



Nordic border communities in the time of COVID-19

POLICY BRIEF 2021:3



Nordregio



Photo by: Daniel Falldin

Re-building cross-border collaboration will be vital after the COVID-19 crisis to secure resilient border communities and Nordic collaboration. The measures to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus were disproportionately damaging for border communities. Healing the wounds inflicted on society, business and institutions demand coordinated actions at local, national, and Nordic levels.

This policy brief gives a brief overview of the impact of border restrictions on border communities during the first nine months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The social and economic implications of closed borders have exposed the fragility of Nordic co-operation. The ability of border areas to exist side-by-side in an integrated, seamless way corresponds to the Nordic vision of being the most integrated region in the world, but the situation that unfolded shows a different story.

Freedom of movement and people across borders have been part of Nordic co-operation since the introduction of the Nordic Passport Union in 1954. It came as a surprise when free mobility across Nordic and European countries suddenly came to a halt.

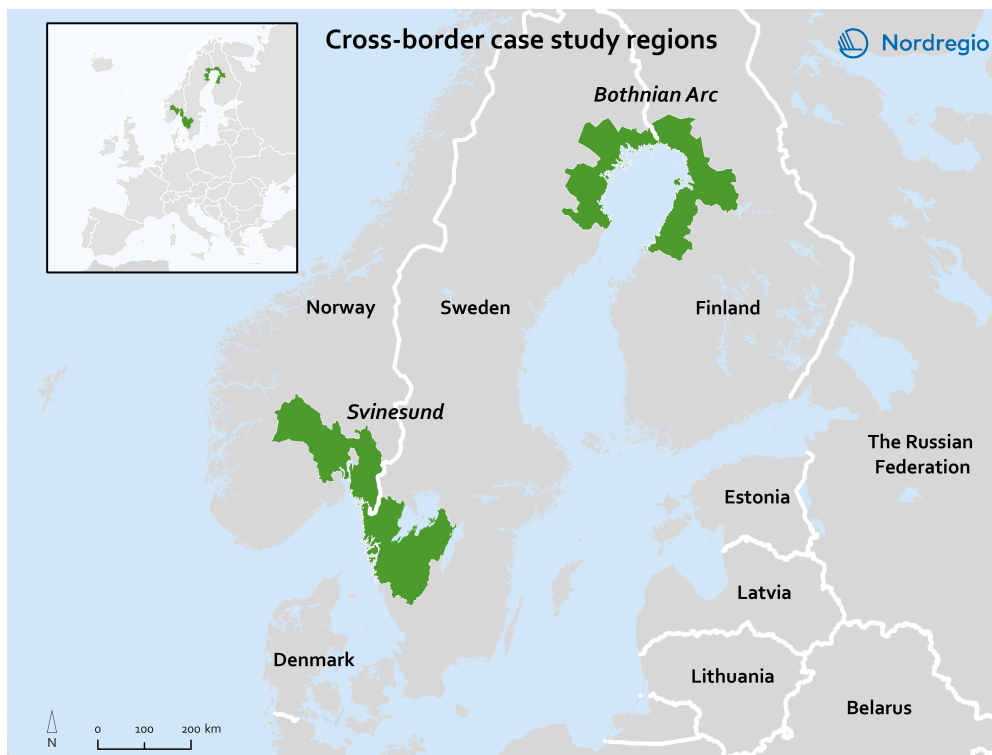
The uncoordinated actions taken by Nordic countries in the face of crisis exposes the role of Nordic institutions. While measures were considered a necessity to curb infection rates across the Nordic countries, the lack of coordination places border areas in a difficult situation, falling between chairs. The policy brief is based on a larger project which included multiple interviews with stakeholders from Svinesund and the Bothnian Arc, as well as border experts, stakeholder meetings, and a large online conference.

The resurrection of borders and the variety of measures adopted to curb COVID-19 infection rates, plus the evident lack of coordination between the Nordic countries during the pandemic, has challenged the strength of existing collaboration and its promise of creating the most integrated region in the world. The role of borders and the true depth of the collaboration suddenly becomes very clear when looking at border communities: places where families, friends and businesses have been divided as a result of the abrupt ending of open borders. Although these countries are not obliged to coordinate their actions, the impact on border residents, as well as cross-country commuters, does imply that coordination mechanisms may be needed.

Beyond the response to the pandemic itself, top-down national measures can be seen to have undermined the unique position of sub-national governments in local matters along borders. Although the pandemic is of both national and global concern, place-sensitive approaches have clearly been necessary.

Despite this, during the first months of the pandemic, few efforts were initiated at the national level to meet border community needs across Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. The failure to make use of existing collaborative platforms, and what seems to have been a lack of

coordination between states, was met with surprise and frustration by border residents and experts on cross-border collaboration.



Cross-border case study regions

Julien Grunfelder



Photo by: Karin Beate Nøsterud / norden.org

Social, political and economic impacts

The social, economic, and political impact of border closures has been significant. Great economic losses resulted from a sudden absence of border shoppers and tourists. Municipalities with close social ties or those having low levels of economic diversity were particularly hard hit. The impact has also been visual with empty streets in border towns along the Swedish-Norwegian border, and the fence cutting through Victoria Square in Haparanda-Tornio. Border restrictions have generated unemployment among frontier workers and in sectors connected to border trade and services.

The situation that unfolded has led to discontent among many people. The uncertainty associated with the status of the border, alongside a confusing system regarding social security and taxation, is testing people's trust in the authorities, as they find themselves yet again subject to what might be seen as the 'double-edged sword' of cross-border working and living.

Several border municipalities in the Nordic countries have collaboration agreements with their neighbour municipalities for the provision of public services. These often require major long-term investments. By closing borders, national governments have seemingly undermined the municipalities' legitimate authority to decide on strategic services. Some of the municipalities consulted in this project are now considering discontinuing certain agreements if free mobility cannot be guaranteed.

Torn communities

Border communities in the Nordic Region and the EU have undergone a long process of integration – something that was not just 'left-to-happen' by solving border barrier issues but has been politically advocated and actively promoted through programmes and funding. The trust built around free mobility has, in very concrete ways, enabled the creation of interwoven societies. Today, this trust is under threat, and that, in turn, may affect the future dynamics of both border communities and Nordic and European society in general.

People not only have expressed frustration to their own national policies and approaches, but also to neighbouring countries' perceived inadequacy in addressing the situation. The tug-of-war between supporting national approaches and remaining sympathetic towards neighbours is becoming increasingly challenging. Overall, this seems to have led to a surge of nationalism.

The tone that is emerging from social media, and from sensationalist reporting of the pandemic

in the media, are seen as symptoms of growing distrust between Nordic siblings. Vandalism of private property as seen on the Swedish-Finnish border, or 'corona shaming' of frontier workers, is making cross-border actors worry about the potential for post-pandemic healing and reconciliation.

Alleviating the pressure

As the pandemic progressed, concessions were made to alleviate the situation. The high degree of co-dependence in the Torne Valley region was a key reason for the Finnish authorities to apply exceptions, enabling people in border communities to cross more easily to the Swedish side. No such measures were implemented on the border between Norway and Sweden, except for allowing frontier workers in key sectors to pass through. Nevertheless, 'border community' exceptions were yet again highly criticised for creating borders within countries that do not necessarily reflect commuting patterns nor define the identity of its residents.

Institutional considerations for policy making

Finding ways for agile yet place-sensitive governance approaches will be key when preparing to tackle new crises in the future. These approaches must be tailored to protect the complex social and economic links that exist in border areas. Rather than blanket policies, this would mean allowing border residents to live similar lives to those residing further from the border.

By moving away from the principle of subsidiarity, the state applies one-size-fits-all policies undermining the value that multi-level and soft governance approaches, such as the structures for inter-municipal collaboration across borders, offer in implementing solutions to inherently diverse regions. The scope for making mistakes was considerable in the context of the unprecedented challenge faced, and the measures adopted posed enormous challenges for border communities.



Photo by: Magnus Fröderberg / norden.org

Post-pandemic border communities

Accelerating change

The pandemic is accelerating structural change. Certain jobs will not come back, whilst others will emerge. In an increasingly digital workspace, and with improved digital solutions and network connections, people may see real potential in settling wherever they choose. This may contribute to enlarging labour markets to the benefit of border areas, though it may also play to its disadvantage. Easier digital access to services could also put peripheral areas on an equal footing with central areas. Digital tools also increase the opportunities for increased communication between border actors and with national authorities. However, increased e-commerce also threatens border shopping and trade. Such structural transformations may demand new competences, skills and flexible employment arrangements to safeguard the future labour market.

Strengthening cross-border communities

Cross-border collaboration between committees and organisations has continued. Municipalities and local actors have redoubled their efforts to secure the availability of basic goods and services, and have often lobbied national authorities to allow frontier workers to continue crossing borders. Several border committees, information centres and services combined their efforts with the Freedom of Movement Secretariat at the Nordic Council of Ministers and Info Norden to monitor and assess the impact of restrictions in border communities. The information they delivered to the national authorities played a significant role in influencing decision-making around critical issues. Para-diplomacy, the region-to-region, or municipality-to-municipality relations should not be underestimated as a powerful social and political tool for retaining some form of normalcy going in cross-border areas after the pandemic. A united cross-border committee also sends a strong message to national authorities about the importance of working with local authorities on the ground to make the whole Nordic region stronger together.

Standing at a crossroads between an old normal and a future path, it is useful to apply resilience thinking to improved planning for the development of border communities. 'Bouncing back' or resuming the pre-shock *modus operandi* may be doomed to fail, given that conditions have changed. Therefore, a more logical way to plan the future of border communities may be to 'bounce forward', and to transition consciously onto a new path. New actions must consider the uncertainties we live with and should reinforce border communities' capacity to 'absorb' disturbances and to adapt. In the short term, border communities should focus on de-escalating fear, and eliminating 'us and them' sentiments, to re-unite people and rebuild trust. Doing so will be essential to bring communities and authorities from both sides to pursue common goals.

Nordic Co-operation

During the pandemic Nordic Co-operation, and the vision of being the most integrated region in the world, has been put under pressure. Nordic governments' unilateral approaches to the pandemic, and the impact this had on cross-border areas arguably indicate a lack of communication and lack of awareness of border community realities beyond cross-border commuters. In many ways, COVID-19 has showed us how fragile Nordic cooperation can be. Coming to a decision on the potential role and scope of Nordic Co-operation should be part of the post-COVID-19 work. The pandemic is an opportunity and a starting point for strengthening Nordic institutions: – not forgetting that states are not just pawns but players in the game, and thus need to be proactive in shaping the Nordic institutions to serve emerging needs.

The saying “never let a good crisis go to waste” rings true. The likelihood of global challenges may rise again. The Nordic Region needs to be prepared.

Policy recommendations

Cross-Border committees

Border committees play a key role as para-diplomatic organisations, that is the region-to-region or municipality-to-municipality relations. They help local authorities adopting perspectives that go outside their immediate jurisdiction and mandate.

- **Re-unite people and rebuild trust:** Peaceful relations are the basis for integration and collaboration.
- **Join voices within and across the cross-border committees** to get border issues on the agenda at national, Nordic and European levels. Border communities are in the spotlight as the pandemic (and Brexit) has shown the consequences of raising hard borders. Take advantage of this window of opportunity.
- **Find allies at the national level to influence decision-making.** National authorities seem not to be aware of the conditions and needs of border communities. Take advantage of being in the spotlight and make yourselves more visible.
- **Re-invent cross-border collaboration** and engage local residents. Most CB committees were created several decades past, now most people take free mobility as a given. Bring forward issues that touch younger generations.
- **Showcase the added value** cross-border regions represent for the Nordic cooperation.

Border municipalities

Border municipalities are key players in fostering cross-border relations, through exercising para-diplomacy both within and out with cross-border committees. Border municipalities are the foundation of cross-border committees and are the ultimate decision-making bodies for the financial, legal, and political aspects of border cooperation. Border municipalities bring border issues onto the national political agenda.

- **Put cross-border collaboration high on the agenda:** border restrictions have been a reminder of the importance of free mobility, social and business integration. Committing politically to cross-border collaboration will create leverage over time.
- **Plan for a "new normal":** Rather than 'bouncing back' to normal, envision potential new futures. What vulnerabilities were uncovered during the pandemic, and how can they be remedied?
- **Engage in cross-border organisations:** People are the glue of Nordic cooperation, and the inter-personal relationships established in common platforms is invaluable.
- **Engage decision-makers in cross-border matters:** Cross-border issues need political anchoring to ensure sustainable co-existence, rather than solely project-based.
- **Invest in skills development:** Skills transfer and knowledge transfer are key to creating stronger communities and reduce risks in an otherwise vulnerable labour market.

National authorities

National authorities are of utmost importance in cross-border relations. Only they can guarantee free mobility and maintain international agreements. National authorities can also play a significant role in strengthening border community integration by empowering soft-MLG structures, including cross-border committees, at a sub-national level, and the Nordic Council of Ministers.

- **Guarantee free mobility:** Free mobility is a cornerstone of the modern world, and key to Nordic living. Guaranteeing a dialogue about borders in crises situations provide security for border residents and Nordic peoples alike.
- **Strengthen the commitment to Nordic Vision 2030:** Demonstrate the commitment to Nordic living by following up with clear actions pertaining to the vision objectives.
- **Rebuild and empower the Nordic Institutions:** National governments are ultimately responsible to determine the mandate of Nordic institutions. Stronger Nordic institutions may better position the Nordic countries in the global arena and strengthen resilience upon global threats. The commitment to Nordic institutions has a direct effect on the mandate

of cross-border committees and their ability to deepen cross-border integration.

- **Consult cross-border organisations:** These para-diplomatic organisations hold valuable information about the nature of cross-border living and their challenges. They also possess large networks across countries and are therefore instrumental in finding solutions to common issues in border areas, such as the provision of public services.
- **Strengthen the political role of Nordic Co-operation:** The commitment to the Nordic Vision 2030 need to be anchored politically in order to achieve and action positive change. Furthermore, increased coordination on actions impacting on cross-border areas will facilitate a truly integrated Nordic Region. Consider lifting this to the highest political level.
- **Treat global crises as global, not national issues:** Global crises requires common responses. This may prevent asymmetrical repercussions following access to support, remedies, or aid.
- **Develop joint crises strategy for joint action:** Ensuring communication with neighbouring countries will generate trust in national authorities.
- **Collect, harmonise, and share cross-border statistics and data:** Access to data is necessary for a well-functioning society in its broadest sense, but it can also be crucial for understanding the impact closing borders may have on border communities and the Nordic region at large.

Nordic level

The Nordic level has numerous cooperative platforms for fostering Nordic collaboration and integration. These include the Nordic Co-operation Ministers, Freedom of Movement Council, Info Norden, cross-border committees and organisations, and various programmes and projects connected to promoting Nordic knowledge sharing and added value. Nordic Co-operation has been struggling with challenges concerning their role and scope of action during the COVID-19 pandemic, and questions surrounding the extent of their function has been raised. These platforms can be used more strategically and actively to minimise risks related to institutional differences.

- **Write a common crises strategy:** Decide what actions should be devised when facing a crisis, expect that crises might hit again.
- **Create a co-operation platform and mechanisms equipped to handle both the good times and the bad:** The pandemic has demonstrated the need for Nordic coordination and stronger dialogue. Emphasise the importance of joint strategies.
- **Use cross-border governance structures more strategically:** They are a microcosm and testbed of living without boundaries in the Nordic Region.
- **Reform Nordic Co-operation structures:** Empower Nordic co-operation platforms by increasing institutional capacity for greater political stakeholder engagement.
- **Move with the changes on the global stage:** When the context and preconditions are changing, Nordic institutions must adapt to stay relevant for their stakeholders and to serve emerging needs.

About this policy brief

Nordic border communities in the time of COVID-19

This study was carried out by the Nordic Thematic Group for Innovative and Resilient Regions 2017-2020 and was commissioned by the cross-border organisations Bothnian Arc and the Svinesund Committee.

The cross-border conference is available here: <https://youtu.be/6ncAu5KYaZs>

The full publication is available here: <http://pub.nordregio.org/r-2021-6-crossborder-covid/>

Research contacts

Mari Wøien Meijer

Research Fellow

mari.woien@nordregio.org

Alberto Giacometti

Research Fellow

alberto.giacometti@nordregio.org

Map:

Julien Grunfelder, Head of GIS at Nordregio

Layout:

Vaida Ražaitytė, Communications Advisor at Nordregio

Cover picture:

Vaida Ražaitytė

ISSN: 2001-3876

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.6027/PB2021:3.2001-3876>