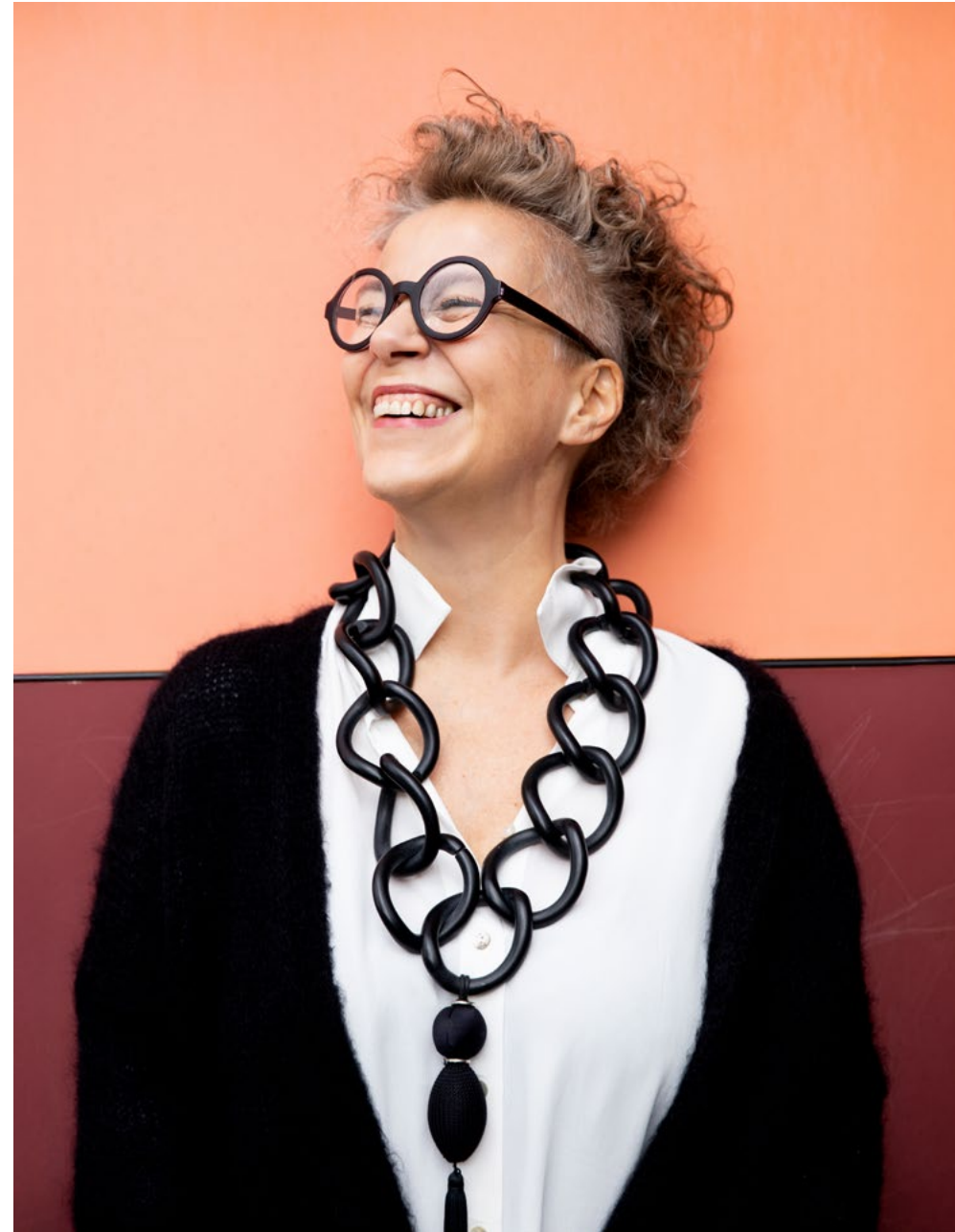
In the dynamic and ever-evolving realm of urban development, this elemental approach offers a timeless framework. It reminds us that transformation is not just about policies or infrastructure. It is about cultivating the qualities that allow cities, and those who lead them, to adapt, grow, and thrive in harmony with the challenges and opportunities of their time.

Civil servant as a Triathlete

If an urban developer is a master of all basic elements, a tall order indeed, then what about civil servants. They are working in a structured operation environment, in a system or an organization that has visible and non-visible boundaries, rules, and even 'turf'-mentality meaning claimed space and power. Mid-level civil servants need to operate with restricted access to information flow, without the management level view to the future, with limited or no official mandate, often scarce resources, and at the same time pressured from all directions: superiors, citizens, partners, consultants, project partners, and political decision makers to mention a few. Not forgetting that operative and mid-level 'resources' are expected to master their own daily operations in a constantly changing and complex, grand challenges driven world, and develop their own work, and personal growth coupled with work environment and culture while doing so. Compensation and rewards being what they tend to be at public sector. Talk about working between a rock and a hard place.

How to succeed in an environment like this? Metaphorically, the role of a civil servant can be associated to a triathlete of unique dimensions: one who bicycles swiftly, dives deep, and runs steadily. These metaphorical skills are essential for thriving in the complex ecosystem of city administration, and in a connected glocal environment. Imagine a civil servant, with a role of developer embedded within a municipal organization. To succeed, they must collaborate seamlessly with colleagues, working in silos, across the organization (run steadily). They must also gain strategic, management level, future foresight view of the evolving world to anticipate and respond to changes (bike fast). And just as importantly, they must dive deep into the murky waters of bureaucracy to make sense of local challenges, facilitate understanding, and communicate effectively with the community they serve.

Photograph: Johanna Taskinen



In mid-sized, and larger cities, this role becomes even more intricate. Picture a network of not just hundreds, but thousands, and tens of thousands, of civil servants: engineers, teachers, social workers, librarians, HR specialists, financial experts, lawyers, security personnel, and strategists, not to mention the mayor's office itself. Each group contributes uniquely to the city's functioning, but their efforts must be aligned to achieve meaningful development and transformation.

This challenge becomes even clearer when viewed from within the organization. A civil servant in a strategic development role operates in a delicate balance between two realms: the depths of day-to-day operations and the higher, strategic level where the future is shaped. Down in the depths, where daily tasks unfold, the timeline is immediate focused on the pressing needs of today and tomorrow. At the surface, however, the horizon stretches further, offering glimpses of trends and shifts that could shape the city's future. Here, the winds of change are felt first, rippling across the waters and hinting at transformations yet to come. Surface phenomena, early warnings of change, often fail to stir those in the depths, where the currents of daily work remain undisturbed. It's only when the winds have grown into storms, altering even the deep-sea currents, that the need for change becomes undeniable. By then, however, it may be too late. The challenge lies in harmonizing these diverse practices, inspiring collective commitment, and ensuring that every individual recognizes the importance of moving forward together. And this is just navigating within the city organization. The goal needs to be to make that organization drive impactful change. For transformation to be successful, the whole community needs to be behind it, and city organization is often the engine of that change.

But how does one bridge these two worlds? How can a civil servant working with strategy and strategic development translate what they see on the horizon into a language that resonates with those focused to the here and now? Key to success is not only in communication but in motivation.

The art of impactful development work lies in anticipating this tipping point. A skillful civil servant must be a mediator between the present and the future, adept at translating strategic foresight into actionable insights and inspiring those around them to embrace transformation before it becomes inevitable. Their work ensures that the city, in all its complexity, can adapt and thrive in a constantly changing world.

And once again, perhaps as no surprise at this point, the vehicle for achieving this is the impactful use of storytelling and stories.

Communication in Urban Governance

When striving to create meaningful impact within a community, one needs to ask: are we aiming for “*impact with*” the community or “*impact for*” the community? Both are correct and the approach should be selected based on what the desired outcome is but regardless of the approach, one thing is inescapable, and that is communication. But what does communication truly entail? This question is especially important in future foresight driven context where it is difficult to find easily quantifiable metrics, when the environment is multi-cultural, challenges are complex, and the target is moving all the time. Much the case in urban governance where you need to communicate effectively at a multilevel and multistakeholder environment. Multistakeholder meaning to your organization, to citizens, businesses, academia, national government and so forth. Everyone has their set perspective, agenda and objectives. In this environment the only feasible approach is to create “*impact with*”, and that is to what this chapter focuses on.

But how to make your voice heard, and find a unison message amongst all the agendas, objectives and goals that flood and jam the bandwidth of urban development? Communication is both an expansive concept and a challenging process to define, let alone implement effectively.

At its core, communication is about learning, a growth process for both the one conveying the message and the one receiving

it. Effective communication demands more than just a shared vocabulary; it requires alignment in values, experiences, visions, and goals. Most importantly communication is active participation and willingness to learn.

One way to visualize communication in urban development is to describe it as an hourglass. The breadth of understanding achieved depends not on the size of the wide openings at the top and bottom but on the diameter of the narrow funnel in the middle. This bottleneck represents the complexities of transmitting and constructing knowledge. Thus, the question “How do we communicate effectively?” might better be reframed as “How can we accelerate and enrich the process of sharing and building knowledge in an emotionally engaging way?” From an external perspective, communication may appear as simple transmission, but within the process, it is about the collaborative construction of new understanding.



The breadth of understanding achieved depends not on the size of the wide openings at the top and bottom but on the diameter of the narrow funnel in the middle. This bottleneck represents the complexities of transmitting and constructing knowledge.

Image by Freepik.

Using Stories to Inspire and Connect

How does storytelling enhance communication? Storytelling is a structured, reflexive methodology that challenges individuals or teams to find the most impactful way to convey a message. Here, 'reflexive' refers to learning through practical communication, followed by reflection on what was effective and identifying areas for improvement. By doing so, it transforms communication into a more learning driven and motivational process. This approach not only results in better-performing teams but also fosters mindful, holistic outcomes. And most importantly, it engages all stakeholders to the development process.

To sum up, storytelling process offers a cross-disciplinary, reflexive and reflective framework to address the complexities of communication. And it is very demanding to achieve in practice. It requires socio-reflective skills, meaning an ability to engage individuals and teams in a dialogue where emotions serve as catalysts for motivation, intention, and transformation. These emotional connections enable people to see the bigger picture, not just the result, but the journey leading to it, and act accordingly. This is of paramount importance in urban governance. It is how effective, impactful and productive governance is achieved.



Photograph: Kerttu Penttinen

Complex Challenges Demand Ambitious Communication

When addressing complex topics, such as those related to sustainable development, the focus must shift from providing answers to asking the right questions. Complex issues are rarely solved through linear processes; instead, they require open and safe spaces for both problem forming- and -solving. This enables teams to collaboratively navigate toward a more holistic understanding.

As an archetype of complex domain, sustainable development challenges are inherently complex, blending social, technical, and systemic demands within dynamic and interconnected contexts. They encompass local, regional, national, and global dimensions, touching upon individual behaviors, community dynamics, technological innovation, and governance frameworks. To communicate these challenges effectively, the goal must be to create motivation that bridges gaps in understanding and fosters engagement.

Effective communication in this realm is less about rigid structures and more about creating space for interactive, intuitive, and reflective, even reflexive dialogue. This means learning to embrace ambiguity, which can lead to more authentic and engaging interactions. In collaborative teamwork, this approach fosters greater awareness and unity, much needed when confronting open-ended and complex challenges.

No wonder communication fails so often. It is already difficult to embrace all dimensions it entails. To make it actually happen, channel understanding to action, is yet another quest. Learning is never easy. But accepting that it is both a rational and an emotional process requiring active, safe and dialogue driven approach is already a lot. We learn as we do and communication if anything is a learning process.

Communication 101 for urban developers

Traditional modes of communication, particularly within hierarchical or bureaucratic systems, often evoke feelings of boredom and frustration. Content is made so that everyone can read it, meaning that very few understand what was said. To counteract this, storytelling taps into deeper emotional reservoirs, connecting with people's experiences, dreams, and visions. It makes it engaging, it makes it personal. This emotional resonance transforms communication from a static process into an engaging and collaborative journey. It is not easy. On the contrary, it is demanding, and yes, it can be done.

As a process and as a learning path, to truly connect with an audience and communicate effectively a complex content, communicators must first look inward, confront fears of failure or vulnerability and embrace the courage to be open and sincere. Storytelling, at its best, is a mutual transformation process. It allows communicators to learn about themselves as individuals and as members of a team, even as they share their message.

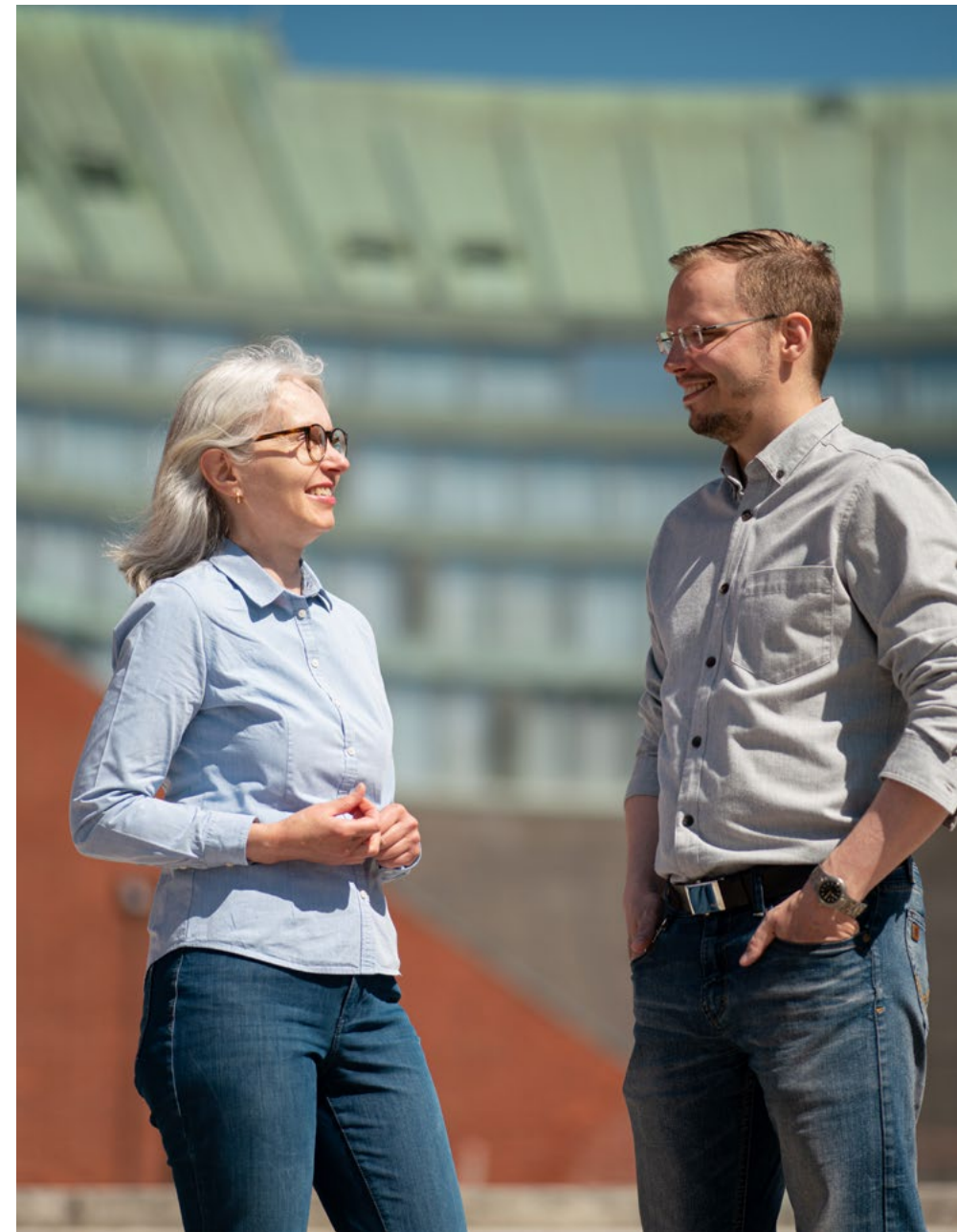
In the end, effective storytelling and communication are about building bridges, between individuals, within teams, and across broader communities. This fosters shared understanding and collective growth.

Theory as a Map, Practice as the Capability to Navigate

Why do theories matter, and why, paradoxically, are they worth no more than 20 cents to a city? The answer lies in the gap between abstraction and action.

On one hand *“Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.”* as an ancient strategist Sun Tzu coined in his book *“The Art of War”*, and it highlights the importance of strategic foresight over mere tactical maneuvering. But then again, as H. von Moltke famously observed, *“No battle plan survives contact with the enemy”*. The same can be said for theories and action. Crafting abstract theoretical frameworks is one of humanity’s unique gifts. These frameworks synthesize information and knowledge, distilling complex realities into shared understandings that enable collaboration across diverse contexts. In public administration, as elsewhere, theories provide a map, a way to frame, contextualize, chart, and align perspectives on a given issue.

But maps alone do not win battles. Theories, like strategies, are only as valuable as the action they inspire. While they can guide, simplify, and provide a common language, they often crumble under the pressure of human realities, emotions, cognitive dissonance or biases, and the unpredictability of interpersonal dynamics, not to mention constantly changing environment and other constraints. The true test of a strategy or a theory lies not in its elegance but in its capacity to drive meaningful action. The real world demands adaptability, courage, and skill, qualities that bridge the gap between a conceptual map and the capability to navigate the terrain it represents.



Photograph: Elias Metsämaa / Filmbutik Oy

The Formula for Success: Strategy, Timing, Motivation, Skills, and Network

Creating lasting impact successfully doesn't always have to be the goal. Mainly because it is so demanding. In many cases, success is measured not by concrete outcomes but by perception, how well processes and projects are understood and valued by stakeholders. Yet genuine, rooted change only occurs when individual and group motivations are aligned, and they understand what is happening, why it matters, and how they fit into the process. Urban development is a lot about enabling that.



Photograph: Elias Metsämaa / Filmbutik Oy

No two municipal organizations are identical, yet most operate within strikingly similar constraints. A city can typically manage one to three high-impact projects that require coordination and leadership across every level of hierarchy, five to ten mid-level initiatives aimed at learning and moderate change, and a handful of smaller efforts designed to maintain the status quo or foster participation. There is a correlation to the size of the organization, but cities of all sizes share hierarchical similarities. Every city has one mayor, one organization structure and one town council. This is what matters.

Even with clear high-level objectives and quantifiable targets, achieving impact requires the simultaneous and synchronous alignment of five key factors:

1. Timing:

Acting when the window of opportunity opens.

2. Strategy:

A clear vision of where to go.

3. Motivation:

A shared will to act, spiced by courage and commitment (strategy = where to go, governance = how to get there).

4. Skills:

Expertise and capacity to execute plans effectively.

5. Network:

Access to the right people and resources, both within and beyond the organization.

The Challenge of Prioritization

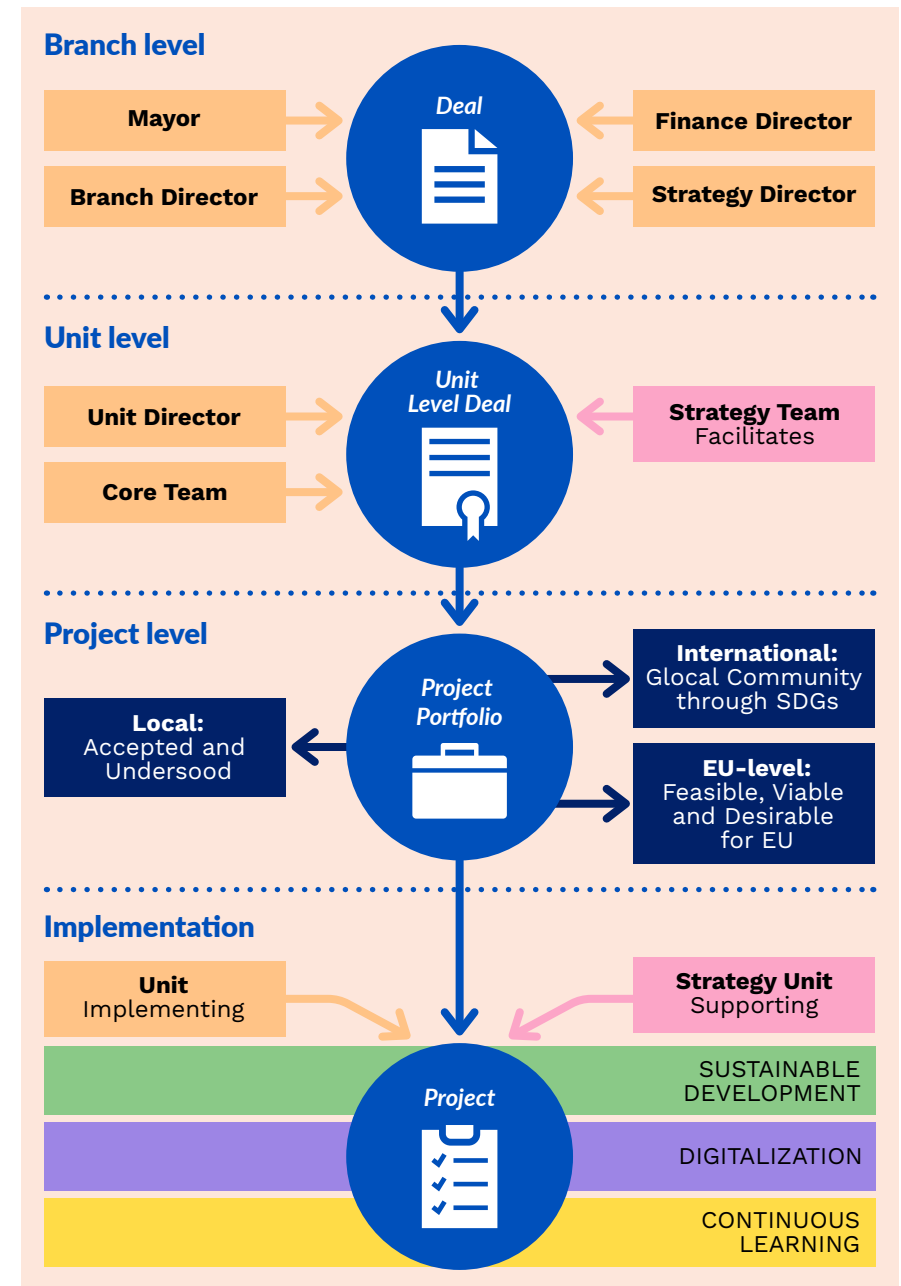
No two municipal organizations are alike. Yet, typically, a given city has the capacity to manage three tiers of projects simultaneously:

- 1) High-impact and strategic projects,
- 2) Mid-level tactical one, and
- 3) Low-impact projects that are operative.

First and second level require full organizational alignment, from the mayor's office to the frontlines of organization and community. Success hinges on the mayor's personal commitment, as their authority and energy must be focused on the desired change. This strategic energy must be channeled into tactical and operational actions that are agreed upon and benefit all stakeholders. Communication flow must be to both directions. Setting clear objectives is of paramount importance (please see Picture 8). Without skilled implementation and a robust internal and external network, this energy risks being squandered.

Picture 8. An Enabling, Holistic and Systemic City Strategy →

Strategic, tactical and operative projects can and should all be observed, conceived, designed, implemented, and operated with the whole organization. For high-impact projects this is a must because the success requires mayor level commitment and participation. An example of a high-impact project could be 'strategic alignment of climate neutrality targets for the whole city community'.



High-impact initiatives demand a visible call to action. Sometimes, this need already exists; other times, it must be actively created and brought to light. These projects utilize the full capacity of a the city organization starting from the mayor and going down to the project manager in a given unit (please see Picture 8).

Mid-level or tactical projects aim for learning and impact. These can be operated at the unit level, connecting laterally across departments and stakeholders. Mayor's commitment doesn't need to be that strong. But while they don't require direct involvement from the mayor, they often contribute to broader goals. Some of these initiatives evolve into high-impact projects, but many serve as valuable learning experiences, fostering growth and incremental improvements.

Low-impact or status-quo operative initiatives focus on maintaining stability or demonstrating engagement to chosen context. They are less resource-intensive but still play a role in fostering participation and signaling interest in ongoing development. In some cases they grow into mid-level or even high-level initiatives.

Photograph: Margit Lindholm



A Lesson from the Startup World

There is a striking, perhaps surprising, parallel, between municipal projects and startups. In the startup ecosystem, few ventures achieve those rare, transformative successes, labelled as unicorns. Yet even the startups that fall short often yield important lessons, drive incremental change, and lay the groundwork for future breakthroughs.

Similarly, in municipal organizations, not every project will revolutionize the city. However, every effort, whether it reinforces stability, facilitates learning, or pushes for high-impact change, contributes to the larger ecosystem of progress. Success lies in leveraging the right resources for the right projects, ensuring that theories and strategies are translated into action that resonates with the people and communities they aim to serve, and recognizing the value of each initiative, and utilizing those learnings. ■



In the following section, European mayors and thought leaders share how they transform ambitious visions into tangible outcomes within their communities. This segment highlights their voices, values, and achievements, offering insights from the front lines of urban leadership and innovation.

Mayor Tanya Hristova, Gabrovo Bulgaria

Tanya Hristova is the four-term Mayor of Gabrovo, Bulgaria, since 2011, the city's first female mayor. She holds Master's degrees in English Philology and Finance from the University of Veliko Tarnovo. She has a family and is a mom to a daughter.

Her professional background includes serving as Deputy Mayor for Sustainable Development (2008–2010) and as Chief of Staff to the Minister for EU Funds, where she headed the Central Coordination Unit (2010–2011). Under her leadership, Gabrovo has become a benchmark for sustainable urban transformation, winning the European Green Leaf Award 2021, earning UNESCO Creative City status, and joining the 100 EU Mission Cities for climate neutrality by 2030, and awarded EU mission label in 2025. Gabrovo is also a candidate for European Capital of Culture 2032. Ms. Hristova chairs the Council for Regional Development of Bulgaria's North Central Region (since 2024) and the Municipal Energy Efficiency Network EcoEnergy, promoting energy transition and climate action. Since 2025, she has been a Board Member of the Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy – Europe. Within the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), she is Head of the Bulgarian delegation. She is an active member of the COTER (Territorial Cohesion) and SEDEC (Social Policy) Commissions. She chaired SEDEC from 2019 to 2022 and now serves as its Vice-President, while also holding the Vice-President position for the EPP Group.



Photograph: Municipality of Gabrovo

Reviving the Legacy, Gabrovo's Path to Sustainable Renewal

The fall of centralized state systems across Eastern Europe in the late 20th century profoundly disrupted local governance, particularly infrastructure and public asset management. End of the socialism era created institutional voids and governance vacuums especially in urban areas across Eastern Europe. In many cases, public assets were left without clear ownership, funding pipelines dried up, and municipalities lacked the capacity for strategic planning. Prior to year 1990, Gabrovo benefited from the coordinated management of infrastructure under the socialist state model. After the political transition, however, the town's systems fell into disrepair. Fragmented responsibilities, donor dependency, and insufficient fiscal autonomy often hindered restoration efforts at the onset of reforms, a scenario typical for post-transition municipalities.

How do you build a thriving and sustainable city and community under these conditions?

■ Gabrovo exemplifies this learning model. By integrating community feedback, engaging with EU policy frameworks, and investing in institutional knowledge, we have evolved into a hub of governance innovation. This is visible in areas ranging from green infrastructure to public communication. It's not just about doing more, it's about doing better and more intelligently. The move from vision to implementation needs institutional coordination that connects with stakeholder engagement

and iterative project cycles. In a way it means aligning policy planning and implementation frameworks with entrepreneurial governance and participatory planning.



Photograph: Municipality of Gabrovo

Electric Bus Fleet in Gabrovo

An electric bus operating in Gabrovo's public transport system, introduced with EU support as part of the city's long-term strategy for sustainable mobility. The process of renewing the fleet with modern zero-emission vehicles is ongoing, reinforcing Gabrovo's commitment to green and inclusive urban transport.

A Call for Local Autonomy

Urban resilience is about having the capacity to be adaptive. One cannot predict external shocks such as economic crises, political instability, or environmental change. But by embracing innovation, and strategic foresight cities can thrive even in uncertain contexts.

■ The 2008 financial crisis hit Europe hard, and Bulgaria was no exception. For Gabrovo this was a test of leadership whether we could stay committed to a vision anchored in European integration and long-term planning. Our ability to navigate this crisis and still pursue sustainable development was a test of institutional resilience. We had our vision and strategic foresight aligned with EU and this helped us to also connect to funding mechanisms that became tools for buffering local vulnerabilities. For me this is the definition of the word adaptive.

Transforming from an industrial city to post-industrial is not just about where production is located or moving away from traditional manufacturing to services. We have learned that questions of identity, memory, and inclusion take center stage. The concept of just transition, rooted in environmental and labor justice, stresses that economic transformation must be equitable and inclusive. This is very important for us. Gabrovo's industrial past and its pioneering role in education make it a unique case. Yet, the city also faces challenges of social exclusion, particularly among Roma communities. Bridging this divide requires going beyond service provision to fostering genuine social cohesion. We believe that heritage can be a unifying tool, especially when combined with inclusive planning and cultural emphasis. Public trust in Gabrovo has remained high, partly because of our emphasis on quality and openness. We view criticism not as opposition but as civic engagement, a signal that people care. Our administration treats transparency not as an obligation, but as a foundational

principle. We prioritize dialogue, responsiveness, and mutual accountability in our governance. It is our way to create legitimacy, transparency, and trust. Policy must not be just about outcomes, focus should be in the processes that generate them.

EU cohesion policy, even World Bank, states that local authorities are best placed to understand and address local needs challenged by global phenomena. But this can happen only if equipped with adequate autonomy, resources and mandate to act. Yet, in many EU member states, the responsibility of work and action is not matched by the sharing of power.

■ Many EU states remain as highly centralized states, Bulgaria included. Despite democratic elections and local budget management, municipalities are constrained by national regulations, limited revenue mechanisms, and inconsistent intergovernmental cooperation. Centralization makes sense when you're only concerned with managing day-to-day services; schools, elder care, basic public functions. For those, centralized governance can be practical. But the world has changed. Centralization restricts innovation and deters investment. The conditions must change for cities like Gabrovo to fully realize our potential. Cities today must respond to far more complex, long-term challenges. These are uncertain, systemic, and require forward-thinking solutions. For these challenges, a centralized approach often falls short. We need new agents, new ways of organizing and governing that are adaptive, systemic, and deeply engaged with the future. We need better governance from all levels starting from citizens all the way to European Union.

Photograph: Municipality of Gabrovo



Night Lights over the Yantra

A night view of Gabrovo's central district illuminated around the Yantra River – the historic lifeline that gave birth to the city more than 165 years ago and still shapes its identity as a resilient European city.

Authentic Leadership is the Way

A clear-cut divide of leadership styles distinguishes transactional leaders from transformational leaders. In short, transactional leaders manage and transformational inspire. It would be hype, but at the same time populist to say all we need is more inspiration. It is true but without management inspiration will have no direction. As a result, in urban contexts both transaction and transformation are needed. Transformational leadership, however, requires more from the practitioner. It involves mobilizing resources, motivating stakeholders, and shaping a compelling narrative for change. For this to happen authenticity is needed. Authentic leadership emphasizes emotional intelligence, ethical foundations, and uniformity between values and actions. One needs to both talk the talk and walk the walk.



Photograph: Municipality of Gabrovo

Ride for a Cause 2024

Mayor Tanya Hristova joins the annual community cycling event “Ride for a Cause,” encouraging healthy lifestyles, family participation, and collective action for social good.

Authenticity can act as a strategy as well. Our commitment in Gabrovo is to lead with both mind and heart, to remain visionary without becoming detached, and grounded without becoming reactive. Both authenticity and consistency are key drivers of institutional trust and civic mobilization. Gabrovo’s story mirrors that of many mid-sized European cities navigating post-socialist transformation, globalization, and civic reinvention. But what distinguishes us is not just our history or struggles, it is our willingness and ability to learn, lead, and include. Though not native to Gabrovo, my personal journey reflects how civic responsibility can grow from exposure, commitment, and connection. In a broader sense, it illustrates how cities are not just physical spaces but emotional and ethical geographies. My evolving role in Gabrovo’s development, first from NGO worker to deputy mayor, and to mayor embodies the principle that strong leadership can emerge from rootedness rather than origin.

In our city, part of the problem lies in the inherited mindset from the difficult years following the 1990s and early 2000s. For too long, our schools, our families, even our communities sent the message to young people: 'There is no future here, graduate and leave'. To rebuild trust and confidence in this place, we must invest, not just financially but emotionally, in what makes this community strong. We need to tap into our identity, not just for nostalgia, but as a springboard to be brave about the future. By grounding development in community values, leveraging institutional capacity, and by embracing complexity, Gabrovo is not just rebuilding infrastructure, but we are crafting a future narrative of intelligent, inclusive, and innovative city. Gabrovo’s story is not just about infrastructure or policy, it’s about people, legacy, resilience, and future. By staying committed to authentic leadership, inclusive progress, and strategic collaboration, we aim to shape a city where everyone can thrive.

What is Needed for the Future

Ms Hristova says that the future for Gabrovo is built through strong civic education, and a culture of openness; schools, factories, and institutions, all need to be transparent. People are encouraged to share ideas, show what they can do, and to collaborate.

■ Citizen engagement must change too. We cannot blame people for the isolation created by former political systems. But it's not that difficult to spark change. Small actions matter. Communities organizing birthday celebrations for the oldest resident in their building, these simple, human acts can help us rebuild our social fabric. Our economy can be getting better, our city might be coming more and more beautiful but are we happier? Not necessarily. And that's something we must take very seriously. Happiness doesn't come for free. With more resources come more responsibilities. Democracy and freedom demand that we participate.

While national governments, and EU create policies, rules and regulation, the local level is where real engagement and implementation happen. What cities do, or fail to do, today has consequences for decades.

■ For example, demographic issues today are rooted in decisions made in the 1950s and '60s. If we want a strong, democratic Europe 50 years from now, we need sustainable cities and regions today and right now. And while we should avoid putting cities against national governments, Europe must support ambitious cities that are willing to take risks. Those willing to experiment may fail, but they may also find better solutions. By backing these pioneers, we can bring more cities on board step-by-step.

Photograph: Municipality of Gabrovo



Innovation Camp Side Visit 2022

Participants of the Gabrovo Innovation Camp during an inspirational side visit to a certified local honey producer on the outskirts of the city, exploring traditional beekeeping practices and sustainable entrepreneurship.al.



Photograph: Municipality of Gabrovo

Gabrovo Innovation Camp 2024

Presentation of working groups at the Gabrovo Innovation Camp, where a bottom-up, participatory approach engages citizens and experts in co-creating solutions for the city's sustainable future.

When we think about the European context, it's clear: different cities, different leaders, different conditions. But if we want to move Europe forward sustainably, we must support cities in their capacity to experiment, to innovate, and to lead. Testing a new material, a new methodology, it requires a clearly defined territory, a group of people, and the ability to evaluate results. For me, that's what the EU missions are about. Cities of various sizes, economies, and cultures come together around one shared ambition: to work comprehensively and engage citizens.

Cities working toward sustainable strategies should be given priority. Just like businesses get fast-track support when they invest in industrial zones, sustainable cities should get expedited approval, funding, and support for infrastructure. Let them be a testing ground for Europe's future. In that way, Forerunner cities are like the European Union itself, they create conditions, provide opportunities, and encourage different actors to take responsibility. We need to support cities in a realistic, resource-efficient way. Climate neutrality touches every part of urban life. If we achieve it, we achieve sustainable development. That, in turn, ensures a strong Europe. Let's not wait for every state to align perfectly. Let's support the few cities ready to lead. Even if only 100 cities take the lead, Europe should support them, and national governments should, at minimum, not prevent them.

Cities as Active EU Citizens

The journey of Gabrovo's transformation over the past two decades has been profoundly shaped by its relationship with the European Union. The new Gabrovo story began in 2007, when Bulgaria joined the EU. That moment marked not just a geopolitical milestone, but the beginning of a new vision, a more European vision.

Initially, our efforts were modest, focused on compliance and integration. But over time, we adopted a more comprehensive and systemic approach. The European perspective taught us to think and work in ecosystems. It took years of learning and considerable support, but the collaborative framework offered by EU programs and partners has been instrumental in reshaping our governance, development strategies, and operational culture. We have benefited immensely from EU partnerships and working with different cities. Through collaborations like these, we've become a kind of model, a city that embraces change, dares to innovate, and strives to integrate European values into local governance.

This brings us to a broader question: can the concept of 'active citizenship' be extended to cities themselves? What if we viewed municipalities not just as administrative units, but as engaged actors in the European democratic project? This would mean granting more autonomy, responsibility, and resources to cities, enabling them to act as 'active EU citizens'.

I strongly believe the answer is yes. However, for cities to fully step into this role, several structural barriers must be addressed. Many local governments in Europe operate under outdated systems of finance and taxation. In Bulgaria, for instance, municipalities have limited fiscal independence, and ability for cities to invest in their own priorities is often constrained by rigid national frameworks. Resources are more

than just funding, they include technical expertise, human capital, and organizational competence. For example, finding and retaining qualified engineers has become increasingly difficult. Without technical capacity, even the best-funded projects may stall. One of my colleagues from a neighboring municipality, double the size of Gabrovo, recently shared that he was unable to spend his annual investment budget simply due to a lack of procurement capacity.

Photograph: Municipality of Gabrovo



Aerial View of Gabrovo's Cityscape and Green Surroundings

A bird's-eye view of Gabrovo's central urban area, seamlessly blending into greenery and forested landscapes at the foot of the Balkan Mountains. The image highlights the city's balance between urban development and its natural environment.

Leadership, Teamwork, and Cultural Change

Organizational change is a step-by-step process. It requires not only structural reforms but also a culture that values innovation, creativity, and collaboration.

■ ■ I strive not to be an instructive leader, but a coach and a motivator. In truth, I often find myself playing the role of psychologist as well, helping individuals overcome work stress, resolve conflicts, and find meaning in their work. In a large municipal administration, hierarchy is often necessary to maintain order, but it should never stifle initiative. The key is balance. I encourage creativity while ensuring clarity of roles and accountability. One of the biggest challenges we face is aligning cross-sectoral projects with traditional governance structures. Climate work, for instance, is inherently holistic. It cuts across departments; urban planning, education, transportation, and health requiring a unified approach. To address this, we've embedded project teams that operate both within and outside of the standard bureaucratic framework, engaging external experts and forming temporary alliances to tackle complex goals. This model has enabled us to scale our capacity beyond what our formal headcount would suggest. At any given time, 100 to 150 people might be working with or for the city on various projects. That flexibility is critical to our success.

Photograph: Municipality of Gabrovo



Launch of the European Year of Skills 2023 in Gabrovo

Mayor Tanya Hristova joins students in painting the art installation "Challenge Yourself," celebrating creativity and community spirit.



Photograph: Municipality of Gabrovo

Gabrovo Municipality Building at Văzrazhdane Square

The imposing city hall tower and administrative building, set in Văzrazhdane Square, exemplify the socialist-modernist architectural style prevalent in Bulgaria during the mid-20th century. Their clean lines, functionalist form, and minimal ornamentation reflect the political and architectural ethos of the communist era, echoing the country's focus on centralized governance and industrial-era urban design.

Another essential area for growth is digitalization. At present, much of our data, whether related to urban planning, social services, or education, is fragmented across institutions and systems. A fully integrated digital environment would allow us to make data-driven decisions, improve transparency, reduce errors, and plan more effectively.

■ Imagine being able to analyze a neighborhood not just by its physical infrastructure, but by its demographic profile, crime rate, education level, and social services, all in one platform. That's the future we're working toward. But change is slow. Some employees still resist digital tools. Cultural change, again, takes time, but we are moving forward.

A vital aspect for all European cities is the relationship with the City Council. Council members are elected by local communities, and they are deeply attuned to neighborhood needs. However, local decision makers may lack European perspective. This can be a barrier when trying to advance strategic goals that align with EU missions, such as climate neutrality or cultural innovation.

■ To bridge this gap, we involve council members from the earliest stages of major projects. Even if their engagement is informal, attending meetings, asking questions, listening, it still builds trust. When the time comes to vote, they are more likely to support initiatives they've had a hand in shaping. This February (year 2025), for instance, we asked the Council to endorse Gabrovo's candidacy for European Capital of Culture 2032. Despite initial skepticism, the motion passed unanimously. Why? Because they were part of the journey from the beginning.

Strengthening Local Democracy

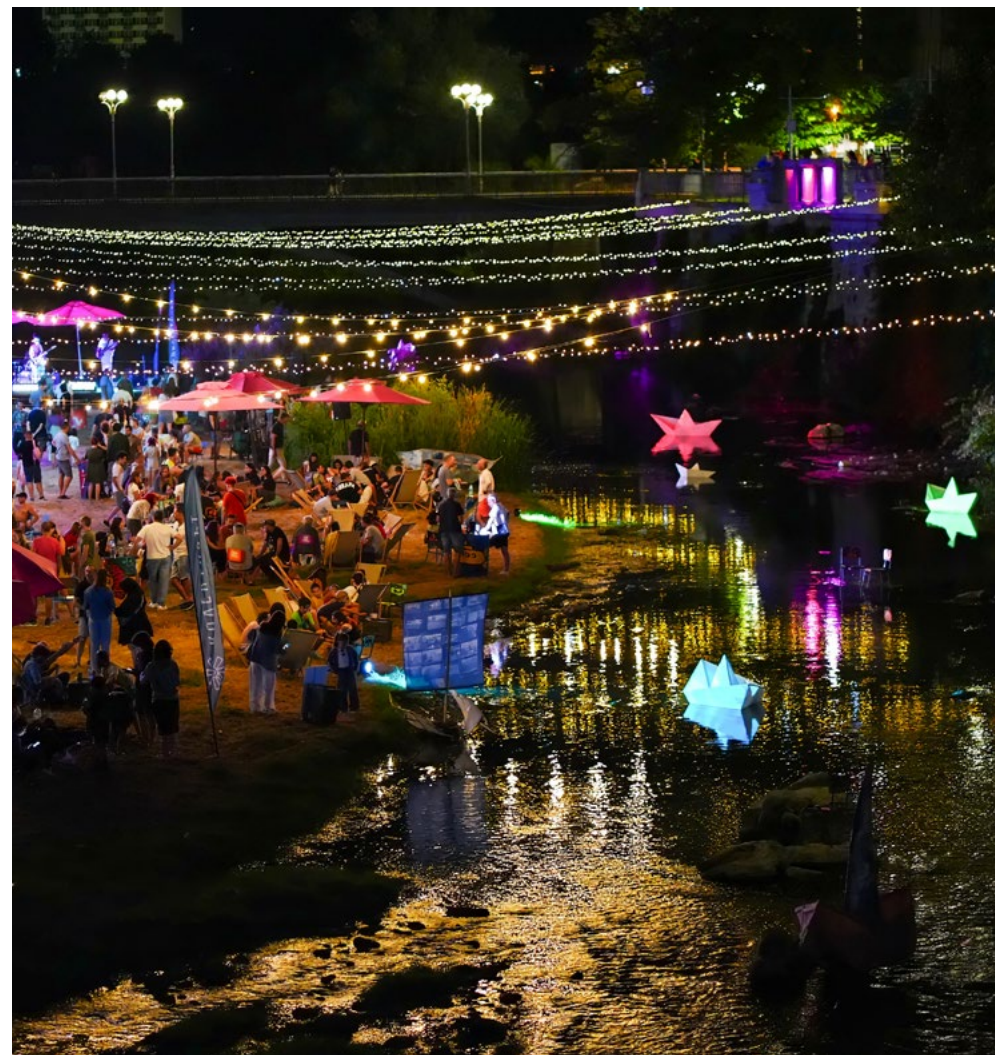
■ Europe must now consider how to evolve its relationship with cities. Not all municipalities are alike. Some are Forerunners, eager and capable of driving innovation. Others will follow once models are proven. That's natural. What is needed from the EU is a framework that recognizes these differences, not to divide, but to enable tailored support.

This could include:

- **Strategic governance support:** Helping cities reimagine their organizational models.
- **Technical expertise:** Offering embedded expert missions to support local administrations.
- **Capacity-building resources:** Focused not just on implementation, but on planning and leadership.
- **Flexible funding mechanisms:** Designed for experimentation and systemic transformation.

The EU must not be a distant mirror reflecting fragmented national policies. Instead, it must act as an integrative force, helping cities build the capacity, confidence, and competence to lead. But this transformation isn't just about energy efficiency, it's a much more holistic approach. It all comes down to the city's strategic vision. At both, the national and local levels, our resources alone are not sufficient. But if used wisely and aligned with Europe's broader vision, they can serve as a foundation. We can seek additional support and cooperation.

Photograph: Municipality of Gabrovo



"Rivers of the City" Youth Festival in Gabrovo

A night view from "Rivers of the City – Youth Stories Against the Current," an annual youth festival held at the end of summer along the Yantra River. The event blends art, music, and civic participation, empowering young people to transform riverside spaces in line with European goals for sustainability and youth engagement.

Perhaps cities like Gabrovo shouldn't be defined by population size or geographic location, but by their ambition and courage. Gabrovo could become a pilot city, one of many with similar needs, and its learnings could be shared with others across Europe, and beyond. And we can learn from others as well. No one has all the answers. We're constantly facing new challenges, and those of us who've experienced different political systems, like socialism, may have valuable perspectives that others lack. We need to be intentional about how we use our time and energy. It must be about realizing our dreams, toward creating opportunities, for people, businesses, and communities."

Understanding cultural strengths and weaknesses is key. Every culture has its pros and cons. It's only when we understand ourselves that we can grow.

■ ■ And it's good that we're different. Uniformity isn't the goal. We should preserve our identity while working together as a community. We need a positive transformation, and that requires shifting the current global tendency from negativity into something that creates stability and confidence in people's minds. Right now, people wake up every day to worrying news. We are bombarded with fear. Culture can be a powerful tool. It can help transform fear into something hopeful. But if we want to tell a positive story, we can't be seen as naïve. That story must be real, and it must work. If we succeed, even gradually, people's assumptions will begin to shift. The problem is, we don't always know how to share them. We lack the communication capacity. But it's not just our responsibility. Everyone has a role in shaping the narrative. If we all contribute, the message will be clearer, and easier to understand. Every credible story starts with the storyteller. If someone tells a story they don't believe in or live by, it comes off as naïve. But when the storyteller believes in it and walks the walk, that story becomes real, and people listen. That's the journey we're on, to find a story for Europe and its cities

that is both positive and believable. A narrative we can live by. It will be valuable not just for Gabrovo, but for many other cities across Europe. The European story must come from both directions, bottom-up and top-down. And sometimes Europe doesn't communicate its role positively. Europe should focus on engagement, on helping cities like Gabrovo take the lead. We're not trying to bypass national governments, not at all. We just want to be a part of the solution. We want to build a European story that responds to today's challenges.

What the European Union may struggle to achieve with national governments, it might actually accomplish with cities. We are ready. We have done our homework. With the right European support, we can achieve far more, not just for ourselves or by ourselves, but for the broader European project and together with our citizens, and with cities and communities across Europe. ■

Mayor Ricardo Rio, Braga Portugal

Ricardo Bruno Antunes Machado Rio (born 21 November 1972) is a Portuguese economist and politician, currently serving as mayor of Braga, Portugal. His professional background includes roles as the General Secretary of the Portuguese Association of Financial Analysts and Director of the Capital Markets Institute of Euronext Lisbon, as well as serving as a university professor at several institutions. He transitioned into public service in 2001 and became the mayor of Braga in 2013, where he has been instrumental in transforming Braga into a smart city, and is now serving his third term.



Photograph: Municipality of Braga

Mayor Rio, member of the Social Democratic Party (PSD), became mayor in 2013. Since the first democratic elections in 1976, the city had been presided over by the same mayor, who did not run in 2013 due to term limits. One of Mayor Rio's successes have been to convert Braga into a smart city. He won a second term, with his right-wing coalition getting 53% of the votes.

Rio's coalition won a third absolute majority in 2021. He called this victory one in a "very different scenario" due to the arrival of rival right-wing parties in local politics.

A Vision for Braga: Leadership, Innovation, and Citizen-Centered Governance

Call to Serve and the Roots of Civic Leadership

■ Leadership often begins not with power, but with purpose. In many cities that have successfully transitioned from stagnation to dynamism, reform-minded mayors have emerged from outside entrenched political machines, driven by community values and personal ethics rather than party loyalty,” states longtime mayor for the city of Braga, Mr. Ricardo Rio.

This emphasis on public virtue, civic responsibility, and service to the common good, offers a lens through which to understand Mayor Ricardo Rio’s entry into the life of public service. Though Ricardos' family was not active in formal political structures, Ricardo’s grandfather’s role in local governance combined with Ricardo's early political years in democratic opposition planted seeds that built foundation for his leadership. This exposure to civic discourse rather than party ideology shaped a leadership ethos that focuses on dialogue, listening, and reform instead of party ideology. This was further enforced through his studying and work experiences in Porto, Lisbon, and abroad.

■ From a young age, I wanted to contribute to my city. It wasn’t about becoming mayor, it was about shaping Braga’s future in meaningful ways. Cities are not just managed spaces, but transformative communities guided by vision and people-

centered governance. This is my home. I know the people, the institutions, the culture. The connection is real and emotional. We can't afford to focus solely on economic development for a few years, and only then turn our attention to the environment or social equity. Being a mayor allows you to act decisively and close to the people. If there's a need, you respond. That's the beauty of local government.



Photograph: Municipality of Braga

Breaking with the Past: A New Era of Governance

Cities governed by one party or administration for decades often experience a kind of democratic fatigue. Bureaucratic routines harden, innovation slows, and citizens disengage. When Braga transitioned away from nearly 40 years of single-party leadership, it wasn't just a political change, it was a cultural reawakening.

■ Trust is rebuilt not only through reforms, but by restoring citizens' belief that government is responsive and fair. We inherited a system that lacked transparency and engagement. Our mission was to rebuild trust and introduce new, intangible dimensions of governance. In practice this meant approach and governance that included openness, collaboration, and citizen participation. Administration must recognize that legitimacy comes not only from being elected, but from being accessible, open, and accountable. The shift from 'managing services' to 'stewarding relationships' has been central in Braga's transformation journey. Our ambition is shared, not just by the municipality, but by our people. We want to grow, connect, and be a city that citizens choose to live in, not out of necessity, but by preference. Modern cities compete not just for investment or infrastructure, they compete for people: talent, energy, families, and ideas.

Braga's transformation into a dynamic, future-facing city reflects how cities have become glocal, the idea that local actions and global aspirations must be harmonized. This reflects a shift from cities being places of last resort to becoming cities of choice. Braga's strategy weaves together smart urban planning, inclusive policy, and cultural vibrancy to build a city that doesn't just function, it inspires. Cities are the place where theory and abstract concepts like vitality, inclusion, and sustainability come to alive.

This is made concrete for example how Braga is innovating for social impact in the “Braga a Sorrir”, rough translation being “Smiling Braga” -Program. The program for dental healthcare has been running now for 10 years. The essence is to invest in preventative and restorative dental care for low-income residents. Dental health is more than medical, it’s about dignity, employment, and self-esteem. Health equity is a core tenet of inclusive governance, and cities in Europe are increasingly stepping in where national systems lag. We have provided dental care to nearly 3500 people and we are not talking about just one single consultation in which you go to a doctor but full treatments. The results speak for themselves. Some beneficiaries have found new jobs, rebuilt families, and re-entered social life. “Braga a Sorrir” exemplifies municipal innovation for social impact and dignity: a targeted, human-centered solution built at the local level. As a result, Braga also positioned itself at the forefront of a dignity-first approach to social policy. The initiative illustrates how local governments can lead in areas traditionally seen as national competencies, and how governance that is compassionate as well as effective, can deliver measurable results.

Photograph: Municipality of Braga





Photograph: Municipality of Braga

Transforming Governance Through Participation

■ Modern governance is increasingly judged not just by what is done, but how it's done. In Braga, the approach has been to create advisory councils across sectors to reflect the transition from representative governance to participatory governance, where legitimacy is co-produced with the whole community; businesses, academia, NGO's, and citizens. Because of the long time I spent in the opposition by the time I was elected, those relationships were already in place. People knew what I stood for no matter what party they were from. Making citizen participation a basic approach and creating co-governance platforms that allow people with different values, needs and approaches to shape policies at every stage. When Braga creates city level policies, such as the Sustainable Mobility Plan, it is done through a process and model of shared responsibility: not a top-down decree, but a collaborative commitment. It's not just consultation, it's shared ownership.

This shift aligns well with global trends toward deliberative democracy. Decisions need to be shaped by inclusive dialogue, not just electoral cycles. From a governance perspective it is more demanding than using consultants to write ready-made plans but going through and succeeding in such a process does mean more shared ownership from early on. And that will lead to more effective implementation. Cities often serve as arenas where ideological divides blur, giving way to pragmatic, value-driven leadership. In Braga, the focus is less on political identity and more on collective mission. Collaborative way of doing governance, which emphasizes compromise and collaboration over politics, and where outcomes and principles matter more than party labels, is made alive in Braga.

This kind of leadership builds bridges across civic, private, and institutional actors, emphasizing merit, capacity, and alignment, rather than ideology. It allows cities to innovate quickly, remain inclusive, and respond effectively to complex, interconnected challenges. What matters isn't political orientation, but a shared commitment to our vision. If someone looked at our policies without knowing the party behind them, they'd struggle to place us. And that's the point, we do what's right for Braga.

Traditional ideological boundaries often fall short in solving today's multifaceted urban challenges. Climate action, social equity, economic resilience, and digital transformation must be tackled simultaneously, not sequentially. Strong local leadership often stems from place-based connection, a leadership identity shaped by personal history, cultural familiarity, and civic rootedness. In a way, the relationship with the city must be more than professional; it is emotional and intimate. Such place-anchored leadership builds resilience and trust. It also enables agility because local leaders, unlike national ones, can often act with speed, proximity, and clarity. Across Europe and globally, cities are asserting their role as proactive agents of change, no longer waiting for national policy, but leading on climate, inclusion, innovation, and health. This reflects a wider trend of urban empowerment in the face of global challenges. We're not bound by bureaucracy. We act where it matters. Whether it's healthcare, social policy, or innovation, local governments can and should lead.

Braga's work demonstrates that meaningful transformation can happen at the city level, and that well-governed cities can serve as laboratories for national reform and models for global exchange. This integrated approach reflects the framework of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which emphasize balanced progress across social, environmental, and economic pillars. It's a result of trying to do many things well, at the same time. Braga's alignment with the SDGs isn't

performative, it is structural. It shows how cities can govern with purpose, innovate with compassion, and lead with integrity.

One of the major challenges in local governance is the short duration of political terms. With just four years to make an impact, mayors often spend their first term fixing past problems or laying foundations, only delivering real change in a potential second term. But what if we could decouple good governance from political cycles altogether. This applies to Braga as well. By creating a model of governance based on community involvement, rather than a top-down, party-driven approach, we want to create continuity that outlasts any individual political figure. If done right, this model can persist even after leadership changes, because it's rooted in shared ownership. One must remember transitions aren't always that clear. When I started, we inherited major challenges as well. For example, the city stadium built for Euro 2004 football games, was supposed to cost €65 million but ended up costing €200 million. Half of that was paid during my time in office. We were still in legal battles with architects and construction companies in 2021. These are the long shadows cast by bad decisions, which is why inclusive, well-supported, and broadly validated planning is essential for long-term success.

Integrating Local Governance with the European Agenda

Since 2014, Braga has been actively engaged in international city networks, both thematic and politically oriented. Whether through Eurocities or the Global Parliament of Mayors, mayor Rio views international engagement as a critical dimension of local governance.

■ It helps us learn from the best practices of others, advocate for cities' voices in shaping EU policy, and increase Braga's global visibility. This visibility has tangible effects. Being recognized internationally helps attract talent, investment, students, and tourism. That creates a virtuous cycle with each element feeding the next. As more people discover Braga, more want to visit, live, study, or invest here. That, in turn, brings new energy to the city's development. While participating in international projects is valuable, what really matters is how those insights are applied locally. In Braga, they have made sure that European collaboration translates into real innovation. Through URBACT and other EU-funded initiatives, Braga tackles issues like sustainable tourism, social innovation, sustainable governance, UN SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals), and youth policy. Take, for example, our participation in the 'Boosting Social Innovation' project. One of our partner cities, Málaga, had already implemented a successful social innovation incubator. Inspired by this, we launched our own: the Human Power Hub. This initiative connects social entrepreneurs with traditional social institutions, businesses, impact investors, academia, and public agencies, creating a dynamic ecosystem that supports inclusive development.

Photograph: Municipality of Braga



Then why does the EU still struggle to learn from cities? Despite these success stories, it remains difficult for cities like Braga to influence EU-wide policy in a significant way.

■ This is partly because the EU's institutional architecture has historically been state-oriented, not city-oriented. While this is slowly changing, there's still a long way to go. Many Member States themselves don't fully value their cities as strategic partners. They centralize competencies and funding, limiting what cities can achieve on their own. Even within EU institutions, there's sometimes an undercurrent of personal or political competition with national politicians perceiving mayors as rivals or threats. Benjamin Barber once posed a provocative idea in his book 'If Mayors Ruled the World'. The premise was simple but powerful: mayors, grounded in daily problem-solving and citizen engagement, are better positioned to deliver the changes societies need. We've embraced that idea in Braga, by refusing to wait for top-down solutions, and by building a bottom-up model of resilient, responsive, and community-led governance. I always say that mayors don't want to rule the world, because we actually like being mayors. The reason is simple: the role of a mayor is uniquely powerful and deeply connected to the community. It's a position that offers a special kind of influence and impact, grounded, immediate, and human.

However, there's a political dynamic that often complicates things. Many full-time politicians see the mayoralty as a steppingstone. There's an unspoken expectation that if they perform well in their cities, the next step is a role in the national government. That ambition makes them potential threats to those already holding national positions. This may very well be one of the root causes of the prejudice we see from national governments toward mayors. It's not always institutional, it can be personal and competitive. This brings us to an important tension: the gap between political ambition and systemic governance. Politics is often driven by values,

Photograph: Municipality of Braga



ideology, and rivalry. But city management is a continuous, systemic process, logical, administrative, and holistic.

One of the most significant barriers cities face today is access to funding. Most cities currently don't have direct access to EU funds, and the trend we're seeing with the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) suggests an even more centralized approach, more control at the national level, less access for cities.

■ This is problematic. What cities are asking for is not preferential treatment, but direct and fair access to funding mechanisms that support their work. The current system places too much reliance on national governments as intermediaries, often filtering out city priorities. Better advocacy is part of the solution, but it's not enough. What's also needed is a redesign of funding instruments, so that cities can apply directly for specific lines of financing tailored to urban challenges. There's one last point that I believe deserves emphasis: capacity building. As we look ahead, more responsibilities will be handed down to the city level. This is inevitable. But it won't succeed if only a handful of cities are equipped to handle it. We need every city, big or small, to be ready. That means investing in the skills and training of both elected officials and municipal staff. Also, internationalization is essential and with the right

capacities this can be achieved. Cities must be open to global dialogue, active in international networks, and engaged in learning from peers. That's how innovation spreads. That's how mayors evolve. That's how cities rise. The question is how? In my opinion there are three main points;

- 1) **The first step is to showcase best practices.** Across Europe and beyond, many cities are achieving outstanding results in areas like sustainability, innovation, urban mobility, and inclusion. These stories need to be elevated, not just for inspiration but also to prove what cities can deliver when given the tools and trust.
- 2) **The second step is about reinforcing capacity.** Not all cities perform at the same level, and that's often due to a lack of resources or trained staff. Building capacity, both political and administrative, is key to ensuring more cities can deliver ambitious outcomes.
- 3) **And third, we must increase city representation in EU policy frameworks.** I serve on the European Committee of the Regions, and the contrast in budget and resources compared to the European Economic and Social Committee is stark. Cities need a stronger voice, not just symbolically, but structurally. They need to be at the table, heard regularly, consulted meaningfully, and engaged early in policy design.

Braga's transformation is not accidental, it is intentional. It is the product of value-driven leadership, civic partnership, and a belief in the transformative power of local government. From restoring public trust to pioneering health equity, Braga has shown what is possible when cities lead not just with plans, but with vision, inclusion, and courage. It is a story of renewal, but also an inspiration for cities everywhere. ■

Jukka Mäkelä – The art of authentic leadership

Jukka Mäkelä (b. 1960, Executive MBA, DI, Honorary Doctor of the Aalto University)

Jukka served as the Mayor of Espoo from the beginning of 2011 until end of 2024. As Mayor, Mäkelä kept his aim high: The city's strategy, the Espoo Story, set the goal of ensuring that the city's growth was economically, socially, environmentally and culturally sustainable. City strategy, Espoo story, was grounded as a fundamental and shared vision for the whole community. Even six-year-old children participated to the process, already 15 years ago. Jukka's message was clear: Espoo is a resident- and customer-oriented community that is used to solving the challenges presented by growth together with the residents, businesses, universities and other educational institutions. Based on his experience, Mäkelä knows that cities achieve the best results when people, communities and companies all work together.

Before his 14-year Mayor term, Mäkelä was a Member of Parliament for the National Coalition Party from 2007 to 2010. He has been involved in Espoo's local politics as a City Council Member from 1997 to 2010, as Chairman of the City Board from 2005 to 2008 and as Chairman of the City Council from 2009 to 2010. Mäkelä, M.Sc. (Tech) was born and raised in Espoo, and he is an enthusiastic advocate of sports and exercise both in his professional and personal life.



Photograph: Olli Urpela / Pintaliitodesign

City Strategy through Partnerships – The Espoo Story

■ Building a city strategy requires a deep understanding of local strengths and the ability to advance them consistently. In case of forerunner cities local knowledge connects with global phenomena. The community, for example businesses and universities operate in global scene, and so must the city. The Espoo narrative, 'Espoo story', is a good example of this. The Espoo Story is not about traditional participation models; it's about shared goals. It clearly states that the city's most important assets are its residents, communities, and companies. The idea is, we don't 'involve' our most important partners to our work. Instead, we support them in reaching the goals they have set for themselves. We're not positioning ourselves as central players in the development of technology, research, or businesses, but instead, we focus on creating the conditions where other organizations can succeed. This is a fundamental strategic distinction.

From a leadership perspective, a strategy must be simple, clear, directional, and most importantly it needs to be shared. The challenge lies in how to maintain that shared direction. This is precisely where a coherent narrative that builds on strengths can offer steps forward acting as a tool for maintaining clarity and common purpose. We should not get lost in overly complex or fragmented expert discourse. It often creates more noise than value. When you have six experts in a room, the conversation may quickly become about who is the smartest in the room. But if you replace

them with one, or two at the most, strategic sparring partners who can communicate clearly and effectively, the outcomes are often significantly better.

An example of a shared, simple, clear and directional goal for Espoo is our aim to collectively as a community find pathways toward carbon neutrality. This approach has produced tangible short-term results, and what is even more important it has created an ethos of improving our work constantly. This principle is strategically crucial.

It makes no sense whatsoever to compete or argue over who has most expertise; rather, it is essential to understand that every actor has their own role. This applies to cities as well. Larger cities host thousands of companies, and other important institutions, large and small, each strong and significant in their own way. From this perspective, our narrative must be based on strategic understanding. And it cannot be merely a cliché used by city leaders; it must be a genuine operational model. And as said earlier, it is not just about participation, but about jointly setting clear goals to which all parties can commit to. One must be truly involved in the process, not just a passive observer.

Cities do not solve global challenges by building ever-larger departments within their own administrations. Success comes from empowering organizations that lead their fields and contribute to the community. In this way, our strategic advantage is based on leveraging local strengths through collaboration, not control. We focus on creating shared direction and enabling others to reach their potential. That is what modern, effective, and open city strategy is all about.

For this reason, I strongly believe that a shared narrative must be simple, clear, and directional. One picture and three pages should be enough for any strategy document. Democracy makes leadership more complicated than in business, hence

it is crucial for leadership to have goals that are set together and that these goals provide clear conditions to move forward.

Leadership is at the core of everything. Media and politics often create a negative narrative focused on deficiencies and confrontation. Rarely is there an assessment of how proposed reforms and solutions are practically implementable. Whenever I hear someone talk about 'comprehensive reform' or 'change management', it means that no one really knows what needs to be done or how the reform will be implemented. It indicates uncertainty and ambiguity about goals and actions. Change management, in turn, means there is no clear plan or vision for implementation.

This is a significant challenge even at the EU level, for instance with the Green Deal program. It raises great expectations, but the risk is that it does not function under a shared umbrella allowing regions and cities to cooperate effectively, and in their local context. Instead, there is a misconception that everyone should do things the same way, which is practically impossible. Such an all-encompassing reform cannot succeed without a clear and realistic implementation plan. Leading a city requires balancing two very different streams of action: on one hand, we carry out public tasks like a government, on the other, we operate with business-like efficiency. But at the core are our residents.

The Art of Building Bridges – and Knowing When Not To

■ One of the persistent challenges in politics is the tendency to build bridges where they are not needed. Bridges need to be built with intention and strategic clarity. What makes working with wise politicians effective is a shared understanding, that they do not expect every idea shared to be taken to implementation. For highly meticulous and detail-oriented people, like experts and scientists typically are, they start with the assumption that everything discussed holds equal weight. In politics this rule does not apply. It is important to identify the points that, in that moment, are most relevant and actionable. This mutual trust and freedom to interpret allows cooperation to thrive. In practice, good governance requires the ability to prioritize and focus on what truly matters at the time. This reflection also serves as a fitting prelude to the themes explored in developing our cities. Core argument is that only through the operational lens of the civil service organization can we fully grasp what is truly important in the broader whole. If an idea cannot be implemented in practice, we must ask whether it's worth further planning at all.

One of the key challenges in for example climate policy is that many international climate initiatives appear disconnected from the rhythm and context of cities. What I mean is that from a local viewpoint, they are distant and out of touch, almost like content generated by artificial intelligence: formally correct, but lacking real resonance. In Espoo, we chose a different path. Already much before UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) the city's growth narrative was rooted in the principle that progress must be sustainable: economically, ecologically, socially, and culturally. This is the direction sustainability work in cities needs to go as well; they need to connect on an emotional level. Now, they struggle to engage those who are responsible for creating

Photograph: Elias Metsämä / Filmbutik Oy



real change in daily life. One of the essential conditions for Espoo's sustainable success has been a willingness to work together. When goals are set collaboratively, they are also easier to implement collectively. For me, these values are personal. I grew up in Tapiola, Espoo in late 1960's and 1970's. Tapiola was a typical living area in Espoo, where sustainability was part of everyday life. Its cellular structure meant that already back then cars weren't necessary, services were within walking or cycling distance. Ecological thinking was foundational. Socially, the community spirit was strong. Every child was included in play, and everything was done together. Culturally, the neighborhood was vibrant and rich in activity. And it was not accidental. The best urban planners

and architects of the time were invited to design Tapiola, and although financial resources were limited, the goals were ambitious. At the same time, the presence of the Helsinki University of Technology, nowadays Aalto University, brought educational and technological leadership to the area. Even then, it was understood that education and expertise are the cornerstones of sustainable development.

Coming back to climate policy, instead of a clear path forward, Espoo like some many other cities is confronted with a cascade of overlapping climate targets. They were derived from international conferences, the national government, ministries, municipal associations, other regional authorities, large city networks, and even European initiatives like Eurocities. These goals had one thing in common: they all targeted the same Espoo residents. Yet in practice, they made little impact. Following it was like water off a duck's back. An AI system could have likely compiled all these objectives in 10 seconds. The issue isn't information, it's implementation. Many of the meetings ended up being arenas where experts competed to be the smartest in the room. They offered little tangible support to the city organization. It's no wonder that local officials began closing their office doors when they saw these seminar groups approaching.

But the lesson is that goal setting and implementation must take place at the local level and strategic goals need to be defined by the actors themselves. This is crucial. Even a superficial analysis shows that effective action depends on the ability to translate EU-level objectives into concrete and meaningful goals within the regional and local context. If this connection fails, the entire process becomes ineffective. It is essential that the right actors are involved. Those with both the expertise and the authority to drive progress. For this reason, building a local narrative should be a priority in all cities. Regional and local perspectives are central to success. Large cities are particularly effective in this regard,

as they typically house most of the necessary resources and stakeholder. One exception being energy issues that requires consideration at a broader scale. Nevertheless, the city is a key actor, as it holds administrative authority and usually has a clear leadership units' structure: the mayor typically has directive power, enabling decisions to be implemented efficiently.

One essential point is related to the assumption of systemic thinking and action in cities. It's important to recognize that systemic thinking and democracy, especially democratic leadership, do not always go hand in hand. In a democracy, every election represents a potential point of discontinuity. This is a crucial insight: even if experts have approached the issue systemically and developed comprehensive solutions, a city council or other democratic body may still reject them. If everything is decided before democratic actors are even involved, democracy becomes a mere formality.

This raises a central challenge: how do we build a process that is both systematic and democratic?

■ It's critical to understand that democracy can't be bypassed. Instead, it must be lived and practiced. Which brings us to one of the toughest questions: why is it that, even at the EU level, commissioners often emphasize the importance of a positive narrative? Initiatives like the Green Deal need a strong, constructive story behind them. This is because the media and political life, particularly elections, tend to revolve around identifying problems. Their tone is conflict driven, negative and resulting in finding differences instead things that unite. The biggest mistake is to assume that this is the only possible mode of leadership. If you truly want to build a successful city, a winning team, or a thriving community, you must lead with strengths, not just react to problems. Effective and sustainable leadership is built on a foundation of shared strengths, not on fear, criticism, or constant problem-solving.

Photograph: Pekka Rousi





Photograph: Olli Urpela

Sustainability is about leadership

■ It is essential to stop and reflect on which factors are strategically important. At times, I get the impression that the sustainability agenda lacks a clear strategic core: is there truly a strategy behind it at all? The perspective often feels fragmented. From a city's point of view, strategy means that everything must be considered through the lens of the city's own starting points and realities. Otherwise, we drift to a situation where municipalities are diligently implementing EU- or national policies based on uniform EU- or national guidelines. This results in a risk of overlooking significant local differences. In Espoo, for instance, we always viewed things through the 'Espoo lens'. Decisions need to be shaped by the city's specific context and population dynamics. When I emphasized this, I often heard criticism: 'Espoo this, Espoo that..'. The point is not to glorify one city, it's about applying strategic thinking sensibly to local context, local needs and local opportunities. For example, Espoo has a high proportion of young people, whereas in many parts of Finland, and Europe the youth population is much smaller, and often declining. We must focus on how these young people transition into working life. The route can look very different that it was for us. At the same time, we face challenges in the international labor market and must continue improving our capabilities there. Whenever we view national or EU guidelines, these phenomena need to be taken into consideration.

Leadership in implementation

■ I would argue that municipal organizations, even communities and ecosystems, especially those composed of experts, naturally tend toward a state of imbalance. It is their basic mode of operation; they try to pursue their natural direction and break out of form. The challenge is how you maintain focus so that there is only one direction, and the team is playing toward the same goals.

For me personally, the ideal for leadership in organization has always been about authentic leadership. Authentic leadership means that you can be genuine in the situation. It might sound cliché, but without authenticity, nothing substantial happens.

This authenticity was essential to shaping the Espoo story. I have witnessed Espoo's growth journey, where the city's population has multiplied tenfold within one generation. This experience has shown me the vital need for a shared narrative. Experiences of governance elsewhere in Finnish cities, in the Finnish Parliament, and globally also gave me the ability to genuinely think this through. I intuitively understood that we need shared goals set from our own perspective. We need everyone's contribution, which means finding enough common themes to create a sense of collective identity, built by setting goals together and implementing them together.

Photograph: Elias Metsämä / Filmbutik Oy



Even though Espoo is Finland's second largest city, very few knew anything about it. It became self-evident that we needed a narrative. Collective identity is important because, in a constantly changing environment like Espoo, focusing on growth, no one is local to begin with and it shouldn't matter whether newcomers are national or international. We operate in an international labor market, and integration has always been about this. My view has been that a large city is a good unit for this. City has the mandate to functions and provide services, and we are a city-scale civil society. In this context, the civil society is easier to manage because the city does not have to categorize citizens by background. We have residents, and they are all Espoo residents. It does not matter which country you are from; we are all Espoo residents.

Authenticity is based on Dialogue

■ There are several key elements in a city that need to be balanced for leadership to be genuinely effective. Authentic leadership requires dialogical leadership, as well as the capability and willingness to work collaboratively. It is both an emotional and motivational matter. Leader must be genuinely committed to collective action and building a sense of community. Traditionally, leaders have told the entire staff what to do. Much like teachers used to teach. I took a different approach. We set clear goals together, defined by the city council, and asked the staff to tell us how they plan to achieve them. Initially this caused some surprise, but I wanted to emphasize that the responsibility lies within us and that ideas shouldn't be outsourced. Once the goals are clear, we can then bring in partners to support their implementation. To support this, we engaged expert help to coach city managers and ensure that leaders live their leadership in a dialogical and authentic way. A first-hand story from this is when, in the name of good governance, a law was passed at the national level requiring all early childhood staff to have formal kindergarten teacher qualifications. Since there simply aren't enough qualified professionals available, this law led to a situation where long-serving childcare professionals were suddenly labeled as 'unqualified'. This is a bit strange when considering that Espoo's highly educated parents consistently give our childcare staff top marks. One year, the average rating was 4.85 out of 5. Yet, this negative political and media narrative, branding these professionals as inadequate, labelled them unqualified. In such a situation, a leader must have a strong connection to the field. You must be able to stand in front of the staff and say; *"You're doing great work. I know this"*.

Understanding this dynamic between public administrations and media guided us to create an inclusive model: we invited everyone to take part. One of the most memorable moments in my career has been when a manager level civil

servant seriously asked: *"Is the Mayor really suggesting we ask preschoolers how Espoo should be built?"* I replied: "Yes." And I can say in retrospect that when we organized 'a day as a Mayor' exercises across all our preschools, the insights from the children were exemplary. They articulated key priorities with clarity and simplicity. Meanwhile, adults often focused more on land use rights and personal interests.

Leadership in this context requires recognizing that politics often thrives on division, while true leadership and storytelling are about identifying shared strengths. Although Espoo's city council must approve the Espoo Story, the narrative itself is not political, it's about implementation. The Espoo Story provides leaders with a backbone to lead with clarity and continuity. This is a crucial point that applies to nearly all major or rapidly growing cities in Europe. In large, dynamic cities, the mayor cannot be a passenger. You must be in the driver's seat. And more importantly, you must want to be in the driver's seat.

There is no Change Management, there is just Doing

Change is not a separate condition; it's the modus operandi of today's leadership. The quality of leadership is reflected in how well ongoing change is managed in everyday operations. You can't say, *"We'll manage change until the end of June, and then we'll stop"*. That's simply not how it works, change is continuous. This also means that urban policy at the EU level needs to recognize and support leadership that builds on local strengths. EU urban policy should focus on empowering cities to lead from their strengths.



Photograph: Joonas Salminen / Tikurilan ilmakuvaus

Different cities possess different strengths and recognizing them correctly is essential. In Espoo, for instance, residents often highlight nature and safety as key strengths. However, there are more than 300 other Finnish municipalities with even more nature and lower crime rates, yet many of them fail to leverage these attributes strategically. Sometimes cities include vague or unsubstantiated claims in their strategies, such as being 'brave' or 'a bit crazy'. But does that reflect residents' or citizen surveys? If not, they shouldn't appear in the strategy. In these cases, it may be wiser to replace the consultant than to base a strategy on imagination rather than insight.

The whole community is another dimension that needs to be understood; when I speak about the EU's strengths, I refer to its globally leading universities in sustainable development. Europe holds a top position globally in this regard. This academic excellence radiates outward, to citizens, research institutions, and companies alike. Yet the EU doesn't always seem to fully believe in its own strengths, despite having every reason to do so. European universities are leaders not only in research quality but also in value-based leadership and sustainability. This is why urban policy is increasingly intertwined with university policy. If we aim to build strong collaboration between universities, research institutions, and companies, it must be backed by strategically aligned urban policy.

From Expert role to Dialogue

■ Leadership, especially at the city level, must be dialogical. Yet, in some cases it appears to drift in the opposite direction, toward top-down, one-way leadership. From the perspective of sustainable development, this is a significant issue. When leadership starts to resemble ideological preaching rather than inclusive collaboration, we are heading in the wrong direction. At times, those who are most fervent about sustainability can behave like medieval sellers of indulgences; handing out moral rules in kindergartens like, *“If you sort your waste correctly, you’ll get go to heaven”*. Instead, they should be encouraging participation: *“What would you do differently? What ideas do you have?”*

Such top-down, elitist leadership often fails to realize how little space it leaves for genuine dialogue. It mirrors the old paternalistic style of leadership, decisions made from above, with little regard for listening. What has concerned me most is this leadership culture that focuses on deficiencies. Imagine a junior sports team whose coach spends year after year pointing out only what’s wrong. What kind of outcome would that produce? Perhaps one tough individual, but most would quit or disengage. Similarly, if a city’s development is viewed only through the lens of flaws and failures, it leads to a negative narrative that prevents collaboration. It’s extremely difficult to motivate people to join forces and build something together if the foundation is solely critical and negative. This is not to suggest that problems should be ignored, quite the opposite. But within the framework of sustainable development, the current approach often leads to resources being spent on marginal projects and minor tinkering. Meanwhile, we fail to harness the real opportunities that lie at the core and in the areas where we are already strong.

Dialogue plays a crucial role in this process. In current discussions, one often hears calls to ‘break down the silos’. The intention is to work more freely across sectors, but this often lacks true dialogical thinking. It is vital to recognize that the public sector must have a clear, structured foundation, silos exist because each unit has specific responsibilities defined by the city council. These mandates must be respected, not dismissed by assuming that ‘everyone should do everything together’.

This reflects a broader leadership issue: line organizations within public governance have clearly assigned responsibilities set by political decision-makers. When they are seen to underperform, the response is often to assign them additional, loosely defined tasks. This is neither efficient nor sustainable. Instead, we should develop holistic programs that support cross-sectoral collaboration without dismantling the structural responsibilities of each unit. These programs would turn the internal focus of silos outward, encouraging partnerships and shared goals. The key is not that everyone does everything together, but that specific units work together where joint action creates added value. That’s what genuine dialogical governance looks like: aligning different tasks and perspectives in a way that strengthens the whole. Therefore, the city’s executive leadership must be supported by a credible staff function that can lead program-based management and coordinate partnerships with external stakeholders, including universities. Storytelling is an important tool for this. A positive narrative fosters emotion that truly support development and collaboration: creativity, joy, teamwork, and motivation. In contrast, a negative narrative often gives rise to fear, shame, and distrust, feelings that do not encourage joint efforts. Therefore, respect is crucial in leadership and collaboration: not only for one’s own work but for the contributions of others, especially within large organizations.

Jukka's key takeaways for mayors and other champions in cities

■ I remember a moment from my childhood, I must have been around five, when I looked out of our living room window into the forest behind our house and felt a strong sense of possibility: “World, get ready, we’re coming.” That might be one of my earliest memories. Today, I live in the same neighborhood, just one building over. The same forest looks smaller now, but the feeling remains. What I want to emphasize again is;

- 1) How important it is for democratic decision-making and public administration to focus on implementation. Goals must be simple, clear, directional, and visible in everyday actions. They must not remain abstract. Every activity should be aligned with these shared objectives.
- 2) Equally important is a foundation of shared values, not as clichés, but as practical, internalized principles. One of the most essential is being resident- and customer-oriented rather than administration-oriented. Public services should exist for the people, not for bureaucracy itself.
- 3) But even well-crafted narratives and defined goals are not enough. They must be supported by an effective leadership structure. In this context, the role of the mayor is not to be a passenger, but the driver. He must want to be the driver. In Espoo, we’ve built community and leadership deliberately and at multiple levels. We had organizational structure that support interaction, and for example annual manager forums that bring together over a thousand managers. There needs to be platforms that contribute to the shared leadership culture.



Photograph: Jakin Diaz / MySome Oy



Photograph: Taru Turpeinen

- 4) Citizen engagement must be very concrete. In addition to other ways, in Espoo we focused on involving residents through early childhood education and schools. When children are involved, their parents and grandparents are naturally included. Engaging the community needs to apply to vocational and higher education as well. This intergenerational engagement is one reason Espoo is among the most community-driven cities in Europe.
- 5) What does it take to build connection, unity, and courage? Above all, it requires the will and capability to work across disciplines and administrative boundaries. It also requires trust in dialogue and the courage to be authentic. Only through authenticity can we build something that truly lasts. Mayor needs to systematically promote this approach. I've served as a mayor for 14 years, and before that, as Chair of both the City Council and City Executive Board. During the 14 years, in every public speaking engagement, around 300 per year, I have highlighted the Espoo Story, both to city staff and residents.
- 6) European urban policy, when grounded in local strengths, fundamentally means collaboration between cities, universities, research institutions, businesses, and residents. Future growth will take place in urban areas, especially within the framework of the sustainability agenda. In this context, European university cities are, in my view, highly competitive; both as cities and as academic institutions. This competitiveness should be recognized at the European level, in addition to public-private partnerships.
- 7) The connection between cities and universities is unique to these European growth hubs. If we cannot foster competitiveness and innovation in these regions, Europe risks falling behind globally.

- 8) There is often criticism, and not without merit, about EU bureaucracy. For example, AI can reveal significant inefficiencies and redundancies in current systems. But this doesn't mean the EU is useless; it means we must focus on what matters: working on the right issues, with the right partners, under guidance that is directional rather than overly prescriptive. Over-regulation should not stifle agile cooperation.
- 9) Another major challenge is the gap between knowledge and implementation. The lack of understanding of the local level needs leads to decisions based on inaccurate data. If you don't know the area, its needs, and its specifics, the resulting policy is often misguided. This undermines trust in the entire system.
- 10) This global-local tension can lead to absurd situations. For instance, Espoo is sometimes described domestically as being too densely built, despite being one of the greenest and most decentralized large cities in Europe. I recall a visit where Ursula von der Leyen and EU leaders were brought to Espoo. After touring the city and ending in Nuuksio National Park, I mentioned that our local media considers Espoo overbuilt. Their reaction was simply: *"Really?"* This illustrates how EU directives can go wrong if they're not based on a true understanding of local realities. This said, European cities have a lot in common. What we need is a shared European level strategy and vision for cities. We need a shared story. Let's do it together. ■

Photograph: Olli Urpela / Pirttiliitodesign





This section explores how sustainable development is conceptualized within the context of this book. It examines the transformative potential of the UN's 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and shares the City of Espoo's journey, from its initial steps in implementing the Agenda to becoming a pioneer in the Voluntary Local Review (VLR) process.

What is Sustainability and a Sustainable City?

Understanding SDGs

In this book, we define sustainability using the Brundtland definition, as outlined in the seminal report **Our Common Future** (1987), published by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). Known as the Brundtland Report, it defines sustainable development as:



Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

This definition highlights the necessity of preserving resources and the environment for future generations while addressing current needs. It also underscores the importance of integrating economic growth with environmental conservation and stresses equitable access to resources, aiming to reduce global poverty. Furthermore, the Brundtland definition acknowledges that environmental challenges such as climate change, deforestation, and pollution are interconnected, requiring global cooperation to achieve sustainable solutions.

The Three Pillars of Sustainability

The Brundtland Report laid the groundwork for the widely recognized **three pillars of sustainability**, which continue to guide discussions on sustainable development:

1. Economic Sustainability

Promoting inclusive economic growth that supports livelihoods without depleting resources or compromising future opportunities.

2. Social Sustainability

Ensuring equality and access to essential resources, education, and opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their circumstances.

3. Environmental Sustainability

Protecting ecosystems, reducing pollution, and managing natural resources responsibly to maintain ecological balance.

While the Brundtland Report has faced criticism for its broad scope and insufficient focus on planetary boundaries, it remains a cornerstone of environmental studies and policy. It also laid the foundation for the 2030 UN Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), discussed in the next section.



Photograph: Noelle Renberg

The 2030 UN Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in September 2015, is a transformative blueprint for achieving global peace, prosperity, and sustainability. At its core are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), accompanied by 169 targets and 231 measurable indicators, which address the most pressing challenges of our time: poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, and global instability. Though not legally binding, it represents a global commitment to achieving peace and prosperity for people and the planet through partnerships by 2030. At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which tackle key global challenges, including poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace, and justice.

Key Features of the 2030 UN Agenda

Vision of Sustainable Development starts with an integrated approach balancing the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability. The 17 SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) that measure the development apply to all countries, regions, and cities but also to academia, businesses, and to non-governmental organizations. They are universal irrespective of development levels, emphasizing shared responsibility for addressing global challenges. Thirdly it is a pledge to ensure that development benefits the most marginalized and vulnerable populations, coined to a slogan “Leave No One Behind.” Finally, the SDGs are interconnected and indivisible, requiring comprehensive strategies to ensure progress across all areas.

Significance of the 2030 Agenda

The SDGs represent a global call to action, offering a roadmap to build a sustainable, equitable, and prosperous future. By addressing the root causes of issues like poverty, climate change, and inequality, they emphasize: Urgent climate action to safeguard ecosystems and ensure resilience, Social inclusion, ensuring equitable opportunities for all, and Economic sustainability through innovation, sustainable technologies, and job creation.

The SDGs aim not only to mitigate environmental and social challenges but also to foster economic growth in ways that are inclusive and future-proof. This holistic approach provides governments, cities, businesses, and individuals with the tools to transform our world by 2030.

By aligning local actions with global goals, cities play a pivotal role in advancing sustainability and serving as laboratories for innovation and collaboration. A concrete outcome of this work is the VLR (Voluntary Local Review) movement that measures the communicate what cities are doing and how where they are in relation to SDGs.



The Dark Side of the Moon: Navigating SDGs in Urban Development

For a city embarking on the integration of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), three critical factors must be considered.

1. The Complexity of SDGs for Experts

Experts often find SDGs challenging to work with. This is primarily because they are deeply immersed in their respective fields, approaching problems from a specialized perspective rather than a holistic one. The interdisciplinary nature of SDGs requires a broader, more integrative approach — something that may not come naturally to field-specific professionals.

2. SDGs and Financial Sustainability

SDGs do not automatically translate into financial returns. In Europe, for example, thousands of city-led projects receive funding from the European Union. While SDGs themselves are not a direct source of funding, they play a crucial role in strengthening city governance, fostering community engagement, and enhancing preparedness for external funding opportunities. By embedding SDGs into city strategies, municipalities position themselves more effectively to attract financial support for development initiatives.

3. The True Value of SDGs Lies in Their Application

While SDGs hold intrinsic value, their true impact emerges when they are applied in context. They provide a structured framework that allows urban challenges and opportunities to be assessed through a comprehensive, holistic lens. This approach ensures that cities can align their efforts with sustainable principles while addressing local priorities.

To navigate these challenges effectively, the following chapters introduce an SDG-analysis tool (SST). By utilizing SST or similar SDG-based tools, cities can systematically integrate sustainability principles into their development strategies, ensuring a more cohesive and actionable approach to urban transformation.



Photograph: Elias Metsämaa / Filmbutik Oy

The 17 SDGs: A Closer Look

Each of the 17 SDGs, listed below, targets specific challenges, forming a comprehensive roadmap for sustainability. 17 SDGs are broken down to 69 targets, which in turn are measured by specific both quantitative and qualitative indicators, 231 altogether. The 17 SDGs are:

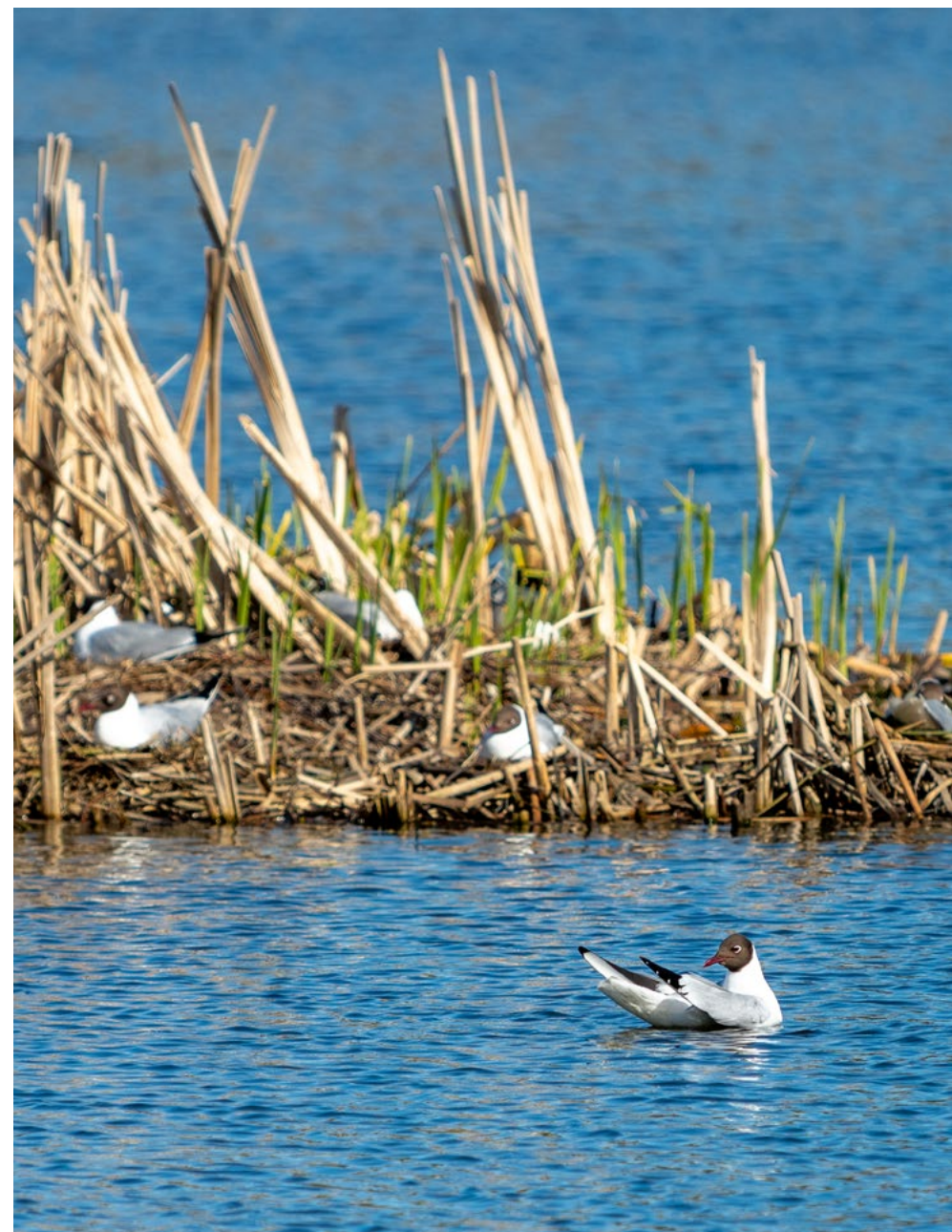
- 1. No Poverty**
End poverty in all forms everywhere.
- 2. Zero Hunger**
Achieve food security, improved nutrition, and sustainable agriculture.
- 3. Good Health and Well-Being**
Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all ages.
- 4. Quality Education**
Provide inclusive, equitable, and quality education and lifelong learning opportunities.
- 5. Gender Equality**
Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
- 6. Clean Water and Sanitation**
Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation.
- 7. Affordable and Clean Energy**
Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



2030 UN Agenda and the SDGs provide a framework and worldview, a set of quantitative and qualitative metrics, and perhaps most importantly a globally shared vocabulary and lingua for sustainable development.

- 8. Decent Work and Economic Growth**
Promote inclusive, sustainable economic growth, full employment, and decent work.
- 9. Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure**
Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation.
- 10. Reduced Inequalities**
Reduce inequality within and among countries.
- 11. Sustainable Cities and Communities**
Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.
- 12. Responsible Consumption and Production**
Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.
- 13. Climate Action**
Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.
- 14. Life Below Water**
Conserve and sustainably use oceans, seas, and marine resources.
- 15. Life on Land**
Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, forests, and biodiversity.
- 16. Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions**
Promote peaceful, inclusive societies and justice for all.
- 17. Partnerships for the Goals**
Strengthen global partnerships for sustainable development.



Photograph: Ami Koiranen

A Call to Action – SDGs and cities

Cities are home to over 55% of the global population, a figure projected to rise to nearly 70% by 2050, in Europe the estimation for 2050 is 80%. This makes urban areas hubs of economic activity, innovation, and cultural exchange, but also epicenters of resource consumption, pollution, and social inequality. The SDGs recognize cities' dual role as both contributors to global challenges and key players in finding solutions. The SDGs are not merely abstract ideals; they are actionable, measurable objectives. Cities face interconnected challenges such as housing shortages, traffic congestion, waste management, inequality, and climate risks. Cities are also centers of innovation and policy experimentation, making them ideal for piloting and scaling solutions to global challenges. Urban areas often drive progress on areas such as: climate work, clean energy transitions, circular economy initiatives, reducing waste and promoting sustainable consumption, transportation, sustainable infrastructure development, local nature, and social innovations. This is typically done in partnerships that connect the public sector with the private one, and with people as well. The SDGs provide a holistic and interconnected roadmap that helps cities to address these issues and partnerships in an integrated way.

By embracing the SDGs and integrating their principles into urban governance and local actions at a strategic, tactical and operative levels, cities, communities, and nations can create a resilient foundation for urban development. The SDGs emphasize the importance of inclusive decision-making processes to ensure all citizens have a voice in shaping their communities. This aligns well with the need for more transparent governance, including businesses, nonprofits, and academia, while at the same time strengthening trust between governments and citizens.

Photograph: Johanna Taskinen



It is not so much about following the goals, targets, and indicators to the letter than it is about using SDGs, and sustainability as a mindset and framework and lingua to engage, and communicate with the community.

This makes SDGs the only glocal tool for holistic sustainable development. It provides cities a comprehensive framework to address the unique challenges urban areas face from different dimensions of sustainability, while capitalizing on their potential to drive sustainable development. And it is cities that ultimately face the challenges of all sustainability dimensions: ecological, social and economic as interlinked communities.

The Story of Espoo's Voluntary Local Review (VLR)



...When we embarked on our first Voluntary Local Review (VLR) journey in the fall of 2019, there was a clear goal: to do a VLR. However, we had no predefined blueprint for what it should look like, or how it should be done. At the time, VLRs typically examined between one and five Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), detailing city actions related to the selected goals separately. While this approach was widely accepted and encouraged by cities, national governments, and the United Nations, it did not align with Espoo's vision of being a forerunner in sustainable development...

...Over the next three months, we engaged in extensive discussions, research, and reflection to determine what a meaningful VLR should look like for Espoo. It became evident that SDGs in our city were not isolated targets but rather interconnected components of broader, phenomenon-driven change...

...As a result, we decided that our VLR should be grounded in our city's strategy implementation, using the Espoo Story, our guiding strategic framework, as the foundation of our review.

Looking back, the ability to take this unconventional approach (Year 2019) was made possible by:

- *Strong culture of experimentation,*
- *Deep commitment to sustainable development across the city organization, and*
- *Trust from top management (mayor and acting team).*

Despite the uncertainty and complexity of the process, we were confident that by taking the time to navigate the ambiguity, we would eventually find a way forward. This trust and flexibility allowed us to embrace uncertainty, explore new approaches, and fully commit to engaging our community, with more than 1,000 people participating in the process.

VLR2020 ultimately became a community-driven endeavor, though this realization only came later. At the outset, we reached out to numerous stakeholders simply because we were navigating uncharted territory. With no clear roadmap, our instinct was to seek diverse perspectives and expertise. In retrospect, what initially seemed like an act of necessity evolved into one of the greatest strengths of the process: deep, meaningful engagement with the community...

A city is a genuinely complex entity, constantly evolving and shaped by those who define it. The proverb of seven blind men describing an elephant, each providing a different perspective, aptly applies to cities. This raises an important question: on what foundation should sustainable development efforts then be built? For Espoo, the answer was Espoo Story, the city strategy.

In Espoo, like in so many cities, strategy serves as a shared vision and value framework, providing a strategic foundation that is both adaptable and actionable.



...When we reviewed our city's activities through the lens of the SDGs, we were initially surprised at how well they aligned. However, upon deeper reflection, the alignment with the strategy made perfect sense...

Across Finland, Europe, and beyond, cities are at the forefront of implementing sustainable development, spanning ecological, social, and economic dimensions. From early childhood education to high-school and vocational training to world-class social care systems, from cultural enrichment to environmental stewardship and employment services, cities play a pivotal role in shaping sustainable futures. In essence, cities are where the SDGs materialize into everyday realities.

The success of the VLR process in Espoo was a testament to collaboration. Over six months, more than 1,000 individuals contributed, ranging from the mayor and city officials to partners and visiting students from neighboring countries.



“...In Espoo we saw it as central that SDGs are a set of goals enabling, future-oriented, diverse and both local and international development together. For us they were a common language for sustainable development that can be used internally, nationally and globally. In the VLR this meant assessing the realization of the Espoo Story through the SDG goals simply because that shared the story who we are, where we come from and where we are going.



Photograph: Jakin Diaz / MySome Oy

“The diversity of voices and expertise involved underscored a key lesson from the process, one that was both humbling and inspiring. Witnessing the dedication, skill, and passion of individuals working towards a more sustainable Espoo was a profound experience. Despite differing professional backgrounds, values, and perspectives, all contributors shared a common goal: to build a better, more sustainable city...

Espoo's first-ever VLR was a comprehensive review of tangible projects, initiatives, and actions undertaken in alignment with the Espoo Story. These initiatives were mapped against the UN's Agenda 2030 and the SDGs. The Espoo approach was distinct in that it was emergent. Rather than merely reviewing existing data, we actively engaged experts, project managers, partners, and citizens, inviting them to share insights and contribute to the review process. These contributions were then assessed by internal and external SDG experts, ensuring a robust and inclusive evaluation.

“...Ultimately, the decision to adopt such an integrative approach was simple. In Espoo, the SDGs were recognized as both a cornerstone and a capstone, essential elements in shaping our community's vision, aspirations, and actions. Our commitment to sustainable development is not just about achieving global goals; it is about creating a thriving, inclusive, and resilient city for generations to come. Through the VLR process, Espoo reaffirmed its role as a leader in sustainable urban development, demonstrating that the SDGs are not abstract targets, but guiding principles embedded in the fabric of everyday life...”

VLR Implementation As SDG Capacity Building For Sustainable Development

For SDGs to have value they must benefit all the activities of the city, including the design, implementation and communication of the strategy.

“...The majority of the content was created by various city units. These units and their faculty were not only instrumental in designing, writing, and reviewing the VLR but also in implementing the very initiatives and actions under review. This holistic and inclusive approach communicated a clear message: Espoo's VLR was not just about reporting progress but about demonstrating the city's ongoing commitment to achieving the SDGs as part of a global community.



Photograph: Elias Metsämaa / Filmbutik Oy

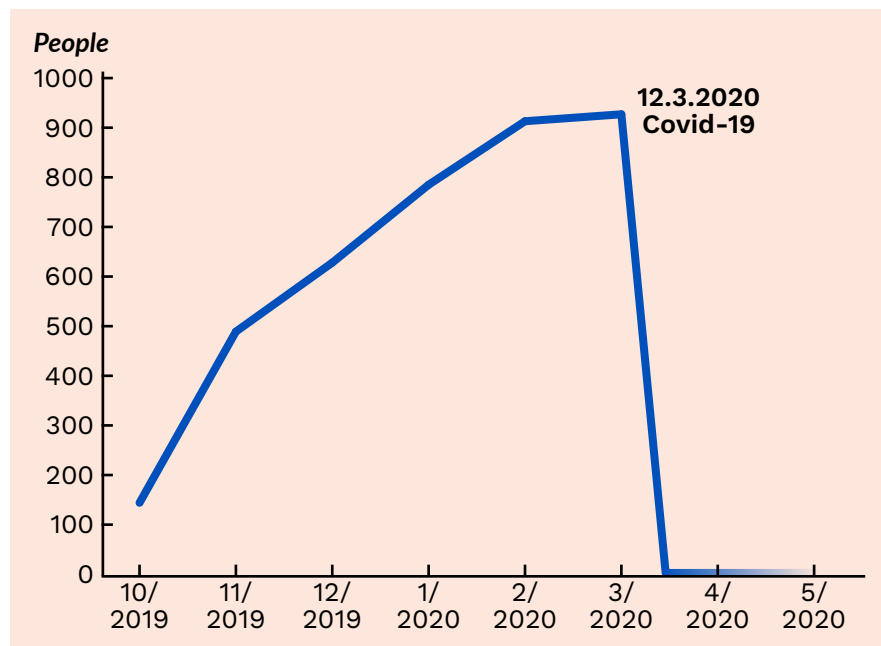
VLR In Practice

All city units, group actors and partners were asked to answer the questions below.

What to do: Go through the main projects, ventures and phenomena in your unit. Select 1 and no more than 3 projects and draw up a description not exceeding 4,000 characters, or approximately 650 words, per project. The texts should contain the items described below, but not limited to them:

- What is the background to the phenomenon, project or activity (venture)? Also describe whether the phenomenon is primarily about economic, ecological or socio-cultural development.
- What is the connection to the Espoo Story or to the City of Espoo?
- Which SDG the project mainly concerns. Select 1-5 SDGs (the UN's Sustainable Development Goals) at goal and target level. What is the most important single goal?
- What is good about the phenomenon, project or activity? (3 highlights of 1-2 sentences of these in the fact box)
- What lessons can we learn from it, and what can we develop further? (3 highlights of 1-2 sentences of these in the fact box)
- What will be important in the future about the phenomenon, project or activity from the perspective of sustainable development?
- Possible image material related to the article?
- From whom/where to find more information (contact details will be published in the report)?

After this, a specially convened VLR editorial team collected and edited the material in a common format, and experts evaluated the material using the SDG reference framework, described in more detail in next section.



Picture 9. VLR process in Espoo was community-driven

A total of 17 different workshops were held during the VLR process. The number of persons at the events varied between 3 and 103 people. The aim of the workshops were to outline the needs of the city as widely as possible and in relation to SDGs. The temporal focus was on Autumn 2019 and Winter 2020. In addition to internal meetings and workshops, meetings with 28 different stakeholders were organized. These included companies, communities, national institutions and organizations. A total of 927 people were met face-to-face between 1 October 2019 and 12 March 2020. Covid-19 brought a sudden stop to workshops but did not affect the actual review process. After March 2020 workshops and meetings continued but just virtually.



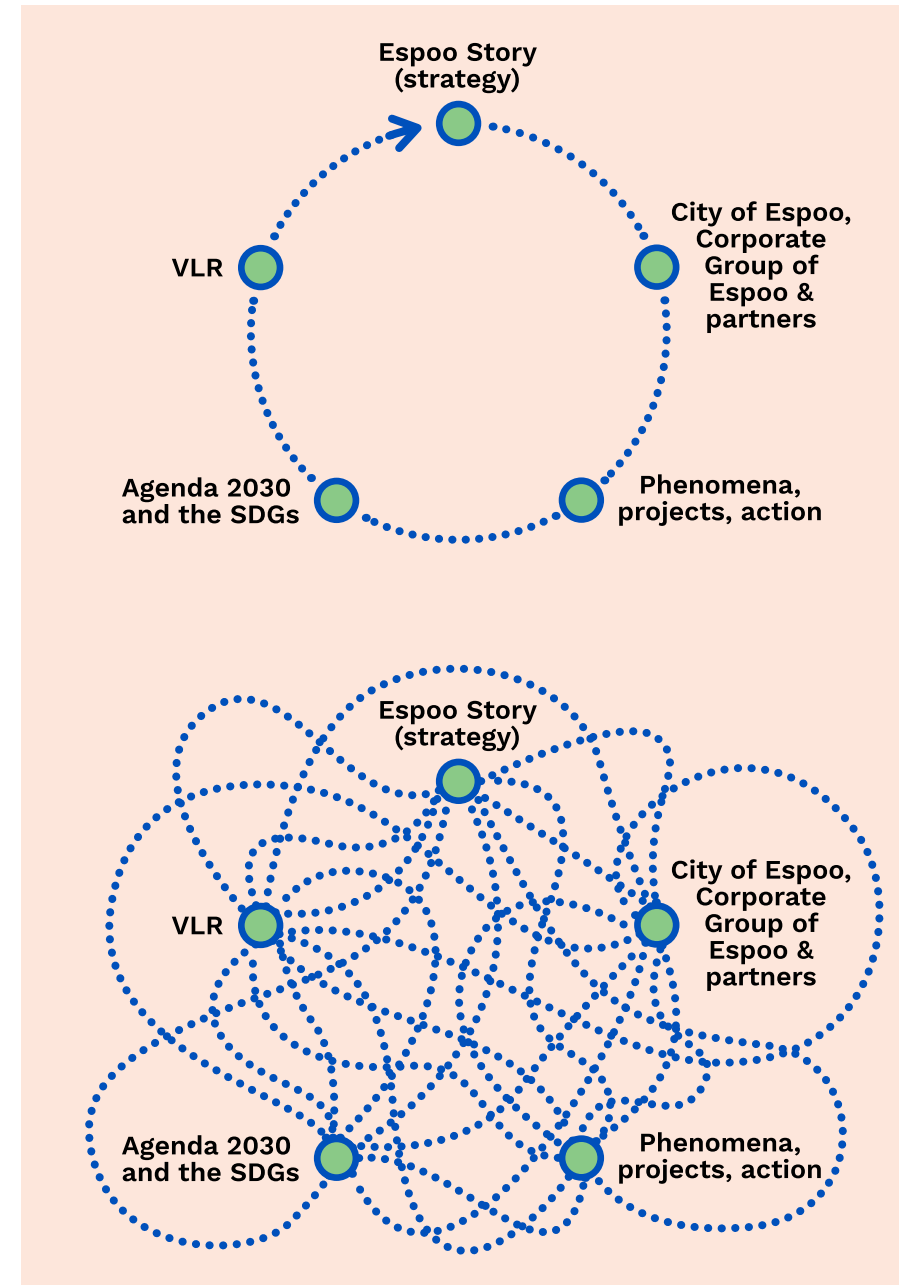
Photograph: Elias Metsämäa / Filmbutik Oy

Picture 10. VLR process was iterative and emergent →

In Espoo the VLR process was phenomena-driven and input came from within the organisation and different stakeholders. Altogether there were more than 30 different units, companies, and other institutions contributing to the design and implementation of Espoo VLR with hundreds of different individuals. Doing it together was the Espoo way. It also meant that the process management had to be kept lean and agile with development loops and with divergent and convergent phases following each other. This can be best described as an emergent process with design thinking driven practices. It also meant that although in theory the VLR process does follow a nice process loop, reality was much closer to something that could be described as “Dancing with Ambiguity”.



Photograph: Elias Metsämäa / Filmbutik Oy

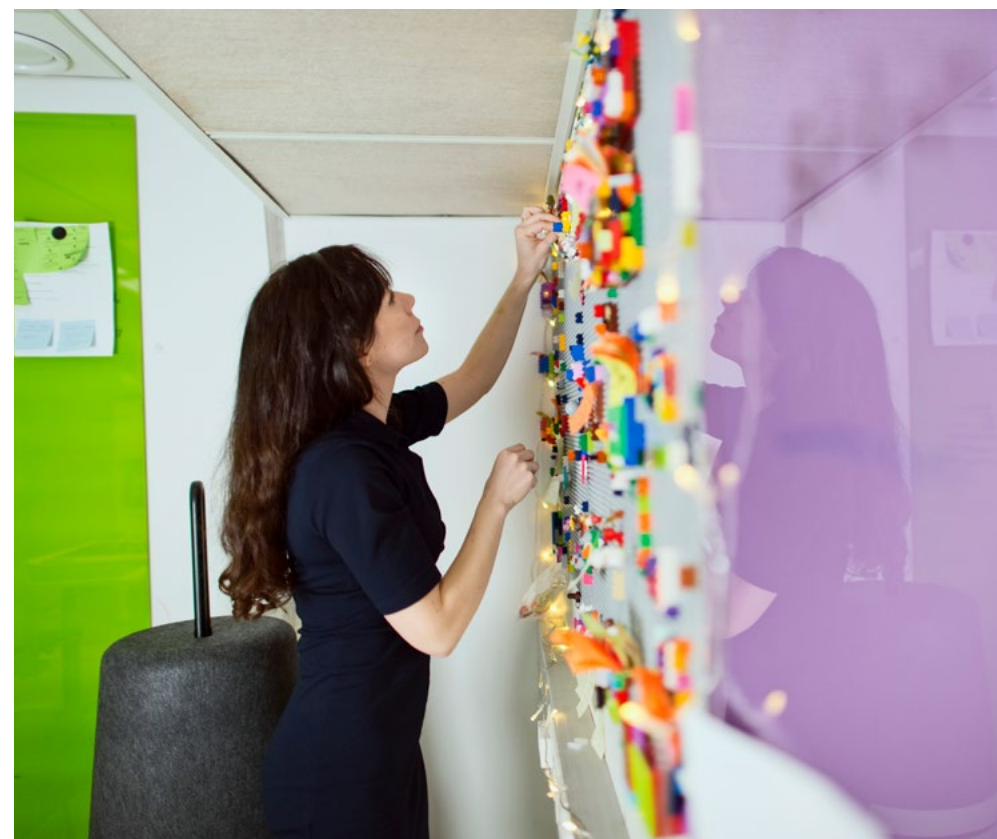


The review process involved experts from different sectors of the city as well as external experts. In total, 6 people participated in the process. The objectives of the review were consistent with the entire VLR process. The goal was that:

- 1) The review is factual, concrete and solution-oriented.
- 2) The review is comprehensive, inclusive, transparent and thorough.
- 3) The review is a process that commits to the implementation of the SDG and evaluates its implementation in everyday life and in work.
- 4) External reviewers are also involved in the review process, which will bring neutrality and credibility.
- 5) The review process and the review encourages more activities and cooperation.
- 6) The review process and the review increase SDG competence in the organisation.
- 7) The review boosts the monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the Espoo Story and of the SDG goals and identifies development targets.
- 8) The review strengthens cooperation on sustainable development between cities, at national level and at international level.
- 9) The review serves as one of the communication tools within the city, between cities and for other stakeholders on the local implementation of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs.

The work of the assessment team was based on the articles drawn up by the units, which are examined from three perspectives:

- SDG relevance: the main SDG and 1–4 others (visualised in report)
- Future potential: icon, (shown if present)
- Handprint or CO₂ handprint potential: icon (shown if present)



Photograph: Heidi-Hanna Karhu

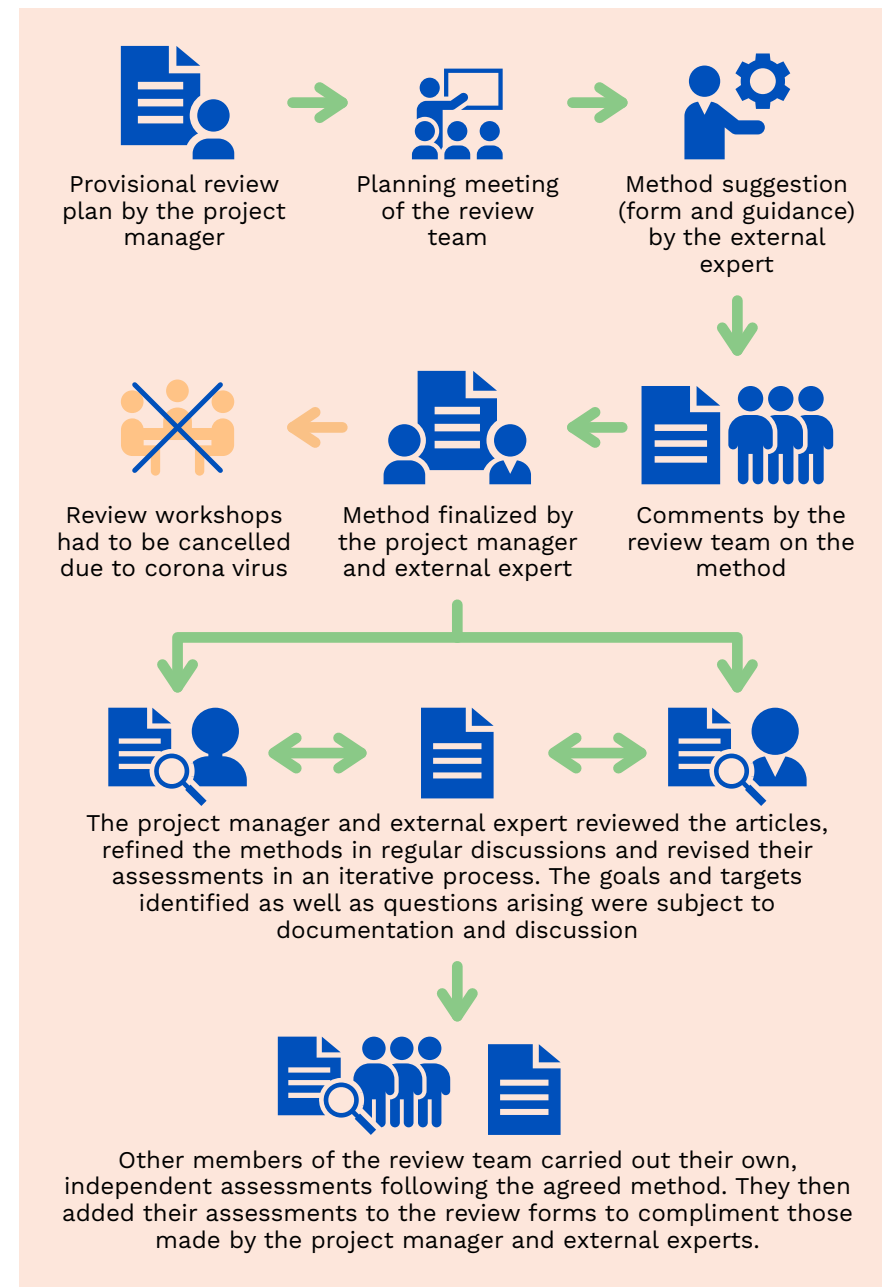
Common Objectives In The Review Process



Photograph: Olli Urpela / Pintailitodesign

Picture 11. Espoo's process for SDG review →

Espoo's review process, interpreted strictly, did not meet the criteria of scientific evaluation. However, the review was thorough for several reasons: a) it involved external experts, b) there were three separate review rounds done using same methods and process with blind review (several reviewers), c) discussion and qualitative analysis based on the review rounds were designed and implemented, and d) quantitative data reflecting the scope of the process was also collected and reported.



Assessment Of SDG Relevance

The SDG relevance was assessed for each 17 SDGs as follows:

Not relevant

The project, phenomenon or activity was not relevant for that SDG. In this case, all boxes on the assessment form were left blank for the SDG.

Quite relevant

The project, phenomenon or activity implements the SDG or its target. However, the link was not very strong or was not especially at the core of the project, phenomenon or activity. Finally, the visibility of this SDG in connection with the article in the VLR report was assessed on a case-by-case basis.

Very relevant

The project clearly implements the SDG or its targets. The SDG was marked on the VLR report for the article.

Main goal

For each article, one SDG which it most clearly implemented was marked. This SDG was highlighted in the report in connection with the article. In the assessment form, one goal was identified as the main goal. A maximum of 4 goals were identified in Very relevant sections.

Assessment Of Future Potential

Future potential was assessed on a three-step scale:

The present

The project, phenomenon or activity primarily concerns the present. The classification would not appear in the VLR report.

The near future

The full potential of the project, phenomenon or activity would be achieved in the next few years. The aim was to identify articles that may be lifted to the Future category. The classification would not appear in the VLR report.

The future

The project, phenomenon or activity would reach its full potential no sooner than around 2025. The effectiveness of the project, phenomenon or activity is assessed as significant in its own reference framework. If an article is classified in this category, it would be accompanied by the Future symbol in the report. Every article was classified into one Future potential class in the assessment form.

Assessment Of Handprint Potential

Handprint and CO₂ handprint potential was assessed on a three-step scale:

Local

The project, phenomenon or activity may be very important for Espoo, but it cannot be disseminated elsewhere, or dissemination is not actively carried out. This category also includes projects, phenomena and activities that have little international novelty value. The classification does not appear in the VLR report.

Scalable

The project, phenomenon or activity may be scalable, but this is uncertain. Or it can be scaled, but it is not certain whether attempts are made to promote scaling or whether it succeeds or not. The aim of the classification is to identify articles that may be lifted to the Handprint category. The classification does not appear in the VLR report.

Handprint

The project, phenomenon or activity is clearly scalable and its dissemination is actively ongoing, planned and/or likely. If the phenomenon has clear impact on carbon handprint then that is selected. If an article is classified in this category, it will be accompanied by the Handprint or the Carbon Handprint symbol in the report. Every article was classified into one Handprint potential class in the assessment form.



Photograph: Kerttu Penttilä



Photograph: Jakin Diaz / MySome Oy

We wanted to have a VLR process that was:

- 1) Inclusive, participatory, transparent and a thorough process
- 2) Evidence based, would produce tangible lessons and solutions
- 3) It would be followed by concrete action and collaboration that drives SDG implementation
- 4) The review is factual, concrete, solution-oriented, comprehensive, inclusive, transparent and thorough
- 5) The review is a process that commits to the implementation of the SDG and evaluates its implementation in everyday life and in work
- 6) External reviewers are also involved in the review process, which will bring neutrality and credibility
- 7) The review process and the review increase SDG competence in the organisation
- 8) The review boosts the monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the Espoo Story and of the SDG goals and identifies development targets
- 9) The review strengthens cooperation on sustainable development between cities, at national level and at international level
- 10) The review serves as one of the main communication tools within the city, between cities and for other stakeholders on the local implementation of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs

Summarizing Espoo VLR2020

A city has many functions, but above all it is a community of its inhabitants and a place to live. Experiences of built environment and stories, memories, and images which are related to the places and intertwine and build the future of the city. In Espoo, the SDGs are perceived as a mutually dependent and phenomena-driven entity. Therefore, instead of reviewing a single SDGs case by case, the VLR2020 was implemented through assessing functional entities, different projects and processes in relation to the entire SDG reference framework. This was a conscious decision and result of thorough discussion with different stakeholders within and outside the city. The idea was that VLR should function as a tool for communicating and collaborating with different cities and entities, but it is also a tool to better understand what is actually happening within the city. We believed that SDG -work needs to start with this latter function.

In a sense, Espoo was a bit selfish when instead of just making a linear SDG review of each SDG independently, VLR looked at what was happening in the city. Then that was mapped into SDGs. It makes comparing the SDGs to other cities a bit more demanding but on the other hand, it gives more real, transparent and holistic picture of what is happening

within the city. One might ask that if each city has unique operations, so how can one compare the results? Point is, that the very epistemology of VLRs and VNRs is that they should be executed to serve the entity in question, whether it being a city or a nation. Through this inference, understanding the development process, it has more to offer when collaborating with others. In other words, VLR and VNR processes act as vehicles for cities or nations to better understand themselves and provide means for sustainable development. For the City of Espoo, the SDGs are not just targets and indicators, but they are a language that help to communicate the strengths, weaknesses, dreams and visions of the city and most importantly the community.



Photograph: Elias Metsämäa / Filmbutik Oy

Conclusions And Learnings From VLR2020

In Espoo, the VLR2020 process was a tremendous, exciting and at the same time demanding learning journey. At the ideation phase the phenomenon-based model was chosen, which meant that all the material would come from within the organization and from different entities in an emergent manner. There was no way knowing what the experts would write or if they would report anything at all. In essence, this meant that the city was totally exposed to all kinds of criticism already in early phase of the process. From the city leadership perspective, allowing the process to be so open was a very courageous decision. Especially when criticism, albeit constructive, was exactly what was asked from the experts.

Around 100 different VLR articles was the final count when material from the whole city organization, group level units, institutions and partners are summed together.

“ ...The number of articles was irrelevant compared to how seriously all authors and author teams reacted to the request of contributing to VLR. It was simply astonishing. During the workshop and material collection phases it was evident that clear majority of experts and other city officials are extremely committed to their work...

Once the articles started coming in, the editorial team composed of experts from five different units, realized that in addition to commitment towards their work, experts had taken the task of reporting their work to the VLR with earnest.

“ ...It was the cycle of material creation, editorial work and then SDG -review of the material that was the heart and soul of VLR2020.

“ ...First the committed work of experts, then editorial team trying its very best to grow up to the challenge of editing the material in a concise, fair and just way. And finally, the review team, with outside expert help, sparing no effort in making sure that all articles receive a just and thorough review. This is what constitutes the core of what Espoo VLR2020 was all about...

Finally, completing a VLR is not an exam, neither is it a competition. Just like sustainable development in general, a VLR is an adventure, and a journey best traveled together. In addition to reviewing phenomena, projects and processes within the city and mapping them to SDGs, key indicators for the city based on each SDG was selected and presented in an Annex.

As mentioned already in the beginning of this book, cities are genuinely complex entities. Furthermore, they are in constant organic flow. One can have as many definitions of why cities exist as there are people defining it. We need a shared glocal framework glocal metrics and a glocal lingua to pursue sustainable development. That is how vibrant, sustainable and thriving cities are built.

Localizing SDGs – A Process of 'How to...'

This chapter is based on the science journal article: **Seven Steps to Strategic SDG Sensemaking for Cities**, published in Administrative Sciences journal Year 2022.

Cities face complexities at several levels. Cities are complex networks of people, organizations and infrastructure. In the 1960s, cities were recognized as:

“

... complex systems whose infrastructural, economic and social components are strongly interrelated and therefore difficult to understand in isolation

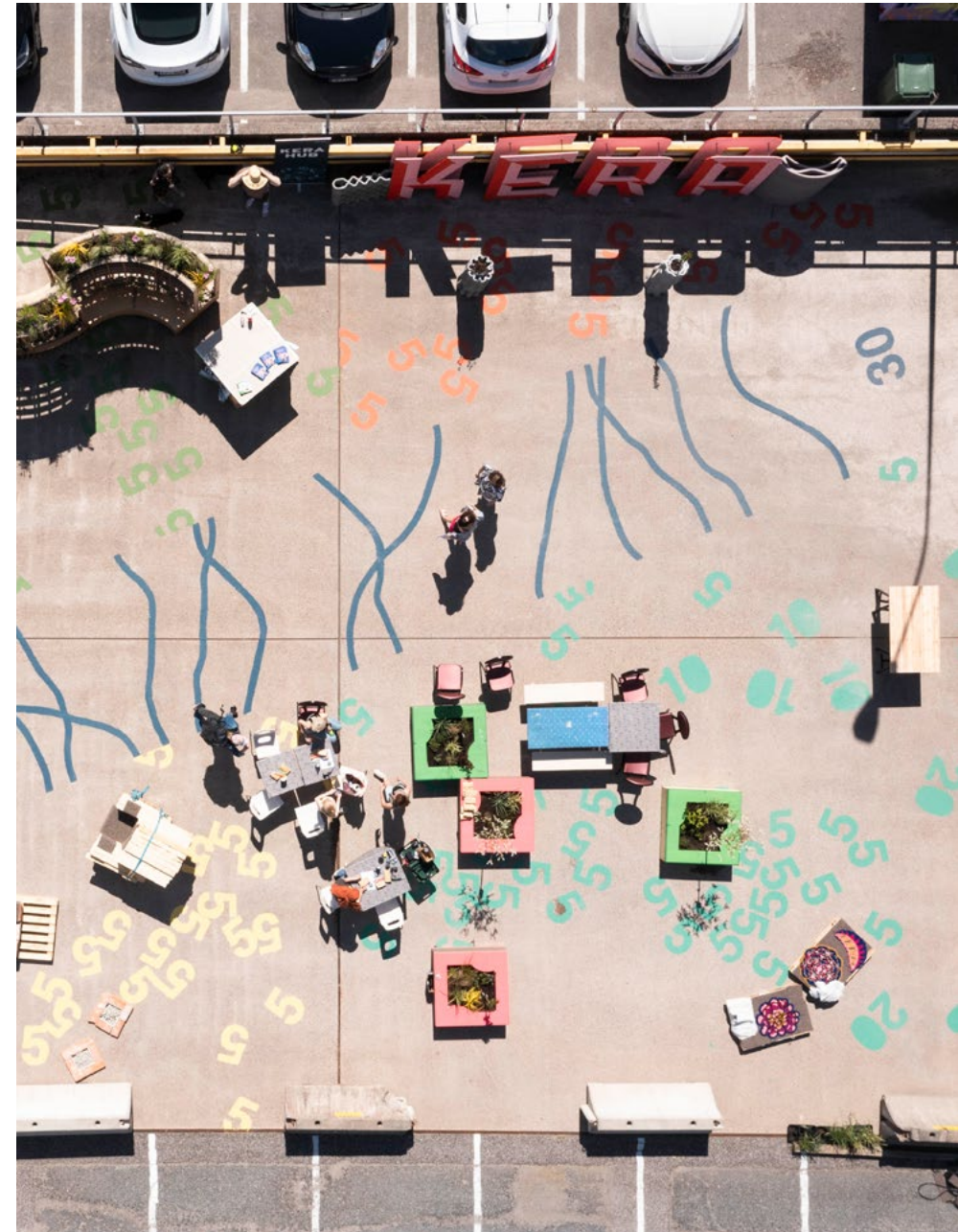
Jane Jacobs (1961)

Or as Michael Batty coined:

“

... there are almost as many perspectives on the nature of a city as there are persons researching their structure, managing their organizations, or engaging with their design.

Michael Batty (2018)



Photograph: Vessi Härmääinen

What makes a city sustainable and why is this important? These are fundamental questions for which there are now well-established answers based on systemic knowledge. Environmental, human-centred and natural sciences all answer these questions from their own general perspectives. How to achieve sustainable, smart, inclusive, resilient, and prosperous cities in practice is, however, a context-driven question so that answers must be more than a sum of other

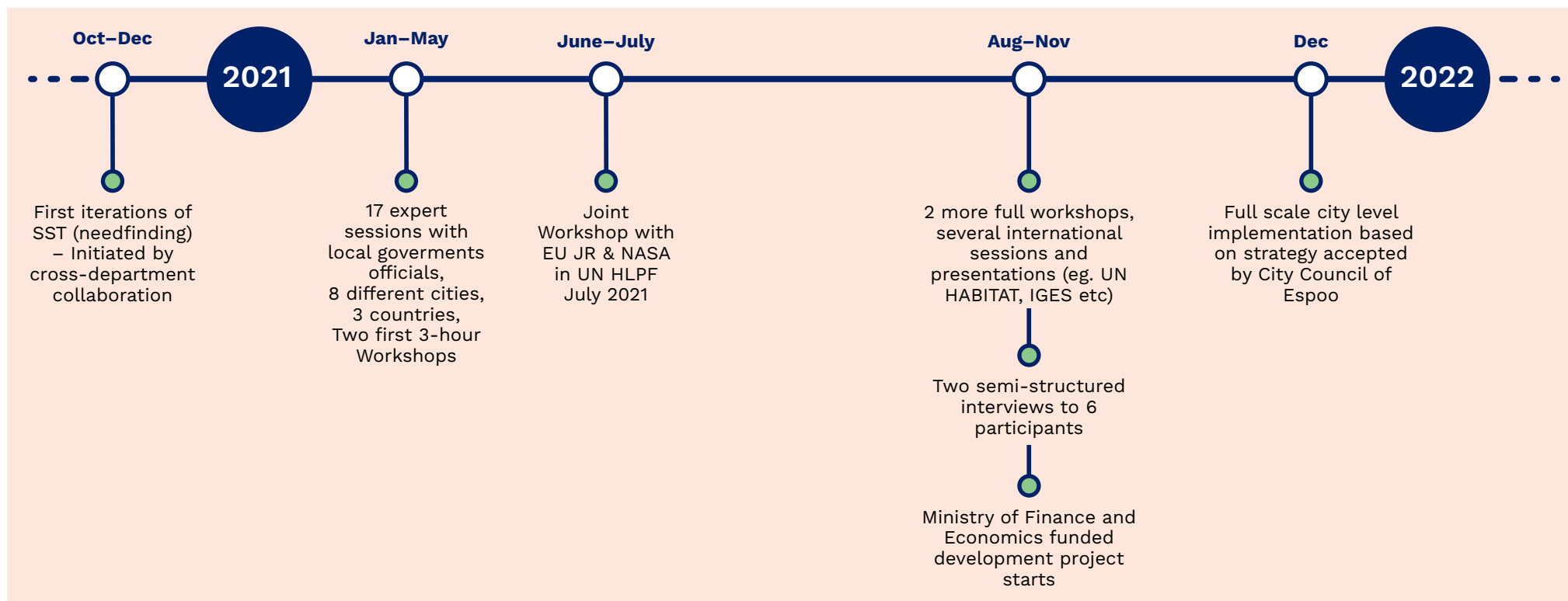


Photograph: Jakin Diaz / MySome Oy

approaches. For example, any successful city strategy must include an affective and emotional buy-in from stakeholders, as well as cognitive rational actions. Any local practical approach is also replete with interlinked complex synergies and trade-offs between different goals and other dimensions of development.

Due to its all-encompassing, systemic and complex nature, specifying the right questions and measurable quantities on sustainable development is at least as important as finding answers. In other words, to navigate complex situations we must first understand the nature of the complexity underlying a given phenomenon.

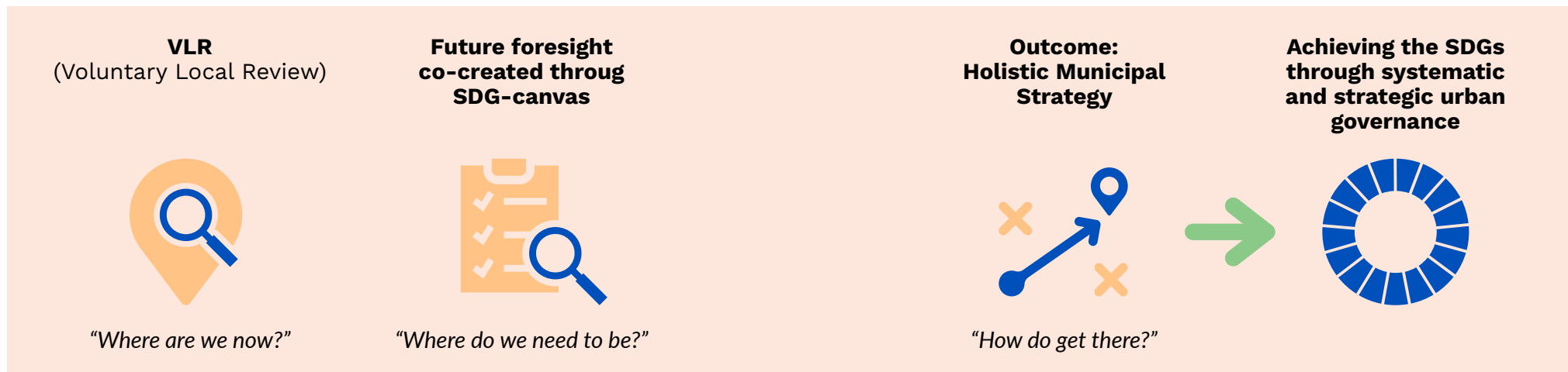
Once the complexity of the urban phenomenon is understood in context, a sensemaking process on how to proceed towards solutions can start. This rationale, applied to urban development, provided the impetus to develop the SDG Sensemaking Tool (SST). It is a practical process that can create an accurate and holistic view of a particular phenomenon in relation to all dimensions of sustainability, including economic, ecological, social, and cultural. In addition, SST is a facilitated process, where a set of indicators is developed to link specific local contexts to more general objectives. Then, these local context-driven metrics can be communicated and compared with internationally agreed sustainable development goals (SDGs), and with their specific targets and indicators. In addition, an important element in SST is that it catalyzes collaboration, shared understanding and engagement to the analyzed topic. Achieving sustainability is as much, if not more, about motivation, intention and participation than purely technical solutions. The goals are important, but the journey must be feasible and inspiring. SST is a process of analysis that has tangible strategic, tactical and operative context-driven outcomes, which can be utilized to further the achievement of SDGs in cities and contribute to overcoming some of these challenges.



Picture 12. Development journey of the SST & SDG Canvas process

Development journey of the first iterations for SDG Sensemaking Tool (SST), explained in more detail in Picture 13 and Picture 14. Now, year 2025 the tool, also referred to as SDG Canvas is widely used in cities as an analysis tool but also as a tool for strategic foresight. The rationale for developing the SST was that although cities face similar challenges on a larger scale, the paths to solutions are case-dependent and vary. SST acts as a phenomenon-based process, which takes into account city specific needs, resources and culture. It aims for societal improvement at local and other levels. Policymakers, city officials, non-governmental organisations, and even companies can replicate the process in other cities, regions or different contexts and produce outcomes, which serve their specific development needs.

The workshop results are at the same time transparent and comparable as they are induced using the same process; SST.



Picture 13. Strategic urban governance process in practice

How VLR's and SST-canvas or SST can be used as vehicles and processes for collaborative and future foresight driven urban strategy creation. This connects well with storytelling, which can be used at operative, tactical and strategic levels of urban governance.

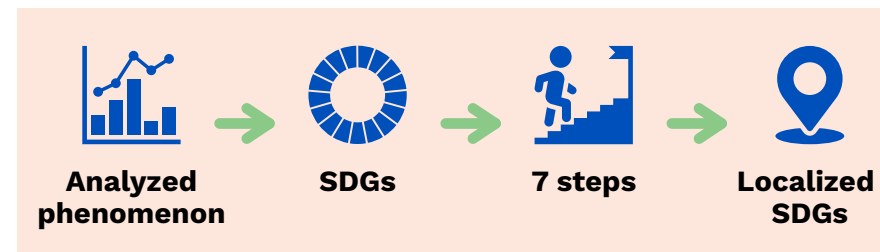


Picture 14. SDG Canvas or SST

Mockup-template designed by Freepik.



Photograph: Johanna Taskinen



Picture 15. SST process described at a generic level

Abstract-level description of the SST process. Analysed phenomenon goes through a sensemaking process where it is reflected in relation to SDGs. The tool can be applied to individual, team, unit, or department level phenomena or projects. They can be descriptive, such as 'building a new bike lane to location A', or thematic, for example 'developing a sustainable and smart urban area in location B'. The SST process can be executed individually or in teams. The latter is advisable, since a team possesses more diverse abilities and knowledge. The meta-level goal of the whole process is to create focused interactions amongst participants and across different stakeholders.

There are many manuals and guidebooks on how SDGs should be reviewed and why it is important. Reviewing SDGs is an important part of creating strategic, tactical and operative understandings on what should be developed and why. Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), for example, are an acknowledged fact-based format for these processes, though their usability is case-dependent. The ways to further sustainable development in each city with its context specific needs and boundaries vary. This was another motivation for creating the SDG sensemaking tool: City officials and policy makers can utilize the SST analysis process in a context-driven way. This makes it possible to better understand and describe in detail what can and should be done locally to achieve the SDGs. ■



This final section provides a synthesis of the book's key insights. The introduction set the stage by exploring the context of urban governance. The second chapter presented perspectives from European forerunner mayors and thought leaders. The third chapter highlighted Espoo's journey with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasizing the collaborative efforts between the city organization and the local community. This concluding chapter distills the main learnings and reflects on their potential implications for cities across Europe."

Photograph: Anna Valli / Ellun Kanat

Conclusions

– Unraveling the Black Box

In the context of multilevel governance, that is, cooperation across local, regional, national, and global communities, cities are viewed through many different lenses. The perspective depends on whose needs, values, and objectives are at stake. For a citizen, the city might be primarily about access to education, healthcare, or other social services, as well as questions of land use and housing. For a company, the focus might shift toward infrastructure that enables competitiveness and growth. For academic institutions, the city can be a living laboratory for research and innovation. And for national governments, the city is often seen as an arena for implementing policies, regulations, and standards.

Each of these perspectives is valid. In fact, this diversity of expectations reflects the very purpose of cities: to serve their communities in different ways. However, in most cases, cities are often approached as though they were an input-output black box. Needs, policies, or regulations are placed in as inputs, and tangible results are expected as outputs. What happens inside, the complex processes, negotiations, and systems that translate needs into outputs, often receives little attention.

This input-output model works reasonably well when challenges are straightforward, linear, and easily addressed. Cities indeed manage countless such demands on a daily basis, ranging from social services and infrastructure to

transportation, education, and employment. But as challenges grow more complex and interdependent, the limitations of this approach become clear. Problems such as climate change, social inequality, housing affordability, and digital transformation cannot be solved through linear processes alone.

Addressing these kinds of issues requires a shift from seeing the city as a machine that produces results, to seeing it as a community for collective sense-making and problem-solving. Instead of starting with predefined inputs and outputs, the process must begin with a shared exploration of the desired impact: What kind of future does the community want to create? From there, stakeholders can work collaboratively to design strategies that lead toward that outcome.



Photograph: Kerttu Penttinen

As learned from all of the Mayor's and thought leader's, this shift requires three things in particular:

1. Dialogue-driven collaboration

Bringing together residents, businesses, institutions, and policymakers to openly discuss needs and possibilities.

2. Authentic leadership

Leaders who can build trust, navigate differences, and keep the shared vision in focus.

3. Context-sensitive approaches

Solutions that are tailored to local realities rather than copied from elsewhere.

It is not enough to design policies in isolation; rather, communities, institutions, and leaders must come together to create and share a vision, to co-develop a strategy, and perhaps most importantly, to weave a shared story of where the city is heading and why.

Demonstrating intelligence is no longer enough

We are living in an era where technological advancement, especially the rise of artificial intelligence, is challenging not only how we work but also how cities develop, communicate, and exert influence. The traditional approach where all focus is set on policy creation as an *input – output* machine as described in previous chapter is gone. How do we connect different values, emotions, views and motivations to urban development during an era where machines already gives us the answer to what should be done?

The question that urban governance keeps coming back to and why this book was written could be stated: **What does this mean for us? To us meaning us, civil servants working in our cities with our communities?**

In a world where EU Commission has traditionally seen national states and related ministries as their natural partners, there is now more understanding on the role of regions and cities as active players in the European innovation game. Yet, the pace of change lacks both speed and seriousness to be truly successful. European cities need to be addressed as key agent and operator when deeply rooted, context-sensitive and cultural transformation is sought after. And there is point in doing anything else except exactly that. It is cities and their communities that know how to drive meaningful change that goes beyond strategy documents or manuals and transforms knowledge into tangible action. If cities are seen only as black boxes whose role is merely to execute policies set by others in an input- black box -output manner, there will be no real transformation, there will be no rooted innovation, and what is most detrimental and dangerous for Europe; the culture of innovation will not develop.

This dynamic becomes especially clear in the age of artificial intelligence. It is not unreasonable to argue, without being polemical, that AI exposes the emperor's new clothes: it reveals which content or processes are hollow or disconnected from real impact. In the context of EU-level policymaking, for instance, it may become increasingly apparent how much of the discourse is redundant or detached from tangible outcomes. Being clever, showing off intelligence for its own sake, has largely outlived its usefulness. Rather than adding value to developing our cities, generic frameworks, methods or theories often add to the already massive day-to-day challenges cities have. Generic models brought from outside are not grounded in emotional intelligence or human connection. Without that relational context, intelligence alone lacks traction. Solutions that we face require commitment from everyone around the table.

It's also fair to recognize that things aren't going especially well in Europe. But it isn't a cause for despair; it's a chance to pivot. To revalue what is uniquely human, emotion, shared experience, and collective action. In this light, the rise of AI may act as a wake-up call, highlighting what truly matters. Perhaps paradoxically, one of its most significant effects could be the increased importance of emotional intelligence and human interaction. As machines become better at producing rational, structured content, the distinct human role shifts elsewhere: to our capacity for context sensitive sense-making, empathy, connection, and meaningful influence on an emotional level amongst the community. Physical presence, genuine collaboration, and trust-based relationships are more critical than ever. Context matters and it is understanding different contexts that creates impact. This means, more focus to cities. That is where the rubber meets the road.

Even if one wouldn't agree with what is happening now with certain European level processes or projects, working with them, and acknowledging the power of long-standing



Photograph: Kerttu Penttinen

figures and processes in European scene also brings valuable perspective. EU has had several successful policies and frameworks, Smart Specialization Strategies and Climate Missions for example. They still have a role to play. The role has, however, changed and no one theory or framework can be all encompassing. What we are facing is not a minor adjustment, but a fundamental shift, perhaps even a quiet revolution. We can disagree about the tools, even underlying frames, but let's disagree around the same table. If we want to change, there is no space for irony nor cynicism. Instead, we need to take transformation seriously, with intention.

What is evident, is that we need to shift focus and start thinking about outcome and impact. For that, EU-level policy operators need to see policy processes differently. It doesn't mean giving political or budget power away. That would be humanly impossible. Instead, policy planning needs to become ambidextrous. In future, if we want to solve grand challenges of our time and be truly innovative, it needs to include the "how to implement" in addition to "what should be done".

But how to truly make a difference

Creating real change has not become easier; in many ways, it has become even more difficult. Impact has always demanded the ability to bridge future vision with present-day reality. Without that you get policies and directives that are like water on a goose back when civil servant organizations try to implement them without any connection to local realities. Surely the gap between EU theories and policies in relation to real-life practice is already wide enough?

It's now so easy to generate statements, positions, manifestos, even full reports using AI in a matter of seconds. What is the role of thousands of EU researchers, consultants and policy officers when content is abundant and fast. Answer is, crucially important. But only if they understand that how they have designed policies in the past will not work in the future. We, all of us, need to move from input-output to outcome and impact. And we need to do that acknowledging both the universal or EU-level future needs and context- and time sensitive present with local needs. Europe is fragmented. We need context sensitive approaches for both highly competitive and developed cities and we need policies for cities that are motivated to develop sustainably. This applies for territories and regions as well. Being a forerunner is a mindset. It is not about being the best student, it is about having the courage to start that journey.

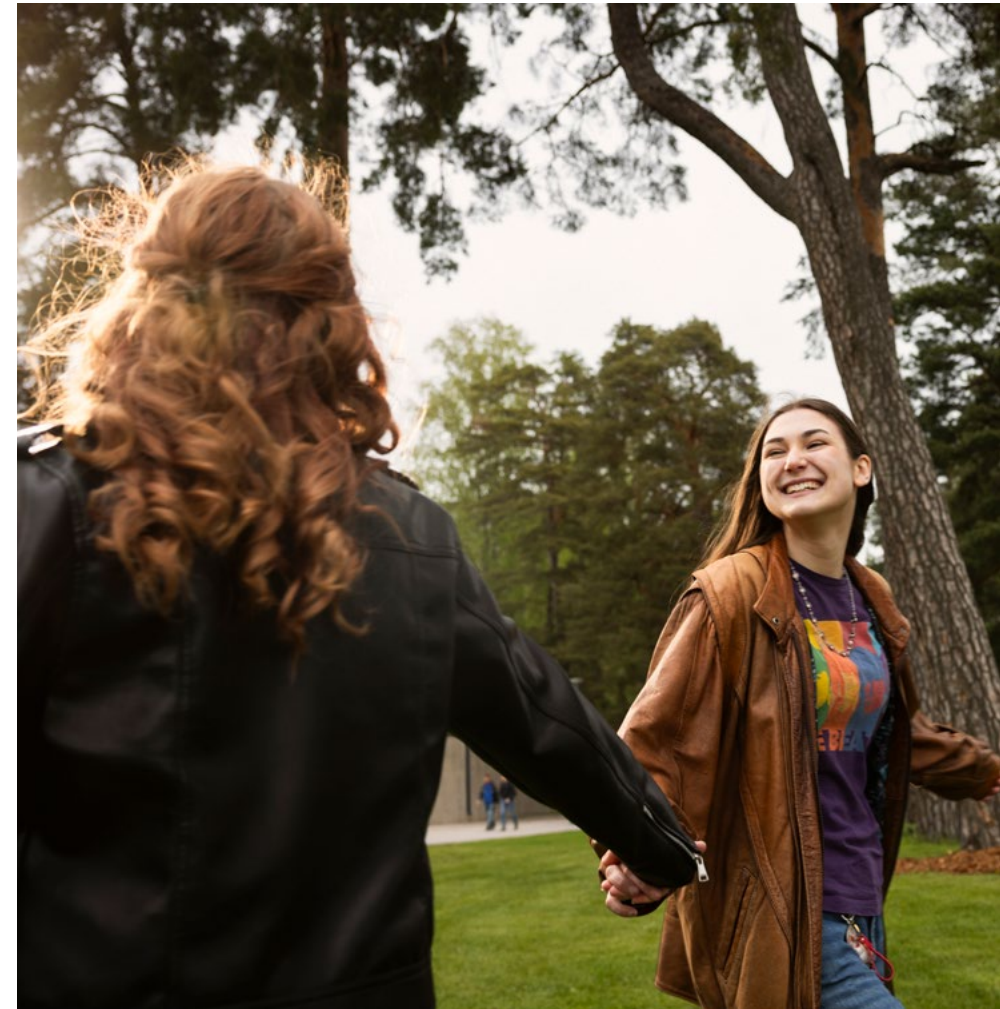
Back to the How

At the core governance is the demand that people must be reached on an emotional level. Amygdala is still located before the frontal lobe. Emotions overrule logic if the connection is not there. And we know this in our cities. At heart, we are still storytellers. We are moved, inspired, and united by narratives that make complex developments relatable and actionable. Challenge is that the story that we need to connect with our citizens is not an easy one. All the easy challenges are solved or can be solved, the complex ones remain. And they are not fading away, on the contrary. In addition, storytelling is a demanding craft. Storytelling is as natural to humans as is breathing or walking. Still, you need to exercise if want to run a marathon, and not all are ultra-marathonist?

What is essential to understand is that storytelling is not just communication, it is a strategic tool through which cities can build shared understanding and collective direction. This has been central to the development of the city of Espoo for instance; creating a story that diverse stakeholders and citizens can connect to and see themselves in.

Finally, the future task is to explore how this approach can be applied in a new context; an age where urban vitality increasingly depends on networks, trust, human interaction, and the ability to combine long-term vision with everyday action. How do we build an organization that operates 'ambidextrously', looking ahead while making things happen here and now? We need to have our heads in the clouds but feet firmly on the ground.

Governance in a complex future driven world is not about offering ready-made answers. Instead, we share experiences, insights, and critical questions that help us understand how the future of cities can be built human to human. How to travel the journey through stories, emotions, and meaningful actions. ■



Photograph: Kerttu Penttilä

European Cities – Clarity within Complexity, Story for a Thriving City

What makes a city thrive in the face of local and global challenges? Across Europe, cities are reinventing themselves. Not through distant plans, but through concrete action, collaboration, imagination, and courage. In *Stories of European Cities*, Dr. Ville Taajamaa invites readers into a compelling journey through the heart of urban transformation, grounded in the lived experience of Espoo, Finland. This book is not a manual, guidebook or a checklist, it's a story. A story of how cities, through clarity, community, and commitment, can become powerful agents of sustainable development locally and throughout Europe. From the first steps of implementing the UN's 2030 Agenda to pioneering the Voluntary Local Review (VLR) process, this book explores how cities can turn complexity into opportunity. It blends personal reflections from leading European mayors and thought leaders, collective insights, and strategic foresight to show how urban environments can be both locally rooted and globally impactful, truly glocal.



Cities are not just systems, they are communities. And every community has a story worth telling."

Markku Markkula is Vice-President of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) and served as its President from 2015 to 2017. He is a longstanding member of the Espoo City Council, where he has held several leadership positions, including Chair of the City Council, Chair of the City Board, and Chair of Espoo's Urban Planning Board.

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