

Rooting for the Rural: Changing narratives and creating opportunities for Nordic rural youth

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Introduction

Understanding young people's priorities when it comes to living and working in Nordic rural regions is the key to ensuring that Nordic rural communities are able to thrive. It is vitally important to gain insights into tools and strategies that young people see as addressing barriers to staying or settling in rural areas. As such, it is imperative that we engage with young people who either currently reside in rural areas or aspire to do so – particularly those who harbour uncertainties about their prospects of staying in these areas long-term.

What are young peoples' needs, aspirations and ideas, and what solutions are they proposing to policy-makers that would draw them back to rural areas? Moreover, how can we create and enhance opportunities for rural youth to realise their potential and make the most of – and make the greatest contribution to – their communities, thereby changing prevailing narratives regarding young people in rural areas? And how can we make sustainability in rural areas integral to the achievement of the Nordic Vision 2030?

This policy brief takes a look at the academic discourse and existing rural development narratives in the Nordic countries, as well as efforts in youth engagement, including related measures, across six thematic areas. The brief also presents the Nordic Rural Youth Panel's 40 action points for revitalising rural areas.

Project aim and mission

Through co-creative workshops with 25 young panellists from across all Nordic countries and self-governing territories, we sought to identify key enablers and solutions that can motivate young people to settle in rural regions. This resulted in 40 policy recommendations for rural municipalities and regions struggling with outmigration of young people. The project was guided by the following overarching questions:

- What is important for Nordic young people when it comes to living and working in rural areas?
- What concrete enablers and solutions do young people identify as central to solving challenges or barriers to settling in rural areas?

The themes and the young peoples' recommendations for rural regions and municipalities struggling with youth outmigration are presented in brief below.



Rural exodus or revitalisation? Nordic rural development and the youth situation

The Nordic Council of Ministers' Vision 2030 for its work with children and youth states that "the Nordic Region shall be the best place in the world for children and young people" (Nordic Cooperation, n.d.). Beyond ensuring that children's rights and youth perspectives are mainstreamed in policy development, it is vital to ensure that children and young people are able to actively engage, participate, share their knowledge and exercise their rights.¹ Young people's voices and perspectives are important when it comes to shaping a sustainable future, creating opportunities in local and regional labour markets, and securing a variety of services. Young people serve as a bridge to the future – they are a form of social and cultural glue. Without them, rural

¹ The Nordic Council of Ministers' definition of children and young people refers to everyone up to the age of 25.

towns and villages will be but a happy memory, rather than thriving areas burgeoning with opportunities.

The project Gen-Z² Agency: Mobilising young people to strengthen Nordic rural areas identifies solutions aimed at improving the living conditions of young people in rural areas.³

² Gen Z refers to young people born between 1996 (1997) and 2010 (2012). The start and end points of "Gen Z" vary.

³ The project took inspiration from the Norwegian Rural Youth Panel, the recommendations of which have been widely used in the Report to Storting 27 (2022–2023). The thoughts and experiences of rural young people are important for finding the most effective policy tools, to enable a rural future for young people across the Nordic Region.



Perceptions of rural versus urban

Young people in rural areas make decisions about the future, i.e., whether to stay or move away from their home area, within a context of diverse societal issues, experiences and social norms with rural connotations. Rural areas are often associated with far fewer educational and labour market options compared to urban areas. Such decisions also relate to young people's sense of belonging, family ties and identity (Rönnlund, 2019). However, the distinction between rural and urban is in many ways vanishing, especially when it comes to the homogenisation of culture and the watering down of traditions and "regional variations" (Bæck U.-D. 2004). This observation was first made in the 1980s, as information technologies began to lead to the characteristics of urban settings being mixed with those of rural areas, resulting in what Hompland called "rurbanisation" (1984 in Bæck, 2004). Indeed, in recent decades, rural and urban areas are becoming increasingly integrated, as products and services become more accessible, especially with regard to digital tools that provide greater access to the same consumer products and services online.

This suggests that the local community is no longer the primary normative centre (Bæck U.-D. 2004), and that the younger generations' sense of cultural belonging and their future hopes and dreams are forged elsewhere. These hopes and dreams are no longer place-specific, but elastic (Barcus & Brunn, 2010), and may change over time (Mærsk, Aagaard Thuesen, & Haartsen., 2023). Seen through this lens, the exodus of young people, whose cultural identity goes beyond that of their local community, becomes more explicable, as "our rural areas have become tightly interwoven with the rest of the world" (Cras, 2018).

Young people's hopes and dreams are not necessarily tied to a particular space, but they are arguably framed by their own perceptions of what rural areas are, and how they compare to urban areas. For example, a Danish study shows that young people with strong academic records tend to envision their future in a way that aspires to urban lifestyles, and feel that they need to "get out to get on" (Dalsgaard Pedersen & Gram, 2018, p. 621). The research reveals that these young people's connections to their local rural surroundings are marked by a complex mix of emotions, encompassing both attachment and detachment, as well as feelings of pride and entrapment (Dalsgaard Pedersen & Gram, 2018). However, there is also evidence to the contrary. A Swedish study shows how young individuals connect with their hometowns, and explores the correlations between this connection and their envisioned spatial prospects, which give rise to a choice between remaining "local" or opting for migration. The outcomes reveal that a strong sense of belonging significantly shapes young people's development of a local identity. Nevertheless, there is no obvious direct link between their identification with their hometown and their inclination to stay there. Instead, the perceived and narrated associations with their hometown and other places, in combination with material conditions, social interactions, and practices, all contribute to young people's articulated perspectives regarding their spatial futures (Rönnlund, 2019).

The perception of rural and urban areas as either traditional or modern, and therefore as safe or exciting, prevails. While rural areas offer perceptions of togetherness and safety, urban areas represent excitement and individuality (Tønneis, 1963 in Bæck, 2004). In a more recent publication, Syssner (2018) elaborates

on this dualism, describing the countryside as "condition" and the city as "process"; the latter embodying creativity, renewal and progress. Furthermore, as Syssner points out, the countryside becomes the base level against which modernity and urban areas are measured. The countryside therefore acts as an antonym to the city, representing tradition and (slow) continuity.

While many depictions about the rural condition and ruralities tend to focus on the problems faced by rural people, rural areas are also often seen as embodying the good life and landscapes of leisure. The motivations and drivers that lead people to decide to stay in their home village or move away are not solely connected to imaginary spaces and symbolism. The depletion of welfare resources from peripheral communities is one of the key challenges faced by rural Nordic areas (Jonsson, Goicolea, Christiansson, B. Carson, & Wiklund, 2020). Different socio-economic groups have different possibilities and options when it comes to coping with or mitigating such processes.

Based on these considerations, young people who opt to stay in rural settings are often portrayed negatively as "left behind", both literally and figuratively, and as such are seen as generally lacking in ambition and agency. They choose tradition and the slow life over excitement, progress and creativity. In a world where this type of perceived "upwards" mobility is synonymous with personal progress, to remain in one place is often seen as stagnating. However, new types of discourse point to staying as a potential privilege, and rural youth as possessing a particularly high degree of place-bound social and material capital – assuming that sufficient possibilities are available to them, as well as opportunities to pursue a sustainable lifestyle.

Defining rural areas in the Nordic Region

The definition and conceptualisation of "rural" varies greatly between the Nordic countries and self-governing territories (Lundgren et al., 2021). The definition spans complex questions based on differing preconditions, but also takes into account different statistical boundaries, such as population density, distance to public and commercial services, and labour market access (Lundgren, Nilsson, Norlén, & Tapia, 2020). Various

classifications and typologies describing rural and urban areas have emerged among researchers and scholars, which accounts for the diversity of places and allows for more granular analyses beyond simple administrative boundaries. What counts as "rural" is therefore also relative to the particular context. However, the negative perceptions associated with this term remain. According to Cras (2018), the media and the public debate both seem to simplify the definition, and "rural" is often equated with the "rest of the country".

There are, however, some demographic, educational and economic characteristics that feature more prominently in rural areas in the Nordic Region. For example, rural areas have a higher old-age dependency ratio than their urban counterparts (Heleniak & Sánchez-Gassen, 2020). This is driven by both natural processes of population change and the migration of young people. Rural areas are also exposed to several types of population development trends that occur in parallel. An influx of new citizens from other countries, new types of labour markets spurred by the green transition and digitalisation that enable multi-locality or remote work, and spatially uneven demographic change (even within rural municipalities) are examples of processes that are ongoing in these areas. Common to all rural areas is the dependence on a demographic composition that enables a sustainable and vital working force and sufficient numbers for public service provision.

Young people in Nordic rural policy discourse

The structures for youth participation vary between and within the Nordic countries and self-governing territories. Young people feature prominently in Nordic policy discourse, especially concerning education, the labour market, skills and competence development across the Nordic Region. They are also frequently mentioned in relation to culture, public transport and housing issues. Furthermore, most Nordic countries have youth councils at the municipal and regional level or use to varying degrees in different forums that facilitate youth participation in policy-making. Most, if not all, have some legislation pertaining to young people's place in policy-making, and most rural policies incorporate "young people" as an underlying aspect of their

formulation. While such initiatives represent positive attempts to elevate young people's voices and needs, how can we ensure that young people are not only being allowed to speak their minds, but are also being heard?

Despite the Nordic countries' long history of engagement with youth and social policy, the circumstances under which young people are able to exercise their rights and access services differ depending on geography and socio-economic circumstances (Şerban & Brazienė, 2021). Many rural municipalities in the Nordic Region are grappling with demographic trends such as ageing populations and the migration of young people to urban areas (particularly those aged 20–29), resulting in a less diversified labour market and fewer services (Karlsdottír et al., 2020). Encouraging young people to remain or settle in rural areas presents a challenge to rural municipalities, as cities and urban areas attract them with a greater variety of educational opportunities and employment prospects.

It is crucial to acknowledge the existence of a wide range of youth perspectives, and therefore a range of different viewpoints on rural life, its potential and its difficulties. Young people form a complex and varied demographic, and each individual has their own stories and aspirations. Recognising young people in policy-making processes can help to effectively tackle the challenge of young people leaving rural areas, and harness and enhance existing opportunities for those who stay. Evidence-based policy-making built on young people's stories, wishes and visions for the future can help overcome the challenges currently faced by Nordic rural areas.



Contextualising the Nordic Rural Youth Panel's 40 action points for rural revival

The Nordic Rural Youth Panel identified one cross-sectoral and six thematic policy areas in which to advise Nordic rural municipalities and regions. This section presents the thematic areas of particular interest to the Nordic Youth Panellists, as well as the recommendations based on the input from the rural youth panellists. The recommendations are part of the efforts to creating sustainable and inclusive rural development in the Nordic Region, which is integral to achieving the Nordic Vision and the Sustainable Development Goals.



Transport and mobility

Transport is a key issue for rural youth in the Nordic Region, as it affects the accessibility of education, employment, services and social activities (Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Rural Affairs, 2023). Rural youth often have longer distances between their homes and schools, workplaces or other destinations compared to their urban peers. Mobility is often limited for rural youth, and there are fewer and less frequent public transport options and services. This is particularly limiting to those who do not have a driver's licence or access to a car. Public transport is an important enabler for both rural youth and social cohesion, as it holds the key to accessing diverse educational and labour market options, as well as social and cultural services (Future Challenges of the Nordics, n.d.).

For example, Sweden generally lacks reliable public transport in rural regions. This particularly impacts access to amenities that are often inaccessible by foot or by bike. It is therefore important to develop cross-sectoral approaches to public transportation solutions in the Swedish rural regions, e.g. various types of bundling municipal

services, as well as demand-responsive transport and multi-modal systems that support the availability of transportation options in areas where demand is lower or distances are longer (Kershaw, 2020). In Norway, the Norwegian Rural Youth Panel has proposed reducing ticket prices for existing public transport, and investing in eco-friendly transport options such as railways, short-haul flight networks, buses, and ferries. They also suggest lowering the minimum age to 16 years for driver's licences for vehicles with lower speeds in rural areas. It is important to bear in mind that the ability to move around independently is not decoupled from economic privilege. So-called EPA tractors are a popular measure in both Sweden and northern parts of Norway, but it is questionable whether such vehicles are available to all or is a sustainable solution.

Moreover, this raises the question of mobility more broadly. Many young Nordic people need to leave home as early as 15 or 16 in order to avoid long daily commutes to their places of education (Future Challenges of the Nordics, n.d.). In this, the broader social context of mobility also comes into play. The lack of transport options, combined with a lack of education opportunities, contributes to the idea of "learning to leave" (Corbett, 2001), i.e. that rural areas offer little to no future potential. In this way, transport and mobility – both social, green, and geographical – are pertinent to young people staying in Nordic rural regions.



Recommendations:

- **Increase the efficiency of transport routes** by splitting routes through hybrid bus systems and by combining larger and smaller buses (as well as other vehicles). The routes should reflect the settlement structure, and must reflect peak times for work and school commuting.
- **Ensure that prices for diverse public transportation options in rural areas are socio-economically and spatially just.**
All actors responsible should evaluate the sustainability and environmental impact of existing transport options, ensure that lower-impact options are prioritised, and adjust accordingly. In places where there is an infrequent but essential need for public transport, rural carpooling and on-demand services could be an option.
- **Ensure participatory processes in local and regional transport planning.** Public transport is for the people, and the timetables should be regularly re-evaluated to reflect the needs of the public in rural areas. This can be done through simple surveys, e.g. via QR codes at bus stops.
- **Prioritise infrastructure to ensure connectivity, to connect rather than isolate rural areas.** A plan that enables the inhabitants of rural areas to travel safely all year round, and therefore makes it possible to live in rural areas, is necessary. Frequent ferry services are an important part of this infrastructure.



Relevant initiatives in the Nordic Region:

NaboGo is a Danish carpooling app launched in September 2019 that local or regional public transportation authorities can use (via contract) to diversify their public service provision. It is currently used by 30 municipalities in Denmark, and it has been linked to the national journey planner Rejseplanen. NaboGo is also used in six municipalities in Sweden, and has been launched in both Norway and the Netherlands. <https://nabogo.com/en/>

Hjem for en 50-lapp is a get-home-safe taxi service initiative for young people aged 15–25 who need a ride home at the weekend. The initiative runs in various regions and municipalities (e.g. Møre og Romsdal), and is locally tailored. <https://mrfylke.no/veg-og-kollektiv/trygt-heim-for-ein-50-lapp>

Housing

Increasingly strained property markets mean that affordable housing development is a key concern in Nordic housing policy. This is one of the key sectors in terms of its effect on quality of life and opportunities for Nordic youth. Housing markets in rural areas are characterised by a dichotomy – many rural areas face challenges in terms of empty houses, yet at the same time lack suitable housing to meet the needs of different societal groups. In some municipalities, young people are also affected by housing stock that is being vacated and repurposed as second homes or holiday lets for more resourceful societal groups. Rural Nordic housing markets are dominated by privately owned individual houses. However, studies indicate that various social groups, and especially young people, require more diversified (rental) housing opportunities.

Rural areas present a diverse picture in terms of housing market characteristics. In general, access to good, well-functioning and well-matched housing options that fit their needs are crucial for the prosperity and wellbeing of rural youth. At the same time, rural youth face challenges related to securing loans for house construction or



renovations, or accessing existing housing stock. Some Nordic countries have set up subsidies for constructing new homes, especially for building rental housing options for specific social groups, e.g. young people or students. In other cases, social requirements, such as a baseline for minimum income, are imposed on lenders, which impacts young people's opportunities to access adequate housing.

The municipalities play a key role in planning, regulating and facilitating rural housing development. They can influence the supply and demand of housing through area zoning, land use, infrastructure, services and various incentives. However, they also depend on national and commercial support and incentives to bridge financial gaps and stimulate rural housing markets that meet the needs of current and potential dwellers (Eliassen, Vestergård, Sigurjónsdóttir, Turunen, & Penje, 2020; Future Challenges of the Nordics, n.d.). Access to affordable housing is vital for attracting young people and resources to Nordic rural areas.

Recommendations:

- **Ensure more affordable, diverse, and accessible options for housing tenure** in rural and sparsely populated areas.
- **Develop a housing development programme targeting young homebuyers**, to engage young people in the building and restoring of homes.
- **Invest in and modernise the idea of shared housing models.** Shared housing alternatives could include multi-purpose services for young people, as well as intergenerational exchanges. Rather than encouraging young people to build individual residential properties, rural municipalities should seek inspiration from urban areas in which shared housing is common.
- **Take into consideration the target group when building new houses**, so that municipalities work to attract a specific demographic.

- **Create a public rural housing loan fund for young people** to facilitate their entry into the housing market, and to invest in building new property or renovating old houses. It is important to give young people an advantage in the rural housing market.

Relevant Nordic initiatives for inspiration:

BoKoop is a private actor that builds cooperative rental housing at reasonable rents outside of urban areas. Their first residence, with approx. 100 apartments, was built in Nykvarn municipality in Sweden, and mainly targeted at young people under 31. <https://bokoop.se/>

Ungdomsboliger.dk is a website that lists youth housing throughout Denmark. The website is run by the construction company UBSBOLIG, which specialises in student housing. <https://www.ungdomsboliger.dk/>



Labour market

The Nordic rural regions face a labour shortage, as young people are moving away and local populations are decreasing or ageing into retirement (Heleniak & Sánchez-Gassen, 2020). This means that there are indeed jobs available in rural areas, especially with the ongoing transitions, although the perception that there is a lack of jobs in rural areas, seems to remain. Structural changes including digitalisation, automation and green transitions also impact local labour markets, as access to the right types of skills and competences becomes crucial for the local and regional economy (Lundgren et al., 2020). For example, skills gaps and mismatches may lead to businesses turning down market and development opportunities, or a lack of skilled labour may force changes to the local welfare sector (Lundgren et al., 2020).

Many young individuals feel "forced" out of the region and towards urban careers, or feel compelled to seek job opportunities elsewhere. The perception of the existence of job opportunities and self-realisation may play important roles here, as work is often viewed as a crucial avenue for self-development (Bæck U.-D. 2004). A recent study based on a survey of Norwegian young people indicates that those who express a willingness to move to rural areas generally do not anticipate rapid career advancement. Conversely, those with reservations about relocating to rural areas expect quicker career progression, yet also express concern about finding their "dream job",

utilising their skills, and enjoying a fulfilling social life (Nordtug, 2021).

Remote job opportunities or “field offices”, as recently introduced in Iceland, are one approach to addressing labour market issues in rural areas. These involve governmental agencies and authorities providing opportunities for people living outside capital areas, as well as creating hybrid workspaces to ensure a social work environment. Coupling this with early knowledge of the local labour market and spaces for nurturing entrepreneurship, i.e. helping young people to develop and create their own jobs, would allow for a more diversified labour market. With regard to remote work, it is important to consider underlying structural aspects, including taxation matters, so that value created locally stays in the community. If rural areas are to contend with urban labour markets, it is vital to develop knowledge of the relationship between local education opportunities and the local (functional) labour market, as well as entrepreneurial opportunities for young people. There should be space for young people to develop sustainable new solutions for the municipality and for local businesses.

Young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs) are a particularly vulnerable group in rural areas, and frequently experience social marginalisation (Karlsdóttir, Cuadrado, Gaini, Jungsberg, & Vestergård, 2019). In order to secure their future prospects, this group needs increased attention from policy-makers working across different social and economic sectors and governmental levels. Enabling this group to participate in the local labour market would improve the prospects of the regional and local area as a whole (Karlsdóttir, Cuadrado, Gaini, Jungsberg, & Vestergård, 2019). There are several initiatives in place to counteract the increased numbers of NEETs in rural areas. Finland leads the way in proactive approaches to engaging NEETs. Finnish municipalities are required to hire outreach youth workers who engage with young individuals who have disengaged from school or work, or are currently inactive. This approach has proved highly effective in assisting socially marginalised groups.

Recommendations:

- **Establish rural public offices and hybrid workspaces** to enable rural youth to participate in hybrid working in their local area, while also reaping the social benefits of a regular workplace.
- **Provide rural grants** to establish public offices for companies who move part of their business to rural areas. This will encourage companies to offer more remote and hybrid work opportunities.
- **Invest in makerspaces and innovation centres** to provide rural start-ups and entrepreneurs with facilities and access to technology, equipment, and business courses. This will increase the number of businesses and make rural labour markets more dynamic.
- **Establish "rural internship" roles** by nurturing collaboration between universities or vocational education and rural companies. This will create opportunities for young people in rural areas to gain experience of the labour market.
- **Focus on the connection between the local labour market and housing provision**, to enable young people to move to rural areas for work.

Relevant Nordic initiatives for inspiration:

Nordfjordakademiet is a cohesive initiative from Nordfjord in Norway. It follows local young people from their early school years until university and beyond, and provides information on local labour market opportunities. <https://www.nordfjordakademiet.no/>

Störf án staðsetningar ("Jobs without specified placement") is an Icelandic regional policy priority in place since 2018, with the aim of addressing regional imbalances. The policy promotes remote work opportunities from rural working centres, and encourages employers to select an appropriate hybrid work facility from around 100 potential centres across the country. See a map here: <https://www.byggdastofnun.is/is/utgefid-efni/maelabord/storf-an-stadsetningar>

Siu Tsiu is a social enterprise initiative in Greenland with a service centre in Tasiilaq. Its goal is to create workplaces for and with young people, based on upskilling and employment, and funded by the municipalities purchasing products produced by the youth programmes. <https://siutsiu.gl/en/home/>



Education and training

The role of location in education should not be underestimated (Bæck U. 2016), as it is crucial for young people's educational performance and young people's future careers. Empirical evidence from around the world indicates significant differences between urban and rural settings in this regard (Green and Corbett, 2013 cited in Bæck, 2016), with urban schools coming out on top (Metsämuuronen & Seppälä, 2022). Moreover, urban schools are observably the norm against which all schools are measured (Bæck, 2016).

It is clear that the regions that demonstrate greater potential and have more promising future prospects are those that boast a high share of educated young people (Karlsdottir and Cuadrado, 2020). This plays an important role in social cohesion and economic performance, as young people's school performance and drop-out rates cannot be separated from their social context (Lundgren et al., 2020). Moreover, social factors influence young people's motivation, self-belief and, subsequently, their performance at school and career choices (Nissinen, K., et al., 2018). It is widely accepted that a person's labour market prospects are tightly connected to how long they stayed in upper-secondary education, i.e. whether or not it was completed (Karlsdottir and Cuadrado, 2020). Boys are the most vulnerable group, especially those with immigrant backgrounds, and are significantly affected by the income and educational

achievements of their parents (Karlsdottir and Cuadrado, 2020). Geographical inequalities are also observable in relation to the degree of urbanisation, with rural areas having a higher share of dropouts than their urban counterparts. The role of geography is important, and the complexity of rural areas may themselves cause inequality (Karlsdottir and Cuadrado, 2020), which may have an impact beyond just disparities in educational performance between rural and urban schools. Educational policies across the Nordic countries need to recognise their inherent bias and acknowledge education's powerful role in unlocking regional and local prosperity.

This is also the case for access to education in native languages. Access to language training in education institutions (and public services) was raised as a point of inequality in the Sami population in Finland (Weckström, Kekkonen, & Kekkonen, 2023). The lack of education opportunities in native languages is often attributable to a lack of resources (Lehtola & Ruotsala 2017 in Weckström, Kekkonen, & Kekkonen, 2023). Moreover, in certain parts of Greenland, for example, limited language training in Danish or English reduces young people's access to higher education in these languages. As choices for higher education in Greenlandic are limited, and are often offered in Danish rather than Greenlandic, this leads to inequality. However, it is possible to offer education in native languages. One of the world's smallest universities, Fróðskaparsetur Føroya in the Faroe Islands, offers bachelor's and master's degrees, along with PhD opportunities, in Faroese (Fróðskaparsetur Føroya, 2023). The university's strategic plan for 2020–2024 emphasises its commitment to addressing local, national and international challenges and serving the specific needs of the Faroe Islands (University of the Faroe Islands, 2020, pp. 4-5).

The University Centre of the Westfjords is another example of educational relevance to the local labour market, and has had great success in bringing higher education to rural areas. It works with other universities to offer hybrid forms of remote teaching, and currently serves around 100 distance-learning students. It also operates two master's programmes that are closely linked to the local economy: Coastal and Marine Management; and Coastal Communities and Regional Development. By providing facilities for group work, reading rooms, and teleconferencing for students and researchers, young people in the Icelandic

Westfjords can easily access higher education without having to relocate. It is crucial to consider at what level education institutions in rural areas should be operating, and the role they play in the local or regional labour market and economies.

As urban settings are the presupposed norm and the "end goal", rural education institutions currently serve as "a quintessential institution of disembedding, making young people adaptable, flexible and mobile" (Corbett, 2001, p. 312). In other words, the structure of the current education system and curricula are intended to provide a "way out" of rural areas. The old idea of a "class mobility", which entails movement from the rural to the urban, always upwards, and always "growing", still plays a prominent role in Western attitudes of what constitutes a good or "fulfilling" career (Adams & Komu, 2021). In order for rural areas to thrive in the future, it is important to take a conscious approach to education in these areas, to offer education that serves the local and functional labour market, and to understand the complexities of educational performance.

Recommendations:

- **Work to maintain and develop smaller schools in rural areas**, as they are important for both children and the local community. At the same time, cooperation should be promoted between smaller schools.
- **Introduce mandatory short-term internships at a local business**, so that all young people can gain insight into working life in their local area. The internships should be one or two weeks long and can be spread between school years. This will increase collaboration between schools and workplaces and help show rural youth what local businesses and public offices have to offer.
- **Invest in vocational education and training** by increasing its visibility and enhancing connections between vocational education and training and local businesses. This will open doors for young people, address skills mismatch, and provide a labour force for rural businesses.
- **Invest in career counselling and guidance for students** to show the diverse range of opportunities available in rural areas, while

also providing favourable scholarships and financial incentives for college students living in rural areas.

- **Mainstream satellite university campuses and offer more hybrid, flexible learning options for college students.** These hybrid options, including online courses, remote work and distance learning centres, will allow students to maintain connections to rural areas while pursuing higher education. Improved models for hybrid studies at university level can offer access to educational programmes or courses that would otherwise be unavailable to certain geographies.
- **Ensure that higher education curricula are available in native languages.** Young people from indigenous rural areas with little education in, e.g. Scandinavian languages, should have the ability to complete higher education in their mother tongue (e.g. Greenlandic, Sami, Faroese).

Relevant initiatives in the Nordic Region:

grit:lab is an Ålandic initiative aimed at helping young people and adults gain new skills in programming, while also responding to local labour market needs. <https://gritlab.ax/>

Folk high schools (Folkehøjskole, Folkehøgskole, Folkhögskola, Kansanopisto) are uniquely Nordic adult education institutions. Originating in Denmark in 1844, they offered an alternative education path for the lower echelons of society, who often came from rural areas. Folk high schools are primarily aimed at those aged 18 or older, but some schools can be accessed by younger people. Attendance is voluntary, and the focus is on lifelong learning, personal development or supporting young people's access to labour or educational markets, but for the most part without issuing formal degrees – although some schools do offer this. Many of these schools are located in rural areas across the Nordics, e.g.: <https://www.folkhogskola.nu/om-folkhogskola/>



Health and well-being

The Nordic countries have been consistently at the top of the global happiness list for many years. Coupled with the Nordic vision of becoming the most socially sustainable and integrated region by 2030, it seems appropriate to assess and address the varied approaches to achieving this goal. Due to their established welfare states and good public services, the Nordic countries are in a strong position to perform well in the Wellbeing Economy (Birkjær, Gamerdinger, & El-Abd, 2021) – a relatively recently devised “beyond GDP” metric for understanding prosperity. However, a relatively large proportion of the total Nordic population struggle with various issues, including mental health disorders, cognitive skills, discrimination, high suicide rates and low life-satisfaction (Birkjær, Gamerdinger and El-Abd, 2021). In their report, Birkjær et al (2021) note that Finland, Sweden, and Iceland have all taken strides towards integrating Wellbeing Economy principles, whereas Denmark was not engaging with this approach circa 2021, and

Norway was only considering certain aspects of it. The Wellbeing Economy approach is concerned with both subjective experiences (e.g. aspects connected to mental health, loneliness, etc.) and objective criteria (longevity, education, air pollution, etc.) from a human perspective.

Health and wellbeing considerations are factors in many aspects of life for young people. They incorporate mental and physical health, as well as a sense of belonging and social life, norms and values. For young people in particular, problems such as loneliness, stress and poor mental health seem to be key challenges (Birkjær, Gamerdinger and El-Abd, 2021) that affect them in various ways. For example, young people with mental health problems are less likely to complete education, and experience major problems in gaining a foothold on the labour market (Sommar, 2016). Mental health problems can also lead to increased mortality, more sick leave and isolation, with low-income families at particular risk of mental health issues arising among children and young people.

The Wellbeing Economy could be relevant for addressing inequalities and prosperity within and between rural and urban regions. Municipal child-welfare services, educational counselling, public healthcare and specialised mental health services for young people, as well as sexual and reproductive health initiatives, are examples of key areas in which policy seeks to address young people's wellbeing. Currently, competence gaps are recognised as an issue when considering rural LGBTQIA+ persons, and very little is known about the mental wellbeing of young people in Sami areas (Stubberud, Prøitz, & Hamidiasl, 2018).

Several studies indicate that indigenous youth are particularly vulnerable in the Nordic Region – especially in the Arctic. Suicide among indigenous youth has emerged as a serious public health challenge in the Arctic region over the past several decades (Young, Revich, & Soininen, 2015). Young people in Greenland are more vulnerable to socio-economic challenges including violence, alcohol abuse and suicide compared to the other Nordic countries and self-governing territories (Karsberg, 2017).

Gender, location, disabilities, ethnicity and social class, among other factors, are intertwined with the local area's structural opportunities and young people's subjective sense of belonging (Eriksen & Andersen, 2021, p. 112). Girls and boys are impacted

differently, with girls in the age group 16–22 suffering the most from mental health problems (Sommar, 2016). It is also assumed here that young men and women deal with and express their emotions (particularly difficult emotions) in different ways – women tend to take it out on themselves, whereas men project their problems outwards, often violently (Sommar, 2016).

Addressing health and wellbeing from both a physical and mental health perspective would not only help those who stay in rural areas, but also create a safe and reassuring space for those who would otherwise choose to move away.

Recommendations:

- **Ensure access to sports facilities and recreational arenas**, so that young people can meet peers with similar interests. This is important for nurturing a sense of community.
- **Ensure fast and reliable internet access** for all communities in rural and sparsely populated areas.
- **Promote the ready availability of digital healthcare tools** to facilitate wider access to mental healthcare in rural areas, as a complement to physical services.
- **Offer good-quality, evidence-based education in sexual and reproductive health and rights for young people in rural areas.** This could include independent facilitators or educators visiting smaller communities to ensure more open dialogue and knowledge-sharing.
- **Include rural LGBTQA+ youth on the agenda** by openly addressing issues connected to their wellbeing.
- **Ensure that rural indigenous youth's wellbeing and opportunities are considered** and that they feel able to openly express their cultural identity, heritage, and tradition.

Relevant initiatives in the Nordic Region:

Geðlestin ("The Mental Train") is a mobile educational and awareness-building mental wellness programme that travels to all secondary and vocational schools in Iceland. The initiative is funded by the Ministry of Health, the Red Cross and the Geðhjálp association. <https://gedlestin.is/>

Uutta Virtta ("New Power") is a compassionate response to mental health decline in marginalised youth groups, which affects their access to education, training and the labour market. <https://norden.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1326483/FULLTEXT01.pdf>



Community and culture

Culture and community are important aspects for retaining young people in Nordic rural areas. Several Nordic countries are also making efforts to revitalise rural communities. Examples of this include the convening of the Rural Youth Panel in Norway, to advise on measures aimed at improving rural lives, and the appointment of a parliamentary working group for sparsely populated areas in Finland. The working group's goals concern the revitalisation of culture and volunteering, strengthening the role of local cultural initiatives and groups, and financing projects connected to the revamping of local cultural activities (Parlamentariska arbetsgruppen för glesbygd, 2020).

Building communities is an important task, but it is important that such efforts are based on a neutral foundation. Such efforts include using existing libraries, develop 'culture houses' and make use of other existing spaces that can allow for young people's cultural expression.

Culture, while important for creating a distinction between regions and municipalities, is often based in tradition. However, for some communities, traditions can be suffocating rather than liberating. For example, the Faroe Islands are among the most conservative parts of the Nordic Region. Religiosity significantly influences Faroese society, particularly with regard to issues of identity and

culture (Gaini, 2022). Those who feel like outsiders often choose to leave the Faroes, while those who return tend to settle in the capital, Tórshavn. This may suggest that rural areas are perceived as too restrictive for those who wish to express their individuality, whether regarding their sexuality or other socio-cultural aspects (Gaini, 2022). The notion of "social control" still plays a role in everyday life in the Faroe Islands, but as Gaini points out, social media has empowered young people to create new bonds and identities beyond the influence of their parents or neighbours (2022).

Reports indicate that LGBTQIA+ individuals face greater difficulties in rural settings compared to urban areas in the Nordic Region, although there are intragroup differences (Eggebo, Almlil, & Bye, 2015). If young LGBTQIA+ individuals in rural areas are to avoid feeling an urgent need to leave, and if others are to be encouraged to consider moving to rural areas, it is crucial that they see these places as safe and inclusive environments.

Social media and internationally diffused youth cultures mean that social networks and relations are transcending local communities. This means that lonely young people in rural areas who have a hard time finding their community locally are able to find a community online. In this way, social media acts as an invaluable resource for meeting likeminded people. However, social relations and opportunities to engage in activities after school or work still play an important role when considering a future place of residence. Social networks and relations have inherent value when it comes to creating a sense of belonging to a place (Bæck, 2016).

Recommendations:

- **Listen to youth voices and give young people a platform** by supporting and elevating the role of youth councils in municipalities and at different policy levels. Youth involvement in councils and panels should be compensated to encourage and recognise young people's input to public policy. Youth council recommendations must be taken into consideration and incorporated into policy-making.
- **Provide or improve existing public meeting spaces** that are neutral (not connected to religion, alcohol, etc.) and accessible, such as libraries and swimming pools. Physical social spaces promote increased social cohesion and inclusion, while reducing loneliness

and inviting younger and older generations to engage in dialogue about local issues.

- **Fund and support social and intergenerational engagement initiatives**, such as markets and community festivals. These events will create arenas in which young people in rural areas can connect with each other and expand their social groups, which will boost the local culture. Social engagement initiatives and events will also make rural areas more attractive places to live in and move to.
- **Communicate policies and important practical information in an accessible way** by recognising the municipality's multicultural aspects. This entails providing information in several languages, using accessible and direct terms, so that it can be understood by everyone in the community.
- **Support social groups that welcome different languages and cultures**, in order to encourage young people who have moved to rural areas to engage with the community. These groups should be multilingual. Similar groups can also help non-native speakers practise the local language and learn about local culture, to encourage social cohesion and combat loneliness.

Relevant initiatives from the Nordic Region:

Leikfélag Hólmavíkur is a community theatre that brings generations together, and is a cornerstone of the village of Hólmavík, Iceland. It receives public funding from, among others, the municipality and the Westfjords Regional Development Office. <https://leikholm.is/>

Bygda er for alle ("Rural areas for all", 2023–2024) is a project that aims to make rural Norway more open and inclusive. The Norwegian Rural Youth group plays an important role in promoting diversity in rural areas. It encourages local chapters to organise Pride events, run educational initiatives, and strengthen their organisation's efforts on LGBTQIA+ issues. <https://www.nbu.no/bygda-er-for-alle/category2343.html>



How to include youth in local development

It is not only right that young people are able to participate in public life, but something that benefits society at large. Engaging young people supports the underlying objectives of Nordic policy development towards creating a greener and more socially inclusive Nordic Region. Efforts have been made to include the perspectives of young people on future policy priorities, such as on Åland and in Norway, but often the presence of youth is lacking. Moreover, in Sweden, only two out of 10 young people believe they can have any impact on local decision-makers (Mucf, 2021). It is therefore important to increase young people's opportunities to participate in local policy and planning processes. There are many definitions of youth engagement in policy-making – it is often associated with community engagement, but it can also refer to involvement in political parties or in direct action and activism. A number of rural municipalities have been testing different ways of working with young people to reach the sustainable development goals, for example, including efforts to improve healthcare services for young people, and using local schools as testbeds for the green transition (Berlina, 2023). This engagement plays an important role for allowing young people to be co-creators of their future municipalities, and to build stronger rapport between young people and policy – and decision makers.

The participation of citizens or civil society groups in policy-making is associated with a wide range of approaches and normative stances. Participation can encompass various degrees of influence over decisions or policy processes. In practice, it can range from mere participation, using young people as sources of information, but it also allows room for co-influence, collaboration and shared responsibility among participants from different spheres of decision-making and civil society, as part of a process of development or creation (see, e.g. Arnstein's ladder of participation, 1969). Schools remain an integral part as a platform for democratic participation through engagement, public hearings and workshops (Berlina, 2023), and opens up for the participation of young people who otherwise would not engage in discourse.

Youth councils at the local and regional level are mandated by law in Norway, and similar bodies exist in other countries. However, it is necessary to consider whether and how their advice and recommendations translate into meaningful action, and whether youth inclusion remains purely symbolic. Ensuring the institutionalisation of youth participation through advisory groups and consultation processes is key. This requires resource allocation and careful process design that enables policy-makers to be held accountable. "Youth washing" as the Gen Z-panellists call it, remains an issue in many Nordic countries. However, actual participation, space for young voices, and involvement are crucial for ensuring ownership and realising the visions for life in rural areas. Lowering the threshold for participation is an investment in the future of rural areas.

There are various means of strengthening young people's participation in policy-making (Berlina, 2023). It could involve, for example, including them in the design, implementation, monitoring, reporting and evaluation of policies. Good communication using plain language is vital, as it lowers the threshold for democratic participation and places people on an equal footing. There are also opportunities to think innovatively about how to use platforms and social media to involve those who might otherwise not be reached. Young people are a very diverse group, and must be approached on their own terms.

Opportunities for young people to engage in policy-making are unevenly distributed in society, and are often conditioned by factors such as socio-economic circumstances, family background and

level of education. Capacity-building and education about youth participation among policy-makers, as well the young people themselves, are two sides of the same coin: on the one hand, raising awareness of participatory processes and how they can take place; and on the other, determining when these processes should take place and managing expectations with regard to their outcomes. Youth participation policies must therefore be aimed at social emancipation and improving life conditions for young people, while also defining the processes of participation. This also means that youth participation policies need to pay particular attention to socio-economic inequalities and how they can be combatted, while also taking into account place-based conditions.

Recommendations:

- **Avoid “youth-washing” and tokenism when involving young people** in policy-making processes. Their contributions are more than symbolic. Involving young people should not be a “box-ticking” exercise with no intention of making any real impact.
- **Use inclusive and accessible language** (including indigenous and minority languages) when engaging young people in policy-making processes.
- **Meet young people in their spaces**, to facilitate better understanding of policy areas and decision-making processes. This includes both social media platforms, where information can be made more accessible, and rural youth being approached by peers from their own age groups.
- **Make participation and engagement in rural planning fun** and appealing for young people. Inspiration for these efforts may be found in urban development and planning movements, which may be adapted to a specifically rural perspective.
- **Support youth involvement in councils and panels through monetary compensation** to encourage and recognise young people’s input to public policy.
- **Promote opportunities for engagement**, to raise awareness of existing channels and forums.

- **Involve young people with disabilities.** "Young people" are a diverse group, and it is important to include the perspectives and experiences of those with impairments to diversify policies and make them more inclusive.
- **Teach young people about democratic and societal engagement processes from an early age,** to increase faith in the democratic system. Efforts aimed at motivation and engagement will be more effective if the processes involved feel relevant and familiar.
- **Make democratic processes accessible** by ensuring safe spaces free of prejudice and age discrimination. Politics can be both overwhelming and daunting.
- **Be good role models** – in other words, "walk the walk". What action will you take to include more young people in your work?

Relevant initiatives from the Nordic Region:

Youth up North is a youth-participation initiative that collaborates with three municipalities in the north of Sweden. Its purpose is to create ways for young people to express their views, develop youth-focused activities, and even organise hackathons and workshops to find solutions. The overarching goals are to empower young people and promote community improvement, by working to change systems that currently exclude them. <https://youth2030.se/youthupnorth/>

Pælum í pólitík ("Let's ponder politics"), devised by an assistant to an Icelandic member of parliament, is an initiative aimed at sparking conversation about political issues on Instagram. Similar initiatives were launched during the global COVID-19 pandemic. For example, every Friday, Icelandic members of Parliament took to Twitter/X to talk, in plain language, about what happened in politics during that week.



Youth involvement in the project "Gen Z Agency: Mobilising young people to strengthen Nordic rural areas"

In order to ensure that youth voices were heard, this project used a co-creative, interactive approach that directly involved young people in rural policy issues, and identified facilitators and solutions for young people's issues in rural areas across all Nordic countries and autonomous territories. Co-creation – often defined as a non-linear process involving multiple actors in brainstorming, implementing and evaluating societal challenges, policies or systems – is a popular tool for making participation processes impactful. The aim is to strengthen the sense of ownership over the process, so that participants feel their voices matter and are heard – not as mere informants, but as co-creators of solutions and outcomes (Do, Powell and Naunova, 2018).

The co-creative method in this project involved recruiting networks of young people and conducting workshops on a range of themes related to sustainable and inclusive rural development, all from the participants' perspective. The thematic areas for discussion were identified and developed during the course of the project in close collaboration with the recruited panellists in the age group 18–25. The goal was that the panellists would provide concrete input to Nordic policy-makers in order to strengthen rural areas and create a brighter future not only for young people, but also by young people.

About this publication

Rooting for the Rural: Changing narratives and creating opportunities for Nordic rural youth

The project **Gen-Z Agency: Mobilising young people to strengthen Nordic rural areas** identifies solutions aimed at improving the living conditions of young people in rural areas. Nordregio worked with 25 young people from across the Nordic Region in a series of co-creative workshops and identified key enablers that will motivate young people to settle in rural areas.⁴ This resulted in 40 recommendations for rural municipalities and regions struggling with migration of young people.

All references can be found in the publication Gen Z Agency: Mobilising young people to strengthen Nordic rural areas. What we did and how we did.

Further reading:

"From Fields to Futures: 40 action points for rural revitalisation": <https://nordregio.org/publications/from-fields-to-futures-40-action-points-for-rural-revitalisation/>

"Gen Z Agency: Mobilising young people to strengthen Nordic rural areas. What we did and how we did it": <https://nordregio.org/publications/gen-z-agency-mobilising-young-people-to-strengthen-nordic-rural-areas-what-we-did-and-how-we-did-it/>

Youth as partners in the green transition: <https://nordregio.org/publications/youth-as-partners-in-the-green-transition/>

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⁴ The project was inspired by the Norwegian Rural Youth Panel, which recommendations has been widely used in the Report to the Storting 27 (2022-2023). Rural Youth's thoughts and experiences are important for finding the most effective policy tools to enable a rural future for young people across the Nordic Region.

Nordregio

The principal role of the Nordregio team has been to facilitate the formulation of action points for the rural youth panel. The recommendations and conclusions presented stem directly from the young participants themselves. Collaborating with this enthusiastic and diverse group of individuals from across the Nordic countries and self-governing territories has been a privilege.

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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