

**Towards healthy
and sustainable diets
in Greenland and the
Faroe Islands**

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Introduction

The food systems and dietary patterns in Greenland and the Faroe Islands are shaped by their unique geographical, climatic, and cultural contexts, setting them apart from other Nordic countries. Greenland stands out with its vast size, diverse climatic conditions, and the isolation of many smaller communities, while the Faroe Islands, characterised by their network of interconnected islands and North Atlantic climate, also face distinct challenges and opportunities. Both these countries navigate unique pathways toward fostering sustainable food systems and dietary practices.

Historically, Greenland and the Faroe Islands have relied predominantly on hunting and fishing, resulting in diets rich in protein and fats derived from marine sources while being low in carbohydrates, sugars, and processed foods (Jeppesen & Bjerregaard, 2012; Svanberg, 2021). Over the past century, however, these traditional diets have undergone considerable shifts, with increasing reliance on imported foods, including fast food and Western-style diets characterised by processed products, refined sugars, and saturated fats (AMAP, 2021; Lyberth Hauptmann, 2024).

Addressing these dietary transitions requires a multifaceted approach that spans the entire food supply chain. This includes promoting sustainable imports, ensuring equitable access to cultural practices tied to local food harvesting, and fostering participation across all population groups. These efforts must be supported by policies designed to enhance the affordability and accessibility of foods that are nutritious, environmentally sustainable, culturally significant, and climate-conscious (Jungsberg et al., 2024).

The Nordic Nutritional Recommendations 2023 (NNR2023) provide a robust scientific foundation for dietary guidance in the Nordic region, placing health and sustainability at the core of its framework. Tailoring the NNR to meet the distinct needs and characteristics of different Nordic countries is essential for developing national guidelines that consider unique local conditions.

This policy brief explores the characteristics of the Greenlandic and Faroese food systems and dietary patterns, examining both the challenges and opportunities, as well as the ongoing policy initiatives aimed at promoting healthy and sustainable food consumption practices. It is based on a review of academic and grey literature, food surveys, and qualitative expert interviews.

Determinants influencing dietary patterns and food security



Photo: Derek Malou / visitfaroeislands.com

The food systems and dietary patterns in Greenland and the Faroe Islands are due to their remoteness and unique geographical, climatic, and cultural contexts, distinctly different from those in other Nordic countries. Greenland, in particular, stands out due to its extreme climatic conditions and remoteness.

There has been growing focus on **food security** and **food sovereignty** within both research and policy in these Nordic Arctic regions (Lyberth Hauptmann, 2024). This involves efforts to ensure that people have access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food while also meeting cultural, social, and spiritual needs. These elements are crucial for Nordic Arctic, where promoting healthy and sustainable food systems requires navigating the complex interplay between the nutritional, social, and cultural significance of traditional diets and the issues related to food accessibility, availability, and affordability, as well as challenges posed by contamination risks of traditional diets.

The following section will delve deeper into the key determinants that influence dietary patterns and food security in Greenland and the Faroe Islands through the lens of the Nordic Food Behaviour Framework (Figure 1), presented in the report [*Policy tools for sustainable and healthy eating: Enabling a food transition in the Nordic countries*](#).

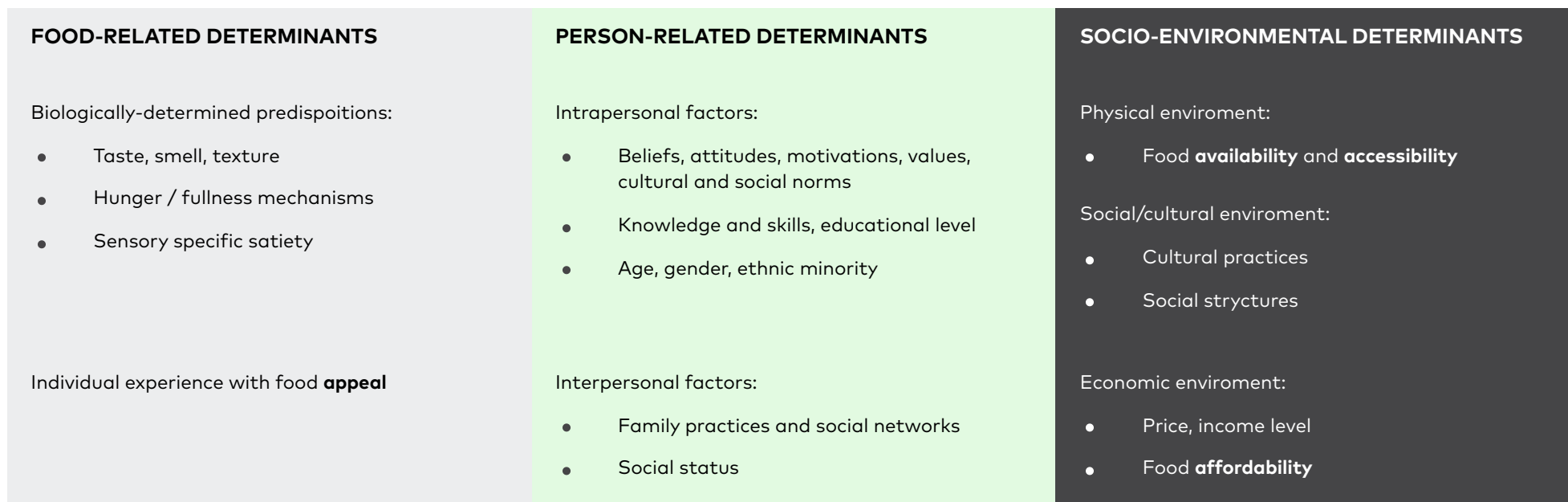


Figure 1 Food Behaviour Framework applied to Nordic conditions: factors influencing food choices and dietary behaviour. Source: Jungsberg et al., 2024.

Socio-environmental determinants

The primary focus in this policy brief is on socio-environmental determinants, as these factors are often more susceptible to change compared to food- and person-related determinants. Socio-environmental determinants include broader, external aspects that can be influenced through targeted policy interventions (Jungsberg et al., 2024).

Physical environment

In Greenland and the Faroe Islands, the physical environment – shaped by unique climatic conditions, accessibility and infrastructure challenges – plays a crucial role in influencing food availability and accessibility. Both regions rely heavily on imported food and essential inputs, such as fuel, to sustain their needs. A study by Vestergård and Rustad (2022) estimated food self-sufficiency in Greenland and the Faroe Islands—defined as the proportion of food produced and consumed within a region, excluding exports—to be only 17% in Greenland and 22% in the Faroe Islands. However, this level of self-sufficiency can vary significantly depending on settlement type and accessibility.

In smaller and remote settlements in Greenland, limited accessibility during winter forces communities to rely on scarce supplies and inconsistent deliveries which adversely affect the reliability, quality, and freshness of food items—thereby impacting food security (AHDR, 2014; Bjerregaard et al., 2021; Goldhar & Ford, 2010). At the same time these challenges force communities to rely more heavily on locally sourced country foods (interview 1). This is further supported by study findings indicating that country foods —obtained through hunting, fishing, and gathering, whether for subsistence or recreation—constitutes 61% of the diet in Qeqertarsuaq, a small community in central West Greenland (Ramage et al., 2022).

Additionally, rapid environmental changes driven by climate change significantly affect life in the Arctic, posing challenges to food availability, safety, and security. These include physical impacts such as permafrost thaw, shifts in the availability of marine resources, and a reduction in safe harvesting days, all of which impact the subsistence activities (Ramage et al., 2022).

Economic environment

Food systems in Greenland and the Faroe Islands, like elsewhere, are susceptible to external shocks, such as economic disruptions and disputes. For example, a recent strike by labour unions in the Faroe Islands led to fuel shortages and service disruptions, significantly affecting food security and placing considerable strain on society (Local.fo, 2024, interview 2).

As in other regions, prices and income levels are decisive factors in shaping

dietary patterns. However, in these Nordic Arctic environments, the particularly high cost of locally sourced nutritious and fresh foods often makes them less affordable to many, especially low-income households. Consequently, many residents who depend on market foods frequently resort to cheaper, less nutritious options (AHDR, 2014; Goldhar & Ford, 2010; Lytken Larsen et al., 2019; Macdonald et al., 2015). In Greenland, both imported and local foods are significantly more expensive than in Denmark, with costs on the east coast being slightly higher than on the west coast.

Cultural practices and traditions

A key distinguishing feature of the food systems in Greenland and the Faroe Islands is the role of traditional subsistence activities. These activities provide essential, nutritious foods that are otherwise expensive or unavailable through imports, while also supporting social well-being, cultural identity, and community life in these regions (Macdonald et al., 2015; Svanberg, 2021). Communal food sharing and trading, along with open markets, form an integral part of the Greenlandic and Faroese food systems (Goldhar & Ford, 2010; Liggjasardóttir Johannesen et al., 2021). Governed by complex rules based on kinship and other social relationships, they play a vital role in supporting both mental and physical health (Goldhar & Ford, 2010).

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Many global and regional initiatives focusing on healthy and sustainable diets are missing a very important aspect: the cultural context of food. This includes geographical, cultural, and physical factors, such as the genetic backgrounds of different populations. When we talk about food, we should not talk only about nutrition alone.

Aviaja Lyberth Hauptmann, Associate Professor, Head of SILA Department, University of Greenland

A decline in local food consumption in Greenland and the Faroe Islands can be attributed to various socio-economic and environmental factors (AHDR, 2014; Macdonald et al., 2015). A significant challenge is the diminishing traditional knowledge among younger generations, especially in extracting and processing various types of animal fat into locally made dishes. Preserving traditional Greenlandic and Faroese gastronomy thus hinges on sustaining and transferring this knowledge, which is currently at risk (Svanberg, 2021). Recognising the importance of local culinary traditions and subsistence activities, both the Greenlandic and Faroese ministers have emphasised their commitment to cherishing and safeguarding these cultural practices, as highlighted below.

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I have happily noticed a new trend in Greenland, more and more families are collecting local food for winter, holidays, and family social events. The local food is not only for the stomach – it is food for the soul, promoting healthier social lives and well-being

(Kim Kielsen, Minister for Fisheries and Hunting, former Premier and Spokesperson for the Greenland Parliament)

Today, increased urbanisation, particularly in the capital areas of Nuuk and Tórshavn, has led to a greater dependency on imported goods. At the same time, new trends have emerged, especially in the Faroe Islands, driven by tourism and the New Nordic Food Movement, which highlight the quality and uniqueness of Faroese food products (interview 3). One notable example is seaweed production, a local commodity that is gaining popularity among both locals and tourists in the Faroe Islands, and increasingly in Greenland as well.

For additional insights from an interview with Høgni Hoydal, please follow this link: vimeo.com/1058920465

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Traditional Faroese foods are now viewed as valuable, contrasting with past perceptions that prioritised imported items like chicken and beef as 'finer' options

(Høgni Hoydal, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Industry, and Trade)

Dietary Shifts and Health Impacts in Greenland and the Faroe Islands

In Greenland, traditional diets have primarily consisted of seal and whale meat, fjord cod, halibut, caribou, musk oxen, and seabirds, particularly in most parts of West Greenland. In South Greenland, sheep farming and vegetable cultivation, especially potatoes, have played a significant role in local diets (interview 1, interview 5). In the Faroe Islands, households relied on local foods like potatoes, fish, birds, sheep, and occasionally whale. Subsistence activities played a significant role in both societies, emphasising locally caught and traded foods with minimal dependence on purchased goods (interview 2, interview 3).

However, over the past century, there has been a significant shift in diets towards more imported foods. This includes a rise in a Western-style diet characterised by increased consumption of processed foods, refined sugars, and saturated fats (AMAP, 2021, interview 5). This shift, along with a decline in the consumption of locally sourced country foods, and changing lifestyles (e.g., reduced physical activity), has negatively impacted the health of local populations, contributing to increasing rates of obesity, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and cancer (AHDR, 2014; AMAP, 2021; Jeppesen & Bjerregaard, 2012; Macdonald et al., 2015). Additionally, concerns have arisen over contaminant exposure from traditional diets, particularly marine mammals, questioning the safety of these foods (AMAP, 2021).

Despite the high nutritional benefits of traditional foods, it has been recognised since the 1970s that the marine-based diets of Greenland and the Faroe Islands contain significant levels of organic pollutants and heavy metals. This combination of beneficial and harmful effects, which seem inseparable, has led to the term "The Arctic Dilemma" (AMAP, 2021; Deutch et al., 2007). Therefore, the health implications of the ongoing dietary transition in these Arctic countries are complex, as neither a diet consisting solely of marine mammals and fish nor a Western-style diet appears to be optimal for health. The following section looks more closely at national dietary guidelines and food surveys data for Greenland and Faroe Islands, respectively.

Dietary Guidelines in Greenland and the Faroe Islands

To promote dietary changes and improve public health, authorities have introduced dietary recommendations with an awareness of the Nordic Nutrition Recommendations. In Greenland, the organisation Paarisa plays a key role in promoting national dietary guidelines that encourage a varied diet (Paarisa, n.d). Greenland's dietary advice includes a wide range of foods, such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, fish, dairy, and meat, with an emphasis on local Greenlandic foods like fish. Recommendations include daily consumption of fruits and vegetables (fresh or frozen), choosing whole grains, and opting for low-fat dairy and meats. The guidelines also advise limiting sugar, sweets, crisps, and cakes, favouring healthier snacks, drinking water instead of sugary drinks, eating three main meals with small snacks in between, and staying active for at least an hour each day. Healthy meals are highlighted as an opportunity for family gatherings.

In the Faroe Islands, the Health Authority recommends a plant-rich, diverse diet, emphasising fruit, vegetables, and fish. It encourages choosing whole grains, plant oils, and low-fat dairy alternatives while reducing meat intake. Staying hydrated with water and limiting foods high in sugar, salt, and fat are also advised (Faroese Health Authority, 2024). Additionally, the Faroese Board of Health advises against consuming contaminated whale meat and blubber, instead recommending low-contaminated fish, such as cod and haddock, and fatty fish, like herring, mackerel, and salmon, without a set limit on weekly servings (interview 2).

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We are promoting the traditional Greenlandic diet, emphasising the consumption of local foods, following the seasonal variations, and engaging in the communal harvesting, preparation, and eating of meals with the family

(Gert Mulvad, Chairman of the Nutrition and Exercise Council)

Food Consumption

This section explores recent dietary trends in Greenland and the Faroe Islands, with a focus on shifting consumption patterns and the evolving role of locally sourced foods. The 2018 Greenland Demographic Survey revealed that there is a gradual increase in the intake of fruits, vegetables, and processed beverages, while fish consumption has declined, reflecting a broader dietary transition influenced by imports. Meanwhile, in the Faroe Islands, a recent survey highlights varying levels of vegetable, fish, and meat consumption across age groups, with a notable preference for traditional foods among older adults.



Photo: Ingrid Hofstra / visitfaroeislands.com

Food Survey – Greenland

The 2018 Greenland Demographic Survey, the most recent in a series of five nationwide health surveys initiated in 1993, included 2,539 individuals aged 15+ from 20 communities spread over the whole territory. The survey revealed a positive trend, with more people consuming vegetables daily and a decrease in food insecurity since it was first measured in 2014 (Lytken Larsen et al., 2019).

Five indicators have been developed based on the dietary recommendations of Greenland's Nutrition and Exercise Council. Figure 2 shows the consumption of fruits, vegetables, Greenlandic foods such as fish, marine mammals, and meat, as well as the consumption of juice and soda. The development of these indicators was measured using the same questionnaire used in the population survey from 2005-2010 and in 2018. The results show that more people report eating vegetables and drinking more juice and soda, while fewer are eating fish. The proportion of those who eat marine mammals 1-3 times a week and those who eat fruit daily has not changed. In both surveys, only 3% of participants met all five dietary indicators, while about 15% met at least four of the five indicators.

Dietary indicators Greenland

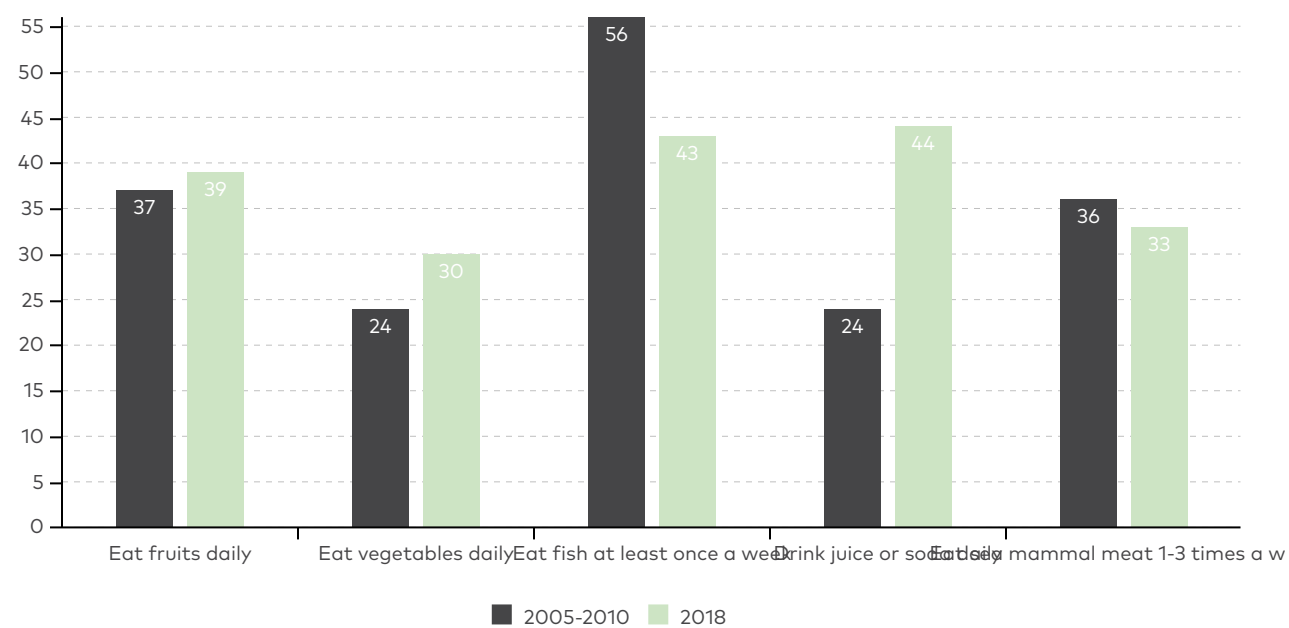


Figure 2: Dietary indicators in Greenland in 2005–2010 and 2018

Over recent decades, the Greenlandic diet has shifted from predominantly local foods to a greater dependence on imports. A population survey from 2005-2010 revealed that local food consumption had already declined to 17% in urban areas and 32% in rural areas, falling further to 14% and 21%, respectively, by 2018. While there were differences in dietary patterns between urban and rural areas, fruit and marine mammal consumption remained similar across both. In rural settlements, fish continued to be a daily staple, but vegetable consumption was notably lower, with a higher intake of juice and fizzy drinks (Lytken Larsen et al., 2019).

A study by Jeppesen and Bjerregaard (2012) among Inuit in Greenland, involving 2752 respondents between 2005 and 2010, found that 67–71% of the participants exceeded the Nordic Nutrition Recommendations 2004 for added sugar intake, 39–44% exceeded the recommendations for saturated fat, and 46–47% for protein. Conversely, 77% fell below the recommended levels for fibre, and 47–59% were below the recommendations for carbohydrates (Jeppesen and Bjerregaard 2012).



Photo: Ólavur Frederiksen / visitfaroeislands.com

Food survey – the Faroe Islands

The 2023 Faroe Islands food survey, which included 5,104 respondents, revealed significant generational differences in the consumption of various food groups. Generally, older consumers (60-85 years) ate vegetables, vegetarian foods, and fish more frequently than younger age groups (Figures 3-4), while consuming beef (Figure 5) and fast food (e.g., pizza, burgers, sausages, fish and chips) less often. For instance, most older adults consume vegetables and fish weekly, whereas younger adults (18-29 years) tend to eat these foods only occasionally. Conversely, younger adults show higher frequencies of red meat and fast food intake, which decreases progressively with increasing age.

Although legumes are becoming popular in many parts of the world, this trend is not reflected in Faroese food consumption. The 2023 Faroese survey shows that legumes, such as lentils, beans, and chickpeas, are infrequently consumed across all age groups. While older adults may be more inclined toward health-conscious food choices, younger generations might benefit from increased awareness and access to healthier options. For example, traditional Faroese cuisine, which includes a variety of fish and fermented foods, may be more appealing to older adults who grew up with these foods, whereas younger generations might prefer more modern, convenience-based diets.

These findings suggest that information campaigns and activities aimed at changing consumer behaviour should be targeted accordingly. This generational pattern highlights the need for age-specific approaches to promoting dietary shifts in the Faroe Islands, as habits differ notably between younger and older populations.

Vegetables/vegetarian food consumption 2023

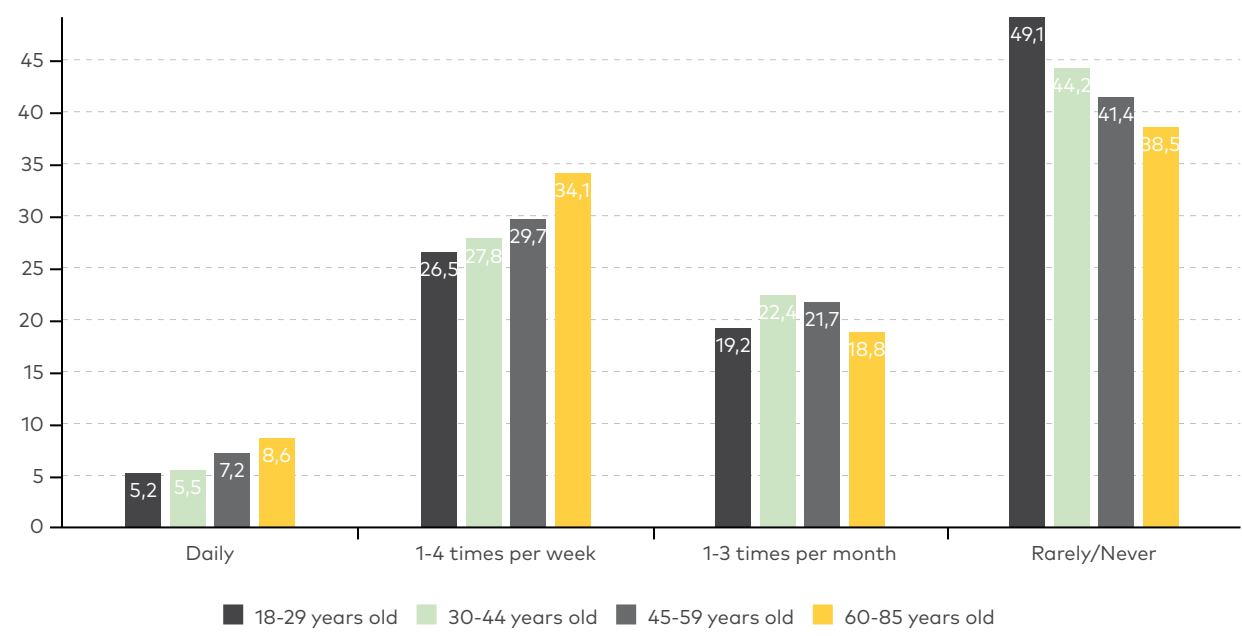


Figure 3: Vegetables/vegetarian food consumption, Faroe Islands 2023^[1]

1. The survey combines vegetables and vegetarian food, and although these are not the same nor easily comparable, this categorisation makes sense in the context of the Faroe Islands.

Fish consumption 2023

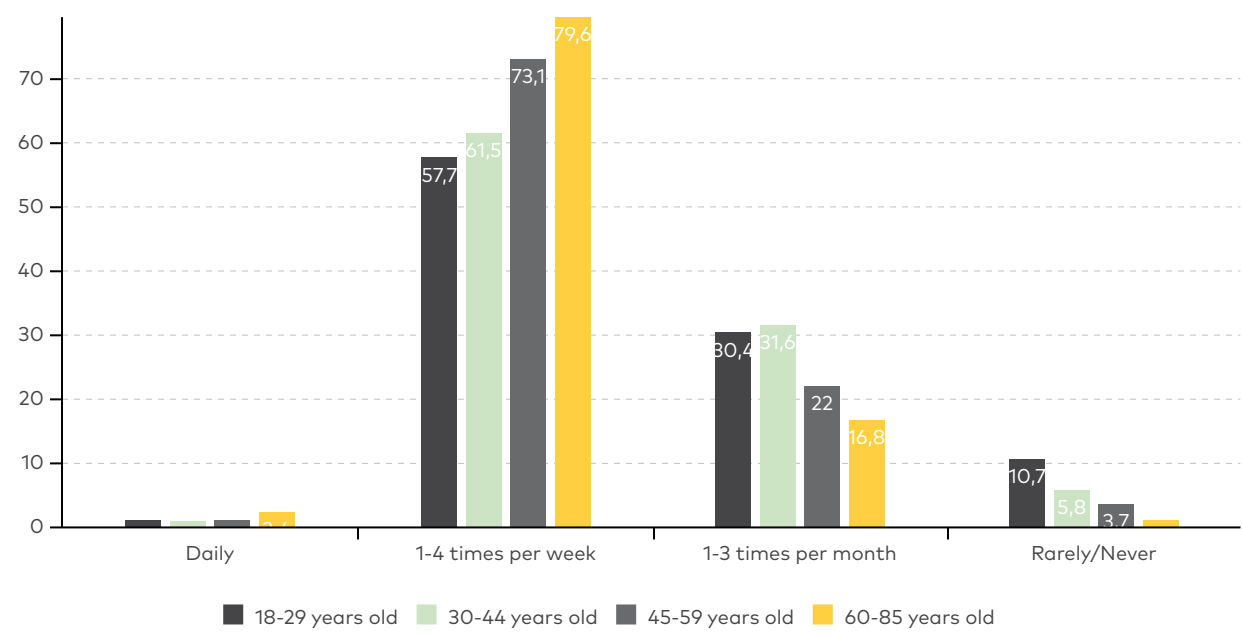


Figure 4: Fish consumption, Faroe Islands 2023

Beef consumption 2023

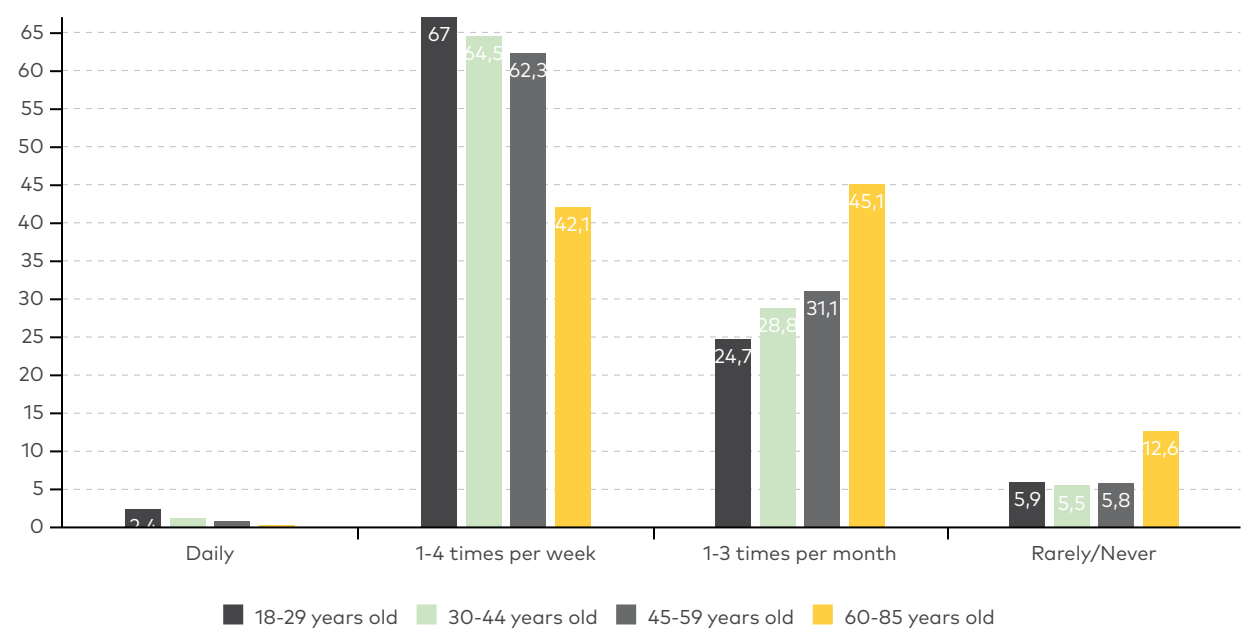


Figure 5: Beef consumption, Faroe Islands 2023

Supporting Policy Environment

This section discusses policy initiatives in Greenland and the Faroe Islands aimed at promoting healthier and more sustainable diets. The focus is on enhancing food self-sufficiency and sustainability, underlining the importance of balancing modern dietary preferences with local resources.



Photo: Amy Robinson / visitfaroeislands.com

Greenland

Local food and healthy diets are issues scattered across several ministries in Greenland. The Department of Health sets overall political priorities, while the Prevention Department, Paarisa, under the National Board of Social Services, focuses on health promotion and primary prevention in the social and health fields, especially for children and adolescents. The Ministry of Fisheries and Hunting primarily handles the regulation of hunting and fishing activities by issuing licenses for both leisure and professional hunting and fishing.

Key initiatives by the Naalakkersuisut (The Government of Greenland) aim to promote local foods to enhance dietary quality and public health. These initiatives encompass educational campaigns, cookbooks for children using local ingredients, and the organisation of annual local food festivals (AMAP, 2021). For example, sheep farmers in South Greenland host an annual programme every summer and autumn, offering farm visits that feature food events as the primary activity (interview 4). Additionally, there is support provided for local markets, food sharing and trading networks, and financial assistance for subsistence harvesters. These incentives are aimed at ensuring that Greenlandic foods remain central to the local economy, cultural identity, and social practices (Goldhar & Ford, 2010).

The Naalakkersuisut is currently developing a self-sufficiency strategy that strengthens Greenland's efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The government promotes the sustainable use of local foods, minimising food waste, and encouraging the utilisation of all resources harvested from nature (interview 1). Paarisa has together with the grocery stores Brugseni, Pilersuisoq, and Pisiffik partnered in Kattulluta Inuuneritta – Together for the Good Life, running until 2030. Based on UN's SDG3 and 17, they aim to increase sales of healthy products to improve health and well-being. The partnership will measure efforts annually to ensure positive impacts on public health and quality of life (Paarisa, n.a.).

Educational measures focus on revitalising and preserving traditional knowledge. Ilisimatusarfik and the Greenland Institute of Natural Resources have collaborated to establish a bachelor's degree in biology named SILA, starting on February 1, 2025. This program includes major components like fishing, hunting, and cooking, ensuring that individuals in Greenland, who may not have family members to teach them these skills, can learn essential practices at the university level (Arctic Hub 2024). Additionally, in South Greenland, the school in Nanortalik has incorporated hunting into its primary school curriculum. At a local grassroot level, the Siu-Tsiu works to establish a social economy in Tasiilaq by teaching young people how to grow kale, onions, and turnips (SiuTsiu, 2024).

Several research projects, including the Greenlandic Diet Revolution and the AMMASSAK project, are examining the nutritional benefits and cultural significance of local foods. Their further objective is to spark a public conversation about the strengths of Greenland's local food system (Ilisimatusarfik, 2024).

Television shows and social media serve as vital platforms for promoting local cuisine in Greenland. Several initiatives on public television, such as the IGAPALL project led by Greenlandic chefs, focus on promoting local cuisine and using local resources (interview 1).

The Faroe Islands

According to Høgni Hoydal, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Industry, and Trade, the Faroe Islands' new agricultural policy aims to enhance self-sufficiency through sustainable, locally produced foods and strengthen the local economy by supporting Faroese agriculture (interview 3). Key initiatives target increased vegetable production, improved forage and milk output, and a certified system for meat production. One significant challenge is the high cost of locally grown vegetables compared to imports, which the government seeks to address through subsidies and potential tax exemptions on Faroese-grown foods. This initiative, part of the upcoming policy (launch date TBD), introduces new subsidies specifically for vegetable production alongside existing ones for milk and sheep. Additionally, insurance options are being considered to offset the risks Faroese vegetable farmers face due to the islands' challenging climate.

Key goals of the policy include protecting the best agricultural land, limited as it is, from competing industrial and construction projects. Maintaining this land for farming is vital for ensuring Faroese food security and supporting the local agricultural economy. To further stimulate demand and support small farmers, the policy proposes that public institutions like hospitals and care homes prioritise locally grown produce. The purpose of the policy is to create a balance between full-time, part-time, and leisure farming while fostering sustainable, health-conscious food production that aligns with modern dietary needs (interview 3).

In terms of development, the policy encourages knowledge-building through education, research, and experimentation to modernise Faroese agricultural practices. For instance, vegetable trials on Sandoy are expected to inform best practices and enhance productivity, while agricultural courses are being updated to provide a comprehensive education pathway. To support these efforts, the policy proposes clear regulations and structured subsidies, along with strengthened financial frameworks to improve profitability.

Recommendations

In promoting healthy and sustainable diets in Greenland and the Faroe Islands, aspects such as food security, robustness, and cultural and social elements are closely intertwined and inseparable; and should all be taken into account. When looking at the dietary guidelines for Greenland and the Faroe Islands and the food consumption, there is a discrepancy between what is recommended by national health authorities in Greenland and the Faroe Islands and what is actually consumed. The following recommendations seek to balance both the cultural values and practices concerning food while also considering health and environmental aspects of food consumption.



Photo: visitfaroeislands.com

- **Adjust dietary recommendations to be more geographically specific.**
When adapting NNR2023 to the contexts of Greenland and the Faroe Islands, it is essential that these scientific guidelines consider geographic and socio-economic factors, including the significant differences between urban and rural areas, to ensure they are practical, feasible, and applicable for remote and rural villages and areas.
- **Introduce policy instruments to improve access and affordability of local foods** across all settlements and population groups. This could involve implementing tailored economic incentives and support measures to boost the domestic food market and environment, ensuring that locally sourced products are affordable for all. Such an approach would enhance public health, strengthen food security, and increase the resilience of the food system.

- **Develop a plan to expand vegetable production in regions with arable land.** Although current production is limited, there is potential in both the Faroe Islands and southern Greenland to increase vegetable yields, providing more locally sourced produce to meet the population's needs.
- **Consider implementing taxes on sugary drinks, sweets, and fast food.** Consumption of these items is high in both Greenland and the Faroe Islands, making it important to assess which incentives could help reverse this trend and encourage healthier choices among the population.
- **Develop targeted strategies to promote healthier dietary habits, especially among young people,** who show lower adherence to dietary recommendations in the Faroe Islands. These strategies could include informational campaigns and nudging techniques, such as product design, portion control, strategic placement, priming, and marketing that emphasises healthier options.
- **Explore initiatives to promote sustainable protein sources as alternatives to imported meat,** supporting both health and environmental benefits. This could include introducing nudges, educational programs, training for public kitchen staff on new legume-based recipes, and public campaigns, all aimed at reducing reliance on imported meat and lowering environmental impact.
- **Promote New Nordic Cuisine by emphasising its unique qualities,** freshness, and sustainability to engage younger generations, preserve culinary traditions, and open up valuable opportunities for local business development, tourism, and economic growth.
- **Support young people's engagement in hunting, fishing, and farming.** This could include educational programs, apprenticeships, and hands-on workshops that teach traditional skills and sustainable practices. Additionally, create funding opportunities or grants for youth-led projects in these areas and collaborate with schools to integrate agricultural, hunting, and fishing knowledge into the curriculum.

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- Interview 3. Hogni Hoydal, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Industry, and Trade in the Faroe Islands, September 2024.
- Interview 4. Gert Mulvad, Chairman of the Nutrition and Exercise Council, 6 June 2024.
- Interview 5. Lyberth Hauptmann, Associate Professor, Head of SILA Department, University of Greenland, 18 June 2024.

About the brief

The brief is produced within the Nordic Council of Ministers' project Healthy and Sustainable Food Systems as part of the Nordic Sustainable Lifestyles programme. Nordic Food and Environments and Behaviour Change is a sub-project run by Nordregio. The project is an essential component of the healthy and sustainable food systems initiative.

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