

Sustainable cities: lessons from a Swedish community-level initiative

Sweden has among the largest per capita environmental footprints of any country in the world.¹ A large part of this environmental impact is linked to citizens' choices and behaviours; for example around travel, accommodation and leisure. A major challenge for today's politicians and other key decision-makers is to stimulate more sustainable lifestyles.

It is increasingly recognized that transforming societies for sustainable development depends not only on national-level action but also on action by local and municipal authorities, along with civil society and the private sector. Sustainable Hökarängen (Hållbara Hökarängen) was a Swedish initiative that explored ways to stimulate sustainable lifestyle choices in an urban community in Stockholm. This brief presents some of the most important lessons from the project.

Project overview

Sustainable Hökarängen was implemented by the public housing company Stockholmshem in collaboration with the non-profit company Sustainable Innovation and SEI. It was supported by the Swedish Energy Agency and Stockholmshem.

Hökarängen is a relatively central district, around 15 minutes by metro from the centre of Stockholm. It is primarily residential, with a few shops and cafes and restaurants close to a pedestrian public square. Its population is around 9000.

The overall aim of the project was to explore ways in which property owners, residents and other local stakeholders in a local community (such as schools, shops and local associations) could collaborate to reduce energy consumption and promote more resource-efficient lifestyles.

The initiative was conceived as a 2.5-year pilot project (2012–2015) and strong emphasis was placed on ensuring that at least some activities would continue under their own steam after the project ended. The project sought to raise awareness and stimulate interest among residents, and help them to develop and start up their own ideas and initiatives, through an action-research approach (see Box 1).



The pedestrian street in Hökarängen.

Key learning points

1. It is important to work with those community members who are particularly interested in sustainability issues and willing to devote time and energy to community-level projects. At the same time, efforts are also needed to reach out broadly in the community.
2. It is helpful to build engagement by introducing a range of activities that appeal to different existing interests.
3. An effective outreach strategy should use a mix of communications channels and methods in order to reach a broad range of residents and other stakeholders.
4. Making sure project events and activities are enjoyable and comfortable both helped to attract participants and encouraged social interaction that can promote engagement in the longer term.
5. From the early stages of implementation, it is important to look at what is needed to build the structures and capacity to sustain relevant activities beyond the lifespan of the project.
6. In order to evaluate the results of a community-level behaviour change project, both quantitative and qualitative measures and methods are needed, as well as longer-term follow-up.

In parallel with the project, Stockholmshem also implemented an energy-efficiency investment programme in their residential buildings in Hökarängen, improving insulation and ventilation and setting up heat-recovery systems. As a result, heating energy use in these buildings fell by more than 30% per square metre compared to 2007.

Lesson 1: Working with local leaders while reaching out more broadly

It is important to work with those community members who are particularly interested in sustainability issues and willing to devote time and energy to community-level projects. At the same time, efforts are also needed to reach out broadly in the community.

Early on in the project, SEI organized a series of open seminars for local residents and other stakeholders on key environmental issues related to consumption and lifestyles. These were an opportunity to inform residents about sustainability issues, and also provided comfortable settings for residents to discuss their ideas and efforts. At the seminars, participants were also invited to propose ideas for further activities to implement within the framework of the project – several of which were then implemented with project support.

At the end of the seminar series, participants were invited to join a network of “Sustainability Ambassadors”. These Sustainability Ambassadors were local residents who were expected to act as local change agents, inspiring their neighbours by example,

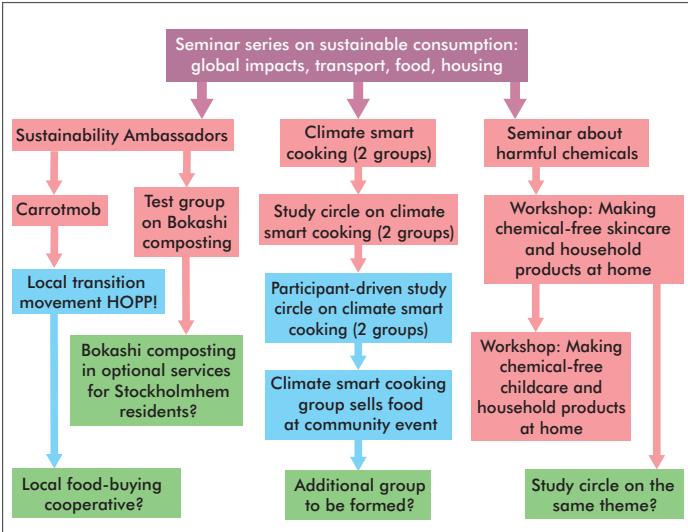


Figure 1: How local initiatives developed in Hökarängen following the initial seminar series, including developments being discussed at the close of the project.

Activities in red boxes were directly inspired by the seminar series and implemented with substantial support from the project. Activities in blue boxes were driven by residents building on or inspired by the red activities, with limited support from the project. Activities in green boxes are some of the ideas for future activities that were discussed at the end of the project.

advocating sustainable lifestyle choices and organizing specific awareness-raising activities – mainly locally but also with their friends and contacts outside Hökarängen. This voluntary network came to include both long-term residents in the area as well as newcomers. The ambition was that the network would stay active beyond the end of the project.

The Ambassadors contributed many ideas for activities and campaigns during the project; for example an appeal on Facebook and a “Carrotmob” to encourage the local grocery stores to stock more organic products.² One Ambassador also started up a local movement named Hökarängen Transition and Permaculture Project (HOPP!) together with another resident. At the end of the project, it looked as if HOPP! had developed into an important player in local sustainability efforts.

The Ambassadors also worked closely with the project team in, for example, prioritizing among residents’ proposals for action, and planning and implementing project activities. They became a very important sounding board for the team thanks to their local knowledge and networks.

Box 1: Action research

Action-research combines project implementation and research in such a way that the project activities are continuously adapted based on ongoing evaluation and reflection.

Stakeholder participation – both in reflecting on activities to date and suggesting new ones – is often a central part of action research. An important benefit of this can be developing increasingly stakeholder-determined and stakeholder-owned processes that lead to effective behaviour change beyond the lifetime of the project.

Several mini-seminars on specific issues were later organized for the Sustainability Ambassadors. The network members then worked voluntarily on tasks connected to the issues discussed in the seminars, including presenting the issues to other residents.

Lesson 2: Varied, and fun, activities

To stimulate broader engagement, it is helpful to introduce a range of activities that appeal to residents’ differing interests. Activities work best if they also contain elements where participants can have fun and socialize at the same time

As noted above, the project sought to build as far as possible on ideas proposed by community members. However, the project team started off by inviting community members to join in some predetermined activities, to sound out what types of activity would work best to kick-start local engagement.

One set of activities aimed to get residents interested in reducing household energy use, which was originally conceived of as the focus of the project. This met with limited success, most likely because Hökarängen is dominated by public housing apartments where heating and hot water are included in the rent and major energy-consuming appliances are provided by the landlord, giving residents few leverage points. Also, electricity consumption only accounts for a small part of residents’ monthly costs, so financial savings were not a strong incentive.

Towards the end of the project, residents were invited to join in a household energy saving competition where they could monitor their energy use via a mobile phone app. Although the number of households participating was small, the positive results suggested that visualizations and an element of competition can motivate large decreases in electricity consumption, at least in the short term.

By the end of the project, a number of different methods for cooperation with the residents, local schools, companies and other local actors had been developed and tested. In the project evaluation several residents said that it was specific activities, rather than an interest in wider sustainability issues, that initially brought them to the project.

The activities that best engaged people included communal gardening, climate-smart cooking and taking nature hikes – social and enjoyable activities. Areas that people had limited influence over (such as apartment energy use) or that would involve significant sacrifices (such as giving up long-distance travel for holidays or not taking their car to work) did not prove good entry points for engagement.

Lesson 3: Communications

A communications strategy, involving varied media and activities and tailored to different audiences, can help to promote engagement.

A lot of effort was invested in project communications, and the varied communication strategy evolved over time, supporting residents’ engagement. As a first effort to stimulate interest, Stockholmshem wrote about the project on its website and included information and updates in its quarterly newsletter to residents, inviting interested people to get in touch.



Hökarängen residents enjoy a climate-smart cooking course.

© Bengt Alm

Broad community engagement was slow to pick up, however, so it was decided to open a project office on the pedestrian street in the centre of Hökarängen. This office stayed open throughout the project and helped in maintaining a daily dialogue with the residents.

After several months, as project activities intensified, use of the project blog hosted by Stockholmshem (at hallbarahokarangen.com) became more active. Posts advertised upcoming activities, reported on past activities, and included other content such as interviews with Sustainability Ambassadors. In addition a monthly electronic project newsletter was started up. Sustainable Hökarängen also had its own Facebook page.

To stimulate further engagement, a door-to-door survey was later carried out with the help of university students, informing the residents about the project and asking about their interests and suggestions for pro-sustainability activities. Through this campaign the project team learned that the residents felt strong engagement around areas such as urban farming, cooking, waste management and recycling, which fed back into project planning.

Events such as seminars were advertised with printed posters. By the end of the project, a video and a book about the project, and a collection of climate-smart recipes from the climate-smart cooking course had been produced, as well as SEI's project report (all in Swedish and available from the website).

The project also arranged a local “sustainability festival”, which brought together residents as well as local businesses and organizations. This attracted a lot of attention outside Hökarängen. A final exhibition was held to mark the end of the project.

Lesson 4: Social activities for community cohesion

A strong sense of community and social cohesion can support more sustainable lifestyle choices and activities. Making sure project events and other activities were enjoyable and comfortable helped not only to attract participants but also encouraged social interaction.

A lot of the work within Sustainable Hökarängen was also about strengthening community cohesion. For example, a lot of effort was put into making sure that project events had a warm and friendly atmosphere. Hot drinks and cakes were always offered, and often light dinners as most activities took place early evening. Children were also welcomed.

Focus group discussions as part of the project evaluation indicated that the social dimension was often an equally or in some cases even more important motivation for participation in activities than the sustainability topic per se.

The project evaluation also suggested that the social cohesion and interaction built by these activities helped to promote more sustainable lifestyles among individuals and households. From observation of participants and informal discussions, it was also concluded that interaction with peers strongly influenced some residents' environmentally responsible behaviour.

Lesson 5. Looking beyond the project's end

In a time-bound project like Sustainable Hökarängen, it is important from the earliest stages to think about building the necessary structures and capacity to ensure that relevant activities extend beyond the lifespan of the project.

The participatory approach taken in the project aimed to ensure that activities were based on residents' ideas, responding to their interests and needs. The project team worked continuously to identify individuals or other actors who could take over activities when the project had come to an end, and many activities appeared to be well placed to continue running.

One suggestion from a Sustainability Ambassador was a “pool” of power tools for common use. To support this the project bought some tools from the local hardware shop and then gave them back to the shop to hire out. The initiative was reported to be working very well – rather than reducing sales of power tools (which were small) it brought new customers to the shop, raising income through rental fees and increasing sales of other products. Management of another pooled resource, a cargo bicycle, was eventually taken over by HOPP!

Many sustainable lifestyle activities require an enabling environment, not just willingness on the part of the residents. For example, residents pointed to the lack of common spaces being a substantial problem for community activities; several wished to continue cooking together but could not find a suitable kitchen to use in the long term. Several also said it would be difficult to manage such a community-level initiative on a voluntary basis, and emphasized the importance of having an actor with an overarching, coordination responsibility – like Stockholmshem in the case of Sustainable Hökarängen.



© Karolina Axelsson

Urban gardening can encourage consumption of locally sourced food, reduce hazardous chemical use, and build community cohesion.



The cargo bicycle pool aims to reduce car use.

The project highlighted the role that local businesses can play, for example in promoting sustainable products/services or by taking responsibility for minimizing their negative impacts on the local environment. A number of small businesses and organizations took an active part in the project and supported residents' engagement. However, small local businesses or organizations often have limited resources to engage in a project of this kind even if they want to. Local businesses should be involved early on in order to increase their opportunities to get involved or provide input.

Lesson 6: Measuring change

In order to evaluate the results of the project, both quantitative and qualitative measures and methods are needed, as well as longer-term follow-up.

SEI was responsible for evaluating the project. In keeping with the action-research approach, evaluation activities such as questionnaire surveys and observations were carried out at different points through the project, with a more concerted round of evaluation at the end. The evaluation used both qualitative and quantitative methods.

The evaluation model clustered the residents and other local stakeholders according to their level of involvement in the project. One cluster comprised those that the project team had close contact with – such as the Sustainability Ambassadors, the climate-smart cooking working group and the HOPP! movement. These were invited to two focus group discussions, as well as taking part in interview surveys and other activities.

A second cluster comprised respondents such as residents attending the seminars, local high school students and local business owners, some of whom attended an open focus group discussion on the project and its outcomes, along with questionnaire surveys, interviews etc.

The findings from these activities indicated that the project had enabled a majority to adopt more sustainable behaviours. One key factor that emerged was the reinforcement generated by the social aspects of project activities: positive acknowledgement of pro-environmental behaviours encouraged them to do more.

A street-corner survey carried out at the end of the project probed general awareness about the project and its aims, which was relatively high. It also asked respondents whether they felt the general atmosphere in Hökarängen had changed over the project period (a large majority thought it had) and whether they had participated in project activities, among other things.

In addition, we carried out interview surveys with people who had come to Hökarängen for study visits – mainly representatives from other municipalities, architects and rental housing companies. Almost all interviewees specifically referred to Sustainable Hökarängen as a good example of a sustainable community project and several said they hoped to replicate some of the project's components.

Overall, the results of the evaluation suggest that the project succeeded in building capacity and will among key local actors to continue running some of the activities after the end of the project: notably the communal garden, the cargo bike pool, the power tool pool and HOPP! Moreover the project seems to have inspired fruitful conversations about societal sustainability, and managed to spur considerable active engagement and positive behaviour change.

However, as the evaluation activities took place during or shortly after project activities, they give little indication of whether the reported changes in attitude and behaviour would be sustained. Stockholmshem was recommended to do periodic follow-up studies up to 10 years after the end of the project.

Endnotes

1 See e.g. the work of the Global Footprint Network (www.footprintnetwork.org/).

2 Carrotmobs are campaigns that use spending power and social media to encourage businesses to act responsibly, for example stocking more organic produce.

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