

Programme for the Nordic Council of Ministers' Co-operation on Labour 2022-2024



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1. Foreword

The common labour market is a cornerstone of Nordic co-operation and has been crucial to the evolution of the Nordic welfare model. The 1954 Agreement Concerning a Common Nordic Labour Market marked the beginning of the countries working together to address shared challenges in this area and led to improvements in the working environment and better job opportunities.

Looking ahead, the Nordic Region faces new challenges. The climate crisis entails an urgent need for a green transition in every part of society – including the nature of working life – if the future is to be more sustainable and equitable. Digitalisation and new technologies will also lead to major changes and demands for adaptation in many workplaces. These changes will affect our social security systems – the pillars of the Nordic welfare model.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to difficulties and changes for all of us, especially in our working lives, in many respects accelerating many of the changes envisaged. We will use this to our advantage and return to a strong and stable Nordic labour market that is resilient in the face of new crises.

It is crucial that we are well prepared for these global changes and play an active role in shaping the working life of the future. The structural changes that we see as a result of demographic change, globalisation, digitalisation and the green transition pose challenges, but also offer opportunities. Some jobs will disappear, but new ones will be created. Throughout this process of adaptation, the health and safety of employees must remain a priority. The unique Nordic labour market model is one of the factors that makes us well placed to ensure that the Nordic workforce has the requisite skills to create an even better labour market for all.

While the megatrends and new technologies mentioned above will have profound and wide-ranging effects, they will not necessarily dictate the nature of our future working life. Rather, the policies we develop will determine the effects of these changes. We will continue to promote participation for all, employee wellbeing, gender equality and opportunities for young people and minorities in well-functioning societies that do not accept stereotypes. We will also continue to work together between sectors to ensure a robust approach to the challenges of the future and to improve working life and the Nordic welfare models.

We will draw on the Nordic Region's unique sense of community to find the best and most sustainable solutions to the challenges we all face. Together we can achieve a green, competitive and socially sustainable Nordic Region!

Tuula Haatainen, Minister of Employment, Finland

Hanna Sarkkinen, Minister of Social Affairs and Health, Finland

The Finnish Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers 2021



Photo: Scanpix.dk

2. Introduction

The Programme for the Nordic Council of Ministers' Co-operation on Labour 2022-2024 promotes development, knowledge and best practices in relation to the challenges faced in the labour market throughout the Nordic Region. The overall objective is to generate proposals, initiatives and solutions that will help drive policy at a national level. The programme also aims to strengthen the common Nordic labour market, help further develop the unique Nordic labour market model, improve cross-border freedom of movement, ensure a positive working environment and good conditions in Nordic workplaces, and coordinate views and joint declarations in areas where the Nordic countries can achieve more together than on their own.

One basic precondition for co-operation is that it generates *Nordic synergies*. Co-operation covers areas in which the Nordic countries have common interests and face the same challenges, and where networking and the sharing of experiences and competencies will improve conditions for development. Supporting co-operation between official agencies is, therefore, a priority for the Council of Ministers for Labour (MR-A).

The co-operation programme is based on the Nordic Council of Ministers' Vision 2030, which states that the Nordic Region will be the most integrated and sustainable region in the world by 2030. The Vision has three priorities: A *green, competitive and socially sustainable* Nordic Region. The programme makes the action plan and its 12 goals tangible, shows what Nordic co-operation needs to achieve by 2024 and identifies several focus areas. The Nordic Council of Ministers' working life sector will help to drive progress on several of the Vision 2030 objectives during the programme period, particularly Objective 7 in the action plan: *The Nordic Council of Ministers will develop skills and well-functioning labour markets that match the requirements of the green transition and digital developments, and that support freedom of movement in the Nordic Region.*

The MR-A's major research initiative, *The Future of Work: Opportunities and challenges for the Nordic Models*, was completed in 2021. The project, its results and recommendations provide

important knowledge and act as a starting point for this co-operation programme. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will also inevitably be a key focal point during the programme period.

The programme will conclude in 2024, which also marks the 70th anniversary of the *Agreement Concerning a Common Nordic Labour Market*, an occasion to be celebrated because the agreement was not only ground-breaking but went on to become a foundational element of Nordic co-operation.

The programme was adopted on 4 November 2021, enters into force on 1 January 2022 and runs until the end of 2024.

Our vision 2030





Photo: Nicky Bonne / vf.dk

3. Strategic priorities

Labour and working life is one of the driving forces behind the Nordic welfare societies and is of crucial importance to business and to us all as individuals. A large and competent workforce, good working conditions and a positive working environment that includes both women and men are essential for creating a green, competitive and socially sustainable region. Our three priorities are interdependent – none can be achieved without the others. Co-operation between the various councils of ministers and with civil society is a prerequisite for making progress and developing the best possible solutions. The distinctive Nordic tripartite model will be another important tool, not just with regards to wages and working hours, but also in relation to the green transition, gender equality and more. This will be the starting point for the MR-A's work during 2022–2024.

3.1 A green Nordic Region

Together, we will promote a green transition of our societies and work towards carbon neutrality and a sustainable circular and bio-based economy.

Goal: A workforce with the competencies needed for the green transition

There are many indications that the green transition will not mean fewer jobs – rather, it will create new ones in different sectors. The key consideration is making sure that both men and women possess the requisite competencies for these new roles. It is also important to help those at risk of losing their jobs and job opportunities due to the green transition into new ones. Skills enhancement, upskilling, continuing and further education etc., will all play important roles in this process. Not only will they be crucial for the success of the green transition, but they are also essential to ensuring that the transition does not feed inequality and, therefore, trigger resistance.

The Nordic councils of ministers, committees and institutions involved: MR-A working with MR-S, MR-R, MR-U, MR-M and the Expert Group for Sustainable Development.

Goal: Ensure that the green transition creates decent jobs

In order to make the green transition fair and equitable, we must actively strive to ensure good working environments and conditions that benefit both men and women. This can be achieved through active, dedicated and evidence-based dialogue between employers, staff, civil society and governments. The unique Nordic labour market model, based on tripartite co-operation, will be a crucial tool in this work.

The Nordic councils of ministers, committees and institutions involved: MR-A and EK-A.

3.2 A competitive Nordic Region

Together, we will promote green growth in the Nordic Region, based on knowledge, innovation, mobility and digital integration.

Goal: Get more people from vulnerable groups into work

Getting as many women and men of working age as possible into work is vital for a well-functioning labour market and for the individual's socio-economic conditions. It also serves as the basis for sustainable welfare models and is crucial for creating a competitive and socially sustainable Nordic Region. The fact that the population is ageing, further underlines the importance of getting even more people into work. During the programme period, the MR-A will focus on ensuring that more refugees, immigrants, young people (including NEETs¹), people with disabilities and senior citizens find work. This will be one of the cross-sectoral initiatives under the Nordic Council of Ministers' action plan for Vision 2030.

The Nordic councils of ministers, committees and institutions involved: The Labour Market Committee, the Working Environment Committee.

Goal: Stabilise the Nordic labour markets in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis and equip them for future crises

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck in spring 2020, the Nordic governments introduced various infection-control measures, all of which have had consequences for their national economies. The consequences for the labour market are reflected in the unemployment figures, changes to work patterns and the use of digital technology at work. To counteract and mitigate these consequences, the Nordic countries have introduced various aid packages and support measures. During the programme period, the MR-A will increase our knowledge and understanding of the Nordic countries' experiences of working life during the COVID-19 crisis. This will include looking at the various strategies behind the measures, restrictions and lockdowns, as well as their consequences, including from a gender perspective. The MR-A will also seek greater knowledge of how the labour market might be stabilised after the crisis, the long-term effects on working life and the Nordic model, and how to prepare for new crises. This will be one of the cross-sectoral initiatives under the Nordic Council of Ministers' action plan for Vision 2030.

The Nordic councils of ministers, committees and institutions involved: MR-A, EK-A, the Labour Market Committee, the Working Environment Committee, the Labour Law Committee and the Integration Programme.

Goal: Ensuring fair conditions in the labour market

One key element in ensuring Nordic competitiveness in the future will be to guarantee fair competition and orderly conditions in the labour market. All Nordic countries support free competition and mobility, but this also requires strong, ongoing efforts to combat work-related crime and social dumping. These are cross-border problems, and contesting them requires that the countries work together across borders and sectors, share experiences and develop joint strategies. During the programme period, the MR-A will strive to generate more concrete, evidence-based knowledge about what works and explore the potential for more exchanges of

1. Not in Education, Employment or Training

experience and closer working relationships in practice.

The Nordic councils of ministers, committees and institutions involved: MR-A, EK-A, the Working Environment Committee, NIVA and the Labour Law Committee.

Goal: Develop solutions to the challenges of the working life of the future

A wide range of factors can influence working life. We often focus on the impact of new technologies and digitalisation, both of which change how we do our jobs and create new forms of work, e.g. via platforms. However, other factors are also important, such as demography, migration, climate change and economic and political changes, such as globalisation, European integration, greater social inequality and equality between men and women. These factors pull in different directions and at different speeds, and we must diligently address the challenges they pose and seize the opportunities they present. Based on the results of the project The Future of Work: Opportunities and challenges for the Nordic models, the MR-A will work to ensure that the labour market of the future also provides jobs that provide with a good physical and psychosocial work environment for both women and men. It will also ensure that the workforce possesses the required competencies and knowledge, as well as access to lifelong learning in order to be prepared for the changes and opportunities ahead. In addition, the MR-A will seek to ensure proper pay and working conditions and that workers' rights are respected in the labour market of the future. This work will be based in part on the ongoing use and development of the unique Nordic tripartite labour market model.

The Nordic councils of ministers, committees and institutions involved: MR-A, EK-A, the Labour Market Committee, the Working Environment Committee and the Labour Law Committee.

3.3 A socially sustainable Nordic Region

Together, we will promote an inclusive, equal and interconnected region with shared values, more cultural exchanges and welfare.

Goal: A better and safer working environment

Ensuring a good and sustainable physical and psychosocial working environment for all throughout their career, is important in the desire to maintain the resources of the workforce at a high level. An important tool in relation to this is, among other things, to promote knowledge about working environments, effective working environment strategies and methods of supervision. Companies' preventive work also plays an important role.

The Nordic councils of ministers, committees and institutions involved: MR-A, EK-A, the Working Environment Committee, NIVA and MR-JÄM.

Goal: Cross-border mobility and freedom of movement

Freedom of movement has been a key factor in the success of the common Nordic labour market over the last 65 years, for example by providing better opportunities for matching. To maintain it for everybody of working age, it is important that we continuously work to improve cross-border mobility, dismantle barriers to freedom of movement and prevent the emergence of new ones. A special focus on mobility for young people is an important part of this work and a high priority for most of the other councils of ministers.

The Nordic councils of ministers, committees and institutions involved: MR-A, EK-A, the Labour Market Committee, the Labour Law Committee and Nordjobb.

Goal: Social sustainability in sparsely populated areas

In order to be sustainable and function well, sparsely populated areas need the right conditions for education, work, participation in society and access to health care and welfare services. During the programme period, the MR-A will promote knowledge on how to create these conditions in sparsely populated areas, with a particular focus on competencies and job mobility.

The Nordic councils of ministers, committees and institutions involved: MR-A working with MR-S, MR-R, MR-U and MR-N.

Goal: Equal treatment and equality in working life

Equal treatment and gender equality in the labour market are vital preconditions for ensuring high levels of employment in the Nordic countries and for drawing on the broad range of competencies in the whole workforce. Realising this goal entails combating discrimination based on, for example age, sex, gender identity, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, other beliefs or disability. This goal must be mainstreamed – it should not be considered one goal among many, but a consistent goal through for all of the MR-A's activities.

The Nordic councils of ministers, committees and institutions involved: MR-A working with MR-JÄM, MR-K, NORDBUK and the Programme for Integration.



Photo: Nicky Bonne / vf.dk

4. Nordic co-operation on EU issues and with other international actors

The MR-A collaborates on EU issues and upcoming legislative initiatives from the European Commission. Among other things, EU issues are discussed regularly at all meetings of MR-A, the Nordic Committee of Senior Officials for Working Life (EK-A) and all the sector's subcommittees (the Labour Market Committee, the Working Environment Committee and the Labour Law Committee). Especially the Labour Law Committee concentrates on EU affairs and focuses on both the early phase of legislation, ongoing negotiations, the implementation of EU legislation and rulings by the European Court of Justice. The Nordic-Baltic-Polish EU Information Group also monitors the EU's work on working-life policy.

The MR-A addresses EU issues that are of interest to the Nordic Region as a whole, for example by issuing declarations, making enquiries or sending letters.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) is central to the MR-A's international co-operation. One focal point for this co-operation is the work done by ILO on future working life, as well as the MR-A's research on the same issue. The Nordic countries also work together informally on ILO issues, and a Nordic country always has a seat on the ILO board.

This work is supplemented by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) knowledge and analyses of labour market issues. During the programme period, the MR-A will pay particular attention to the OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC).

In several contexts, representatives from the EU, OECD and ILO will be invited to meetings, conferences etc.



Photo: Eiríkur Björnsson / Norden.org

5. How Nordic co-operation is organised

The Council of Ministers for Labour have overall responsibility for Nordic co-operation on labour market issues. It is organised by EK-A, which sets the guidelines for and administers the MR-A budget. A flexible organisational structure is vital for the ability of Nordic co-operation on labour market issues to initiate and follow up on current topics. EK-A has established three standing committees – the Labour Market Committee, the Working Environment Committee and the Labour Law Committee – and sets up ad hoc groups as needed. The main task of the Nordic-Baltic-Polish EU Information Group is to monitor the EU's work in labour market policy, labour law and the working environment.

The Nordic Institute for Advanced Training in Occupational Health (NIVA) in Helsinki is part of the Nordic co-operation on the working environment (see p.9). The MR-A also works with other Nordic institutions, such as the Nordic Welfare Centre (NVC) and NordForsk. The Council of Ministers partly finances the Nordjobb programme, which is an exchange programme for young people in the Nordic Region who want to take a summer job in another Nordic country (www.nordjobb.org). In addition, the MR-A funds an information programme about Nordic working life in both Scandinavian and English (www.arbeidslivinorden.org) and the newsletter *EU & Labour Law*.

The MR-A has a long tradition of involving and working with employers' organisations and trade unions and invites them to its meetings and to various activities under the auspices of the annual Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers. In a number of cases, the MR-A also involves the Nordic Council of Ministers' Civil Society Network and holds open consultations.

5.1 Intersectoral strategies

The Nordic Council of Ministers policy for mainstreaming sustainable development, gender

equality, and a child rights and youth perspective into all of its activities² recurs throughout the work of the MR-A, as do integration and disability issues.

The MR-A co-operation programme supports the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular SDG #8 (decent work and economic growth). Its work has also been important for the achievement of SDG #4 (quality education), SDG #5 (gender equality) and SDG #10 (reduced inequalities).

In practice, this means that these perspectives are systematically taken into account in all of the MR-A's activities. Responsibility for this lies with the decision-making bodies, including in particular the MR-A, EK-A and the three sub-committees, as well as the staff and actors who participate in Nordic co-operation.

2. <http://norden.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1474814&dswid=1273>



Photo: Scanpix.dk

6. Evaluation the co-operation programme

The Programme for the Nordic Council of Ministers' Co-operation on Labour runs until the end of 2024. The programme is reflected in the MR-A's budget, which sets the conditions for the implementation of the programme. The programme will be evaluated in advance of the end date. This evaluation will, among other things, form the basis for the sector's work going forward.

Appendix 1: Strategic mandate for NIVA

The Nordic Institute for Advanced Training in Occupational Health (NIVA) is part of the Nordic co-operation on labour, working under the Nordic Council of Ministers (www.niva.org). NIVA's activities are based on a strategic mandate set by EK-A. Its main role is to act as a forum for knowledge sharing on working environment issues.

NIVA's remit includes generating dialogue on important and innovative topics related to working environment, with a view to improving working life in the Nordic Region. NIVA also generates Nordic added value by organising research-based courses, webinars, workshops and seminars at high academic level, particularly in areas where the individual countries lack critical mass. This is done in line with the recommendations in the most recent evaluation of NIVA.

NIVA will contribute to achieving Vision 2030 by ensuring that all of its activities integrate aspects of a green, competitive and socially sustainable Nordic Region. This will entail a closer focus on driving forces such as new technologies, globalisation, demographic change, the climate and the environment, and on how these factors impact working life and the working environment.

The working environment is an interdisciplinary field in which the challenges faced are closely connected to changes in working life. NIVA helps to educate and train experts in the working environment in the Nordic Region. In addition to general themes, NIVA will offer particular expertise related to specific challenges during the programme period, e.g. extended careers, the burden of physical work, the consequences of the working environment for quality, productivity and the economy, organisational and psychosocial risks, new technologies (e.g. digitalisation), accident prevention and safety culture, new chemical risks and new forms of organisation and employment.

About this publication

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Nordic co-operation

Nordic co-operation is one of the world's most extensive forms of regional collaboration, involving Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland.

Nordic co-operation has firm traditions in politics, economics and culture and plays an important role in European and international forums. The Nordic community strives for a strong Nordic Region in a strong Europe.

Nordic co-operation promotes regional interests and values in a global world. The values shared by the Nordic countries help make the region one of the most innovative and competitive in the world.

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How the Co-operation Programme relates to *Our Vision 2030*

All activities in the Nordic Council of Ministers will contribute to fulfilling our vision that the Nordic Region will be the world's most sustainable and integrated region in 2030. The co-operation programme describes how the sector will work with the three strategic priority areas and contribute to reaching the 12 objectives in the Action Plan 2021–24 in the work to attain *Our Vision 2030*.

Read more: norden.org