

From Fields to Futures: 40 action points for rural revitalisation

Nordic Rural Youth Panel 2023



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Dear reader,

There are many reasons why young people choose to leave rural areas – and also many preconceived ideas. One is that the irresistible lure of mobility draws young people away. Another is that rural areas offer no future for young people. Such places are considered stagnant, and those who choose to stay are often stigmatised as people who lack the ambition or agency to move on. They are left behind, both figuratively and literally. Given that, the truly bold move is not to leave for the bigger cities, but to stay put.

Many Nordic rural municipalities are grappling with demographic trends such as ageing populations and the migration of young people to urban areas, leading to less diversified labour markets and services. Encouraging and enabling young people to remain and settle in rural areas presents a challenge, as the cities and bigger towns offer more educational opportunities and greater employment prospects. Rural areas must adapt to demographic trends while also reaching out to potential new, young inhabitants – a difficult balance to strike on the best of days. Fewer people means less money for services for older people, and fewer schools and public services for children and youth. As opportunities and services diminish, fewer people see a potential future in rural areas, and the situation begins to spiral. This is a vicious circle. In many ways, the discussion of moving up, out and away implies

that success can only be obtained through mobility. This nurtures commonly held perceptions of what constitutes a "good" career, a "fulfilling" life or "big" dreams, as defined through comparison with others. The idea of mobility also holds the promise of new identity – an opportunity for reinvention or to be your true self, which may have been suppressed in areas of greater social control. For some, mobility offers deliverance; for others, it presents a challenge, as it normalises the idea that "the grass is always greener on the other side". It deflates the self-confidence and identity of rural areas. They become places to visit, not places to live.

However, we want to be able to live in rural areas; we want to thrive, settle, and develop our communities. We want to reclaim rural agency, reinvent rural identities as bold and innovative, and raise the profile of Nordic rural areas as more than just tourist destinations, but viable and flourishing places full of opportunity. We at the Nordic Rural Youth Panel set out to advise policy- and decision-makers in Nordic rural areas about what young people need to thrive in these areas, and what will make them want to stay.

It is important to recognise that there is a multitude of alternative narratives and of potential representatives for Nordic rural youth. We are just one small group of voices calling for change. But we believe that the policy recommendations for rural municipalities we present here can help improve rural lives for all.

The Nordic Rural Youth Panel



The Nordic Rural Youth Panel's Recommendations

We, the Nordic Rural Youth Panel, believe that:

- **Rural youth need accessible and efficient transportation options.** In order to achieve a just green transition in the transport sector, affordable public transport (including efforts to promote diverse and locally adapted multi-modal transport options) is a priority.
- **Rural youth need more affordable and diverse housing options** to ensure that they can access attractive private and public housing (tenure and ownership) that meets their needs. This is also strongly linked to service provision and opportunities for community engagement.
- **Rural youth need accessible and dynamic education opportunities at all levels** and want clear links between education and training and the local labour market.

- **Rural youth need to see existing and potential opportunities in their local labour markets**, including through the provision of remote work options. This also connects to their access to rural housing.
- **Rural youth need access to safe spaces and tools** that enable discussion of mental and physical health, as well as access to recreational facilities.
- **Rural youth need funding for public meeting spaces** and social engagement initiatives to create stronger bonds and establish roots in rural areas.
- **Rural youth need to be met and reached on their terms**, using their own language and platforms, so that they feel able to fully participate in policy processes as valuable members of society.

Watch a video with the Nordic Rural Youth Panel [here](#).





EDUCATION AND TRAINING

We believe that access to the right type of education provides individuals in rural areas with the knowledge, skills, and tools to improve their lives and pursue opportunities. Education and training closely connected to the local labour market will help them develop the skills needed for future employment. At the same time, by encouraging young people to tap into their entrepreneurial spirit from an early age, and by providing various support measures, rural municipalities can become hubs for start-ups and entrepreneurship, which will contribute to the development of rural communities. Access to great education and training at all levels, whether online or in person, is important for encouraging young people to stay and see a future in Nordic rural areas.

We recommend:

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



- **Mainstreaming satellite university campuses and offering more hybrid, flexible learning options for college students.** These hybrid options, including online courses, remote work, and distance learning centres, will allow students to maintain connections to rural areas while pursuing higher education. Improved models for hybrid studies at university level can offer access to educational programmes or courses that would otherwise be unavailable to certain geographies.



- **Ensuring that higher education curriculums are available in native languages.** Young people from indigenous rural areas with little education in, e.g., Scandinavian languages, should have the ability to complete higher education in their mother tongue (e.g., Greenlandic, Sami, Faroese).





LABOUR MARKET

Access to a dynamic labour market is important for the future of rural youth, and educational opportunities must be matched to potential employment. A dynamic rural labour market must also allow for new jobs and remote work, e.g., by enabling young people to participate in public administration and policy-making at local, regional and national levels, and to work in technologically advanced companies elsewhere, as well as national agencies and authorities.

As remote work and remote studying require only a laptop and internet access, rural municipalities should invest in creating communal meeting places, meeting rooms and open workspaces, in order to create a sense of community in rural areas, so that young people see them as viable places to live. This is also crucial for spurring entrepreneurship, bringing people together and creating spaces in which young people can test or develop their ideas.

The labour market cannot be seen in isolation from other needs of young people. Affordable housing is just as important as rural job opportunities.

We recommend:

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





HOUSING

Affordable housing should be one of the main attractions of rural areas. However, this is often not the case. Housing in Nordic rural areas is expensive and often not fit for purpose. With increasing tourism, housing that could be used for young people is instead used for short-term holiday lets.

Housing is more than a roof over your head. In fact, it is highly important that housing in rural areas is recognised as a key factor in establishing connections between the community and the environment. Multipurpose housing could be vital for the future of rural communities.

We recommend:

- **Ensuring more affordable, diverse, and accessible options for housing tenure** in rural and sparsely populated areas.
- **Developing a housing development programme targeting young homebuyers**, to engage young people in the building and restoring of homes.
- **Investing in and modernising the idea of shared housing models.** Shared housing alternatives could include multi-purpose services for young people, as well as

intergenerational exchanges. Rather than encouraging young people to build residential buildings for themselves, rural municipalities should seek inspiration from urban areas in which shared housing is common.

- **Taking into consideration the target group when building new houses**, so that municipalities work to attract a specific demographic.
- **Setting up a public rural housing loan fund for young people** to ensure their ability to enter the housing market, and to invest in building new property or renovating old houses. It is important to give young people an advantage in the rural housing market.





TRANSPORT

Accessible transportation is crucial if young people are to see rural regions as viable places to live, especially since basic services (e.g., healthcare, access to amenities, job opportunities) are often limited or unavailable in such regions. When it comes to providing or improving transport solutions, there is often a lack of funding, as well as a lack of cooperation between key actors. Transport, whether public or private, is often expensive, and therefore inaccessible to many young people who have less disposable income. Public transport in rural regions is often non-existent, infrequent, or impractical. The bus does not take you where you need to go, and services are too infrequent to be practical. The infrastructure is often poor, as roads are often ill-maintained and in bad condition. Young people in rural areas need accessible and efficient transportation options. In order to realise a just green transition in the transport sector, affordable public transportation and diverse and locally adapted multi-modal transport options must be prioritised.

We recommend:

- **Increasing the efficiency of transport routes** by splitting routes through hybrid bus systems and by combining larger and smaller buses (as well as other vehicles). The routes should reflect the settlement structure, and they must reflect peak times for work and school commuting.

- **Ensure that prices for diverse public transportation options in rural areas are socio-economically and spatially just.** All actors responsible should evaluate the sustainability and environmental impact of existing transport options, ensure that lower-impact options are prioritised, and adjust accordingly. In places where there is an infrequent but essential need for public transport, rural carpooling and on-demand services could be an option.
- **Ensuring participatory processes in local and regional transport planning.** Public transport is for the people, and the timetables should be regularly re-evaluated to reflect the needs of the public in rural areas. This can be done through simple surveys, e.g., via QR codes at bus stops.
- **Prioritising infrastructure to ensure connectivity.** We want an infrastructure that connects rather than isolates rural areas, and that takes people where they need to go. We need a plan that enables the inhabitants of rural areas to travel safely all year round, and therefore makes it possible to live in rural areas. Frequent ferries is an important part of this infrastructure.





COMMUNITY AND CULTURE

Including youth voices in policy-making, and improving their access to community and culture, will promote social cohesion and political engagement among young people, and allow them to see a future in Nordic rural areas. It is therefore crucial to support youth councils, meeting spaces, and social engagement initiatives, and ensure that these are accessible and welcoming to everyone in the community. This will also improve social well-being and encourage more young people to stay in or move to Nordic rural areas.

We recommend:

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

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





HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Health, well-being, and welfare services are unevenly distributed in the Nordic regions and municipalities, particularly in rural and sparsely populated areas. Some of the key future challenges include ensuring that improvements in health and well-being are evenly distributed in the population; that the growing mental health crisis among young people is addressed; and that rural youth do not lag behind their urban counterparts in terms of access to essential services. Recreational activities are also highly important for young people's well-being. In order to combat loneliness and improve mental health, it is vital to ensure that rural youth have access to, e.g., swimming pools, sports arenas, and youth clubs.

We recommend:

- **Ensuring access to sports facilities and recreational arenas**, so that young people can meet peers with similar interests. This is important for nurturing a sense of community.

- **Ensuring fast and reliable internet access** for all communities in rural and sparsely populated areas.
- **Promoting the ready availability of digital healthcare tools** to facilitate wider access to mental healthcare in rural areas, as a complement to physical services.
- **Offering good-quality, evidence-based education in sexual and reproductive health and rights for young people in rural areas.** This could include independent facilitators or educators visiting smaller communities to ensure more open dialogue and knowledge-sharing.
- **Including rural LGBTQA+ youth on the agenda** by openly addressing issues connected to their well-being.





YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Young people in rural areas need to be met on their own platforms and spoken to on their own terms, so that they feel like they can participate in policy processes as valuable members of society. Young people need to be part of the decision-making space to ensure that their needs are met, and their recommendations must be considered and incorporated into policy-making processes. Decision-making processes affect young people's lives both now and in the future. If rural areas are to survive, we must ensure that we are building a future that appeals to those who want to move there and the demographics the rural areas wish to attract.

We recommend:

- **Avoiding "youth-washing" and tokenism when involving young people** in policy-making processes. Their contributions are more than symbolic. Involving young people should not be a "box-ticking" exercise with no intention of making any real impact.
- **Using inclusive and accessible language** (including indigenous and minority languages) when engaging young people in policy-making processes.
- **Meeting young people in their spaces**, to facilitate better understanding of policy areas and decision-making processes. This

includes both social media platforms, where information can be made more accessible, and rural youth being approached by peers from their own age groups.

- **Making participation and engagement in rural planning fun** and appealing for young people. Inspiration for these efforts may be found in urban development and planning movements, which may be adapted to a specifically rural perspective.
- **Supporting youth involvement in councils and panels through monetary compensation** to encourage and recognise young people's input to public policy.
- **Promoting opportunities for engagement**, to raise awareness of existing channels and forums.
- **Involving young people with disabilities.** "Young people" are a diverse group, and it is important to include the perspectives and experiences of those with impairments in order to diversify policies and make them more inclusive.
- **Teaching young people about democratic and societal engagement processes from an early age**, to increase faith in the democratic system. Efforts aimed at motivation and engagement will be more effective if the processes involved feel relevant and familiar.
- **Make democratic processes accessible** by ensuring safe spaces free of prejudice and age discrimination. Politics can be both overwhelming and daunting.
- **Being good role models** – in other words, "walking the walk". What action will you take to include more young people in your work?



NORDIC RURAL YOUTH PANELLISTS 2023

LIST OF YOUTH PANEL PARTICIPANTS (AGE 18-25)

The following young representatives have, to varying degrees, 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. Jonas 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 Örkin Melsted, Iceland
16. Selma Dís Hauksdóttir, Iceland
17. Carina Burroughs, Iceland
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About this publication

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Nordregio

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

Nordregio is a leading Nordic and European research centre for regional development and planning, established by the Nordic Council of Ministers in 1997. We conduct solution-oriented and applied research, addressing current issues from both a research perspective and the viewpoint of policymakers and practitioners. Operating at the international, national, regional and local levels, Nordregio's research covers a wide geographic scope, emphasising the Nordic and Baltic Sea Regions, Europe and the Arctic.

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