

Nordic spatial variations in demographic, social, and economic characteristics

A VISUAL GUIDE

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Contents

Introduction	3
Demographic characteristics: Age structure, gender and foreign-born populations	6
Socio-economic characteristics: Education, unemployment and income	13
Economic sustainability characteristics: Employment composition, greenhouse gas emissions and green jobs	22
Annex: Nordic rural-urban typology	29
References	33
About this publication	34

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<https://pub.nordregio.org/wp-2025-2-nordic-spatial-variations-visual-guide>



Photo: Johannes Jansson/norden.org

Introduction

Over the last decade, feelings of being left behind have increased in some regions in Europe and other Western countries (Berman 2021, Chilvers et al. 2024). Trust in politicians and government institutions has fallen in parts of the Western world, and the liberal democratic model appears to have come under dispute. The emergence of these so-called "geographies of discontent" has, among other factors, been linked to - real or perceived but in any case, multi-dimensional - inequalities between regions (Galston 2018, de Ruyter et al. 2021).

This visual guide aims at showcasing the extent of such inequalities in the Nordic Region. It uses maps and charts to show key demographic, social, and economic indicators at the local level, allowing for comparisons between municipalities, regions, and the Nordic countries. The charts next to each map highlight the distribution across municipalities and indicate which rural-urban differences are statistically significant at the Nordic level (see Box 1). The indicators were chosen to reflect the factors identified in academic literature as drivers of discontent.^[1]

In this visual guide, municipalities in the Nordic Region are classified as rural, intermediate or urban based on the Nordic rural-urban typology developed by Nordregio (see Annex 1 for more detailed information). Urban municipalities include inner and outer urban areas, and intermediate municipalities include peri-urban areas, rural areas close to urban areas and, in part, local centers in rural areas. Rural municipalities include rural heartlands, sparsely populated areas, and some local centers in rural areas.

1. See section 3 in the Nordregio policy brief "Navigating Nordic discontent: Regional divides, electoral trends and the green transition": <http://doi.org/10.6027/PB2025:18-2001-3876>

Overall, the guide shows that that urban, intermediate and rural areas in the Nordic Region differ along demographic, social, and economic dimensions, with urban municipalities being advantaged in several respects. For example, urban municipalities usually have younger, more educated populations with a more balanced gender ratio. Households in urban municipalities also tend to have higher incomes. Additionally, urban economies register lower greenhouse gas emissions per employee and more green jobs.

Rural municipalities, by contrast, tend to face various demographic and socio-economic challenges, such as aging populations with a less balanced gender ratio, higher greenhouse gas emissions per worker, and lower household incomes. However, rural municipalities also have strengths. For example, they have lower income inequality than urban municipalities and may therefore be considered more socially cohesive. Additionally, in 2022, unemployment levels were lower in rural compared to urban municipalities in many Nordic countries, with Finland being an exception.

Intermediate municipalities fall between their urban and rural counterparts based on these indicators.

This visual guide complements the Nordregio policy brief **"Navigating Nordic discontent: Regional divides, electoral trends and the green transition"**^[2].

The policy brief explores whether geographies of discontent exist in the Nordic Region and analyses the factors that contribute to this discontent, including the role of the green transition.

See also related discussion papers:

- **Geographies of discontent in the Nordic Region**^[3]
- **Moving together or drifting apart?**^[4]

This work is part of the project **"Ensuring inclusive economic growth in the transition to a green economy"**^[5] and was funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers.

2. See more: <https://nordregio.org/publications/navigating-nordic-discontent/>

3. See more: <https://nordregio.org/publications/geographies-of-discontent-in-the-nordic-region/>

4. See more: <https://nordregio.org/publications/moving-together-or-drifting-apart/>

5. See more: <https://nordregio.org/research/ensuring-inclusive-economic-growth-in-the-transition-to-a-green-economy>

Box 1: How to read the violin plots in this visual guide

Each of the following figures contains a map and a violin plot. A violin plot is a statistical visualization that shows the distribution of a continuous variable across different groups or categories.

Understanding the plot: The x-axis represents different groups or categories (here: rural, intermediate, and urban areas). The y-axis represents the continuous variable being measured. Each group is represented by a violin-shaped distribution, showing the density of the data points within that group. The width of the violin at each level represents the proportion of data points at that value. The black box inside each violin shows the interquartile range (IQR), which is the range of values between the 25th and 75th percentiles. The black thick line inside each IQR represents the median of the data points within that group.

Significance brackets: The significance brackets above the violin plots indicate which pairs of groups have statistically significant differences between their means. These brackets are created using the two-sided Wilcoxon rank sum test, a non-parametric statistical method for comparing two groups or samples. Being non-parametric, the test can also be used when the data does not follow a normal distribution. Statistical significance is indicated above the brackets with the following notation:

- Not significant (ns): $p > 0.05$
- *: $p \leq 0.05$
- **: $p \leq 0.01$
- ***: $p \leq 0.001$
- ****: $p \leq 0.0001$

Interpreting the plot: Groups with violins that are shifted to the top or bottom indicate differences in the median values. Groups with wider or narrower violins indicate differences in data variability. Points outside the shaded area are more than 1.5 times the IQR above the third quartile or below the first quartile and are considered statistical outliers.



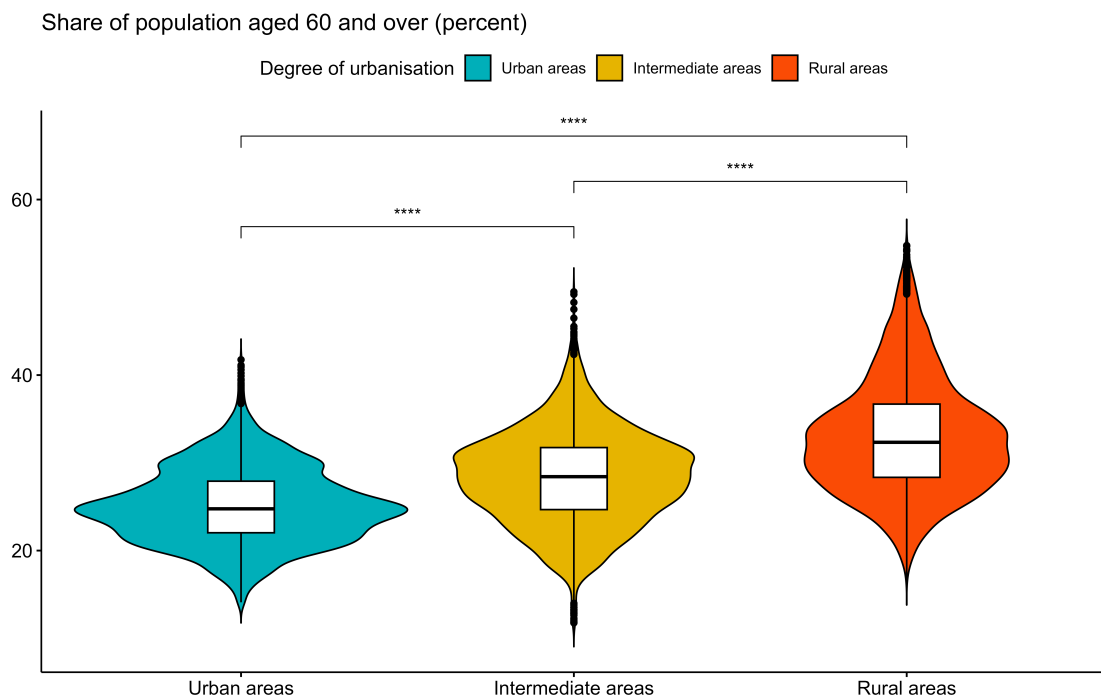
Photo: Christian Lue/Unsplash

Demographic characteristics: Age structure, gender and foreign-born populations

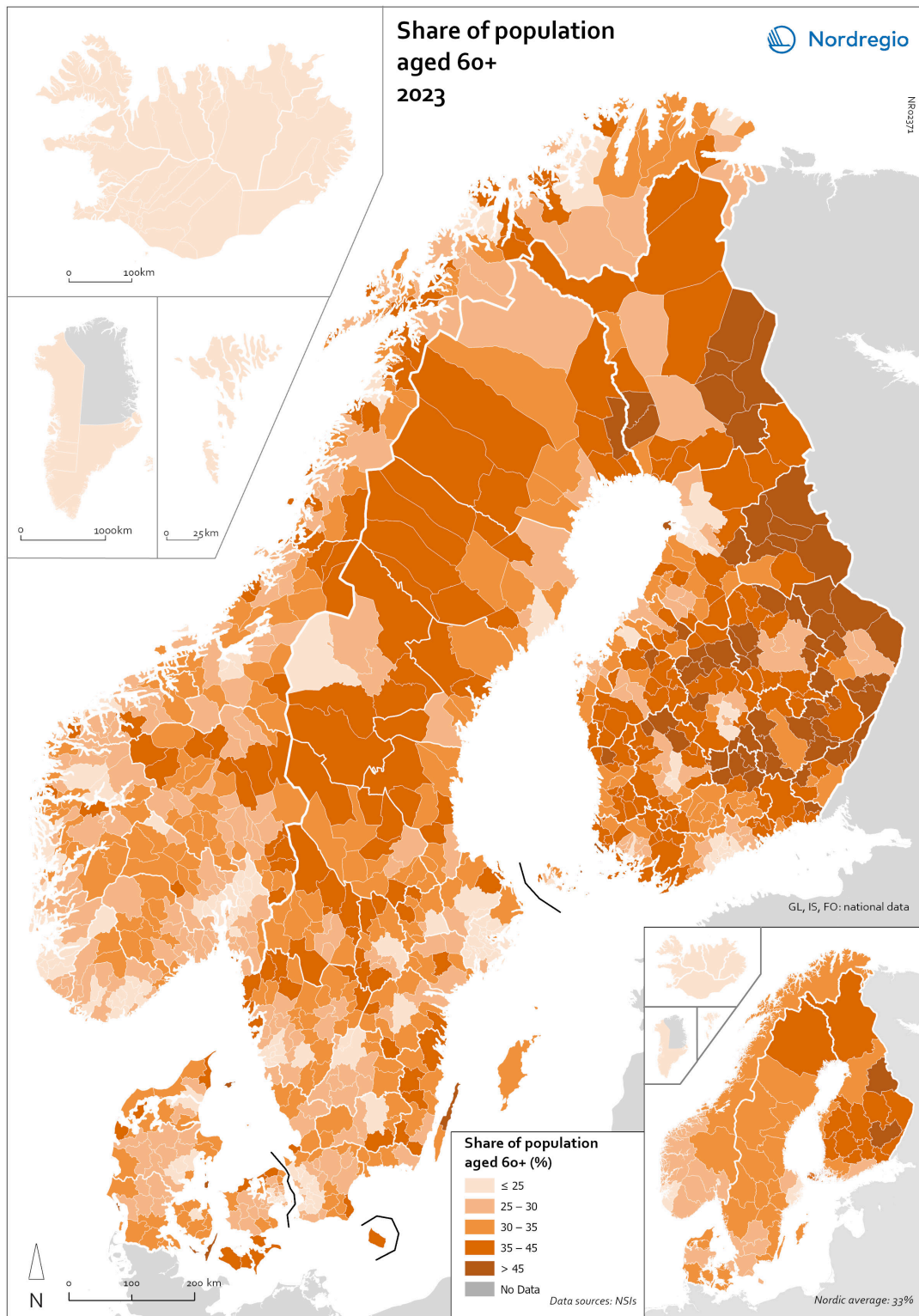
Age structure

Map 1 shows the share of the population aged 60 and above in the Nordic countries in 2023. Rural municipalities generally have the highest proportions of elderly residents, exceeding 35% in several cases, particularly in Finland and northern Sweden. These areas often have ageing populations due to younger people moving to cities. In contrast, urban municipalities like Stockholm, Oslo, Helsinki, and Copenhagen have a lower share of older populations, often less than 25%. Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and Iceland all have comparatively young populations with a low share of people aged 60 and older. The violin plot in Figure 1 shows that the age distribution differences between urban, intermediate, and rural municipalities are statistically significant at $p \leq 0.0001$.

Figure 1: Share of population aged 60+ (2023)



Note: The violin plot does not include Greenland and the Faroe Islands, since they are not part of the urban-rural typology used here (see Annex 1). Iceland is also not included in the violin plot, since data were not available at municipal level.

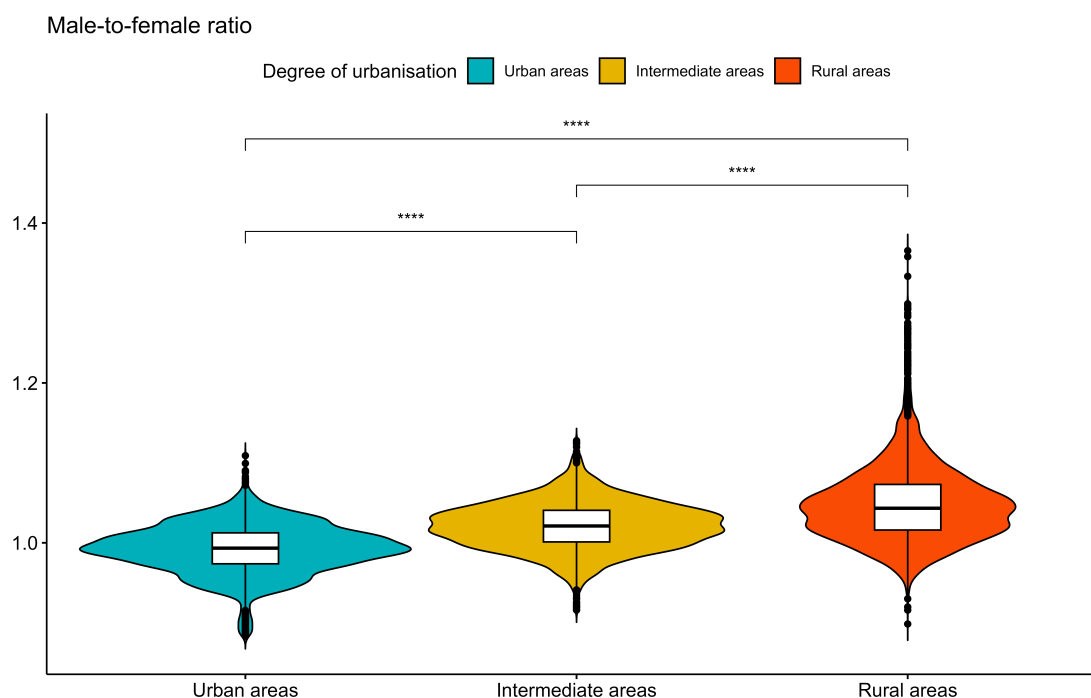


Map 1: Share of population aged 60+ (2023).

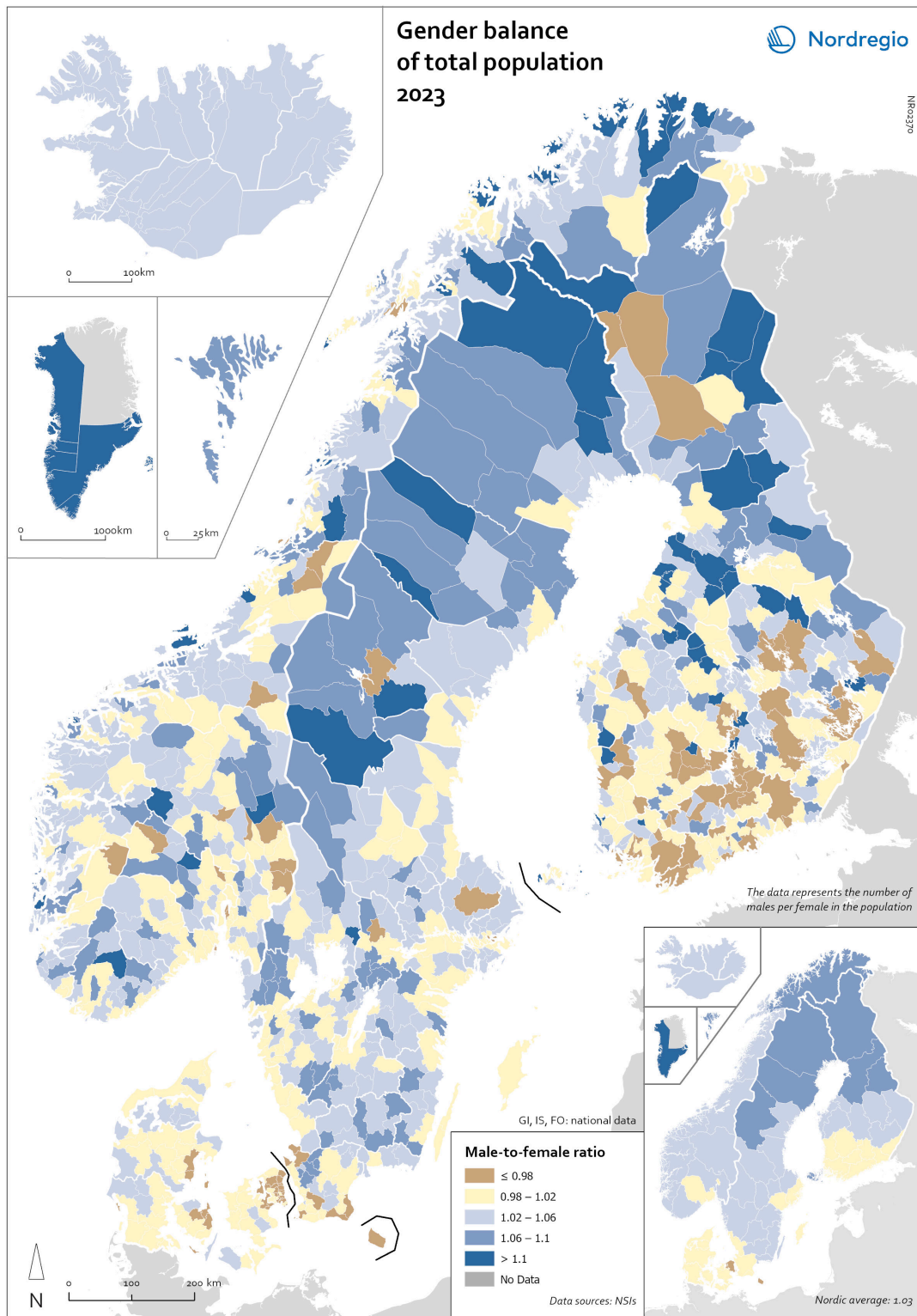
Gender

Map 2 illustrates the gender balance of the population in Nordic municipalities in 2023, expressed as a male-to-female ratio. On average, there are slightly more males than females in the Nordic Region, with a male-to-female ratio of 1.03. However, there are significant regional and local variations. Greenland has the highest male-to-female ratio in the Nordic Region. The Faroe Islands, as well as rural municipalities in northern Sweden, northern Finland and parts of Norway, also have high ratios, often exceeding 1.06. This is often because of more women moving to cities. In contrast, cities like Stockholm, Helsinki, Oslo and Copenhagen tend to have lower male-to-female ratios, often below 1.02, indicated by brown and yellow shades. These areas have more balanced or even female-dominated populations. Overall, Denmark has less pronounced gender imbalances compared to its Nordic neighbors, with most municipalities having ratios closer to the Nordic average. The four asterisks above the significance brackets in the violin plot in Figure 2 show that the differences in gender balance between urban, intermediate and rural municipalities in the Nordic Region are statistically significant at $p \leq 0.0001$.

Figure 2: Gender balance (2023)



Note: The violin plot does not include Greenland and the Faroe Islands, since they are not part of the urban-rural typology used here (see Annex 1). Iceland is also not included in the violin plot, since data were not available at municipal level.



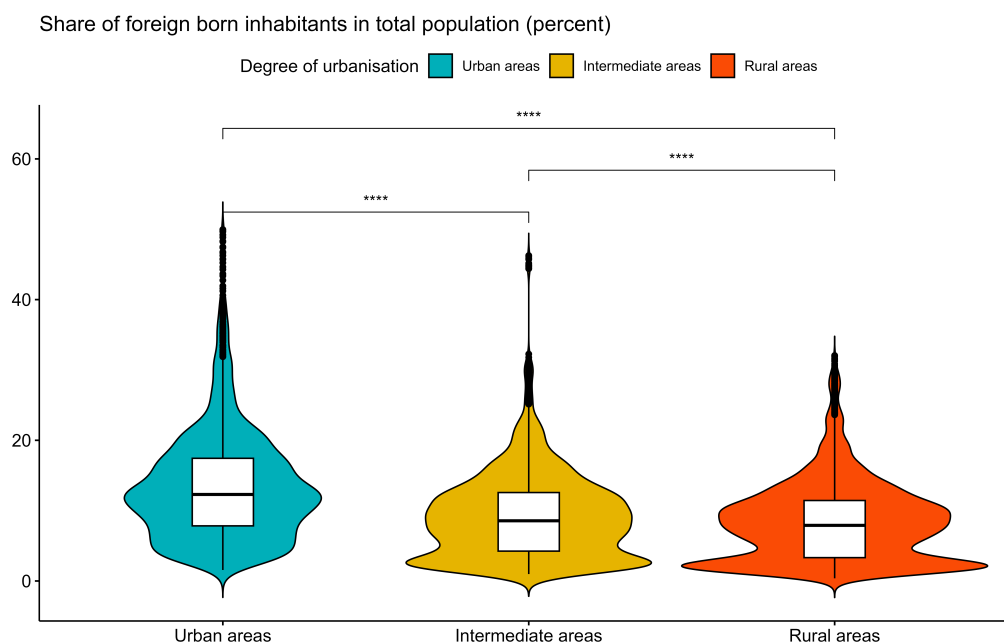
Map 2: Gender balance (2023).

Foreign-born populations

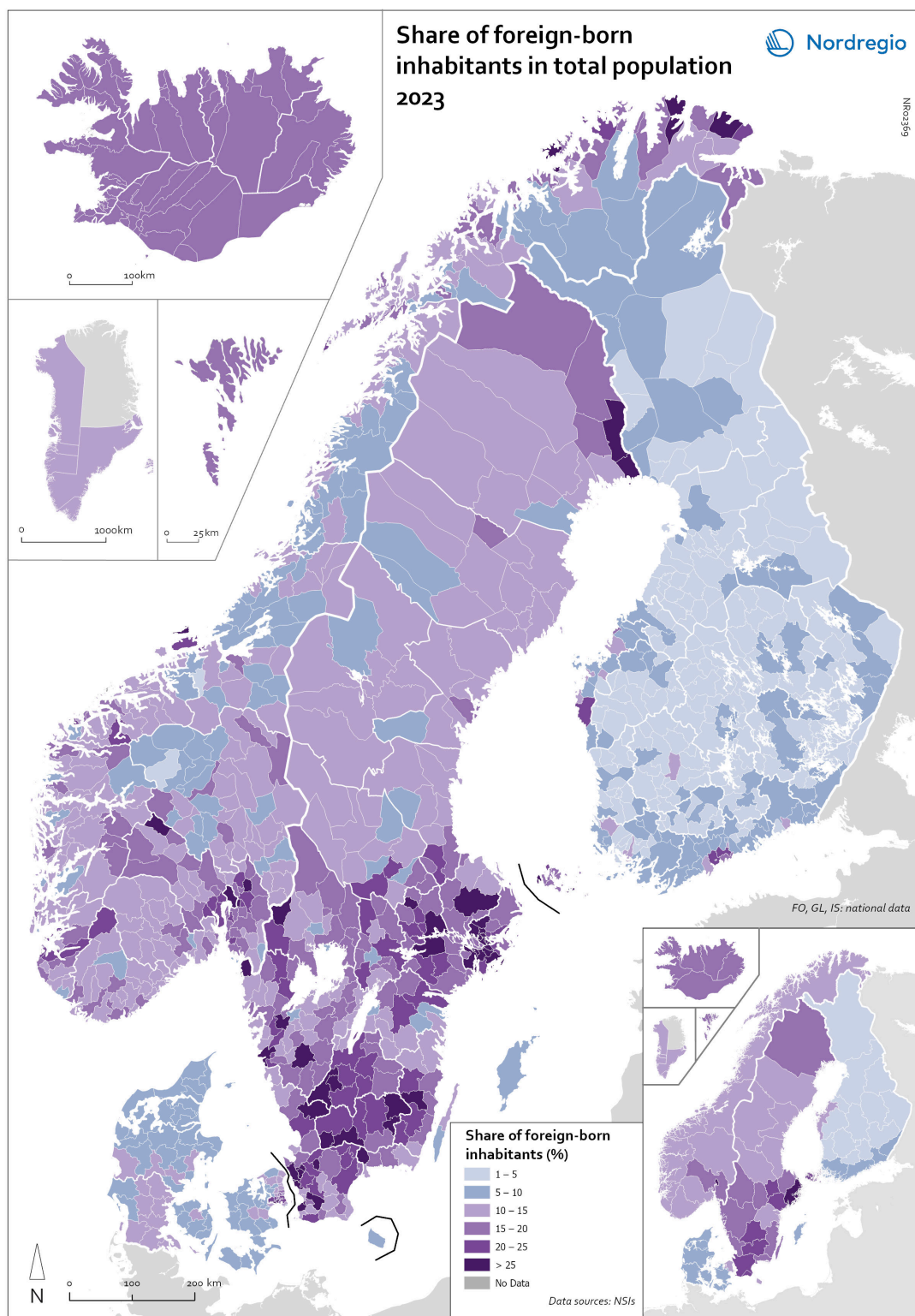
Map 3 shows the share of foreign-born inhabitants among the total population in 2023, highlighting significant variation between the Nordic countries, regions and between urban, intermediate and rural municipalities. Cities like Stockholm, Oslo, and Copenhagen have higher shares of foreign-born residents.

In Sweden, municipalities with high levels of immigrants include Botkyrka, Södertälje, and Huddinge, all in the Stockholm area, where about 50% of the population is foreign-born. In southern Sweden, municipalities like Malmö and Landskrona have foreign-born populations exceeding 40%. Västra Götaland, including Gothenburg, also has high shares, though at slightly lower levels. In Denmark, the Capital Region, including Copenhagen, and other urban municipalities show higher proportions of foreign-born inhabitants, though values are generally lower compared to Swedish cities. In Finland, Helsinki has a high share, though it remains below many Swedish municipalities. Åland also stands out for its relatively high percentage of foreign-born residents compared to mainland Finnish regions. In Norway, Oslo has the highest share of foreign-born residents, with nearly 28% of its population from outside Norway. Regions like Viken and Rogaland show moderately high shares. The four asterisks above the significance brackets in the violin plot in Figure 3 show that the differences between urban, intermediate and rural municipalities in the Nordic Region are statistically significant at $p \leq 0.0001$.

Figure 3: Share of foreign-born people among the total population (2023)



Note: The violin plot does not include Greenland and the Faroe Islands, since they are not part of the urban-rural typology used here (see Annex 1). Iceland is also not included in the violin plot, since data were not available at municipal level.



Map 3: Share of foreign-born people among the total population (2023).



Photo: Magnus Fröderberg/norden.org

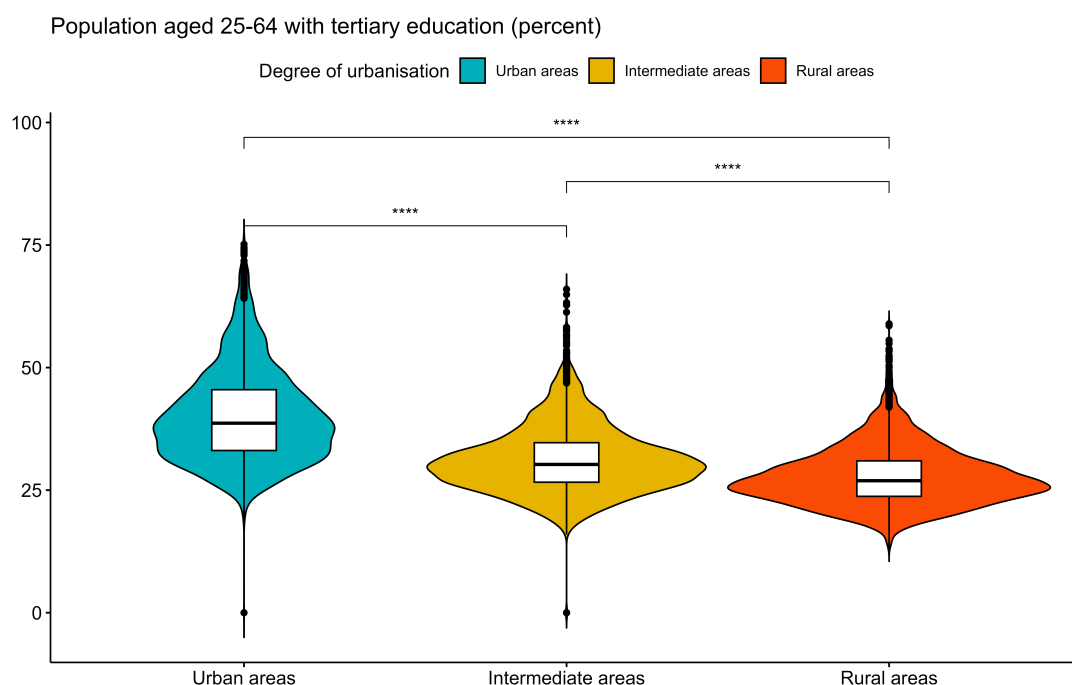
Socio-economic characteristics: Education, unemployment and income

Tertiary education

Map 4 shows the percentage of the population aged 25–64 with tertiary education in the Nordic Region in 2022. Tertiary education includes Bachelor's, Master's, or equivalent degrees, doctoral degrees as well as short-cycle educational programmes.^[6]

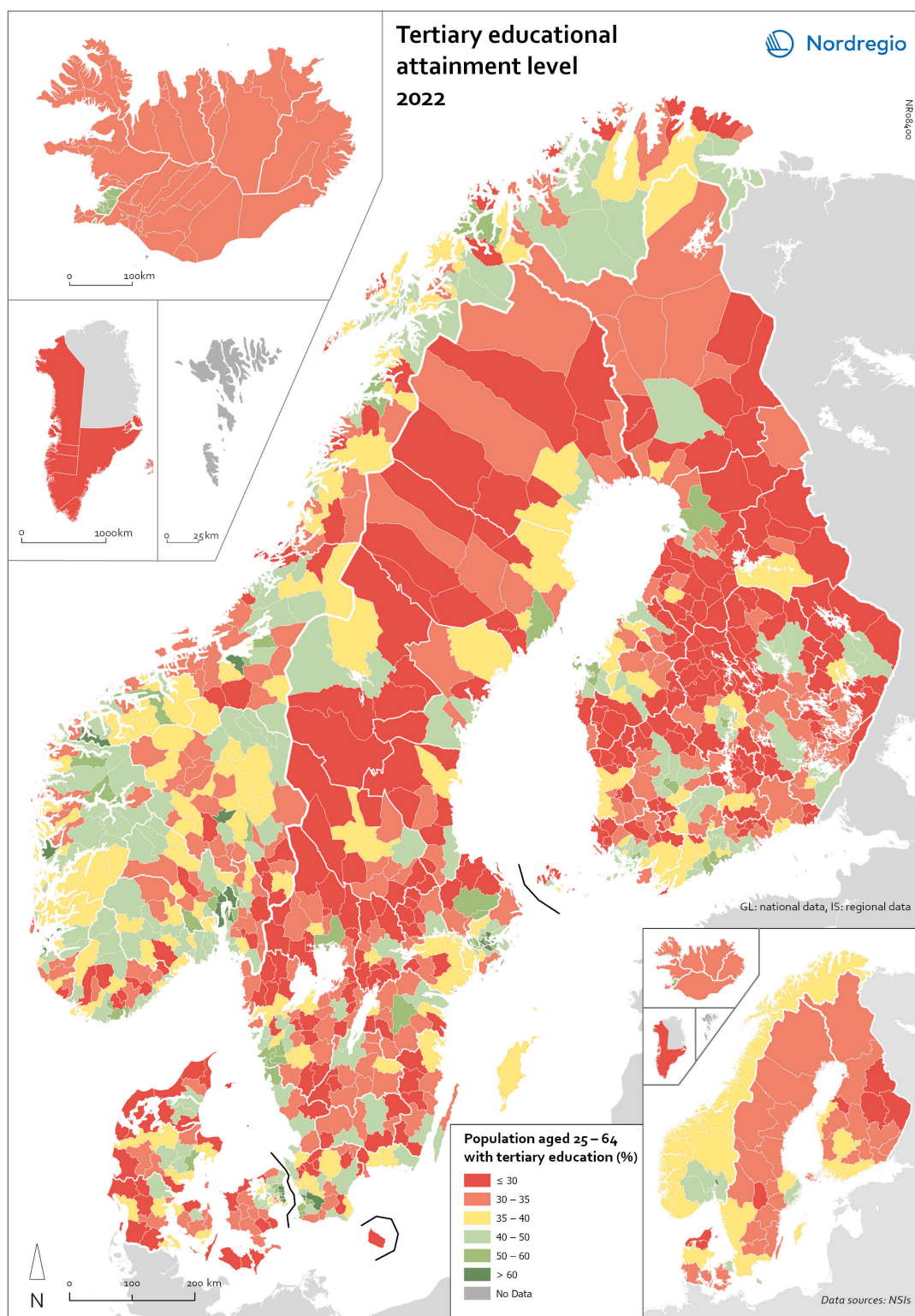
The map highlights urban-rural differences. Major cities and their surrounding municipalities tend to have higher percentages of people with tertiary education compared to rural municipalities. For example, Oslo and Stockholm have high levels of tertiary education, with 60% or more of the population having attained such education. Similarly, the Uusimaa region, which includes Helsinki, has the highest percentage of tertiary-educated individuals, while rural regions like North Karelia and Kainuu have lower levels. Denmark follows a similar pattern, with the capital region of Denmark (Hovedstaden) having higher educational attainment levels than North Jutland and Southern Denmark. In Iceland, the share of people with tertiary educational is greater in Reykjavik than in the rest of the country. Norway has comparatively high levels of higher education even in rural municipalities. The significance brackets included in the violin plot in Figure 4 show that the differences in educational attainment between rural, intermediate, and urban municipalities are statistically significant at $p \leq 0.0001$.

Figure 4: Tertiary educational attainment (2022)



Note: Data were not available for the Faroe Islands. The violin plot does not include Greenland, since it is not part of the urban-rural typology used here (see Annex 1). Iceland is also not included in the violin plot, since data were not available at municipal level.

6. This corresponds to levels 5-8 in the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), see <https://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary>.



Map 4: Tertiary educational attainment (2022).

Unemployment

Map 5 shows the unemployment rates across Nordic municipalities and regions for 2022, highlighting variations both within and between countries. Areas shaded in darker red indicate higher unemployment rates, while yellow shades represent lower unemployment.

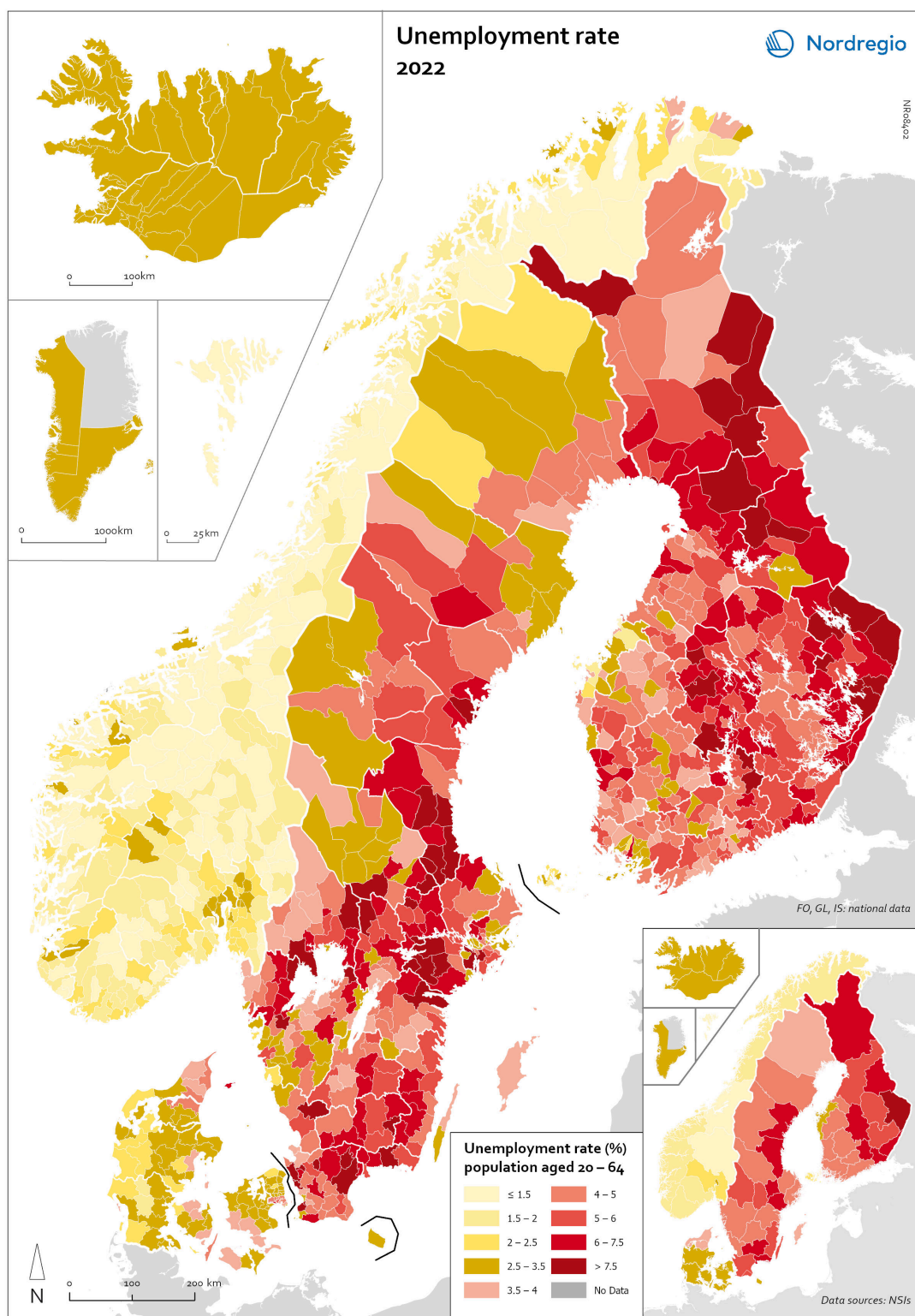
Norway had the lowest unemployment rates in 2022, especially in regions like Trøndelag and Innlandet, where rates were below 1.5%. Many rural municipalities of Norway had low unemployment, and urban municipalities around Oslo and Stavanger had relatively higher rates, although still low compared to other Nordic countries (2.5-3.5%). Denmark shows a similar pattern, with generally low unemployment rates in 2022. Like in Norway, the largest Danish cities such as Copenhagen, Aarhus, Aalborg and Odense had higher unemployment compared to rural municipalities. Finland presents a different scenario, with higher unemployment rates in the rural Eastern and Northern regions, such as Lapland, North and South Karelia. The more densely populated Western regions including urban municipalities like Turku and Tampere, as well as Ostrobothnia, had lower unemployment rates. Sweden had a complex unemployment pattern in 2022. Lower unemployment rates (2.0-3.5%) were observed in both rural municipalities in northern and central parts of the country, including in Norrbotten, Jämtland, and Dalarna, as well as in urban municipalities such as Gothenburg and Stockholm. By and large, however, the more densely populated southern regions had higher unemployment levels.

The violin plot in Figure 5 indicates that, from a Nordic perspective, rural municipalities had lower unemployment rates compared to their intermediate and urban counterparts. These differences are statistically significant at $p \leq 0.0001$. Nevertheless, this result masks cross-country and regional differences, with many rural municipalities in Finland and Sweden experiencing higher-than-average unemployment.

Figure 5: Unemployment rate (2022)



Note: The violin plot does not include Greenland and the Faroe Islands, since they are not part of the urban-rural typology used here (see Annex 1). Iceland is also not included in the violin plot, since data were not available at municipal level.



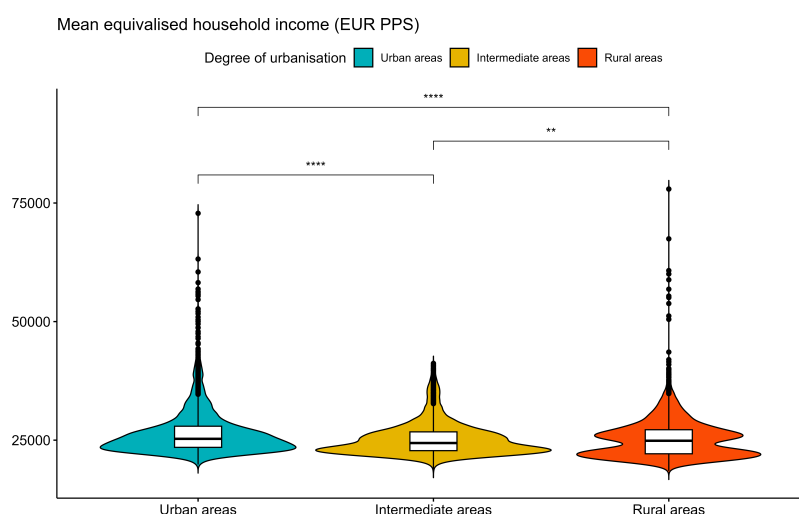
Map 5: Unemployment rate (2022).

Household income

Equivalized income is a measure of household income^[7] that adjusts for the size and composition of the household, giving a more accurate picture of economic well-being. This adjustment is usually based on net (disposable) income and uses an equivalence scale, which assigns a weight to each household member. This method allows for meaningful comparisons between households of different sizes and compositions. For comparisons between regions, income values are standardized to euros in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) standard terms to reflect differences in price levels between countries.

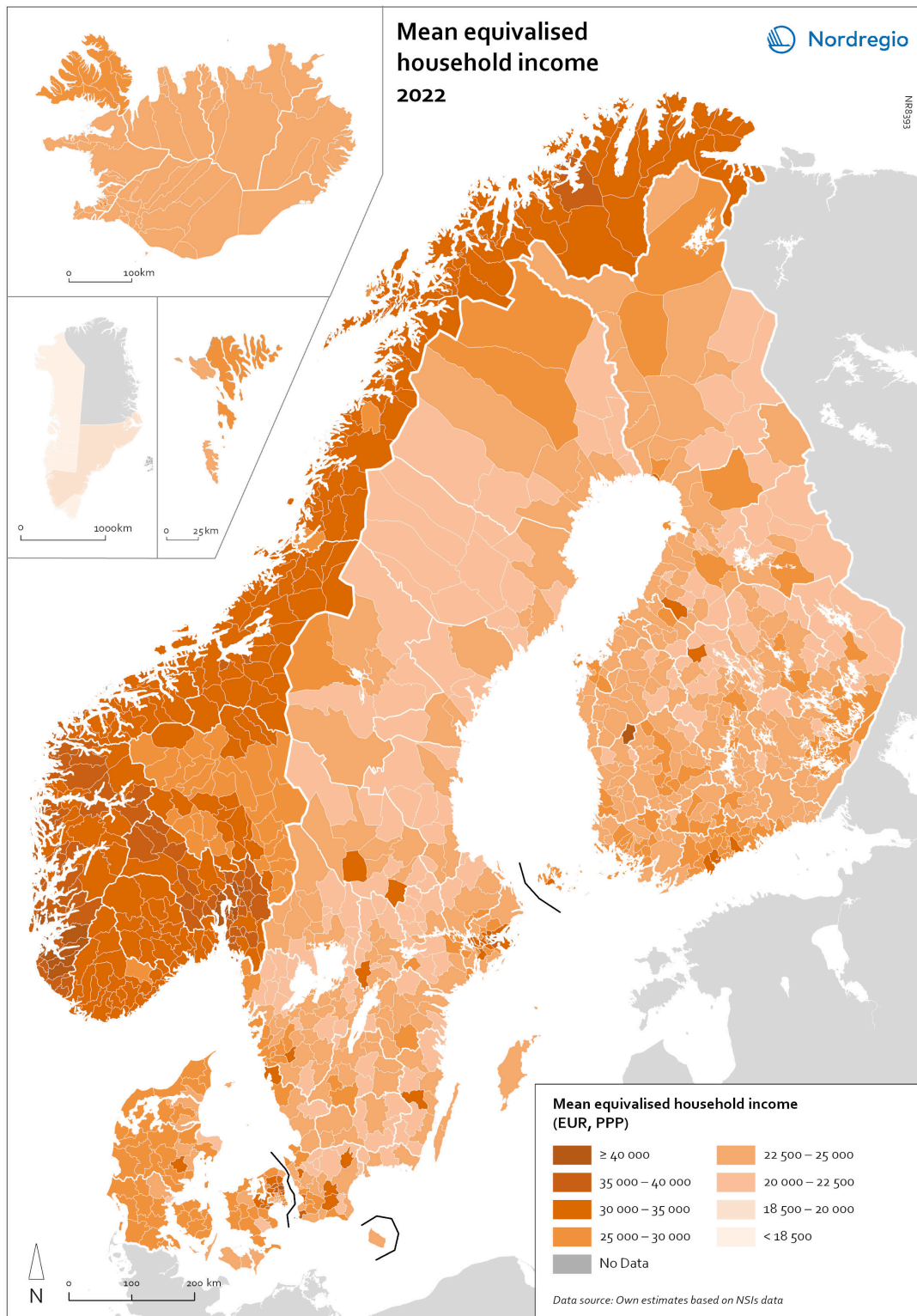
The distribution of equivalised household income across municipalities in the Nordic Region in 2022 shows significant imbalances (Map 6). Two main patterns stand out. First, households in Norway are much wealthier than those in other Nordic countries, with an average equivalised household income of 33,099 EUR-PPP. Greenland has the lowest mean equivalised household income in the region, at 19,695 EUR-PPP. Second, urban households generally have higher incomes than those in rural and intermediate municipalities. This trend is especially noticeable in the largest cities of Sweden, Finland, and, to a lesser extent, Denmark, where urban municipalities offer more economic opportunities. The violin plot indicates that the spatial income differences between urban and intermediate, and urban and rural municipalities are statistically significant at $p \leq 0.0001$. Differences between intermediate and rural municipalities are significant at $p \leq 0.01$. There are also outliers with very high incomes (over 50,000 EUR-PPP) among both urban and rural municipalities. Such outliers are not found among intermediate municipalities (peri-urban municipalities, rural areas close to urban areas and local centers in rural areas). Overall, these patterns highlight economic disparities within and between countries in the Nordic Region, with notable urban-rural divides and differences in national averages contributing to an uneven distribution of household income.

Figure 6: Mean equivalized household income (2022)



Note: The violin plot does not include Greenland and the Faroe Islands, since they are not part of the urban-rural typology used here (see Annex 1). Iceland is also not included, since data were not available at municipal level.

7. Household income refers to the income earned by all members of a household (incl. wages, salaries, self-employment, welfare and social security benefits, pensions, investment income, and other sources of income).



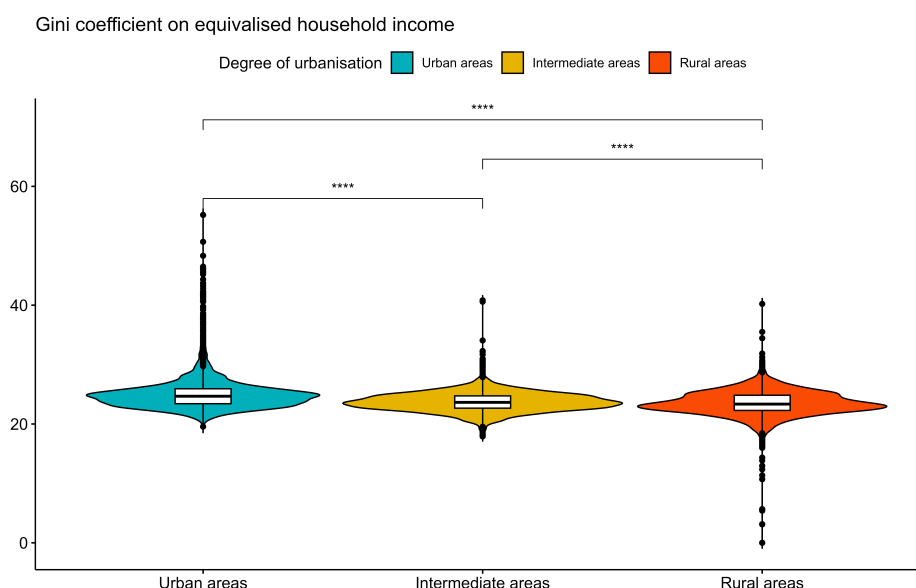
Map 6: Mean equivalized household income (2022).

Economic inequality

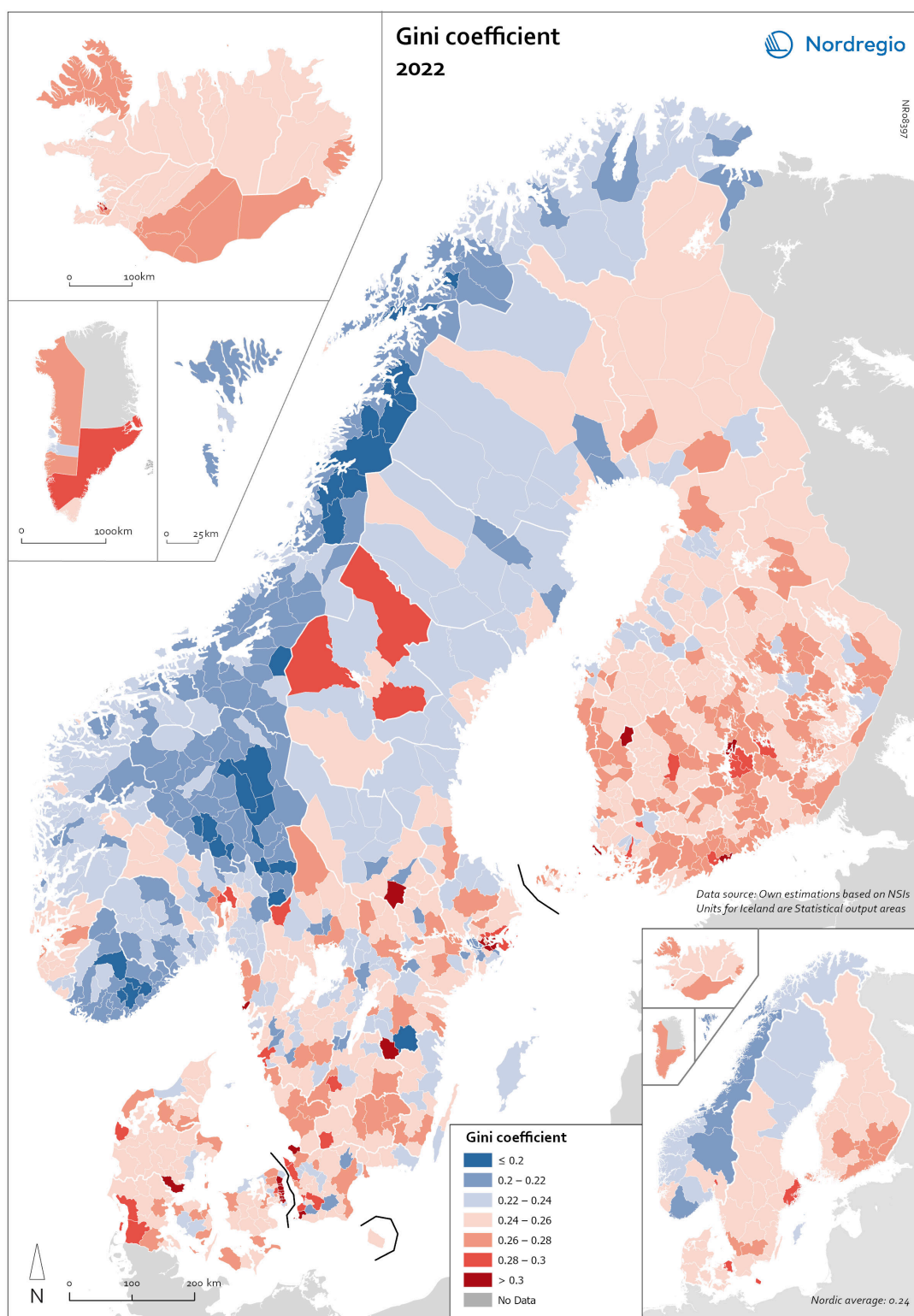
The patterns in Figure 6 may conceal significant socio-economic differences within municipalities. This perspective is added in Map 7. The map shows the Gini coefficient at the municipal and regional level across the Nordic Region for 2022, highlighting variations in income inequality. The Gini coefficient, which ranges from 0 to 1, measures inequality: 0 means perfect equality, and 1 means maximum inequality. Higher income inequality is associated with greater levels of poverty and social exclusion, lower levels of perceived wellbeing and happiness, and lower levels of human development (Tapia et al. 2024).

Two patterns stand out from Figure 7. First, household income is generally more equally distributed in Norway and Northern Sweden than in other parts of the Nordic Region. Several factors may explain the lower levels of income inequality in Norway, including the active role of its welfare state in redistributing income, the development of high-income industries like energy production and oil-related activities in many rural areas, and a strong public sector that often dominates the local labour market in rural and remote municipalities (Tapia et al. 2024). Second, income inequalities tend to be higher in urban than in rural municipalities. Apart from some outliers observed in rural Finland and Sweden, most of the municipalities with higher Gini coefficients were located in the largest urban areas in 2022. The violin plot confirms that household income inequalities are generally higher in urban than in rural and intermediate municipalities. The four asterisks above the significance brackets in the violin plot in Figure 7 show that the differences between urban, intermediate and rural municipalities in the Nordic Region are statistically significant at $p \leq 0.0001$. The violin plot also shows the presence of several statistical outliers. Among urban municipalities, outliers tend to show higher than expected levels of inequality (Gini coefficients of 0.4 and higher). Among rural municipalities, there are outliers in both directions - some with Gini coefficients of over 0.3, and a few that approach income equality (Gini coefficients below 0.1).

Figure 7: Household income inequality (Gini coefficient, 2022)



Note: The violin plot does not include Greenland and the Faroe Islands, since they are not part of the urban-rural typology used here (see Annex 1). Iceland is also not included, since data were not available at municipal level.



Map 7: Household income inequality (Gini coefficient, 2022).



Photo: Thomas Richter/Unsplash

Economic sustainability characteristics: Employment composition, greenhouse gas emissions and green jobs

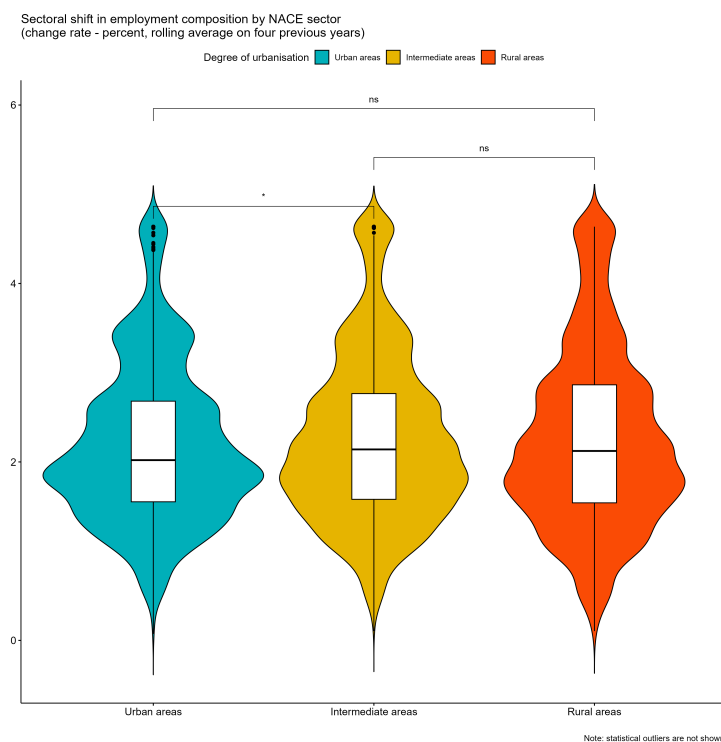
Stability of regional labour markets

The rolling average of employment composition smooths the inter-annual change rates in the sectoral distribution of employment across NACE sectors over the past four years. The indicator should be interpreted as a relative measure of sectoral employment stability, rather than an indicator of balanced or skewed job distribution. It can highlight structural changes in the sectoral distribution of employment in the Nordic regions.

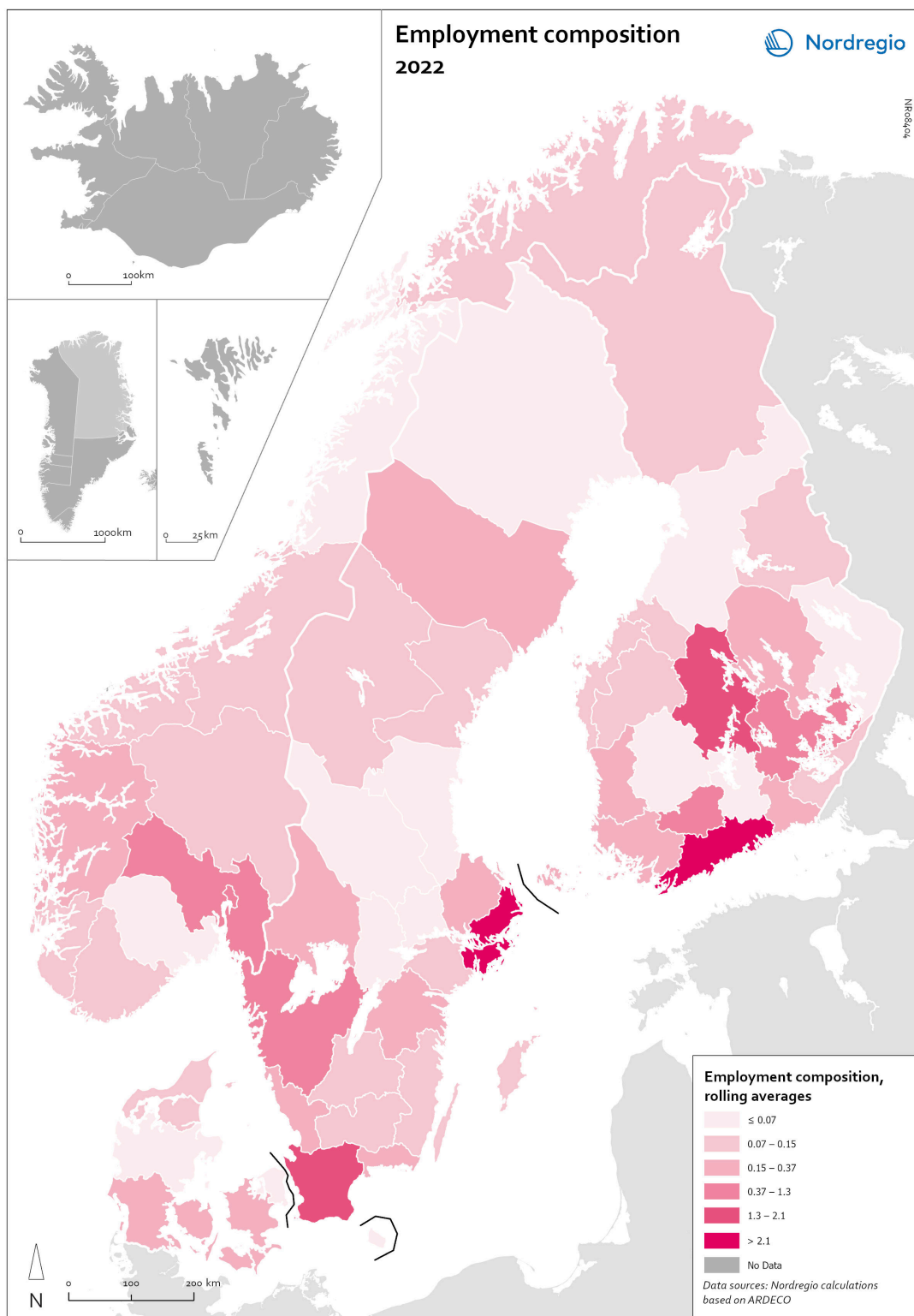
Map 8 represents the rolling average change rate in employment distribution across 10 NACE sectors in the Nordic Region for 2022, highlighting regional differences in sectoral employment changes during the previous four years^[8]. Regions with higher rolling averages have a more mutable employment basis across sectors. Lower rolling averages indicate a more stable distribution of jobs across industries. Regions around cities like Stockholm, Helsinki, and Malmö have higher rolling averages, indicating more dynamic labour markets in terms of the sectoral distribution of jobs. In contrast, regions in northern Norway, Sweden, and Finland tend to show more stable labour markets.

Wilcoxon test results shown above the violin plot in Figure 8 indicate that differences in the change in employment composition between urban and intermediate regions are statistically significant at $p \leq 0.05$. However, differences between urban and rural municipalities, as well as between intermediate and rural municipalities, do not appear to be statistically significant at conventional levels. In other words, spatial differences in the sectoral employment shifts by region and degree of urbanization are less pronounced across the Nordic Region.

Figure 8: Employment composition (2022)



8. Since the data on sectoral distribution of employment were only available at regional (NUTS3) level, all of the municipalities included in each region share the same value.



Map 8: Employment composition (2022).

Note: Data on employment composition are only available at regional (NUTS-3) level. Therefore, this map compares Nordic regions. Employment composition data are not available for Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands. Individual municipalities may not always reflect the employment composition registered at regional level.

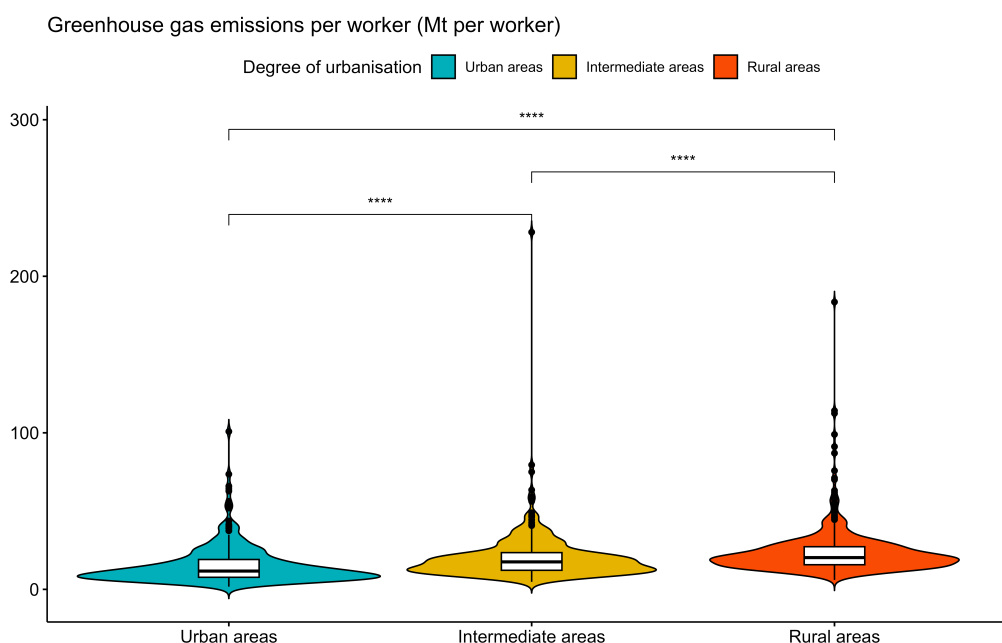
Greenhouse gas emissions

Map 9 shows greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions per employee in 2022 across the Nordic Region. On average, GHG emissions per employee in the region were 15.7 tonnes, exceeding the EU average of 13.5 tonnes. To estimate emissions at the municipal and regional level, we calculated average emissions per sector and used employment data by sector to estimate emissions per person employed at the municipal level. These results assume uniform GHG emissions for all jobs within the same sector.

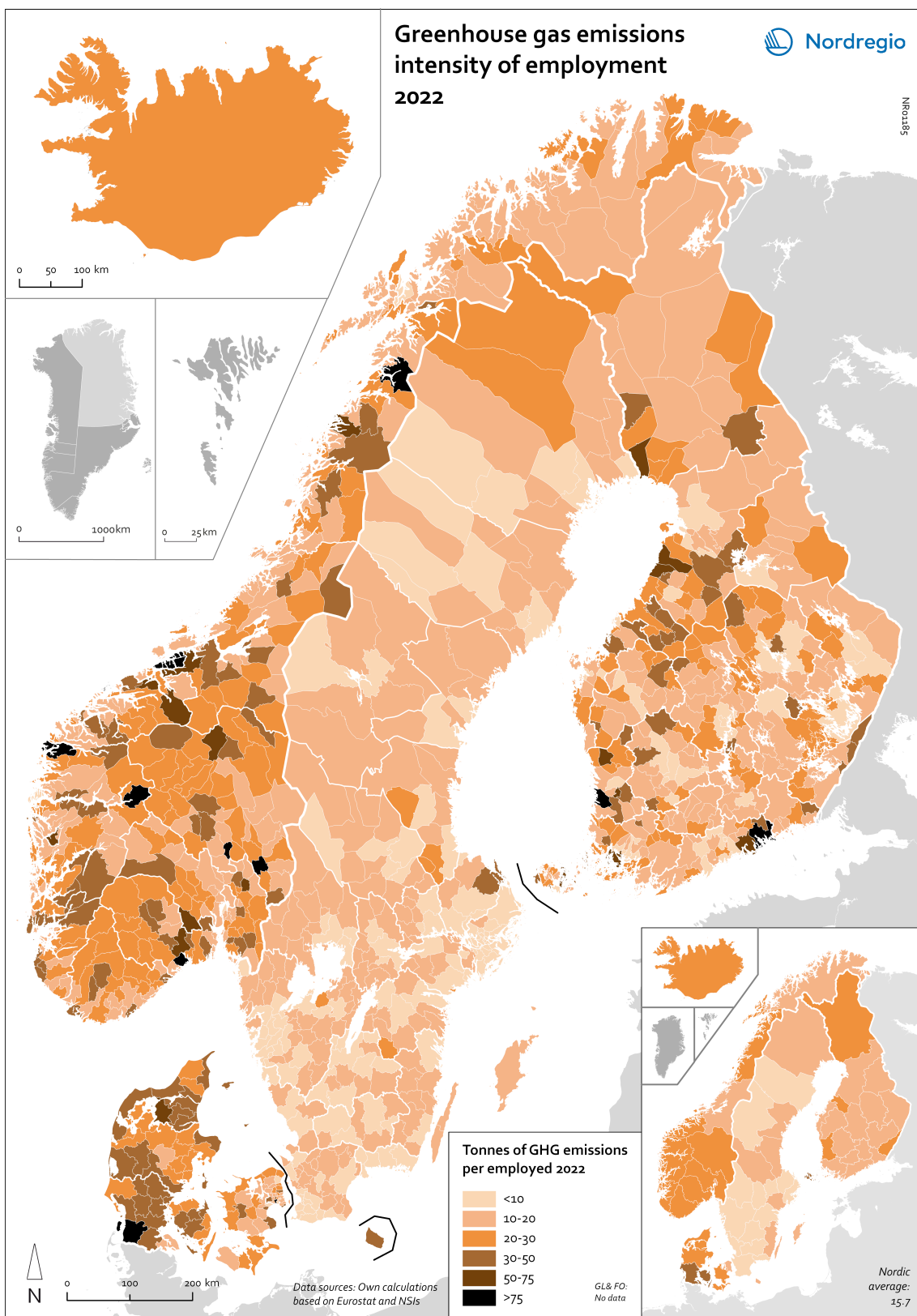
Regionally, Åland had the highest emissions per employee at 40 tonnes, followed by Southern Denmark with 31 tonnes, Satakunta in Finland, Iceland with 29 tonnes, and Vestfold og Telemark in Norway with 28 tonnes. In contrast, the Swedish regions of Stockholm (5 tonnes), Blekinge (7 tonnes), and Jönköping (8 tonnes) had the lowest emissions. Åland's high emissions are mainly due to sea transport, which makes up over 70% of its total emissions because of its role as a ferry traffic hub between Sweden and Finland.

Municipalities with high emissions per employee are often dominated by sectors with high emissions, such as transport (e.g., Brøndby, Denmark), agriculture (e.g., Tønder, Denmark), refineries (e.g., Porvoo, Finland), and other industrial processes (e.g., Oxelösund, Sweden). Overall, emissions per employee tend to be higher in rural municipalities (24 tonnes) compared to intermediate municipalities (18 tonnes) and urban municipalities (13 tonnes). The four asterisks above the significance brackets in the violin plot show that the differences in between urban, intermediate and rural municipalities in the Nordic Region are statistically significant at $p \leq 0.0001$. The violin plot also shows the existence of several outliers where average emissions are particularly high. These are municipalities where employment is dominated by activities with particularly high emission intensities.

Figure 9: Greenhouse gas emissions per employee (2022)



Note: Data were not available for Greenland and the Faroe Islands. The violin plot does not include Iceland, since data were not available at municipal level



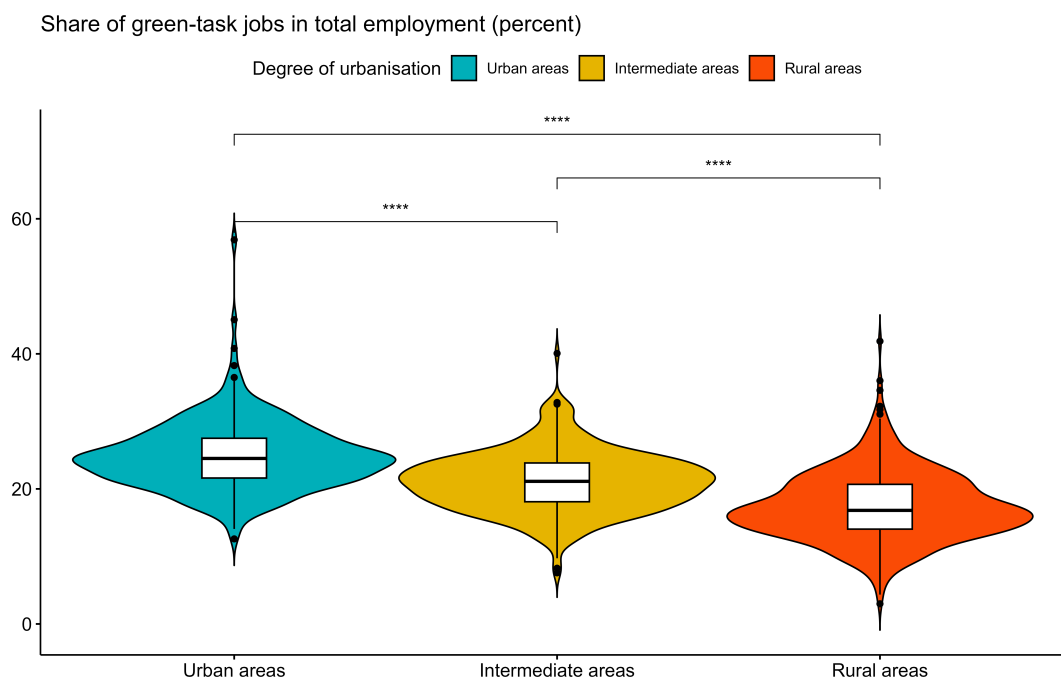
Map 9: Greenhouse gas emissions per employee (2022).

Green jobs

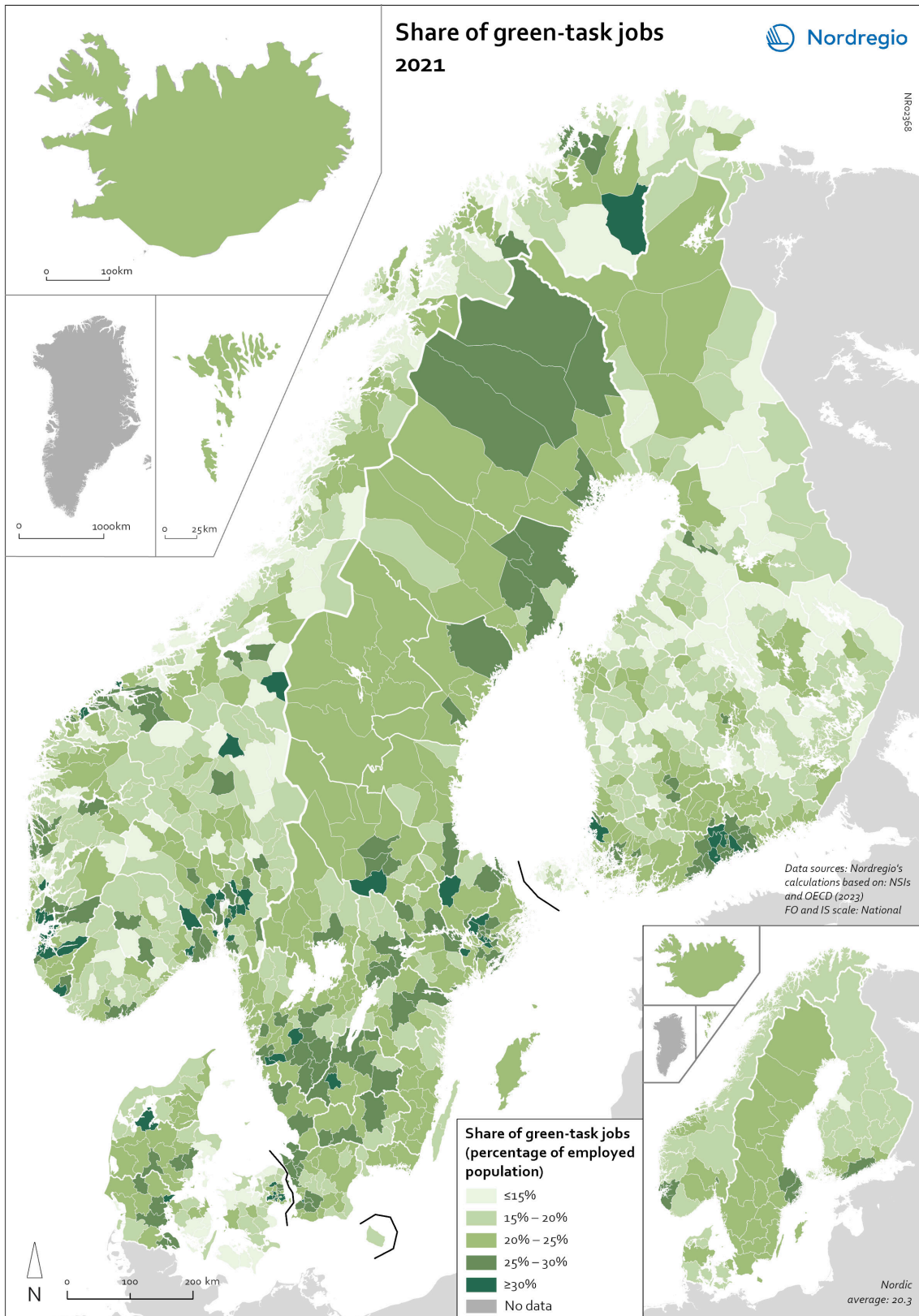
Figure 10 shows the share of green jobs in 2021, as defined by Vona and colleagues (2017) and the OECD (2023). This approach classifies occupations based on green skills and tasks, focusing on roles in engineering, management, monitoring, and science. Using International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) data, 83 out of 437 occupations are classified as green. Harmonized with OECD standards, our analysis identifies green jobs at the municipal and regional levels across the Nordic Region.

Urban municipalities have a higher prevalence of green jobs, averaging 28% compared to 21% in rural municipalities, with capital cities leading the way. Stockholm (30%) and Copenhagen (27%) are among the top areas for green jobs. In Sweden, municipalities like Sundbyberg and industrial hubs such as Burlöv (34%) and Gnosjö (32%) surpass 30% of green jobs. Norway's leaders include Sandnes (35%), Stavanger (32%), and Bærum (36%), with Rogaland transitioning its skilled oil workforce to green jobs. Finland's Uusimaa region leads, with municipalities like Espoo (30%) and Uusikaupunki (33%) excelling due to industries embracing sustainability. In Denmark, Allerød (41%) and Copenhagen (30%) top the list, with regional shares ranging from 27% in Hovedstaden to 17% in Sjælland. Municipalities classified as rural and intermediate show comparatively smaller proportions of green jobs. The violin plot in Figure 10 shows that the differences in green jobs between rural, intermediate and urban municipalities are statistically significant at $p \leq 0.0001$.

Figure 10: Share of jobs involving green tasks (2021)



Note: Data were not available for Greenland. The violin plot does not include the Faroe Islands, since they are not part of the urban-rural typology used here (see Annex 1). Iceland is also not included in the violin plot, since data were not available at municipal level.



Map 10: Share of jobs involving green tasks (2021).

Annex:

Nordic rural-urban typology

Annex 1:

Nordic rural-urban typology

This visual guide classifies Nordic municipalities as urban, intermediate and rural based on a typology developed by Nordregio (Stjernberg et al. 2024). The typology is based on 1 x 1 km grid statistical data on population, building density and land-use intensity derived from CORINE land-cover data. The typology distinguishes between the following seven classes based on an area's degree of urbanity and rurality, ranging from inner urban areas to sparsely populated rural areas:

- **Inner urban areas** are the most densely populated parts of urban cores. Urban cores are clustered cells summing up to at least 15,000 inhabitants, and these are divided into Inner and Outer urban areas based on density criteria (population density and building floor space).
- **Outer urban areas** are the least densely populated parts of urban cores. Urban core areas are clustered cells with at least 15,000 inhabitants, and these are divided into Inner and Outer urban areas based on a density criteria (population density and building floorspace).
- **Peri-urban areas** are intermediate zones between urban cores and the rural. They are based on generalized travel-time estimates from the edges of outer urban areas (6 min travel-time zones) and smaller urban settlement (4-6 min travel-time zones).
- **Local centers in rural areas** are population centers located outside urban areas, including small towns and large parish villages, where population is between 5,000-14,999 inhabitants.
- **Rural areas close to urban areas** have a rural character and are functionally connected and close to urban areas. On average, this means a 20-30 minute driving time from the edge of outer urban areas.
- **Rural heartland.** These are rural areas with intensive land use, with a relatively dense population and a diverse economic structure at the local level. Most of the agricultural land is in this class.
- **Sparsely populated rural areas** are areas with dispersed small settlements that are located far from each other. Land cover usually consists of forests, mountains, or natural grassland.

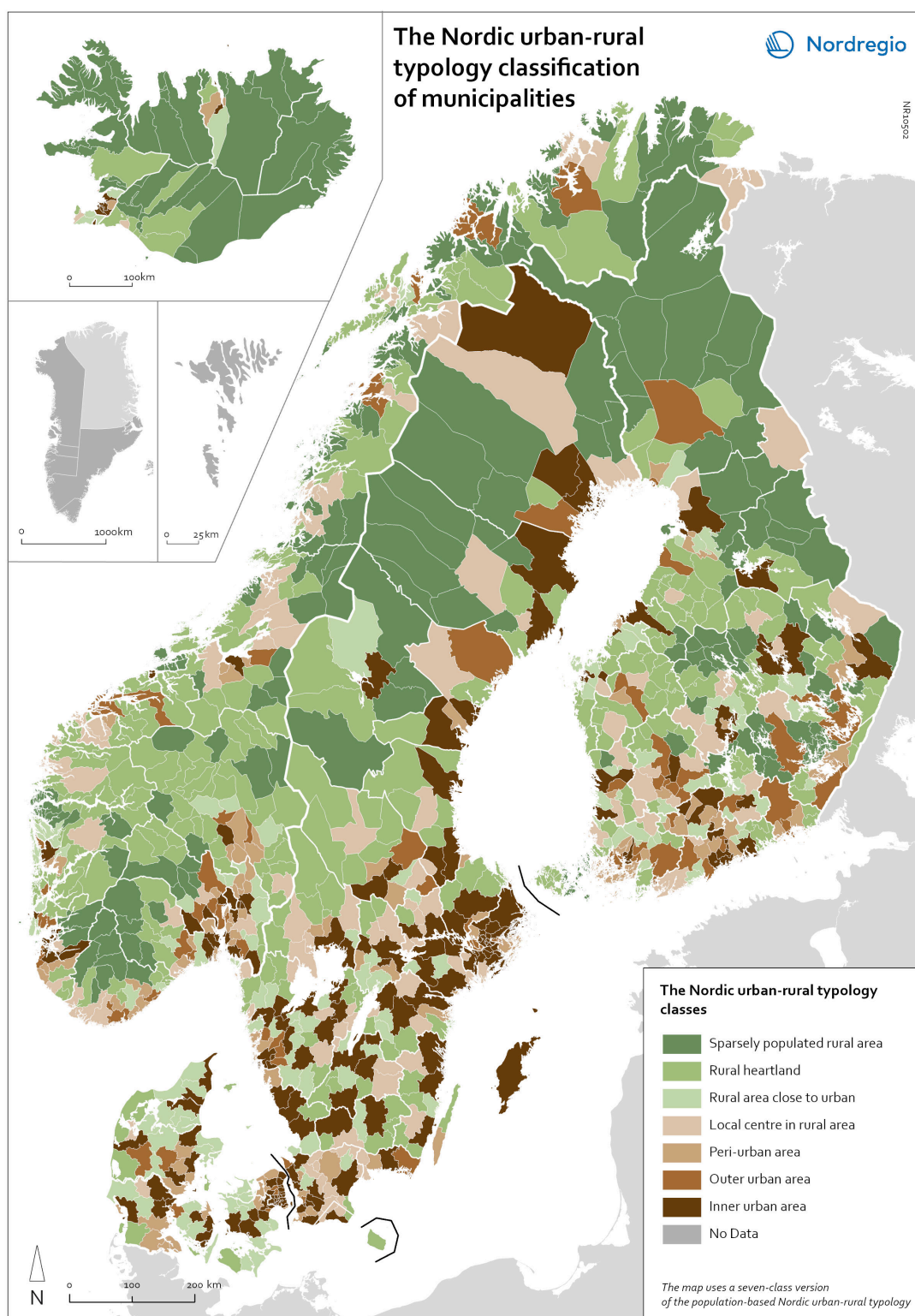


Figure A: Nordic urban-rural typology.

Figure A displays a map of the Nordic Region, highlighting the classification of all municipalities. Note that Greenland and the Faroe Islands are not included in the typology due to lack of data.

For the analyses in this visual guide, these seven classes have been merged into three classes – urban areas, intermediate areas and rural areas - to facilitate comparisons. The three classes correspond to the seven classes in the following way:

Combined Nordic typology classes	Detailed Nordic typology classes
Urban areas	• Inner urban areas • Outer urban areas
Intermediate areas	• Peri-urban areas • Rural areas close to urban areas • Local centres in rural areas*
Rural areas	• Local centres in rural areas* • Rural heartland areas • Sparsely populated rural areas

(*Local centres in rural areas fall between intermediate/rural areas)

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