

The Aalborg Commitments

The municipality of Vännäs baseline review

Executive summary

Introduction

The municipality of Vännäs is a part of Västerbotten county, which is the second largest county in Sweden and covers more than one eighth of the total area of our country. Sweden is composed of 290 municipalities, 18 county councils and 2 regions (Västra Götaland and Skåne). The national Parliament (Riksdagen) is the supreme national political decision-making body in Sweden. Municipalities and county councils are self-governed and have their own local authorities and responsibilities. Municipalities have a great deal of autonomy and take on many duties such as: schools, social services, health and environmental services.¹

Vännäs is a comparatively small municipality with a population of about 8,500 citizens, 70 % of which live in Vännäs proper. More than 3,000 people both live and work within the municipality of Vännäs, whereas 1,600 of its citizens are employed in Umeå. About 800 who live in other municipalities are employed in Vännäs.

The Sustainable Umeå Region initiative consists of six municipalities jointly committed to sustainable development. The purpose is to create a joint regional management system for sustainable urban and rural development in a functional labour market region. The Vännäs municipality as well as all the other municipalities of the Sustainable Umeå Region have signed the Aalborg Commitments. The signature of the Aalborg Commitments represents a general effort to reach a common ground and improving the environmental, social and economic profile of the Umeå Region municipalities.

What are the Aalborg Commitments?

The Aalborg Commitments are a tool to help local government to address the challenges of sustainable development.² Up to 2008, 550 local governments across Europe have signed and new signatories are still joining. On signing the Aalborg Commitments, local governments enter a target-setting process in dialogue with local stakeholders and incorporating existing LA21 (Local Agenda 21) or other sustainability action plans.³ It is composed of fifty commitments gathered under ten broad themes:

1. Governance
2. Local management towards sustainability
3. Natural common goods
4. Responsible consumption and lifestyle choices
5. Planning and design
6. Better mobility, less traffic
7. Local actions for health
8. Vibrant and sustainable local economy
9. Social equity and justice
10. Local and global

Baseline Review

This document describes the baseline review of the Vännäs municipality which is the first deliverable of the Aalborg Commitments process. This exercise allowed identifying the municipality's strengths and weaknesses in a structured manner. The baseline review is an important step since it will provide the

¹ http://www.skl.se/startpage_en.asp?C=6390

² <http://www.aalborgplus10.dk/>

³ The Aalborg Commitments, inspiring futures, <http://www.aalborgplus10.dk/default.aspx?m=2&i=307>

foundation for the local goals and targets' formulation and the application of appropriate measures. Throughout 2008, Vännäs municipality working group conducted the baseline review and further planned the work regarding the Aalborg Commitments. Some significant strengths and weaknesses have been identified and are summarized in the following paragraphs.

Strengths

The Vännäs municipality is working towards participatory democracy and citizen dialogue in line with the commitment "1. Governance". In 2006, the municipal council adopted an ambitious strategic plan and vision based on an open and mutual dialogue between the municipality, inhabitants, non-profit organizations and the private sector. One initiative was to develop the "Citizen Panel" project (Medborgarpanel). The main purpose is to increase dialogue between the municipality and the citizens via a web-based survey programme. Another initiative is the "Next Step" project which organizes various activities to increase inhabitants' awareness towards sustainability issues to positively influence behavioral patterns. Various communication channels are used in order to address sustainability. The municipality website provides a great deal of information and allows the citizens to leave comments and questions. KI, the municipal information newspaper has also been identified as a great tool to engage the population towards sustainable development.

The commitment "3. Natural common goods" has both been identified as a strength and as a weakness. The Vännäs municipality's vision is to become energy self-sufficient and successively replace fossil fuels by renewable locally produced energy sources. The main efforts within the energy area are:

- reduce energy use and emphasize energy conservation for in-house heating and hot water
- development of renewable energy sources such as: solar, wind, geothermic and heat-pumps
- use renewable energy as primary energy source for district-heating purposes

Extensive air quality assessment in the beginning of the 90's revealed high level of particles. The following measures have been conducted to improve air quality in urban areas:

- Development of the district-heating system
- Transition from wood burning to pellet-stoves for district-heating purposes
- Recent installation of heat-pumps
- Development of railroad as a transportation mean
- Ban of "idle mode" for road vehicles in the city-center

The resulting effect was a drastic reduction of air pollutants which greatly improved the general air quality.

A great deal of work has been done towards the commitment "9. Social Equity and Justice". In order to improve its social services, the municipality is taking part in various projects such as: Care and welfare college (VOC), Telematic Services for the Elderly (TSE) and Remote telematic solutions for patient diagnoses and the training of health care professionals in sparsely populated areas (REMEDY). The Vännäs municipality has prioritized its work towards safety and security. One initiative was to identify areas perceived unsafe by its inhabitants and apply the appropriate measures (ex. adding missing street lights). The municipality is also actively engaged in the integration of the different social groups by supporting activities of social and non-profit organizations.

Weaknesses and areas to be further developed

According to the commitment "2. Local management towards sustainability", a holistic external monitoring system needs to be established to evaluate the municipality progress regarding different sectors: environment, social and economical. The external monitoring system must be comprehensive and well-designed in order for a third-party to easily and effectively understand and use it.

As mentioned previously the commitment "3. Natural common goods" must also be reviewed and improved. Even if the water quality was classified as really good, no comprehensive water conservation plan has been set up. In the municipality, 6 areas are classified protected by the EU network Natura 2000.

Under the commitment “4. Responsible consumption and lifestyle choices”, the review notes that the municipality of Vännäs is bound by the Law on public procurement (LOU). Sustainability considerations are lacking and therefore need to be developed and included.

Regarding the commitment “10. Local and global”, efforts to reduce causes of global warming have been mainly conducted through the BioFuel Region project. The municipality has an energy plan (modified in 2001), but a strategic energy and climate plan with measurable targets is lacking. A need for better knowledge and education dissemination regarding sustainability issues has also been identified. Furthermore, this information must be easy to grasp and adapted to different social groups (young, elderly, decision-makers, disabled...etc.).

Conclusion

By signing the Aalborg Commitments, the municipality of Vännäs has given itself the opportunity to improve its sustainability profile and strengthen its political position as an innovative and proactive European municipality. The next step consists of setting local targets with the help of the baseline review.