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The value of social sustainability in Nordic Tourism Policy

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Preface

The Nordic Vision 2030 aims for the Nordic Region to become the most sustainable and integrated region in the world. To realise this vision, the focus is on creating:

- a green region, promoting a green transition of our societies,
- a competitive region, promoting green growth based on knowledge, innovation, mobility and digital integration,
- and a socially sustainable region, promoting an inclusive, equal and cohesive region with strengthened cultural exchange and welfare.

Tourism plays a critical role in achieving this vision. While it presents significant opportunities for regional development, it's imperative to consider its impact. The Nordic focus on digitalization, innovation, and attracting long-haul markets aims to strengthen the industry's competitiveness and raise the region's profile, all while prioritizing sustainable tourism practices (Nordiska Ministerrådet, 2020).

Within this context, the research project "Socially Sustainable Rural Tourism" seeks to look further into the concept of sustainable tourism development from a sociocultural perspective in the Nordic context. The focus will mainly be on regional and local tourism (not urban tourism) since tourism is also being utilised and promoted as an important regional development tool. While tourism is seen as having great economic possibilities for the more rural regions it will also have environmental impacts as well as social. The project will examine what the Nordic countries consider and define as the social and cultural impacts of tourism development to be, and what indicators are used to measure and evaluate the social dimension of sustainability in the Nordic countries' ongoing quest for sustainable tourism development.

The project is part of an assignment Nordregio has been commissioned to do by the Nordic Thematic Group for Green, Innovative and Resilient Regions, which is a part of the Nordic Co-operation Programme for Regional Development and Planning. For further information about the Nordic Thematic Group for Green, Innovative and Resilient Regions, please see: <https://nordregioprojects.org/innovation/>

This report is the first publication of the project "Socially Sustainable Rural Tourism". The content of the report is based on a literature review of academic publications, inputs from existing international indicator frameworks for measuring the sustainability of tourism and the most recent and relevant national policy documents of the eight Nordic countries.

The focus of this study is understanding the context and background of socially sustainable tourism in the Nordic region. The report therefore serves as a prerequisite and foundation for upcoming case studies in all eight of the Nordic countries. Hence, it functions as the basis for further studies and informs our upcoming work, where we set out to explore how (and if) Nordic tourism destinations implement and manage the social dimension of sustainable tourism.

Executive summary

The Nordic countries have experienced a significant increase in tourism over the past two decades, bringing economic benefits such as job creation and regional development. However, this rapid growth has also posed challenges, including strains on infrastructure, public services, and the environment, as well as threats to local cultures and traditions. The report delves into the concept of socially sustainable tourism, examining how social aspects are discussed in academic literature, international indicator mechanisms, and national Nordic tourism policies.

The academic literature on sustainable tourism highlights the importance of community engagement, cultural integrity, and heritage preservation. It emphasises the need to balance tradition and innovation in tourism practices, addressing challenges such as over-tourism, community displacement, and ensuring equity and accessibility in tourism development. The literature also underscores the significance of stakeholder collaboration, partnerships, and effective governance frameworks, along with the need for robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

In reviewing international indicator mechanisms, the report finds that while economic and environmental impacts of tourism are well-documented and often quantifiable, the social dimensions, such as community well-being, cultural changes, and social cohesion, remain underexplored and less understood. This gap in research is problematic because the social impacts of tourism are profound and multifaceted. Tourism can influence local cultures, alter social structures, and affect the quality of life for residents. Issues such as housing affordability, the displacement of local populations, changes in community identity, and shifts in social values and norms are critical areas that require more focused research. Enhanced research on these aspects would help policymakers create more holistic and sustainable tourism strategies that promote not just economic and environmental sustainability but also the social well-being of local communities.

The national tourism policy review reveals that Nordic tourism policies increasingly address the social aspects of tourism, especially the impact on local populations, public services, and infrastructure. However, the operationalisation and conceptualisation of how social aspects of tourism are integrated into tourism development and planning is often lacking. The report highlights that while all Nordic countries aim for sustainable tourism development in their national tourism strategies, the degree of a holistic view on sustainable tourism development varies considerably. Some policies set broad goals, while others provide more detailed actions. There is a growing recognition of the importance of the social dimension in sustainable tourism development, but how to measure this systematically is not yet conceptualised in depth, and effective measurement resources are often lacking.

Sammenfatning

De nordiske lande har oplevet en markant stigning i turisme i løbet af de seneste to årtier, hvilket har medført økonomiske fordele som jobskabelse og regional udvikling. Men den hurtige vækst har også skabt udfordringer, herunder pres på infrastruktur, offentlige tjenester og miljø samt trusler mod lokale kulturer og traditioner. Rapporten dykker ned i begrebet socialt bæredygtig turisme og undersøger, hvordan sociale parametre diskuteres i akademisk litteratur, internationale indikatoremekanismer og nationale nordiske turismepolitikker.

Den akademiske litteratur om bæredygtig turisme fremhæver vigtigheden af samfundsengagement, kulturel integritet og bevarelse af kulturarv. Den understreger behovet for at afbalancere tradition og innovation i turismepraksis, håndtere udfordringer som overturisme, fordrivelse af lokalsamfund og sikre retfærdighed og tilgængelighed i turismeudviklingen. Litteraturen understreger også betydningen af samarbejde mellem interessenter, partnerskaber og effektive styringsrammer samt behovet for robuste overvågnings- og evalueringsmekanismer.

I gennemgangen af internationale indikatoremekanismer finder rapporten, at mens de økonomiske og miljømæssige konsekvenser af turisme er veldokumenterede og ofte kvantificerbare, er de sociale dimensioner, såsom trivsel i lokalsamfundet, kulturelle ændringer og social samhørighed, stadig underudforskede og mindre forståede. Dette hul i forskningen er problematisk, fordi de sociale konsekvenser af turisme er dybtgående og mangefacetterede. Turisme kan påvirke lokale kulturer, ændre sociale strukturer og påvirke livskvaliteten for beboerne. Spørgsmål om boligpriser, fordrivelse af lokalbefolkningen, ændringer i lokalsamfundets identitet og skift i sociale værdier og normer er kritiske områder, der kræver mere fokuseret forskning. Øget forskning i disse aspekter vil hjælpe beslutningstagere med at skabe mere holistiske og bæredygtige turismestrategier, der ikke kun fremmer økonomisk og miljømæssig bæredygtighed, men også lokalsamfundenes sociale velfærd.

Gennemgangen af de nationale turismepolitikker viser, at de nordiske turismepolitikker i stigende grad tager fat på turismens sociale aspekter, især indvirkningen på lokalbefolkningen, offentlige tjenester og infrastruktur. Men der mangler ofte en operationalisering og konceptualisering af, hvordan turismens sociale aspekter integreres i turismeudvikling og -planlægning. Rapporten fremhæver, at selv om alle nordiske lande sigter mod bæredygtig turismeudvikling i deres nationale turismestrategier, varierer graden af et holistisk syn på bæredygtig turismeudvikling betydeligt. Nogle politikker opstiller brede mål, mens andre indeholder mere detaljerede tiltag. Der er en voksende anerkendelse af den sociale dimensions betydning for bæredygtig turismeudvikling, men hvordan man systematisk måler den, er endnu ikke gennemtænkt, og vi mangler ofte effektive

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The Nordic countries have seen a surge in tourism over the past few decades. This influx, driven by factors like growing international interest in nature and adventure travel, has benefited the region economically and is an important factor for regional development. However, the rapid growth also presents a challenge: balancing tourism's economic contributions with its environmental and social impacts.

Globally, the tourism industry plays a big part in the economy. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council Economic Impact Report, in 2022, the Travel & Tourism sector contributed 7.6% to global GDP (WTTC, 2023). While tourism undoubtedly fuels the global economy, its impact can be a double-edged sword. While destinations like the Canary Islands, Venice, and Barcelona grapple with "overtourism," signs that the Nordic region are beginning experiences similar challenges are becoming more evident.

Since the millennium, a significant growth in international tourist arrivals have occurred in the Nordic countries. In total, overnight stays in the Nordics has increased around 75% from the millennium (Nordic Statistics, 2024). While significantly contributing economically to the Nordic Region, the rapid growth in tourism has brought several challenges to some parts of the Nordic region, including concerns about overtourism at popular destinations, strains on infrastructure and public services, environmental impact, and a potential threat to local cultures and traditions (Bogason et al, 2020, Karlsdóttir et al, 2021). Popular rural areas like Lofoten in Norway or parts of Iceland, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands face concerns about how to manage an influx of tourism in a sustainable way, for both the tourists, the local community and the environment.

The public has become increasingly aware of the social and environmental costs of unbridled tourism development. Residents raise concerns about housing affordability, displacement, and the preservation of the local traditions and way of life. Discussions around better tourism management, responsible development practices, and engaging local communities are ongoing (OECD, 2024). Balancing tourism growth with the well-being of residents and the conservation of natural and cultural resources is crucial for ensuring the sustainability of the industry and preserving the region's unique character for generations to come (Broegaard, 2022).

1.2 Aim and research questions

Tourism development discussions have the last 20 years or so revolved around the notion of "sustainable tourism". UNTWO defines sustainable tourism as "*tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities*" (UNTWO, 2005). In theory, sustainable tourism development should therefore consider economic, social, and environmental factors equally and aim to balance these three dimensions of sustainability. However, in practice, economic considerations have often taken precedence historically. The focus has been stimulating regional growth by, for example, increasing tourist numbers, job creation and revenue generation. This is often translated to national policies and strategies aimed at attracting high visitor numbers, looking first and foremost at the economic gains (Bogason et al, 2020). The visibility and relatively easy measurability of economic outcomes of tourism have likely also contributed to the economically focused analyses of tourism effects in both policy and research.

While economic factors remain important, there's a growing recognition of the environmental consequences of tourism. This can partly be attributed to international climate obligations but also to the increased awareness of tourism's potential negative impacts caused by the massive increase in international tourism with congestion and crowding in fragile natural environments. The growth in tourism seems to have caused stakeholders and authorities alike to pay more attention to the environmental aspects of tourism. After all, nature is the main attraction when it comes to Nordic tourism and especially the more rural Nordic tourism (Óladóttir, 2020; Árnadóttir, 2019; Øian et al, 2018). The increased awareness of individual tourists to the consequences of their actions and the role their travels play in an environmental sense has also increased significantly in the past decades.

While economic and environmental impacts are well-documented and often quantifiable, the social dimensions, such as community well-being, cultural changes, and social cohesion, remain underexplored and less understood (Torkington, Stanford & Guiver, 2020). This gap in research is problematic because the social impacts of tourism are profound and multifaceted. Tourism can influence local cultures, alter social structures, and affect the quality of life for residents. Issues such as housing affordability, the displacement of local populations, changes in community identity, and shifts in social values and norms are critical areas that require more focused research. Furthermore, understanding residents' perceptions and attitudes towards tourism is essential to developing sustainable tourism policies that balance growth with community welfare.

Employing both qualitative and quantitative methods can provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of the social impacts of tourism. Enhanced research on

these aspects would help policymakers create more holistic and sustainable tourism strategies that promote not just economic and environmental sustainability but also the social well-being of local communities.

While both research and tourism policies are in general paying more attention to the social challenges associated with tourism growth in recent years, how and in which ways to address possible social issues related to tourism still remain quite unclear. Recent Nordregio studies show that all Nordic countries aim for sustainable tourism development in their national tourism strategies. Numerous regional and local tourism development plans also reflect these aims, although the degree of the holistic view on sustainable tourism development – tourism that accounts for economic, environmental, and social sustainability—varies considerably. Instead, the focus is often exclusively on growth, and few concrete actions or measures connected to social sustainability are evident (Karlsdóttir et al, 2020; Bogason et al, 2021; Broegaard, 2022).

After the COVID-19 pandemic, all Nordic countries have, or are in the process of, releasing new national tourism strategies/policies. As more attention has been brought to the social part of sustainable tourism development it is interesting to look into how social and cultural components are addressed in the updated national tourism plans of the Nordic countries. Recent and ongoing research on tourism that is being conducted on behalf of the Nordic Council of Ministers has mainly focused on the economic assessment tools of tourism (TSA) and possible updates to such an evaluation system as well as extensive research on the environmental impact of tourism. After the COVID-19 pandemic and the de-facto stop of tourism that followed, stakeholders have understandably put their emphasis on rejuvenating the tourism industry. Now, in 2024, tourism has regained its position in many places and even already exceeded the pre-pandemic levels (OECD, 2024). In this regard, a sustainable tourism development is more vital now than ever.

The focus of this project is to look at the social and cultural impacts of tourism on local, regional (and maybe even national) level in relation to the sustainability concept. This project intends to zoom in on the less researched dimension of social sustainability in relation to tourism in the Nordic countries, to see how the topic is addressed in research literature, how social elements are considered in existing frameworks for measuring the sustainability of tourism and how social features of tourism are discussed in Nordic tourism policies. This project's aim is therefore to examine social and cultural effects of tourism and possible indicators to measure the social dimension of sustainability in the ongoing quest of the Nordic countries for a sustainable tourism development. For this, the project will explore the following research questions:

1. How do social and cultural aspects influence sustainable tourism? This question can also be presented in a simpler way as "*What is socially sustainable tourism?*"

2. Are social aspects of sustainable development being considered as well as environmental and economic aspects in current Nordic tourism development? This question will be addressed by researching if the social dimension is being considered in the development of Nordic tourism?
3. What are the main social indicators for measuring impacts of tourism in the Nordic regions? This research question will inspect if there are any indicators and if so, what are they and how are they being used?
4. What can the Nordic countries and regions learn from each other when it comes to sustainable tourism development? The research will address this by looking into a potential common Nordic understanding of sustainable tourism development.

1.3 Research Methodology

The project will be based on a qualitative methodology, combining a literature review and policy review with case studies and document analysis. The following research steps will be taken:

A) Literature Review: A literature and policy review will determine how the Nordic countries are currently working with sustainable tourism, focusing on the social aspects of the effects of tourism, both positive and negative. We will conduct a comprehensive literature review to identify relevant documents. This will include searching academic databases, government websites, and policy reports. The literature review will focus on both academic and grey literature, exploring the social dimension of sustainable tourism, key concepts and indicators. The policy review will include existing national policies focusing on tourism development from all Nordic countries. These reviews will provide a comprehensive overview of the existing literature and policy landscape related to the research questions.

B) In-depth Case Studies: Based on findings from step A, case studies in all Nordic countries will be conducted to gather data and local experiences on the subject. Also to understand how socially sustainable tourism is addressed in practice to identify potential best practices and lessons learned. Maximum case sampling will be employed, where we intentionally select cases that represent the widest possible range of variation, with the aim of gaining a deep understanding of different challenges and approaches connecting social sustainability in Nordic tourist destinations. The case studies will be chosen based on specific criteria, e.g., a specific social element that is being addressed in tourism development, diversity, relevance, or success stories. Each case study will include desk research (document analysis), and interviews with local tourism stakeholders.

C) Analysis, Conclusion and dissemination of findings. The data gathered in steps A and B will be explored and analysed in step C.

As beforementioned, this report is the first output of the project and provides the literature and policy review. This first part of the project will contribute to answer the first three research questions from a literature and policy standpoint. The next part of the project will address those same research questions along with the fourth one, adding a more experience-based perspective to the questions through more qualitative data and insights into how the social dimension is considered in practice in sustainable tourism development.



Photo: Kotryna Juskaite

2. Theoretical Background of Tourism

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), *tourism* involves individuals "traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment" for leisure, business, or other purposes". For travel to qualify as tourism under this definition, it must last more than 24 hours and not last more than one year.

From an academic perspective, tourism is a multidisciplinary field of study that encompasses the activities, industries, and relationships involved in travel for recreational, leisure, business, or educational purposes. Academically, tourism is often approached from various disciplines such as economics, sociology, geography, environmental studies, business management, anthropology, and more. Scholars in these fields study tourism from different angles to understand its economic, social, cultural, environmental, and political implications.

Tourism involves a range of activities and services, including transportation, accommodation, food and beverage services, attractions, entertainment, and other amenities provided to meet the needs and desires of travellers. Overall, from an academic standpoint, tourism is a complex and dynamic field of research that explores the interactions between tourists, host communities, businesses, governments, and the environment to understand the multifaceted nature of travel and its impacts on society.

Sustainable tourism is defined by the UNTWO as "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities" (UNTWO, 2005). As such, sustainable tourism considers environmental, social, and economic sustainability principles to ensure that tourism activities can continue in the long term without harming the environment or negatively impacting local communities. It aims to balance the needs of tourists, the industry, the environment, and host communities. Therefore, social sustainability in tourism often focuses on specific aspects such as community engagement, local perceptions, and social impacts. It emphasises the involvement of local communities in tourism development and the promotion of their well-being (UNWTO, 2022).

There are several related concepts in the broader field of tourism used in the literature on the subject as well. While there is overlap among these concepts, each term has its own specific focus and principles, but each concept contributes to the promotion of tourism that is beneficial to both travellers and destination communities, while also preserving natural and cultural resources for future generations.

Responsible tourism is tourism "that maximises the benefits of tourism for destinations while minimising negative impacts. It is about enhancing the positive effects of tourism while reducing the negative ones" (UNWTO, 2020). It has also been defined as "tourism which minimises negative social, economic, and environmental impacts, generates greater economic benefits for local people and enhances the well-being of host communities" (WTTC, 2024). Another definition of responsible tourism is that it is "travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of local people, and involves interpretation and education" (TIES, 2024). In that way, *responsible tourism* aims to minimise negative social, economic, and environmental impacts while maximising the benefits of tourism for destinations and local communities. It emphasises ethical practices, respect for local cultures, and sustainable development.

Related terms, like *ecotourism* specifically focuses on responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of local people, and involves interpretation and education. It promotes conservation efforts and supports local communities (Wearing & Neil, 2009). *Nature tourism* usually refers to any form of tourism that involves visiting natural attractions, such as national parks, wildlife reserves, forests, or beaches (He et al, 2023). While nature tourism may include ecotourism activities, it is a broader term that encompasses all nature-based experiences.

Community-based tourism involves local communities in the development and management of tourism initiatives. It aims to empower communities, generate economic benefits, and preserve local culture and heritage (Zielinski et al, 2020). *Cultural tourism* focuses on travel experiences that emphasise the cultural heritage,

traditions, arts, and lifestyle of a destination. It involves visiting museums, historical sites, cultural events, and engaging with local communities (Du Cros & McKercher, 2020). *Adventure tourism* involves travel experiences that include physical activities, exploration of remote or rugged landscapes, and engagement with nature. It emphasises outdoor adventure, thrill-seeking, and personal growth through challenging activities (Janowski et al, 2021). *Heritage tourism* centres around visiting cultural and historical sites, monuments, and museums to learn about the heritage, traditions, and identities of a destination. It promotes the preservation and appreciation of cultural heritage (Timothy, 2014). *Slow tourism* encourages travellers to take a leisurely approach to travel, focusing on immersive experiences, sustainable practices, and a deeper connection with local cultures and environments. It promotes a more mindful and environmentally friendly way of traveling (Moir et al, 2017).

These concepts expand the scope of sustainable and responsible tourism by highlighting different aspects of the tourism industry, such as community involvement, cultural preservation, adventure experiences, heritage conservation, and sustainable travel practices. Each concept offers unique perspectives on how tourism can contribute positively to society, the economy, and the environment while respecting local communities and cultures.



Photo: Christian Moller / Unsplash.com

3. Setting the Scene: Sustainable tourism and the effects of tourism

3.1 Evolving Priorities: Navigating Economic, Social, and Environmental Dimensions

As described above, sustainable tourism should balance the environmental, economic, and social dimensions equally. Looking back, Nordic national policy goals regarding tourism have evolved over time, reflecting changing economic, social, and environmental priorities. International tourism was insubstantial during most of last century. Therefore, national policies on tourism tended to focus on promoting the Nordics in an attempt to generate a growth of the industry. Later tourism policies have highlighted the industry's ability to diversify economies and create jobs particularly in rural and remote areas.

International organisations, the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) and OECD for example, have also published numerous reports highlighting the economic contributions of tourism on both global and national

scales. These reports often emphasise tourism's role in generating income, economic growth, job creation, boosting GDP, and improving infrastructure (OECD, 2024; UNWTO, 2024a; 2024b). Governments, regional authorities and local communities have in the past often prioritised economic benefits when developing and promoting tourism activities (Diefenbach, 2021; Liu et al, 2023). After the COVID-19 pandemic, which in effect also put international tourism on hold for almost two years, the priority of many tourism operators and authorities was understandably to bounce back as quickly as possible.

The direct visibility and measurability of economic outcomes, such as employment rates, revenues, and tax contributions associated with tourism, are therefore in many ways still at the forefront when it comes to assessing the effects of tourism. The development of the TSA (Tourism Satellite Account) system, a widely used framework that provides a way for measuring the economic effects of tourism, reflects the sector's recognised importance to the economy. The TSA system provides a framework that allows for the measurement of tourism's economic contribution in a systematic and standardised way which also makes it easier to compare tourism's economic impact across different countries and regions. The system has a strong economic focus, and the importance of TSA lies in its ability to offer a detailed and comprehensive picture of tourism's economic significance, guiding policymakers, stakeholders, and researchers in decision-making processes. It can aid in formulating strategies that aim to enhance tourism's economic benefits but can also be a guide to address the need for sustainable and responsible tourism development practices that account for the welfare of local communities and the preservation of natural and cultural assets. These environmental and social effects of tourism activities are however much harder to measure and therefore systematic ways of monitoring them are lacking.

Concepts like sustainable tourism, responsible tourism, and ecotourism are among those that have gained traction in recent years, emphasising the need to balance economic benefits with social equity and environmental protection. This shift is reflected in newer research and policy initiatives on tourism aiming to incorporate these broader considerations into tourism development strategies (OECD, 2024).

3.2 Effects of tourism: Intersections and Influences

From a policy and business standpoint, tourism is a complex and multifaceted industry that intersects with numerous policy fields and subject areas, both influencing and being influenced by a wide range of topics. Tourism contributes to the economy with job creation, foreign exchange earnings, and investment in infrastructure development. It impacts sectors such as hospitality, transportation, retail, and entertainment – to only name a few sectors – while being able to stimulate local economies and drive regional development.

Tourism also influences urban planning decisions, transportation systems, land use

policies, and infrastructure development in destination areas. It can lead to the construction of hotels, resorts, airports, roads, and recreational facilities, shaping the physical environment of cities and regions. Activities related to tourism can have both positive and negative impacts on the environment. It affects natural resources, biodiversity conservation, waste management, water usage, and carbon emissions. It can also play a role in the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage sites, museums, traditions, and intangible heritage. It can contribute to cultural revitalisation, heritage protection, community identity, and the celebration of local arts and traditions.

Tourism can influence public health outcomes, safety standards, emergency preparedness, and healthcare services in destination areas. It impacts issues such as sanitation, disease control, health infrastructure, food safety, and tourism-related health risks. Social inclusivity, community development, cultural diversity, and local livelihoods are also affected by tourism. It can create employment opportunities, enhance social cohesion, foster intercultural exchange, and support marginalised groups through community-based tourism initiatives.

In Europe, some of the effects of tourism are becoming more and more evident. Popular European tourist destinations like The Canary Islands, Venice and Barcelona are grappling with "overtourism", a situation where tourist numbers overwhelm local capacities. While tourism brings economic benefits, it can also strain local resources, crowd out residents, and even damage cultural landmarks. Local residents have begun to raise concerns and complaints about the impact of tourism on their daily lives and communities (Giuffrida, 2024; BBC, 2024a; 2024b; Visentin & Bertocchi, 2019). Issues like housing affordability and displacement of locals along with cultural preservation have been prominent (Milano et al, 2021; Araya López, 2020). This has led to discussions about better tourism management policies, regulating tourism flows, promoting alternative attractions, and engaging with local communities in decision-making processes to ensure that tourism benefits are shared equitably and that the negative impacts on residents are mitigated. As tourist numbers rebound after the pandemic, some European destinations are grappling with how to manage mass tourism for a more sustainable future.

The diverse topics and policy fields of tourism are interconnected and play a critical role in shaping the tourism phenomenon. They all effect and are affected by tourism. Effective public policies in these areas can therefore support or hinder the development of responsible, inclusive, and resilient tourism practices. By examining how tourism intersects with the different topics, stakeholders can address challenges, leverage opportunities and the competitiveness of the tourism industry while still promoting sustainable and responsible tourism practices that benefit both visitors and destination communities.



Photo: Levi Stute / Unsplash.com

4. Literature review

4.1 Academic literature review

As presented, the concept of sustainable tourism development has gained significant traction, recognising the interconnectedness of environmental, economic, and social aspects. This literature review delves into the social dimension, exploring its multifaceted and multidisciplinary nature. The review aims to examine how the social dimension manifests in the context of rural and regional tourism, analysing how the concept of social sustainability is defined and discussed in relation to tourism. By examining different definitions and classifications of the social dimension, this review aims to provide initial steps towards understanding its complex and often overlooked role in achieving sustainable tourism development.

First, we present an academic literature review on the concept of socially sustainable tourism and from that we set forth a classification of the topics highlighted as essential issues and crucial elements in the discussion of socially sustainable tourism. Next, we present grey literature from international organisations on how sustainable tourism is defined and measured, looking into the frameworks and indicators used. Finally, we present how the social aspects of sustainable tourism development are discussed and presented in national tourism policies in the Nordic countries.

4.1.1 Approach to academic literature review

The Academic literary review in this study is based on studies published in journal articles, and reports published by research institutions. The studies collected were read with a focus on searching for specific discussions on socially sustainable tourism, what the *social* encompasses in discussions on sustainable tourism and what characterises socially sustainable tourism. By doing this the aim was to identify what academic literature on sustainable tourism considers when addressing the social dimensions of sustainability.

To identify and incorporate insights from various studies published in peer-reviewed journal articles, a structured literature search was performed using the ScienceDirect platform. The initial search utilised the term "social sustainable tourism," yielding 55,509 results. To refine the search, additional keywords such as "rural," "regional," and "Nordic" were included, resulting in a narrowed sample of 525 documents published between 2000 and 2024. Further limiting the search to the years 2018-2024 reduced the sample to 250 documents, comprising 195 research articles, 28 review articles, 21 book chapters, and 6 conference abstracts. These documents were then sorted, and abstracts were reviewed to determine their relevance to the study. To ensure a comprehensive perspective, additional studies from sources such as Nordregio, OECD, UNWTO, and the World Travel and Tourism Council were also included. A few academic studies, that were published prior to 2018 and were referenced in much of the collected data, were also added to the sample. Ultimately, 37 documents were identified as highly relevant for the study.

The objective of this literature review was to explore key variables and topics related to social sustainable tourism in rural and regional contexts within the Nordic countries.

4.1.2 Rural tourism

Aslam (2016) and Rosalina et al. (2021) both highlight the need for sustainable development and community-based features in rural tourism, with the latter also emphasising the importance of experiences. McAreavey (2011) and Sharpley (2002) further underscore the significance of adaptive tourism and the potential for rural tourism to contribute to economic and social development. However, they also point out the challenges of institutional capacity, stakeholder interests, and the dominance of mass tourism operators. These findings suggest that while rural tourism in the Nordic countries presents opportunities for sustainable development, it also requires careful management and support. While rural tourism in both developed and developing contexts emphasised location as a main defining characteristic, sustainable development and community-based aspects appear prominently in the literature related to developing countries, and the experience

dimension appears more frequently in the literature related to developed countries (Rosalina et al. 2021).

4.1.3 Social sustainability

The social dimension of sustainable tourism development is a key area of concern, with a need for more attention and research (Nugraheni, 2020; Baros, 2007). This dimension is often overlooked in favour of economic and environmental aspects (Nugraheni, 2019). This might partially be caused by the fact that both economic and environmental factors are more easily measurable. Environmental indicators in tourism measure aspects like energy and water consumption, waste generation, greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity impacts, land use changes, water quality, and air quality. Economic indicators track tourist arrivals, expenditure, employment, revenue, contribution to GDP, investment, prices, and business profitability. On the other hand, indicators for measuring social sustainability in tourism include community, destination, and organisational variables (Franzoni, 2015). Social impacts of tourism, such as cultural impacts, community empowerment, social equity, and tourist satisfaction, are often more difficult to measure due to their subjective and intangible nature. Existing methods rely on qualitative data and surveys, which can be time-consuming and resource intensive. Further research and development of robust and standardised methods are therefore needed to better capture the social aspects of tourism. Adding to the complexity of this, there is a lack of consensus on the concept and definition of social sustainability in this context (Nugraheni, 2019; Tölkes, 2018).

As Nugraheni (2020; 2019) further points out, social sustainability cannot be absolute or constant and the social dimension of sustainable tourism development is difficult to attain and operationalise. Despite these challenges, research has highlighted the importance of social indicators in measuring tourism sustainability. These indicators focus on the behaviour of key actors and the pursuit of stakeholder consensus, providing valuable insights into the social dimension of tourism and making stakeholder consensus a possibility (Franzoni, 2015). Moreover, the integration of sustainable tourism indicators into planning and management processes is crucial for ensuring equitable and inclusive tourism practices (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023).

Taking a closer look at literature on the Nordic model of social sustainability in tourism reveals that the concept operates within a framework that prioritises equality, inclusivity, and collective well-being. This model prioritises approaches that benefit local communities, preserve cultural heritage, and ensure an equitable distribution of resources (Hall & Brown, 2020). European and Nordic perspectives often interweave cultural heritage conservation with contemporary sustainable practices. Bjørk (2019) highlights this interconnectedness, advocating for balanced tourism development that respects social values and traditional ways of life. This approach recognises the importance of preserving cultural heritage while

simultaneously fostering sustainable tourism practices.

Social sustainability in Nordic tourism is therefore mainly conceptualised as the process of designing and managing tourism activities in a manner that maximises benefits for local communities, preserves cultural heritage, and ensures an equitable distribution of resources among stakeholders (Lundberg & Fredman, 2021). This model advocates for maximizing benefits for local communities, fostering high levels of social capital, adhering to environmental protection regulations, and promoting stakeholder engagement with participatory approaches involving local communities and respect for cultural heritage.

The academic literature review suggests that despite growing recognition, socially sustainable tourism remains understudied compared to the environmental and economic dimensions. Furthermore, a clear definition of the concept and a common understanding of what falls under socially sustainable tourism is unclear. The social dimension in sustainable tourism development is multifaceted in nature, but from the literature there are clear common themes encompassing the concept. Aspects like equality, education, health, and community well-being are among topics that fall under the concept. Measuring and operationalising subjective and intangible concepts like these pose challenging. Despite challenges in measuring and defining the concept, social sustainability remains a vital component of sustainable tourism development. The fact that the versatile nature of the concept is a matter of substantial discussion further underlines its importance. Overall, tourism is a complex and ever-evolving landscape, and its comprehensive scope encompasses a wide array of issues and consequences, both positive and negative, reflecting the intricate interrelationships between tourism and society.

From the equitable distribution of tourism benefits and community empowerment to preserving cultural heritage and ensuring social cohesion, a myriad of topics fall under the umbrella of social sustainability. These diverse aspects span various academic disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, economics, psychology, and political science, highlighting the multidimensional nature of social sustainability in tourism. Understanding this complexity is paramount in understanding the concept and developing effective strategies for achieving social sustainability. By recognising the interconnectedness of the various social issues and consequences, stakeholders can work towards creating a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable tourism industry.

The next section presents further the different components of socially sustainable tourism that were taken from the literature review.

4.1.4 Components of socially sustainable tourism from academic literature

After reviewing the academic literature, the exploration led to a categorisation of the topics presented as key issues and vital components in the discussion of socially

sustainable tourism. It should be kept in mind that the literature review encompassed literature from different parts of the world and although the most relevant material for this study was chosen, the topics sometimes had different focus points and priorities than it might have in the Nordic countries. The themes were however the same. Therefore, the following categories of topics that were extracted from the literature can have a different relevance for different areas in the Nordic countries. While some topics can be shared as vital across all Nordic regions, others can be relevant in one setting while irrelevant on others.

The following were identified as key components from the literature on socially sustainable tourism. Here, these topics have been classified into 16 different categories and in some cases recommendations for how to address specific challenges are also presented.

Key topics relates to the social dimensions of sustainable tourism

Community Engagement and Empowerment: Involving local communities in tourism policy development ensures that initiatives meet their specific needs and preferences, empowering them through capacity building and decision-making opportunities.

Cultural Integrity, Heritage Preservation, Environmental Intersectionality, and Social

Consideration: Preserving cultural integrity and promoting heritage conservation are crucial for sustainable tourism, balancing development with local social and environmental concerns.

Over-Tourism and Community Displacement: Over-tourism can lead to increased visitor pressure and community displacement, necessitating impact assessments and measures to manage visitor pressure and protect residents.

Equity and Accessibility: Ensuring equitable distribution of tourism benefits and access promotes inclusivity and diversity, allowing broader community participation and benefit.

The Balance of Tradition and Innovation: Balancing tradition and innovation in tourism practices preserves cultural heritage while embracing sustainable trends, offering unique and authentic experiences.

Stakeholder Collaboration and Partnerships: Collaboration among government, communities, and industry partners is vital for socially responsible tourism practices, fostering a collective approach to sustainable development.

Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms: Robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are essential for assessing social sustainability and community well-being, ensuring adaptive policy improvements.

Effects on the Local Population: Understanding the socio-economic impacts of tourism on residents is critical for creating models that enhance livelihoods and community welfare.

Public Services and Infrastructure: Adequate public services and infrastructure are essential for supporting tourism development and maintaining community well-being.

Effects of Tourism on Housing for the Local Population: Tourism growth can impact housing affordability and accessibility, requiring policies to protect residents' housing rights.

Responsibility for Socially Sustainable Tourism Development: Private companies must balance profit motives with social and environmental responsibility to promote social sustainability in tourism.

Health Outcomes: Considering tourism's impacts on local health and well-being is essential for creating a sustainable and responsible industry.

Education: Educational opportunities within the tourism sector enhance knowledge and skills, promoting sustainable practices and understanding of tourism's importance.

Community Perception: Understanding community attitudes toward tourism development fosters positive relationships and support for sustainable initiatives.

Tourism Governance: Effective tourism governance frameworks ensure transparent and accountable management, promoting responsible development.

Decent Work: Promoting fair employment opportunities in tourism enhances job quality, social equity, and community well-being.

Community Engagement and Empowerment

In the context of sustainable tourism, community engagement plays a crucial role in shaping policies and actions that benefit local residents. By involving local communities in policy development, tourism initiatives can be tailored to meet the specific needs and preferences of the people who call these regions home. Opportunities for capacity building and decision-making further empower communities to have a voice in the development of tourism strategies, ensuring that their interests are taken into consideration (Scheyvens & van der Watt, 2021).

Cultural Integrity, Heritage Preservation, Environmental Intersectionality, and Social Consideration

Preserving cultural integrity and promoting heritage conservation are essential aspects of sustainable tourism. Practices such as environmental justice and social considerations are vital in maintaining a delicate balance between tourism development and local social and environmental concerns. Strategies that aim to uphold and promote local cultural heritage while ensuring authenticity in tourist experiences contribute to a more meaningful and sustainable tourism industry (Jamal & Higham, 2021; Chambers, 2023; Czernek-Marszałek, 2020).

Over-Tourism and Community Displacement

The negative effects of over-tourism, such as increased visitor pressure and community displacement pose significant challenges to sustainable tourism. Conducting impact assessments to understand the implications of tourism growth on local communities is essential. Measures must be implemented to manage visitor pressure effectively and prevent displacement, safeguarding the well-being of residents and the cultural fabric of the region (Oklevik et al, 2020; Slåtmo et al, 2021; Fredman & Margaryan, 2021).

Equity and Accessibility

Ensuring equitable distribution of tourism benefits and access to tourism opportunities for all community members is key to fostering social sustainability. Addressing issues of equity and accessibility in tourism development promotes inclusivity and diversity, allowing a broader range of individuals to participate in and benefit from the tourism sector (Gillovic & McIntosh, 2020; Sisto et al, 2022).

The Balance of Tradition and Innovation

Balancing tradition and innovation in tourism practices is essential for preserving cultural heritage while embracing new and sustainable tourism trends. Valuing local traditions while encouraging innovative tourism practices ensures that communities can benefit from tourism development without compromising their cultural identities. By preserving cultural heritage amidst technological advancements, destinations can offer unique and authentic experiences to visitors (Palmi & Lezzi, 2020; Katsoni & Spyriadis, 2020).

Stakeholder Collaboration and Partnerships

Collaboration among various stakeholders, including government entities, local communities, and industry partners, is vital for promoting socially responsible tourism practices. Engaging in collaborative initiatives and partnerships fosters a collective approach to sustainable tourism development, where diverse voices and perspectives contribute to the well-being of both tourists and local residents (Graci, 2020; Gustafsson & Amer, 2023).

Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms

Establishing robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms is essential for assessing social sustainability and community well-being in tourism destinations. Implementing metrics to measure the impacts of tourism on local communities and continuously gathering feedback ensures adaptive policy improvements and the alignment of tourism practices with community needs and expectations (Hovelsrud, et al, 2021).

Effects on the Local Population

Understanding the socio-economic impacts of tourism on local residents is critical for creating sustainable tourism models that benefit communities. Monitoring the quality of life and well-being indicators among residents helps identify areas where tourism can enhance livelihoods and improve community welfare, facilitating a balanced and inclusive approach to tourism development (Kronenberg & Fuchs, 2022; Xie, 2020).

Public Services and Infrastructure

The adequacy of public services to support tourism development is essential for ensuring a seamless and enriching visitor experience while maintaining the well-being of local communities. Investing in infrastructure development that meets the needs of both tourists and local residents promotes sustainable tourism practices and enhances the overall quality of life in the destination (Oklevik et al, 2020; Ianioglo & Rissanen, 2020; Sæþórsdóttir et al, 2020).

Effects of Tourism on Housing for the Local Population

The growth of tourism can impact housing affordability and accessibility for local populations, leading to housing challenges such as displacement and changes in the housing market. Implementing policies to address these housing issues and protect the housing rights of residents helps mitigate potential adverse effects of tourism development on local housing markets (Adamiak, 2020; Mikulić et al 2021; Cró & Martins, 2024).

Responsibility for Socially Sustainable Tourism Development

Private companies play a crucial role in promoting social sustainability within tourism development by balancing profit motives with social and environmental

responsibility. Acknowledging the obligations of private sector entities to support socially sustainable practices ensures that tourism development benefits both local communities and the broader environment (Oklevik et al, 2020).

Health Outcomes

Considering the impacts of tourism on local health and well-being is essential for creating a sustainable and responsible tourism industry. Implementing health promotion initiatives within tourism development strategies helps safeguard the health and safety of both tourists and local residents, contributing to a more robust and resilient tourism sector (Godovykh & Ridderstaat, 2020).

Education

Providing educational opportunities and initiatives within the tourism sector enhances the knowledge and skills of individuals working in or affected by tourism activities. Community education programs play a crucial role in promoting sustainable tourism practices and fostering a deeper understanding of the importance of tourism for local communities and economies (Edelheim, 2020; Graci, 2020).

Community Perception

Understanding community attitudes and perceptions toward tourism development is key to growing a positive and supportive relationship between tourists and local residents. Implementing engagement strategies to address community concerns and enhance support for tourism initiatives builds trust and collaboration, leading to more sustainable and inclusive tourism development (Chen et al, 2020; Helgadóttir & Dashper, 2021).

Tourism Governance

Establishing effective frameworks and mechanisms for tourism governance ensures the transparent and accountable management of tourism activities. Upholding principles of transparency and accountability in tourism decision-making processes promotes the responsible and sustainable development of tourism destinations, benefiting both residents and visitors (Bogason et al, 2020, Karlsdóttir et al, 2021; Bishlet, 2021).

Decent Work

Promoting decent and fair employment opportunities in the tourism sector is essential for building a sustainable and inclusive industry. Supporting labour protections and workers' rights within the tourism sector enhances job quality, stimulates social equity, and contributes to the well-being of tourism workers and their communities (Filho et al, 2021; Ioannides et al, 2021).



Photo: Linus Mimietz / Unsplash.com

4.1.4 Conclusion of components of socially sustainable tourism

The literature review has provided a comprehensive understanding of what academia considers to be most relevant when analysing socially sustainable tourism. By examining the intersection of social, cultural, economic, and environmental factors within tourism development, the literature review presented multifaceted dimensions and contributed to critical components regarding the concept itself. Therefore, *socially sustainable tourism*, must be viewed as part of the broader concept of *sustainable tourism development* which includes environmental, economic, and social dimensions. The social dimension, which is often overlooked, is considered crucial for a balanced and successful sustainable tourism development. The social dimension of sustainable tourism development can therefore involve the improvement of host communities' living standards and the protection of local traditions and cultural landscapes, but also a construct of a socially responsible tourist, emphasising the need for tourists to be aware of and support social sustainability in their travel behaviours. While all the variables and topics gathered and categorised after the academic literature review are to some extent relevant to socially sustainable tourism in the Nordic countries, the emphasis on community engagement, cultural integrity, equity, stakeholder collaboration, and the well-being of the local population align closely with Nordic values and priorities. This makes those topics particularly significant in the context of tourism development in the region.

4.2 Grey literature: Defining and measuring sustainable tourism

To further compliment what academic research on sustainable tourism development, and especially the social dimensions of the concept entails, the research team took a look at existing frameworks and indicator schemes for measuring the sustainability of tourism. Numerous frameworks have been developed to measure the sustainability of tourism, each varying in scope, methodology, and application. However, this research will confine its focus to large-scale international schemes due to their comprehensive nature and widespread acceptance. Specifically, the study will examine frameworks developed by prominent organisations, such as the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the European Commission in conjunction with Eurostat, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC). These organisations have established to a wide degree recognised indicators that offer insights into various dimensions of sustainable tourism, including economic, environmental, and some social aspects. By centering on these leading frameworks, the research aims to provide a better overview of the topics and indicators that are currently influential and authoritative tools in shaping the discourse on sustainable tourism measurement.

4.2.1 Existing frameworks & Indicators

The Statistical Framework for Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism (SF-MST) is a newly developed multipurpose conceptual framework designed to support the recording and presentation of data about the sustainability of tourism. It aims to record data about tourism's economic, environmental and social connections. What falls under each dimension according to this framework can be seen in table 1 (UNWTO, 2023). Prior to this the UNWTO had presented a set of indicators that responded to policy and destination management needs, e.g. the 2004 UNWTO Guidebook for Indicators of Sustainable Development for Tourism Destinations (WTO, 2004). Other actors have also done some work on establishing relevant indicators for sustainable tourism development.

Eurostat released a comprehensive review in 2006 of the measurement of sustainable tourism which included 20 indicators, primarily from economic and environmental domains, along with a few social/cultural indicators. The indicator set was intended to be applied at regional/sub-national level (Eurostat, 2006). In 2022, Eurostat, jointly with the Member States, started working on an updated set of indicators on the sustainability of tourism. The main headings identified in that version are 1) economy, 2) labour market, 3) social and cultural (other than labour market), 4) environmental and 5) digitalisation (UNWTO, 2023).

Economic Dimension	Environmental Dimension	Social Dimension
Tourism industry value added	Water use in tourism industries	Culture/heritage
Tourism GDP	Energy use & intensity (including wastewater establishments)	Health outcomes
Tourism establishments	GHG emissions generated by tourism industries	Education
Tourism expenditure	Solid waste generated by tourism industries	Community
Tourism infrastructure assets	Land use (including marine areas)	Visitor perception
Employment in tourism industries	Ecosystem conditions and services for wildlife in protected areas	Tourism governance
Demographics of tourist flows	Wildlife protected areas/park	Accessibility
Investment in tourism assets	Green jobs	Decent work

Table 1. *The three dimensions of sustainable development and what falls under which according to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO, 2023).*

In 2010 the OECD also identified three main challenges for sustainable tourism - climate change, resource conservation, social cohesion. Their following work created a limited set of indicators. More recent work of the OECD covers a wider range of issues while the indicators are still quite general, focusing on demographics, GDP, labour force, environmental, landcover and innovation (OECD, 2016).

In 2013 the European Tourism Indicators System for sustainable destination management was developed with 43 core indicators (European Commission, 2016a) defined. This has since been further developed and now has more optional indicators. All the indicators are subdivided into four categories: 1) destination management, 2) social and cultural impact, 3) economic value, 4) environmental impact. The social and cultural impact indicators are 5 in total^[1] with 13 sub indicators (see Table 2).

1. Community/social impact, Health and safety, Gender equality, Inclusion/accessibility & Protecting and enhancing cultural heritage, local identity and assets (European Commission, 2016b)

ETIS social and cultural impact indicators	ETIS Indicator Description
C1 Community impact	Number of tourist visits per core resident
C1 Community impact	Percentage of residents who are satisfied with tourism in the destination (per month/season)
C1 Community impact	Number of beds available in commercial accommodation establishments per 100 residents
C1 Community impact	Number of second homes per 100 homes
C2 Health and safety	Percentage of tourists who register a complaint with the police
C3 Gender equality	Percentage of men and women employed in the tourism sector
C3 Gender equality	Percentage of tourism enterprises where the general manager position is held by a woman
C4 Social and cultural impact	Percentage of rooms in commercial accommodation establishments accessible for people with disabilities
C4 Social and cultural impact	Percentage of commercial accommodation establishments participating in recognised accessibility information schemes
C4 Social and cultural impact	Percentage of public transport that is accessible to people with disabilities and specific access requirements
C4 Social and cultural impact	Percentage of tourist attractions that are accessible to people with disabilities and/or participating in recognised accessibility information schemes
C5 Protecting and enhancing cultural heritage	Percentage of residents that are satisfied with the impacts of tourism on the cultural heritage, local destination's identity
C5 Protecting and enhancing cultural heritage	Percentage of the destination's events that are focused on traditional/local culture and heritage

Table 2. The social and cultural impact indicators in the ETIS system published by the European Commission in 2016 (European Commission, 2016a).

The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) Destination Criteria Version 2.0, which was presented in 2019, provides a framework and performance indicators for sustainable tourism. It was designed for application across diverse destinations, regardless of size or location, and involves various stakeholders including local communities, businesses, and governments (GSTC, 2019). It outlines expectations for destination management organisations to coordinate efforts on sustainable tourism. The criteria also include guidance for visitor management, local economic benefits, cultural heritage protection, and environmental sustainability. They serve as a foundation for certification, helping destinations validate their sustainable practices and communicate this commitment to tourists and other stakeholders.

The revised criteria promote a more developed approach to monitoring and improving sustainability performance across areas such as stakeholder engagement, economic contribution, cultural asset protection, resource management, and environmental impact mitigation. A commitment to improving the social fabrics such as health, safety, and cultural integrity within the tourism context is outlined as well as community engagement and feedback.

Based on previous work the European Commission has since also launched its so-called EU Tourism Dashboard which was made available in 2022. The online tool is aimed at promoting and monitoring the green and digital transitions, and socioeconomic resilience factors of EU tourism. The indicators are grouped in three policy-related categories: environmental impacts, digitalisation and socio-economic vulnerability (European Commission, 2022).

Since 2021 EU's EPA Network and Interest Group Environment and Tourism (IGET) has taken on the role of sharing environmental data to support the process of selecting indicators relating to the environmental dimension of tourism sustainability. The goal is to help provide a more complete picture of tourism in the context of monitoring environmental impacts (EPA, 2022).

4.2.2 Discussion on indicators – complexity of measuring social aspects

These indicator initiatives highlight the relevance of measuring the performance of countries and destinations as part of implementing sustainable tourism objectives. Although all three dimensions of sustainable tourism development are usually considered in these indicator systems, traditionally the most prominent focus has been on economic performance while environmental consequences of tourism have become more prominent in recent years. As shown, the social dimension of sustainable tourism development is now also being considered to a greater extent. Nonetheless, quantitative measures used for environmental and economic dimensions are not as easily accessible when it comes to social sustainability. Social indicators often involve subjective assessments and diverse perspectives, making it challenging to create standardised metrics that capture the complex social aspects

of sustainable tourism. The relevance of these social indicators might also vary greatly from one destination to the next based on contextual differences since each region has unique social, economic, and environmental contexts that shape their priorities when it comes to tourism development.

Furthermore, social impacts, such as community well-being, cultural preservation, and social equity, are intangible and context-specific, making them difficult to quantify and measure consistently across different destinations and communities. Social sustainability in tourism is influenced by a wide range of factors, including community engagement, cultural preservation, and social inclusion, which involve multiple stakeholders with varying interests and priorities, making it challenging to capture and measure the breadth of social impacts accurately.

It should also be noted that social impacts of sustainable tourism development often unfold over extended periods, requiring long-term monitoring and evaluation to assess changes in community well-being, cultural identity, and social cohesion, which adds complexity to measuring the continuous and evolving nature of social sustainability. Also, compared to environmental and economic data, social data for sustainable tourism development can be harder to collect, less standardised, and reliant on self-reported or anecdotal information. This can lead to potential data gaps, inconsistencies and reliability issues in measuring social impacts effectively.

In measuring the sustainability of tourism, a range of social indicators serves to assess the multifaceted impacts on local communities and visitors. Key indicators include cultural and heritage preservation, reflected in the percentage of residents satisfied with tourism's impact on cultural heritage and the identity of the local destination, as well as the focus on traditional/local culture in destinations. Health outcomes, education levels, and overall community well-being are, according to the existing indicators, considered crucial aspects as well, capturing the broader social dynamics influenced by tourism. Visitor perception is another critical domain, indicating tourist satisfaction, safety, and their interactions with local culture. Effective tourism governance, demonstrated by the management roles assigned to women and the overall employment equity in the sector, further highlights the importance of inclusivity and equitable opportunities within tourism enterprises. Accessibility remains a vital component, evaluated through the accessibility of commercial accommodations, public transport, and tourist attractions for people with disabilities, alongside the participation in recognised accessibility schemes.

Based on the academic literature review presented earlier and the brief introduction to some of the existing monitoring schemes it becomes clear that achieving a comprehensive understanding of the social dimension of sustainable tourism development based on a standardised indicators is a complex task. The interests and priorities of local stakeholders – including residents, businesses, and policymakers – can vary widely, influencing which indicators are deemed most important. The historical development of a region, including past tourism initiatives and their outcomes, can affect current priorities and strategies. Different

characteristics like demographic composition, cultural values, income levels and employment rates, available natural resources, environmental sensitivity, how tourism is governed and the regulatory environment all play a role in what affects social values at different destinations.

A better understanding of the social dimension of sustainable tourism therefore requires an integrative and holistic approach that incorporates diverse perspectives, community engagement, and participatory methods, that can contribute to a framework that capture the interconnectedness of the social as well as the environmental and economic aspects. The next step of the research was therefore to examine the national tourism policies of the Nordic countries to see if and how they address the social dimension of sustainable tourism development.



Photo: Kotryna Juskaite

5. Cross-Nordic Policy Review: National Tourism Policy Analyses from the basis of the academic literature review

For the review of the Nordic national tourism policies the most relevant policy documents at the state level were analysed. These documents are not in all ways comparable since they are not equally detailed. Some are developed within ministries but others by institutions or public tourism bodies. There is also some difference since the policy documents sometimes contain strict overall tourism policies while others also include action plans to implement those policies, either in the same plan or as a separate document. In those instances, both documents were included in the analyses. Some of the national tourism policies set out broad overall goals for the tourism industry, regions and municipalities and other actors on how tourism should ideally develop over the coming years while other national tourism policies go further and operationalise some of the topics they address in a more detailed way. Either way, the overview and analyses of these policies provides a good general overview of themes and objectives that the Nordic countries, on a national level, present as priorities when it comes to tourism development.

The policies were analysed with reference to the 16 social components of socially sustainable tourism that were identified in the academic literature review. While some policies address all of those topics, or very related topics, others do not. However, from a strict policy perspective, there are many shared common aspects among all the Nordic countries when it comes to tourism development. The Nordic countries mainly share priorities in sustainability and environmental stewardship, quality standards and safety, nature-based and outdoor tourism, and cultural preservation across the Nordic countries along with local community engagement, where each nation tailors its tourism policies to leverage its distinct strengths and address specific challenges. These differences underscore the rich diversity within the Nordic region while also highlighting their common vision for future development.

Community Engagement and Empowerment

The Nordic countries' tourism policies reflect this principle. For instance, the Danish tourism policy emphasises the importance of community involvement in tourism planning and development, ensuring that local voices are heard and considered (Erhvervsministeriet, 2022). Similarly, the Faroe Islands' policy highlights the role of local communities in shaping tourism experiences, promoting community-led initiatives and capacity building (Visit Faroe Islands, 2023). Finland's tourism strategy focuses on empowering local communities through participatory planning processes and decision-making opportunities (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2020). This approach is echoed in Greenland's policy, which underscores the significance of community engagement in tourism development, fostering local ownership and empowerment (Visit Greenland, 2021). Iceland's tourism policies stress the need for community involvement in tourism governance, ensuring that local communities benefit from tourism activities (Menningar- og viðskiptaráðuneyti, 2024a; 2024b). This is in line with Norway's tourism strategy, which promotes community engagement through collaborative planning and capacity-building initiatives (Visit Norway, 2021).

The Swedish tourism policy advocates for community participation in tourism development, emphasising the importance of local input and empowerment (Näringsdepartementet, 2021). Similarly, Åland's roadmap for sustainable tourism highlights the role of local communities in tourism planning and development, promoting community-led initiatives and decision-making (Ålands landskapsregering, 2023).

In essence, the Nordic national policies demonstrate a strong commitment to community engagement and empowerment, recognising that sustainable tourism is not just about attracting visitors, but also about ensuring that tourism development benefits the local communities and enhances their well-being. This approach is also considered crucial for achieving acceptance, legitimacy and thus fosters a more social sustainability in tourism development.

Cultural Integrity, Heritage Preservation, Environmental Intersectionality, and Social Consideration

The Nordic countries place some emphasis on preserving cultural integrity and promoting heritage conservation in their tourism policies. For instance, Norway's tourism policy promotes the integration of sustainable practices across the tourism value chain, fostering partnerships with environmental organisations to ensure that tourism development is both environmentally and socially responsible. The Norwegian tourism policy further highlights the importance of enhancing Sami tourism and cultural integration (Visit Norway, 2021). Similarly, the strategies of Iceland, Greenland, and Finland underscore the need for a tourism industry that respects and preserves local culture and heritage. They also stress the importance of managing visitor pressure to prevent over-tourism and community displacement, ensuring that tourism development is environmentally responsible and socially considerate (Menningar- og viðskiptaráðuneyti, 2024a; Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2020; Visit Greenland, 2021). Greenland's policy also emphasises the significance of community engagement in tourism development, especially fostering local ownership and empowerment while preserving cultural heritage (Visit Greenland, 2021). Sweden's tourism policy advocates for community participation and local empowerment to maintain cultural integrity and promote heritage conservation (Näringsdepartementet, 2021). Åland's roadmap for sustainable tourism highlights the role of local communities in tourism planning and development as well. The policy promotes community-led initiatives and decision-making, and it is stated that should be done to ensure that tourism development aligns with local cultural and environmental values (Ålands landskapsregering, 2023).

As such, the Nordic countries' tourism policies collectively emphasise the importance of preserving cultural integrity and promoting heritage conservation. They advocate for strategies that uphold and promote local cultural heritage while ensuring authenticity in tourist experiences. In this way, the policies recognise that sustainable tourism is not just about attracting visitors but also about ensuring that tourism development benefits local communities and enhances their well-being, preserves cultural values and thereby contributing to a more meaningful and sustainable tourism industry.

Over-Tourism and Community Displacement

The negative effects of over-tourism, such as increased visitor pressure and community displacement, can be significant challenges to sustainable tourism. The Nordic tourism policies offer insights into how various Nordic countries address these issues in their policies. For instance, the Swedish tourism policy discusses the potential erosion of natural and cultural values due to a large number of visitors. It emphasises the need for visitors to show care and responsibility for the destination

so that it is not destroyed or impoverished. In addition, the policy mentions the problem of over-tourism in many other countries and advocates for planning for sustainable tourism at all levels to avoid such a development in Sweden (Näringsdepartementet, 2021).

Similarly, the policy from Åland highlights the issue of seasonal tourism, which can lead to high volumes of visitors during certain periods of the year. The policy advocates for the creation of new seasons and extension of existing ones to manage visitor pressure effectively (Ålands landskapsregering, 2023). The Faroe Islands' tourism policy advocates for the creation of new seasons and extension of existing ones as well to distribute visitor numbers more evenly throughout the year. This approach aims to mitigate the negative impacts of over-tourism and ensure the well-being of local communities and the policy also emphasises the need to manage visitor pressure effectively to prevent over-tourism (Visit Faroe Islands, 2023).

Norway's tourism strategy discusses the challenges posed by rapid tourism growth in quite some detail. It highlights the need for improved management capabilities at destinations and stronger cooperation between public and private stakeholders. The strategy also acknowledges the growing pains experienced due to volume growth at iconic natural attractions, in harbours welcoming lots of cruise arrivals, and in charming districts visited by many people, especially during peak seasons. Norway emphasises the need for a balanced approach to tourism development to prevent community displacement and protect natural and cultural values (Visit Norway, 2021).

Iceland's tourism policy stresses the importance of managing visitor pressure to prevent over-tourism in a similar way. The policies advocate for community involvement in tourism governance to ensure that local communities benefit from tourism activities while preserving their cultural heritage. This approach aims to balance tourism development with the well-being of residents and the cultural fabric of the region (Menningar- og viðskiptaráðuneyti, 2024a; 2024b).

Overall, the Nordic policies demonstrate a commitment to addressing the challenges posed by over-tourism and community displacement. They highlight the importance of conducting impact assessments, implementing measures to manage visitor pressure, and preventing displacement. Most often this is said to be safeguarding the well-being of residents and the cultural fabric of the region, thereby contributing to a more sustainable tourism industry in the long run.

Equity and Accessibility

Equity and accessibility can be said to be themes in many of the Nordic countries' tourism policies. These policies discuss the importance of making tourism opportunities available to diverse community members and the discussion also addresses distributing benefits of tourism equitably across regions. For instance,

the Finnish tourism strategy discusses the need for equitable distribution of tourism benefits. It mentions that improved round-the-year spread of tourism will have positive effects on other industries, regions, and host populations by providing host residents with employment and promoting sustainable development in the region (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2020).

Similarly, the policy from Åland focuses on social, economic, and ecological dimensions of sustainable tourism. It aims to engage local communities in policy development and promote slow tourism for authentic cultural immersion. The strategy also discusses the development of the accessibility of tourism services and the importance of communicating about accessibility (Ålands landskapsregering, 2023). In Norway, public and private businesses that work with the general public, including outdoor areas, commercial buildings, public buildings, and transport, are obliged by law to ensure universal design. The aim is to ensure that services can be used by everyone, including people with disabilities, visual impairments or hearing impairments, and people with various diseases such as asthma and allergies, as well as the elderly, pregnant women, and people with temporary injuries. This is translated directly into the tourism policy as basis to create equitable tourism (Visit Norway, 2021).

The Nordic countries' tourism policies collectively contribute to the concept of equity and accessibility in tourism. They address various aspects, including community engagement, cultural preservation, equity, health, and stable employment.

The Balance of Tradition and Innovation

Balancing tradition and innovation in tourism practices is essential for preserving cultural heritage while embracing new and sustainable tourism trends. This balance ensures that communities can benefit from tourism development without compromising their cultural identities. By preserving cultural heritage amidst technological advancements, destinations can offer unique and authentic experiences to visitors.

The Nordic countries' tourism policies highlight the importance of this balance. For instance, the Finnish tourism strategy emphasises the need for the tourism industry to be aware of gradual developments due to changes in customer behaviour, consumption, digitalisation, or other new technologies. This proactive approach ensures that the industry can adapt to new trends while preserving cultural heritage (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2020). In the Faroe Islands, the tourism policy integrates the preservation of cultural heritage with innovative tourism practices. The policy advocates for the promotion of local traditions and culture while encouraging the use of digital tools and sustainable technologies to enhance the visitor experience. This approach ensures that the cultural identity of the Faroe Islands is maintained while embracing modern

tourism trends (Visit Faroe Islands, 2023). Greenland's tourism policy also reflects this balance by emphasising the importance of community engagement in tourism development that can attract visitors and benefit the local economy. This dual focus is meant to ensure that tourism development in Greenland is both culturally sensitive and forward-looking (Visit Greenland, 2021).

Norway's tourism strategy underscores the significance of integrating sustainable practices across the tourism value chain. The strategy promotes the use of cutting-edge technologies in traditional tourism offerings to enhance visitor experiences while preserving cultural authenticity (Visit Norway, 2021). Denmark's tourism policy discusses a strategic focus on digitalisation and the green transition in the tourism sector. The policy advocates for the electrification of transportation for tourists and the incorporation of technologies in traditional tourism offerings. (Erhvervsministeriet, 2022).

In summary, the Nordic countries' tourism policies collectively address the importance of balancing tradition and innovation. They recognise the value of preserving cultural heritage while embracing new trends and technologies so communities can benefit from tourism development without compromising their cultural identities.



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Stakeholder Collaboration and Partnerships

Collaboration among various stakeholders, including government entities, local communities, and industry partners, is a common theme in the Nordic tourism policies. The Finnish tourism strategy highlights the role of multi-stakeholder partnerships in achieving sustainable tourism development. It emphasises the need for interaction on a national, regional, and local level, and in all sectors and stakeholder groups in the tourist industry, as well as from corporate level to ministry level. Interaction is needed among commercial stakeholders, fully and semi-public enterprises and the voluntary sector. Public-private partnerships should be encouraged, along with increased use of networks, clusters and measures to promote innovation and interaction within the tourist industry, but also with other sectors and industries (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2020).

Similarly, the Swedish tourism policy discusses the need for strategic collaboration as well as risk analyses. It also takes into account the needs of tourism businesses within existing support structures. With this strategy, the Government shows the desired situation for Swedish tourism and the hospitality industry in ten years' time. This can help to establish a consensus that can facilitate sustainable development throughout the tourism industry's stakeholder system (Näringsdepartementet, 2021). In Denmark, tourism policy outlines an approach for developing socially sustainable tourism, with a clear focus on community engagement, cultural integrity, accessibility, and environmental sustainability. The strategy highlights the importance of collaborative initiatives between government, local communities, and the industry, including public-private partnerships to bolster socially responsible tourism practices (Erhvervsministeriet, 2022). Often, this however seems rather directed towards the visitors rather than the host community.

In summary, all the Nordic policies demonstrate a strong commitment to stakeholder collaboration and references to this can be found in all countries.

Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms

Establishing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms is needed for assessing social sustainability and community well-being in tourism destinations. Some of the Nordic tourism policies address this. The Finnish tourism strategy highlights the role of key quantitative indicators such as tourism employment, registered overnight stays, accommodation sales, and the number of visits to protected areas. It also discusses the development of indicators for the assessment of sustainability at regional, national, and international levels. This approach is meant to contribute to continuous monitoring and evaluation so that the impacts of tourism on local communities are leading to adaptive policy improvements (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2020).

The Norwegian tourism policy addresses this to some extent highlighting the overall

importance of metrics to evaluate social sustainability and community well-being, incorporating various indicators to complement existing ones like tourism employment, registered overnight stays, accommodation sales, and the number of visits to protected areas. Continuous feedback systems are discussed as essential to enable adaptive policy improvements, ensuring tourism practices remain aligned with community needs and expectations. Socio-economic impacts on local residents are mentioned as vital as well through indicators like quality of life and well-being, assessing the adequacy of public services and infrastructure to support tourism development. The strategy highlights the importance of developing infrastructure that meets the needs of both tourists and local communities, ensuring adequate public services to support tourism growth (Visit Norway, 2021).

To translate strategic objectives into actions, the Norwegian strategy recommends the formulation of concrete action plans. These plans, produced every two years and valid for two years at a time, shall clearly outline implementation details, financial measures, and responsibilities. A coordination group is tasked with drawing up these action plans, while the implementation responsibility is shared among the concerned parties. The use of key quantitative indicators shall be used in assessing the progress of these strategies and the overall impact of tourism on local communities (Visit Norway, 2021).

Effects on the Local Population and Community Perception

Norway's tourism strategy emphasises the importance of increasing the creation of value and jobs across the country in a way that enriches local communities. The strategy highlights that all types of visitors, including cabin owners, bring significant purchasing power to towns or communities, beyond what is generated by the local population. This influx strengthens the economic base for suppliers of goods and services in various sectors, including trade, cultural offerings, activity facilities, building and construction, cleaning, advertising, tradesmen, safety/security, health services, voluntary organisations, and food producers. At the same time, it can put increased pressure on public infrastructure and services. The strategy aims to ensure that tourism contributes to attractive local communities and satisfied residents, with employment and settlement increasing in areas where tourism activity grows and where infrastructure development can also grow accordingly (Visit Norway, 2021).

Similarly, the Finnish tourism strategy underscores the positive impacts of tourism on local communities and overall well-being. It aims for sustainable and prosperous societies by promoting tourism that supports local and regional development, investment, services, and the conservation and development of natural and cultural environments. The strategy also highlights the importance of high-quality health care and well-being holidays for visitors, indicating a focus on enhancing the quality of life for both tourists and residents (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2020).

Therefore, the Nordic countries' tourism policies highlight the importance of understanding the socio-economic impacts of tourism on local residents and investing in public services and infrastructure to support tourism development. However, the tourism policies mainly focus on the possible positive outcomes but do to a lesser extent address the possible negative impacts. The Norwegian strategy does however address that the economic impacts of tourism can lead to income disparities, with some benefiting more than others, exacerbating social inequalities within communities. Additionally, the rising cost of living in popular tourist destinations can strain the financial resources of local residents. Job quality in the tourism sector may be low, marked by seasonal employment and lack of benefits, contributing to job insecurity for many (Visit Norway, 2021). The Norwegian policy also discusses tolerance towards tourists as something that needs to be monitored in popular destinations and that is also briefly mentioned in the Icelandic policy (Menningar- og viðskiptaráðuneyti, 2024a; 2024b).

Public Services and Infrastructure

Public services and infrastructure are understandably much discussed in Nordic tourism policies. These topics are viewed as essential for supporting tourism development, possible growth in tourism development as well as crucial for regional and local development in relation to tourism. The adequacy of public services is generally discussed in the Nordic policies as necessary and a vital part of enriching visitor experience at the same time as maintaining the well-being of local communities. Norway's strategy discusses the need for the trade and service offerings in municipalities with tourism and many second-home cabins to be greater than what is implied solely by the number of residents (Visit Norway, 2021). Iceland's policy in a similar way discusses that infrastructure must be able to support both tourists and local residents, enhancing the overall quality of life in the destination for locals (Menningar- og viðskiptaráðuneyti, 2024a; 2024b). In Åland, the tourism strategy emphasises the development of infrastructure to meet the needs of both tourists and local communities. The strategy advocates for the creation of new seasons and the extension of existing ones to manage visitor pressure effectively. Åland further addresses infrastructure development to support tourism growth and at the same time being able to offer better service provision and public infrastructure for local residents (Ålands landskapsregering, 2023).

Generally, the Nordic policies discuss the need for adequate infrastructure development and public services along with a growing tourism development. Thus, including transportation systems, healthcare facilities, waste management, public safety services and health is highlighted in many of the policies and deemed as critical to accommodating the needs of both tourists and residents alike. Pressure on infrastructure and public services is quite prominent in both the policies for Norway, Finland and Iceland (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2020; Visit Norway, 2021; Menningar- og viðskiptaráðuneyti, 2024a; 2024b) while also being mentioned in the policies of other countries.

Effects of Tourism on Housing for the Local Population

While the effects of tourism on housing for local populations is a widely discussed issue in popular tourism areas this is not addressed to any extent in the Nordic tourism policies. Housing affordability and accessibility can emerge as a critical issue affecting local populations, and this has been a discussion especially in Iceland and some parts of Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The Norwegian policy elucidates how the expansion of tourism can exert pressure on housing markets, leading to soaring prices and a scarcity of affordable housing options for residents. This dilemma is particularly pronounced in regions witnessing a surge in tourism activity, where the escalating housing demand fuelled by tourism development exacerbates challenges for local inhabitants seeking affordable housing solutions. The discourse surrounding land use and cabins in Norway underscores the intricacies of balancing tourism development aspirations with the imperative of preserving local landscapes and community interests. Attractive areas in many locations in Norway are under pressure due to tourism development. This affects development opportunities for tourism and leads to discussions about the use of land for the construction of holiday homes and activity facilities in the mountains and at the seaside. These discussions often involve conflicts between local business interests and the priorities of the wider community, such as conservation measures and infrastructure developments (Visit Norway, 2021).

Responsibility for Socially Sustainable Tourism Development and Tourism Governance

While all the Nordic tourism policies discuss sustainable development of the industry as a whole the responsibility for such a development is not necessarily addressed in great detail. General sustainable development of tourism is most often said to be the responsibility of the whole industry. The Finnish tourism strategy highlights the importance of reducing climate emissions in line with international agreements and reducing resource utilisation. This extensive task is said to require a holistic approach with a commitment from all players in the tourism industry (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2020). Private companies are therefore said to play a pivotal role in promoting social sustainability within tourism development by balancing profit motives with social and environmental responsibility. As such, a sustainable tourism industry must take responsibility for the current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts of tourism. This involves addressing the needs of visitors, businesses, employees, destinations, and the environment (ibid).

Many policies mention various quality assurance and monitoring initiatives, such as certifications and labels, to guide visitors towards more sustainable choices and so on without further operationalisation of responsibility for a socially sustainable tourism development. Initiatives like certifications indirectly stimulate more efforts

by companies and destinations to develop their products and services in a sustainable direction. In Greenland, the tourism industry is encouraged to work in various ways to account for the situation of local residents and landowners, ensuring that tourism development does not negatively impact local communities (Visit Greenland, 2021). In the Norwegian policy, different sectors are directly addressed and said to be responsible to participate in turning the tourism sector green. Transport, accommodation and food services, attractions and retail are among the sectors that the strategy mentions specifically (Visit Norway, 2021).

The discussion on responsibility in sustainable tourism development is closely linked with effective tourism governance frameworks. While all countries have sustainable development of their tourism industry as an overarching goal, the responsibility for insuring that the social dimension of sustainability is considered in balance with the economic and environmental is nearly never operationalised. As mentioned earlier, all Nordic policies highlight the importance of stakeholder participation in governing tourism development. Most of the policies put forward are a general guideline for a sustainable tourism development that are then to be implemented at regional or local levels while some policies include strategies and specific actions at national level. All policies do however share the view that collaboration between government bodies, local communities, industry partners, organisations and the public is vital.

Health Outcomes, Education and Decent Work

Finally, the Nordic policies do to a limited extent discuss impacts of tourism on local health outcomes and well-being. Some policies address the implementation of health promotion initiatives within tourism development strategies to safeguard the health and safety of both tourists and local residents. For instance, the Finnish tourism strategy highlights the importance of high-quality health care and well-being holidays for visitors, indicating a focus on enhancing the quality of life for both tourists and residents (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2020). Moreover, some of the policies emphasise the need for environmental impact assessments to monitor tourism's effects on human health, living conditions, and community structure to ensure that tourism development does not negatively impact the health and well-being of local people (Visit Norway, 2021).

Providing educational opportunities and initiatives within the tourism sector is however quite widely discussed as a goal in the tourism policies of all the Nordic countries. That is generally said to enhance the knowledge and skills of individuals working in or affected by tourism activities. The policies share a discussion on the importance of community education programs in promoting sustainable tourism practices and fostering a deeper understanding of the importance of tourism for local communities and economies. For example, the Norwegian tourism strategy highlights the need for a nationally coordinated, program-based skills boost for further and higher education in the tourism industry (Visit Norway, 2021). In a

similar way, Iceland and Norway address the lack of labour and skilled staff with relevant and up-to-date skills within different sectors in the tourism industry to be better addressed, meeting the needs of both workers and companies while creating new opportunities for work in e.g. rural regions (Menningar- og viðskiptaráðuneyti, 2024a).

The Finnish tourism strategy also emphasises the importance of lifelong learning and higher education in tourism related sectors. It discusses the need for mobility between forms of education and the ability to switch between education and work or combine the two. This flexibility is crucial for developing the range of training programs aimed at the hospitality industry and improving the match between the supply of education and labour market demands (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2020).

All policies then generally address the seasonality of tourism work, the dilemma and challenge of making tourism related work a less seasonal occupation, enhance job quality and thus foster social equity and contribute to the well-being of tourism workers and their communities. For instance, the Finnish tourism strategy highlights the need for good working conditions and a good working environment, which are crucial for retaining and developing staff. It also discusses the importance of skills development, clearer career paths, and opportunities for career change, indicating a commitment to promoting decent work in the tourism sector (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2020). Similarly, the Swedish tourism policy underscores the need for easily understandable and appropriate rules, good treatment and service from authorities, and regulations that promote innovation and capitalise on technological and digital developments. These measures aim to improve the conditions for entrepreneurship and ensure that tourism development benefits both local communities and the broader environment (Näringsdepartementet, 2021).



Photo: Kotryna Juskaite

6. Discussion and suggestions

From the policy analyses conducted, it becomes clear that the Nordic tourism policies do in many ways cover the main topics that the academic literature review and analyses of existing sustainable indicator frameworks consider essential in assessing the social dimension of sustainable tourism development.

Understandably, each unique country customises its tourism policies to certain priorities that take note of its particular advantages as well as address certain challenges or obstacles. On the national policy level, the Nordic countries therefore all reflect a strong commitment to sustainability in general, with varying degrees of emphasis on social aspects.

The academic literature review on socially sustainable tourism highlights the importance of community engagement, cultural preservation, and social inclusion among other things. These themes are to some extent included in existing frameworks and indicators, such as the Statistical Framework for Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism and the UNWTO's indicators for sustainable tourism. These frameworks aim to capture the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of tourism, although the social aspects are often less developed and harder to measure (UNTWO, 2023; WTO, 2004; OECD, 2024).

The operationalisation of socially sustainable tourism in Nordic policies varies as it does in existing indicator frameworks. While some policies set broad goals, others provide more detailed actions. For example, Norway's policy includes specific

sectors responsible for turning the tourism sector green, such as transport and accommodation (Visit Norway, 2021) and Iceland's tourism policy is accompanied by a specific action plan that is meant to put certain priorities in motion (Menningar- og viðskiptaráðuneyti, 2024b). Overall, many policies lack concrete measures and operationalisation for social sustainability, focusing more on measurable economic and environmental aspects (Karlsdóttir et al., 2020; Bogason et al., 2021; Broegaard, 2022). It should also be noted that these measurements and concrete actions are in some instances further discussed and put into practice in separate proposals or plans that are developed on the regional or local levels or meant to do so in the future.

In the context of the Nordic countries, identifying and operationalising social indicators for sustainable tourism development involves several common and shared key aspects. Firstly, from the policy review, the community well-being appears as a crucial indicator, encompassing the overall quality of life for local residents, including access to public infrastructure and services like healthcare, education, and recreational facilities. Social equity is also important as stressed in the national tourism policies. The discussions mainly relates to ensuring that the benefits of tourism are distributed fairly among different community groups, including marginalised populations, that local benefits are maximised, and that tourism development happens on the terms of the local community.

Cultural preservation is another vital aspect as it appears in the policies. Possible indicators that are discussed in some policies aim to track the conservation of cultural heritage sites and traditional practices. The extent and quality of interactions between tourists and local communities are also frequently mentioned and can form a basis for another indicator that could be measured and utilised to promote mutual understanding and respect. Employment and economic opportunities are significant indicators that are part of existing indicator systems and have a specific economic focus. Those indicators do however also have a social component to them as they could further focus not only on the number of jobs, but also quality of jobs created by tourism, fair wages, stable work and working conditions in general. Additionally, the contribution of tourism to diversifying the local economy and reducing dependency on a single industry could be assessed, not only in economic terms but also social terms.

Capacity building is another crucial aspect that appears throughout the tourism policies. Ideas like training programs being offered to local residents appear to enhance their skills and employability in the tourism industry are sometimes mentioned in this context. Conducting awareness campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of sustainable tourism and community participation among tourists and locals is another example. Collaboration and partnerships are also very prominent in the Nordic tourism policies. Frequently cooperation is said to be best fostered through multi-stakeholder platforms that bring together the relevant authorities, the private sector, and local communities to address the development

of tourism. However, the social dimension of tourism development is generally not addressed directly in reference to such platforms in the policies.

From the policy review it also becomes clear that the national tourism policies are in agreement with literature on the subject of sustainable tourism development that community participation is essential. Indicators measuring the involvement of local communities in tourism planning and decision-making processes could therefore be beneficial, but the measurement of such participation is discussed in a very limited way in the Nordic policies despite the fact that this is highlighted in every tourism policy. Furthermore, the effectiveness of local governance structures in managing tourism development sustainably should also be evaluated to meet the standards and aims that are put forward in the tourism policies. Local governance and local participation of tourism development is a shared priority goal in all of the Nordic tourism policies. Evaluation and feedback mechanisms of such frameworks are however to a limited extent addressed in the national policies. In the same way, social infrastructure – including the adequacy of public services such as transportation, sanitation, healthcare, safety and security – should also be assessed in a more systematic way to support both residents and tourists.

To operationalise these indicators, data collection and monitoring are key. Regular surveys and questionnaires are one way to gather data on community well-being, cultural preservation, and employment conditions. Establishing platforms for local residents to provide feedback on tourism impacts and development plans is also important. But for this to be possible, it requires both resources and a methodologically comprehensive approach. Beyond regular surveys and feedback platforms – which require both commitment and funding from those that govern the tourism development at both local, regional and national level – several technical and methodological steps need to be taken. Establishing baselines for the things to be measured is a critical first step. Baselines provide a reference point against which changes can be measured over time. To set these baselines, initial data collection should be conducted before any significant tourism developments begin. Since this is impossible in many instances where the tourism landscape has already transformed in recent years, this is a step that should be taken as soon as possible. Creating baselines would involve gathering detailed and relevant information about the current state of community well-being, cultural practices, employment conditions and so on.

Once baselines are established, ongoing data collection is essential to monitor changes and trends. This requires the development of standardised data collection protocols to ensure consistency over time. Such protocols include clear definitions of indicators, standardised survey questions, and consistent data entry and management practices. Methodologically, and as discussed, the possible social indicators are harder to measure since they can be less consistent, they are intangible and often possess both objective and subjective elements. Therefore, it is important to employ both quantitative and qualitative research methods. While

quantitative data provides measurable and comparable results, qualitative data offers deeper insights into the experiences and perceptions of local communities. Combining both methods better ensures a holistic understanding of social impacts. Since qualitative data can be inconsistent, validation of the data gathered can be done with e.g. triangulation by cross-verifying results from multiple sources. For example, survey results can be compared with feedback from focus groups and interviews to ensure reliability and accuracy.

The gathering of more qualitative information can then be utilised in different ways. Longitudinal studies can be conducted to track changes over extended periods, providing a more comprehensive view of the long-term impacts of tourism. Geospatial analysis of social indicators could also be utilised to better understand the spatial distribution of tourism impacts. This would involve mapping community well-being and other social indicators and compare them geographically to identify patterns and areas of concern. More advanced statistical techniques, such as regression analysis, could in this way help identify causal relationships and thus also predict future trends.

Stakeholder engagement is another critical aspect throughout the data collection and monitoring process. Involving local communities, tourism operators, and government agencies in the design and implementation of monitoring systems ensures that the indicators are relevant and that data collection efforts are supported and accurate. Regular reporting and communication of findings to all stakeholders enhance transparency and accountability. Creating accessible reports and visualisations of the data analysed can in this way assist communities and policymakers to use the data to perform informed decision-making.

As mentioned before, the methods mentioned here require a commitment from those that govern the tourism development, and they are demanding on resources. However, applying adaptive management practices that take social considerations into account can only be applied if the relevant information is available. Implementing and integrating, and thus allowing for the continuous review and adjustment of policies and strategies based on monitoring results rely on information gathering. Such iterative processes ensure that tourism development remains responsive to the needs and well-being of local communities, leading to more sustainable and equitable social outcomes.



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7. Conclusion

According to our results – mainly through a cross-comparison of what academic literature highlights as important social subjects in tourism development, existing indicator frameworks and the tourism priorities – inclusive policies that explicitly address social indicators and ensure inclusive benefits for all community members have in many ways already been developed in the Nordic countries. Furthermore, the Nordic countries also have existing regulatory frameworks that to some extent protect certain cultural heritage, environments and promotes fair labour practices. In this sense, Nordic tourism policy framework accounts for all three dimensions of sustainable tourism – the economic, the environmental and the social dimension as well. However, further conceptualising and operationalisation of how the social dimension should be considered, measured, monitored and utilised in sustainable tourism development is generally lacking.

Social and cultural aspects play a pivotal role in shaping truly sustainable tourism. Socially sustainable tourism emphasises the preservation of cultural integrity and heritage, ensuring that tourism development does not erode the cultural fabric of local communities. It involves promoting heritage conservation and maintaining authenticity in tourist experiences and hosting communities which contributes to a more meaningful and sustainable tourism industry. The negative effects of over-tourism, such as community displacement and increased visitor pressure, highlight the need for impact assessments to manage tourism growth effectively. Ensuring

equitable distribution of tourism benefits and access to opportunities for all community members is also crucial for positive social outcomes. These practices help maintain a balance between tourism development and local social and environmental concerns, fostering a socially responsible tourism industry.

In the context of Nordic tourism development specifically, social aspects are increasingly being considered in policy development alongside environmental and economic dimensions. National tourism policies in the Nordic countries reflect a strong commitment to sustainability, however with varying degrees of emphasis on social aspects. Community well-being, social equity, cultural preservation and possible local benefits are key social themes in these policies. There are discussions on benefits contributing back to the hosting community, that the benefits of tourism are distributed fairly among different community groups, including marginalised populations, and that tourism development aligns with the terms of the local community. However, the operationalisation of socially sustainable tourism varies, with some policies setting broad goals and others providing more detailed actions. Overall, there is a growing recognition of the importance of the social dimension in sustainable tourism development in the Nordic region. How to measure this systematically is however not conceptualised in depth and effective measurement resources are often lacking.

The main social indicators for measuring the impacts of tourism in the Nordic regions, at least at the policy level, include community well-being, social equity, and cultural preservation. Community well-being encompasses the overall quality of life for local residents, including access to public infrastructure and services like healthcare, education, and recreational facilities. Social equity focuses on the fair distribution of tourism benefits the community and different community groups. Cultural preservation involves tracking the conservation of cultural heritage sites and traditional practices. These indicators help capture the complex impacts of tourism on local communities and visitors, providing a better understanding of the social dynamics influenced by tourism. However, measuring social impacts can be challenging due to the complexity and evolving nature of social sustainability, as well as potential data gaps and inconsistencies.

Understanding social attitudes, wellbeing, tolerance and how communities generally view increased tourism activities is crucial, as they significantly influence the success and acceptance of tourism initiatives. Nordic countries and regions can learn from each other by sharing best practices and experiences in sustainable tourism development. There is a common understanding of the importance of community engagement, cultural integrity, equity, stakeholder collaboration, and the well-being of the local population in the context of sustainable tourism. By focusing on the key social indicators that have been addressed in this research and creating operational strategies to include social aspects in tourism development, the Nordic countries can ensure that tourism development is not only economically viable but also socially inclusive and culturally respectful, contributing to an increasing overall sustainability of the tourism development in the region.



Photo: Kotryna Juskaite

8. Research outline & next steps of the research

This paper, being the first output of the project – provides an academic literature review, a short overview of existing indicator frameworks to assess the sustainability of tourism development, and a policy review of Nordic national tourism policies – has thus far provided outlines and some answers to the research questions presented at the beginning of this report.

So far, the research has provided insights into the social sustainability of tourism development in the region. The literature review has helped to answer the initial research questions by identifying key themes and aspects of social sustainability in tourism. The next steps will involve a more detailed analysis of how these themes are applied in practice. That will be carried out through case studies and stakeholder interviews to provide a more comprehensive understanding of social tourism sustainability, if and how it is applied in practice.

The results of the next phase of the project, building on the insights gleaned from this report, will be analysed along with the results of this report to assess how socially sustainable tourism development is initially presented on a policy level and subsequently implemented in practice. Case studies and field visits will provide opportunities to gather information on realities of tourism policy implementation. By engaging with key stakeholders – such as local government officials, tourism

operators, and community members – the research team will be able to gather more qualitative data to assess the alignment between the policies' intended goals and their actual outcomes. These interactions will reveal the practical challenges and facilitators in the policy execution, offering a nuanced understanding of its efficacy. Case studies of specific tourism destinations or initiatives within the Nordic region will serve to illustrate how, and if, the policy is operationalised in diverse contexts. These case studies, drawn from different geographic and socio-economic settings, will enable a comparative analysis to identify common themes and unique variations.

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