



SUSTAINABLE CONFERENCE IN PRACTICE

Solutions – local, together Conference in Turku
– how did we make it happen



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Author

The author of the guidebook, Stella Aaltonen, was the event architect of the Solutions local, together Conference and takes the full responsibility of content of the guidebook.

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Organizers of the Solutions local, together Conference



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Prewords

Solutions – local, together, Nordic Conference on Sustainable Development in the Baltic Sea Region gathered 584 participants from 16 different countries in the city of Turku, Finland 31.1. – 2.2.2011. During 2,5 days the participants of the conference got the opportunity to hear 88 speakers with several practical solutions to share. The conference offered also a choice of 13 local solutions, 3 side events and 8 restaurants offering local food. All this was done as inspirationally and sustainably as possible.

The Solutions – local, together, Nordic Conference on Sustainable Development in the Baltic Sea Region (from now on the Solutions local, together Conference) was the fourth in the series of Nordic Conferences on Sustainable Development. Previous conferences were held in Gothenburg, Sweden in 2004, in Oslo, Norway in 2006 and in Odense, Denmark in 2008. The next takes place in Umeå, Sweden in 2013.

This guidebook focuses on how to make an event truly sustainable in practice. It describes how Solutions local, together Conference was designed and highlights the things to consider when organizing a sustainable event of any size. Enjoy and benefit from it!

The success of the conference was due to a determination of the Finnish Ministry of the Environment to launch the process in the first place, fantastic and passionate National steering group of the conference, dedicated Nordic planning group and inspired local planning group, devoted staff members, enthusiastic students, professional service providers and all active participants of the conference! For me, as the main process architect, the smooth cooperation was the key factor to the successful outcome. Thank you for this great process!



Sustainable event?

In order to make a sustainable base for any event, all of the following parts are expected to be taken care of:

- Reasoning why an event is necessary and why it can not be compensated with a virtual meeting.
 - o Organizing an event needs to be well justified in order to reach the goals set for it.
 - o A virtual meeting is the most sustainable event as the majority of the carbon emissions of an event are due to travelling to the event.
- Decisions on the hosting city and the venue.
 - o The most sustainable events are take place close to the majority of the participants. The venues should be served by several mobility modes, such as good public transport system, trains, buses and direct flights.
 - o The amenities and hotels are recommended to be in close proximity in order to minimize the use of transportation during the event and to enable walking and cycling/public transportation between the locations.
 - o The venue itself should be interested/ready to put efforts on energy efficiency or already certified on sustainability issues, such as energy and water efficiency.
- Accommodation and transportation
 - o A selection of the environmentally certified hotels/hostels or hotels/hostels with environmental policies and practices in place is offered with special event prices.
 - o Participants are encouraged to use sustainable travelling and transportation options.
- Marketing and Communications
 - o Electronic or paperless communication, registration and media accreditation in place in all of the conference languages.
 - o If participants request printed documents, those are available on-line in a well-designed format, so that they fit to a minimal number of pages.

This guidebook assumes that all of the parts above are taken care of as sustainably as possible and one would like to have more practical actions. In several events there is a separate carbon offset used to make the event as carbon neutral as possible. This is a good solution for events that are not committed in having a holistic look at all the parts of the conference and do not want to showcase an event that could be sustainable not just in talks but in actions.

The Solutions local, together Conference was organized in the city of Turku, Finland. The Turku City Theatre was selected as the venue of the event, due to the fact there was no need for local transportation, as all the hotels and main event places were on walking distance. The city theatre, as well as other event places, were all interested in implementing practical sustainability actions and during the planning process of the conference they started several actions towards sustainability. The majority of the conference participants came from Finland by train. Those participants that came by air plane were transported from the airport by the public transportation to the selected hotels. An ordered bus transportation was used only once during the conference to take 1/5 of the participants to see the local solutions situated further away from the main venue place.



Sustainable events make a difference and are visible to the citizens. In the Solutions local, together Conference participants walked from one local solution to another.

Commitment for a sustainable event

In order to organize a sustainable event, clear full commitment from the management/steering group is needed. It is recommended that it should be explicitly written out and used in all of the communication/marketing of the event and not to be forgotten in the minutes of the planning meetings of the event.

In the beginning of the planning of the Solutions local, together Conference it was decided to bring sustainable development into practice! The entire conference preparation was focused on arranging an event with as low carbon footprint as possible yet enabling a physical meeting of the participants. This was being reached through following key principles:

- All amenities and hotels were in close proximity in order to minimize the use of transportation. For this reason, the conference was organized in the City Theatre that is located in the centre of the city.
- The conference promoted responsible travelling.
- The catering was to be organized using local products and environmentally friendly suppliers.
- The use of disposable products was to be eliminated.
- Only products/materials, that could be reused/recycled after the conference, were to be used.

The planning of a sustainable event needs to have enough resources to succeed. Especially a sufficient planning time and people are needed. In the end calculations, the sustainable choices in many cases, turn out to be cheaper than non-sustainable ones.

In the case of the Solutions local, together Conference, the planning time from the tendering of the venue to the actual event was 2,5 years. This made it possible to focus, not just on environmental aspects, but also on creating the social dimensions for the sustainable event. The need for staff resources got bigger as the event got closer. Especially the full service in three languages (English, Finnish and Swedish) and the large number of side events of the conference requested more time and staff.

Programme development

Normally the content of the conference is decided by a separate programme committee without linking it strongly to the design of the conference. In the worst cases, the conference content comes out in a totally separated process and all the rest of the design elements are purchased separately from independent suppliers. This is due to the fact that there is no so called event architect involved in the process. Therefore the possible integrated, holistic approach of event will be missed out.

In the case of the Solutions local, together Conference the conference architect was in the heart of the processes ensuring that the key principles of the conference would be kept to the smallest detail. The programme reflected the name of the conference providing practical solutions on four themes – Earth, Water, Air and Fire. These four themes became also the core of the staging of the conference, as well as the divisions of the workshops with subtopics etc Also the conference days were labelled Together, Local and Inspire to further stress the content.

The programme of the conference was composed by the National steering group of the conference. It was fine-tuned in one planning workshop one year before the conference. After the workshop an open call was arranged for identifying sustainable solutions to be presented under the different topics of the conference. Most of the solutions presented at the conference came through this open call.

A truly sustainable event adds value to the ongoing processes, not just for those participating in the event, but also in the local surrounding where the event takes place. In the best cases the event improves content wise the process or leaves a trace in the local reality by creating new processes that continue after the event. The **integration of different local organizations** already from the beginning increases the likelihood of this to

happen. Very often only one local organization is included in the planning process. Also it is worth to consider to integrate the event into other happenings taking place at the same time in the hosting country/city



The Solutions local, together Conference had three planning stages that were integrated together from the very beginning. There was a National steering group, a Nordic planning group and a local planning group. All of these had very distinct roles and enabled a better integration of the event to the local, national and Nordic processes. The Solutions local, together Conference was a kick off to the Finnish Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers in year 2011. This enabled a high level presentation of the Nordic cooperation ministers at the conference and also a larger media exposure of the conference and the presidency programme. The conference was also linked with the European Culture Capital Turku 2011 year through local visits.



Staging

The event organizer has a possibility to influence on the demand and supply of the local market and through it, one can create sustainable changes that last also after the event. This can cover programme elements, staging as well as catering. This possibility to influence is seldom used in practice as it requires that the organizer dares to challenge the suppliers and knows what it wants.



In many cases the conference place is a dull, normal conference hall or room with only a poster, flag or a flower decoration to lift it up. It is worth to put effort on staging the place to fit the topic in question. This creates an atmosphere that can not be reached simply by great speakers.

Participants of any events are normally interested to get to know more about the **local specialities, products and to get inspiration** on the topic in question. A very convenient and sustainable approach is to stage the venue places and create **win-win cooperation** also locally. In the staging process one also starts to question the options the venue itself has for the event and this way starts to change their approach. This can concern their chairs, tables, lights, accessories etc.



Normally in the planning processes of the events, the programme and marketing are in a central focus and therefore the full picture is not experimented. It is worth to consider the effects that different colours, sounds and tastes can have on the participants. This can be the icing on the cake in order to provide a **memorable holistic experience** for the participants.



Staging details

One of the main ideas behind the Solutions local, together Conference was to create a sustainable conference that advances also local social and economic sustainability. As an essential part of the advanced conference planning is the design of the conference halls. It was clear from the beginning that as the main venue was a theatre, it was decided to benefit from that. And since a specific atmosphere was to be created at the theatre, with two halls, it was decided to put an extra effort to stage also the second venue Radisson Blue hotel, where two parallel sessions were held.

In the planning of the staging, first the local producers that would have suitable items that could fit with conference topics Earth, Water, Air and Fire were analysed and contacted. Majority of the local producers were eager to take part in the staging. In the end the Conference Secretariat designed the theatre together with staff members from the Turku city theatre and the Radisson Blue together with the students of the Tourism Management at Novia University of Applied Sciences.



In the staging, sets from following plays were used: A little night music (2011), Hamburger Börs (2010), Anna Karenina (2010), The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat (2010), Romeo och Julia (2008), Thors' hammer (2007), The Sleeping Beauty (2006), The April Witch (2003).



Stage with decorations



All of the conference items had clear signs indicating the origin of the items in three languages.



The winter time in Finland is not the time of fresh flowers. Therefore the decorations also followed the season and were designed using hand-felted flowers from sheep wool and willow with felt. All of the decoration arrangements had a planned afterlife use. They were either sold at the Market of Solutions or given as thank you gifts or served in the next events as decorations.

According to the basic principles of the conference, the conference interior was to be developed from recycled or borrowed objects or materials. The elements themselves would all have a sustainable origin and showcase how the existing materials could be used again. All of the items that ended up on the stages were either parts of old theatre plays, borrowed from city of Turku stage design or from local producers or organizations. As the Solutions local, together Conference wanted to promote local professionals and their sustainable production, an open auction of the conference interior elements was organized at “Market of Solutions”, at one of the side events of the conference. All of the revenues of the auction went to the local producers themselves.



The auction of conference interior elements took place during the “Market of Solutions” and was open to the public. Most of the elements of the conference interior were there to auction and the auction money gained went directly to the local producers.

In the Solutions local, together Conference the colour scheme of the conference was followed in staging, marketing and communication items. The taste world was focused on seasonality and local specifics. Also a specific sound of the conference was separately designed to invite the

participants to start the sessions. It was deliberately created so that it was inviting, inspiring and fresh.



Moderators Alf Ren and Gunvor Kronman



Communication

When considering the right mix of communication at the event, one should always bear in mind the target group and their capability to use different means available. An important part of the communication is the possibility to activate participants all the way through the process. Also it is important to follow the decided principles of the event and the possibilities to pinpoint the local uniqueness through the communication. Here is a selection of the measures used at the Solutions local, together Conference to create the atmosphere, communicate and guide the participants.

Catering

A starting point for a sustainable catering should be that:

- Everyone gets suitable food i.e. all the different allergies and food restrictions are well taken into account. This is still not the case in many events. And if it has been noticed, in many cases the same food elements repeat or the meals are not nutritious enough in the longer events.
- The amount of waste and left overs is minimized. A minimization of packaging materials and a beforehand decision on what to do with the left overs are advised.
- From the carbon point of view, the catering should be organized using local seasonable products and environmentally friendly suppliers. The definition of the local food needs to be clearly agreed with the suppliers and should be explicitly showed in the menus.
- The menu options have to be carefully chosen in order to avoid big mistakes, such as the use of rice instead of potatoes in the case of Finland. Consider the use of meat.
- The table cloths should not be disposable and the serviettes as environmentally friendly as possible, preferably done as close as possible.
- No disposable cups, plates, cutlery etc. It is worth to stick with this, as this is the way to ruin the sustainable atmosphere. Remember the cups for the session speakers!
- Tap water and local juices to be used.
- Consider how you could combine the experimenting of the local atmosphere/elements and catering at the same time.



Remember to label/market the local drinks!

In order to recognize the local food option on the restaurant's menu and to indicate the restaurants involved, a symbol competition campaign was carried out in 2010. This was the result of it. The initiative is still alive and has started to progress as a business idea.

When analysing the choices of local food providers in Turku in 2009, it was realized that at that time the city of Turku did not have enough restaurants that would be able to offer an entire menu using locally produced ingredients for over 500 conference guests. The organizers wanted to speed up the local food process in Turku and decided that one evening all of the conference participants would spread up across the city to enjoy the evening. This enabled the start of a local food initiative as now there was a demand for the local food. Through restaurant-producer workshops, logistical profiling, marketing and open cooperation was formed. It was vital that it was not a project, but a common commitment that had in the end eight committed restaurants in Turku. During the Solutions local, together Conference on 1st February 2011, the restaurants launched a dinner that was made of minimum 80 percent locally produced ingredients. This meal also utilized seasonal raw materials, ecologically produced and Fair trade products. After that date the restaurants involved have had daily local food offers on their lunch lists or à la carte menus.



All the catering companies during the Solutions local, together Conference followed the same guidelines as the local food initiative and all the menus, snacks and drinks went through a thorough analyse before any acceptance.

How was the local food defined in the Solutions local, together Conference?

- The South-West Finland counts as a neighbouring and local area for the following products: vegetables, eggs, meat and grain products. Reindeer, wheel, fish and dairy products can be produced in the entire country.
- The served products are fresh (bread baked max. 6 hours earlier, potatoes peeled in the last 24h)
- The delivery time and distance of the products are short
- The products are environmentally sustainable (wrapping, transportation and delivery)
- Avoiding singly wrapped products, favouring recyclable packages or materials and short delivery distances.
- No food additives in the products
- Seasonable vegetables in Finland in winter were: beetroot, swede, carrots and other root vegetables, red and white cabbage, onion, potato, pickled cucumber etc., berry juice, frozen berries and citrus fruits.

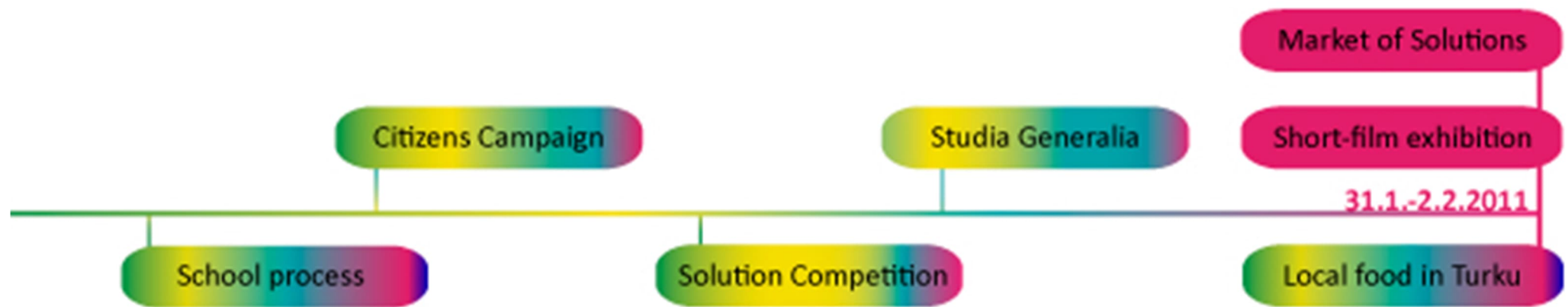


Avoiding left-overs was one of the main concerns of the conference. First of all, from the organizer point of view, was to optimize the number of eaters per meal. This requested more planning but paid off in clear savings from the project budget. The organizer had also a call up list of persons to join in for a dinner if some participants did not turn out to the place. The list consisted of persons who had helped during the planning process of the conference.

Secondly, those left-overs, such as the morning sandwiches, that could be quickly and easily transported were delivered free of charge to the students in the nearby campus. Thirdly, the catering companies put extra effort in planning the menus, so that the different ingredients could be used efficiently.



Integrated side events



Very often the conferences have a life of their own during the event and do not necessarily advance the topic in question in the hosting city. This is truly a pity as the potentiality to influence on the local reality is big. Then again, once there is an attempt from the organizer side to **create local connections** and to get to know the situation, this is warmly welcomed. This was the case of the Solutions local, together Conference, as there were several enthusiastic parties to brainstorm the topics from the local approach and to give birth to several new approaches.

As a result of the planning process of the Solutions local, together Conference offered 13 side visits showcasing local sustainable solutions to participants to choose from. In addition to this three side events and four processes were created. The local food initiative was already described under catering, here are the rest of the side events and processes explained briefly. The processes were implemented prior to the actual conference and had an impact on the conference programme. Part of processes continue to live also after the conference. The side events complemented the conference programme and enable citizens, companies and organizations to actively participate in it. These events advanced the local sustainability processes and managed to raise the awareness of the importance of small everyday actions.

Water path in schools

The Solutions local, together Conference initiated a “Water path” process, out of which a practical Water path was introduced in autumn 2010. The “Water path” is composed of several, functional path points that are targeted for the 5th graders in connection to the school camps that are organized annually by the city of Turku. Thanks to the path materials, the teachers are easily able to arrange a hands-on activity for the class as part of the camp programme. The path materials are available in all of the camp locations of the city.



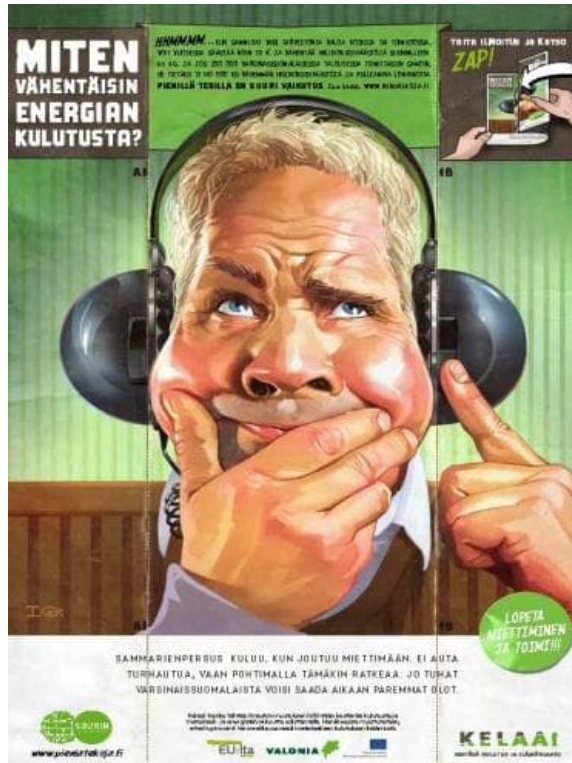
During the conference a separate school event with functional exhibition was organized for the grades of 3-9. In the exhibition, the children had a possibility to get to know part of the Water path and other environmental activities offered by the different actors involved. This event had over 1000 visitors during the day.

Practical solutions to climate change -competition

During the year 2010, an international competition targeted at the Baltic Sea Region and the Nordic countries was searching for business concepts, practices and technologies to assist municipalities and other local and regional actors to better control the effects of climate change. The competition was looking for projects that would: combat climate change, support local and regional economics, employment and general well-being, lead to concrete changes in the practices of the municipalities and their residents, and be able to be broadly implemented as a successful measure. In total, 78 solutions from seven different countries were sent in. The competition was part of the Solutions local, together Conference and the winners of the competition were announced at the conference.



Citizens Campaign



One of the biggest processes prior to the Solutions local, together Conference was the Small actions — big impacts regional campaign, through which everyone in South-West Finland was challenged to do climate actions. The idea of the campaign that started in September 2010 was to offer practical, inspiring and easy web tools to do small everyday actions. The results of the campaign were presented at the Solutions local, together Conference.

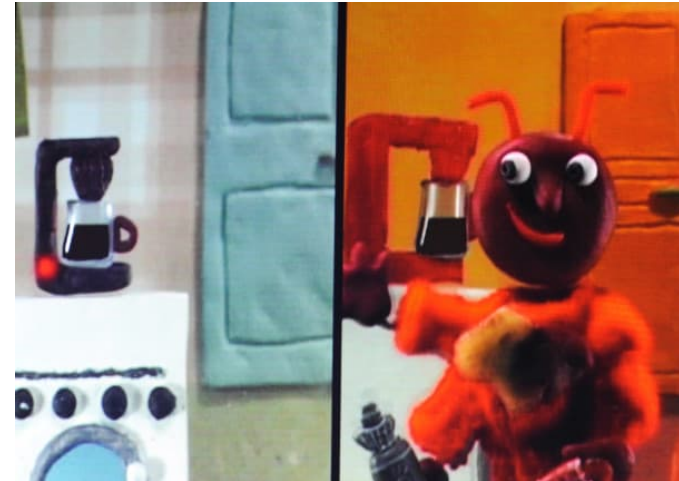
The citizens campaign included several advertisements in news papers. These raised the awareness and also invited citizens to visit a specific website of the campaign. Through the website of the regional campaign one could learn how to effectively reduce energy or water consumption. And at the same time one can save money. In the website one could see what others have done, for example the reduced mileages, shower time or room temperature totally.

Studia Generalia

During Autumn 2010, an interactive series Different perspectives on Sustainable life – Studia Generalia on sustainable development was organized. The series was arranged by the institutions of higher education in Turku. The Solutions local, together Conference offered additional content for the discussions. The aim was to get more visibility for the know-how of sustainable development in the Turku region, and to enable better contacts between the facilitators working on sustainable development issues – and above all, discuss this content subjects each time.

Sustainable — Not sustainable — Sustainable short ecological films

In the Swedish Theatre of Turku, environmental and non-commercial short-films from all around the world were presented in an open film show. The short films were chosen together with the Green Vision film festival, organized annually by the Committee for Nature Use, Environmental Protection and Ecological Safety of the city of St. Petersburg. The event showcased 16 short films, the length of which varies from 5 to 15 min. The short movies come for example from Germany, Belgium, Russia and Finland. The films cover the following topics: sustainable transport, water and biodiversity, climate change and energy and ecological education.



Market of Solutions

The Market of Solutions was an exhibition and networking event on sustainable development, that brought together over 1000 visitors and over 50 exhibitors from different fields. The programme continued over an entire afternoon with surprise guests and infos and offered an interesting setting for updating knowledge. All the visitors took part in a lottery with gift vouchers to restaurants offering local food (local food initiative). Several innovative, sustainable companies from the Practical Solutions to Climate Change –competition were also present at the market. As part of the Market, was also the Auction of the conference interior elements.



Evaluation

Several evaluations are carried out in the events organized, and it is really worth to consider, what is the **real purpose of the evaluations**? When is it worth to be carried out and what can be learnt from it? Online or paper questionnaires might not be enough to tell about the quality of the event, especially if it is not designed to answer the real need. Evaluations could, in best forms, **showcase the potential return on investment** of the event.



The students of Integrated Coastal Zone Management at Novia University of Applied Sciences calculated the "carbon foot print" of the conference.

*The foot print of the Solutions local, together Conference was visible at the Market of Solutions during the conference. The calculations included the preparatory phase of the conference. It showcased clearly that 76% of the GHG emissions caused by the conference were of travel emissions. Naturally the more GHG emissions is saved by the event, the bigger portion will be on the travel share. It would have been interesting to compare the event with similar events, but at that time, there were no suitable carbon foot print calculations available on similar size of events. The planning of the evaluations should be integrated into the overall planning of the event. Nowadays there are many possibilities to carry out online, offline, real time or after event evaluations. The evaluations should be as objective as possible to give a true picture of the event. One could argue that if you do not **use the evaluation results afterwards**, there is no point in evaluating at all. Therefore ensure that the results are used!*

In the Solutions local, together Conference several evaluations were carried out during the event. One of the forms of the evaluation was the use of evaluation equipment that gave the **immediate reaction** on the questions displayed. Another form used were the student interviews on the first day about how people arrived to the conference and what were their **expectations**. Also the students took examples of the amounts of wastes during the conference, from the hotel rooms and also from the local food

restaurants. This showcased that the waste collection per participant of the conference was extremely low 3-4g. This means that the event was successful in reducing waste. All of these evaluations were objectively analysed by the students of the degree programme in sustainable development of the Turku University of Applied Sciences.



Happy or Not feedback unit was used to gather immediate reactions of the

participants on the topics in question. Through these answers the organizers were able to alter some elements of the conference according to the opinion of the participants.

In addition to these an **online questionnaire** was sent to the participants right after the conference and the return rate of the answers was 34%. The results showcase that even the smallest details in practical arrangements were noticed.

For once the conference was sustainable, not just in talks but in actions

Sustainable practical conference arrangements (aprons, name lanyard, voting in the panel, flower decorations, reminders on individual choices on name tag and by e-mail, feedback automats, not receiving a conference bag with unnecessary documents etc)

What was left behind?

The preparation of a sustainable conference was a very rewarding process as the majority of the persons contacted over the preparations said instantly “No one has ever asked for that before.”, “I have never thought of that” or “Let me check if it is possible.” It would have been much more easier to take the normal offers and arrange a conference without thinking about sustainability. It would have been easier, but not so rewarding!

Sustainable arrangements required "clear vision and aims, perseverance, team work and courage".



It has been a learning process that created a lot of new knowledge, synergy and new ways of work for all the actors involved. As part of the process, it was possible to showcase what a sustainable conference can be/should be like and what is needed for it. Now it remains to be seen, if the learnings are being used elsewhere, as it is possible to be much more sustainable than we are nowadays with our meetings, conferences and events. Take the challenge and make your next meeting more sustainable!



Many times, after the event, the organizer is left with loads of materials.
What happened this time? What was left behind?

- 6 conference books
- 3 new carpets made as workplace health promotion activity
- 500 name lanyards to be used again
- 6 aprons for further use
- one wooden exhibition leg for a poster

