

Assessing local social sustainability

Lessons learned from testing the Place Standard Tool in Kristiansand, Norway

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Abstract

Social sustainability has been increasingly discussed in scholarly research, but the concept has not been extensively applied in urban governance and planning practice. In this paper, we present results and experiences from assessing local social sustainability in practice. Municipal coordinators, urban planners, and researchers have collaborated and used the Place Standard Tool to assess local social sustainability based on residents' insights. The case area was the district of Tinnheia in Kristiansand, Norway, a district that has been under ongoing local development processes. Using the Place Standard Tool, we assessed local social sustainability in two ways representing a mixed-methods approach: as a survey tool and as a dialogue and co-creation tool. This testing has provided lessons for urban governance and planning practice. Some of these are: (1) systematic assessment of local social sustainability can be a useful addition that has been often missing from urban planning practice; (2) the tool can be used to assess residents' evaluations of local social sustainability without requiring assistance of an expert or researcher; (3) using the tool for both survey and dialogue can offer complementary benefits; (4) residents' evaluations on place characteristics are more meaningful if used comparatively across places or neighborhoods.

Keywords

Social sustainability, Urban planning, Urban governance, Place Standard Tool, Cities, Neighborhood

1. Introduction

Social sustainability has been increasingly discussed in scholarly research (Eizenberg & Jabareen 2017; Hofstad & Bergsli 2017; Hofstad 2021; Mouratidis 2020). Several attempts have been made to conceptualize and measure social sustainability in urban contexts (Cloutier et al. 2018; Dempsey et al. 2011; Larimian & Sadeghi 2019; Opp 2017). However, although researchers seem to be more and more interested in social sustainability, the concept has not been extensively applied in urban governance and planning practice (Hofstad 2021). At the same time, there is a corresponding lack of concrete knowledge among practitioners and decision makers about the tools needed to assess social sustainability and develop their local communities accordingly (Dassen et al. 2013). Previous research shows that urban development processes involving and engaging residents contribute to create more socially sustainable communities that generate stronger local governance systems (Medved 2017).

In this paper, we present results and experiences from testing the application of local social sustainability in practice. Municipal coordinators, urban planners, and researchers have collaborated and used the Place Standard Tool to assess local social sustainability based on residents' insights. The aim was to obtain necessary knowledge on residents' perceptions of their local physical and social environment helping to provide new and more nuanced insights on key components of socially sustainable communities. A secondary, more practical aim was to mobilize residents to participate in shaping their local community based on social sustainability goals. The case area was the district of Tinnheia in Kristiansand, Norway, a district that has been under ongoing local development processes. Thus, the application of the Place Standard Tool in this district aimed at testing a real case example of how the assessment of social sustainability can contribute to planning and shaping new urban development. The paper is part of the project "Social sustainability as a new driving force in local community development (SOSLOKAL)" funded by the Norwegian Research Council.

2. Testing the Place Standard Tool

2.1. Case area: Tinnheia in Kristiansand, Norway

The case area for this study is Tinnheia (Figure 1), a district in the city of Kristiansand in Norway. It has a population of approximately 3500 inhabitants. The area has a small local center with a few shops and a primary school with 200 pupils. It has various types of housing including a large number of apartments in apartment blocks compared to other districts in Kristiansand (excluding the city center). Tinnheia has a high percentage of inhabitants with immigrant background. It scores a little below the city average in terms of level of education and income.

The research activity of SOSLOKAL project in Tinnheia is being carried out at the same time as a feasibility study carried out by Kristiansand Municipality's city planning department together with the local community. The feasibility study explores what can be done to upgrade the area. The application of the Place Standard Tool in Tinnheia aims at mobilizing residents to participate in local development processes as well as providing input on social sustainability and potential improvements in the area.



Figure 1. District of Tinnheia in Kristiansand, Norway from above. Source: Havstad112 - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=40204771>

2.2. Place Standard Tool

The Place Standard Tool is a tool used to assess places. The tool is developed by NHS Health Scotland, the Scottish Government, and Architecture & Design Scotland. The tool provides a simple framework to discuss and evaluate physical (e.g. buildings, public spaces, transport) and social (e.g. safety, place identity) aspects of places, neighborhoods, and districts. These are all aspects found in literature on social sustainability in urban environments (Arundel & Ronald 2017; Bramley et al. 2009; Dempsey et al. 2012; Hofstad 2021; Mouratidis 2021), making the tool very relevant for evaluating, at least to some extent, local social sustainability (Gjorgjev et al. 2020; Koeckler et al. 2020). The tool is easy to use and is developed to facilitate dialogue between communities, organizations, businesses, and decision makers (Horgan & Dimitrijević 2019). The Place Standard Tool includes 14 main themes shown in Figure 2. The themes and the tool guide are based on research on how the urban environment can support health and well-being (Hasler & Howie 2020). Through the assessment of these 14 themes, strengths and weaknesses of places can be identified and ideas on how to address challenges can be initiated.

The Place Standard Tool can be used in different ways. For example, it can be used as a survey tool, a tool to conduct personal interviews, a tool for different types of workshops, and a tool for walking tours. In the SOSLOKAL project, we used the Place Standard Tool in two ways: (1) as a tool for a questionnaire survey with local residents and (2) as a tool for workshops in the form of focus groups with specific groups of local residents.

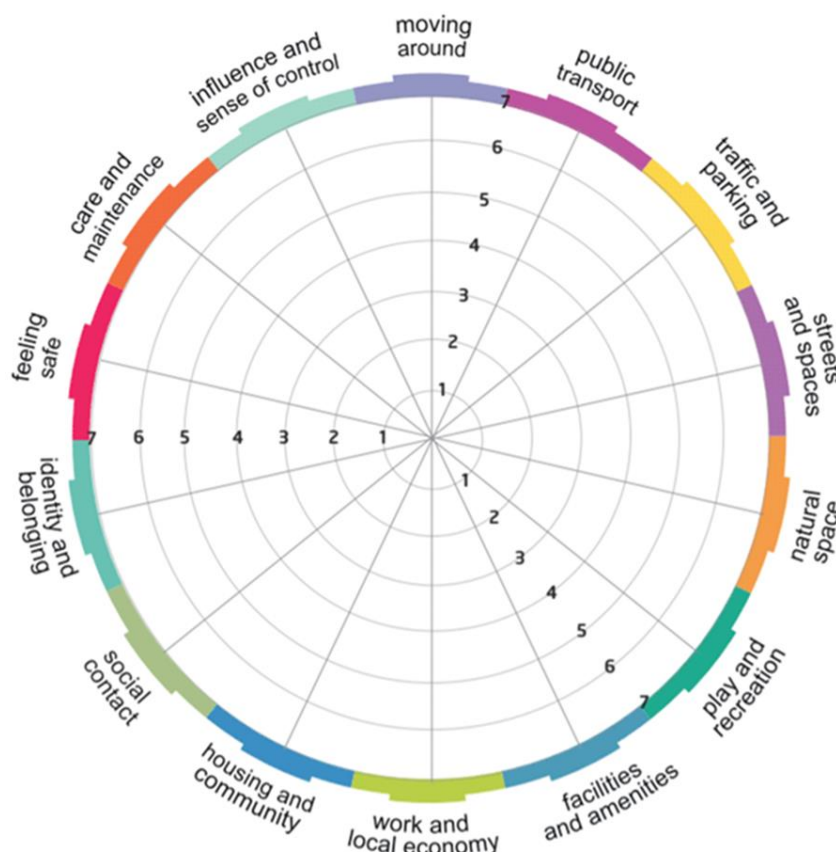


Figure 2. Place Standard Tool. Source: NHS Health Scotland.

2.3. Survey

Based on the Place Standard Tool, we conducted a survey with adult residents of the district of Tinnheia in February 2021. The sample size is N=358. This represents about 10% of the inhabitants of the district. We collected quantitative evaluations on fourteen main physical and social characteristics of the area representing the fourteen main themes of the Place Standard Tool (Figure 2). We also included some additional questions about the area of Tinnheia and we collected basic sociodemographic data. The sociodemographic characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1. The survey was conducted electronically. It was distributed with the help of local associations that sent out an invitation to participate in the survey to email lists with local residents.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the survey sample (N = 358).

Variables	N	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	189	52.80 %
Man	168	46.90 %
<i>Age</i>		
18-30	19	5.30 %
31-45	111	31.00 %
46-60	142	39.70 %
61+	86	24.00 %
<i>Level of education</i>		
Elementary school	12	3.40 %
High school (or professional secondary school)	123	34.40 %
Technical education (e.g. vocational school)	44	12.30 %
Bachelor's degree or similar	123	34.40 %
Master's degree or higher	52	14.50 %
<i>Household size</i>		
1	37	10.30 %
2	134	37.40 %
3	64	17.90 %
4	98	27.40 %
5	19	5.30 %
6	4	1.10 %
10	1	0.30 %

2.4. Focus groups

We used the Place Standard Tool to conduct workshops (focus groups) with specific groups of residents. The focus groups took place on 17-18 June 2021. We invited residents for dialogue and co-creation via the social media and local organizations. We selected groups who might have not been sufficiently represented in participatory processes, as also done in previous relevant applications of the tool (Koeckler et al. 2020). Groups comprised residents with immigrant background, older adults, young adults, and families with children. We also included a mixed group with no specific sociodemographic profile. Groups consisted of 3-5 persons, with the exception of the young adult group that consisted only of one person (eventually this was a personal interview), since it was particularly difficult to recruit younger individuals.

We used the detailed Place Standard Tool guide as a framework for the discussions. Each participant first answered a questionnaire survey evaluating the fourteen themes of the Place Standard Tool. This was followed by an in-depth group discussion. Two facilitators were present in each focus group, one municipal coordinator and one researcher. The focus groups were held in Tinnheia's youth club (fritidsklubb). A large map of Tinnheia was placed on the table used for the focus groups so that participants could point at places in the area during the discussion. The focus groups lasted approximately 1 to 1.5 hours. All sessions were audio recorded.

3. Results

3.1. Survey results

An overview of the Place Standard Tool survey results is presented in Figure 3. The chart presents the mean score for each of the fourteen themes of the tool. The scores are based on survey participants' evaluations on a scale from 1 to 7. These results indicate characteristics that residents consider satisfactory or less satisfactory. Public transport, feeling safe, and moving around are the characteristics with the most positive evaluations. Work and local economy, social contact (mainly in terms of meeting places), and care and maintenance are the characteristics with the least positive evaluations. The remaining characteristics received moderate evaluations with scores between 4 and 5.

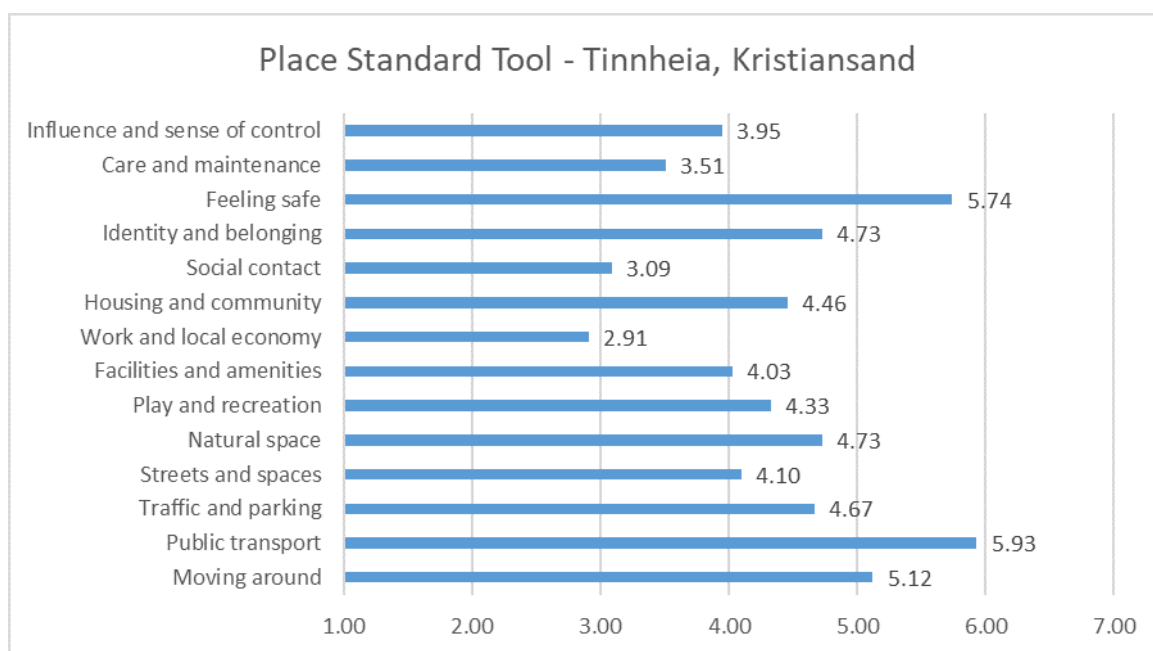


Figure 3. Place Standard Tool survey results (N=358). Source: The authors.

As mentioned above, the survey also included open-ended questions. The answers to these questions indicate that most survey participants enjoy living in Tinnheia and like the area. The major reasons for that according to participants are (in order of importance): (a) proximity to the city center, (b) safety and calmness of the area, (c) good neighbor relations, (d) proximity to nature (e.g. green spaces, forest, lakes), and (e) the child/family-friendly character of the area.

The survey also included an open-ended question asking which places of Tinnheia can be improved. Almost half of the respondents mentioned the main square of the area (Tinnheia Torv) as the place that needs improvement. Other places that need improvement include the main green space of the area (Grønndalen), other outdoor areas and hiking trails, and playgrounds.

3.2. Focus groups results

The focus groups discussions provide support for some of the results of the survey but also offer in-depth elaborations on the characteristics of the area. Focus groups participants mentioned that they enjoy living in Tinnheia and seem to be attached to their district. They generally consider it a safe, central, green, and socially cohesive place to live. However, participants think that Tinnheia is unfairly looked down on by residents of other areas who consider it as a deprived area (even ghetto). Table 2 below presents main results from the focus groups categorized by the themes of the Place Standard Tool.

Table 2. Main results from Place Standard Tool focus groups.

Place Standard Tool theme	Topic	Evaluation	Suggestions for improvement
Social contact / Facilities and amenities / Streets and spaces / Care and maintenance	Main square (Tinnheia Torv)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Square was negatively evaluated by participants - Poorly maintained and lacks life, greenery, shops, cafes etc. - Needs major improvements - Has a lot of potential to be a good public space for the area 	The square could have: a café, shops, greenery, general practitioner's office, a pharmacy, public art, and a fountain. Cars need to be removed from the square
Natural space / Play and recreation	Main green space (Grønndalen)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - One of the favorite places among participants - Need to preserve and upgrade it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Add a sign on the road Add outdoor training facilities Add lighting to use the park in dark hours Add a shelter with a roof Add a place for BBQ Split Grønndalen in two parts: one for families and one for youth Provide better access to Grønndalen, access from all sides Add benches
Facilities and amenities	Local amenities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There are not many shops - Residents need to go to other areas to access basic facilities and services including bakery, café, pharmacy, clothing shops, doctor - Lack of facilities for the youth 	Some more amenities e.g. café, shops, pharmacy, legesenter, bakery in Tinnheia Torv, but without compromising the low-density character of the area
Play and recreation	Playgrounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Topic highlighted by parents with small children - Playgrounds in the area need maintenance - Safety standards need to be updated 	No need for colorful, fancy playgrounds – just updated and well-maintained playgrounds are needed
Housing and community	Housing / densification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Preference for detached houses or row houses, and not apartment blocks - Participants say that small apartments not suitable for children - Generally, participants opposed to densification - They like the area as it is: green and peaceful - Some groups think that extra people could cause additional traffic waiting in the kindergarten; would alter the character of the area; could lead to crime; impersonal, aggressive social interaction 	Maintain low-density character and if needed, develop detached houses and row houses, not apartment blocks
Traffic and parking / Streets and spaces / Moving around	Traffic safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Generally safe and quiet area without much traffic - Some streets could be better (visibility, sidewalks, traffic speed, cycling) - Mix of cyclists and cars on main road is unsafe - Car parking to drive/collect children to/from school is far from the school and there is a street in-between, making it dangerous and troublesome 	Apply traffic calming measures, improve cycling conditions, improve certain sidewalks, improve car parking for school
Public transport / Moving around	Public transport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participants generally satisfied with public transport - However, most residents use the car for daily travel (interesting that public transport scores the highest in survey while most people use cars) 	Bus could be better connected to other areas (not only to city center, university etc.)

4. Lessons learned

Testing the use of the Place Standard Tool for assessing local social sustainability and integrating it into urban planning processes have provided several lessons for urban governance and planning practice.

- First, the tool can offer a structured, user-friendly framework for assessing residents' subjective evaluations of local social sustainability and can be applied without requiring the assistance of an expert or scholarly researcher.
- Second, performing such evaluations in a systematic way can be a useful addition that has been often missing from urban planning practice. The tool provides useful information for urban planning and policy, helps identify strengths and weaknesses of a place/area and make comparisons with other places/areas. Certain problems and challenges of a place/area can be presented in detail through Place Standard Tool workshops. Residents may come up with good solutions and suggestions on how to improve certain aspects and are enabled to participate in decision-making.
- Third, citizens seemed engaged and eager to be heard. The tool offered a good platform for residents' input and dialogue.
- Fourth, using the tool for both survey and dialogue, as done in this study, can offer complementary benefits: a combination of quantitative and qualitative data and a combination of large-scale assessment, in-depth qualitative understanding, and co-creation process. Survey data from the Place Standard Tool can reveal strengths and weaknesses of places, while using the Place Standard Tool for dialogue can offer a more nuanced understanding but also mobilize residents to co-create solutions for local development.
- Fifth, residents' evaluations on key place characteristics are more meaningful if used comparatively across places, neighborhoods, or districts. It is more useful to compare scores and residents' feedback across different areas than to assess scores only within an individual area.
- Sixth, attention should be paid to the representativeness and the particularities of groups involved in the survey and qualitative discussions. Recruitment of a representative selection of age groups and interests can be a challenge and needs attention and consideration.
- Seventh, users of the tool need to consider that people often express their self-interest instead of the greater good (e.g. often prioritize self-interest over environmental issues or social justice).
- Eighth, within focus groups, some participants may dominate the discussion, while others may be reluctant to raise certain issues or to oppose the dominant views.
- Finally, yet importantly, it should be noted that the use of the Place Standard Tool cannot on its own provide a holistic assessment of local social sustainability. Residents' insights from using the tool should be complemented with an assessment of a variety of objectively measured indicators related to social sustainability.

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