



**Gen Z Agency:
Mobilising young people to
strengthen Nordic rural areas**

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Preface

Understanding the priorities of young people when it comes to residing and working in Nordic rural regions holds the key to shaping thriving Nordic rural communities. In their twenties and thirties, individuals in the Nordic region are on the cusp of embarking on their careers or nearing the completion of their education. They face the significant choices of selecting career paths and deciding where to settle. The decisions and perspectives of these individuals will inevitably shape the future development of the Nordic region.

To gain insights into what can be done to address barriers to settling in rural areas, it is imperative that we engage with young people who either currently reside in rural areas or aspire to do so, particularly those who harbour uncertainties about their prospects of staying in rural areas long-term. What are young peoples' aspirations, ideas and solutions that would draw them back to rural areas? What would make young people, who already live in rural areas, thrive?

It was imperative for the project outcome to place the young people at the centre of our project. This project was for them and by them – an attempt to follow the well-known iteration from the indigenous and LGBTQIA+ communities: "Nothing about us without us".

We have done our utmost to follow this principle, according to our abilities, project scope, budget, and time frame. Working with young people from all over the Nordic region, with different backgrounds and experiences was highly rewarding, and not least, a great privilege. It will be one of those projects we will always remember. The GenZ-panellists' thoughts and ideas challenged our preconceived notions, and generated new perspectives, and we hope that this project also inspired our panellists to continue to engage in the public discourse on matters that concerns them. Their voices matter.

This document outlines what we did and how we did it when engaging young people to tell us what policy and decision-makers need to do to revitalise Nordic rural areas.

The Nordregio GenZ-project team

Why Gen Z Agency: Mobilising young people to strengthen Nordic rural areas?

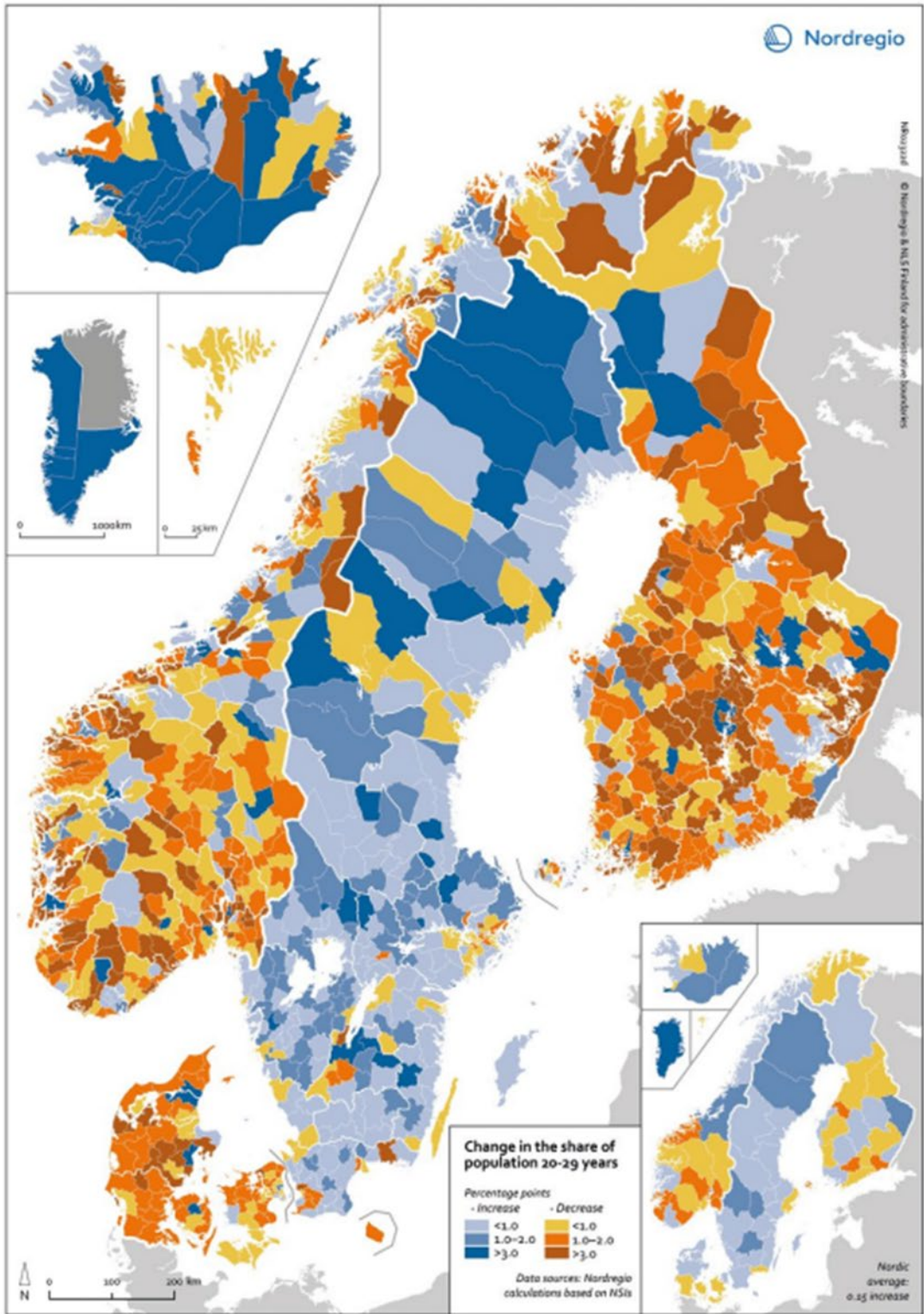
The Nordic Region aims to become the most sustainable and integrated region in the world by 2030, and the Nordic Council of Ministers wants the Nordic countries to be the best place in the world for young people and children (Nordic Co-operation, n.d.). Children and young people are rights-holders, and the Nordic vision aims to improve their well-being and enable them to exercise their rights and be heard. Young people are important for implementing the vision and achieving sustainable and inclusive regional development, in cities, rural areas, and everything in between. During Iceland's presidency of the Nordic Co-operation in 2023, the month of November is dedicated to the youth of the Nordics. Young people have therefore featured prominently on the agenda in the Nordic Council of Ministers' work during 2023.

Young people are important for the future prospects of rural areas, for local and regional labour markets, for a variety of services, and as a social bond. At the same time, many rural municipalities are experiencing a demographic trend with an ageing population, youth migration, and a less diversified job market and service offerings. The population change for young people aged 20-29 is particularly negative in rural municipalities, according to studies (change in their share of this age group, see Map 1) (Karlsdóttir, Cuadrado, Gaini, Jungsberg, & Vestergård, 2019). Cities and urban centres attract young people with wider variety education or employment opportunities – although many rural municipalities are grappling with a shortage of skills and a labour force shortage. To understand and address these processes, we need to illuminate a diversity of experiences and perspectives among young people regarding welfare, planning, and how dreams are formed and realised.

The voices and engagement of young people are central to strengthening the Nordic rural areas and promoting the well-being of young people. What is necessary for young people to feel that they have a future in rural areas? Where do young people see the solutions and enablers for them to choose to live and work there? In what ways can we enable young people in rural areas to thrive, and in what ways can we enable their agency in forging their desired rural futures?

The famous words of Nelson Mandela, uttered 25 years ago, declared that the future belongs to the youth. Nearly three decades later, the progress and advancement of countries and regions are inextricably linked to the active involvement of young people in policy formulation and strategic planning. To steer the Nordic Region towards becoming a global leader in social and environmental sustainability, it is imperative to gain insights into the career decisions, mobility trends, and sustainability outlook of the younger generation.

To capture these perspectives, the Nordic regional ministers decided to implement a project on what young people believe is required for Nordic rural areas to be attractive for living and working in.



Map 1: Change in young adults (20–29 years), share of total population 2000–2019. governing territories.

Project aim

The aim of the project was to identify and describe the central enablers and solutions concerning young people's living conditions in rural areas and for young people to want to settle in rural areas in the Nordic region. Overall, the project was to answer the following questions:

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

To address these questions, the project proposed recruiting and involving young individuals to participate in a co-creative workshop series. The thematic focus was developed, formulated, and elaborated in collaboration with the young participants from the beginning, and throughout the project. These workshops discussed critical issues and produced practical recommendations to make rural areas in the Nordic region more attractive for young people, with a particular focus on facilitators and potentials. Since the project was to heavily involve young people, the first phase of the project focused on developing methods and themes in collaboration with the young participants and understanding what inclusion and co-creation processes with young people entailed in this process and project.

Young people: The core of our project

The Nordic countries and international organisations have established definitions of what constitutes “youth”. Within the Nordic Council of Ministers, the definition of children and young people include individuals up to the age of 25 (in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child). Due to the possibility of international travel, the project focused on recruiting young people in the age range of 18-25.

Youth is a diverse group with expertise in their own life situations, surroundings, and future visions. To ensure a wide range of perspectives, the participant group aimed to include a group with a connection to rural areas:

- Young people (aged 18-25) who already reside in and have settled in rural areas.
- Young people (aged 18-25) who have previously lived in rural areas and could potentially return.
- Young people (aged 18-25) who have not previously lived in rural areas but might consider moving there.
- Young people (aged 18-25) who have left rural areas and do not envision moving there or returning.

The project name includes the term “Gen Z”. Gen Z is, according to the Cambridge Dictionary “the group of people who were born in the late 1990s and early 2000s”. It is a term associated with many definitions, and it is accompanied by specific assumptions pertaining to this group of young adults. The Gen Z’s are allegedly also the largest group of people on the planet. This also means that they play an important role for future generations.

Recruitment

Including young people from various background connected to rural areas provided a broader perspective on the conditions of rural areas. It was essential that the project represented diverse geographical regions in the Nordic countries and autonomous territories. In total, 24 individuals were recruited, and in total there were 25 people were involved in the process in one way or another. However, it should be noted that the active core of the group comprised approximately 20 individuals. We still managed to retain a good geographical distribution across the Nordics throughout the project.

The open recruitment process took place over the course of January through March 2023, sharing the application to participate on Nordregio’s social media outlets, as well as in local newspapers, newsletters, and in relevant target groups and youth associations identified in a stakeholder mapping exercise. Snowballing was also an important component in the recruitment, and the project team members used their networks to distribute the call for applicants.

The project team at Nordregio received a total of 50 applications, and all applicants were contacted for an interview. In the end, we conducted 46 interviews, and selected 24 panellists based on different gender identities, age groups, educational levels, disabilities, and various types of regions and municipalities, as well as including a group of people from outside the Nordic Region to shed light on what it is like moving to a Nordic rural area. Moreover, it was important to acknowledge people’s backgrounds, to strive to have selection of people that were as representative as possible. Therefore, our group consisted of people who had a lot of both political and organisational experience, but also those who did not (see Box 1). For some, it was the first time they engaged in processes that placed their voices at the centre of the agenda.

BOX 1: LIST OF YOUTH PANEL PARTICIPANTS (AGE 18-25)

The following young representatives have to a varying degree participated in the workshops, depending on work/study load, capacity, and interests. The panellists participated on a voluntary basis.

1. Mikkel Nisker, Denmark
2. Agnes Bjerg Pedersen, Denmark
3. Cecilia Huhtala, Finland
4. Anton Vest, Finland
5. Joonas Mäkelä, Finland
6. Jenny Hieto, Finland
7. Aleksandra Mazurek, Finland
8. Jógvan Jón Henriksen, Faroe Islands
9. Jóhan Nattestad Kass, Faroe Islands
10. Jákup í Jákupsstovu, Faroe Islands
11. Maria Hvalsrætt, Faroe Islands
12. Nivi Rosing, Greenland
13. Lukas Andersen, Greenland
14. Margrét Lara Baldursdóttir, Iceland
15. Bára Örk Melsted, Iceland
16. Selma Dís Hauksdóttir, Iceland
17. Carina Burroughs, Iceland
18. Ingebjørg Flyum Bjørlo, Norway
19. Mads Ødegaard Harstad, Norway
20. Gustav Johansson, Sweden
21. Annie Linsemark, Sweden
22. Sofia Lindgårde, Sweden
23. Farah Mohanud, Sweden
24. Beatrice Bucht, Sweden
25. Jenny-Erika Åkerman, Åland



Reference group

To support the recruitment process of the young persons as well as the development of a solid workshop structure, the project team recruited a number of experts from across Nordic and national level organisations and associations working with youth related issues, to form a reference group (see Box 2). The group held six meetings in total. A few of the reference group participants were also asked to comment on Nordregio's final policy brief, and contributed with their expertise. The group emphasised the importance of creating trust among the youth panellists, and we followed up by ensuring that we had a number of fun activities in addition to the workshop content. They were also invaluable help in guiding us in terms of shedding light on how to engage with young people in such group exercises.

BOX 2: REFERENCE GROUP MEMBERS

1. **Denmark:** Eva Mærsk, University of Southern Denmark
2. **Finland:** Kaisa Vehkalathi, University of Jyväskylä
3. **Faroe Islands:** Ernst Sumberg Olsen, NORA
4. **Greenland:** Nivikka Witjes, Siutsiu
5. **Iceland:** Friðmey Jónsdóttir, Samfés
6. **Norway:** Anne-Irene Myhr, Distriktssenteret
7. **Sweden:** Ellen Lundkvist, Landsbygdsnätverket
8. **Nordic Welfare Centre:** Merethe Løberg
9. **Norden Association:** Anna Scaramellini.

An Ålandic organisation was invited, but was unable to participate.

Method

Participation is a broad concept with a wide range of approaches, and can encompass various degrees of active involvement or influence. It ranges from mere participation in the role of an informant, but also involvement that provides room for co-influence, collaboration, and shared responsibility in a developmental process or creation (e.g., Arnstein's ladder of participation from 1969).

Co-creation is a popular tool for making participation processes impactful (Do, Powell, & Naunova, 2018). The co-creation process is defined as a non-linear process involving multiple actors in brainstorming, implementation, and assessment of societal challenges, policies, or systems. The methods ensure strengthened ownership to the process, and that participants feel their voices matter and that they were heard, not as informants but as co-creators of solutions and outcomes. Co-creation was, therefore, a cornerstone of the project's perspective and concrete methods, where young people were involved in creating the content – from the method and content of workshops to outputs and recommendations, including video content and participation in meetings with public officials. In other words, the project involved young participants from start to finish.

"Hela Sverige Ska Leva" has developed a so-called "Society's Needs Hierarchy" (based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs) that illustrates a hierarchy of various societal functions that needed to interact to enable rural development. This was applied as a framework to initiate a dialogue with young people and structure the initial ideas that were developed – we adapted these based on the perspectives and needs of the young participants.



Figure 1: Society's Needs Hierarchy (Hela Sverige Ska Leva, 2021).

Workshop number 2 was hosted online at the end of April. During this workshop, the participants were tasked with developing survey questions and do a small stakeholder mapping.

Note on the survey and survey questions:

The youth group indicated that they wanted to conduct a survey to establish whether their focus areas could be anchored in a wider group.

The questions for the survey were developed during workshop number 2, and it was placed in a survey format by the project team at Nordregio. The panellists were tasked with a small stakeholder mapping during the workshop, and furthermore, with the distribution of the survey in their networks. These efforts were complimented by Nordregio’s project team’s efforts to share the survey as well.

In total, there were 128 respondents to the questionnaire. The geographic distribution of respondents was not even (see Figure 3), and the relatively low number of respondents meant that the survey results could not be used as a generalisation, but it still served a function: The answers, particularly the written responses, corresponded with our panellists’ thoughts and ideas, and the survey could therefore be used as a guiding document to widen the participants thoughts and ideas.

1. Which Nordic country do you live in?

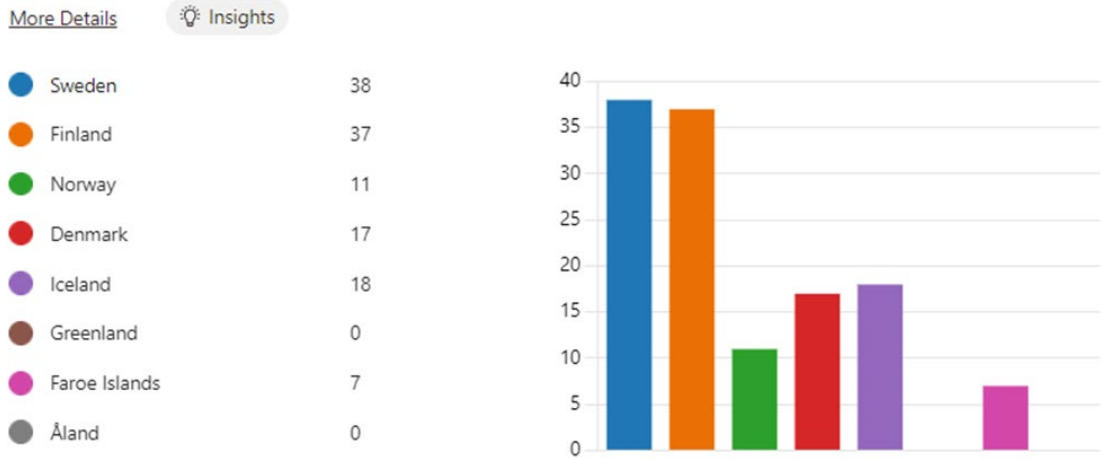


Figure 3: Distribution of survey respondents by country.

The **third workshop** was held in person at Nordregio in late May 2023. Most of our panellists travelled to Stockholm to participate. The workshop included an introduction of the first findings from the survey. The participants were tasked with developing their initial hypotheses for the recommendations, using a template to generate ideas. There was also time for a presentation and discussion about young people’s role in sustainability efforts, which was hosted by a different project at Nordregio,



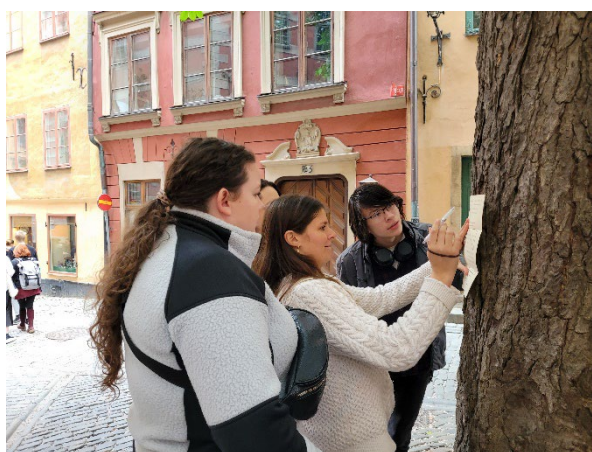


hosted by Åsa Hildestrand, senior project manager at Nordregio. There were also an ice breaker and fika. The day ended with fun activities in Stockholm city centre, combining sightseeing and problem solving.

Workshop number 4 was hosted online in August, and it focused on policy brief development and how to think about target audiences when writing. There was also some time to continue the work on the policy recommendations and start the planning of communications activities.

The final workshop was hosted in person in Stockholm. The purpose was to finalise the policy recommendations, or action points, by working in groups, and finally develop the communications output through creative activities. This included, e.g., videos where the panellists brought up their most important perspectives on young people as part of rural development . aimed at Nordic policy- and decisionmakers.

The final recommendations were structured and synthesised by the team at Nordregio. The panellists were able to access and change the content of the recommendations until the end of September.



Knowledge background

This section contains brief overviews of policies on rural areas and youth in the Nordic Region. It is by no means exhaustive, and aims primarily to give a snapshot of the current situation.

Nordic rural areas

The boundary between rural and urban areas is gradually blurring, particularly in terms of cultural homogenisation and the erosion of traditions. This observation was made back in the 1980s when urban qualities began mixing with rural characteristics due to the influence of information technologies, resulting in what was termed "rurbanisation" by Hompland (1984 in Bæck, 2004). Over the past few decades, rural and urban areas have been merging, as certain segments of consumer products and services become increasingly accessible.

With the profound advancements in information technology, the proliferation of digital tools, and the widespread availability of consumer products and services online, both in rural and urban areas, the unique characteristics of these locales are undeniably fading (Bæck U.-D. , 2004). This cultural transformation also exerts an influence on "regional variations," leading to the decline of traditions and the emergence of a more homogenised population across countries. It implies that the local community no longer serves as the primary normative centre (Bæck, U.-D., 2004), and that cultural identity, as well as the future aspirations of younger generations, now take shape elsewhere, displaying a certain malleability (Barcus & Brunn, 2010) as well as changing over time (Mærsk, Aagaard Thuesen, & Haartsen., 2023) When viewed through this lens, the migration of young people, whose cultural identity transcends that of their local community, can be partly elucidated by how " rural areas have become tightly interwoven with the rest of the world" (Cras, 2018).

The aspirations and dreams of younger generations are not necessarily inherently tied to a specific geographical location; rather, they are arguably shaped by their individual perceptions of rural areas in comparison to urban settings. For instance, a Danish study demonstrates that young individuals with strong academic backgrounds tend to envision their future in a manner that leans towards urban lifestyles, often believing they must "get out to get on" (Dalsgaard Pedersen & Gram, 2018, p. 621). Research uncovers that the relationships these youths have with their local rural surroundings are marked by a complex blend of emotions, encompassing both attachment and detachment, as well as feelings of pride and entrapment (Dalsgaard Pedersen & Gram, 2018).

Nevertheless, there is also contrasting evidence. A Swedish study delves into how young individuals establish connections with their hometowns and explores the connections between this sense of belonging and their envisioned spatial prospects, which encompass the decision to remain in their 'local' area or opt for migration. The findings reveal that a strong sense of belonging significantly shapes the identity development of young people. However, a direct link between their identification with their hometown and their inclination to stay there is not readily apparent. Instead, the perceived and narrated associations of their hometown with other places, in conjunction with material conditions, social interactions, and practices, all contribute to the articulated perspectives of these youths regarding their spatial futures (Rönnlund, 2019).

The perception of rural and urban areas as traditional or modern, and therefore safe or exciting, persists. Rural areas are often associated with a sense of community and safety, while urban areas symbolise excitement and individuality (Tønneis 1963 in Bæck, 2004). In a more recent publication, Syssner (2018) expands on this duality, characterising the countryside as 'condition' and the city as 'process,' embodying creativity, renewal, and progress. Furthermore, as Syssner points out, the

countryside serves as the baseline against which modernity and urban areas are measured. Consequently, the countryside becomes the antithesis, representing tradition and (slow) continuity.

Keeping these dynamics in mind, rural youth who choose to remain in rural settings are often unfairly portrayed in a negative light as 'falling behind,' both literally and metaphorically, and are perceived as lacking ambition and agency. They are seen as opting for tradition and a slower pace of life over excitement, progress, and creativity. In a world where perceived 'upward' mobility is equated with personal advancement, staying in one place is often viewed as stagnation. How can we shift this perception?

Defining rural areas in the Nordics

The definition and conceptualisation of 'rural' varies greatly between the Nordic countries and self-governing territories (Lundgren et al., 2021). The definition spans complex questions based on differing preconditions, but also depart from different statistical boundaries, including population density, distance to public and commercial services and labour market access (Lundgren, Nilsson, Norlén, & Tapia, 2020). Various classifications and typologies describing rural and urban areas have emerged among researchers and scholars, which seek to account for the diversity of places for making more granular analyses beyond simple administrative boundaries. 'Rural' is therefore also relative for the particular context. However, the negative perceptions of 'rural' remain. According to Cras (2018), the media and public debate still seems to simplify the definition, and 'rural' is often equated with the 'rest of the country'.

Finland is a sparsely populated country most of which area is considered predominantly rural. Its demography is characterised by a strong concentration of the population in the so-called southern growth centres (Nilsson & Jokinen, 2020). The Finnish national level urban-rural classification distinguishes four different types of rural areas – sparsely populated rural areas, rural heartland areas, rural areas close to urban areas and local centres in rural areas. This classification is applied in statistical analyses and is cross-cutting municipal borders. This highlights the diversity of rural municipalities and regions (Kull, Stjernberg, & Eggers, 2020). The autonomous region of **Åland** is an island community and is characterised by both mainland and archipelagic rural areas. Statistics and Research Åland (ÅSUB) refer to all municipalities except for Mariehamn as rural municipalities (including archipelago) (Ålands statistik- och utredningsbyrå, 2023).

Rural areas in **Norway** are classified based on a centrality index (Statistics Norway, 2020) ranging from category 1, the most central, to category 6, the least central, determined by factors such as proximity to public services, labour market access, and population data. Additionally, a rural index is used to allocate rural and regional policy support measures, incorporating four indicators: Statistics Norway's centrality index (weighted at 40%); population growth over the past decade (40%); Labour market growth over the past decade (10%) and the Herfindahl's index for the private sector (measuring business structure dynamics, 10%). Municipalities with lower scores face greater challenges, while those with higher scores encounter fewer issues (The Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Rural Affairs, 2022).

In **Sweden**, there are numerous definitions of "rural" for policy purposes. For example, The Swedish Agency for Growth Policy Analysis (Tillväxtanalys) has developed a territorial classification resulting in six different kinds of municipalities¹. The definition recognises mixed rural/urban areas, rural areas

¹ The categorisation include:

A) Municipalities with less than 20 percent of the population in rural areas and a with neighbouring municipalities combined population of at least 500,000; B1) Other municipalities with less than 50 percent of the population in rural areas and at least 50 percent of the

close to cities and remote rural areas, and embarks from population density, population size and population proximity to population agglomerations. A difficulty with defining the countryside at the municipal level is that most municipalities are very different from each other and many therefore do not feel that it is fair to define the countryside in this way (Tillväxtanalys, 2014). The word "countryside" or "rural" does not only have statistical implications but is among the general public also associated with conceptual ambiguity. In this regard, it is often used to describe places or settlements in general terms, or even natural and cultural landscapes such as buildings, labour market segments, the forest, or the availability of goods and services (Westholm, 2018).

In 2021, the definition of an **Icelandic** municipality included a minimum population of 50, and today, there are 5 municipalities in Iceland with a population between 50-99 people. By 2026, the minimum population of a municipality will be 1000 people, affecting approximately half of Iceland's municipalities today (Alþingi, 2021). The aim of the amalgamation is a better allocation of public funds (economies of scale) and improved access and quality of the services provided, many of which will affect children and young people, such as primary schools, infrastructure for sports and youth activities, leisure centres and other cultural opportunities. Municipalities are responsible for providing basic services, including social services, primary school infrastructure, and services to the elderly and the disabled. Around a third of the total public funds are in the hands of municipal authorities. However, there is no single definition on 'rural' areas, and it changes depending on the policy documents at hand (OECD, 2020).

Categorising Danish municipalities is also less specific than their Nordic counterparts, leading to a lack of a clear definition for **Denmark's** regional and rural policies (Lundgren, Lidmo, Wøien Meijer, Teräs, & Eliassen, 2021). Nonetheless, the white paper "Regional- og landdistriktspolitisk redegørelse" (2021) offers two rural area definitions, one which is based on municipal and parish typologies, based on proximity to more densely populated municipalities (Danish Government, 2021). Eurostat's urban-rural typology characterizes the region of North Jutland and the Zealand Region as predominantly rural in terms of population distribution, but this paints too broad a picture of rural Denmark. A classification introduced during the 2007 municipal reform considers seven indicators of "rural," covering urbanisation, agriculture significance, centre-periphery dynamics, development, economy, education, and demography. Under this framework, Denmark has 16 peripheral rural areas and 30 predominantly rural areas, collectively covering about 71% of Denmark's land area (Vestergård, Refsgaard, & Wolk, 2020).

The **Faroe Islands**, an autonomous region within the Kingdom of Denmark, is home to 54,738 inhabitants spread across its 18 islands. The population has seen a steady increase since the early 2000s (Nordisk Samarbeid, 2022; Hagstova Føroya, 2023). Out of the 53,653 residents in 2022, 22,704 reside in Tórshavn, the capital. The Faroe Islands is a remote island, and although the island would in general be classified as rural, Tórshavn represents a markedly different community than the rest of the Faroe Islands (Gaini, 2022). Gaini describes it as a "microscopic metropolis" (Gaini, 2022, p. 35). We could not find a definitive definition of 'rural' for Faroe Islands. This might be due to a lack of language capacities.

population with less than a 45-minute commute to one agglomeration with at least 50,000 inhabitants; B2) Other municipalities with less than 50 percent of the population in rural areas and less than 50 percent of the population with less than a 45-minute commute to an agglomeration with at least 50,000 inhabitants; C1) Municipalities with at least 50 percent of the population in rural areas and at least 50 percent of the population with less than a 45-minute journey to an agglomeration with at least 50,000 inhabitants; C2) Municipalities with at least 50 percent of the population in rural areas and less than 50 percent of the population with less than a 45-minute journey to one agglomeration with at least 50,000 inhabitants and C3) Municipalities with the entire population in rural areas and with at least 90 minutes average journey to an agglomeration with at least 50,000 inhabitants.

Being the largest island in the world, with one of the world's lowest population densities at 0.3 persons per square kilometre, **Greenland** can be said to be primarily sparsely populated or uninhabited. The total population of approximately 58,000 people reside along the coastline (Slätmo, Bogason, Vasilevskaia, & Salonen, 2022). The Greenlandic definition of rural versus urban has existed until recently in for example area planning documents, in the form of "by/illoqarfik" (town) and "bygd/nunaqarfik" (rural areas). These definitions are addressed in the Government of Greenland's recent white paper "Det nødvendige vedligehold: Redegørelse om landsplanlægning 2023"², where the demarcation is removed and replaced with the neutral "bosted/inoqarfik" (household or dwelling) (Government of Greenland, 2023). The country is furthermore characterised by limited road infrastructure networks, rendering sea and air transport common. According to Bogason et al. (2021) Greenland has a total of five heliports, 42 helistops and 12 airports across the country, transporting people and goods. Commuting between villages and towns is largely limited, making these communities reliant on the employment opportunities offered by the natural resources available in their vicinity.

Demographic development in Nordic rural areas

Rural areas in the Nordic region have a higher old age dependency ratio than their urban counterparts. This is driven by both natural population change and the migration of young people. But rural areas are exposed to different types of population development trends taking place in parallel. The influx of new citizens from other countries, new types of labour markets enabling multi-locality living as well as spatially uneven demographic change (even within rural municipalities) are also examples of processes that are ongoing in these areas. Common to all rural areas is the dependence on a demographic composition that enables a sustainable and vital working force.

Population decline predominantly affects islands and peripheral regions in **Denmark** (Andersen, 2017) making demographic change a defining aspect of the Danish rural future. Denmark does however experience population growth overall, but with an imbalance; major city-municipalities and the capital region see the most significant growth, while middle-sized municipalities have more balanced population development. In peripheral areas, the most notable difference is in the youth population, with a nearly 40% decrease in the age group 25–30 since the 1990s. On the islands, this number rises to 58%, primarily due to young people leaving for the capital region (Andersen, 2017, p. 10).

In **Iceland**, the geographical distribution of its population changed drastically during the 20th century. In 1901, only 10.5 % of the population lived in the capital region, compared to 62.7% today (Hagstofan, 2023). Back then, the capital region and the adjacent south-west Reykjanes peninsula both had fewer inhabitants than each of the regions of Westfjords, Northeast and South Iceland. The total number of municipalities in the country was 192, at the time (Landmælingar Íslands, n.d.). Today, Iceland has a population of 388,000, distributed between 8 regions and 64 municipalities.

Demographic changes in **Sweden** are characterised by urbanisation and increased population concentration into urban areas. This is primarily due to immigration from other countries and excess births. Internal migration accounts for only a small part of urbanisation in Sweden. Young adults still account for a third of the long-distance migrations, and migration flows are usually towards larger cities (Regeringen, 2021). Similar to the other Nordic countries, many rural Swedish municipalities and regions are also having an ageing population, which is reflected in a long legacy of population change (Heleniak & Sánchez Gassen, 2019). In rural research, rural service provision challenges often constitute an important theme, particularly in relation to shrinking rural areas. However, service

² In English: Necessary maintenance: Statement on country planning 2023.

provision challenges in Sweden are not necessarily only related to depopulation. Even in rural areas with population growth, access to service facilities are becoming poorer (Cras, *Service i framtidens landsbygdssamhällen*, 2018).

This is also an issue in **Finland**. The discussion on uneven spatial development and the future of Finnish rural areas and smaller and medium-sized cities, has intensified in recent years against the backdrop of an ongoing population decline in rural areas (Copus, Kahila, & Fritsch, 2022). Key challenges for the rural regions and municipalities in Finland include a declining and ageing population and challenges to ensuring service provision for all. Regarding labour market and economic development, the number of workplaces is decreasing in some rural regions and municipalities, while others experience labour shortages in many sectors (Statsrådet, 2020). Development of services, consideration of residents and businesses in decision-making, improved conditions for businesses and increased opportunities for leisure activities, are all examples of Finnish rural policy priorities that contributes to viable rural areas (Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, 2022).

Norwegian rural areas have grappled with a continuous migration of young people for many years. The predominant migration trend is that people move towards the more central areas of Norway (Amundsen, 2023). People already living in central areas of Norway also move, but shorter distances: People growing up in central areas like the region of Viken, do tend to move from the place they were raised, but they tend to stay within the same region, often only moving to the neighbouring municipality (Amundsen, 2023). Amundsen's findings are referring to the recent longitudinal demographic study published by Statistics Norway, which followed cohorts of young people who were 15 years old in the period 1978 – 2002, tracking them to the age of 35 (Høydahl, 2023). It shows that the lowest proportion of permanent residents is found in the least central municipalities, and that few moved back. Education plays a role in this, and is connected to the sexes, too. A significantly larger number of women hold higher education degrees compared to men, and individuals with higher education tend to follow a more centralising relocation pattern than those with lower educational qualification. Moreover, as there are generally more women moving away from the municipality they were raised in, there is also slightly more women than men moving back again. On the national level, Høydahl writes, there has been a slight, but positive increase in return migration for all municipalities, except for those municipalities with a centrality level of 6 (lowest).

Similar to the global trend, **Greenland** has experienced ongoing urbanisation over the past century, driven by industrialisation. This can be seen in the substantial growth in urban centres over the past century, resulting in fewer small villages (Government of Greenland, 2023). It is worth noting that smaller villages have, to some extent, received policy protection to prevent mass migration from sparsely populated areas (Government of Greenland, 2023; Greenland Business Association, 2022). Industrialisation has led people to leave villages in search of employment opportunities all over the world. Sustaining a livelihood from local resources has become increasingly challenging. The Greenland Business Association (2022) suggests that there has been a shift in the relationship between the labour market and natural resources over the years. The most significant industries include fisheries, hunting and trapping, tourism, and raw materials, with the fishing industry being dominant. However, it should be noted that many villages, due to factors such as industrial fishing, technological advancements, and centralisation of services, no longer serve as key hubs for unlocking Greenland's natural resources. This has led to a centralisation of the Greenlandic people.

In the **Faroe Islands**, the capital city, Tórshavn, as well as the municipalities of Runavík, and Sjóvar municipalities have been experiencing the highest population growth in the last years (Hagstova Føroya, 2023). Nes municipality, surpassing 1,500 inhabitants, recently became the ninth Faroese municipality to achieve city status. However, nine out of the 29 municipalities saw a decline in

population, with Sumba, the southernmost municipality in Faroe Islands, being the most affected, losing 14 residents. In 2022, net migration accounted for four-fifths of the total population growth, while the excess of births contributed one-fifth. This marks a shift from 2021, when births played a more substantial role in the Faroese population growth. This change is attributed to fewer births and more deaths in 2022, along with increased net migration, as more people moved to the Faroes than left (Hagstova Føroya, 2023).

Finally, the **Åland Islands** consists of thousands of islands, out of around 50 of which are inhabited by a total population of just over 30,000 people. The geography and demographic composition of Åland is characterised by a larger concentration of the population around the municipality of Mariehamn, while most parts of the island territory are composed of rural municipalities and municipalities in the archipelago. Since the turn of the millennium and until the end of 2017, Åland has slightly grown by roughly 3,700 people, from 25,776 to 29,500 Ålandic residents. However, from a regional perspective, Åland's population development and growth in labor market and economy is uneven. Development in the more peripheral rural municipalities and municipalities located in the archipelago is significantly lower (Ålands landskapsregering, 2019).

Nordic rural policy

Young people play a prominent role in Nordic policy discussions, particularly in areas related to education, the labour market, skills, and competence development across the entire Nordic region. They are also frequently mentioned in the context of culture, public transport, and housing issues. Moreover, most Nordic countries have established youth councils at the municipal and regional levels or have created platforms that allow young people to have a voice in policymaking. Almost all of these countries have legislation that addresses young people's participation in policymaking, and their rural policies typically include the horizontal integration of young people in the formulation process.

Despite the Nordic countries' extensive history of engagement with youth and social policy, the ability for young people to exercise their rights and access services varies depending on their geographical location and socio-economic group (Şerban & Brazienė, 2021). Many rural municipalities in the Nordic region are contending with demographic trends characterised by aging populations, the out-migration of young people to urban areas, particularly within the 20-29 age group, resulting in less diverse job markets and fewer available services (Karlsdóttir et al., 2020). Encouraging young people to remain in or settle in rural areas presents a significant challenge for these municipalities, as cities and urban regions attract them with a wider range of educational opportunities and employment prospects.

It's vital to recognise that there exists a broad spectrum of youth perspectives, each offering different insights into rural life, including its potential and challenges. Young people represent a diverse and multifaceted demographic, each with their own unique stories and aspirations. Incorporating the perspectives of young people into policymaking processes can help address the issue of young people leaving rural areas effectively, and it can harness and enhance existing opportunities. Policy development based on evidence and shaped by the stories, desires, and visions of young people for the future may prove instrumental in overcoming the challenges faced by Nordic rural areas.

Key policies concerning rural areas

Finland's rural policy is integrated in a multi-level governance system.- The Finnish Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment is responsible for the overall co-ordination of regional policy in Finland and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry is responsible for rural development, coordinating the implementation of the National Rural Policy Programme as well as EU rural development policy. At the regional level, regional councils, including their regional cooperation boards are key for implementing regional policy, and engaging with central government authorities and cooperating with municipalities and other relevant parties within their regions. Municipalities play an essential role in that they are self-governing units at the local level and responsible for statutory duties such as land-use planning within their territories and organising different public services for their residents, for example within health and social, infrastructure, education, and culture (Stjernberg & Salonen, 2023).

Finnish rural policy is characterised by decentralisation and integrating different sectors and stakeholders from public, private, and civil society in line with the rural policy agenda. One example is the national Rural Policy Council which is appointed by the Government, with civil society, private and public representation. Rural policy goes under the regional policy which also encompasses a dedicated island policy for the islands and archipelagos and their special conditions, which is one of the oldest elements of regional policy in Finland. In broad terms, the aim of the rural policy is to ensure that the Finnish rural areas remain vibrant and can make use of its own resources. The rural policy programme for 2021-2027 prioritises increased added value through sustainable use of natural resources; rural actors – a part of the solution that is sustainable transition; strengthening

competitiveness and vitality; ensuring a smooth everyday life as well as strengthening inclusion and a sense of community in rural areas (Kattilakoski, o.a., 2021).

Although there is no regional level of authority in **Iceland**, each region sets out a strategic five-year regional plan of action (Sóknaráætlun) which includes regional priorities, a future vision, and specific targets for the regional development programme, including national land use policy, cultural policy, and other appropriate public policy cases. These action plans are drafted in each of the eight regions, involving local authorities, government agencies, cultural organisations, private sector representatives and other stakeholders. The regional associations of local authorities are responsible for implementing the initiatives through contracts with the government. The current regional plans of action are valid from 2020-2024 (Innviðaráðuneytið, n.d.).

Key strategies and policy emphasis for rural development and regional affairs in Iceland are listed in the Strategic regional plan 2022 – 2036 and its associated Action Plan 2022 – 2026. Key policies for youth participation and rights are the Youth Act 70/2007, the National Youth Policy 2022 – 2030 and Education Policy 2022 – 2023.

The Strategic regional plan has two main objectives:

1. Infrastructure is to meet the needs of society.
2. Communities and municipalities around the country are to become sustainable.

The plan identifies 5 target areas: (1) Demographic development and basic services, (2) Diverse economic activities, (3) Infrastructure, (4) Environmental and climate change issues, and (5) International competitive position and the sustainability of communities. Equalising access to services and employment opportunities are the core objectives of the plan (Alþingi, 2022). Access to services is to be equalised and special emphasis is placed on communities suffering from unemployment, lack of industrial diversification and long-term depopulation.

The Strategic Regional Plan covers a wide range of topics vital to the prosperity of rural youth in Iceland, such as employment, education, public transport, and access to public services. However, the plan only specifically mentions young people in two sections; namely that *children and young people are to have equal access to culture, art, sports and other recreational activities regardless of their place of residence or economic status* (Alþingi, 2022, section A.m.), and *The role of sports regions shall be defined and promoted, with the interests of children and young people as the guiding principle* (ibid, section C.r).

The **Danish Government** emphasises the importance of accessible local services, including shops, cultural activities, and healthcare, to foster thriving rural areas that attract new residents and benefit tourism and business (Danish Government, 2021). Denmark's rural areas face significant transformations encompassing both opportunities and challenges, particularly regarding demographic balance, outmigration, education, housing, and labour market mismatches (Vestergård, Refsgaard, & Wolk, 2020). Rural villages have gradually lost essential services like schools and local shops. A significant challenge in rural Denmark is meeting the demand for healthcare providers, especially doctors. In 2021, over 100,000 residents had limited or no doctor choices, affecting over 600,000 people across the country, with coastal areas and smaller islands like Lolland and Falster facing the greatest need (Danish Government, 2021, p. 45)

Norway has long been at the forefront of Nordic rural policy development, maintaining a distinctive rural and regional political framework for decades (Lundgren, Lidmo, Wøien Meijer, Teräs, & Eliassen, 2021). In recent years, there have been efforts to counteract centralisation trends, with the Solberg II

government devolving greater authority to regional authorities and the current Støre government contemplating a reversal of the regional reform. Both governments share the objective of promoting vibrant and sustainable local communities across Norway, albeit with differing approaches and starting points. A significant challenge is to balance the need for securing expertise in rural areas, through competence pooling, while simultaneously ensuring that essential services remain accessible locally (e.g., child protection services). The regions are formally in charge of societal planning documents and area planning, as well as dentistry, high schools, and public transport. Norwegian municipalities are charge of area planning, healthcare and services, primary education, among a myriad other thing pertaining to everyday life and social support.

There are also a range of measures and investment programmes geared towards rural revitalisation through state and regionally organisations including Innovation Norway and SIVA when it comes to enable entrepreneurship and businesses to thrive and expand, as well as the Merkur-programme, which financially supports rural shops (Distriktssenteret, 2023). There are also efforts to attract young people to the northernmost regions of Norway. As part of the “Intervention Zone Finnmark and North-Troms”³ The Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, 2021), the government offers person-targeted measures. These are:

- A write-off of student loans by up to 20 percent of the original loan amount, capped at 30,000 kroner per year.
- Forgiveness of student loans for qualified primary school teachers working in Finnmark and Nord-Troms.
- Exemption from electricity tax on electricity consumption.
- Reduction in personal income taxation.
- Introduction of free nurseries from August 1st, 2023.

One of the suggested strategies to combat outmigration of young people and to ensure a vibrant and skilled labour market in rural regions for the future, is the establishment of a flexible and decentralised education system that caters to the needs of those residing in these areas (NOU 2020:15, 2020). This proposal was put forth in the recent official report on demographic development in Norway (NOU 2020:15) and it is also the part of the recommendations from the Norwegian Rural Youth Panel. The idea is to encourage educational institutions to take a more active role in preparing students for local job markets and highlights the necessity for a more suitable financing and incentive system to facilitate this transformation (NOU 2020:15, 2020; The Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, 2023).

Sweden has a national rural policy defined by the Coherent Rural Policy Bill (proposition) 2018. Its main goal is to have viable rural areas with equal opportunities for enterprise, work, housing, and welfare that lead to long-term sustainable development throughout the country. The policy specifies objectives, policy areas and measures for rural development (Regeringen, 2018). Rural policy is also integrated in regional policy. In Sweden, the regional policy is often divided into a ‘small’ and a ‘big’ regional policy. The ‘small’ refers to regional development policy and the ‘big’ regional policy refers to different sectoral policy areas which also contribute to creating equal regional conditions (Tillväxtanalys, 2021). In the recently adopted Swedish National Strategy for Sustainable Regional Development (2021-2027) the government identifies five areas with major societal changes as the most central to achieving the goal of the regional development policy: Demography, globalisation, environment, and climate, socioeconomics, and cohesion as well as technological development. The strategic areas tackling these challenges include equal opportunities for housing, work and welfare

³“Tiltaksplanen Finnmark og Nord-Troms” in Norwegian

throughout the country, competence supply and competence development everywhere, innovation and renewal, entrepreneurship, as well as accessibility through digital communication and transport systems across the country (Regeringen, 2021).

The governance of rural policy in Sweden is characterised by its distribution across various ministries and national authorities, integrated in a multi-level governance system. Within this framework, regions and municipalities play pivotal roles in implementation, with a strong emphasis on empowering local communities.

The Ministry of Rural Affairs and Infrastructure is responsible for matters relating to rural areas, food and agricultural industries, regional development, transport, and infrastructure as well as housing and community planning. The ministry was established on 1 January 2023. The Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth, in turn, is responsible for coordinating agency efforts in rural development. This includes funding, implementing, and evaluating measures, with the added responsibility of serving as the managing authority for the regional structural funds. Furthermore, the Board of Agriculture has the role of managing authority for the rural development program and is responsible for overseeing the agricultural sector within this comprehensive governance framework (OECD, 2018).

Municipalities and regional self-governance carry a broad spectrum of responsibilities crucial for regional development. Among these, the regulation of land and water use stand out, as it sets the stage for diverse regional development opportunities and initiatives. However, this municipal task has grown increasingly complex since the 1970s, with variations in financial capabilities among municipalities, further influencing their ability to actively engage in rural policymaking and secure service provision (Tillväxtanalys, 2021).

In rural research, the rural service provision challenge is often highlighted as an important theme, particularly in relation to shrinking rural areas. However, service provision challenges in Sweden are not necessarily only related to depopulation. Even in rural areas with population growth, service facilities are becoming fewer (Cras, 2018). In the last 50 years, national and global competitive economic pressures have had effects of varying degree on Swedish rural municipalities such as restructuring of jobs and businesses as well as closures of services and schools. The service closures in rural areas have meant that an increasing number of localities go from having a shop, a gas station, or a school to a situation without the diversity of such services in the area. This means that several smaller service hubs in the rural areas lose their function as service locations. However, many service provision segments have also been transformed and diversified with technological development and digitalisation (Cras, 2018).

Rural development in **Åland** is driven by horizontal and vertical coordination across different actors. The Åland Rural Centre is one example of this, which is a voluntary cooperation body for fourteen different organisations from public, private, and civil society sectors that contribute to developing and expanding business activities in rural Åland.

The policy documents *Ålands landskapsregerings interventioner ingående i Finlands CAP-strategi* (Ålands landskapsregering, 2021) and *Tillsammans för Åland* (Ålands landskapsregering, 2019) indicate certain rural development prioritisations for Åland. Some of the main sectors targeted in Åland's rural policies are education, healthcare, social care, and physical infrastructure, mainly transport by land and sea. There is an overarching political goal of vibrant rural areas and archipelagos on Åland. To implement the goal, the basic community service availability is one key policy area for rural development on Åland. This applies not least to the public sector's supply of workplaces, schools, health, and care for the older population as well as commercial services.

The circumstances and needs differ between the municipalities and communities, and from a regional perspective, population development, labour market and economic growth is spatially uneven. A large share of the population growth is concentrated around Mariehamn and the surrounding municipalities within commuting distances. In turn, the archipelago municipalities have experienced a population decline and an ageing population (Government of Åland, 2019). This is a challenge for ensuring the overall service provision on the islands. To implement the goal of vibrant rural areas, the basic community service availability is one key policy area for rural development on Åland. This also applies to the public sector's supply of workplaces, schools, health, and social care for the older population as well as commercial services.

Faroe Islands' municipalities primarily handle issues related to daycare, primary and secondary education, healthcare services, public transport, and area and social planning. The island's economic pillars are tourism and the maritime industry and play an important role, and the islands' primary source of income is fishing exports. Approximately 90% of all Faroese exports consist of fish-related products. These sectors employ a lot of people. Unemployment remains notably low in the Faroe Islands, with only 2.2% of the labour force between the ages of 15 and 64 being unemployed (Hagstova Føroya, 2023). Connectivity between the islands is notably one area that is important for young people, as well as the availability of education opportunities at all levels. As for rural policies in the Faroe Islands, the research team was limited by the lack of appropriate language capacities.

Access to employment opportunities and the labour market plays a pivotal role in the future of villages and towns in **Greenland** (Greenland Business Association, 2022). Likewise, the level of education is crucial for fostering competence and skills development, potentially leading to a more innovative industrial landscape. The government of Greenland play a big role in the delivery of public services, and more so than in other Nordic countries like Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, where municipalities play a bigger role, though they are shared (Slätmo, Bogason, Vasilevskaya, & Salonen, 2022). Education, labour market and housing of particular interest in connection to youth in rural areas. Municipalities are tasked with primary education, social care, housing, and job centres, while the government oversees infrastructure, higher education, and healthcare (Slätmo, Bogason, Cedergren, & Huyhn, 2023). According to Slätmo et al.'s report (2023), digitalisation plays a vital role in ensuring access to healthcare services in remote areas, a key factor for young people envisioning a future in Nordic rural regions.

Key policies concerning rural youth

The policy documents under consideration view young people as a valuable demographic group to engage with. In rural areas, the presence of young people is crucial for staying relevant, for local sustainability, and for local prosperity. The **Danish** government places significant emphasis on the importance of making local areas appealing and ensuring equal access to public services like in their urban counterparts.

Young people in **Denmark** are primarily considered in policy in terms of education and competence development to meet local and national labour market demands ((Danish Government, 2021; Danish Government, 2021). Efforts include initiatives like FGU (forberedende grunduddannelse) (Cedergren, et al., 2021), aimed at those who did not complete secondary school, and a municipal law guiding those under 25 towards education and employment (Retsinformation, 2023). The government's white paper, "Tættere på – flere uddannelser og stærke lokalsamfund," aims to avoid centralisation by offering diverse higher education courses outside major cities, in collaboration with local businesses and government (Danish Government, 2021, p. 15). This supports local needs and ensures a skilled workforce for businesses and the public sector. Housing and transport are important aspects mentioned in relation to young Danes. Rural Denmark is characterised by poorer public transport

options and a greater dependency on private cars, primarily due to depopulation (Danish Government, 2021). With fewer young people and children, and an increased number of old people, there is a lower demand for such services. Concerning housing, Danish law guarantees young people the right to suitable housing, with "Ungdomsboliger" (Youth housing) providing housing options based on financial, educational, and social needs (Borger.dk, n.d.). These youth housing units can be municipally owned or provided by private housing companies.

The aim of the **Finnish youth policy** is to improve the conditions in which young people grow up and live in and to enhance interaction between the generations through intersectoral cooperation. The objective of youth work is to support young people in growing and transitioning into independent life and to promote their participation in society (Ministry of Education and Culture, n.a.).

The youth policy and youth work are under the responsibility of the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture. The development of youth policy issues is informed by the Government Program, the National Youth Work and Policy Program as well as other strategies and implementation plans of the Government. The National Youth Work and Youth Policy Program is a statutory horizontal program which is adopted every four years by the Government to promote a good environment for young people to grow up and live. There is also a State Youth Council in place to coordinate with the Government. As with implementing the rural policy, the municipalities are important for local youth work. This includes for example supporting youth organisations and facilities that engage in youth work. The municipalities' youth work is implemented in multi-professional cooperation and cross-sectorally. There are also many youth organisations in the form of councils and networks with different purposes or orientation.

Regarding the key issues for rural development and youth in Finland, the population development of rural municipalities is particularly affected by young people and women moving away from the areas, difficulties in finding employment in a rural area as well as the focusing of immigrant integration efforts and related services into urban areas. To tackle this, youth issues are integrated horizontally in the Finnish Rural Policy Programme for 2021-2027. This perspective is for example integrated in rural service provision, cultural and leisure activities, communality, and civic activities as well as regarding the inclusion of different population groups to strengthen the communal structures of rural areas, where the participation of young people in villages and municipalities must also be supported. The programme highlights that young people should be heard and be given the means to create forms of involvement that appeal to themselves. At regional level, Leader youth divisions and youth projects serve as channels for promoting the inclusion of young people.

Developing the availability of libraries, cultural, sports and youth services and training available at adult education centres in rural areas, utilising digitalisation and new forms of cooperation is one of the measures for monitoring the implementation. The Finnish Rural Policy Program 2022-2027 also points at research which indicates that many young people have dreams of living in sparsely populated rural areas. The program emphasises that it is important to respond to the demand concerning rural areas and to promote the mainstreaming of these trends. Although more and more people are interested in opportunities for ecological living, the poor availability of housing creates concrete challenges for those interested in relocating to rural areas (Kattilakoski, o.a., 2021).

The **Icelandic** National Youth Policy is based on the Youth law 70/2007 where youth is defined as children and young people in the age group of 6 – 25 years, and youth work is defined as *organised social and leisure activities where children and young people work together in their spare time towards ideals, goals and interests they find of value* (Alþingi, Youth Law 70/2007, 1. pgr). The minister of Education is responsible for the Youth Act and appoints nine members to the National Youth Council.

The role of the Youth Council is to guide the authorities in youth affairs, including policy-making, and enhance cooperation between schools, municipalities, social clubs and other actors in organised youth activities. According to the Youth Act, local authorities set their own rules and agenda regarding support to youth activities and youth committees, but municipal governments shall participate in establishing youth councils with the role of advising the authorities on youth issues within the municipality. Each local government can set their own rules regarding the specific role of the youth council and the appointment procedures (Alþingi, 2007). In 2020, youth councils were operating in 65% of Iceland's municipalities. The government is currently working on the revision of the Youth Act 40/2007 which will include the legislation of local youth councils and their mandate, roles, and responsibilities clarified. The government is also working on developing an electronic platform for children and youth in Iceland to access information and education on children and youth rights, and it communicate suggestions to the government to strengthen the influence of youth and children (Alþingi, 2023).

In 2022, the Ministry of Education and Children published a National Youth Policy 2022 – 2030 where the government and society recognise the importance of leisure and social activities of youth and their educational value and provide a clear legal and operational framework for these activities. Included in the policy is a strategy for the education and training of staff and volunteers working with children and youth leisure and social activities (Ministry of Education and Children, 2022).

The National Youth Policy does not specifically mention rural youth, but it clearly states that all children and youth have equal access and equal opportunities to participate in youth activities (Ministry of Education and Children, 2022). The Education Policy 2022 – 2023 also emphasises that residence should not influence educational opportunities. Improved transport and technological advancements should ensure opportunities for education regardless of residence by strengthening knowledge centres in rural areas. Availability of courses outside of larger towns will be improved, specifically vocational education and training. The policy recognises the importance of locally available educational opportunities for retaining youth and enhancing skills in rural areas (Ministry of Education and Children, 2022a).

Young people feature prominently across several ministries and agencies in **Norway** and has been horizontally integrated in Norway's recent rural white paper (The Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Rural Affairs, 2023). Norway has been following the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child since 1991, and it has been part of Norwegian law since 2003. The law takes precedence to other Norwegian laws if there are conflicting matters at hand (The Norwegian Ministry of Children and Families, 2022).

The recommendations of the Norwegian Rural Youth Panel, established by the previous government, form a cornerstone of the current government's policies. Overall, the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Affairs, the municipalities and in part the regional authorities, and the Rural Agency are the most important actors concerning rural affairs in Norway. Young people feature horizontally across municipal and regional plans, various directorates, and agencies, including the Rural Development Agency (Distriktssenteret). Education, public transport, housing, the labour market, public services, cultural access, and an overarching focus on demographic development, mental health, and young people all form integral components of the current government's rural policies (The Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, 2023).

Regarding transport, the government acknowledges the challenges posed by the lack of public transport, which hinder young people's ability to engage in activities (The Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Rural Affairs, 2023). The Rural Youth Panel underscores the role of flexible transport

solutions (e.g., on-demand services) as a potential key to fostering participation and averting social exclusion (Ungdommens Distriktspanel, 2021). They also advocate for lowering the minimum age for driver's licenses for vehicles with lower speeds to 16 years in rural areas, reducing ticket prices for existing public transport, and investing in eco-friendly transport options such as railways, buses, and ferries, but also short-haul flight networks.

Housing presents a similar challenge, with the Rural Youth Panel suggesting municipal financial support for constructing or purchasing housing in rural areas. They propose, for example, removing financial equity requirements for obtaining housing loans in rural areas and diversifying the housing market to cater to the preferences of young people (Ungdommens Distriktspanel, 2021).

In the labour market, facilitating remote work is deemed essential, with job postings emphasising the possibility of remaining in rural areas rather than relocating for suitable employment (Ungdommens Distriktspanel, 2021). This aligns with the former Solberg government's ambition to establish more government jobs nationwide (Ministry of local government and modernisation, 2019). The Rural Youth Panel also advocates for government investment in financial support mechanisms that enable skill development in workplaces, particularly in rural areas. They stress the importance of fostering positive work environments and improving access to apprenticeships by assisting businesses and public sector organisations in taking on more students (Ungdommens Distriktspanel, 2021).

Access to recreational opportunities and nature, considered crucial features of rural areas, were highlighted in the Rural Youth Panel's recommendations. Emphasising these aspects when attempting to attract young people to move to rural areas is seen as a unique and compelling opportunity (Ungdommens Distriktspanel, 2021). According to Eriksen and Andersen's 2021 report on young people's well-being and sense of belonging in rural Norway, several factors, including background, attitudes, social life, and social norms, influence how they perceive life outside urban areas. Their perspective is shaped by what they perceive as the gains or losses of residing in rural regions (Eriksen & Andersen, 2021). In addressing mental health concerns, the Rural Youth Panel and the government's rural policy white paper have emphasised the need for improved mental health services, particularly for youth and children (The Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, 2023). Eriksen and Andersen also highlight that happiness and unhappiness in rural areas are not random occurrences. Gender, location, and social class intertwine with the local area's structural opportunities and their subjective sense of belonging (Eriksen & Andersen, 2021, p. 112). A ten-year plan has been adopted to bolster mental health support nationwide, with a specific focus on creating accessible services for young people and children within municipalities (The Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, 2023, p. 47).

Since 2022, the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs is in charge of youth policy. The objectives of **Sweden's** youth policy are that all young people between the ages of 13 and 25 are to have good living conditions, the power to form their own lives and influence over developments in society. The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society is the authority that produces and disseminates knowledge about the living conditions of young people and the conditions for civil society. During the period 2022-2024, the agency has been commissioned by the Swedish Government to work specifically to:

- increased social inclusion and more young people settling into working and social life;
- increased access to meaningful and developing leisure activities for all young people;
- reduced differences in young people's upbringing and living conditions;

- increased mental health among young people (Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor, 2022).

The national strategy for sustainable regional development points out that a youth perspective must be promoted within the regional development policy. It states that regional development should enable young people to develop their democratic skills and competences, and that their participation in democracy should be promoted. Furthermore, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child became Swedish law in 2020. That means that law enforcement officers at all levels in public activity must take them into account rights that follow from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in weighing and assessing which is done in decision-making processes in cases and matters concerning children and interpreting Swedish provisions in relation to the Convention on the Rights of the Child based on customary practices principles of interpretation (Arbetsmarknadsdepartementet, 2019).

The government guidelines for youth policy are not limited to government decisions and actions, but it should broadly be considered in public activities involving young people. However, they are not mandatory for municipalities and regions. Young people not in education, employment, or training (NEETs) is a particularly prioritised group within the Government's youth policy initiatives.

A frequently addressed concern regarding young people in rural areas is that young people are leaving the countryside. For example, the Swedish government has highlighted the need to expand youth activities and educational possibilities to stimulate local economic growth and development in rural areas (Rönnlund, 2019). The rural strategy has also pointed out some sectoral challenges for youth. Young people's reasons to leave rural municipalities are often found the search for more diverse education opportunities and labour market options. An education system that enables the supply of different skills and increases accessibility to education throughout the whole country is therefore an important priority for the rural strategy. Access to post-secondary education is an even more important underlying factor for women's decision to leave the countryside than it is for men. The supply of skills in rural areas faces major challenges. Housing is another area highlighted by the policy, where young people as a group often find it difficult to establish themselves in the housing market. This also refers to the rural areas where there is a lack of actors who are willing to finance and build homes that match their needs. The functioning of the market and the conditions of rural areas often lead to a weak interest from the market in both new production and renovations. Furthermore, association and cultural life and the opportunity for leisure activities are of great importance to young people's experience of their hometown and play an important role in young women's and men's willingness to stay or move back (Regeringen, 2018).

A study from Malmö University on youth decisions to stay in their home village on the countryside indicate that these decisions are actively made. In-depth interviews with career guidance counsellors indicate that sense of belonging, family ties and life quality weigh heavier than careers and studies. Women and girls are more prone to leave their home villages for studies compared to their male counterparts. But many of the informants also chose to return, even though that meant not working with what they set out to study (Ennerberg, Lundberg, & Axelsson, 2022).

Youth policy is cross-sectoral and spans all the policy areas that affect young people's living conditions in **Åland**. The youth policy's starting point in the regional government's overall youth policy goals for Åland includes giving young people opportunities for influence and participation in society and that young people's commitment, creativity and critical thinking shall be used as a social resource. Opportunities for active citizenship among youth makes an important part of the youth program. The project Nabo – social inclusion of young people in the Nordic region delivered a special report on social inclusion of youth on Åland (2019). This report emphasises the importance of social activities

and community-building as part of the public service provision. The report also highlights the importance of reliable and well-matched public transport services (Roos, 2019).

The current Ålandic youth policy program highlights overarching goals and clarifies basic concepts, shows operational areas and development areas, and provides guidelines and inspiration for efforts for and together with young people in youth policy. Three areas have been prioritised in particular, including: Active citizenship; health and well-being, and culture and leisure.

The work with young people's health is integrated across different governance levels including the public sector with the provincial government and its authorities and institutions together with municipalities, partly other producers of health promotion measures such as civil society associations and networks in Åland.

A study on behalf of the Nordic Council of Ministers indicates that most young people in **the Faroe Islands** are content with their situation and have strong ties to their hometowns (Gaini, 2022; Gaini, 2019). The study found that young people feel they can influence politics if they choose to, reflecting a close connection between policymakers and constituents, often family members, friends, or acquaintances. However, the report also suggests that young people don't believe they have a platform to raise young people's perspectives in public discourse. Gaini also notes that young people have strong opinions on certain policies, such as housing, infrastructure, transport, and digitalisation (2022, p. 35). In summary, the youth in the Faroe Islands are actively engaged in the public discourse surrounding their communities and regions.

Social control is an issue that features in reports on rural areas in the Nordics (e.g., Gaini, 2022; Stubberud et al., 2015). The Faroe Islands is among the most conservative nations in the Nordic Region, with over 95% identifying as believers and more than 80% adhering to the Lutheran-Evangelical Church. This religiosity significantly influences Faroese society, particularly in discussions about identity and culture (Gaini, 2022). Those who feel like outsiders often choose to leave the Faroes, and those who return tend to settle in Tórshavn – a “microscopic metropolis” offering Faroese youth a chance to explore a different way of life compared to their home village. This may suggest that rural areas are perceived as too limiting for those who wish to express their individuality, whether regarding their sexuality or other socio-cultural aspects. The notion of ‘social control’ still plays a role in everyday life, but as Gaini points out, social media has empowered youth to create new bonds and identities beyond their parents' or neighbours' control (2022).

The ability to now study in Faroese and experience a student life on the islands that is similar to Copenhagen's are compelling reasons for staying in the Faroe Islands (DR, 2018). The proportion of young Faroese people staying on the islands for higher education increased from 36% in 2011 to 43% in 2018 (DR, 2018). The introduction of university courses in Faroese at one of the world's smallest universities, Fróðskaparsetur Føroya, has made the Faroes Islands a contestant in fighting for its students as they now offer a comprehensive education system. It provides Bachelor's, Master's, and Ph.D. opportunities in Faroese (Fróðskaparsetur Føroya, 2023). The university's strategic plan for 2020-2024 emphasises its commitment to addressing local, national, and international challenges and serving the needs of the Faroe Islands (University of the Faroe Islands, 2020, pp. 4-5). Bachelor's programs cover various fields, including certain STEM courses, economic, and social sciences (Fróðskaparsetur Føroya, 2023). Notably, courses in finance and economics have been introduced relatively recently, allowing young Faroese people to study locally rather than abroad, in places like Denmark.

The government's main objectives concerning young people in **Greenland** revolve around the future workforce and combating youth unemployment through education, skills matching, and job

availability (Government of Greenland, 2020). For example, the government has established Majoriaq as a one-stop-shop for young people to receive guidance on education, the labour market, and employment opportunities, with one Majoriaq centre in each of Greenland's 17 towns (Government of Greenland, n.d.). However, it cannot be seen in isolation from access to housing. Housing plays a crucial role in ensuring space for apprenticeships and jobs in remote areas (Government of Greenland, 2020). Rental housing is considered a public service in Greenland, particularly in remote regions (Slätmo, Bogason, Vasilevskaya, & Salonen, 2022). As of January 2022, municipalities bear the primary responsibility for maintenance and distribution (Government of Greenland, 2020, p. 35). Private actors are also involved, particularly in providing housing for employees. This situation extends to transport as well (Slätmo, Bogason, Cedergren, & Huyhn, 2023).

While government policy papers do not place the issue of brain drain from villages at the forefront, the historical challenge of brain drain from Greenland as a whole should not be underestimated. Ilisimatusarfik, Greenland's University, has attracted individuals from smaller settlements to its campus in the Greenlandic capital, Nuuk, for years, though shorter higher education courses are also available through specific vocational schools in smaller towns (Slätmo, Bogason, Cedergren, & Huyhn, 2023). According to Slätmo et al. (2023), a significant trend has seen many young people, approximately 30%, pursuing higher education opportunities abroad, particularly in Denmark. Denmark offers a wider range of job opportunities for individuals with higher education and competence than Greenland.

Youth participation

Youth participation in local matters in **Norway** is enshrined in Norwegian law, specifically Article 5-12 of the Municipal law. Youth councils hold advisory roles and have the right to speak on any matters relevant to young people (Lovdata, 2022). The creation of the Norwegian Rural Youth Panel is also a nod towards the need to understand young people's situations in rural areas, to ensure that young people see a future there. This initiative was also underpinned by the rural policy white paper, "Meld St. 5 (2019-2020) *Levende lokalsamfunn for fremtiden - Distriktsmeldingen*" (Ministry of local government and modernisation, 2019). Guided by the Rural Youth Panel, the government recognises that "the experiences and priorities of young people are important in shaping society and rural policies for the future" in the white paper (The Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Rural Affairs, 2023, p. 6). Young people are also referenced in connection with Norway's northern politics through a regional forum for the north (The Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Rural Affairs, 2023, p. 12).

Regarding youth participation in **Danish** local affairs, several municipalities have established "ungeråd" (youth councils), each with varying functions. In some municipalities, youth councils actively champion young people's rights and engage in youth politics, while others primarily focus on organising cultural activities and services for their peers. Although these councils are not mandatory and are not governed by Danish municipal law, they play a significant role in cultivating robust local democracies in Denmark (Netværket af Ungdomsråd, 2020). The Network of Youth Councils in Denmark assists young people in establishing new youth councils in their respective municipalities and serves as a resource hub, offering guidance for youth engagement in democratic processes (Netværket af Ungdomsråd, 2020).

There is also a youth act (Youth Act 2017) in place in **Finland**, which obliges municipalities and central government authorities to offer and organise for young people an opportunity to participate and exert influence in the processing of issues related to local, regional, and national youth work and youth policy or to otherwise consult young people on these issues. The youth act is to support all persons between the age 0 and 29 years (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2016). The Provincial Government

of **Åland** has legislative competence in youth policy area. The Ålandic law (1986:87) on youth work describes, among other things, the responsibility of municipal youth committees for the promotion of youth work and activities in the municipality, the distribution of provincial shares for youth work and the support opportunities for youth activities. Here, the definition of youth on Åland includes young people at the age of 13-25 years old.

Non-party affiliated youth engagement in rural areas is almost exclusively organised by local authorities, in accordance with Youth Act 2007/70 in **Iceland**. This is due to one of the main challenges being high travel costs because of great distances within rural areas and thus lack of active members (Birgisson, 2020). An ongoing discussion in Iceland is whether these governmental youth platforms should be reserved for those below voting age only, since people above the age of 18 can engage in the public debate through common democratic procedures. The Icelandic Association of Youth hosts the annual conference Youth and Democracy (Ungt fólk og lýðræði) with funded travel costs.

In **Sweden**, the goal of the Swedish national youth policy is that all young people should have good living conditions, the power to shape their lives and influence over social development. Youth engagement policy is developed and implemented at various levels of governance and through many sectors. As mentioned in page 23-24, Sweden has a dedicated youth policy that deals with multidisciplinary issues in areas such as education, employment, private economy, housing, health, participation, culture, and leisure. In turn, The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society is responsible for its broad implementation. As a member of the EU, Sweden also participates in the youth cooperation at EU level. While the EU does not have the mandate for law-making in the field of youth, the member states have since 2002 agreed that a special youth policy collaboration together with other policy areas with a focus on young people, such as education and employment.

Municipalities and regions are key for implementing policies in Sweden and the closest policy layer to citizens. Municipalities and regions are responsible for a variety of public services that relate to young people and their societal needs. Many Swedish municipalities and regions have established youth councils to engage in local policy formation, but the organisation and extent of this is uneven. Civil society is also present with various umbrella organisations for children and youth issues – which of many also represent youth. Examples of politically independent organisations active for rural youth is Landsbygdsnätverket with their working group on Youth inclusion and the youth association #Ungapålandsbygden.

The Swedish national youth policy has high ambitions regarding young people's opportunities for political participation, either directly or through civil society organizations. At the same time few efforts to systematically evaluate the effects of these policies have been made, both on the participants themselves and involved policy institutions (Amnå & Helander, 2022)

According to The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, the most common form of political engagement among youth in Sweden is to support opinions online, followed by conscious consumption and give money to organisations or charities. All of these are more common among girls compared to boys. Other forms of political engagement such as demonstrations and petitions for various causes have however decreased among young people (Thornström & Sevedag, 2023). The government of Sweden recently (October 2023) commissioned an investigation to analyse and submit proposals on how public recognition for the purpose of further valuing young people's commitment and efforts in civil society could be designed. Since previously, research efforts on youth engagement have largely focused on urban areas, while rural youth has been paid less attention. This despite the many active civil society movements that have developed in rural areas (Adolfsson & Coe, 2022)

Although there is no national policy specifically targeted at young people in the **Faroe Islands**, there have been indications of increasing focus on youth issues, especially in discussions about identity and culture (Gaini, 2022). For instance, in 2005, a survey gathered the opinions of young people in Tórshavn, resulting in recommendations that included opening youth clubs, investing in apprenticeships (including in the creative arts), and improving education (Gaini, 2019). Klaksvíkar municipality has also made efforts to include youth through a youth manifesto, emphasising the importance of a safe and educational environment, cooperation, and young people's influence over their lives (Gaini, 2019, p. 19).

Thematic areas discussed in the Gen Z- workshops

This section forms the backbone of the policy brief published through this project.

Transport and mobility

Transportation is a significant concern for rural youth in the Nordic region, as it has a profound impact on their access to education, employment, services, and social activities (The Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, 2023). Unlike their urban counterparts, rural youth often face the challenge of covering longer distances between their homes and various destinations such as schools and workplaces. Their mobility is frequently constrained due to the limited availability and infrequency of public transportation options and services in rural areas. This limitation is particularly burdensome for those who lack access to a car or a driver's license.

The availability of public transport plays a crucial role in empowering rural youth and fostering social cohesion since it is the key to unlocking diverse educational and employment opportunities, as well as accessing social and cultural services (Future Challenges in the Nordics, n.d.). In Sweden, rural regions generally suffer from a lack of reliable public transportation, which severely hampers access to essential amenities that are beyond walking or biking distance. Therefore, adopting cross-sectoral approaches to public transportation solutions in rural Sweden is vital. This involves bundling municipal services, implementing demand-responsive transport, and establishing multi-modal systems to ensure transportation options are available in areas with lower demand or greater distances (Kershaw, 2020).

In Norway, the Rural Youth Panel has proposed reducing ticket prices for existing public transport and investing in eco-friendly transportation alternatives like railways, short-haul flight networks, buses, and ferries (Ungdommens Distriktspanel, 2021). They also recommend lowering the minimum age for obtaining a driver's license to 16 years for vehicles with lower speeds in rural areas. However, it's essential to acknowledge that the ability to move independently is closely tied to economic privilege. While EPA tractors are a popular solution in both Sweden and northern parts of Norway, their availability and sustainability remains questionable.

Furthermore, this issue brings up broader questions about mobility. Many young people in the Nordic region need to leave their homes at the age of 15 or 16 to avoid long daily commutes to their educational institutions, as highlighted by Future Nordics (n.d.). This broader concept of mobility extends to the social aspects of rural life. The lack of transportation options, coupled with limited educational opportunities, reinforces the notion of "learning to leave," (Corbett, 2001). This concept suggests that rural areas offer little to no future prospects. Therefore, both physical and social aspects of transport and mobility are crucial for young people to stay in rural areas in the Nordic region.

Housing

Due to increasingly strained housing markets, the development of affordable housing has emerged as a prominent concern in Nordic housing policy. This issue significantly impacts the quality of life and opportunities available to Nordic youth. In rural regions, the housing landscape exhibits a duality. On one hand, many rural areas contend with challenges related to vacant houses, while simultaneously facing a shortage of suitable housing options catering to diverse societal groups. In certain municipalities, young people are also affected by housing stock that is being vacated and transformed into second homes or holiday rentals for a more affluent segment of society. The predominant housing type in rural Nordic areas is privately owned individual houses. Nonetheless, research suggests that the needs of various social groups, with a specific focus on young individuals, necessitate an increase in more diverse (rental) housing opportunities.

The housing market characteristics in rural areas present a heterogeneous picture. In general, ensuring access to appropriate and well-suited housing options that meet the needs of rural youth is vital for their well-being and prosperity. Simultaneously, rural young individuals encounter difficulties in obtaining loans for house construction, renovations, or accessing the existing housing stock. Some Nordic countries have introduced subsidies for constructing new homes, especially focused on creating rental housing options for specific social groups, such as young people or students. In other cases, economic prerequisites, like minimum income requirements, are imposed on lenders, which can affect young people's ability to secure adequate housing.

Municipalities play a pivotal role in the planning, regulation, and facilitation of rural housing development. They have the authority to influence the supply and demand of housing through area zoning, land use, infrastructure development, services, and a variety of incentives. However, they also rely on national and commercial support and incentives to bridge financial gaps and stimulate rural housing markets that align with the needs of current and prospective residents. Access to affordable housing is of utmost importance in attracting young people and resources to Nordic rural areas (Eliassen, Vestergård, Sigurjónsdóttir, Turunen, & Penje, 2020; Future Challenges in the Nordics, n.d.)

Labour market

Rural areas in the Nordic region are arguably confronted with a shortage of labour, as a result of young people relocating elsewhere and the local population dwindling or entering retirement (Heleniak & Sánchez-Gassen, 2020). Additionally, transformations like digitalisation, automation, and the green transition are also influencing local labour markets, making it imperative to have the right skill sets and competencies for the local and regional economy. This can lead to a shortage of skilled labour, potentially causing businesses to forego market opportunities and necessitating adjustments in the local welfare sector (Lundgren et al., 2020). In other words, there are job opportunities in rural areas, but they might not be evenly distributed across rural areas.

Many young individuals feel compelled to leave rural regions in pursuit of urban careers or are driven to explore job prospects elsewhere. The significance of job opportunities and self-realisation is noteworthy in this context since work is frequently regarded as a pivotal avenue for personal growth, as discussed by Bæck in 2004. Recent research based on a survey of Norwegian youth indicates that those willing to move to rural areas generally do not anticipate swift career advancement. In contrast, those with reservations about relocating to rural areas anticipate quicker career progression if they do make the move, but they express concerns about achieving their "dream job," utilizing their skills, and enjoying a fulfilling social life, as revealed by Nordtug in 2021.

One strategy for facilitating a future in rural areas involves granting access to remote job opportunities or establishing "field offices," a concept recently introduced in Iceland. In this approach, governmental agencies and authorities offer opportunities to individuals residing outside capital areas, along with the creation of hybrid workspaces to foster a social work environment. Combining this with early knowledge of the local labour market and spaces for fostering entrepreneurship would result in a more diversified labour market. When contemplating remote work, it is crucial to consider underlying structural aspects, including tax-related matters, to ensure that local value creation remains within the community. Understanding how the local (functional) labour market relates to local educational opportunities and the potential for individuals to forge their own path in the local labour market through entrepreneurship is vital for rural areas to compete with urban labour markets.

Young people who are neither in education, employment, nor training (NEETs) constitute a particularly vulnerable group in rural areas and are at risk of experiencing social marginalization (Karlsdóttir, Cuadrado, Gaini, Jungsberg, & Vestergård, 2019). This group needs increased attention

from policymakers working across various social and economic sectors and governmental levels to secure their future prospects. Enabling this group to participate in the local labour market would enhance the prospects of the regional and local area as a whole, as emphasized by the same authors in 2019. Various initiatives have been implemented to address the growing numbers of NEETs in rural areas. Finland is at the forefront of proactive strategies for engaging NEETs, where municipalities are mandated to employ outreach youth workers to engage with young individuals who have disengaged from education or employment. This approach has proven to be highly effective in assisting socially marginalised groups.

Education and training

The significance of physical space in education should not be underestimated (Bæck U. , 2016). It profoundly influences the educational performance and future careers of young people. Worldwide empirical evidence supports the claim that differences between urban and rural settings in this regard are notable, with urban schools generally outperforming their rural counterparts (Green and Corbett, 2013 as cited in Bæck, 2016). Furthermore, urban schools are considered the standard against which all schools are evaluated (Bæck, 2016).

It is evident that regions displaying greater potential and future prospects are those with a high proportion of educated young individuals (Karlsdóttir & Cuadrado, 2018). This proportion plays a crucial role in social cohesion and economic performance since the educational performance and dropout rates of young people are closely intertwined with the social context of this demographic (Lundgren et al., 2020). Additionally, social factors significantly impact young people's motivation, self-belief, and subsequently, their academic performance and career choices (Nissinen, K., et al., 2018). It is widely acknowledged that a person's prospects in the labour market are strongly linked to the duration of their upper secondary education, whether or not it is completed (Karlsdottir and Cuadrado, 2020). The most vulnerable group in this regard is boys, particularly those with immigrant backgrounds, and they are also influenced by their parents' income and educational achievements (Karlsdottir and Cuadrado, 2020). Geographical disparities are also evident concerning the degree of urbanization, with rural areas experiencing higher dropout rates compared to their urban counterparts. The role of geography is significant, as the complexities of rural areas themselves can lead to inequality, going beyond a simple comparison of educational performance between rural and urban schools. Therefore, educational policies across the Nordics must acknowledge their inherent biases and recognize the powerful role of education in unlocking regional and local prosperity.

This issue is also pertinent to access to education in native languages. In the Sami population in Finland, access to language training in educational institutions (and public services) has been identified as a point of inequality (Weckström, Kekkonen , & Kekkonen, 2023). The lack of educational opportunities in native languages is often attributed to resource constraints (Lehtola & Ruotsala 2017 as cited in Weckström, Kekkonen, & Kekkonen, 2023). Additionally, in certain parts of Greenland, limited language training in Danish or English limits young people's access to higher education in these languages. Since choices for higher education in Greenlandic are limited and often offered in Danish rather than Greenlandic, this leads to inequality. However, it is feasible to provide education in native languages. For example, at one of the world's smallest universities, Fróðskaparsetur Føroya in the Faroe Islands, Bachelor's degrees, Master's, and Ph.D. opportunities are now available in Faroese (Fróðskaparsetur Føroya, 2023). The university's strategic plan for 2020-2024 underscores its commitment to addressing local, national, and international challenges and specifically serving the needs of the Faroe Islands (University of the Faroe Islands, 2020, pp. 4-5).

When considering the educational relevance to the local labour market, the University Centre of the Westfjords serves as a successful example of bringing higher education to rural areas. It offers a hybrid

form of distance learning through other universities and currently caters to approximately 100 distance learning students. It also operates two master's programs closely tied to the local economy: Coastal and Marine Management and Coastal Communities and Regional Development. By providing facilities for group work, reading rooms, and teleconferences for students and researchers, young people in the Icelandic Westfjords can access higher education without having to relocate. It is crucial to determine the appropriate level at which educational institutions in rural areas should function and the role they should play in the local or regional labour market and economies.

As urban areas are often considered the default norm and the ultimate aspiration, rural educational institutions currently function as a "quintessential institution of disembedding," preparing young people to be adaptable, flexible, and mobile (Corbett, 2001, p. 312). In other words, the existing education system and curricula are essentially providing an "escape" from rural areas. The traditional notion of "class mobility," where individuals transition from rural to urban settings, typically upwardly, and consistently "growing," still plays a prominent role in Western ideals of what constitutes a good or "fulfilling" career (Adams & Komu, 2021). Therefore, adopting a deliberate approach to education in rural areas, focusing on preparing individuals for the local and functional labour market, and understanding the intricacies that underlie educational performance, are crucial for the future prosperity of rural areas.

Health and well-being

The Nordic countries have consistently held the top positions on the global happiness index over the years. Given the Nordic vision of becoming the most socially sustainable and integrated region by 2030, it is prudent to examine and tackle the strategies for achieving this objective. The relatively recent emergence of the Wellbeing Economy, which represents a "beyond-GDP" approach to gauging prosperity (Birkjær, Gamerdinger, & El-Abd, 2021), aligns well with the Nordic countries, thanks to their established welfare state and robust public services. However, a notable portion of the total Nordic population faces various challenges, encompassing issues related to mental health disorders, cognitive skills, discrimination, high suicide rates, and low life satisfaction (Birkjær, Gamerdinger, and El-Abd, 2021).

In their report, Birkjær et al. (2021) highlight that three Nordic countries—Finland, Sweden, and Iceland—have made strides in incorporating principles of the Wellbeing Economy, while Denmark, in 2021, was not actively engaging with this approach, and Norway was contemplating aspects of it. The Wellbeing Economy approach is concerned with both subjective elements (e.g., mental health, loneliness, etc.) and objective experiences (longevity, education, air quality, etc.) from a human perspective.

Health and well-being play a significant role in various aspects of young people's lives, encompassing mental and physical health, a sense of belonging, social life, norms, and values. Notably, issues such as loneliness, stress, and poor mental health are key challenges for young people (Birkjær, Gamerdinger, and El-Abd, 2021). These challenges affect young individuals in multiple ways. For instance, young people dealing with mental health issues are less likely to complete their education and encounter substantial difficulties entering the job market (Sommar, 2016). Additionally, increased mortality, sick leave, and isolation are among the consequences of mental health problems for youth, with low-income families at a higher risk regarding the mental health of children and young people.

The Wellbeing Economy could prove pertinent in addressing disparities and promoting prosperity within and between rural and urban regions. Areas of policy that address youth well-being include municipal child welfare services, educational counselling, public healthcare, specialized mental health services for young people, and sexual and reproductive health initiatives. Notably, there is a

recognised competence gap when it comes to rural LGBTQIA+ individuals, and there is limited knowledge about their mental well-being in Sami areas (Stubberud, Prøitz, & Hamidiasl, 2018)

Numerous studies indicate that indigenous youth, particularly in the Arctic, are especially vulnerable in the Nordic region. Suicide rates among indigenous youth have emerged as a significant public health challenge in the Arctic region over the past few decades (Young, Revich, & Soininen, 2015). In Greenland, young people are more likely to face socio-economic vulnerabilities, including violence, alcohol abuse, and suicide, in comparison to other Nordic countries and self-governing territories (Karsberg, 2017).

Factors like gender, location, disabilities, ethnicity, and social class intertwine with the structural opportunities of the local area and young people's subjective sense of belonging (Eriksen & Andersen, 2021, p. 112). Mental health problems impact girls and boys differently, with girls in the 16-22 age group being more affected (Sommar, 2016). It is also assumed that young men and women deal with and express their emotions differently, particularly challenging emotions. Women tend to internalize these emotions, while men tend to externalize them through violent behaviours (Sommar, 2016).

Addressing health and well-being, both from a physical and mental health perspective, would benefit those who choose to stay in rural areas and create a sense of a safe space for those who might otherwise opt to relocate.

Culture and community

Culture and community hold significant importance in retaining young people in Nordic rural areas. Several Nordic countries are actively taking steps to rejuvenate rural communities. This includes the establishment of the Rural Youth Panel in Norway, tasked with advising on actions to enhance the quality of young people's lives in rural areas, as well as the formation of a parliamentary working group for sparsely populated areas in Finland. The goals of this parliamentary working group are centred around the revitalization of culture and volunteering, strengthening the role of local cultural initiatives and groups, and funding projects related to the revitalisation of local cultural activities (Parlamentariska arbetsgruppen för glesbygd, 2020)

Creating and nurturing communities is indeed a crucial undertaking. However, it is essential that this process is built on neutral and inclusive foundations. This includes finding new ways to use libraries, culture houses and other spaces that allow young people to exercise and express their identity.

Culture, while significant in distinguishing between regions and municipalities, often stems from traditions. Traditions, though, can sometimes be constricting rather than liberating within a community. For instance, the Faroe Islands, one of the most conservative nations in the Nordic Region, is deeply influenced by religiosity, particularly in discussions about identity and culture (Gaini, 2022). Those who feel like outsiders often opt to leave the Faroes, and those who return tend to settle in the capital, Tórshavn. This suggests that rural areas may be perceived as too restrictive for individuals seeking to express their individuality, whether in terms of their sexuality or other socio-cultural aspects (Gaini, 2022). The concept of 'social control' still plays a role in everyday life in the Faroe Islands, but as Gaini points out, social media has empowered youth to create new bonds and identities beyond the influence of their parents or neighbours (2022).

Reports indicate that LGBTQIA+ individuals face greater challenges in rural settings compared to urban areas in the Nordic Region, although there are variations within the LGBTQIA+ community (Eggebo, Almli, & Bye, 2015). To encourage young LGBTQIA+ individuals to consider living in rural areas, it is imperative that they perceive these regions as safe and inclusive environments, reducing the urgency to leave rural settings.

With the widespread use of social media and international diffusion of youth cultures, social networks and relationships are no longer confined to local communities. This enables lonely rural youth who struggle to find a sense of belonging in their rural areas to connect with like-minded individuals online, offering an invaluable resource for finding a sense of community. Nevertheless, social connections and opportunities for engagement in activities outside of school or work continue to be significant factors when considering a future place of residence. Social networks and relationships inherently contribute to creating a sense of belonging to a place (Bæck, 2016).

Youth participation and inclusion

Youth participation is both a right and something that benefits society. Young people are at the forefront of many horizontal policy concerns in Nordic countries. Strides have been taken to include youth perspectives and youth assessments on future policy priorities, such as on Åland and in Norway, but often the presence of youth is lacking. Moreover, only 2 out of 10 young people believe they can impact local decision-makers in Sweden (Mucf, 2021). It is therefore important to lift the possibilities and



opportunities to participate in local policy and planning processes. There are many definitions of youth engagement in policy-making. Often it is associated with community engagement, but it can also refer to political party organisation or direct action and activism. A number of rural municipalities have been testing different ways of working with young people to reach the sustainable development goals, for example, including efforts to improve healthcare services for young people, and using local schools as testbeds for the green transition (Berlina, 2023). This engagement plays an important role for allowing young people to be co-creators of their future municipalities, and to build stronger rapport between young people and policy – and decision makers.

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

Participation of youth in policy-making can be strengthened by various means and for different desired outcomes (Berlina, 2023). This refers for example to including youth in the design, implementation, monitoring, reporting and evaluation of policies. To facilitate democratic participation, it is important to use plain language. Good communication is pertinent, and it lowers the threshold for participation. There are also opportunities to think innovatively about how to use platforms and social media to reach those who would not otherwise be reached. Young people are a very diverse group, and they must also be approached in their own way. Opportunities for young to engage in policy-making is unevenly distributed in society and often conditioned by socio-economic

circumstances, family background and level of education. Capacity building and education about youth participation among policy-makers as well for the youth themselves are dual aspects of the same coin to ensure that awareness of how participatory processes can take place, what can be expected as outcomes of such processes and when these processes best take place. Youth participation policies need to target social emancipation and improving life conditions for young people, while also catering for how to participate. This also indicates that youth participation policies also need to pay particular attention to socio-economic inequalities, how these can be combated as well as taking into account place-based conditions.

Youth councils at the local and regional level are mandated by law in Norway, and similar structures exist in other countries. However, it is necessary to consider whether and how their advice and recommendations are being translated into meaningful actions, and whether or not youth inclusion remains just a symbolic act. Ensuring that youth participation is institutionalised through advisory groups and consultation processes is key. This requires resource allocation and careful process design that hold policy-makers to account. "Youth washing" as the Gen Z-panellists called it, remains an issue in many Nordic countries today. However, actual participation, space for young voices, and involvement are crucial to ensure ownership and visions for life in rural areas. Lowering the threshold for participation is an investment in future rural areas.

Project communication

Nordregio Forum

Nordregio Forum is the annual gathering for practitioners and policymakers engaged in regional, rural, and urban development within the Nordic countries. It serves as a platform for the exchange of innovative concepts, emerging trends, and the dissemination of fresh insights, real-world cases, and shared experiences. Moreover, it offers a unique opportunity to champion both national and regional policy priorities while benefiting from mutual learning and collaboration.



At Nordregio Forum 2023, the central theme revolved around exploring the future of the Nordic region from the vantage point of the younger generation: "Young Nordics". The conference took place in Reykjavík in Iceland on the 17th of October 2023.

The Forum presentations ranged from talking about rural stayers, including the story of "Rosie" when "everyone else wants to be a Frodo or a Bilbo"⁴, a presentation of the GenZ-panellists' recommendations, young people's perspectives on the green transition and in Arctic areas. It also featured two panel discussions where three of the GenZ-panellists participated on behalf of the group.



Photos: Mads Ø. Harstad, Annie Linsemark, Bára Örkmelsted, Mari Wøien Meijer, Ann-Sofi Backgren, Hans-Peter Carlson, Lilja Rannveig Sigurgeirsdóttir.

⁴ Character in J.R.R Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*-trilogy. The three characters Rosie, Bilbo and Frodo are hobbits in Tolkien's books about Middle Earth and the Ring of Power. These were used by Nordregio Forum presenter researcher Eva Mærsk to illustrate different destinies of rural young people and how these often are narrated in general opinion and scholarly communities. While the characters of Bilbo and Frodo make a significant bulk of Tolkien's stories, Rosie, who remains in the Shire is not mentioned much - but nonetheless, Rosie is very important for the Shire's community as well as to other characters.

At the end of the first panel discussion titled: "What do GenZ need to stay in Nordic rural areas?", the conference participants helped generate the word cloud found below. These words illustrate the conference participants' perception of what young people need to stay and thrive in rural areas.

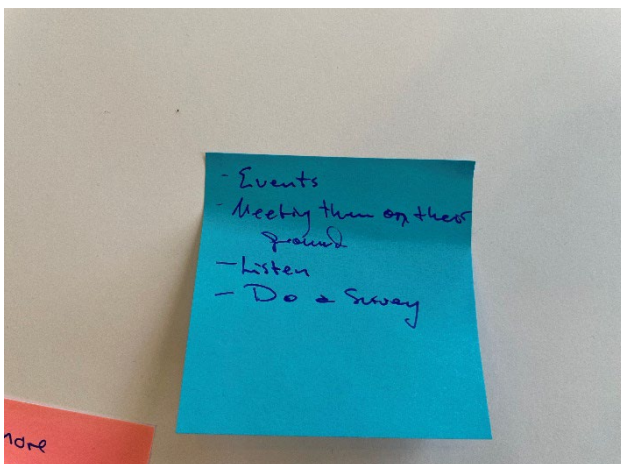
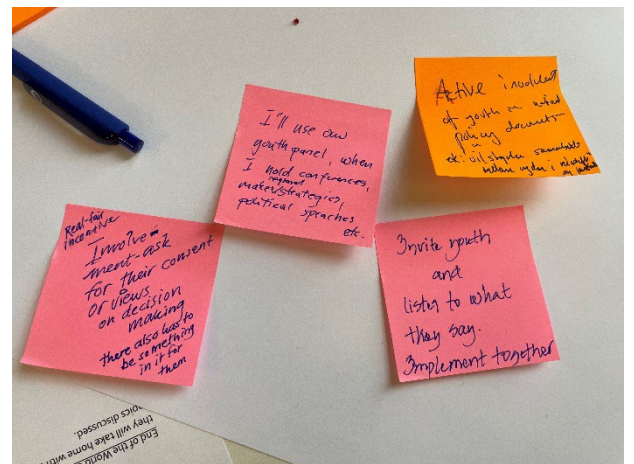
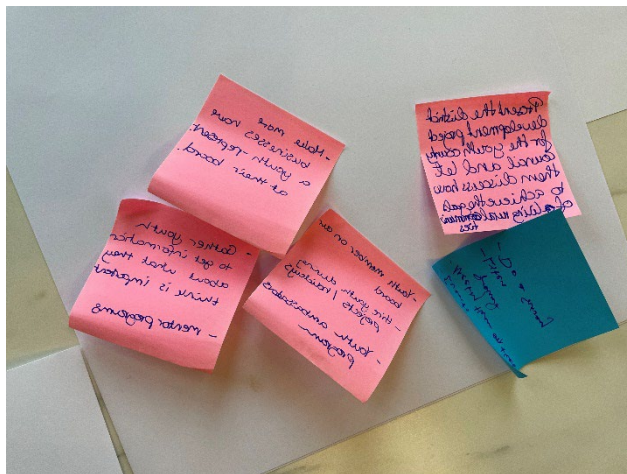
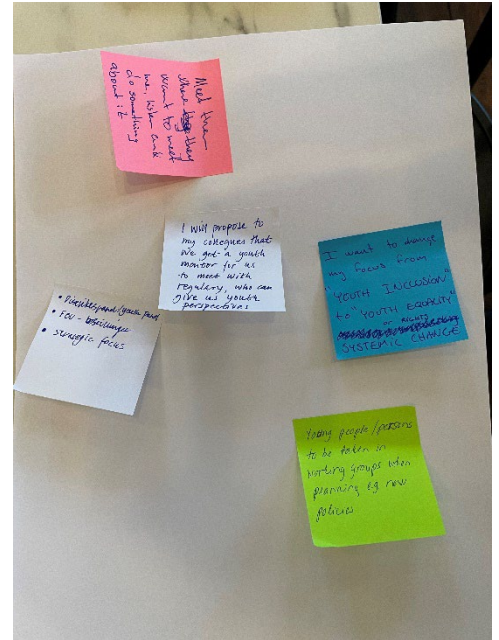
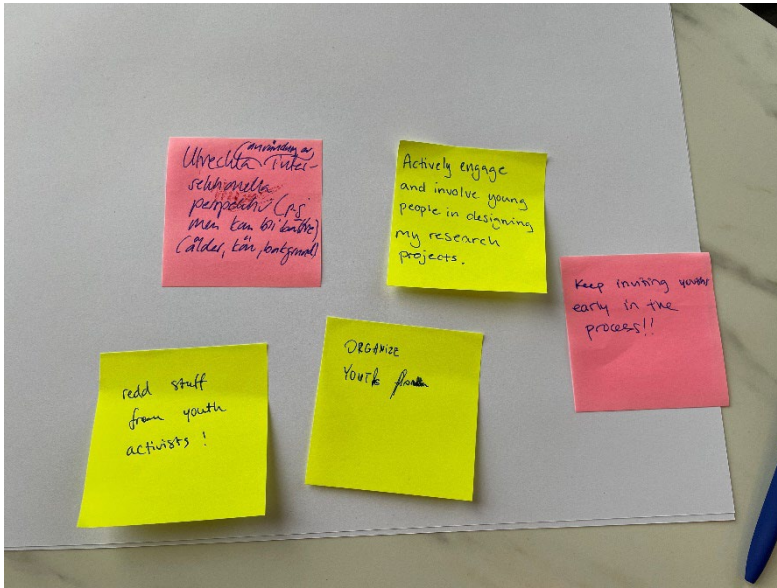
Join at menti.com use code 51169688

In one word, what do GenZs need to stay and thrive in Nordic rural areas?
77 responses



The conference was followed by a 'Nordic'⁵ café discussion about the topics covered during the conference day, such as young people's role in the green transition, the role of housing and transport options for viable rural areas, the role of education and labour markets as well as youth participation. This allowed the conference participants to have a direct dialogue with the GenZ-representatives in an informal setting. At the end of the workshop, each of the conference participants were to reflect and note down one actionable point on youth involvement to take home with them, to try an implement in their organisations.

⁵ World café-methodology



Post its: Action points to take home for policy and practitioners at Nordregio Forum.

Meeting the Nordic ministers

Three GenZ-representatives were invited to attend the Nordic Ministerial meeting (Ministerråd-vekst) in Reykjavík on the 18th of October 2023. A total of 45 min were set aside for presenting the recommendations from the GenZ-panellists, including a roundtable discussion among the ministers and state secretaries from Denmark, Finland, Greenland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Åland. Their enthusiasm for the recommendations demonstrates a commitment to the cause of youth involvement beyond 'youth washing' and a desire to invest in rural areas throughout the Nordic region.

The minutes from the Ministerial meeting can be found here:

<https://opengov.360online.com/Meetings/nmr/Meetings/Details/757446>



Photo: Karen Ellemann (Secretary General for the Nordic Council of Ministers), Sigurdur Ingi Johannsson (Minister of Infrastructure, Iceland), Margrét Lára Baldursdóttir (Gen Z representative), Bára Örsk Melsted (Gen Z representative) Fredrik Karlström (Minister of Enterprise, Åland), Mads Ødegaard Harstad (Gen Z representative), Naaja H. Nathanielsen (Naalakkersuisoq for labour market, trade, natural resources, justice and equality Greenland), Louise Schack Elholm (Minister of Rural Affairs, Denmark), Daniel Ericsson (State secretary to the Minister of Rural areas and Infrastructure, Sweden), Anna-Leena Seppälä (Director of the Building Council), Sigrun Wiggen Prestbakmo (State secretary to the Minister of Local Government and Rural Development, Norway).

Project learning

Upon concluding the Gen Z Agency project, aimed at mobilising young people to strengthen Nordic rural areas, we have gleaned some valuable insights from the process for similar projects in the future.

Some of these thoughts extend also to include youth involvement in processes in general. These reflections are detailed in the bullet points below:

- Placing young people's voices first is important for creating a sense of agency and power, which is what this project sought to do.
- Youth engagement is an ongoing process. When young people contribute policy input or ideas, it requires sustained dialogue and learning exchanges for effective implementation.
- Embracing diverse groups of young people is vital to capture a range of life experiences and perspectives. This may involve a more extensive recruitment process to youth involvement platforms or panels as well as providing tailored support, as some individuals may be new to policy work, political involvement, or civil society activities. However, reaching those with less organisational and political experience is crucial in at least two ways: First, it enables policymakers, practitioners, decision-makers and researchers to hear from a group that is somewhat elusive; and second, encourages democratic participation when understanding that their voices matter and that they are taken seriously in such processes.
- The conditions for young people in rural areas can vary significantly within and between Nordic countries, depending on the specific rural regions or communities they reside in. To ensure that recommendations or action points are relevant for all, a variety of communities, socio-economic conditions and realities must be included in the discussion.
- Enabling an open space for young people to brainstorm ideas and solutions to local challenges or opportunities creates ownership to the future and the processes that (need to) happen in their rural towns for them to thrive.
- Young people's voices, perspectives and visions are important for rural areas, but rural areas should also be seen as opportunity spaces for young people to act out their dreams and ideas for the future.
- While digital solutions are essential for inclusive development, this youth panel underscores the significance of location-specific services and investments. Place-based considerations remain crucial despite the increasing digitalisation of rural areas.
- Spatial planning, often referred to as "rural planning," serves as an effective channel for addressing youth inclusion and perspectives in rural governance. This is especially valuable when incorporating place-based approaches, covering various sectors and involving citizen and civil society consultations in rural place-making processes.

Links to the Nordic Vision and the Regional Sector's Cooperation Programme 2021-2024

Our project links to the Nordic Vision 2030 and the Regional Sector's Cooperation Program 2021-24, as well as the global sustainable development goals.

Objective on social sustainability. Goal 9 "Contribute to good, equitable, and secure health and well-being for all"; **goal 10**: "Work to involve all Nordic citizens in the green transition and digital development, harness their potential, and prevent societal disparities from increasing due to transitions"; and **goal 11**: "Give Nordic civil societies, especially children and youth, a strengthened voice and participation in Nordic cooperation, and enhance their knowledge of neighbouring countries' language and culture."

The Regional Sector's initiative **S.10.E**: *Highlight and develop models and tools for citizen engagement to strengthen local democracy.*

Additionally, the project should particularly address the following **global SDGs**:

SDG 3 Good health and wellbeing: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

SDG 5 Gender equality: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

SDG 8 Decent work and economic growth: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.

SDG 10 Reduced inequality: Reduce income inequality within and among countries.

SDG 11 Sustainable cities and communities: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.

SDG 16 Peace, justice, and strong institutions: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

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