



How to strengthen cooperation between local authorities and civil society actors to enhance sustainability? - A transnational gap analysis



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Table of Contents

Background.....	1
1. Applied methodology: Focus groups and gap analysis	2
1.1 Focus group method	2
Rationale of using the focus group method	2
Focus groups in the We make transition!.....	4
Key steps of focus group analysis.....	9
1.2 What is a gap analysis?.....	10
Rationale for using gap analysis	10
Levels of gap analysis.....	11
Gap analysis methods.....	13
2. Main themes brought up in the focus groups	13
2.1 Most used words and terms	13
Generalised perception of the term “sustainable”	13
Generalised perception of “social change” and “societal factors”	14
2.2 Findings related to the role of different actors in eco-social sustainability	15
2.3 Findings based on key topics of discussion	15
2.4 Findings based on key thematic areas of focus groups.....	18
2.5 Different and similar perspectives within focus groups	22
3. Converting findings of focus groups into the gap analysis approach	23
3.1 Examples of gaps in local contexts	24
3.2 Categorisation of identified gaps in the focus areas	27
3.3 Identified challenges in the cooperation between municipalities and civil society	28
Micro-Level Challenges (Individual and Local)	28
Meso-Level Challenges (Organisational and Community)	28
Macro-Level Challenges (Policy and Societal)	29
Policy Impact Evaluation.....	30
4. Summary of proposed improvements to identified gaps	31
5. Recommendations to improve cooperation	33
Appendices	35



Background

The key focus of the We make transition! project is to develop and pilot new ways for interaction and cooperation between local authorities and various local civil society and business actors promoting ecological and social sustainability. The project utilises the **Transition Arena method** to enable local processes of engaging, joint visioning and co-creating transformative solutions. The project involves 11 partners from six Baltic Sea region countries: Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Germany, and Norway. The partners implement the project in altogether 12 cities and municipalities.

The Transition Arena process always starts with an actor and system analysis. For this, each partner location organised **focus group discussions** participated by local authorities, local decision-makers, civil society actors, and business actors. Each focus group had a concrete sustainability topic selected in cooperation with the city. The chosen topics were mainly related to sustainable lifestyle, circular economy, agriculture & food, biodiversity, and social sustainability. Altogether, 20 focus group discussions were organised in a total of 12 locations in 2023.

The focus group discussions helped identify and reach relevant local civil society actors and stakeholders as well as get their views on concrete sustainability topics. The discussion enabled participants to improve their understanding of the role and ideas of civil society actors in enhancing sustainability, as well as insights into the gaps within civil and public sector cooperation and how these could be solved. The discussions supported the engagement of stakeholders and provided a basis for the detailed planning of local transition arena workshop processes that were implemented in the 12 locations during 2024. The series of arena workshops includes co-creation of a joint vision, pathways to the vision and concrete solutions to be implemented in cooperation with actors from many levels.

Purpose

This analysis summarises and analyses the results of 20 focus group discussions to provide general conclusions on the challenges and opportunities for enhancing public-civil cooperation. The key focus is on **potential directions for solutions**. The analysis also aims to investigate the role, typology, relevance, and activities of civil society actors in the field of eco-social sustainability, identify major bottlenecks, and suggest possibilities for improving cooperation with the public sector.

Scope

The data for the gap analysis were collected from the focus groups organised in 12 locations in Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Germany, and Norway in March–September 2023. In total, **20 focus groups were held with more than 200 participants/stakeholders**, representing public, business, and civic sectors totalling over 150 unique organisations.

1. Applied methodology: Focus groups and gap analysis

1.1 Focus group method

The focus group method is a qualitative research technique designed to gather in-depth insights and perceptions from a diverse group of participants on a specific topic of interest. In this structured discussion format, the moderator guides the conversation, using a predetermined set of open-ended questions to encourage participants to share their experiences, opinions, and ideas. The method leverages group dynamics, fostering interaction and allowing participants to build upon each other's responses. The aim is to uncover nuanced perspectives, explore shared understandings, and delve into the complexity of human experiences, making it a valuable tool for researchers seeking a comprehensive understanding of qualitative data.

The focus group session itself follows a structured format, commencing with introductions, possibly incorporating icebreaker activities to establish rapport, and then progressing to the main discussion phase. During this phase, participants are encouraged to share their thoughts, experiences, and perspectives, with the moderator facilitating the conversation and potentially incorporating interactive activities. The session concludes with a thoughtful summary and closure.

Rationale of using the focus group method

Focus group is a powerful method that was seen as suitable within the We make transition! project because focus groups enable inclusive, dynamic, and contextually relevant discussions. Through this method, participants could collaboratively address their views on the local sustainability topics and cooperation challenges and bring up ideas for locally grounded ways to solutions. Focus groups were chosen as a method for several reasons:

Diverse Perspectives: The ecological and social challenges are multifaceted and complex. Focus groups allow for the inclusion of diverse perspectives, bringing together individuals and organisations with varying experiences, expertise, and insights. This diversity enriches the discussions, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand.

Interactive Dialogue: Focus groups facilitate interactive and dynamic discussions. This format encourages participants to actively engage with one another, share personal experiences, and build on each other's ideas. The interactive nature of focus groups fosters a collaborative environment, promoting the co-creation of solutions and initiatives.

Qualitative Insights: Ecological and social sustainability issues often involve qualitative aspects that may not be fully captured through quantitative methods alone. Focus groups provide a qualitative research approach, allowing participants to express nuanced opinions, values, and priorities that contribute to a more holistic understanding of challenges and potential solutions.

Networking and Collaboration: Focus groups serve as networking hubs, bringing together civil society actors and the public sector who may not typically collaborate or do not collaborate to such an extent. By creating a space for interaction, focus groups facilitate the establishment of connections, partnerships, and collaborations among organisations and individuals working towards common sustainability goals.

Contextual Relevance: The Baltic Sea Region has unique ecological characteristics and cultural contexts that influence the dynamics of sustainability initiatives. Focus groups allow, by their nature, participants to delve into the specific contextual factors that impact the region, ensuring that strategies and interventions are tailored to the local setting.

Qualitative Data for Actionable Strategies: Focus groups generate rich qualitative data that can inform actionable strategies. This is particularly valuable for civil society actors who seek practical insights and real-world perspectives to guide their initiatives and advocacy efforts in the realm of ecological and social sustainability.

Participatory Decision-Making: In the spirit of participatory democracy, focus groups empower participants to contribute to decision-making processes. This inclusive approach enhances the sense of ownership among civil society actors, fostering a collective commitment.

Real-Time Feedback: Focus groups provide a forum for real-time feedback. Civil society actors can gauge immediate reactions, concerns, and preferences, enabling them to adjust their approaches promptly in response to the evolving needs and expectations of the community.

Focus groups provide a structured platform for dialogue and collaboration. Focus groups enable diverse stakeholders, including NGOs, community organisations, and the public sector, to come together. Through focused discussions, these groups facilitate the exchange of ideas, insights, and expertise, fostering a collective understanding of the various perspectives on sustainability. This collaborative approach helps understand different approaches, shapes more effective and targeted initiatives, and encourages sharing of the best practices.



Figure 1. Focus group on “sustainable food system” in Helsinki-Uusimaa, Finland, June 2023. Photo: Miranda Sundholm.

Focus groups in the We make transition!

Focus groups' topics and locations

In total, there were 20 focus groups organised with 204 participants, representing over 150 unique organisations. Table 1 below provides information on the locations, number of participants in each focus group, and focus group topics.

Table 1. Focus groups organised in We make Transition! project.

Country	City/municipality/region	Number of participants	Focus group topic
Germany	Bremen	9	Sustainable Food
	Bremen	14	Climate change and involvement of youth
Latvia	Cēsis	11	Biodegradable waste management
	Cēsis	10	Bioregion development
Estonia	Tartu	7	Circular economy
	Lääne-Harju	7	Community energy
Poland	Gdynia	9	Green urban spaces of participation
	Gdynia	9	Sustainable consumption/lifestyle
Finland	Tampere	14	Biodiversity
	Tampere	15	Sustainable consumption/lifestyle
Finland	Hämeenkyrö	14	Sustainable mobility
	Hämeenkyrö	20	Sustainable agriculture
Finland	Helsinki-Uusimaa	8	Sharing economy
	Helsinki-Uusimaa	8	Sustainable food systems
	Helsinki-Uusimaa	7	Sustainable use of buildings and space
Finland	Kimitoön	8	Sustainable entrepreneurship and work
Finland	Kimitoön	8	Youth and sustainable lifestyle
Finland	Uusikaupunki	7	Biodiversity
	Uusikaupunki	10	Sustainable consumption/lifestyle
Norway	Trøndelag Region	9	Social sustainability

Relation of the topics to Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as a universal call to action to enhance social sustainability and protect the planet. The 17 SDGs presented in Figure 2 recognise that action in one area will affect outcomes in others, and that development must balance social, economic, and environmental sustainability. The creativity, know-how, and financial resources from all of societies are necessary to achieve the SDGs in every context.

The chosen topics for these 20 focus groups relate to a wide range of the SDGs, demonstrating the interconnectedness of these goals and the potential for comprehensive positive change in various areas of sustainability and well-being.

The topics of the focus groups are especially linked with the following SDGs:

- **Climate Action (Goal 13)**
- **Sustainable cities and communities (Goal 11)**
- **Good Health and Well-Being (Goal 3)**
- **Responsible Consumption and Production (Goal 12)**
- **Life on Land (Goal 14)**
- **Partnerships for the Goals (Goal 17)**



Figure 2. 17 SDG goals by the United Nations.

Categorisation of focus groups' topics and key terminology

The sustainability topics for the focus groups in each location were selected in cooperation with local authorities based on the local relevance and the needs to improve cooperation with local actors. The categorisation of the topics described in the following Figure 3 provides a clearer structure of the key aspects of sustainability that were addressed in the focus groups.

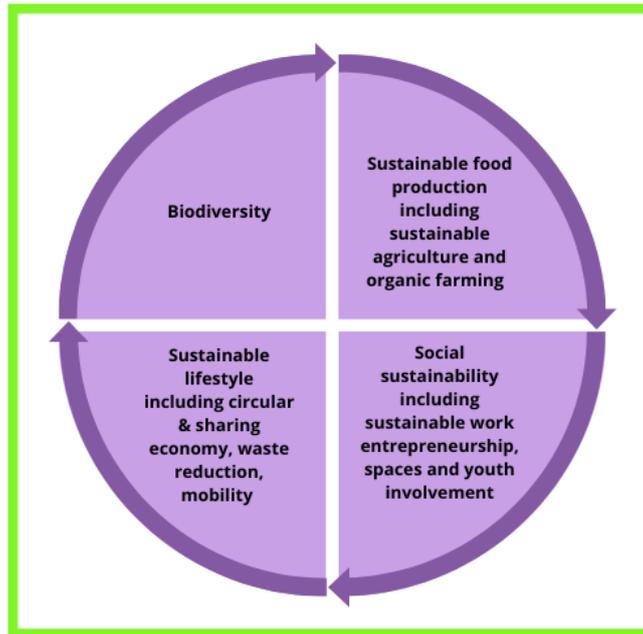


Figure 3. Categories of focus groups' topics.

Ecological and Social Innovation: This term generally refers to innovations aiming at addressing social and ecological challenges independently or in combination without necessarily integrating the two in a deeply intertwined manner. Social innovations focus on new strategies, concepts, ideas, and organisations that meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations. Ecological innovations are primarily concerned with developing new products, processes, or services that reduce environmental impact or enhance the resilience of natural systems.

Eco-Social Innovation: This concept goes a step further by deeply integrating social and ecological considerations into a singular, unified approach. Strongly eco-social innovations are designed to address social and ecological issues in a manner, where solving one issue directly contributes to resolving the other, recognising that these realms are deeply interconnected. Such innovations acknowledge that effective, sustainable solutions must consider the social and ecological dimensions as fundamentally intertwined, striving for a holistic approach that fosters societal well-being and ecological sustainability simultaneously. In essence, while social and ecological innovations may tackle their respective domains in parallel or with some degree of overlap, strongly eco-social innovations are characterised by a more integrated, systemic approach that seeks to harmonise and synergise social and ecological outcomes. In relation to the project, both terms are used and co-exist while the focus is on the eco-social innovation.



Questions of the We make transition! focus groups

The following questions were translated into national languages and used in all focus group discussions in different countries:

1. What comes to your mind about X topic? What kind of activities are currently and mainly supporting X topic?
2. What type of civil society actors/organisations are the most active in the X topic in our region? (NGOs, cooperatives, communities, small enterprises/entrepreneurs, activists...?)
3. How do you see your role in enhancing the X topic?
4. How are activities of civil society actors currently supported? What kind of support do you think is needed among various civil society actors in relation to X topic? (both civil society and municipality can reply and experience different opinions)
5. What are the current major challenges of civil society actors in relation to the X topic? How would you suggest overcoming those? (This form allows both civil society and municipalities to engage)
6. How would you improve the cooperation between civil society and local authority?
7. If you could give only one advice on how to strengthen and improve the selected sustainability topic X in your region, what would you suggest doing?

Characteristics of participated organisations

The suggested participant profile and composition of the focus groups aimed for a range of 7-12 participants. Overall, the average focus group consisted of 10 participants, ranging from 7 in the smallest to 20 in the largest group.

Recommended profiles of participants included representatives of social enterprises, associations, cooperatives, representatives of public administration dealing with or related to the focus group topic, local politicians, and representatives of the private sector – entrepreneurs, whose activities promote ecological and/or social sustainability.

Primary importance. Civil society actors from environmental, social, cultural sectors: cooperatives, communities, associations, social business; local and regional authorities from environmental, social, cultural sectors; political decision-makers.

Secondary importance participants. Entrepreneurs and researchers related to the focus group topic.

In total, there were 204 participants, representing 155 unique organisations, with the primary representation of NGOs and activists (53) and municipalities (29). See the detailed representation of the main typology of participants in the Figure 4 on next page.



Figure 4. Types of participated organisations and individuals.

The blended typology of organisations within focus groups, with a primary focus on the involvement of civil society actors, constituting 33% of the total participants, reached the goal of the main typology's participation.

Municipalities, as a distinct category, represented the second-largest group, comprising 19% of the participants. The involvement of local government bodies highlights the importance of engaging with relevant administrative units that can influence to the cooperation with the local actors.

Beyond NGOs, individuals and municipalities, the typology of participants extended to include small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), educational institutions, universities and research organisations. Each category brought its unique perspectives, contributing to the overall richness of the discussion. The success of any collaborative initiative lies in recognising and leveraging the diverse strengths that each participant brings. In this case, the typology of participants paints a picture of a well-rounded and inclusive effort that goes beyond usual settings. By understanding and appreciating the unique contributions of NGOs, municipalities, SMEs, educational institutions, universities, research organisations, and others, the initiative can harness the collective power of a multi-faceted approach towards achieving its objectives, namely, searching for more cooperative approaches to enhance local sustainability.



Figure 5. Focus group on “sustainable agriculture” in Hämeenkyrö, Finland, September 2023. Photo by Markus Lappi.

Key steps of focus group analysis

The classical approach to qualitative focus group analysis is based on a structured method for identifying major themes and interpreting them in context. Below is a breakdown of the key steps:

Identify Major Themes: This initial step involves reviewing the data collected from the focus groups. There is a need to look for recurring topics, ideas, or concepts that emerge from participants' responses to pre-designed questions. These themes are typically identified through inductive coding, where data is systematically reviewed to find patterns and commonalities.

Interpret Themes in Context: Once the major themes are identified, the next step is to interpret them within the context in which they arise. This means understanding the nuances and subtleties of how participants discussed and related to these themes. The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning and significance of each theme.

The analysis of generalised outcomes of all focus groups uses an analytical generalisation approach. This process is following:

Terminology Identification: To identify transnational themes, the analysis starts by identifying specific terms, sentences, or paired words most frequently used within the focus group discussions. This may involve creating a list of the most common and relevant vocabulary emerging from the data.

Foundation Setting: The most frequent words identified across all focus groups are considered foundational. These terms or concepts are particularly salient or important in the research context.

Contextual Analysis: After identifying the foundational terms, the analysis delves into the context and examines how these terms are combined within the broader context of the discussions. This contextual analysis provides a more comprehensive understanding of the themes and how they relate to the research objectives.

Limitations

The settled guidance was meant to achieve a basic and conceptual understanding of the “state of the art” of civil society actors enhancing sustainability related to a specific topic in a specific region. Due to the limitations of the method, this, however, does not provide a representation of the whole region or the sector, but rather insights into direction.

1.2 What is a gap analysis?

Gap analysis is a method used to assess the difference or “gap” between the current state of something and its desired state. It helps identify areas where improvements or changes are needed. In the context of an existing state in cooperation between municipal and civil sectors, the gap analysis involves evaluating the current situation, comparing it to the desired outcome and identifying any existing discrepancies or gaps. By doing so, it allows for a better understanding of what needs to be done to bridge those gaps.

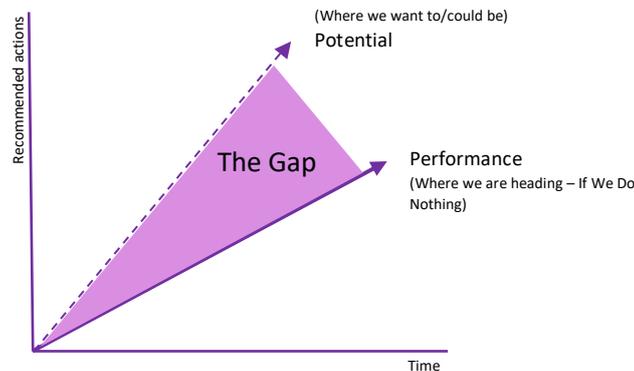


Figure 6. Gap analysis visualisation.

Source: <https://www.clearpointstrategy.com/blog/gap-analysis-template>

Rationale for using gap analysis

Gap analysis can provide valuable information **related to challenges in cooperation between local authorities and the local actors**. By conducting a thorough gap analysis, both parties can identify areas where their current collaboration may be lacking or falling short of expectations.

Here are a few ways in which gap analysis can be utilised for this purpose:

- 1. Identifying common goals:** Gap analysis can help municipalities and the civil sector identify shared objectives and goals. By understanding where their interests align, they can focus their efforts on areas that require improvement and work together towards achieving those goals.
- 2. Assessing existing resources:** Gap analysis allows both parties to evaluate their current resources. This includes financial, human, and technological resources. By identifying any gaps in resources, they can explore opportunities for collaboration to fill those gaps and optimise their joint efforts.

3. **Recognising communication gaps:** Effective communication is crucial for successful cooperation. Gap analysis can help identify any communication gaps or breakdowns between the municipality and the civil sector. By understanding these gaps, they can implement strategies to improve communication channels, enhance transparency, and foster better collaboration.

4. **Addressing legal and regulatory gaps:** Gap analysis can also shed light on any legal or regulatory gaps hindering cooperation between the municipality and the civil sector. By identifying these gaps, both parties can work together to advocate for necessary changes or amendments to existing laws or regulations, enabling smoother collaboration.

5. **Monitoring progress and evaluating outcomes:** Gap analysis is not a one-time event, but an ongoing process. It allows for the continuous monitoring of progress and the evaluation of outcomes. By regularly conducting gap analyses, municipalities and the civil sector can track their collaborative efforts, identify areas of improvement, and make necessary adjustments to enhance their cooperation over time.

In summary, gap analysis can be a valuable tool for municipalities and the civil sector to identify areas of improvement, enhance their cooperation, and work towards common goals.

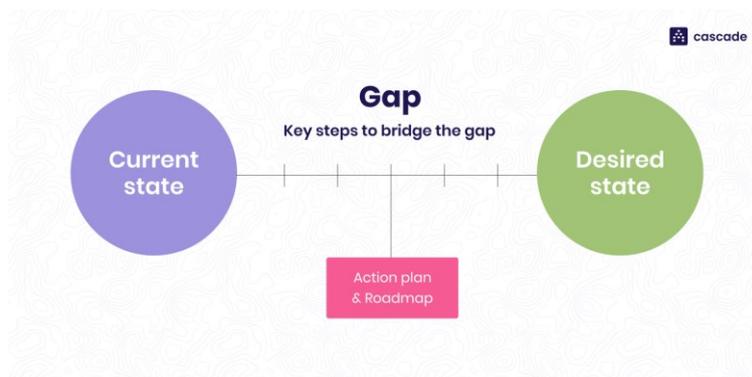


Figure 7. Relation between current and future state in Gap analysis.

Source: <https://medium.com/@affineworkos/top-8-proven-brainstorming-techniques-for-creativity-in-2024-4fbc98a3ca8>

Levels of gap analysis

In the context of gap analysis, the micro, meso, and macro levels represent three distinct but interconnected layers of analysis, each offering a unique perspective on the data and insights being examined. Gap analysis focuses on the following **three levels**: 1) local level, which is mostly discovered by the focus groups and is assumed to be a **micro level**, where the main informative input is focus group summaries and represent individuals, 2) **meso**, and 3) **macro** levels, which are based on the analytical generalisation and methods for proper visualisation and systematisation. Below is a definition for each level in the specified context. Having three levels in a gap analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of issues.

Micro Level: this level focuses on the **local or individual context**, where data and insights are primarily gathered from focus groups. The analysis is intensely detailed at the micro level, concentrating on the specific nuances, experiences, and perspectives of individual participants or localised scenarios.

This level provides a granular understanding of the issues at hand, capturing the unique characteristics and immediate concerns within a specific, localised context. The main informative input at this level comes from the summaries of focus group discussions, which offer direct, qualitative insights into the localised experiences and perceptions of the participants.

Meso Level: At the meso level, the analysis expands to identify patterns, commonalities, and differences across various micro-level insights; in a nutshell, it is at the **organisational and community level**. This level involves analytical generalisation, synthesising data from different local contexts to identify broader trends and insights not limited to individual cases. The meso level bridges the micro and macro levels, offering a more generalised understanding of the issues by integrating and comparing findings from multiple micro-level analyses. This level employs e.g. visualisation, clustering, and systematisation methods to categorise and interpret the data, facilitating a more structured and comparative analysis that highlights scalable interventions and commonalities across different local contexts. Meso level generalisation is reflected in the current gap analysis.

Macro Level: The macro level provides the broadest perspective in the gap analysis, focusing on overarching trends, systemic issues, and broad-scale implications of the findings at **political and societal level**. At this level, the analysis is concerned with identifying and understanding the larger context or system within which the individual and meso-level findings exist. The macro level analysis helps recognise widespread patterns, structural challenges, and overarching goals or policies that influence the issues identified at the micro and meso levels. This level of analysis is crucial for aligning the findings with broader trends, societal goals, or systemic frameworks, ensuring that the gap analysis remains relevant and effective at a larger scale.

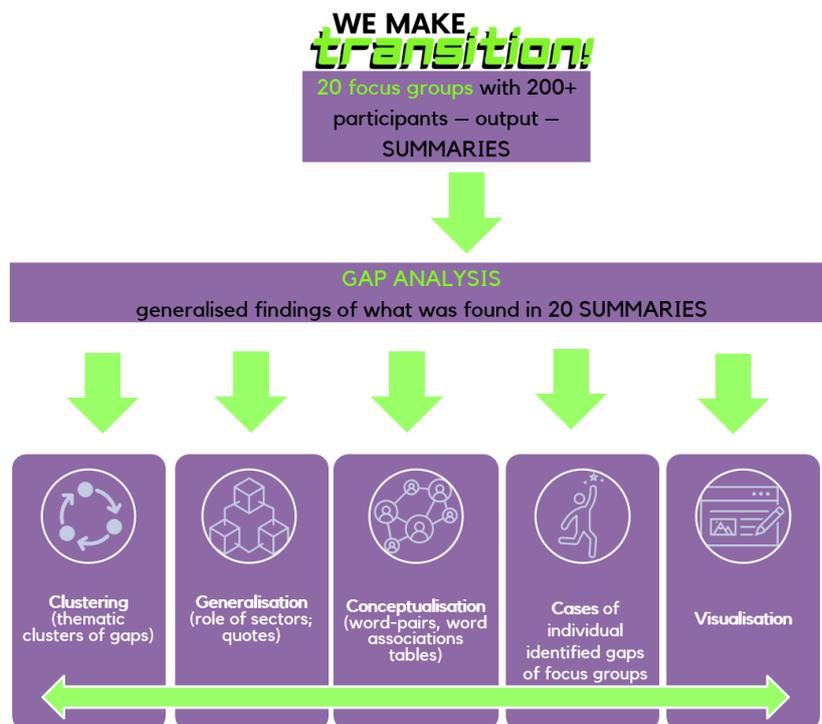


Figure 8. Gap analysis structure.

The adjective “sustainable” is mentioned 198 times in the focus group summaries, and while it does not completely reflect the total usability of the adjective during the process, it demonstrates the importance of the term among stakeholders/participants. While the limitations suggested that the focus groups were based on the summaries and not transcripts, “sustainable” is likely the most dominant and was used mainly in connection with **lifestyle, education, and consumption**.

Overall quoting related to “sustainable”

Focus group summaries had a variety of quotes, a few of which are listed below:

“**Sustainability** should be considered on **three dimensions: ecological, social, and economic.**”

“We must find a way to bring **ecological sustainability** more forward while still respecting this so-called ‘cultural diversity’ within the municipality and its inhabitants.”

“Sustainability means slowing down.”

“Environmental **education is needed** to change attitudes, also for adults. There is a need for a deeper understanding of the significance of different species for the health of both the environment and humans.”

“The value of biodiversity is currently lost in our worldview, we need ecopsychology - Human diversity is clear to us, but nature biodiversity is not, because our world is so anthropocentric.”

“Urban planning places too much emphasis on direct economic benefits. Urban planning usually forgets that people's own natural attractions in the city prevent mental health problems and improve well-being.”

“There should be a **shift from consuming goods and materials to consuming experiences**, and this sustainable lifestyle should also be seen as a business opportunity.”

“We need **constructive debate** and cooperation to solve sustainability challenges.”

“In order to enhance sustainable practices, the community would need to **invest in cooperation** and work together more.”

“Many associations enhance sustainable consumption **without naming** it as such.”

“If we want to achieve sustainability, we need to focus on **regionality and de-globalisation**”.

Generalised perception of “social change” and “societal factors”

According to focus group discussions, “social change” and “societal factors” are important aspects of socio-ecological innovation. For instance, attachment to tradition, climate change, competition, cultural influence, long-term thinking, market transformation, societal norms and systemic thinking are a few of the societal factors affecting different processes within society and respectively, connected to the social aspects of innovation. Social change is characterised by key terms used in the focus groups, such as activism, collective actions, grassroots movements, NGOs, reforms, and support for civil society.



2.2 Findings related to the role of different actors in eco-social sustainability

There are different perspectives and expectations from the stakeholders and actors. Due to limitation/lack of representative identification, opinions are partly attributed to the specific sectoral representatives.

PUBLIC SECTOR

*“The role of the municipality is to **provide the necessary resources**, for example, in the form of municipal land (...).*

The role of municipality is expected to be a *“**creating encounters between actors**”*. Additional aspects are, for instance, making influence on industries to be more sustainable.

The role of the public sector is to create favourable conditions and bring different actors together.

CIVIL SOCIETY

(NGO / community representative:) *“The role of a non-governmental organisation or community is to **bring practical examples to people**”*.

Cultural actors are mentioned to play *“an encouraging role and guiding a sustainable lifestyle”*. Better recognition is advised for these actors.

The role of sustainability actors is seen more in **information and education**, especially in focusing on youth.

BUSINESS SECTOR

(Entrepreneur) *“The role of a company specialising in food innovations is to **provide technology solutions for industry and indoor farming companies**”*.

However, there is also an expectation that *“the role of commerce is to promote well-being for consumers”* and that it is important to *“(...) create new services that take into account the entire life cycle of the product”*.

RESEARCH

(Researcher) *“A researcher's role is to **bring new information**. Also act as a mediator, bring different actors and perspectives to the discussion”*.

2.3 Findings based on key topics of discussion

In this section, the **key-words-based search or associative search** related to the focus group questions and topics was performed. Key discussion topics like “challenge”, “support” and “cooperation” are forming the conceptual, associative findings of focus group discussions related to the words used by the participants (see Table 2).

Table 2. Summary findings of the focus groups

Challenge	Support	Cooperation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - shortage of human resources - society largely based on consumption - cooperation - bureaucratic - prevailing linear economic model - barriers to implementation - budget constraints - bureaucracy - collaboration issues - common point of connection - limited information, miscommunication - complexity - criticism - distrust - financial constraints - fragmentation - inefficiency - inflexibility and resistance to change - infrastructure and resource allocation - restrictions - knowledge gap - lack of consistency - lack of expertise - lack of impact - lack of transparency - loss of focus - overload - visionless - lack of willpower 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - monetary incentives - policy communication to increase public support - civil society actors need support and expertise in applying for funding - finance on adapting good practices into daily routines - public support building and strengthening networks - local authorities should support the development of the ecosystem - the discussion focused more on how the actors could better support each other - psychological support - support a sense of community - support grassroots activity - human resource - support in building and supporting networks - support mechanisms for the transition - strengthened support systems for various stakeholders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - creating cooperation throughout all sectors - civil actors should be seen as equal partners for cooperation - cooperation between different municipalities to combine small resources - push towards closure cooperation - diverse perspectives - elimination of fragmented collaboration - cooperation networks

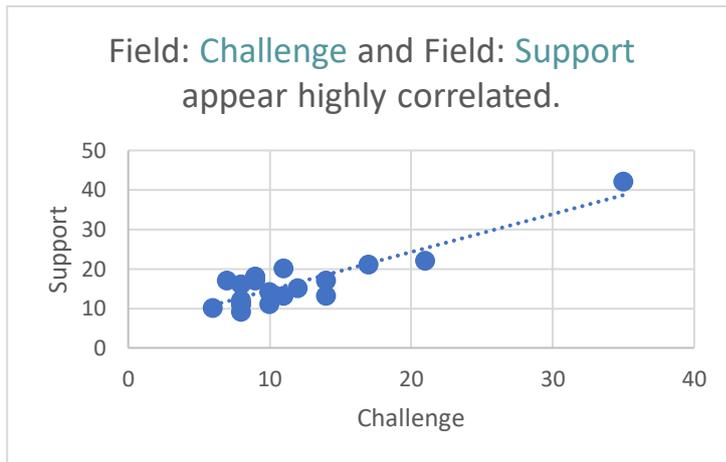
The interesting conclusions on the different perspectives related to the “challenge”, “issue” and “problem” can be summarised in the Table 3 below, observing the difference in the usage of the specific terms. Since the data inputs are not from the transcripts but summaries, this does not exclude the biases of individual perceptions of the person summarising the discussions. Still, specific terms in use may indicate regional/sectoral differences when challenging topics/issues and problems are discussed. Pre-assumingly, groups with the highest total are more concerned about the specific issue, while less mentioned in the group’s terms indicates a less pressing situation in the sector/topic discussed within the specific municipality.

The interesting finding is that the term “problem(s)” is dominant, having a 51% of total mentions with the very close use of “challenge” with 40% and less mentions of the “issue”.

In conclusion, the use of keywords like “support”, “challenge”, and “cooperation/collaboration” in the associative search of focus group discussions has yielded important insights into the key themes and concerns of the participants. These findings can help inform strategies, policies, and actions to bridge gaps and promote collaboration within the context of the local enhancement of cooperation between civil and municipal stakeholders.

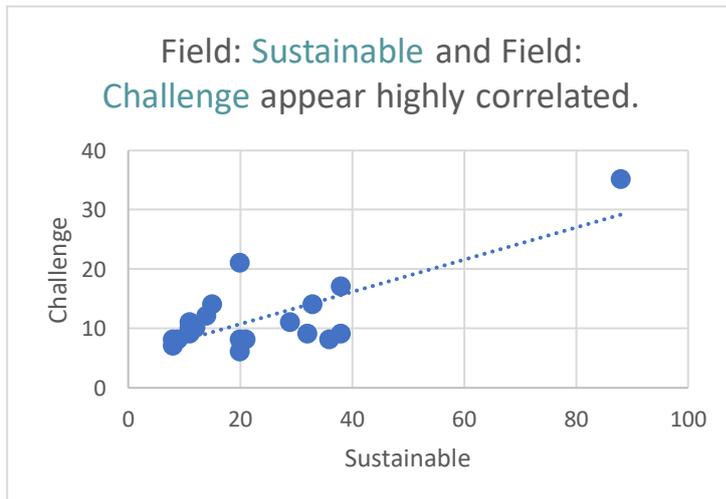
Table 3. Summary findings of the focus groups

Country	Municipality and/or city	Topic	Problem	Challenge	Issue
LATVIA	Cēsis	Biodegradable waste management	7	10	9
FINLAND	Helsinki-Uusimaa	Sharing economy	0	12	0
FINLAND	Helsinki-Uusimaa	Sustainable food production	14	8	0
FINLAND	Helsinki-Uusimaa	sustainable use of buildings and built space	7	21	2
LATVIA	Cēsis	Bioregion development	1	9	2
FINLAND	Hämeenkyrö	Sustainable agriculture	110	11	3
FINLAND	Hämeenkyrö	Sustainable mobility	41	6	0
FINLAND	Tampere	Biodiversity	1	7	2
FINLAND	Tampere	Sustainable consumption	66	9	0
ESTONIA	Lääne-Harju	Renewable energy communities	0	11	4
NORWAY	Namsos	Eco-social sustainability	4	8	0
FINLAND	Kimitoön	Sustainable entrepreneurship/work in archipelago	1	9	0
GERMANY	Bremen	Sustainable food production	9	35	10
ESTONIA	Tartu	Circular economy	0	14	2
GERMANY	Bremen	Climate change and activation of young generation	16	17	10
FINLAND	Uusikaupunki	Sustainable consumption	8	8	0
FINLAND	Uusikaupunki	Biodiversity	0	10	0
FINLAND	Kimitoön	Youth participation and role in building sustainable lifestyle	7	14	5
POLAND	Gdynia	Green spaces of participation	0	8	2
POLAND	Gdynia	Sustainable consumption	7	8	1



Continuing the overall relationship and correlation findings, the terms “Support” and “Challenge” are correlated based on the summative Code matrix browser. Measured value is the number of repeats in all focus groups. This indirectly indicates that “support” pre-assumingly expected by the civil society actors is challenging.

Figure 10. Correlation between “Support” and “Challenge”.



It is also found that the term “Challenge” is correlated with the “Sustainable”. Assuming that focus group discussions were on the topics concerned, that is rather leading to assumption that sustainability issue in the topics discussed is challenging.

Figure 11. Correlation between “Sustainable” and “Challenge”.

2.4 Findings based on key thematic areas of focus groups

The key findings from twenty focus groups delved into various sustainability topics — from sustainable lifestyle and biodiversity to circular economy and eco-social innovations, identifying similar trends while exploring effective cooperation between civil society and public authorities. A comprehensive synthesis of these discussions highlights the dominating four areas in all countries.

Area #1 Sustainability as a key in all sectors

As per one of the focus group participants mentioned, “sustainability should be considered on three dimensions: ecological, social, and economic”. It is important to integrate this multifaceted view whenever discussing local, regional, or national level sustainability issues.

Ecological Dimension: The ecological dimension of sustainability emphasises the importance of preserving and enhancing the natural environment. This involves responsible resource management, biodiversity conservation, and mitigating the impact of human activities on ecosystems. Discussions on local, regional, or national sustainability issues must consider the ecological dimension to prioritise environmental resilience and health. This was a prominent part of several focus group discussions.

Social Dimension: The social dimension of sustainability is related to the well-being of communities, emphasising inclusivity, social justice, and cultural preservation. Sustainable development should address social equity, community engagement, and the protection of human rights. Considering this dimension in discussions ensures that the needs and aspirations of diverse populations are considered, promoting a more equitable and just society.

Economic Dimension: The economic dimension of sustainability recognises the interdependence of economic systems with environmental and social factors. It involves fostering economic growth that is not only financially viable but also environmentally and socially responsible. Balancing economic development with ecological and social considerations is crucial for the long-term prosperity of communities.

The integration of the **Multifaceted View**, assuming different levels of administrative organisation and how these levels can handle different challenges related to the sustainability and resilience, is reflected in following way below.

Local Level: At the local level, considering sustainability across ecological, social, and economic dimensions means tailoring initiatives to the specific needs of the community. This may involve implementing environmentally sustainable practices, promoting social inclusion, and supporting local businesses to ensure a resilient and thriving local ecosystem.

Regional Level: Regional sustainability discussions should involve collaboration between diverse stakeholders to address shared challenges. Regional planning should consider the ecological impact of development, social cohesion among diverse communities, and economic strategies that promote prosperity without compromising long-term well-being.

National Level: At the national level, policies and frameworks should reflect a commitment to sustainability across all dimensions. This requires a coordinated effort to create legislation promoting environmental conservation, social justice, and economic growth that benefits the nation.

In conclusion, the **three-dimensional approach to sustainability provides a robust framework for addressing the complexities of contemporary challenges**. By integrating ecological, social, and economic considerations, discussions and initiatives at various levels can contribute to a more balanced and sustainable future for communities, regions, and nations. This holistic perspective ensures that the pursuit of sustainability is not only environmentally conscious but also socially inclusive and economically viable.

Area #2 Education, awareness, and information

Based on the 20 focus groups, the term combination of “education, information and awareness,” including a specific focus on youth and children, is identified as prevalent in most focus groups. Even more important is to stress that the cross-sectoral perspective (public, non-governmental and business sectors) agreed that education and information are key factors pivotal in establishing long-term cooperation and getting topics of concern discussed within the focus groups.

Youth and Children as a Focal Point: The specific emphasis on the youth and children within this term combination highlights a forward-looking approach. By acknowledging the importance of instilling values of sustainability, environmental consciousness, and social responsibility in the younger generation, the focus groups recognise the potential for lasting impact. Engaging youth and children in discussions about pertinent issues empowers them with knowledge and ensures the continuity of efforts towards sustainable practices.

Cross-Sectoral Agreement: Equally noteworthy is the observation of cross-sectoral alignment related to the role of education and information in sustainable change. This alignment, spanning public, non-governmental, and business sectors, underscores the universal recognition that sustainable change necessitates collaborative efforts across sectors. The interconnectedness of public awareness, non-governmental initiatives, and responsible business practices is crucial in forming a holistic approach to sustainability.

Key Factors in Establishing Long-Term Cooperation: The consensus among the focus groups regarding the centrality of education and information points to these elements as key factors in establishing long-term cooperation. Whether discussing public policy, non-profit initiatives, or business strategies, the understanding that an informed and educated populace is more likely to engage actively in sustainable practices lays the foundation for enduring collaboration. Education catalyses a shared understanding of the challenges at hand and the collective responsibility in addressing them.

Area #3 Cooperation of different stakeholders and the role of civil society

Following analysis of all 20 focus groups, the term “civil” was searched for the matching word combinations. In the documents of 20 focus group, it appeared 165 times, most frequently as civil society, stressing the importance of this term with all focus groups organised.

Emphasis on Grassroots Engagement: The prevalence of "civil society" in the discussions suggests recognising the importance of grassroots engagement, activism, and community-driven initiatives in addressing the concerns at hand.

Advocacy and Social Change: The emphasis on civil society also indicates a collective acknowledgement of the role of advocacy, activism, and social change movements in contributing to sustainable and equitable development.

Inclusive Participation: The prominence of “civil society” in other focus groups suggests a commitment to inclusive participation, involving non-governmental organisations, community groups, and individuals in decision-making processes related to the focus groups' objectives.

Recognition of Diverse Perspectives: The focus on civil society indicates the significance of awareness of the diverse perspectives, interests, and initiatives that emanate from the broader community, reinforcing the need for a collaborative and inclusive approach to the discussed issues.

The above-mentioned findings indicate the necessity for considering future discussions and directions; namely, the most important are mentioned below.

Balancing Perspectives: While the emphasis on civil society is valuable, it is essential to ensure a balanced consideration of various stakeholders, including local authorities, to foster effective collaboration and comprehensive solutions. A few statements that civil society did not feel valuable enough point to the necessity of proper “balanced power” schemes to be introduced as primary establishments for successful cooperation.

Exploring Local-Level Dynamics: Given the contrast in frequency, further exploration of the dynamics between civil society and local authorities in future discussions may provide insights into how these entities can collaborate synergistically for sustainable development. This again, considering proper cooperation mechanisms and a “more balanced power” approach.

In conclusion, the findings highlight the importance of grassroots engagement, advocacy, and inclusive participation. This emphasis, when contrasted with the frequency of mentions related to local authorities, suggests a nuanced focus within the discussions. Understanding the implications of this emphasis can guide future talks to ensure a holistic and collaborative approach to the issues at the heart of the focus groups' objectives.

Area #4 Locality and localism

Many focus groups have indicated the necessity of “localism” and the use of “local” as a contributor or essential factor in relation to the sustainability processes. Locality can be seen as necessary in many aspects of sustainable lifestyle, including consumption, agriculture, and mobility. Hence, the localisation instead of the globalisation trend should be considered when assuming long-term contributions towards sustainability.

These topics provide valuable insights into the key themes and concerns discussed in the focus groups, offering a comprehensive understanding of the various dimensions of sustainability, the significance of education and information, the role of different stakeholders, and the emphasis on locality in sustainable processes. This information can be instrumental in shaping strategies, policies, and actions related to sustainability and cooperation in the Baltic Sea region.

Localism in Sustainable Lifestyle: The focus groups recognise the importance of locality in shaping sustainable lifestyles. This extends to various aspects, including how communities consume resources, practice agriculture, and engage in mobility.

Sustainable Consumption: The concept of “local” concerning consumption implies a preference for locally sourced products, reducing the carbon footprint associated with transportation, and supporting regional economies. This aligns with the principles of sustainable consumption and ethical consumerism.

Local Agriculture: Acknowledging the significance of “local” in agriculture suggests an emphasis on promoting regional and sustainable farming practices. This can include supporting small-scale farmers, reducing reliance on long-distance transportation of food, and fostering food security at the community level.

Local Mobility: Considering “local” in the context of mobility indicates a move towards sustainable transportation solutions within communities. This may involve promoting walking, cycling, and using locally available public transportation options to reduce environmental impact.

Long-Term Contributions towards Sustainability in terms of localism are proposed as follows:

Community Resilience: The emphasis on localism is seen as a strategy to build community resilience. By fostering self-sufficiency at the local level, communities become more capable of addressing challenges and adapting to changes, contributing to long-term sustainability.

Cultural Preservation: Prioritising local practices and traditions contributes to preserving cultural identities. This is essential for sustaining a sense of community and fostering a connection to the environment.

Environmental Impact Reduction: Choosing local over global options in consumption, agriculture, and mobility has a potential to significantly reduce the environmental impact associated with long-distance transportation and resource extraction.

Implications for the Baltic Sea Region: Acknowledging these themes and concerns within the focus groups provides valuable insights that can inform strategies, policies, and actions related to sustainability in the Baltic Sea region. Understanding the importance of localism can guide collaborative efforts among regional stakeholders, encouraging the development of initiatives that align with the values and aspirations of local communities. By incorporating these insights into regional planning, the Baltic Sea region can foster a sustainable future that respects local ecosystems, supports community well-being, and contributes to a global shift towards more environmentally conscious and socially responsible practices.

The preference for “localisation” over “globalisation” reflects **a shift in mindset towards valuing community resilience, self-sufficiency, and preserving local cultures.** This trend suggests a desire to minimise the negative (environmental, social, and economic) impacts and dependencies associated with global supply chains and to prioritise self-sufficiency and local communities' well-being and the importance of ensuring self-sufficiency.

2.5 Different and similar perspectives within focus groups

Analysing differences and similarities of focus groups in terms of the appearance of different words, the surprising findings are part of the focus groups' analysis discovery. “Local”, “sustainable” and “support” are the terms characterising discussion within all focus groups.

The colour coding used in the table, indicates “red” as the most often used term, while “green” as the least often used. This is also supported by the small visualisation of the chart icons – representing gradation.

Table 4. Summary findings of the focus groups

	civil	people	society	sustainable	cooperation	challenge	support	activity	local
Biodegradable waste management	7	6	10	11	14	10	11	0	19
Sharing economy	12	3	12	14	13	12	15	3	12
Sustainable food production	7	9	7	20	10	8	11	0	20
sustainable use of buildings and built space	24	1	19	20	23	21	22	1	9
Bioregion development	7	3	9	11	12	9	18	0	20
Sustainable agriculture	6	32	10	29	16	11	20	2	40
Sustainable mobility	5	10	4	20	5	6	10	1	14
Biodiversity	6	12	7	8	14	7	17	0	16
Sustainable consumption	8	6	7	38	12	9	18	1	13
Renewable energy communities	10	4	10	11	14	11	13	0	9
Eco-social sustainability	8	9	8	8	10	8	12	2	11
Sustainable entrepreneurship/work in archipelago	11	6	9	32	15	9	17	0	19
Sustainable food production	21	2	35	88	37	35	42	0	12
Circular economy	11	2	12	15	22	14	13	0	8
Climate change and activation of young generation	11	49	16	38	19	17	21	0	7
Sustainable consumption	8	12	8	36	11	8	11	1	32
Biodiversity	11	15	10	12	12	10	14	1	23
Youth participation and role in building sustainable lifest	12	13	12	33	15	14	17	0	22
Green spaces of participation	8	11	8	9	9	8	9	0	3
Sustainable consumption	8	13	8	21	11	8	16	0	6

Insights on the findings

Local and Sustainable Prioritisation: The high frequency of “local” and “sustainable” strongly emphasises community-centric and environmentally conscious approaches in the discussions.

Support as a Consistent Theme: The frequent use of “support” highlights the recognition of the importance of collaboration and assistance in achieving sustainability goals.

The differences and similarities in term usage provide valuable insights into the focus group discussions. While “activity” is notably absent, the consistent emphasis on “local”, “sustainable”, and “support” signifies a collective commitment to community-centric, environmentally conscious, and collaborative approaches to address sustainability challenges.

3. Converting findings of focus groups into the gap analysis approach

Converting the findings of focus groups into the gap analysis approach is a critical step in understanding and addressing the discrepancies between current and desired states in various directions and topicalities identified by focus groups. By integrating these findings into a gap analysis framework, civil stakeholders and municipalities can systematically identify and prioritise the gaps that must be addressed to achieve their strategic goals in partnerships. This process involves distilling key themes and insights from the focus groups, mapping them onto specific areas of concern or opportunity, and developing actionable strategies to bridge the identified gaps through the transition arena process.



3.1 Examples of gaps in local contexts

While the discussions shared various similarities and conceptualised findings, each focus group also uncovered very specific examples of gaps within its particular focus. These distinct gaps highlight the unique sustainability challenges and opportunities identified in the localised contexts. By examining these specific examples, we can gain deeper insights into the particularities of each group's experiences and perspectives, thereby enriching our understanding of the broader themes at play.

In Vidzeme region, they noted **infrastructure and accessibility as a specific gap**. More precisely, the availability of waste sorting infrastructure varies between urban and rural areas, leading to challenges in implementing convenient waste sorting systems. This gap highlights the need for more accessible and widespread infrastructure to support effective waste management practices.

Another gap outlined is the implementation and support for creating a bioregion, specifically highlighting **challenges related to support and engagement**. Focus group participants noted a need for existing practices and support systems for entrepreneurs and farmers transitioning towards the bioregion concept. They also emphasised the need for targeted state or municipal support, political backing, and public education to make the bioregion concept more appealing and understandable to entrepreneurs and the wider community.

The Bremen focus group identified gaps in the **promotion of sustainable food** within the city of Bremen, focusing on challenges such as integrating sustainable practices into city planning and promoting regional and de-globalised food production. A specific example highlighted is the need for increased green spaces within the city to support the concept of “edible cities”, aiming for urban agriculture and creating of more sustainable and accessible food sources for city residents.

The second focus group organised in Bremen, identified a **significant gap in the engagement and representation of young people** in climate discussions and actions. An example of this gap is the need for more inclusive and effective participation mechanisms for young people in climate policy-making and environmental activism. Despite various initiatives and discussions, young people often feel powerless and excluded from meaningful participation in climate-related decision-making processes, highlighting a need for more accessible and empowering platforms for youth engagement.

The Norwegian focus group highlighted a **gap in addressing social sustainability**, particularly in integrating immigrants into the workforce and the community. Specific examples include the challenges related to language and employment for immigrants, youth engagement in environmental activities, and the reliance on a few key individuals or organisations to implement sustainability projects. This gap underscores the need for broader community involvement and more comprehensive support systems to integrate diverse groups into sustainability initiatives.

A focus group organised on the topic “Biodiversity” in Tampere identified **gaps in urban planning and biodiversity management**, emphasising the need for a more integrated approach that considers biodiversity in the urban environment. A specific gap is the lack of attention to biodiversity in water ecosystems and urban planning, where the focus often lies on direct economic benefits rather than the intrinsic value of biodiversity. The focus group suggests that preserving biodiversity with local specifics could add significant value to the city's image and well-being, highlighting a gap in awareness and appreciation for nature and biodiversity.

Another focus group related to the topic of sustainable lifestyle in Tampere outlined **gaps in fostering a sustainable lifestyle**, especially in terms of implementing and supporting urban farming and the sharing economy. It highlighted challenges such as bureaucratic hurdles that impede the initiation of urban

farming projects and the need for more transparent policies and support systems to facilitate sharing economy initiatives. This reflects a broader issue of integrating sustainability into urban development and lifestyle choices, emphasising the **necessity for streamlined processes and supportive infrastructure** to encourage sustainable practices among residents.

Hämeenkyrö uncovers several gap areas, particularly in **integrating sustainable practices within local agriculture** and promoting a broader understanding and appreciation of these practices among the community. A specific example of these gaps includes the challenge of shifting public perception and policy to genuinely support sustainable farming methods, overcoming the stigma attached to agriculture within the public debate, and addressing financial sustainability. The focus is on the need for a more nuanced approach to agriculture that values biodiversity, organic farming, and local production while also considering the socio-economic sustainability of farming communities.

Another focus group in Hämeenkyrö focuses on sustainable mobility, revealing **gaps in infrastructure and community engagement** for promoting safer, sustainable transportation methods. Key challenges include the lack of safe, separate routes for pedestrians and cyclists, car dependency, and insufficient support for alternative mobility options like cycling and walking. It suggests the need for better infrastructure, more comprehensive municipal support for sustainable mobility initiatives, and increased community involvement in developing accessible and safe transportation alternatives.

The focus group organised at Uusikaupunki discussed sustainable consumption, highlighting a **gap in community engagement and support for sustainable practices**. Specific challenges include the need for social pressure, knowledge, and alternative lifestyle options to encourage sustainable consumption. The suggestions were that laws, regulations, and financial incentives could address overconsumption, pointing out the role of geographical location and city planning in facilitating sustainable practices.

Besides that, in Uusikaupunki they discussed biodiversity in the area, highlighting the challenge of reconciling the city's identity as a "car city" with efforts towards carbon neutrality and biodiversity. A specific **gap that was identified is the community's resistance** to maintaining biodiversity in urban recreational areas, with a preference for neatness over ecological considerations. This points to a broader issue of public awareness and acceptance of biodiversity-friendly practices.

One focus group in Kimitoön municipality pointed out the **need to strengthen micro-entrepreneurs' resilience** to change, emphasising the seasonal nature of businesses and the potential for innovation in eco-social sustainability. However, participants weren't familiar and engaged with the concept of social entrepreneurship among participants, suggesting a need for more focused discussions on societal-problem-solving business models.

Another focus group in Kimitoön reveals a **gap in youth engagement** and participation in sustainability initiatives. It highlights that while there are extremes in youth attitudes towards sustainability, there is a general lack of safe spaces for open discussion about sustainability issues. The emphasis is on the importance of eco-social education. It suggests that more efforts are needed to integrate sustainable practices into the lives of young people in a way that reduces anxiety and fosters a sense of community and participation.

A focus group organised in Gdynia highlighted a **gap in the continuity and expertise** involved in and managing green spaces within the city. Specifically, it pointed out that many projects need long-term planning and must be consulted with specialists, otherwise it leads to temporary solutions rather than sustainable developments. Moreover, there was an emphasis on the need for more permanent and

ecologically thoughtful designs to serve the community throughout the year, underscoring a broader issue of short-term thinking in environmental planning.

The second group from Gdynia addressed sustainable consumption, mainly circular and sharing economies, zero waste, and upcycling. It identified **gaps in public awareness, engagement, and support for sustainable consumption practices**. Key discussions included the importance of education, both formal and through community engagement, to foster conscious consumerism, sustainable fashion, and local sourcing. The challenges related to public perception of sustainability as expensive or inconvenient were also highlighted.

In Helsinki-Uusimaa, they discussed the sharing economy's role in fostering community, inclusion, and resource efficiency. They highlighted **the need for trust, responsibility, and mutual understanding** in sharing economy practices to be successful. Challenges include enhancing public awareness and engagement, the role of cities in promoting the sharing economy through expanded services like libraries and integrating it into municipal planning. The focus group concluded that conveying knowledge and skills alongside goods could further sustainability goals.

Another focus group reported gaps within the topic dedicated to **sustainable food systems**, highlighting gaps in the current one, dominated by large actors and centralised retail, which leads to a **lack of support for local production** and sustainable practices. Challenges included overcoming regulatory obstacles, fostering collaboration among various stakeholders, and increasing public and decision-maker engagement to support a shift towards more local and sustainable food systems.

Sustainable use of buildings and built space was also discussed, where the challenges and gaps were related to considering buildings as long-lived assets that require maintenance and adaptable use to prevent unnecessary demolition and construction emissions. The suggestions promoted multi-use and flexible design, reviewing the lifecycle of buildings from planning to potential repurposing, and improving regulations and practices to support the preservation and adaptive reuse of buildings for ecological and social sustainability.

The Lääne-Harju focus group focused on community energy as a relatively new topic for the municipality. It identified **a gap in community engagement and the implementation** of collective energy projects. A specific example mentioned was the proposal for the municipality to provide space for residents to crowdfund energy projects, highlighting the need for innovative approaches to involving the community in sustainable energy solutions.

In Tartumaa, the focus group emphasised **the gap in implementing a circular economy** due to a **narrow perception** of it being mainly about waste management. It highlighted the need for a broader understanding and integration of circular principles across different sectors, company production adjustments to household habit changes. They suggested improving cooperation among civil society actors, local authorities, and businesses to enhance the circular economy's implementation. Participants pointed out the challenges in recycling organisation and the importance of vocational education in promoting circular economy professions.

The focus groups from different regions unveiled specific challenges like the need for more significant support and engagement from municipalities and political entities, enhanced public education, and better inclusion of various community sectors. The gaps identified range from local infrastructural issues to broader engagement and support mechanisms, emphasising the necessity for targeted, context-sensitive approaches to foster effective sustainability practices and cooperation between civil society and municipalities across diverse domains.

3.2 Categorisation of identified gaps in the focus areas

After outlining the specific examples of gaps identified in each focus group, we proceeded to a more structured analysis by categorising these gaps into four distinct groups. This categorisation, achieved through a blend of manual and automated textual analysis, allows us to organise the diverse and multifaceted challenges into coherent categories. These **four different gap categories are**: legal, political, and planning gaps; financial or human resource gaps; activism, cooperation and networking gaps and gaps related to education, information, and perception. There are a variety of gaps, depending on the sector and the topic discussed. However, most focus groups have mentioned at least a few gaps broadly defined under these four categories (see Table 5).

Table 5. Categorisation of identified gaps.

Category	Gap identified
Legal, Political, or Planning	- An unclear framework of the municipality's regulations on the X topic.
	- Lack of a specific plan, funding, and action on the topic X.
	- Necessity to diversify approach in cities vs countryside due to the differences in the availability of infrastructure.
	- Struggle with bureaucracy (including the civic organisation foundation process).
	- Regulatory barriers.
Financial or Human Resource	- Lack of political will.
	- Lack of manpower in both the civil and public sectors.
	- Necessity to ease public funding procedures.
	- Minimal support from municipalities to civic organisations.
Activism, Cooperation, and Networking	- Lack of expertise in applying for funding.
	- Intrinsic change cannot be forced by administration.
	- Issues with the lack of time of community leaders.
	- Little knowledge (from the public sector) about the "landscape of civil society actors".
	- Low level of activity in society.
	- There is little interaction between civil society, public administration, economy, and culture.
	- Lack of trust and cooperation.
	- Fragmentation.
- Challenge of participation.	
Education, Information, Perception	- Lack of a platform for exchanging information and ideas.
	- Lack of information.
	- The know-how needs to be more comprehensive.
	- The public sector is perceived as bureaucratic.
	- Perception in the society that 'sustainability' is expensive.

Despite the variety of sectors and topics discussed across the focus groups, it's noteworthy that the majority have touched upon issues that align with these broad categories, providing a comprehensive framework to understand and address the identified challenges systematically.

3.3 Identified challenges in the cooperation between municipalities and civil society

This section outlines the diverse challenges that arise at the micro, meso, and macro levels in the collaboration between civil society organisations and municipalities. It encapsulates the difficulties encountered across these varying scales, emphasising how these challenges were identified through the We Make Transition! project focus groups. It also relates or assesses how those are connected to broader and general perspectives. The overview of these challenges at different scales is summarised below:

Micro-Level Challenges (Individual and Local)

Trust and Communication: Building trust between individual civil society representatives and local government officials can be a significant challenge. Effective communication and transparency are essential but may be hindered by historical conflicts and a lack of channels for meaningful dialogue.

Resource Constraints: Micro-level challenges can include limited financial resources, time, and expertise among both civil society organisations and local government units. Smaller organisations may struggle to engage in meaningful cooperation due to resource limitations. At least half of the focus groups mentioned resource constraints, which are particularly challenging in smaller municipalities.

Differing Objectives: Individual civil society organisations often have specific objectives and interests that may not be visible in the municipality's priorities. Balancing these differing objectives can be challenging. For this reason, methods like focus group discussion or workshops to discuss the desired objectives can bridge the gaps and lead to a more harmonised local and municipal vision.

Power Dynamics: Power imbalances can arise when one party has significantly more influence, resources, or decision-making authority than the other. This can affect the equity and effectiveness of the partnership. In this regard, statements that representatives in power must listen more to the society representatives, demonstrate the issue raised.

Community Engagement: In some cases, ensuring that cooperation is inclusive and represents the broader community's interests can be challenging. Engaging diverse voices can be a struggle at the micro-level. From the focus group perspective, this is reflected in a low level of engagement, activism, and a sense of community and its common interests rather than an individualistic approach.

Meso-Level Challenges (Organisational and Community)

Coordination and Collaboration: At the meso-level, organisations on both sides may struggle to coordinate their efforts, leading to fragmented or duplicative activities. Effective collaboration and information sharing are key challenges. This is reflected as a critical gap area and a space for improvement in the majority of focus group discussions.

Capacity Building: Building the capacity of both civil society organisations and local government units to engage in meaningful cooperation can be a meso-level challenge. This includes developing the skills, knowledge, and resources necessary for effective partnership. The knowledge and competence gaps, reflected again in most focus groups, reflect this.

Legal and Regulatory Barriers: Meso-level challenges can involve navigating complex legal and regulatory frameworks that may not be conducive to collaboration. Overcoming bureaucratic obstacles and addressing legal constraints can be daunting. These barriers vary from country to country and from sector to sector, however, those exist in the same way as bureaucracy constrains, by the focus group statements.

Sustainability: Maintaining long-term cooperation can be difficult at the meso-level. Organisations may face challenges sustaining momentum, especially when leadership changes or funding constraints arise.

Macro-Level Challenges (Policy and Societal)

Political and Institutional Factors: At the macro-level, political factors, including changes in leadership or shifts in the political landscape, can influence the willingness and ability of municipalities and civil society to cooperate. This area was not mentioned in the focus groups.

Societal Perceptions: Broader societal attitudes and perceptions about the roles of civil society and local government in addressing community issues can affect cooperation. Public support or resistance can shape the macro-level environment. This has been mentioned within several focus groups as one of the aspects.

Resource Distribution: At the macro-level, the allocation of resources at a regional or national level can impact the ability of municipalities and civil society organisations to address local challenges effectively. These challenges were not broadly discussed within focus groups.

Legal and Policy Frameworks: Macro-level challenges may include outdated or inflexible legal and policy frameworks that hinder cooperation. Advocacy efforts to reform these frameworks can be a complex and lengthy process. Similarly to the resource distribution, also this topic did not get proper attention within focus groups when discussing solutions.

Cultural and Historical Factors: Cultural and historical factors, including past conflicts or deeply rooted societal norms, can impact cooperation at the macro-level. These factors may require extensive efforts to address.

Cooperation between municipalities and civil society organisations is a complex endeavour that involves navigating challenges at multiple levels. Successful collaboration often requires a combination of strategic planning, capacity building, effective communication, and a commitment to addressing challenges at all levels.

Analysing three levels of cooperation challenges, the majority can be identified at the micro and meso level, while macro level issues are mentioned very briefly or not mentioned at all. This corresponds to the general perception of “locality” not only in terms of sustainability but overall process organisation towards more sustainable and local community.

Policy Impact Evaluation

The focus groups highlighted the potential for policy impact, particularly in the realms of social and ecological sustainability from the perspective of three levels.

Micro level: The focus groups have significantly highlighted the community's interest in developing localised, sustainable initiatives. For instance, discussions emphasised the importance of integrating sustainability into local food systems through policies that support local agriculture, farmer markets, and urban gardening projects. These initiatives can help reduce the carbon footprint associated with transportation and promote local economic growth. Furthermore, sustainable urban planning has gained traction, with participants advocating for policies that encourage green building standards, enhance public transportation options, and increase access to green spaces. These policies can help create more liveable, environmentally friendly cities that align with the community's sustainability goals.

Key Actions:

- Implement zoning laws that favour sustainable development and green spaces.
- Provide grants or tax incentives to support local agriculture and businesses engaging in sustainable practices.
- Develop educational programs to increase residents' awareness and participation in local sustainability initiatives.

Meso Level:

At the meso level, focus group insights highlighted the need for better coordination and resource management to address ecological challenges that span beyond local boundaries. Participants called for policies that facilitate cross-border cooperation on environmental protection, such as joint initiatives for water management, biodiversity conservation, and combating climate change. The establishment of regional frameworks can help synchronise efforts across municipalities and countries, leading to more comprehensive and effective environmental strategies.

Key Actions:

- Create regional councils or bodies dedicated to coordinating sustainability efforts across different jurisdictions.
- Promote data sharing and joint research projects to address regional environmental issues.
- Support regional policies that standardise sustainable practices across borders to ensure a unified approach to ecological challenges.

Macro Level:

At the macro level or nationally, the focus groups catalysed discussions around the need for systemic changes to integrate sustainability education into the national curriculum, ensuring that future generations are equipped with the knowledge and skills to live sustainably. Moreover, there's a call for greater public-sector accountability in environmental practices, urging national governments to set examples through sustainable operations and transparent reporting of environmental impact. National policies could be shaped to ensure that sustainability permeates various aspects of governance and public administration, fostering a culture of accountability and proactive environmental stewardship.

Key Actions:

- Mandate sustainability education in schools at all levels, incorporating topics on ecological awareness, climate change, and sustainable living.
- Enforce sustainability reporting for all public agencies, requiring them to disclose their environmental impact and progress towards sustainability goals.
- Establish national incentives for cities and regions that achieve significant advancements in their sustainability efforts, such as reducing carbon emissions or effectively managing natural resources.

4. Summary of proposed improvements to identified gaps

Proposed cooperation improvements can be divided in five categories, in line with the categories of identified challenges (see Table 6).

Table 6. Categorisation of cooperation improvements and proposed actions to bridge identified gaps

Category	Proposed improvements to identified gaps
Importance of collaboration, networks, and dialogue	The need for the continuation of the started dialogue
	Look for cooperation opportunities between different sectors
	More interaction and networking between civil society, public administration, universities, economy, and culture
	Engagement of new actors
	Decision-makers should be directly involved in the discussion
	Systematic, instead of fragmented implementation of the change
	With time and long-term activities - trust-building
	Systematic participatory processes
	Building the sense of community
	Support for volunteering activities and culture
	The ones in power should listen better to the views of civil society
	Building and strengthening the networks
Capacity of constructive discussion	
Policy, (long-term) planning, leading by example	More interactive long-term planning
	Add flexibility to the legislative framework, avoid irrational restrictions
	Public sector must show an example with its actions enhancing sustainability
	Municipality should delegate various functions (and funding) to associations
	Create a reward system towards a sustainable lifestyle
	Decreasing bureaucracy in a way that holds the balance with the necessities of public administration
	Ensuring continuity
	Stronger role of the municipal sector to take a lead towards transitional change
Education, information, and awareness	Public communication is also important to raise awareness: better communication & reaching out towards civil sector
	Educate sustainability and sustainable lifestyle from the very beginning (kindergarten and school)
	Constant education and learning, learning from mistakes
	Various communication and interaction methods should be used

Focus on sustainability, resources, and support	Experiment with experiences and new methods, develop a plan, and dedicate funding to organise X infrastructure
	Financial support
	Application process for public funding should be easier
	Must have a large selection of actors (for cooperation and serving) specific topic X
	Think outside the box and strengthen innovation potential
	Increasing understanding, all stages: identifying, collecting, and doing
	Increasing participation possibilities in the process
	Operating grants
	The role of the municipality is to create pre-conditions (for the successful development of topic X)
	A sense of community must be built
	Municipality should delegate various functions (allocating a budget) to associations and organisations
Technology and Innovation	Technological solutions for more direct communication
	“At the moment, there is no effective way or channel where a company or a civil society actor could pitch its own innovation or project idea in the direction of public sector actors.”

These categories of improvements highlight the diverse perspectives and ideas emerging from the focus groups, with a common focus on collaboration, education, sustainability, and innovation as key factors in addressing various challenges and fostering positive change.

The collective perspectives emphasise a holistic approach to societal improvement. Stakeholders, including municipalities, advocate for continuous dialogue and cooperation across diverse sectors, stressing the engagement of decision-makers and the importance of systematic, long-term implementation.

Policies and planning should exemplify sustainable practices, with public organisations taking a lead and avoiding unnecessary restrictions. Education plays a pivotal role, spanning different ages and areas, with an emphasis on improving public communication, mobilising younger generations, and fostering continuous learning. To support these efforts, there is a call for tailored funding, simplified application processes, and the delegation of functions to diverse actors. Finally, the integration of technology for effective communication and innovation is highlighted, with a recognition of the need for more channels for pitching ideas to the public sector. The overarching goal is to build a sense of community, trust, and active participation in addressing societal challenges.

5. Recommendations to improve cooperation

Improving cooperation between civil society and the local public sector requires a **strategic approach**. Here are some steps to enhance collaboration.

- **Establish Communication Channels:** Create a central platform or hub where both civil society organisations and municipal representatives can regularly communicate and share information, focusing on sustainability solutions. This could be a website, an online forum, or a physical meeting space.
- **Define Common Goals:** Identify shared objectives and areas of interest. This could include community development, environmental conservation, or public health initiatives. Ensure that these goals are well-defined and mutually agreed upon.
- **Training and Capacity Building:** Organise workshops and training sessions for both civil society and municipal employees to enhance their skills in effective communication, negotiation, and conflict resolution. This can help bridge the understanding gap.
- **Regular Meetings and Collaboration Events:** Host regular meetings or collaborative events where both parties can discuss progress, challenges, and opportunities for joint projects. These gatherings foster personal relationships and build trust. Establishing regular platforms for dialogue and collaboration could help to improve communication and coordination between different stakeholders. Transition Arena methods is one of such tools to enhance regular and long-term collaboration towards defined common goals.
- **Transparency and Accountability:** Establish transparent reporting mechanisms for projects and initiatives. Ensure that both civil society and municipal sector representatives are held accountable for their commitments and actions.
- **Create Incentives:** Develop incentive programs to encourage collaboration, such as awards or recognition for successful joint projects. Positive reinforcement can motivate both parties to work together more effectively.
- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Collaborate on public awareness campaigns to engage the community in the importance of civil society and municipal cooperation. This can create public support and pressure for improved collaboration.
- **Use Technology:** Leverage digital tools and social media to facilitate communication and share information. These platforms can also help in reaching a wider audience and engaging more stakeholders.
- **Efficient funding and support mechanisms focusing on sustainability:** Sometimes a small funding for a civil society actor can enable great impact for ecological and social sustainability. The rules of funding should be targeted at supporting sustainability.
- **Long-Term Planning:** Develop a long-term strategy for cooperation that includes milestones, regular evaluations, and adaptability to changing circumstances.
- **Feedback Mechanisms:** Encourage feedback from both civil society and the municipal sector to continuously improve the cooperation framework.

By implementing these steps, civil society and the municipal sector can work towards improving common understanding and relevant cooperation platforms to foster more effective collaboration for the benefit of the community.

Potential role of Clusters in eco-social innovation

The identification of key areas such as locality, cooperation among different stakeholders, education and awareness, and sustainability within the context of the Baltic Sea region reveals a strategic focus on fostering positive change through clusters of social and ecological innovation as a possible solution. The significance of these clusters cannot be overstated, as they emerge as powerful catalysts for regional development, addressing both socio-economic and environmental challenges in a cohesive manner. Assuming that clusters are focused on the social, ecological, and cooperative matters, this approach is seen as one of the possibilities to improve and strengthen local and regional cooperation and power of community.

Locality, as a key area, is central to the clusters' effectiveness. These clusters are rooted in local contexts, leveraging the unique strengths, resources, and challenges of the Baltic Sea region. By promoting a sense of place-based identity, they stimulate economic activities tailored to the specific needs of local communities. The clusters become engines of regional growth and cooperation among different stakeholders, nurturing sustainable practices.

Cooperation among different stakeholders is fundamental for achieving holistic and lasting impact. The clusters serve as collaborative ecosystems where businesses, government bodies, NGOs, and research institutions converge. This interdisciplinary collaboration allows for the pooling of expertise, resources, and perspectives, fostering innovative solutions to complex issues. The synergy generated within these clusters ensures that a variety of stakeholders contribute to and benefit from the shared goal of regional betterment.

Education and awareness, another key area, find a natural home within the clusters of social and ecological innovation. By integrating educational initiatives, the clusters empower individuals and organisations with the tools to understand, navigate, and contribute to sustainable practices. This emphasis on education and awareness is essential for creating a culture of informed decision-making and fostering a collective commitment to sustainability. This partly is reflecting some findings of change agents, search for local education and community centres as drivers for the change of future.

Sustainability, the cornerstone of these clusters, is approached comprehensively. The clusters operate as laboratories for testing and implementing sustainable models across various sectors, including agriculture, energy, and urban development. By incubating and scaling sustainable business practices, the clusters contribute to the regions' resilience against environmental threats while ensuring a harmonious balance between human activities and the Baltic Sea ecosystem.

In the Baltic Sea region, the importance of clusters of social and ecological innovation cannot be overstated. The interconnectedness of these key areas addresses the multifaceted challenges faced by the region, providing a framework for inclusive, collaborative, and sustainable development. Beyond economic and environmental benefits, these clusters foster a sense of shared responsibility and community engagement. They lay the groundwork for a resilient and thriving Baltic Sea region, setting a precedent for how collaborative innovation can shape the future of sustainable development in maritime communities.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Word frequencies

Word	Frequency	Rank	Documents %
sustainable	198	1	92.31
city	190	2	76.92
actor	179	3	100.00
local	179	3	100.00
society	163	5	100.00
food	146	6	61.54
civil	144	7	100.00
people	144	7	100.00
work	143	9	100.00
example	134	10	100.00
project	129	11	92.31
association	128	12	100.00
municipality	123	13	84.62
sustainability	119	14	100.00
activity	117	15	100.00
support	116	16	100.00
public	108	17	84.62
make	107	18	92.31
topic	103	19	100.00
different	94	20	100.00
nature	92	21	76.92
use	86	22	100.00
change	85	23	84.62
climate	79	24	69.23
authority	78	25	92.31
plan	78	25	76.92
organisation	77	27	100.00
think	76	28	92.31
youth	74	29	69.23
education	73	30	92.31

Appendix 2. Word frequencies of word pairs

Word combination	Frequency	%	Rank
civil society	185	1.91	1
society actor	101	1.04	2
young people	65	0.67	3
local authority	61	0.63	4
sustainable consumption	38	0.39	5
sustainable food	33	0.34	6
circular economy	32	0.33	7
climate change	27	0.28	8
waste management	25	0.26	9
share economy	24	0.25	10
public administration	23	0.24	11
sustainable lifestyle	22	0.23	12
food system	20	0.21	14
sustainable education	18	0.19	16
major challenge	16	0.17	18
sustainable mobility	16	0.17	18
enterprise entrepreneur	15	0.16	21
local food	15	0.16	21
municipal governance	15	0.16	21
public sector	15	0.16	21
regional authority	15	0.16	21
small enterprise	15	0.16	21
green space	14	0.14	29
large company	14	0.14	29
research organisation	14	0.14	29
urban plan	14	0.14	29
city plan	13	0.13	34
private person	13	0.13	34
public fund	13	0.13	34
biodegradable waste	12	0.12	38
different opinion	12	0.12	38
environmental education	12	0.12	38
food production	11	0.11	46