

Recipe book for regional development

How to improve your community?

Karen Refsgaard (editor)

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PREFACE

This *Recipe Book for Regional Development* brings together practical examples and shared insights from across the Nordic Region from projects and activities conducted by Nordregio, the Nordic Cross-border Committees and the Nordic Atlantic Cooperation (NORA). It highlights how cooperation and mutual learning can help address common challenges in the region—from demographic shifts to the green transition.

At Nordregio, we are proud to have coordinated this work as part of the Nordic Cooperation Programme for Regional Development and Planning 2021–2024. Our aim has been to support the implementation of *Our Vision 2030* by fostering a green, competitive, and socially sustainable Nordic region. This publication is a testament to that ambition, and to the many dedicated individuals and institutions working to make it a reality.



Rolf Elmér
Director
Nordregio

INTRODUCTION

The Nordic regional development context

The Nordics today rank among the world's most innovative and competitive regions, endowed with both thriving cities and resource-rich rural areas. Of particular note is the high level of trust demonstrated by the region's 27 million inhabitants, which offers a good starting point for developing the countries' respective welfare societies in line with Our Vision 2030.

At the core of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is the mantra of 'leave no one behind'. Achieving this means acknowledging that the SDGs cannot be achieved individually. Rather, cross-sectoral efforts and cooperation between multiple administrative levels, the private sector and civil society are needed.^[1] Given that different parts of the Nordic region have distinct prerequisites for development and restructuring, having the ability to adapt is crucial.

Against this backdrop, constructive analyses of the Nordics' diverse communities offer an invaluable resource for those working towards improved living conditions, greater innovation, a successful green transition and inclusive societies. Alongside this, cooperation networks and ongoing exchanges of ideas represent a vital element in cross-border understanding and development. In this way, the creation of Nordic added value becomes possible.

The Nordic countries/autonomous areas have – relative to other regions in the world – similar governance structures, welfare conditions and cultural outlooks, providing a solid basis for the cross-border exchange of knowledge and ideas. Also of relevance is the fact that each of the Nordic countries have tax equalisation systems in place aimed at reducing local and regional inequalities.

Comparable challenges and opportunities can be found across the Nordic region. For example, many rural communities are struggling with declining populations and a lack of younger incomers, while cities are confronted by growing segregation and rising housing prices. In the face of such concerns, investigating the Nordics more broadly throws up an array of potential solutions. Potential avenues include:

1. Nordisk samarbeidsprogram for regional utvikling og planlegging 2021–24 – for et grønt, konkurransedyktig og sosialt bærekraftig Norden (2020):
PolitikNord 2020:713
ISBN 978-92-893-6710-3 (PDF)
ISBN 978-92-893-6711-0 (ONLINE)
<http://dx.doi.org/10.6027/politikkord2020-713>

- Idea, knowledge and experience exchanges between decision-makers and relevant actors, including across borders.
- Cross-border networks where critical views on challenges, solutions, trends and policy measures can be both solicited and offered.
- Access to comparisons and analyses that provide a broader perspective on a particular community's performance.
- A diverse collection of inspirational case studies showcasing activities that other regions and communities can learn from.

Over recent years, regional policy in the Nordics has shifted away from equalisation towards competitiveness. Moreover, at a country level, regional policy is often interpreted in different ways.^[2] In Sweden, for example, the term 'regional *growth* policy' has been replaced by 'regional *development* policy'. In Norway, meanwhile, the term 'regional and rural policy' is increasingly being used, whereas in Denmark, regional policy is equated with 'trade and industry policy'.

All these countries make a distinction between 'small' regional policy (which reflects regional growth/development policy in the Swedish context) and 'large' regional policy (which refers to sector-by-sector policy areas). In many cases, the sector-by-sector policy areas hold the potential for transformational societal effects, impacting regional infrastructure, education and labour markets.

In light of the shared challenges highlighted above, Nordic areas, municipalities and communities seeking innovative ways of enhancing economic growth, social development or environmental sustainability can benefit greatly from looking to their neighbours. It is this idea that forms the seed from which this report grows.

Basis and structure of the report

What can Nordic municipalities and communities learn from contemporaries across the region? How can potentially transformational policies, strategies and initiatives be successfully transferred from one local context to another? Such are the questions underlying this report, which is perhaps best viewed as a 'recipe book' of relevant examples from across the Nordics' five countries and three self-governing regions. In focusing on regional cooperation, the following chapters travel from coast to mountaintop, from city centres to remote settlements, and across borders.

2. Tillväxtanalys 2021: Nordisk studie om regionalpolitik och omställningsförmåga. Rapport 2021:05. Sweden.

This report arises out of the [Nordic Cooperation Programme For Regional Development And Planning 2021–2024](#) (RCP), which Nordregio was responsible for coordinating. In doing so, Nordregio worked alongside the three thematic groups, the cross-border committees (CBCs) and Nordic Atlantic Cooperation (NORA).^[3] Further details of these partners, as well as maps of the area/countries covered by them, can be found in the final chapter.



The aim of the RCP was to facilitate implementation of the three strategic priorities contained in the Nordic Council of Ministers' [Our Vision 2030](#). As such, it constitutes a key stepping stone towards a *green*, *competitive* and *socially sustainable* Nordic region.

The remainder of the report unfolds as follows. The first part "[23 recipes for regional development](#)" consists of 23 short chapters, each of which describes a project or an event conducted as part of the RCP. These projects were carried out variously by Nordregio in conjunction with Nordic regional ministries, by one of the CBCs, or by NORA.

The second part "[Story map of inspirational case studies](#)" gives details of the interactive Story map that has been created based on the 113 case studies.

The third part "[Regional relevance and Nordic added value](#)" then pulls back to explore the cross-cutting areas of regional relevance that emerged from the 23 recipes, before summarising them in the form of some key takeaways. It then proceeds to supplement this analysis by applying a similar lens to 113 inspirational case studies also conducted as part of the programme. Having done so, this part concludes by expanding on the nature of Nordic value added.

The fourth part "[Topic search mapping tool](#)" outlines the tool that encompasses both the 113 cases and the 23 recipes.

Supplementing the above, the fifth part "[About the Nordic Cooperation Programme](#)" provides further details on the institutions involved in implementing the RCP.

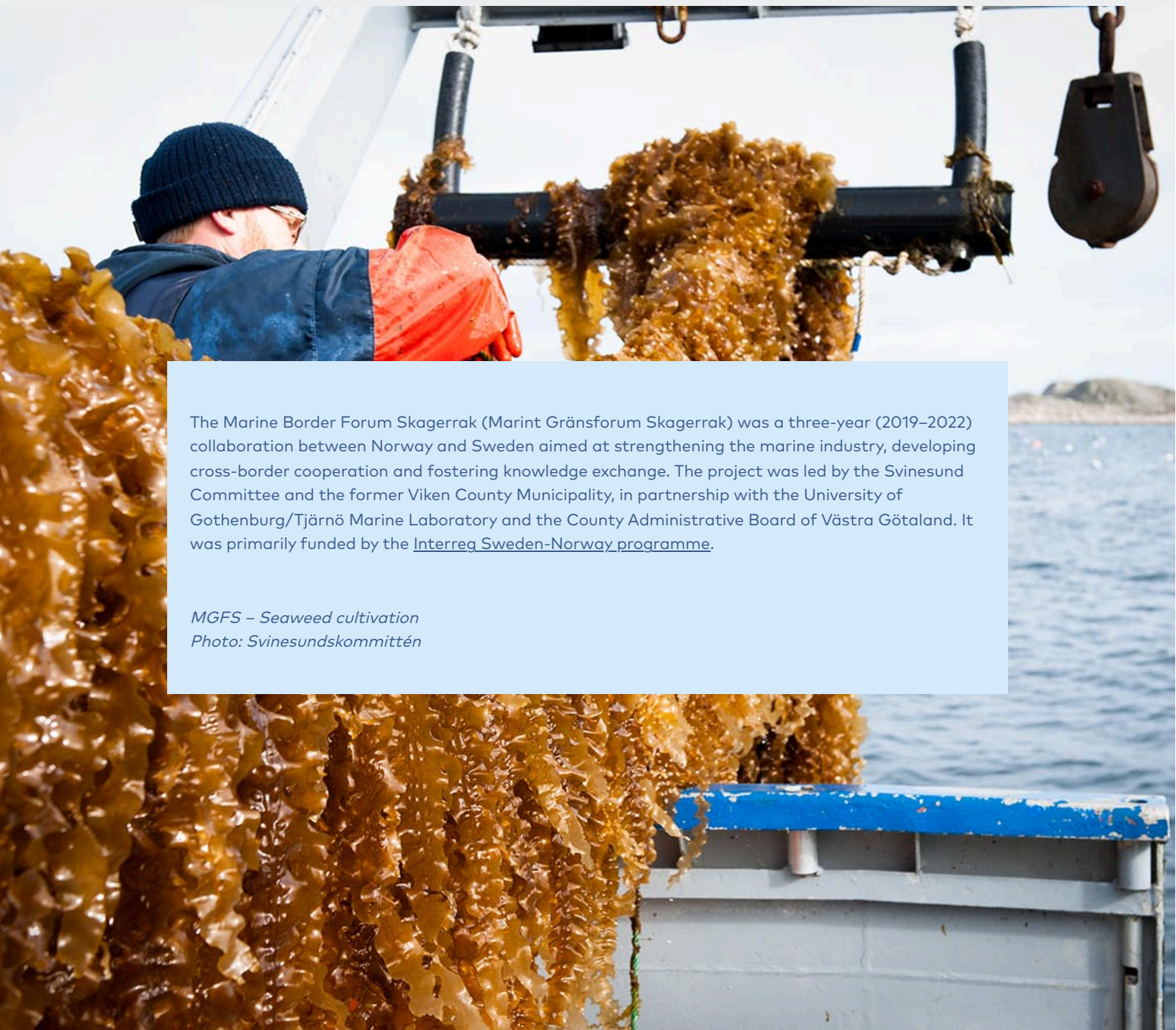
3. Further details of these partners, as well as maps of the area/countries covered by NORA and by the Nordic cross-border committees, can be found in the chapter *The Nordic Regional Cooperation Programme and its participating institutions*

A signature dish

Marine Border Forum Skagerrak

TOPICS: Cross-border | Economic sustainability | Environmental sustainability
| Governance | Planning | Regional innovation

AUTHOR: Svinesundskommittén



The Marine Border Forum Skagerrak (Marint Gränsforum Skagerrak) was a three-year (2019–2022) collaboration between Norway and Sweden aimed at strengthening the marine industry, developing cross-border cooperation and fostering knowledge exchange. The project was led by the Svinesund Committee and the former Viken County Municipality, in partnership with the University of Gothenburg/Tjärnö Marine Laboratory and the County Administrative Board of Västra Götaland. It was primarily funded by the [Interreg Sweden-Norway programme](#).

MGFS – Seaweed cultivation

Photo: Svinesundskommittén

Key activities and focus areas

The project was structured around three main themes:

1. **Marine business development:** Supporting existing and new businesses in the aquaculture, algae production and shellfish industries.
2. **Marine management:** Developing dialogue and joint strategies for sustainable marine planning across the border.
3. **Research and academia:** Encouraging stronger collaboration between research institutions and the private sector.

Two cross-border business networks were established for the oyster and algae industries. More than 15 new companies were founded within the project area, while several existing businesses expanded or began exporting.

Workshops, courses and meetings between businesses, researchers and authorities fostered new collaborations, thereby increasing expertise in sustainable resource management and marine business development. A total of 49 companies received direct support through the project.

Key results and synergies

- **Political Forum Skagerrak** was established as a permanent platform for political dialogue on marine issues in the Skagerrak region.
- **The Industry Council Svenskt Vattenbruk och Sjömat (SVoS)** was founded to unite aquaculture businesses and facilitate dialogue with regulatory authorities.
- **A cross-border planning forum** was created for municipal planners and business developers.
- **Regulatory mapping and licensing processes for aquaculture** identified differences between Norway and Sweden, leading to proposals for simplifications.
- **A marine allotment project at Tjärnö Marine Laboratory** demonstrated how small-scale ocean farming can contribute to increased seafood production and sustainable resource use. The project attracted over 150 media articles.
- **The Skagerrak Conference** brought together industry, government and academia to discuss marine business development and resource management.

Who benefited from the project?

- **Businesses** gained access to networks, skills development and improved regulatory conditions.
- **Researchers** found new collaboration arenas and increased engagement with the industry.
- **Authorities, as well as more than 30 politicians**, gained greater insight into the challenges and opportunities of marine business development.
- **Local communities** became more aware of sustainable resource use in the marine sector.

Lessons learned and future prospects

The project demonstrated that cross-border collaboration can unlock new opportunities for blue growth. In this respect, despite the challenges posed by differing regulations in Norway and Sweden, the project helped increase understanding and dialogue between authorities and businesses. Another useful lesson was that, regardless of the greater participation enabled by the pandemic-induced shift to digital solutions, physical meeting spaces remain important.

The networks and forums established as part of the project will continue to play a role in developing Skagerrak as a sustainable blue growth region. Moreover, the success of the project can help inspire other Nordic regions to pursue similar marine management and business development initiatives.



MGFS – Marine knowledge day

Photo: Svinesundskommittén

23 RECIPES FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The cross-border committees

1. Archipelago possibilities in numbers (APIN)
2. Borderless, secure and vibrant North
3. Bothnian Arc Transport Forum
4. Capacity building in MidtSkandia – The E12 Corridor: From the Atlantic Ocean to the Baltic Sea
5. Cross-border transport and strategic infrastructure development in the Kvarken region
6. Cross-border vocational education and training
7. Integrated border region
8. Marine Border Forum Skagerrak
9. Mental border obstacles
10. The Moss–Karlstad Union Trails
11. Ruralplan: Innovative planning in communities with population decline
12. Save Bothian Bay initiative: Increasing awareness among a broad stakeholder group
13. Smart archipelago traffic

NORA

14. Arctic Young Chef
15. Coworking for Bygdeliv!
16. Generation North Atlantic

Nordregio

17. Terra Nordica: The Nordic land-negotiation game

18. How regions adopt a mission approach

19. The Nordic urban–rural typology: Shedding new light on territorial differences

20. Rural Roadmap

21. Sustainable and welcoming rural areas

22. Socially inclusive and climate neutral cities

23. Socially sustainable tourism: Beyond measuring economic outcomes

The cross-border committees

1. Archipelago possibilities in numbers (APIN)

TOPICS: Cross-border | Business competitiveness | Economic sustainability | Tourism

AUTHOR: Nordiska Skärgårdssamarbetet

In 2023, [Nordic Archipelago Cooperation \(NSS\)](#) submitted a report on economic benefits linked to archipelago environments. The study, based on the Archipelago Possibilities in Numbers (APIN) project, reported that in the NSS areas of Sweden, Åland and Finland, the tourism industry has not only generated powerful economic effects in recent years, but holds further potential going forwards. Estimates suggest that over the course of a single year (2022), 32 million visitors generated €1,700 million of turnover across the region.

Existing data sources from the three territories were supplemented by mobile data analysis, as it was suspected the official visitor counts fell far short of the reality. Thus, the total number of visits was based on mobile phone positioning data, divided into commercial (e.g. overnight stays in hotels, guest harbours) and non-commercial (e.g. overnight stays in private holiday homes) visits. Calculations were then made of the direct economic value and indirect socioeconomic benefits of the archipelago's tourism industry: currently, the industry employs 22,000 full-time equivalents and generates €250 million in tax revenue each year.

In many parts of the archipelago, tourists tend to restrict their visits to a short period during the summer. Faced with this, the industry has long sought to extend the tourism season. While the broad challenges were already well known, the report was able to translate into figures what it would mean if September matched August for tourist bookings. As Joakim Franklin of consultancy firm WSP, which was responsible for the study, observes:

The same number of visits in September as in August would, all else being equal, mean an increased turnover of €55 million for the tourism industry and an employment effect equivalent to over 9,000 full-time jobs over the course of a month.

The issue is important from a number of perspectives. For example, if the tourism sector can offer a greater number of jobs and a longer season, then people will be more likely to move to the archipelago. In this respect, Åre in Sweden, which hosts a multitude of ski resorts, is often highlighted. Nevertheless, large seasonal variations put considerable pressure on the environment, infrastructure and – to a certain extent – social sustainability. NSS will continue to address this issue in its future activities and projects.

[Read more here.](#)



Kayaking in the Swedish archipelago
Photo: iStock



Skiing in Åre, Sweden
Photo: Niclas Vestefjell, Imagebank.sweden.se

2. Borderless, secure and vibrant North

TOPICS: Cross-border | Business competitiveness | Infrastructure | Labour market | Preparedness | Regional innovation

AUTHOR: Tornedalsrådet

Aim

The Borderless, Secure and Vibrant North project taking place during 2024 sought to arrange a series of 13 meetings at the Council of Torne Valley and Fell Lapland Development Area in Sweden, Finland and Norway. These events aimed to promote cross-border cooperation by giving the parties involved an opportunity to discuss the impacts of planned infrastructure projects on cross-border movement, supply lines and security. In addition, the project spotlighted the preparedness of the border regions' joint labour market and business areas in the face of potential future crises.

A common thread running throughout the project was the importance of cross-border cooperation. In particular, cross-border transport connections are the lifeblood of these border regions, enabling labour mobility by linking together not only neighbouring municipalities, but the entire Nord Calotte region.

Target

Achieving the project's goals required the participation of not just the officials and politicians from the municipalities involved, but representatives from a variety of organisations and authorities. Moreover, the content of each event was tailored according to the issues considered most pressing to that municipality.

In the northern municipalities, for instance, the challenges posed to reindeer husbandry by increased traffic and possible new rail connections were discussed. Meanwhile, increased drug smuggling proved to be an important topic in Tornio, Haparanda and Ylitornio. The standout issues to emerge from these discussions are elaborated on below.



Discussion meeting with Nordreisa and Kåfjord municipalities in Storslett, 18 November 2024.
Photo: Tornedalsrådet



The bridge over Pajala to Kolari.
Photo: Tornedalsrådet



The bridge between Ylitornio and Aavasaksa, Ylitornio.
Photo: Tornedalsrådet

Results: Infrastructure and advocacy

- The bridges over the Torne River linking Sweden with Finland are in need of repair, as they cannot currently support heavy military vehicles. Moreover, bridges without walking and cycling routes pose safety risks due to increasing numbers of tourists who stop in the middle in order to take pictures of themselves straddling the border. Alongside this, there is a need for walking and cycling routes to the Övertorneå-Aavasaksa Bridge, the Pello–Pello Bridge and the Pajala–Kolari Bridge.
- Northern Finland's road network is also important for maintaining the security of supplies into Northern Norway's municipalities.
- A prerequisite for new track connections in reindeer herding areas^[4] is the construction of protective trackside fences. Moreover, increased traffic in reindeer grazing areas has intensified the risk of collisions, with many tourists insufficiently prepared for encountering reindeer on the road. For example, before the Alpine World Cup in Kittilä, reindeer herders collect the reindeer from the roadside.
- A common view is that policymakers do not have a broad understanding of the northern border regions' untapped potential.
- The geopolitical situation in Europe has changed. As a result, when Finland, Sweden and Norway discuss cross-border security issues regarding supply lines and transport connections, the member municipalities of Torne Valley Council and Fell Lapland Development have increasingly moved centre-stage.

4. All border areas of the Torne Valley Council from Sweden and Norway and all other areas/municipalities in Finland except Tornio.

Results: Supply line security and possible future crises

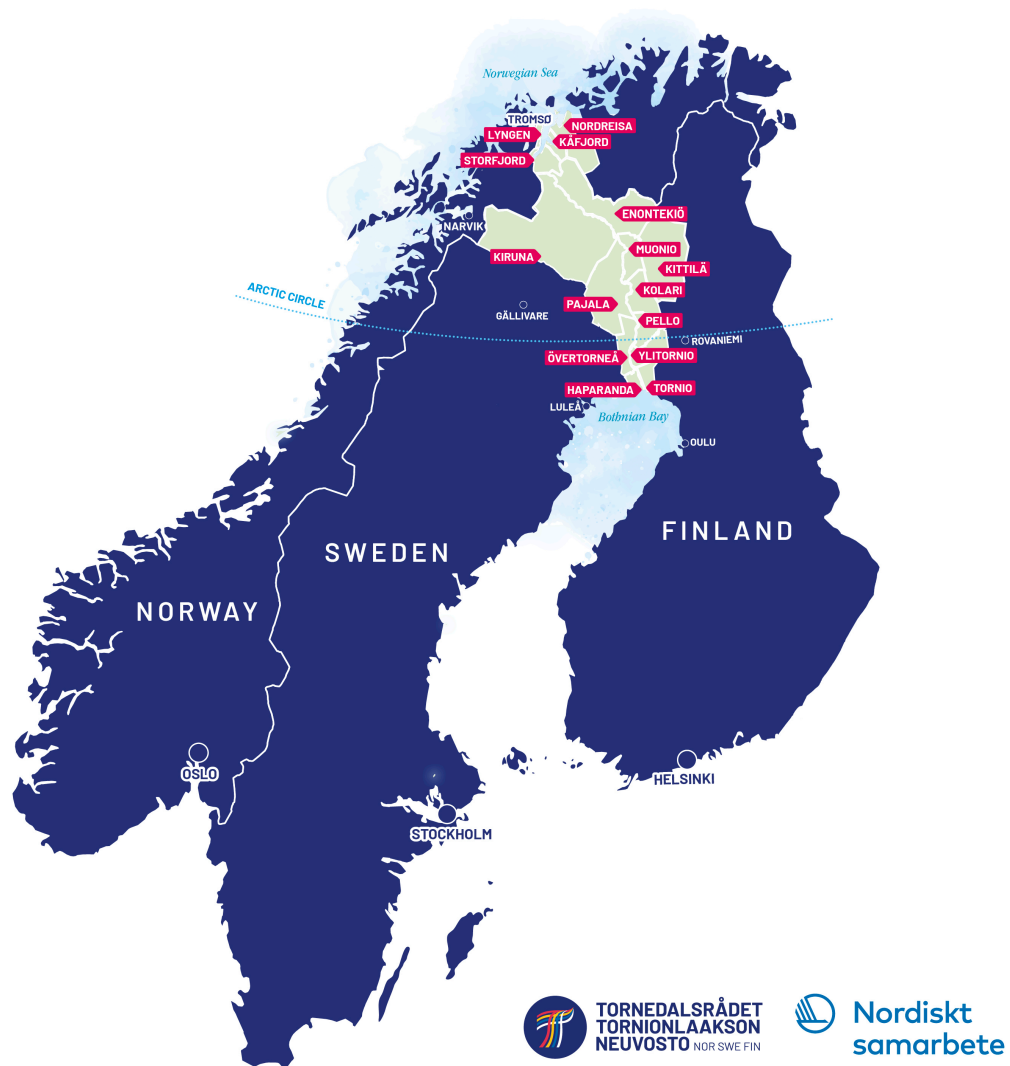
- In terms of preparedness for emergency situations, it is particularly important to ensure the mobility of residents, workers and businesses in border municipalities.
- The Finnish Government's concept of a 'border community'^[5], introduced during the coronavirus pandemic, remains in place, and could be deployed again during exceptional situations.
- The increased threat of crises and war should be reflected in the contingency planning of border municipalities. For instance, the Swedish border municipalities are exploring the possibility of receiving refugees from Finland, while Finland's border municipalities are doing likewise in terms of people fleeing the country's eastern border.
- It is important that the civilian population is fully prepared for emergency situations, especially in small municipalities in the north, from which there may be long distances, e.g. hospitals, not all official services in their own municipality.
- Cooperation between Sweden's Police and its Border Guard from Finland (with special troops for border control) is better than ever before.
- Investments are required to combat rising drugs and weapons smuggling in the Torne Valley linking Sweden and Finland.

More generally, the project has led to new cross-border project ideas emerging, cooperation networks being established, and authorities gaining increased knowledge of decision-making, planning processes and preparedness in neighbouring countries.

The project has also facilitated information-sharing on cross-border transport connections, as well as preparedness concerning emergency situations. Nevertheless, much remains to be done to strengthen cross-border cooperation in the Arctic region's joint advocacy work.

[Read more here.](#)

5. A border community refers to border municipalities located on the land border of Finland, Sweden and Norway that had a special right to move across the border during the Corona pandemic. This decision was made by the Finnish government, because there is close interaction, family relations, work, hobbies and studies between the border municipalities. The Tornio Valley region was recognised by the Finnish state as a special area due to the cross-border labour market and business area and family relations.



The Council of Torne Valley has 15 member municipalities. These three, Enontekiö, Muonio and Kittilä are members both in the Council of Torne Valley and the Fell Lapland Development: Enontekiö, Muonio and Kittilä.
Source: Tornedalsrådet

3. Bothnian Arc Transport Forum

TOPICS: Cross-border | Infrastructure

AUTHOR: Tornedalsrådet

The Bothnian Arc is an important economic area that reaches from Skellefteå in Sweden to Kalajoki in Finland, following the Bothnian Bay coastline. It is a vital part of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T), connecting the Nordics with the rest of Europe.

In 2023, a new cross-border Transport Forum aimed at enabling cross-border traffic and logistic connections in the Bothnian Arc was established. The forum aims to ensure ongoing dialogue over transport issues, coordinate implementation of the Action Plan, of cross-border Transport Vision 204 for Bothnian Arc Corridor, and address any emerging transport issues that might impede the Transport Vision 2040.

The Transport Forum meets three or four times a year, bringing together 15 Finnish and 15 Swedish participants from municipal and regional representatives from municipal and regional authorities, development organisations, state organisations, transport operators and other stakeholders. Its work is guided by the Transport Vision 2040's eight goals, which seek to enable: 1) sustainable mobility and transport; 2) resilience and security; 3) the borderless transport of goods and people in support of investments; 4) connected logistics chains; 5) an accessible region; 6) fluent travel chains; 7) tourism and leisure travel; and 8) a culture of cooperation.

During its first year of operation, the Transport Forum dealt with various themes and issues, including:

- sustainable transport planning in the region;
- security of supply and resilience in transport planning;
- development of the TEN-T North Sea Baltic and Scandinavian–Mediterranean core network corridors;
- ensuring railway capacity;
- ensuring funding;
- Tornio–Haparanda as an essential node for the Bothnian Arc corridor;
- launching cross-border train traffic; and
- collecting and sharing information/data on transport.

Moreover, members of the Bothnian Arc Forum have participated in various other transport-related platforms, including Platform North, a collaboration between Norway, Sweden and Finland.

Learning from one other

Regional cross-border awareness is crucial when it comes to developing safe, smooth and sustainable east–west travel connections between Finland and Sweden. In this respect, the Bothnian Arc Cross-Border Transport Forum offers Finnish and Swedish transport and traffic professionals a crucial space for swapping information, learning and concerns.

Administratively, the Bothnian Arc Border Committee is responsible for promoting cooperation among the networks involved in the Transport Forum, including facilitating the meetings and providing secretarial services. It also assists in reporting sectoral developments and the outcomes of actions taken by the Transport Forum.

Ultimately, the forum's objective is to nurture knowledge-sharing among cross-border actors, who can then inform regional and state organisations/decision-makers about local needs or challenges arising from transport systems or traffic connection. In doing so, the forum can feed into the broader Nordic dialogue in this arena, not only highlighting border obstacles but coming up with potential solutions.

As all of the above implies, the Transport Forum's role in enabling better functioning travel chains and connections means it is of great value to a variety of actors, including decision-makers, residents and those working in tourism-related businesses.

[Read more here.](#)



Lighthouse in Oulu Nallikari.
Photo: Bothian Arc



Bridge across the river Torne.
Photo: Bothian Arc

4. Capacity building in MidtSkandia – The E12 Corridor: From the Atlantic Ocean to the Baltic Sea

TOPICS: Cross-border | Infrastructure | Preparedness

AUTHOR: MidtSkandia

Recently, MidtSkandia border committee engaged Danish multinational engineering company Rambøll^[6] to investigate whether the current transport infrastructure in the E12 region – which stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Baltic Sea – requires further development. Crucially, the feasibility study incorporates the Nordic region's new security policy situation, with Sweden and Finland as NATO members. Going forward, it will form the basis for future projects.

At present, the region's transport capacity is sufficient, with only minor improvements planned by 2030. Over the longer term, however, societal changes may require greater investment in, especially, sea and rail transport. The driving forces behind these anticipated social developments in Northern Norway and Northern Sweden can be summarised as follows:

Geopolitical conditions

- Increased Norway–Sweden cross-border defence activity
- Increased investments in critical infrastructure

Important societal goals

- Increased critical raw materials self-sufficiency in Europe
- Increased energy production from renewable resources

Climate change

- Increased population and business development
- New international transport corridors

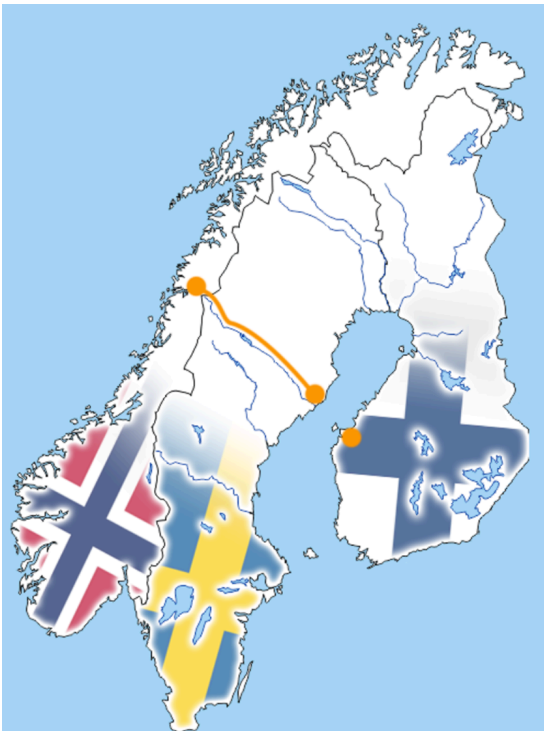
While a scenario analysis of Northern Norway's transport systems reveals various development opportunities between now and 2060, an increase in transport needs is widely recognised.

6. Rambøll in this case was Norwegian. It is a Danish company but we had contact with the norwegian part of the company

The feasibility study assesses current national plans and natural resources in the High North as they relate to economic development and transport in the E12 corridor. Although the Swedish Transport Administration has previously mapped possible measures to develop the area, the corridor's railway line currently has a low market share and is among the country's least developed.

The members of MidtSkandia are calling for significant improvements to the West Bothnia Line, as well as a westward expansion of the rail network once the North Bothnia Line has been completed. Norway, Sweden and Finland have agreed to establish a cross-border railway corridor for both civilian and military purposes, which includes the possibility of the Nordland Line in Norway undergoing further development.

[Read more here.](#)



Map showing the location of the E12-corridor
Picture: MidtSkandia



Map of the E12-corridor
Picture: MidtSkandia



Photo: iStock

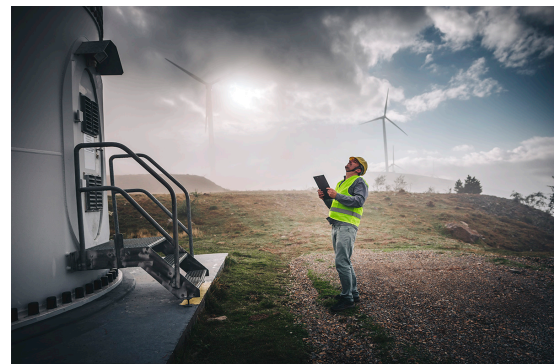


Photo: iStock

5. Cross-border transport and strategic infrastructure development in the Kvarken region

TOPICS: Cross-border | Business competitiveness | Environmental sustainability
| Governance | Infrastructure | Regional innovation | Tourism

AUTHOR: Kvarken Council EGTC

The Kvarken Council

The Kvarken Council is a European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) – the first fully Nordic one of its kind. As a legal entity under EU legislation, headquartered in Vaasa (Finland) with an office unit in Umeå (Sweden), the organization combines legal mandate with democratic decision-making to enable effective cross-border cooperation.

Area of operation and mission

The Kvarken Council covers three Ostrobothnian counties in Finland and the regions of Västerbotten and Västernorrland in Sweden. Together they form the Kvarken region. The region is characterized by a long history of cooperation across the Bothnian Bay, where the narrowest part, the Kvarken Strait, is about 80 km wide between Vaasa and Umeå, but only 25 km between the outermost islands, Replot and Holmön. Historically, the Kvarken acted as a natural connection point via both ice roads and maritime routes. For over 50 years, the Kvarken Council has served as a neutral platform and enabler for cross-border cooperation. The organisation actively works to improve infrastructure, support economic growth and cultural exchange, and reduce cross-border obstacles between Finland and Sweden. The region has a strong industrial base in areas such as energy, technology, and the food industry, with a combined population of nearly one million inhabitants.



The Kvarken region, the Kvarken Council's area of operation, is marked on the map.

From Midway Alignment to Nordic Connector: Strategic transport projects in the Kvarken Region

The Kvarken Council has a strong track record of developing cross-border transport solutions for the Kvarken region, with the Midway Alignment project series showcasing how structured governance, strategic funding, and regional cooperation can enable major infrastructure investments. Building on this experience, the Nordic Connector initiative — which seeks to establish a fixed transport link across the Kvarken Strait, thereby strengthening regional ties and benefiting a wider area — is also supported by a series of projects. In autumn 2025, the FLINC project, funded by Interreg Aurora, will support the Nordic Connector initiative by exploring funding opportunities and assessing the wider impacts of improved cross-border infrastructure. The findings are intended to serve as a model for other border regions planning large-scale cross-border transport investments.

Midway Alignment and Aurora Botnia: A cross-border transport innovation

Midway Alignment is a key cross-border cooperation project that resulted in the development of the environmentally friendly Aurora Botnia ferry. When the previous ferry operator withdrew from the route between Vaasa (Finland) and Umeå (Sweden), local and regional authorities acted to maintain this crucial transport link.

The project series consisted of several projects that ultimately led to a concrete outcome – the acquisition of a new vessel, which is essential for maintaining cooperation between the two countries. To make this possible, the municipalities of Vaasa and Umeå established Kvarken Link, a jointly owned company through which they operate Wasaline (the ferry route between the two). Ownership of Kvarken Link is split equally between the City of Vaasa and Umeå Kommunföretag AB, a company fully owned by Umeå municipality. This solution ensured long-term political commitment to the route, as well as its financial sustainability.

The project was backed by extensive feasibility studies and economic assessments, ensuring data-driven decision-making. As a result, Aurora Botnia – the world's most environmentally friendly passenger and cargo ferry, running on a combination of liquefied natural gas and battery power – was built. According to a recent [press release](#), Wasaline has become the first carbon-neutral shipping company in the Baltic Sea, achieving a climate goal set for 2030 ahead of schedule – and its Aurora Botnia route is now the first operational international green shipping corridor.

The collaborative governance model used by Midway Alignment and Aurora Botnia has attracted national- and EU-level attention as a showcase for how municipalities, regions and stakeholders can work across borders to secure critical infrastructure and achieve tangible results. The Midway Alignment project series – financed by, among other sources, the Motorways of the Sea programme under the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) and the Interreg Botnia-Atlantica programme – has strengthened the entire region's connectivity and economic resilience, ensuring sustainable transport remains a central part of regional development. Crucially, the Midway Alignment/Aurora Botnia project has set a precedent for how long-term cooperation, strategic funding, and joint decision-making can lead to impactful infrastructure investments that benefit both national and local economies.

Beyond securing the continuity of ferry operations, Aurora Botnia has strengthened trade links, boosted tourism opportunities, and enhanced regional business competitiveness by providing a reliable, sustainable transport connection. The project has also provided environmental benefits through reducing emissions and serving as a model for green maritime innovation. In doing so, it aligns with national and EU climate objectives.

In addition, Aurora Botnia functions as a floating laboratory for regional technology companies, facilitating the development of sustainable maritime transport innovations. Finally, improved connectivity has reinforced cross-border labour mobility and access to services, benefiting communities on both sides of the Kvarken Strait.

The Kvarken Council has served as the coordinating body behind both the Midway Alignment and the Nordic Connector initiatives, facilitating cooperation between local, regional and national actors, and securing EU-level support.

This success laid the foundation for exploring a more permanent cross-border solution.

Nordic Connector: A vision for cross-border infrastructure

Nordic Connector represents the next phase of developing cross-border transport infrastructure in the Kvarken region. Like the earlier Midway Alignment, it will consist of a series of projects that gradually advance the decision-making process. Towards this end, the project aims to enhance long-term accessibility between Finland and Sweden, while also integrating concurrent energy, digital connectivity and economic development strategies.

A fixed connection would fundamentally reshape connectivity not only in the Kvarken region but across northern Europe. Establishing a permanent corridor between the two countries would significantly boost trade and investment opportunities, as well as strengthen supply line security on a broader scale. Although primarily planned for civilian and economic purposes, the initiative could also enhance regional resilience during times of crisis by ensuring critical infrastructure remains functional.

More generally, the project aligns with European green transport corridor discussions, helping ensure the Kvarken region remains competitive in terms of sustainable infrastructure planning, while also contributing to strategic preparedness and supporting cross-border business conditions.



MS Aurora Botnia
Photo: Christoffer
BjörklundWasaline NLC Ferry



Photo: Kvarkenrådet

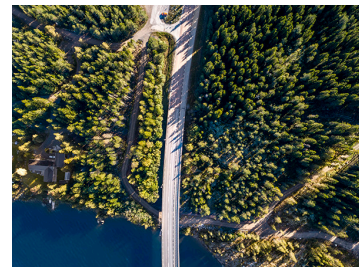


Photo: Kvarkenrådet

Cross-border governance and policy innovation

These projects illustrate the role played by political innovation in overcoming cross-border challenges, with Kvarken Council's governance model demonstrating how municipalities and regional authorities can achieve impactful results beyond national structures.

Both Midway Alignment and Nordic Connector point to the importance of structured, long-term cooperation based on data-driven decision-making, strategic planning and strong partnerships. They also highlight how regional transport can act as a catalyst for wider policy change, influencing infrastructure planning at a national and even European level.

In addition to these infrastructure projects, Kvarken Council has contributed to the [Political Innovation Handbook](#), developed alongside Nordic cross-border organisations STRING and Mälardalsrådet. This initiative compiles governance and regional cooperation best practices, providing inspiration and guidance for decision-makers across the Nordics. Throughout, the Handbook emphasises that structured governance, long-term commitment and evidence-based policymaking are crucial for enhanced cross-border collaboration.

Lessons learned and policy impact

Kvarken Council gained a number of valuable insights into successful cross-border collaboration during implementation of the Regional Cooperation Programme 2021–2024. In particular:

- formalising governance structures enhances long-term cooperation;
- inclusive engagement and multi-level governance create broad ownership and political commitment;
- evidence-based advocacy helps integrate cross-border perspectives into national and EU strategies; and
- trust and personal networks are crucial for efficient decision-making and problem-solving.

Kvarken region's approach to cross-border cooperation offers a replicable model for other Nordic regions facing similar infrastructural and administrative challenges. Through integrating the lessons from infrastructure projects into broader governance discussions – such as in the Political Innovation Handbook – Kvarken Council has helped strengthen cross-border collaboration at the regional, national and European levels.

Applying lessons to future policy development

Moving forward, Kvarken Council aims to strengthen its role as a policy adviser. As part of this, the council will continue testing and scaling governance models transferable to other Nordic cross-border regions. By fostering structured collaboration, evidence-based policymaking and long-term strategic planning, Kvarken Council offers proof that administrative boundaries need not hinder development.

[Read more here.](#)

6. Cross-border vocational education and training

TOPICS: Cross-border | Education and competencies | Labour market

AUTHOR: Gränskommittén Innlandet-DalarnaInnlandet

The border area between Innlandet in Norway and Dalarna in Sweden is currently facing labour shortages across a wide range of occupations, particularly in technical fields, healthcare and tourism. In addition, the area hosts an ageing population, with the number of working-age residents set to decrease by 2030.

In order to meet these challenges, the Innlandet–DalarnaDalarna cross-border committee is working to bring together Swedish and Norwegian educational actors, create new training courses, and coordinate efforts for a more integrated labour market.

Demography and skills supply

According to a study by Nordregio, the working-age populations of border municipalities in both Sweden and Norway will decline over the next ten years. Fewer people will therefore be available to do increasing amounts of work, necessitating greater efficiency and new forms of employment. At the same time, there is considerable untapped labour potential among immigrants, which could help fill skills gaps.

An example of a specific challenge facing border municipalities is the recruitment of snow technicians (persons responsible for production of snow) and piste machine operators – specialised professions that face growing skills gaps due to impending retirements. Another is the recruitment of restaurant staff and chefs to meet growing tourism needs. Several companies and municipalities are calling for more coordinated efforts to meet these skills shortcomings, prompting the cross-border committee to address the issue in a systematic way.

Expert study on cross-border training

The cross-border committee conducted a study investigating opportunities for making better use of the two countries' education systems across the border area. The study concluded that there are no legal barriers to a Norwegian or Swedish citizen studying on the other side of the border, and that an active exchange between the two countries could provide important educational opportunities for the region's young people.

Doing so, however, requires that the relevant programmes be sufficiently attractive to students, as well as widely known among the target populations. Thus far, this has proved to be a challenge. For example, restaurant and cooking courses in the tourism-heavy municipalities of Trysil and Malung-Sälen had to be closed down due to too few students signing up.

Cooperation between education and training actors

In 2023, the cross-border committee organised several workshops in which Swedish and Norwegian education providers, municipalities and business representatives discussed solutions to skills supply shortages. It became clear that neither country's actors had much awareness of the education system and training opportunities on the other side of the border. As a result, participants highlighted the need for a mapping exercise. This in turn led to the idea of creating a cross-border career centre based on a model from Innlandet, with guidance focused on the border region's specific needs.

Moreover, greater flexibility is needed in order to make the education system more relevant to the labour market. Given that seasonal work is especially common in tourism and hospitality, it would make sense to design more courses allowing students to work and study at the same time. In addition, ensuring educational opportunities are open to students across the border means a broader range of skills training will be available to young people.

One initiative that has been prioritised is establishing a new vocational cross-border education for operating staff at winter destinations, such as Sälen, Idre and Trysil. This training would cover the technical skills required to operate, among other facilities, lifts, snow groomers and snow cannons. Many current employees are approaching retirement, meaning these areas have a pressing need for trained staff.

Results

As touched on above, the cross-border committee's work has yielded a number of concrete results. Specifically:

- A variety of training actors from Sweden and Norway have been brought together and several cross-border initiatives launched. Funds have been secured to establish a cross-border forum to plan, coordinate, and market educational offers across borders.
- Karriere Innlandet and Torsby municipalities have applied for an Interreg project to map vocational education facilities in the border area, as well as develop proposals for a cross-border career centre.
- In collaboration with industry and 'Prosjekt Fagskole i Sør-Østerdal', the cross-border committee is exploring the establishment of new Nordic vocational education program for operating staff in mountain destinations.

More generally, the demographic challenges faced by border region communities has been discussed in various meetings with municipal authorities.^[7]

Ultimately, the cross-border committee's work on skills supply relies on a structured, long-term approach based around knowledge building and the careful assembly of an inventory of needs.

[Read more here.](#)



Snowy mountains, Trysil
Photo: Trysil municipality

7. The following film demonstrates several opportunities for solving skills shortages through cross-border cooperation: <https://f.io/M9YAJsTp>.

7. Integrated border region

TOPICS: Cross-border | Business competitiveness | Preparedness

AUTHOR: Svinesundskommittén

The 2022–2025 Integrated Border Region project^[8] – led by the Svinesund Committee in collaboration with Region Västra Götaland and Østfold County Municipality (previously Viken County Municipality), with primary funding from Interreg Sweden-Norway – aimed to strengthen cooperation between Norway and Sweden in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Towards this end, the project focused on two main objectives:

1. **Eliminating border barriers that hinder or complicate cooperation between small and medium-sized enterprises.** Through identifying and removing border obstacles, improving business opportunities and strengthening collaboration between authorities, the project has sought to create better conditions for the border region's businesses, public entities and residents.
2. **Ensuring the border region's residents can remain confident that the border will stay open, even in the event of a new pandemic.** The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on the Norway–Sweden border region, with border closures and unclear regulations creating difficulties for commuters, businesses and society at large. The project has therefore sought to learn from the pandemic and ensure smoother border management should future crises strike.

Removing border barriers for businesses

One of the project's key goals is to facilitate cross-border business operations. In this respect, the Business in Sweden and Business in Norway seminars have seen over 60 Norwegian and 70 Swedish companies receive guidance on conducting business in the neighbouring country. More specifically, companies have been given advice on customs regulations, taxation, business support programmes and differences in business culture.

A clear innovation gap arises when national systems hinder practical cross-border cooperation. Public support programs are often limited to companies within their own country, which means that, for example, Norwegian companies cannot use Swedish testbeds and vice versa. In order to enhance innovation capacity, the project has worked on testbeds for businesses, exploring how regulatory differences between Sweden and Norway can hinder collaboration. As part of this, an expert study has mapped the potential obstacles, proposing solutions aimed at opening up cross-border innovation opportunities.

8. The project ended 30 June 2025.

Improving border traffic flow and customs handling

Lengthy queues of trucks at the Sweden's Svinesund customs checkpoint have caused significant delays over the past few years. The issue stems from inefficient customs handling and the requirement that empty trucks pass through customs clearance. Through a working group bringing together industry organisations and government agencies, the project has successfully implemented a number of remedial measures:

- The lifting of an overtaking ban on the Svinesund Bridge has improved traffic flow.
- The Swedish Customs Authority has increased the number of clearance booths from six to ten in order to speed up freight handling.
- A new customs administration training programme is being launched in Strömstad, ensuring a skilled workforce for future needs.

Harmonising building regulations

Differences in building regulations between Sweden and Norway poses challenges for companies looking to invest and operate across the border. As such, the project has pushed for a more unified Nordic construction market. As part of this, a workshop was organised in Oslo where construction firms, policymakers and experts discussed how regulations could be harmonised.

In an effort to raise the issue's political profile, the project also hosted an Almedalen Week seminar entitled, 'Is a Common Nordic Construction Market Possible?', which saw Swedish and Norwegian experts and decision-makers discuss the benefits of regulatory harmonisation. In particular, the potential for a larger, more unified market, increased competitiveness and reduced construction costs was highlighted. The initiative has gained significant attention, prompting 12 published articles in the Swedish, Norwegian and Danish media, as well as public acknowledgement from the European Commission's DG REGIO. All this strengthens the prospects for future regulatory changes.

The Reform Agenda

A key component of the project is the [Reform Agenda](#), a political platform designed to influence national decisions affecting the border region. The Agenda has been presented on multiple occasions, receiving support from several cross-border committees along the Swedish–Norwegian border. It is now being used as a tool to push for change in cross-border cooperation.

8. Marine Border Forum Skagerrak

TOPICS: Cross-border | Economic sustainability | Environmental sustainability
| Governance | Planning | Regional innovation

AUTHOR: Svinesundskommittén

The Marine Border Forum Skagerrak (Marint Gränsforum Skagerrak) was a three-year (2019–2022) collaboration between Norway and Sweden aimed at strengthening the marine industry, developing cross-border cooperation and fostering knowledge exchange. The project was led by the Svinesund Committee and the former Viken County Municipality, in partnership with the University of Gothenburg/Tjärnö Marine Laboratory and the County Administrative Board of Västra Götaland. It was primarily funded by the [Interreg Sweden-Norway programme](#).

Key activities and focus areas

The project was structured around three main themes:

1. **Marine business development:** Supporting existing and new businesses in the aquaculture, algae production and shellfish industries.
2. **Marine management:** Developing dialogue and joint strategies for sustainable marine planning across the border.
3. **Research and academia:** Encouraging stronger collaboration between research institutions and the private sector.

Two cross-border business networks were established for the oyster and algae industries. More than 15 new companies were founded within the project area, while several existing businesses expanded or began exporting.

Workshops, courses and meetings between businesses, researchers and authorities fostered new collaborations, thereby increasing expertise in sustainable resource management and marine business development. A total of 49 companies received direct support through the project.

Key results and synergies

- **Political Forum Skagerrak** was established as a permanent platform for political dialogue on marine issues in the Skagerrak region.
- **The Industry Council Svenskt Vattenbruk och Sjömat (SVoS)** was founded to unite aquaculture businesses and facilitate dialogue with regulatory authorities.
- **A cross-border planning forum** was created for municipal planners and business developers.
- **Regulatory mapping and licensing processes for aquaculture** identified differences between Norway and Sweden, leading to proposals for simplifications.
- **A marine allotment project at Tjärnö Marine Laboratory** demonstrated how small-scale ocean farming can contribute to increased seafood production and sustainable resource use. The project attracted over 150 media articles.
- **The Skagerrak Conference** brought together industry, government and academia to discuss marine business development and resource management.

Who benefited from the project?

- **Businesses** gained access to networks, skills development and improved regulatory conditions.
- **Researchers** found new collaboration arenas and increased engagement with the industry.
- **Authorities, as well as more than 30 politicians,** gained greater insight into the challenges and opportunities of marine business development.
- **Local communities** became more aware of sustainable resource use in the marine sector.

Lessons learned and future prospects

The project demonstrated that cross-border collaboration can unlock new opportunities for blue growth. In this respect, despite the challenges posed by differing regulations in Norway and Sweden, the project helped increase understanding and dialogue between authorities and businesses. Another useful lesson was that, regardless of the greater participation enabled by the pandemic-induced shift to digital solutions, physical meeting spaces remain important.

The networks and forums established as part of the project will continue to play a role in developing Skagerrak as a sustainable blue growth region. Moreover, the success of the project can help inspire other Nordic regions to pursue similar marine management and business development initiatives.

[Read more here.](#)



MGFS – Seaweed cultivation
Photo: Svinesundskommittén



MGFS – Marine knowledge day
Photo: Svinesundskommittén

9. Mental border obstacles

TOPICS: Cross-border | Labour market | Social sustainability

AUTHOR: Nordkalottrådet

Working on behalf of the Arctic Council and the Border Service of the Arctic region, with funding from the Swedish Government Offices/Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the Öresund Institute explored in 2021 how people experience the obstacles and opportunities that arise when working across the Finland–Sweden border. This chapter provides a summary of the learnings and recommendations that arose, broken down into key themes.^[10]

Long distances and weak social networks

Obstacles:

- While there is a great deal of everyday integration close to the border, especially in Haparanda and Tornio, social networks are weaker further from the border: fewer people know someone who works across the border, and there is less knowledge of what the labour market looks like or what rules apply in the neighbouring country.
- Employers who recruit new staff and jobseekers who are looking for jobs sometimes find each other through social networks. Therefore, it is important for who is hired or finds a job in the neighbouring country whether the networks extend across the border or not.

Opportunities:

- **Cross-border social networks** can give advice on jobs or people to recruit, as well as provide 'role models' in the form of people already working across the border.
- **Everyday integration** normalises attitudes to working in or recruiting from the neighbouring country.

10. For the full report (in Swedish and in Finnish), see: www.oresundsinstitutet.org/ny-analys-mentala-granshinder-se_fin/. Previously, the Öresund Institute examined mental barriers to the Sweden–Norway and Sweden–Denmark borders.

Where national, regional and local narratives intersect

Obstacles:

- Despite strong perceptions of a 'borderless' Torne Valley and a unified northern community, national stereotypes and narratives about 'the others' persist. This encourages a sense of distance between the two countries, coupled with an attitude that things are 'different' on the other side of the border.
- Stereotypical perceptions associated with nationality include, for example, harsh [but homely Finns versus open but unpleasant Swedes. Some friction between the nationalities – from local teasing to resentment at a perceived 'big brother' attitude among Swedes – emerged in the interviews. Here, it should be noted that the importance of national identity became particularly pronounced during the CORONA-19 pandemic.

Opportunities:

- **The perception in both Finland and Sweden that society and culture are equal** makes it easier to work or recruit across borders.

Soft or hierarchical work culture

Obstacles:

- There was a relatively unanimous view among interviewees that Finland and Sweden have differing work cultures, which serves to underscore the border between the two nations.
- The most common perception is that Finland has a more hierarchical work culture than Sweden, which has more discussing work culture and is seen as 'softer'. Another preconception is that Swedish workplaces are slower paced compared to their Finnish equivalents.
- While some interviewees claim to have experienced these differences firsthand, many jobseekers or students have no personal experience of working in both countries and so are only relating what they have heard from others.

Opportunities:

- **The Swedish work culture**, highlighted as calmer and less hierarchical, seems to attract Finns.
- **The perception that Finns work hard** may stimulate interest among Swedish employers.

National gravitational pull

Obstacles:

- A national 'gravitational pull' creates common frames of reference among the respective populations of Finland and Denmark, sometimes at the expense of deeper knowledge about the neighbouring country.
- Although interviewees reported consuming news reports and cultural output from the neighbouring country, they rarely engaged to the same extent as in their own country. As a result, many people are not fully aware of what the labour market looks like across the border.

Opportunities:

- **Differences in job opportunities, working conditions and pay can generate dynamism** between countries.



A destination sign in Swedish for IC train 953 at the Helsinki railroad station towards Kupittaa station in Turku.

Photo: iStock



IKEA in Haparanda is a workplace for many local residents. The company recruits employees from both sides of the border.

Photo: iStock

Language as a mental barrier

Obstacles:

- The most common issue raised by the interviewees was that an inability to speak the neighbouring country's language represents a concrete obstacle to taking a job across the border, as some degree of fluency is often required. Nevertheless, attitudes to the language skills required differ from employer to employer and, to some extent, from country to country. For instance, workplace language requirements generally seem to be stricter in Finland. The interviewees also expressed differing beliefs regarding the adequacy of their own language skills, with few feeling completely secure.

- The two languages are not unambiguously divided by the Finnish–Swedish border, as there are citizens of both countries who speak the language of the neighbouring country. The history of the two languages in the Finnish–Swedish region is loaded with emotion, which can affect people’s willingness to speak them in certain contexts.

Opportunities:

- **Bilingualism can be a competitive advantage** in the labour market.
- **Swedish and Finnish are spoken** to some extent in both countries.

The experience of a high threshold

Obstacles:

- While a majority of interviewees were broadly positive about working across the border, they also expressed concerns about the language barrier; the neighbouring country’s work culture; their limited knowledge of the labour market they might be entering; their lack of a social network across the border; and the rules that might apply to them as a cross-border commuter. The prospect of having to overcome these barriers – even if in reality they are easily surmountable – can lead to people feeling the easiest option is to remain where they are.
- The prospect of having to navigate bureaucratic hurdles in order to work across borders can be discouraging, with some interviewees claiming to have heard ‘horror stories’ about such problems.

Opportunities:

- **Differences between the two countries can be experienced as exciting**, providing opportunities for personal development.

Recommendations

Make it easier to find jobs and employees across the border:

- Finnish and Swedish job search sites should link directly to jobs on the other side of the border, allowing jobseekers to find vacancies in the neighbouring country via a service they are already used to.
- In cases where Swedish language skills are not mandatory, the job advertisement could be in English, making it easier for Finnish jobseekers to apply.
- Local newspapers should be encouraged to provide more information on job opportunities across the border.
- A job fair could be organised in Oulu featuring Swedish companies looking for labour, using past job fairs involving Norwegian companies as a model.

- Employers wishing to hire people from the neighbouring country should talk about more than just the job itself in the recruitment process – for example, painting an enticing picture of what it would be like to live on the other side of the border.

Improve language skills:

- In Finland, greater investment should be made in Swedish language teaching so that knowledge of the language does not die out among the population. Moreover, it is important that people in the two countries learn to understand both Swedish and Finnish, allowing them to communicate without the risk of workplace misunderstandings.
- In order to work in Sweden, Finns should focus on improving their English if they do not speak Swedish.

Increase information:

- More information should be made available on the practicalities of working across the border between Finland and Sweden. In this regard, the Border Service of the Arctic Cap could be more visible.

Increase cooperation between authorities:

- Authorities from both countries should be encouraged to work under the same roof in the border region, thereby facilitating collaboration. This would help ease the practical and bureaucratic challenges faced by residents looking to work across the border.

Remove concrete obstacles to freedom of movement:

- A smoother process for validating professional qualifications would encourage workers in certain professions to look for employment across the border (e.g. Swedish nurses willing to work in Finland).

Collaborate across borders:

- Finland and Sweden should develop a joint crisis strategy aimed at ensuring the situation that developed during the COVID-19 pandemic – with riot fences at the border – is not repeated.

[Read more here.](#)

10. The Moss–Karlstad Union Trails

TOPICS: Cross-border | Business competitiveness | Infrastructure | Tourism

AUTHOR: Border committee Värmland-Østfold

The Moss–Karlstad Union Trail (Unionsleden) is a 350 km cycle route that runs from Norway to Sweden, starting in Moss (where the union between Norway and Sweden was established in 1814) and finishing in Karlstad (where the union was dissolved in 1905).^[11] It is divided into seven day-long stages. Along the way, cyclists pass through places where military skirmishes took place in 1814. In addition, the route goes through areas where refugees fled across the border from Norway into Sweden during World War II, with traces of the war still in evidence.

In total, the route – which in 2024 was nominated for the Newcomer of the Year in Europe award at the Fiets en Wandelboers cycling fair in Utrecht – passes through 11 municipalities, crossing the national border at Ørje/Töcksfors. The main coordinator for the route is the Värmland–Østfold Border Committee.

The route was developed over a ten-year period (2013–2023). Initially, it received funding as a preliminary project from the members of the border committee, before Interreg Sweden/Norway stepped in to fund the main project.

In 2024, the route was estimated to have resulted in Euro 2.7 million of added value creation. It now features in sales catalogues for cycling tourism in the Netherlands and in Scandinavia, with visitor numbers increasing every year. With this in mind, the current goal is to increase the value added figure to more than Euro 8.4 million per season.

The success of the Unionsleden brand offers a multitude of marketing opportunities for local businesses and communities – for instance, in promoting bicycle-friendly accommodation. It has also encouraged cross-border collaboration, with visitor organisations in Sweden and Norway working together to market the route. One concrete outcome has been a gravel race for competitive cyclists called the 'Unonsrittet'.

More generally, the cycle route led to a renewed focus on public transport connections across and along the national border, particularly in terms of bicycle and bus/train combinations.

11. For further information about the Union Trail, see www.unionsleden.com.

The Union Trail project now is being followed up by the 2024–2027 Interreg-funded Cross Border Biking project. This new project, which encompasses the entire central Scandinavian border area of Norway/Sweden, involves several cycling routes working together to make inroads into the European market – both in terms of cycling in general and gravel cycling more specifically.

[Read more here.](#)



Photo: Border Committee
Värmland-Østfold



Photo: Border Committee
Värmland-Østfold



Photo: Border Committee
Värmland-Østfold

11. Ruralplan: Innovative planning in communities with population decline

TOPICS: Cross-border | Migration and demography | Planning | Rural development | Social sustainability

AUTHOR: Gränskommittén Innlandet-Dalarna

Ruralplan was a research project carried out in 2024 by Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences in collaboration with Linköping University in Sweden and the Swiss Center for Mountain Regions. Funded through the European Territorial Observation Network (ESPON), the project focused on innovative planning in rural areas experiencing population decline and/or population composition challenges. In doing so, it examined a variety of methods and strategies designed to address the demographic changes faced by many rural communities.

The project's ultimate goal was to develop long-term solutions conducive to a sustainable future for communities hampered by static population growth. The Innlandet–Dalarna Border Committee was involved in the methods development and model testing.

A key element of the project was the development and use of the RUPIL (Rural Planning and Innovation Lab) model, a methodology based on an established innovation process adapted to work in a community planning context.^[12] The model allows participants to engage in creative, future-oriented planning processes designed to ensure societies remain sustainable regardless of population growth. Towards this end, it engages a broad range of actors, including residents, politicians, NGOs and other societal actors, in workshops geared towards gathering local knowledge and experiences.

As part of the Ruralplan project, the RUPIL model was tested in several pilot areas, including the municipality of Os in Norway, Malung-Sälen in Sweden and the Albula region in Switzerland. Based on results thus far, the process has proven effective in cultivating a deeper understanding of demographic challenges, as well as mobilising local resources in support of concrete strategies and solutions.

12. For more about the RUPIL model and the project more generally, see: www.inn.no/forskning/forskningsprosjekter/ruralplan/.



Photo: iStock

An example of how Ruralplan and the RUPIL model have contributed to municipal planning can be seen in Malung-Sälen, which faces demographic challenges related to an ageing population and labour shortages. Previously, the municipality had not directly addressed these challenges in its overall planning, as it had growth ambitions. Through using RUPIL, however, the municipality has come to a better understanding of how to manage the changes wrought by a declining working-age population and a growing proportion of older residents. In particular, the model has enabled dialogue around adapting the municipality's elderly care and labour market strategies, and has facilitated concrete proposals on how to attract the skills needed for sustainable labour market.

The Ruralplan project has also yielded a toolbox designed to help municipal/regional planning authorities implement RUPIL's methodological steps while simultaneously tailoring strategies to local priority areas. In addition, a [policy brief](#) produced by the project has been published by the EU, providing recommendations on how small municipalities across Europe can address demographic challenges. The brief summarises the project's key lessons, setting out how the methods and processes used could be applied on a wider scale.

The project has shown how important it is to think long-term in planning, especially when dealing with demographic changes. While many planning strategies and policies focus on increasing the population and growing economically, Ruralplan strives to show that sustainable, viable communities can be nurtured even without population growth. Doing so, however, means thinking deeply about such factors as quality of life, the environment and social cohesion. Only then will it be possible to create a future in which people – including those in rural areas with declining populations – want to live and work.

[Read more here.](#)

”

It was good with the workshops, they offered opportunities to meet different types of actors that we do not meet on a daily basis, for new meetings and dialogues.

– Municipal leadership in Malung-Sälen, Sweden

Feedback shows that the test municipalities appreciated the work conducted using the RUPIL model. The Innlandet–Dalarna Border Committee is now working to ensure that more municipalities can work with the model, and is looking to disseminate experiences gathered through the project both nationally and more widely across the Nordic countries.



The RUPIL model six steps
Image: Innlandet University

12. Save Bothnian Bay initiative: Increasing awareness among a broad stakeholder group

TOPICS: Cross-border | Environmental sustainability | Youth engagement

AUTHOR: Bothnian Arc

The idea for Save Bothnian Bay (Rädda Bottenviken) was first introduced in 2022, with implementation starting the following year. The initiative aims to increase awareness of Bothnian Bay's ecological state among citizens, the public sector and businesses, and thereby spotlight the possibilities offered by the sea environment to those living along the bay's northern coastline.

In 2024, the Save the Bothnian Bay initiative was included in the Sea City Oulu Action plan ([Merikaupunki Oulu](#) | [Oulun kaupunki](#)) as an action that could help improve the ecological state and quality of the area's sea water.

That same year, a Save the Bothnian Bay event was organised in Oulu for Baltic Sea Day, bringing together 1,800 school children and approximately 25 NGOs and organisations around the theme of 'Save Bothnian Bay'. Finnish and international students, musicians, dancers and writers also participated.

The event, which received considerable coverage in the local media and also had its own Instagram account, received excellent feedback from teachers, students and organisations. Overall, it served to:

- increase children's and teachers knowledge on Bothnian Bay;
- deepen the school curriculum by giving practical examples on protecting the maritime nature;
- increase knowledge on what possibilities the sea can offer citizens;
- increase knowledge on sea-related safety matters;
- offer NGOs and other relevant organisations a platform to present their work and activities;
- give international students of education an opportunity to learn by doing through organising the event;
- give Finnish and international students a chance to volunteer and learn;

- give artists and performers a platform;
- bring together the city of Oulu and a range of organisations; and
- build capacity in the Bothnian Arc with a view to ensuring the theme continues to receive attention.

The successful event will be repeated yearly, also in 2025, and is being included in Oulu's European Capital of Culture Oulu programme for 2026.

More generally, Save the Bothnian Bay features in the Bothnian Arc action plan. The aim is for the initiative to expand into member municipalities across the border, increasing cross-border cooperation between youth and citizens. Envisaged activities include camps, gatherings and other events.

[Read more here.](#)



School children in Save the Bothnian Bay Day.
Photo: Bothnian Arc



Recognizing different species of fish.
Photo: Bothnian Arc



Trainees studying the quality of water of Bothnian Bay.
Photo: Bothnian Arc

13. Smart archipelago traffic

TOPICS: Cross-border | Green transition | Infrastructure

AUTHOR: Nordiska Skärgårdssamarbetet

The Nordic Archipelago Cooperation (NSS) serves as a partner in the EU's Horizon Europe Regions4Climate project, contributing expertise through its own Smart Archipelago Traffic initiative. This pilot project forms part of the broader Regions4Climate framework, spans five years, and is scheduled to conclude in 2027. Accordingly, the outcomes of NSS's work are not only processed internally but are routinely shared with other Regions4Climate participants to support collaborative learning and impact.

The project falls under the NSS's 'green transition' activities, as part of the vision put forward by the Nordic Council of Ministers to achieve 'the world's most sustainable and integrated region' by 2030. Against this backdrop, Regions4Climate aims to address current and future climate change-related challenges, and so build resilient European societies. This is to be done by, among other things, building knowledge, reducing uncertainty and bridging gaps between the worlds of science, politics and stakeholders.

The NSS has carried out an investigation into how best to organise a green transition in archipelago traffic, with a particular focus on the role of cross-border cooperation. In this study, VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland (VTT) was responsible for modelling routes and energy consumption to support the development of more sustainable archipelago transport. The findings will be presented to regional authorities, including the Åland County Government. The results—published under the title 'Can Cross-border Business Models Enable the Green Transition of Ferry Traffic in the Nordic Archipelago?'—were shared at an inspirational seminar held in Stockholm in December 2024, attended by leading politicians and officials.

The work going forward will encompass assessing inter-island transport, renewing transport connections and choosing renewable energy solutions. Throughout, the guiding objective is to develop a vision and action plan in conjunction with stakeholders. Workshops involving NSS members will continue to provide input towards this end.

[Read more here.](#)



Bridge in the archipelago of Gothenburg, Sweden
Photo: iStock

14. Arctic Young Chef

TOPICS: North Atlantic | Environmental sustainability | Regional innovation | Youth engagement

AUTHOR: NORA

NORA has long sought to shine a spotlight on the North Atlantic's unique culinary traditions. In this respect, the people of the region – which is richly endowed with healthy, high-quality ingredients – have shown a growing interest in both sustainable food and new culinary experiences. Traditional French and Italian cuisines have been supplemented by or fused with innovative new approaches, drawing enthusiasts from far afield keen to taste dishes where local ingredients are given the space to shine.

Even so, the North Atlantic region's cuisine is yet to receive the level of attention it deserves. Although a number of promising young chefs have emerged in recent years, a platform is needed to give full reign to their talent and industry.

Thus, NORA seized the opportunity to give these culinary stars of the future a stage on which they could show off their skills while making use of underutilised local ingredients, thereby both promoting North Atlantic dishes and championing sustainability. This took the form of the Arctic Young Chef culinary competition, which kicked off in March 2024.

The competition centred on blending traditional culinary skills with innovation and creativity. Towards this end, young chefs from the four NORA countries (Iceland, Greenland, the Faroe Islands and coastal Norway) were asked to focus on underutilised local ingredients, such as offal or lesser-used fish. Also emphasised was sustainability, food waste and the potential to adapt dishes for use in schools or cafeterias.

Throughout the semi-finals in the respective NORA areas, the young chefs displayed an impressive level of professionalism, creativity and innovation, as well as – perhaps most importantly – a genuine love of cooking. All this made it extremely difficult for the judges to select who would go through to the grand final. After much deliberation, Runar Helgeland (Norway), Andrés Björgvinsson (Iceland), Lars Abelsen (Greenland) and Sebastian Jimenez Garcia (Faroe Islands) were announced as the chosen candidates.

The final took place in Reykjavík's impressive Harpa concert hall in October 2024, at the Arctic Circle Assembly. There, the four finalists were tasked with creating three dishes using traditional regional ingredients combined with ingredients representative of each NORA country: seaweed from the Faroe Islands, cloudberries from Norway, beer from Greenland, and skyr from Iceland. Following a close-fought contest, Norway's Runar Helgeland emerged victorious. Receiving his richly deserved first prize from Iceland's president Halla Tómasdóttir on the grand stage, Helgeland enthusiastically observed:

It is so important to hold this kind of competition, which gives young chefs the opportunity to experience the fantastic possibilities of Arctic and North Atlantic cuisine. I really hope this will lead to more cooperation among young chefs in our region. I am grateful to have won this competition, and the level was very high.

In the case of the Faroe Islands, this was the first time a cooking competition had even been held in the country. Going forward, it seems unlikely that this will be the last time the North Atlantic region's culinary pioneers compete for the title of Best Young Chef.

The competition also garnered overseas attention, with NORA granted the honour of presenting the North Atlantic's culinary arts at the World Expo 2025 in Osaka, Japan. All this is a sure sign that Arctic Young Chef has become more than just a competition, providing not only an exceptional showcase for what Nordic food culture has to offer, but inspiration for building a sustainable culinary future across the North Atlantic area.

[Read more here.](#)



Photo: NORA



Photo: NORA



Photo: NORA

15. Coworking for Bygdeliv!

TOPICS: North Atlantic | Digitalisation | Labour market | Rural development

AUTHOR: NORA

In 2024, NORA granted funding to the Norwegian–Faroese–Icelandic project Coworking for Bygdeliv! (Coworking for Village Life!)[¹³]. The project's goal was to attract new residents to villages and small towns in the NORA region through mobilising digital nomads. In doing so, it built on learning from earlier NORA-funded projects, such as [Arctic Digital Nomads](#) and In Residence in the Arctic, both of which focused on mobile work opportunities.

One of the region's main challenges is demographic change and population decline, which has hit small communities especially hard. Young people, particularly women, are moving away. Job centralisation and urbanisation have exacerbated this trend, resulting in economic pressure and social decline in many local areas. These problems are especially pronounced during winter, which is the off-season for tourism.

Digital nomads – people who use technology for remote work – are often associated with countries that have warmer climates and lower living costs. In an effort to counter this, Coworking for Bygdeliv! offered successful applicants free accommodation and workspace access, thereby allowing them to live and work in Norway, Iceland or the Faroe Islands for up to three months in the first quarter of 2025.

This unique opportunity to relocate one's workplace, experience the Nordic winter and immerse oneself in Nordic culture is the result of cooperation between Geirangerfjorden Verdsarv in Norway, Samfelagsmiðstöðin Þingeyri in Iceland, and Vágs Kommuna in the Faroe Islands. Together, they created a project that not only offered an appealing work environment, but helped foster a community ethos and holistic lifestyle conducive to young newcomers. Essentially, the project rests on a belief that sustained time and resource investments in underpopulated localities can drive both sustainable development and growth, benefiting locals and visitors alike.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the world has undergone a significant shift in working patterns. Flexibility and digital mobility have become the norm for many, with remote work now an integral part of many business' strategies. Moreover, beyond boosting productivity and stimulating creativity, the combination of remote work and living in

13. It is an ongoing project for three years, 2024-2026, but NORA gives the grants on a yearly basis, so they need to apply every year.

attractive new surroundings offers mobile workers a unique opportunity to enrich their lives. Harnessing this mobility can help address the demographic challenges many small communities face.

In the case of Coworking for Bygdeliv!, the initiative sought to entice digital nomads, freelancers and remote workers into becoming part of local communities, whether temporarily or permanently, through offering flexible modern workspaces in stunning remote locations. When applications opened for free accommodation and workspace access in Norway's Geirangerfjorden area, the village of Vágur in the Faroe Islands, and Iceland's rugged Vestfjords region, the organisers were overwhelmed by the response. In fact, it was so immense that they had to bring the deadline for applications forward by several weeks.

In addition to the interest generated among applicants, the project received considerable media attention from, among other outlets, the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK), American business magazine *Forbes*, and the UK *Financial Times*.

In sum, Coworking for Bygdeliv! is a prime example of how innovative initiatives can create new opportunities for small communities, while also attracting a new generation of digital nomads to the North Atlantic region.

[Read more here.](#)



Photo: NORA



Photo: NORA

16. Generation North Atlantic

TOPICS: North Atlantic | Regional innovation | Social sustainability | Youth engagement

AUTHOR: NORA

Young people across the North Atlantic region are expressing a desire to come together and build a stronger sense of community. At present, however, they lack a platform conducive to discussing challenges specific to their region. This challenge speaks directly to NORA's strategy of mobilising the region's youth through innovative, sustainable engagement initiatives. Against this backdrop, NORA, alongside Nordland Fylkeskommune, organised a Generation North Atlantic youth (aged 18–30) event in Bodø and Lofoten.

The event, which took place on 16–19 September 2024, was set up as a smaller-scale precursor to Generation Barents, an annual gathering that brings together the youth of the Barents region. Over the course of Generation North Atlantic's programme, participants were granted a unique opportunity to discuss mutual challenges and solutions, strengthen their competencies, and create valuable cross-regional connections. Through workshops and business and museum visits, the attendees achieved a deeper understanding of both themselves and their common North Atlantic identity. Following the event, the participating youths went on to join the Generation Barents gathering.

Having a smaller group of participants made for a more intimate, inclusive atmosphere, where everyone could feel seen and heard. In addition to the educational and professional benefits, many attendees formed long-lasting friendships, with one describing his experience thus:

The trip was amazing, and I can't believe how much I learned! Every day was filled with new experiences that opened my eyes to different cultures and perspectives. From exploring historical sites to trying local food, each moment was a chance to grow and understand the Nordic countries better. Meeting new people and hearing their stories made the journey even more meaningful. I feel inspired and grateful for the knowledge I gained, and not to mention all the new friendships!

During a workshop aboard the Bodø–Lofoten ferry, participants were asked to identify and analyse the region's biggest challenges. Using the insights gained from this exercise, they presented mock NORA project proposals, which led to the winning team outlining a social media campaign (#SmallTownBigLife) showcasing the benefits of small town and village life.

Despite an already a packed programme, the participants requested further time for interactive activities and collaboration. More generally, there was a clear call for Generation North Atlantic to be repeated in future years.

NORA constantly works to support youth initiatives in the North Atlantic. In this regard, the feedback from Generation North Atlantic underlines just how important it is to find ways of bringing together the region's young leaders. Partly driven by this, NORA is planning another youth initiative involving Varanger commune in Northern Norway. For the second consecutive year, the ICE Arctic Circular Economy Summit will highlight key topics such as the circular economy and innovation in the Arctic. Building on this fertile soil, NORA aims to create a framework offering further opportunities for the region's youth.

More generally, NORA's focus on wellbeing and development across the region is reflective of how we – in collaboration with the youth – can contribute to a brighter future for North Atlantic society.

[Read more here.](#)



Photo: NORA



Photo: NORA

17. Terra Nordica: The Nordic land-negotiation game

TOPICS: North Atlantic | Green transition | Rural development

AUTHOR: Nordregio (Hilma Salonen)

During the [Nordregio Forum 2024](#) (an annual conference organised by Nordregio bringing together decision makers, industry leaders and regional researchers), a [game](#) simulation was organised to showcase the land-use decisions and priority-setting involved during green transitions in Nordic rural areas.^[14] Before beginning, the participants were given the following simulation outline:

Description of the game

Green business is everybody's business – or is it? You can probably think of several examples of conflicts when a region has to balance green energy proposals with community needs. In this workshop, you will roleplay the solution process. Using Norrbotten lessons as inspiration, we jump into a simulation game, comparing different pathways to local ownership on the way.

Goal

Sharing knowledge on how to create local ownership of green energy projects. Learn and discuss how to balance local priorities and energy investments, while doing an exercise on group negotiations over green transition issues.

14. Hilma Salonen developed the game with Elin Slätmo, Miia Itänen, and Anne Katrine Ebbesen's help. Lisa Pelling from Arena Idé moderated the actual game exercise.

The game featured four tables, each representing an imaginary Nordic community dealing with a green transition process. The four scenarios presented involved the opening of a mine (Sweden); wind power and land use (Finland and Denmark); and the local effects of a hydrogen plant (Norway).

In each case, the groups were given two rounds to make unanimous decisions on the placement of energy infrastructure or the initial round of investments from large industrial activities. Having done so, they had to decide how best to answer related social and environmental questions, as well as invest revenues in ways beneficial to the community's future.

The simulation concluded with a risk realisation round in which each group compiled a statement for the moderator detailing the rationale underlying their choices. This was followed by a group discussion on the different paths local value creation can take during green transitions.

Presenting and discussing research results in a form of a game allowed us to both explore them in a more concrete way and deepen our understanding of their significance. As the group discussions eventually discovered questions that were not part of the original research that had inspired the game, they give us directions for new interpretations or research questions for the future.

[Read more here.](#)



Photo: Hilma Salonen, Nordregio



Photo: Hilma Salonen, Nordregio

18. How regions adopt a mission approach

TOPICS: Nordic | Governance | Green transition | Regional innovation

AUTHOR: Nordregio (Alberto Giacometti)

Mission innovation

In recent years, mission-oriented innovation policy (MOIP) approaches have gained considerable policy and scholarly attention as a means of addressing 'grand societal challenges'.^[15]

Policy shift?

Mission approaches are not new. In 1986, Ergas conceptualised them as 'big science for big problems', with the Apollo programme that led to the moon-landing an iconic example.^[16]

So, what's new? Traditionally, innovation policy has mainly been concerned with economic growth, which is reflective of a narrower approach to missions.^[17] By contrast, the current shift entails applying science, technology and innovation (STI) to a comprehensive (systemic) government-led process aimed at meeting societal needs.^[18] MOIPs are thereby embedded in broader transformative policy frameworks.

The project

The first phase of the [Systems Perspective and Mission-oriented Policies project](#) involved reviewing innovation policy traditions in Denmark, Finland and Sweden. In doing so, the aim was to identify how they have been shaped by mission and transformative approaches.

15. See, for example: Mazzucato, M., 'Mission-oriented research & innovation in the European Union', European Commission, 2018.

16. Ibid.

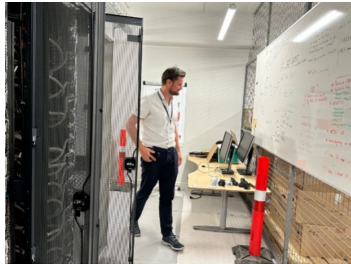
17. Grillitsch, M. & Hansen, T., 'Green industry development in different types of regions', *European Planning Studies* 27/11 (2019): 2163–2183.

18. Ibid.

The second step turned to the potential implementation of MOIPs at a regional level, focusing on the cases of Northern Jutland (Denmark), Ostrobothnia (Finland) and Västerbotten (Sweden). [The project](#) culminated with a scientific article (forthcoming) and policy brief^[19]



Alberto Giacometti
presenting project in Terceira,
Portugal
Photo: Nordregio



Joint European workshop in
Aalborg, Denmark
Photo: Nordregio



Joint European workshop in
Aalborg, Denmark
Photo: Nordregio

Method

Given that current MOIPs are only in the early stages of development, and so subject to an array of interpretations, the project adopted an explorative dialogue approach with regional stakeholders. This 'action research' method was useful not only to the researchers, but regional stakeholders seeking possible avenues for a mission approach.

Throughout, researchers refrained from prescribing a policy development blueprint. Nor did they attribute values – whether positive or negative – to particular missions. Rather, their task was to assist stakeholders in exploring their own priorities, traditions and contexts. This proved useful when it came to understanding how context can expand or diminish the space for policy experimentation.

Key findings

While transformative policy approaches are common at the level of programmes and projects, it is much rarer to find them at the broader level of government-led missions. Denmark's Innomissions, which encompasses mission-driven green partnerships, is the only case of the latter to be found in the three Nordic countries studied. It therefore remains to be seen whether MOIPs will become the norm. For the time being, most countries and sub-national authorities are restricting themselves to careful, experimental steps.

19. Giacometti, A. & Jessen, S., 'Implementing Missions in Nordic Regions', Nordregio Policy Brief 2025:17, 2025 AND Giacometti, A. & Jessen, S., 'Making Innovation a Mission? Overview of the Implementation of Mission-Oriented Innovation Policies in Denmark, Finland and Sweden', Nordregio Report 202

The diverse place-based contexts found across different regions offer a range of opportunities for MOIPs. To date, however, the tools and capabilities that authorities need to coordinate implementation of MOIPs remain largely understudied.

[Read more here.](#)

FURTHER READING

Making Innovation a Mission?

Overview of the Implementation of
Mission-Oriented Innovation Policies in
Denmark, Finland and Sweden
[Nordregio Report 2024:17](#)

Implementing Missions in Nordic Regions

[Nordregio Policy Brief 2025:17](#)



19. The Nordic urban–rural typology: Shedding new light on territorial differences

TOPICS: Nordic | Migration and demography | Planning | Rural Development

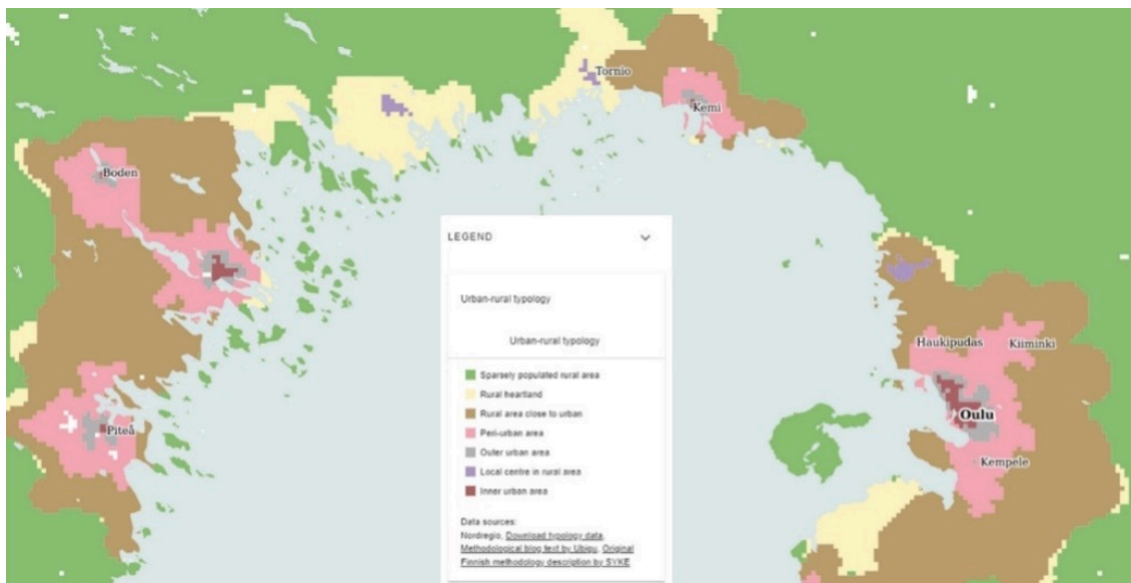
AUTHOR: Nordregio (Mats Stjernberg and Lisa Rohrer)

The Nordic urban–rural typology – which emerged as part of the Remote Work: Effects on Nordic People, Places And Planning project – was driven by the need for a territorial typology capable of shedding fresh light on how urban and rural areas should be categorised, particularly in terms of their development over time.

While regional- and municipal-level differences have been relatively well studied across the Nordic countries, a dearth of easily available, comparable, harmonised data means less is known about the demographic trends occurring at a more local level. With this in mind, the new typology aimed for a better understanding of such local-level differences and trends.

In practical terms, it was important to ensure the typology could combine different types of data, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of territorial differences across the Nordic countries. The typology was created at a 1 x 1 km grid-level, allowing users to identify area characteristics at a fine-grained level.

The Finnish grid-based urban–rural classification (*Kaupunki-maaseutuluokitus*) provided the main source of inspiration for the new typology, with seven categories of Nordic territory identified based on the degree of urbanity/rurality: 1) urban areas; 2) outer urban areas; 3) peri-urban areas; 4) local centres in rural areas; 5) rural areas close to urban areas; 6) rural heartland areas; and 7) sparsely populated rural areas.



Visualisation of the interactive Nordic urban–rural typology web map, showing the cross-border Bothnian arc region in northern Finland and Sweden.

Dissemination and further use of the typology

The new Nordic typology has been launched as an [interactive online web-mapping platform](#). This allows the user to zoom in on different areas across the Nordic countries, with the relevant typology data made available for downloading. The project also produced a [report](#) setting out the typology and detailing how it was constructed, accompanied by analyses of territorial differences, settlement patterns, and population change dynamics across the urban–rural continuum in the five Nordic countries.

Perhaps the most important benefit of the urban–rural typology is its ability to highlight territorial differences that may be unobservable using more generalised regional- or municipal-level statistics and data. For instance, the grid-based typology reveals that many municipalities feature urban, intermediate *and* rural areas. These territorial differences may be difficult to identify – or even be entirely concealed – at more general levels of aggregation.

While the new typology has thus far been used mainly for studying settlement patterns and population change dynamics, its flexibility is such that it can be used in combination with other types of data as an analytical framework for spatial phenomena across the urban–rural continuum. In fact, it has already been put to use in a number of research projects, including identifying [cases study cities for the Nordic Climate Neutral Cities](#) project; studying the location of airports based on their degree of urbanisation in the [Electric Aviation project](#); and analysing migration patterns in [the State of the Nordic Region 2024 report](#). The typology has also been used at the EU level, and is currently functioning as a point of departure for Nordregio in developing a European-wide typology for rural areas (as part of the EU-funded GRANULAR project).

Moreover, by providing an analytical tool capable of generating new evidence on territorial development, the typology can support spatial planning and policy. A concrete example of this can be found in Sweden's Östergötland region, where the Nordic typology has been adapted by regional authorities and used in the regional strategy (see figure below).

[Read more here.](#)



[Adaptation of the Nordic urban-rural typology in the Regional strategy for Östergötland](#)



Photo: Unsplash

20. Rural Roadmap

TOPICS: Nordic | Green transition | Rural development | Sustainable development

AUTHOR: Nordregio (Hilma Salonen and Elin Slätmo)

The [Rural Roadmap](#) provides practical steps and solutions aimed at bridging policy silos and enabling a more holistic, ecosystem way of thinking about rural policy. It represents a comprehensive synthesis of the work and discussions that took place during the TGB programme period, as well as the results this yielded. In doing so, the synthesis draws on the entire co-creation process undergone with TG members, encompassing two workshops and a final validation round.

This open collaborative process allowed us to capture the nuances of the rural lived realities, from past development paths still affecting the situation today to current discourses and possible future trends. The end result, with its interactive format, can be used to bridge policy silos as it showcases the problem settings – as well as possible solutions – shared by different policy fields.

[Read more here.](#)



Roadmap
Picture: Nordregio

21. Sustainable and welcoming rural areas

TOPICS: Nordic | Rural development | Social sustainability

AUTHOR: Nordregio (Elin Slätmo)

The 2024 Finnish–Swedish Rural Parliament ([Landsbygdsriksdagen](#)) was held on 23–24 October in Vaasa, Finland, under the theme of 'Sustainable and Welcoming Rural Areas'. This biennial event, which circulates across Finland, offers the country's Swedish-speaking minority a means of building and strengthening their networks.^[20]

The 2024 Landsbygdsriksdagen programme encompassed, among other events, a fishbowl panel featuring an EU coordinator and Finnish national officials; a youth panel made up of NGO representatives; workshops on storytelling, crafts and podcasts; and fieldtrips to Replot Island and the Kvarken archipelago world heritage site.^[21]

Nordregio was honoured to be an invited speaker, with Senior Research Fellow Elin Slätmo elaborating on how the organisation contributes to the vision of Nordic sustainability. Specific topics included the three thematic groups set up to implement the Nordic collaboration programme, and their involvement in supporting policy migration, within which policy praxis from one Nordic country can migrate from one country to the other, and Nordic added value. Results from some of the research projects funded by the thematic group were also discussed in the keynote presentation.^[22]

20. It should also be noted that a Finnish-speaking rural parliament was arranged for 2024 (during September), pointing to the vibrancy of the NGOs active in Finnish rural areas. See www.ruralparliament.fi/.

21. For more details on the programme, see:

https://bya.fi/sv/landsbygdsriksdagen/tidigare/landsbygdsriksdagen_2024/.

22. For further information on these projects, see: [Tillgänglighet till service](#); [En rättvis grön omställning](#); [Samverkande regionalt ledarskap](#); [Distansarbete och multilokalitet](#); [Färdplan för landsbygden](#); [Smart anpassning till befolkningsminskning](#); and [Arbetskraftsbrist](#).

Elin was also asked to comment on the other speakers' presentations, especially concerning how to ensure just transitions. Here, discussion topics included *procedural justice* (who should be involved in processes and hearings); *outcome justice* (how to ensure the results of a decision are sustainable and just); and *restorative justice* (how to include a reparative perspective in the Nordics' nature resource planning). These observations spurred further debate, the general consensus being that while there is much to be proud of in terms of Nordic sustainability, it remains an ongoing process.

[Read more here.](#)



Historical knowledge and place wisdom shared.
Photo: Elin Slätmo



Diversifying incomes at the farm, with green care for elderly and sick, and crafts for kids.
Photo: Elin Slätmo



Workshop of storytelling.
Photo: Elin Slätmo

22. Socially inclusive and climate neutral cities

TOPICS: Nordic | Green transition | Intergration | Planning | Social sustainability

AUTHOR: Nordregio (Mats Stjernberg and Lisa Rohrer)

Planning for socially mixed and inclusive neighbourhoods

Nordic cities have witnessed a general trend over recent decades towards increased urban segregation, prompting a wide range of policy and planning responses among the region's countries. Amid this context, the [Planning for Socially Mixed and Inclusive Neighbourhoods project](#) examined how Nordic governments and cities can address urban segregation challenges through policies, strategies and plans that foster greater social inclusion.

The project approached the issue from a variety of perspectives, investigating national policies in relevant fields (e.g. housing, education, employment, social policy, integration, urban planning) in all five Nordic countries. Alongside this, it studied the use of indicators in supporting policy interventions, participatory planning approaches and urban planning/design measures aimed at improving physical and social living environments in 13 Nordic cities.

The study concluded that counteracting segregation and creating more socially inclusive cities is a complex, challenging task. In particular, close collaboration between actors at various levels of policy and planning, as well as citizen/stakeholder engagement throughout planning and development processes, are key preconditions for inclusive, effective implementation.

The case studies highlight that no universal blueprint for creating more inclusive cities and neighbourhoods exists, and that each approach has its advantages and limitations. For example, interventions in the physical living environment can improve local living conditions and neighbourhood vitality, particularly if residents and the actors involved engage in meaningful co-planning. However, when it comes to addressing the broader structural causes of urban segregation – such as social inequalities – the effects of physical interventions appear somewhat limited, requiring accompanying interventions in other policy fields.

Overall, a holistic, multi-sectoral approach is essential for effectively tackling urban segregation. This in turn requires long-term planning and ongoing efforts that extend beyond the limited time frame of individual projects.



Dialogue bike – Gamla Bron in Umeå
Photo: Umeå Municipality, Emil Sandström



The city of Tampere
Photo: Unsplash.com

Nordic climate neutral cities

[The Nordic Climate Neutral Cities project \(2023-2025\)](#) investigated how Nordic municipalities are working across various sectors (e.g. land use; buildings and construction; transport and mobility) to achieve climate neutrality, including through spatial planning. The study utilised a multi-level governance perspective in order to better understand the challenges and opportunities presented by these efforts.

Through nine case studies across the Nordic countries, researchers examined how the policy capacity – encompassing regulatory autonomy and financial in/dependence – and institutional capacity of local governments play a crucial role in their climate work. As a result, a number of key strengths and weaknesses were identified among Nordic cities pursuing climate neutrality.

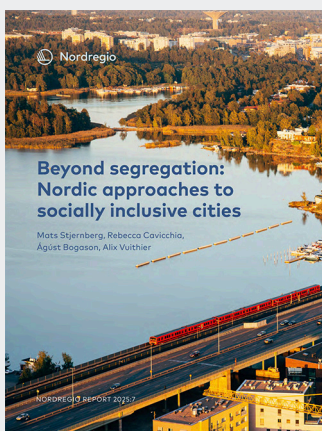
More specifically, the study demonstrated that despite the remarkable progress made by Nordic municipalities in this regard, regulatory complexities, siloed approaches and a reliance on national funding can present obstacles to local-level climate initiatives. At the same time, Nordic cities can benefit from stronger institutional capacity (including knowledge resources and active participation in climate networks), political commitment and autonomy in spatial planning.

Nevertheless, the proven ability of many Nordic cities to innovate, engage communities and take a holistic approach to sustainability offers a solid foundation for future progress. As the study makes clear, strengthening governance alignment, improving funding mechanisms and enhancing collaboration between municipalities, national governments and climate networks can help dismantle barriers and accelerate climate action.

Cross-cutting learnings and policy uptake

Nordic cities are characterised by diverse urban realities and challenges. In order to fully grasp this diversity, researchers in the aforementioned projects conducted case studies in cities of varying sizes. The aim of this was not only to collect best practices, but fully scrutinise a broad range of policy and planning approaches designed to create more socially inclusive and environmentally friendly cities and neighbourhoods.

Through identifying successful practices and lessons learned, these case studies offer inspiration and guidance to a multitude of actors involved in urban planning and development (see box below).



Beyond Segregation: Nordic approaches to socially inclusive cities

Nordregio Report 2025:7

Planning for socially mixed and inclusive neighbourhoods and Nordic climate neutral cities: A sampling of key messages

- Indicators are crucial for monitoring segregation and guiding policy interventions, but must be used carefully in order to avoid stigmatising disadvantaged areas. While indicators provide valuable insights, there is a risk of misinterpretation and oversimplification. As such, it is essential to complement quantitative data with qualitative insights.^[23]
- Although urban design and the physical environment play a crucial role in fostering social inclusion, their impact on addressing deeper socioeconomic inequalities is limited. Well-planned public spaces, diverse housing options and accessible living environments can enhance community cohesion, but must be addressed in parallel with broader structural issues, such as employment, education and economic inequality.^[24]
- Public engagement should be a focal point for future efforts at achieving climate neutrality. Targeted communication campaigns can raise awareness and inspire behavioural change, helping citizens understand the long-term benefits of sustainable choices and bold policies. Additionally, they can be used to disseminate information about available incentives, ensuring the target audience is well informed. Such campaigns also act as a bridge between policy and public action, ensuring collective commitment to climate goals.^[25]
- Expanding the taxation and regulatory frameworks as a means of holding polluters accountable can accelerate progress towards climate neutrality. By implementing fees and tools reflective of the true environmental costs of emissions, Nordic cities can both generate revenue to fund sustainable projects and incentivise greener practices across sectors.^[26]

23. Stjernberg, M., Cavicchia, R., Bogason, A. & Vuithier, A., 'Beyond Segregation: Nordic Approaches to Socially Inclusive Cities', Nordregio Report 2025:7, 2025, <https://pub.nordregio.org/r-2025-7-beyond-segregation-nordic-approaches-to-socially-inclusive-cities/>.

24. Ibid.

25. Aguiar Borges, L., Cavicchia, R., Tomren, L., Bogason, Á., & Kačkus Tybjerg, J. 'Nordic Cities: Pathways Towards Climate Neutrality', Nordregio Report 2025:8, 2025, <http://doi.org/10.6027/R2025:8.1403-2503>.

26. Ibid.

The two projects have been presented at various webinars, seminars, conferences and other events targeted at those working on Nordic urban planning and development issues at the national, regional and local levels. For instance, researchers presented findings from Planning for Socially Mixed and Inclusive Neighbourhoods at Nordregio Forum 2022 in Hamar; during seminars and webinars arranged by UN-Habitat and the Nordic City Network; and for the City of Vejle urban planning department. The project has also been presented to the Finnish Segregaatiolinkki network – a state–city expert group composed of national- and local-level practitioners/planners working to counteract segregation in Finland.

Meanwhile, dissemination activities for the Nordic Climate Neutral Cities project include presentations at the PLANNORD conference in Reykjavík and the Norwegian University of Life Sciences, as well as a workshop and panel discussion targeting planners/practitioners at Nordregio Forum 2024 in Luleå. An additional webinar to accompany the launch of the final Planning for Socially Mixed and Inclusive Neighbourhoods report in April 2025 was also held, attracting a wide audience from across the Nordic countries and elsewhere in Europe. The running theme throughout these activities has been the sharing of experiences, know-how and learnings concerning planning for socially inclusive cities and climate neutrality.

[Read more here.](#)



Panel debate on Climate Neutral Cities (Nordregio Forum 2024 in Luleå).
Photo: Magnus Stenberg, Luleå Fotograferna



Presentation on How to Counteract Urban Segregation and Plan More Socially Inclusive Neighbourhoods (Nordregio Forum 2022 in Hamar).
Photo: Sofia Strömgård, Nordregio

23. Socially sustainable tourism: Beyond measuring economic outcomes

TOPICS: Nordic | Social sustainability | Tourism

AUTHOR: Nordregio (Ágúst Bogason, Maja Brynteson and Lisa Rohrer)

A sustainable tourism approach seeks to balance economic growth, environmental protection and social equity when developing an area's tourism industry. In doing so, it aims to minimise tourism's negative impacts on the environment and local communities, while maximising the benefits for stakeholders. Sustainable tourism practices include promoting responsible travel; conserving natural and cultural heritage; supporting local economies; and ensuring inclusive, equitable tourism development.

Importance of socially sustainable tourism in Nordic policies

The Socially Sustainable Tourism project conducted a number of policy analyses and case studies exploring the Nordic countries' tourism policies. These reveal that while tourism's social aspects are seen as highly relevant, they are for the most part not well conceptualised. For instance, indicators on localised benefits and how local population are affected are lacking, and it is often unclear what the socially sustainable tourism concept entails in practice.

In short, although people consider tourism's social aspects to be important, they also find it difficult to measure and assess them. This points to the need for relevant, properly thought-out tools that can address this gap. Only then can the wellbeing of local communities be adequately considered and addressed.

The Socially Sustainable Rural Tourism project

The Socially Sustainable Rural Tourism research project, which started in 2022 and was finalised in 2025, explored sustainable tourism development in the Nordic context from a sociocultural perspective. Given that tourism in the Nordics is primarily viewed as a regional development tool, the project's focus is mainly on regional and local tourism.

Building on this, the project examines how the Nordic countries view the social and cultural impacts of tourism development, particularly when it comes to the indicators used to evaluate the social dimensions of sustainability.

Methods used

The project employed a multi-method approach, with the initial phase consisting of a literature review of academic publications, grey literature and national policy documents from the eight Nordic countries.

This was followed by a series of case studies conducted in each of the eight countries/territories, selected to ensure diversity and relevance. These involved interviews with a variety of tourism-related actors, including public officials, tourism planners, tourism workers and business owners. Additionally, policy and document analyses were conducted for the eight case study regions.

Key findings

A key finding of the project is that while there is a strong focus on sustainable tourism in the Nordic countries, the emphasis has mainly been on economic and environmental sustainability. By contrast, social sustainability has not been accorded the same attention, despite its recognised importance. This is partly due to the fact that tourism's economic and environmental aspects are more easily measured by traditional indicators.

As touched on above, the results show that although there is some awareness of tourism's social aspects, the concepts applied are unclear and taking meaningful measurements is often seen as difficult. In light of this, authorities and the main stakeholders involved should take proactive and meaningful steps to consider the wellbeing of locals living in tourist destinations.

In a nutshell, it is not enough to measure the effects of tourism in purely economic and environmental terms. Rather, we must give equal regard to the social dimension if we are to achieve sustainable tourism development across the Nordics.

[Read more here.](#)



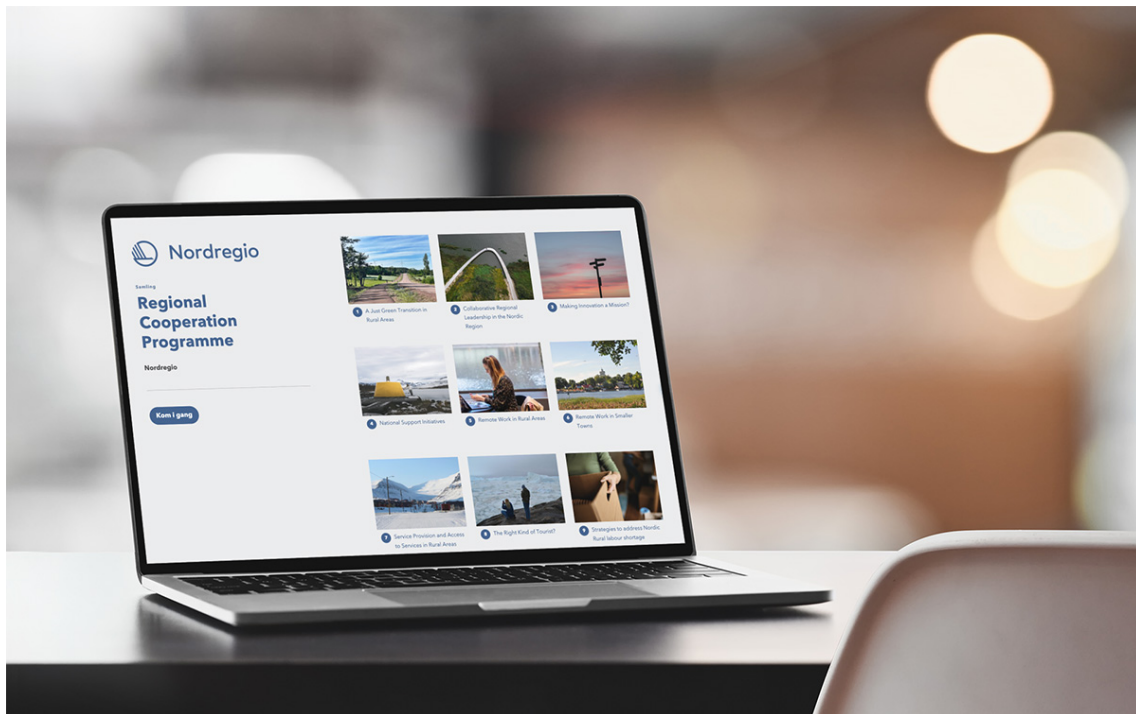
Photo: Ágúst Bogason

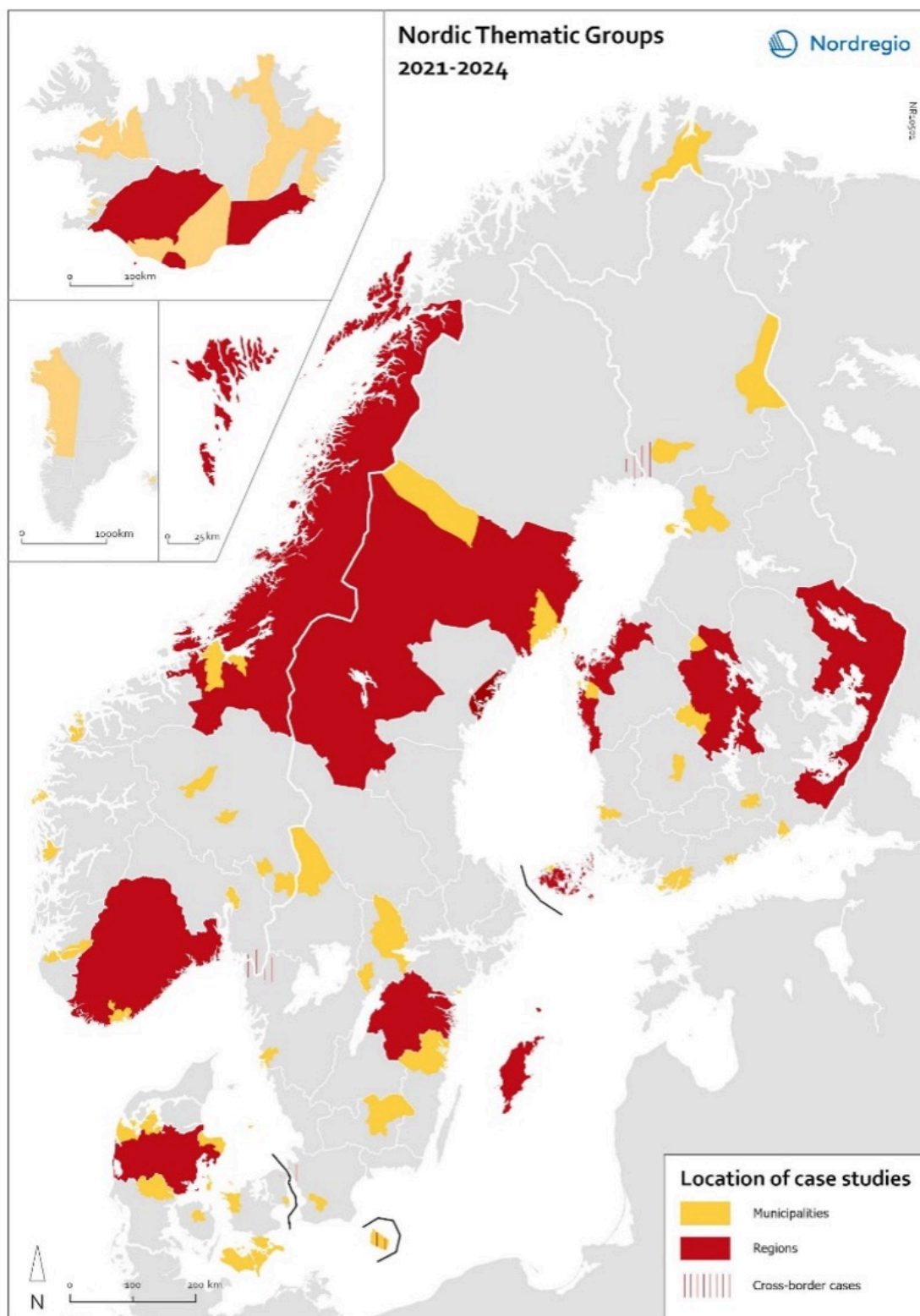


Photo: Ágúst Bogason

STORY MAP OF INSPIRATIONAL CASE STUDIES

This report draws on 113 inspiring case studies – municipal, regional and cross-border – from across the Nordic region. These cases were mainly conducted under the aegis of the three thematic groups (see map below), alongside three additional cases carried out by NORA, and have been captured in an interactive [Story Map](#). Thus, anyone interested – whether policymakers, NGOs or members of the public – has easy access to comprehensive information on each case. The map also facilitates comparative analyses based on geography, topic and type of community.





Map showing the geographical and thematic distribution of the case studies.

REGIONAL RELEVANCE AND NORDIC ADDED VALUE

Areas of regional relevance from the 23 recipes

The 23 recipes illustrate the breadth of the regional development and policy alignment contributions taking place across the Nordic region. Against this backdrop, this chapter highlights five key areas of regional relevance.

1. Economic growth, cross-border connectivity and social sustainability

The 23 recipes all demonstrate a strong commitment to economic expansion; strengthening cross-border trade and mobility; enhancing workforce development; and promoting social sustainability. In this regard, the following projects and themes are particularly noteworthy:

- **Economic growth and competitiveness:** Initiatives such as *Arctic Young Chef*, *Borderless*, *Secure and Vibrant North* and *Bothnian Arc Transport Forum* bolster regional competitiveness through food tourism, labour mobility and improved transport infrastructure.
- **Cross-border connectivity:** The *E12 Corridor* and *Bothnian Arc Transport Forum* enhance transport systems between the Nordic nations, ensuring smooth movement of goods and people.
- **Social sustainability:** Projects such as *Arctic Young Chef* and the *E12 Corridor* tackle workforce challenges by providing career-building opportunities and fostering cross-border economic integration.
- **Innovation and sustainability:** Investments in transport, the culinary arts and infrastructure prioritise environmentally conscious solutions, reinforcing Nordic leadership in the field of green transitions.

2. Rural revitalisation and workforce development

The projects serve to highlight rural sustainability, adaptation strategies and education-driven workforce solutions designed to counteract depopulation and economic stagnation.

- **Revitalising rural areas:** *Coworking for Bygdeliv!* encourages digital nomads to settle in Nordic villages, thereby strengthening local economies and creating new social networks. Meanwhile, *Sustainable and Welcoming Rural Areas* enhances collaboration among policymakers, NGOs and businesses.
- **Cross-border vocational education and training:** **border vocational education and training:** Fostering education and skills development in technical professions, tourism and healthcare offers a means of addressing labour shortages.
- **Strategic infrastructure development:** Initiatives such as *Cross-Border Transport* and *Strategic Infrastructure in Kvarken Region* support seamless travel, mobility and trade.
- **Youth empowerment:** *Generation North Atlantic* strengthens youth leadership and community engagement, reinforcing cultural identity in the region.

3. Green transition and sustainable innovation

Several projects put particular emphasis on equitable development and environmental responsibility when managing the Nordic region's transition to sustainable energy and mobility.

- **Green transition and innovation:** *The Green Transition Game: Land-Use Negotiation* facilitates local decision-making and promotes sustainable energy investments.
- **Strategic tourism growth:** *Tourism in the Archipelago (APIN)* balances economic expansion with ecological preservation and social sustainability.
- **Green mobility and transport development:** *Smart Archipelago Traffic* promotes Nordic sustainability goals by fostering environmentally friendly ferry systems.

4. Policy-driven governance and regulatory development

The projects implement structured governance models that align with EU policy frameworks, ensuring long-term resilience when it comes to infrastructure, labour mobility and sustainability.

- **Regulatory harmonisation:** The *Marine Border Forum Skagerrak* strengthens aquaculture regulations and marine industry oversight.
- **Workforce and economic integration:** *Mental Border Obstacles* highlights Finland–Sweden labour mobility challenges, offering solutions that incorporate language training and improved job search platforms.

- **Strategic investment models:** The *Moss–Karlstad Union Trail* receives ongoing funding through Interreg in support of its role promoting Scandinavian cycling tourism.
- **Territorial planning improvements:** The *Nordic Urban–Rural Typology* provides fine-grained territorial classifications, helping policymakers better understand demographic shifts.
- **Regional infrastructure resilience:** *Integrated Border Region 2022–2025* tackles geopolitical challenges, regulatory alignment and cross-border trade efficiency.

5. Social inclusion and long-term sustainability

Nordic sustainability efforts extend beyond environmental concerns, with policy initiatives taking pains to prioritise inclusivity, governance and long-term resilience.

- **Sustainable and inclusive planning:** *RuralPlan* and *Socially Inclusive and Climate Neutral Cities* promote holistic urban–rural planning, thereby tackling demographic challenges while enhancing local governance.
- **Environmental advocacy and public engagement:** *Save Bothnian Bay* mobilises youth and citizens for marine conservation efforts.
- **Rural community support:** *Sustainable and Welcoming Rural Areas* strengthens rural networks, bolstering inclusivity and resilience through cultural and knowledge exchanges.
- **Balanced tourism development:** *Socially Sustainable Tourism* works to refine Nordic tourism policy frameworks by emphasising social impacts alongside environmental and economic concerns.

Key takeaways

Taken together, the 23 recipes offer a comprehensive showcase for the benefits of cross-border collaboration, workforce inclusion, green innovation and resilient infrastructure. In doing so, they highlight the extent of the Nordic region's leadership in terms of promoting sustainability, governance and economic integration. Collectively, the projects:

- **Advance Nordic leadership** in global sustainability policies and resilient infrastructure investment.
- **Strengthen cross-border cooperation**, enhancing mobility, trade and regional connectivity.
- **Support social inclusion**, ensuring economic development aligns with equitable labour policies and rural revitalisation.
- **Promote participatory governance**, giving communities, businesses and policymakers the means to shape Nordic economic and environmental strategies.

Areas of regional relevance from the 113 case studies

The 113 inspirational case studies cover a broad range of regional development and policy alignment strategies across the Nordic region. Key themes to emerge from the cases include cross-border cooperation, innovation, urban inclusion, remote work, climate neutrality, tourism sustainability and rural development. The findings from the cases – many of which are explored in greater detail by a series of Nordregio publications referred to below – underscore the Nordic countries' commitment to fostering integrated, sustainable regional growth.^[27]

1. Cross-border cooperation

Nordic municipalities – particularly in Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland – have well-established collaborative frameworks. Nevertheless, challenges remain due to topographical barriers and policy inconsistencies.

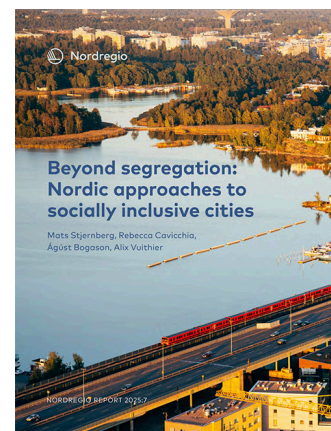
[*Strengthening Cross-Border Cooperation in the Nordic Region*](#) examines how integration can be improved through identifying shared obstacles and research avenues.



2. Urban inclusion and social segregation

Authorities at multilevel across the Nordic region are addressing rising segregation through policies that encourage citizen participation, architectural redesigns and multi-sector collaboration.

[*Beyond Segregation: Nordic Approaches to Socially Inclusive Cities*](#) emphasises the need for comprehensive strategies aimed at combatting structural inequalities.



27. For a more comprehensive list of the Nordregio publications dealing with the 114 case studies, see the chapter *Story map of inspirational cases*

3. Remote work and small town attractiveness

The rise of remote work presents opportunities for smaller towns. In practice, however, municipalities often lack formal strategies to harness the full potential offered by this.

Moreover, while digital infrastructure and housing improvements are helpful for attracting remote workers, widespread hybrid work models place limits on what can be achieved.

4. Climate neutrality and governance challenges

Despite being world-leaders when it comes to sustainability efforts, Nordic cities frequently struggle with regulatory barriers and funding constraints.

[*Nordic Cities: Pathways Towards Climate Neutrality*](#) details both how outdated national laws limit ambitious climate policies, and how multi-level governance coordination can accelerate progress.



5. Enhancing rural labour markets

Rural labour shortages remain a persistent issue across the Nordic region. Dealing with this challenge calls for tailored strategies, including migration incentives, lifelong learning and leveraging digital solutions.

Here, [*Strategies to Address Nordic Rural Labour Shortages*](#) provides policymakers with six adaptive approaches.



6. Green transitions and local value creation

[*Can Local Value Creation Induce a Sense of Justice During Green Transitions?*](#) examines strategies for integrating renewable energy projects in rural areas. In doing so, the report stresses the importance of fostering trust through stakeholder engagement, local ownership and transparent benefit-sharing. Only then can equitable green transitions be assured.



7. Tourism and socioeconomic sustainability

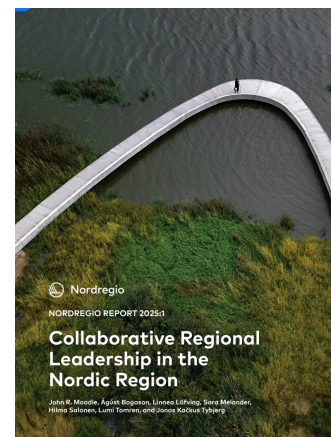
Rural tourism undoubtedly contributes to economic growth. At the same time, maintaining cultural identity and local wellbeing is crucial. In this respect, Nordic policies advocating sustainable tourism practices often fall short in their execution due to gaps between policy objectives and implementation.

The challenges posed by this conundrum are elaborated across eight case studies in [*The Right Kind of Tourist? Rethinking Tourism's Impact on Nordic Communities*](#).



8. Collaborative regional leadership

Strong leadership and cross-sector partnerships play a critical role in regional development. Through highlighting relevant enablers and barriers, the four cases in [*Collaborative Regional Leadership in the Nordic Region*](#) point to the importance of long-term governance structures in supporting collaborative initiatives.



9. Adapting to population shrinkage

Shrinking populations in Nordic municipalities require innovative planning approaches. This key challenge is the focus of the 34 cases in [*Rethinking Population Shrinkage*](#). Instead of simply viewing demographic decline as a crisis, regions should apply adaptive urban planning to sustainable services and infrastructure.



10. Mission-oriented innovation policies

Although Nordic innovation policies have moved towards incorporating mission-driven approaches, they remain fragmented in many cases. Denmark, Finland and Sweden are currently experimenting with mission-oriented innovation strategies conducive to better coordination between national and sub-national levels.

Key takeaways

The insights provided by the 113 cases point to the following key takeaways:

- **Effective strategy implementation requires policy alignment** across local, national and regional governance levels.
- **Policy fragmentation remains a barrier to long-term success**, regardless of the fact that the Nordic countries/regions tend to excel in sustainable planning, digital adaptation and cross-sector collaboration.
- **Enhanced coordination, knowledge-sharing and data standardisation should be prioritised** in an effort to harmonise regional efforts.

Ultimately, the 113 cases provide a valuable resource for any policymaker, urban planner or regional stakeholders working to achieve the Nordic Vision 2030 goal of turning the Nordics into the world's most sustainable and integrated region.

Nordic added value

Collectively, the 23 recipes and 113 cases spotlight the strength and breadth of the Nordic region's leadership when it comes to sustainability, social cohesion, economic resilience and cross-border cooperation. All this is reflective of the Nordics' preeminent global position in terms of innovation and regional governance.

With the above in mind, Nordic added value is most clearly in evidence across the following key dimensions.

1. Strengthened cross-border collaboration and regional integration

Nordic cooperation is a defining feature of regional development, facilitating shared infrastructure investments, workforce mobility and trade expansion. This is demonstrated by the fact that cross-border municipalities and organisations are actively working to enhance trade, mobility, governance and workforce integration:

- **Transport and mobility:** Projects such as the *E12 Corridor*, *Bothnian Arc Transport Forum*, *Smart Archipelago Traffic* and *Integrated Border Region* seek to optimise cross-border transport between Finland, Sweden and Norway through the development of sustainable, efficient travel solutions. In doing so, they act to remove infrastructure bottlenecks, streamline regulatory processes and enhance economic interactions between the three countries.
- **Workforce and business development:** *Integrated Border Region*, *Mental Border Obstacles* and *Cross-Border Vocational Education* all dismantle regulatory barriers, improve business environments and strengthen the Nordic labour market.
- **Collaborative leadership models:** *Strengthening Cross-Border Cooperation in the Nordic Region* shows how regional municipalities can work together to harmonise policies and address shared challenges, including labour shortages, crisis preparedness and sustainable urban development.
- **Knowledge-sharing platforms:** Structured collaborations such as *Marine Border Forum* and *Skagerrak* foster dialogue between governments and industry leaders, thus ensuring policymaking benefits from evidence-based best practices.

2. Advancing sustainable and green transition efforts

The Nordic region has emerged as a global leader in terms of green innovation, climate neutral strategies, green transitions and sustainable urban–rural policies:

- **Renewable energy and innovation:** *Green Transition Game: Land-Use Negotiation* empowers local stakeholders to integrate green solutions into land-use planning.
- **Sustainable maritime and transport systems:** The *Aurora Botnia* ferry project, *Smart Archipelago Traffic* initiative and *Moss–Karlstad Union Trail* promote renewable energy-powered, low-emission transport models.
- **Balanced tourism strategies:** Projects such as *Tourism in the Archipelago (APIN)* and *Socially Sustainable Tourism* emphasise economic expansion must be accompanied by sustainability, ensuring tourism benefits local communities without degrading the environment.
- **Climate neutral city strategies:** *Nordic Climate Neutral Cities* stresses multi-level governance approaches that accelerate climate action through policy innovation and green infrastructure investments.
- **Environmental conservation and public engagement:** Initiatives such as *Save Bothnian Bay* integrate marine protection efforts with youth and community participation, bolstering long-term ecological resilience.

3. Social inclusion and rural revitalisation

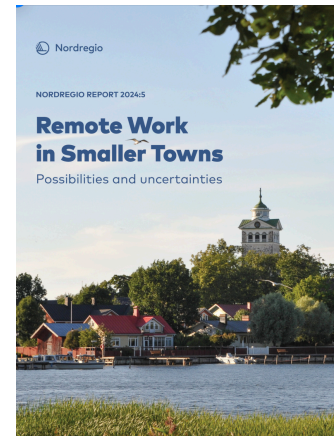
Nordic sustainability efforts are not limited to environmental concerns, but encompass equitable development and rural regeneration, helping ensure rural areas continue to thrive regardless of demographic shifts:

- **Rural adaptation and liveability:** *RuralPlan*, *Sustainable and Welcoming Rural Areas* and *Coworking for Bygdeliv!* address depopulation and workforce shortages through innovative planning and digital economy strategies. In particular, they leverage participatory planning as a means of maintaining liveability and service provision, even in declining populations.
- **Cultural preservation and community strengthening:** *Marine Border Forum Skagerrak*, *Generation North Atlantic* and *Save Bothnian Bay* all promote awareness of cultural identity and community-driven environmental knowledge.
- **Digital transformation and remote work:** *Coworking for Bygdeliv!* and the case studies in [Remote Work in Smaller Towns](#) showcase innovative ways of attracting skilled workers, increasing economic activity and adapting to evolving labour trends.
- **Equitable green transitions in rural areas:** During renewable energy transitions, projects focused on local value creation can help ensure rural communities benefit from green policies.

4. Economic resilience and competitiveness

Nordic initiatives integrate sustainability with economic growth, supporting the region's industries in their attempts to remain globally competitive while meeting climate and social targets:

- **Balanced tourism models:** *Socially Sustainable Tourism* and the case studies in [*The Right Kind of Tourist?*](#) offer strategies aimed at ensuring tourism's economic benefits do not come at the expense of local communities or environmental health.
- **Labour market and workforce solutions:** *Cross-Border Vocational Education, Mental Border Obstacles* and the approaches outlined in [*Strategies to Address Nordic Rural Labour Shortages*](#) directly address skills gaps and demographic challenges, thus ensuring thriving rural economies.
- **Sectoral growth and trade expansion:** *Marine Border Forum Skagerrak* supports sustainable fisheries, aquaculture and maritime industry competitiveness, leveraging Nordic regulatory leadership in order to secure global policy influence.



5. Strong governance, policy innovation and collaboration

Nordic countries excel at policy-driven governance models designed to improve regional planning, crisis preparedness and multi-sectoral cooperation:

- **Mission-oriented innovation policies and regulatory adaptation:** The *Nordic Urban–Rural Typology*, *Mental Border Obstacles* and the use of *mission-oriented innovation strategies* all contribute to evidence-based policymaking and tailored governance responses. This demonstrates how, through enhanced regional cooperation, policy experimentation can drive climate, infrastructure and employment solutions.
- **Data-driven decision-making:** Projects such as the *Nordic Urban–Rural Typology* and *Socially Sustainable Tourism* have introduced new indicators that can help policymakers craft more precise, equitable strategies.
- **Collaborative regional leadership:** Insights from the various case studies emphasise how cross-sectoral engagement fosters policy synergies, long-term funding models and participatory governance. Similarly, *Socially Inclusive and*

Climate Neutral Cities works to create sustainable urban environments by bringing together multi-sectoral housing, employment, mobility and energy policies.

6. Global Nordic leadership and policy influence

Nordic collaboration extends beyond the region itself, with policymakers and actors from the constituent countries working together to influence EU sustainability policies and global green transition movements:

- **EU-level influence:** Projects such as the *GRANULAR* project (which is connected to the *Nordic Urban–Rural Typology*) and *EU-regulated maritime strategies in the Kvarken region* contribute to Europe-wide policy frameworks.
- **Showcasing Nordic sustainability:** *Smart Archipelago Traffic*, the *Green Transition Game* and Nordic tourism policies more generally serve as global models for sustainable development and participatory governance.

Key takeaways

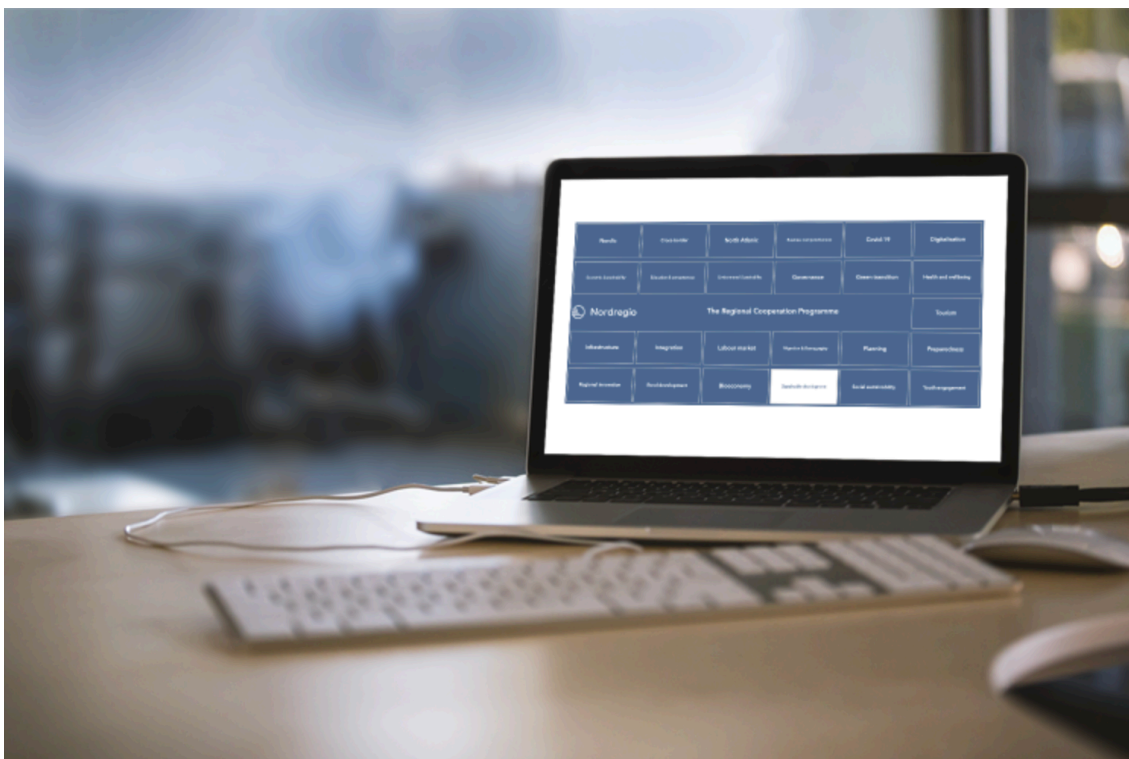
The picture painted above of Nordic added value highlights the region's leadership in the arenas of sustainability, governance, infrastructure and economic resilience. A running theme throughout the projects and cases informing this report is that Nordic cooperation leads to results beyond what can be achieved by national efforts alone. In doing so, such cooperation ensures:

- **Nordic unity** through cross-border governance frameworks and strategies concerning transport, workforce mobility, economic integration and environmental protection.
- **Long-term viability and environmental resilience** through – among other approaches – sustainable rural adaptation strategies, tourism innovation, climate neutral city strategies, green transport models, marine conservation efforts, digital planning and participatory processes.
- **Policy excellence** in governance models through integrating mission-oriented approaches, crisis preparedness and regulatory adaptation.
- **Cross-sectoral collaboration** through engaging governments, businesses, researchers and civil society in evidence-based policy decisions that aim for long-term sustainability.
- **Global leadership and policy influence**, with Nordic models serving as blueprints for sustainable governance, including in EU policy dialogues.

In sum, the projects and cases discussed in this report collectively advance – through strengthening Nordic identity, ensuring economic vitality, and reinforcing a globally recognised commitment to sustainability and social inclusion – the pan-Nordic vision of becoming the world's most sustainable and integrated region by 2030.

TOPIC SEARCH MAPPING TOOL

The [Topic Search](#) mapping tool allows users to search the case studies (113 in total) and projects (23 in total) referred to in this report according to topic, encompassing.



Overview of recipes and case studies: [Download as Excel file](#)

ABOUT THE NORDIC COOPERATION PROGRAMME

The Nordic Regional Cooperation Programme and its participating institutions

The Nordic Regional Policy Cooperation Programme (RCP) involved the following actors: the Council of Ministers for Sustainable Growth (MR-Vækst); the Executive Committee for Regional Policy and Planning (EK-R); the three Thematic Groups, the Secretariat of the Nordic Council of Ministers; Nordic research institution Nordregio; 12 cross-border committees (CBCs), the Nordic Atlantic Cooperation agency NORA, and the Nordic development fund Vestnordenfondet.

Implementation of the RCP fell to the three thematic groups, the CBCs, NORA and Nordregio, with the latter coordinating activities between these institutions.^[28]

MR-Vækst and EK-R

The *Nordic Council of Ministers for Sustainable Growth (MR-Vækst)*, represents the highest decision-making body when it comes to regional policy cooperation. It is led by the Nordic ministers for business, energy and regional policy, who usually meet once a year. The meeting acts as a forum for political discussions, experience exchanges and developing new collaborations. The chairmanship rotates annually between the Nordic countries.

The *Committee of Senior Officials for Regional Policy (EK-R)* holds technical and administrative responsibility for regional sector activities, in close cooperation with the Secretariat of the Nordic Council of Ministers. The EK-R chairmanship, which leads the committee's work, follows the presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers. EK-R acts as a platform for knowledge and experience exchanges, as well as collegial discussions supportive of policy development within and across national borders. EK-R is tasked with following up on the RCP's implementation, and towards this end receives and assesses the results of the programme.

28. See: <https://pub.norden.org/politiknord2020-713/>.

Nordregio

[Nordregio](#), founded in 1997, is a research institute for the regional sector working under the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM). Its obligations towards the NCM are delineated in a Strategic Mandate included in the Nordic Cooperation Programme for Regional Policy and Planning 2020–2024 and an Annual Grant Letter. NCM's steering model includes two annual meetings between the council's secretariat and Nordregio.

Nordregio is a key player in the RCP. In collaboration with EK-R and the thematic groups, it is responsible for planning and carrying out the programme's implementation activities, as well as disseminating the resultant knowledge and learnings.

The three thematic groups

The committees for the three thematic groups are comprised of national-, regional- and municipal-level policymakers from the five Nordic countries and three self-governing regions, with the cross-border committees and NORA also represented. Nordregio, as well as bearing primary responsibility for the work carried out, acts as secretariat for the thematic groups.

The thematic groups operate as unique socioeconomic laboratories for Nordregio's research on regional development, providing invaluable local knowledge on relevant challenges and opportunities. The policymakers involved also act as ambassadors, ensuring locally adapted dissemination and creating Nordic added value through cross-regional knowledge exchanges.

The thematic groups are divided up according to the following three themes: 1) [Green and Inclusive Urban Development](#) (TGA); 2) [Green and Inclusive Rural Development](#) (TGB); and 3) [Green, Innovative and Resilient Nordic Regions](#) (TGC). A bibliography of English-language publications produced under these three themes is given below.

TGA

- [Nordic cities: pathways towards climate neutrality](#) (Report)
- [Beyond segregation: Nordic approaches to socially inclusive cities](#) (Report)
- [Strengthening Cross-Border Cooperation in the Nordic Region – Analysis of Three Case Studies on the Swedish Border](#) (Report)
- [National Support Initiatives in Nordic Spatial Planning](#) (Report)
- [Nordic overview of national support initiatives in urban planning](#) (Discussion Paper)
- [Nordic overview of national support initiatives in urban planning](#) (Policy Brief)

- [Et styrket nordisk samarbejde om distancearbejde og multilokalitet](#) (Policy Brief)
- [Strengthening Nordic cooperation on remote work and multilocality](#) (Report)
- [Local and regional experiences of remote work and multilocality](#) (Report)
- [Remote work: Effects on Nordic people, places and planning 2021-2024](#) (Report)
- Attractive Smaller Towns (Report) *(Will be published in September 2025)*

TGB

- [Roadmap for Nordic rural development](#) (Storymap)
Roadmap is also available in [Danish](#), [Finnish](#), [Icelandic](#), [Norwegian](#), [Swedish](#)
[Roadmap one-pager](#) (in English)
- [Rethinking population shrinkage: smart adaptation for Nordic municipalities and regions](#) (Policy Brief)
Policy brief is also available in [Swedish](#), [Danish](#), [Norwegian](#), [Finnish](#), [Icelandic](#)
- (Cross-TG) [Collaborative Regional Leadership in the Nordic Region](#) (Report)
- (Cross-TG) [Planning around remote work: Latest research and implications for planners and policymakers](#) (Report)
- [Strategies to Address Nordic Rural Labour Shortage](#) (Report)
Report summaries available in [Swedish](#), [Danish](#), [Norwegian](#), [Finnish](#), [Icelandic](#)
- (Cross-TG) [Remote work in rural areas: possibilities and uncertainties](#) (Report)
- (Cross-TG) [Remote Work in Smaller Towns: Possibilities and uncertainties](#) (Report)
- [Between hand-outs and stand-outs: Opportunities for policy support for just green transitions](#) (Policy Brief)
Also available in [Swedish](#), [Norwegian](#), [Danish](#), [Finnish](#), [Icelandic](#)
- [Can local value creation induce a sense of justice during green transitions? A study of six rural areas in Denmark, Finland, and Norway](#) (Report)
- [Service provision and access to services in Nordic rural areas](#) (Report)
- [Essential Service Provision and Access to Services in Nordic Rural Areas](#) (Policy Brief)
Also available in [Swedish](#), [Norwegian](#), [Danish](#), [Finnish](#), [Icelandic](#)
- [Strengthening Nordic cooperation on remote work and multilocality](#) (Policy Brief)
Also available in [Danish](#)
- [A "Just Green Transition" for Rural Areas in the Nordic Region: key concepts and implications](#) & [A "Just Green Transition" for Rural Areas](#) (Discussion Paper)
- (Cross-TG) [Local and regional experiences of remote work and multilocality](#) (Report)
- (Cross-TG) [Remote work: Effects on Nordic people, places and planning 2021-2024](#) (Report)
- [Essential rural services in the Nordic Region – Challenges and opportunities](#) (Report)

TGC

- [Implementing missions in Nordic regions](#) (Policy Brief)
 - [The Right Kind of Tourist? Rethinking tourism's impact on Nordic communities](#) (Report)
 - [Reaping the Benefits of Nordic Collaboration in Regional Development](#) (Report)
 - [Collaborative Regional Leadership in the Nordic Region](#) (Report)
 - [The value of social sustainability in Nordic Tourism Policy](#) (Report)
 - [Making Innovation a Mission?](#) (Report)
 - [Who drives green innovation in the Nordic Region? A change agency and systems perspective](#) (Report)
 - [Should I stay or should I go? Early career mobility and migration drivers](#) (Working paper)
 - [Championing sustainable construction using timber in the Baltic Sea Region](#) (Policy Brief)
 - [Innovation Dynamics in Wood Construction in Sweden and Finland](#) (Working Paper)
 - [How can labour market mobility in the Nordic Region be increased?](#) (Policy Brief)
 - [The Systems Perspectives on Green Innovation](#) (Discussion Paper)
 - [Re-start competence mobility in the Nordic Region](#) (Working Paper)
-

The cross-border committees

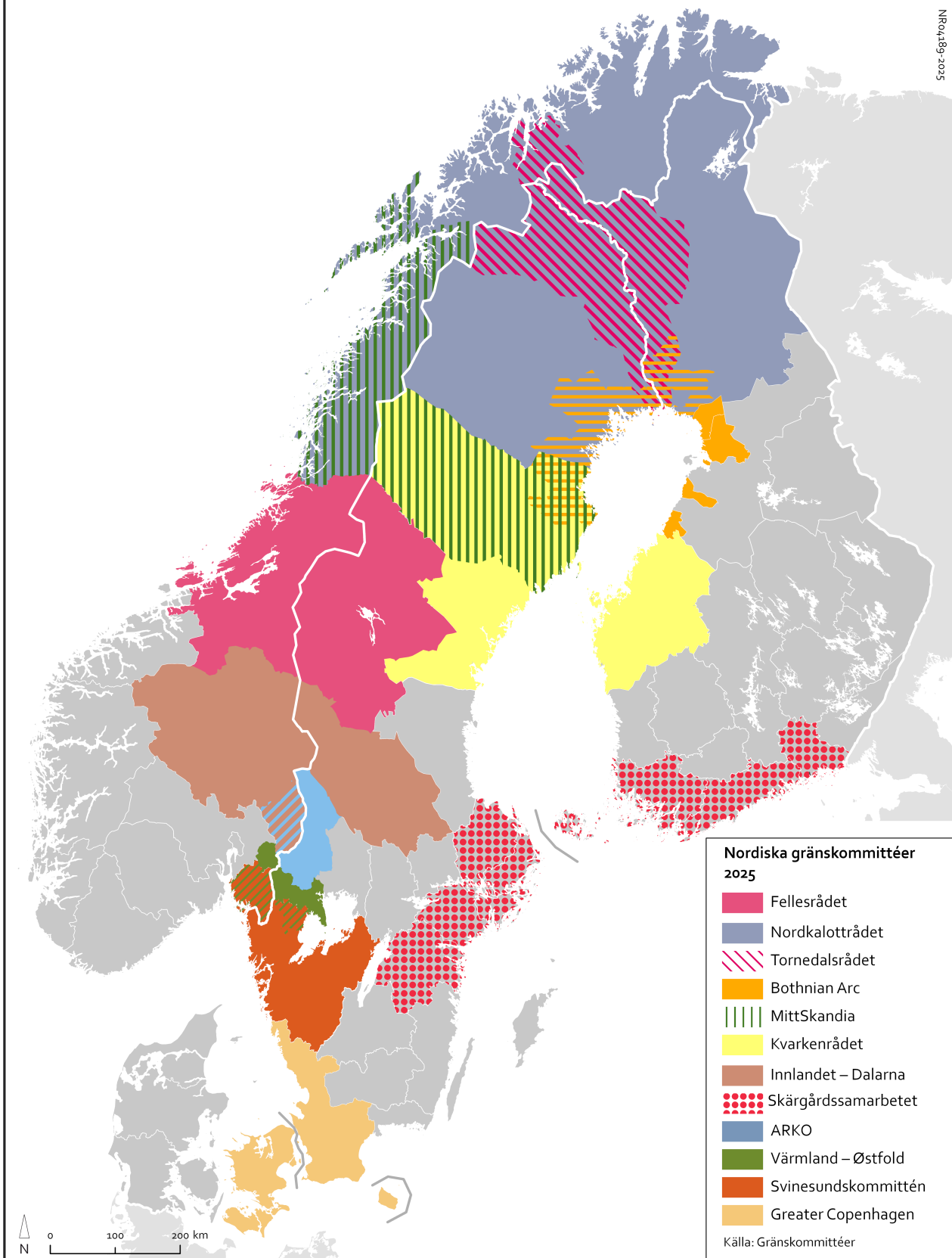
Cross-border cooperation in the Nordic countries relies on 12 cross-border committees (CBCs), which work in the border areas between Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Norway (see map below). The CBCs are membership organisations that bring together local and regional actors to work on integration across national borders.

The CBCs primarily work to promote business sector competitiveness; identify and mitigate border obstacles; foster sustainable and climate-friendly environmental and energy solutions; develop relevant infrastructure and communications; and manage land use. Their areas of interest vary according on their location and historical context. The work of each committee is carried out in collaboration with local businesses, knowledge organisations and civil society.

The 12 border committees and their websites are listed below, followed by a map displaying the areas covered by the respective CBCs:

- [Innlandet-Dalarna](#)
- [Nordkalotträdet](#)
- [Greater Copenhagen and Skåne Committee](#)
- [Skärgårdssamarbetet](#)

- [Svinesundskommittéen](#)
- [ARKO](#)
- [Kvarkenrådet](#)
- [Bottenviksbågen Bothnian Arc](#)
- [MidtSkandia](#)
- [Värmland-Østfold](#)
- [Tornedalsrådet](#)
- [Fellesrådet for Trøndelag og Jämtland Härjedalen](#)



Map showing the areas covered by the Nordic cross-border committees.

NORA

Nordic Atlantic Cooperation (NORA) works to develop networks, strengthen cooperation, and support projects aimed at ensuring strong, sustainable economic development across the North Atlantic region. NORA's scope of operations encompasses the Faroe Islands, Greenland, Iceland and coastal Norway (see map below).

NORA contributes to implementation of the RCP through direct assignments received from EK-R, as well as its participation in the thematic groups. The table below provides a broad overview of NORA's activities and publications.

Overview of NORA projects 2021-2024: [Download as pdf](#)



Map of the area/countries covered by NORA.

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

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Co-editor: Ken Barlow

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Nordregio

Nordregio is a leading Nordic and European research centre for regional development and planning, established by the Nordic Council of Ministers in 1997. We conduct solution-oriented and applied research, addressing current issues from both a research perspective and the viewpoint of policymakers and practitioners. Operating at the international, national, regional and local levels, Nordregio's research covers a wide geographic scope, emphasising the Nordic and Baltic Sea Regions, Europe and the Arctic.

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