

Abstract

EKOARKI – Organic Pastries and a Carnival Atmosphere

Fruits of Labour from the Ekoarki Project of the Metropolitan Area Recycling Center Ltd (Pääkaupunkiseudun Kierrätyskeskus Oy) and the Finnish Association for Environmental Education (Suomen Ympäristökasvatuksen Seura ry) in 2003–2005.

The Urban II Community Initiative of the European Union presented the Metropolitan Area Recycling Center Ltd and the Finnish Association for Environmental Education with an opportunity to search for new means for promoting environmental responsibility from a communal perspective. This report outlines the story of Ekoarki and its achievements.

The objective of the Ekoarki project was to promote sustainable development by increasing awareness of an ecological way of life, by supporting environmental education and by providing opportunities for the active contribution to environmental sustainability. The project comprised five core areas: action groups; courses and training events aimed at increasing knowledge and practical skills relating to environmental issues; environmental education and advice; recycling and sharing services; and communication promoting the project and the exchanging of experiences.

Voluntary Action Groups of Residents

The themes chosen by each group varied from making handicrafts to producing radio broadcasts, and methods ranged from lectures to practical action. The common denominator between all the themes was the appreciation of ecological values and the pursuit of changing one's lifestyle and immediate surroundings for the better. Handicrafts groups used recycled materials, the food group bought organic products straight from the farmer and the group comprising residents of the Aartenetsijäntie estate made changes to their immediate environment. Ekoarki supported the groups by helping them to plan their activities, acquire materials and by communicating information.

The action groups succeeded beyond expectations. Six to seven groups were in action each year and hundreds of local residents participated. Having time for the residents, engaging in genuine discussions, showing interest and putting the customers first were essential factors contributing to the success. The success also reflects that the opportunities presented by the action groups corresponded to the residents' needs.

Versatile Courses and Training Events

Training was provided to both residents and educators with the aim of increasing environmental knowledge and skills. The courses that were aimed at the residents focused on increasing their knowledge of their natural and cultural environment, waste management, ways in which they could influence their immediate surroundings and how to recycle and reuse materials. Regional networks were also established and training was provided to support the work of the volunteers. Examples of training events include the environmental club for adults, which was one of the big success stories of the project. In just over two years the club organised 26 excursions and events, and pulled in a total of over 600 residents and educators.

Two kinds of courses and meetings were offered to the educators: events that were open to all educators and exclusive courses tailored for specific groups of colleagues. Revolutionary operating models were created on this front as well. Theme events that focused on ecological well-being were organised for nursery school and playground personnel. The idea was to improve work motivation through doing things together while also educating the participants about environmental issues.

The set targets were exceeded in relation to the courses and training events as well. Almost 2,000 local residents and educators took part in the environmental training events. The single biggest training event in the project was the international conference on 'Sustainable Development through Education', which was organised jointly by various education and environmental associations and pulled in a total of 263 participants from 16 different countries. The success of the training events was down to the regional networks and cooperation in organising the courses.

Environmental Education and Advice from the Cradle to the Grave

Children, young people and adults alike were given information and advice about the environmental implications of their actions. The requirements of environmental consultancy services targeted at enterprises were also assessed. In addition, educators and residents were successfully encouraged to set up programmes for sustainable development and projects for environmental education, and to take an active role in improving their own living environment. Various kinds of information leaflets and teaching material were also produced.

Children's nurseries, schools, youth clubs, housing associations, enterprises, associations and event organisers could invite an environmental consultant or a regional environmental educator to speak to their organisations. Advice was given on the ABC's of a sustainable way of life, recycling and sorting, environmental programmes, ecological handicrafts and planning environmental theme days for schools, for example. A total of 916 hours of advice was given during the project, and its audience comprised 6954 residents and commuters in the Urban II area.

Enterprises did not receive much in the way of environmental consultancy services, but many doors were opened towards the end of the project making this possible in the future. A report was produced at the end of 2005 assessing the needs for environmental consultancy services and education in the enterprises operating within the Urban II area in Helsinki. The report indicates that advice would be particularly welcome on special and hazardous waste, environmental guidelines, reducing the amount of waste generated and saving energy.

Various environmental education projects were launched involving groups of children, young people and adults alike. The projects were aimed at promoting a more active role for residents, increasing the number of ways in which children and young people can contribute, and learning means for making a difference.

The overriding objective of all educational activities was to make environmental education a structured, permanent fixture in the way that schools, nurseries and other educational institutions operate. Results were positive, despite the challenge of making an entire working community commit themselves to such activities. At the start of the project two schools and

one nursery reported having an environmental programme, where by 2005 environmental programmes were already used in 10 institutions.

Recycling and Sharing

The contribution of the Metropolitan Area Recycling Center Ltd resulted in the opening of Finland's first ever local store for recycled goods, which makes recycling and the resulting low prices more approachable for local consumers. In addition to conventional sale products, the store operates a swap shop lends out household items and supplies handicrafts materials for free.

Sharing was promoted in many different ways. The communal areas of residential buildings were supplied with tableware, tools, books and magazines that the residents could borrow. The project's own library also lent out materials relating to a sustainable way of life and environmental education.

The feedback received on the recycling and sharing activities was highly positive. The magazines, for example, were popular, and the communal dinner sets and skis were frequently used. Recycling and sharing are efficient ways of reducing waste and environmental loading in a cost-effective manner. For example, a dinner set for 40 people, used communally in a housing association, is expected to have helped reduce waste by over 2,500 individual pieces of tableware, as the need to buy disposable dinner sets was eliminated. Estimates indicate that the volume of goods recycled as a result of the project accounted for a reduction of approximately 40,000-50,000 kilograms in the amount of waste that ends up in landfill sites.

Communication and Exchange of Experiences

The project gave rise to a multitude of exhibitions, radio broadcasts, postcard collections, web pages and publications. The residents played a major role in producing the communications.

The exhibitions were taken to places that provided the best exposure: libraries, underground stations, recycling centres, community centres and the busiest parts of Helsinki's city centre. The 'Shoe Angels and Coffee Cup Mary' ('Kenkäenkeleitä ja kahvikuppi-Maria') nativity scene exhibition, for example, comprised handicrafts produced by pupils aged between 7 and 9 from the Kontula primary school. The exhibitions were repeated 12 times, and according to estimates, over 65,000 pairs of eyes rested on one or the other of the exhibitions organised in connection with the project during the three-year period.

Various publications were produced to provide reference material for the project and to communicate achievements. All in all, a total of 16 publications of various forms ranging from radio broadcasts to video tapes and environmental teaching materials were released during the project. The project also gave rise to a multitude of cheerful pieces of environmental news. The majority of the stories appeared in local papers, but some were sufficiently newsworthy to make the television and national media as well. The hottest news stories were generated as a result of the innovative ideas of local residents. A total of over 50 news stories relating to the project were published in various media.

Public events also played a key role in the project. Ekoarki was represented at thirty of the area's public events during the three-year period: at the 'Wonderful Kivikko' ('Ihana Kivikko') and at Kivikko's 'Night of the Arts' ('Taiteiden Yö') events, for example. Advice was given on how to organise events in a more environmentally friendly way, and the events also served as a good channel for promoting local cooperation.

Achievements of the Ekoarki Project and Sustainable Development in the Area

In light of the review on the effectiveness of the project, Ekoarki can be said to have succeeded in its objectives both quantitatively and qualitatively. The effects of the project could be seen on three levels: in attitudes, knowledge and skills, and behaviours. The participants' interest in environmental issues and ecologically sustainable consumer behaviour increased and attitudes became more positive. Moreover, the participants' faith in their own power to make a difference was strengthened.

According to the residents themselves, they have changed their consumer behaviours towards a more environmentally friendly direction following on from the advice that they were given on recycling and food production, for example. The new forms of participation and the participants' faith in their own power to make a difference also contributed to the increased activity amongst the residents. The educators felt that the advice they were given and the resulting enthusiasm have given them more courage to add a more environmentally orientated approach to their work. Regional cooperation amongst the educators has also increased.

The evaluation revealed that the residents' primary motive for participation in the project was a social one. Being part of a group and engaging in social interaction were considered important both from the perspective of the residents' own well-being and the well-being of the community. Moreover, the project brought inspiring activities, esteem and substance to the residents' lives. The educators were lacking means of implementing environmental education in their work. For them, the reasons for participation included the fascinating subject matter, the wish to better themselves and the need to grow in their work. Listening to the participants and using their views as the basis for activities was considered a particular strength of the project.

In addition to the residents and the educators, the other people working in the area also participated in the activities and received information on ecologically sustainable solutions that can be implemented in working life. Environmental loading decreased not only as a result of the increase in environmental awareness but also thanks to the recycling and sharing services provided in connection with the project. The recycling store with its handicrafts exchange as well as the communal dinner sets and other items available for sharing in housing associations will continue to provide opportunities for ecological practice even after the project. In addition to ecological sustainability, the project encouraged participants to develop social networks and to engage in cooperation with their neighbours as well as presenting opportunities for designing the activities with the interests of the residents in mind. The residents felt that their own actions had helped to improve the image of the entire area. As much as this may be more a case of mental images, it may be significant in terms of the appeal of the area.

The project also made a difference on a cultural level. It gave the participants faith, enthusiasm and skills for changing the direction their own work and area are heading. The everyday innovations that arose from the needs of the residents and were carried out in the spirit of democracy were new experiences for the residents. The new educational culture implemented in the schools and nurseries increased motivation for participation. The existing environmental knowledge is now distributed between the organisations operating in the area, with the aim of making sustainable development a permanent aspect of education and teaching.

The objective of the project was to search for new means of promoting environmental responsibility on a community level and to further develop operating models that are already in place for implementing environmental education. Several new potential operational models were created. One of them is the so-called regional environmental motivator model. A regional environmental motivator is a person who is charged with encouraging the entire community to promote environmental friendliness and rewarding local actions that promote sustainable development. There appears to be extremely high demand for environmental motivators both within the area involved in the project and elsewhere.