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VOLUNTARY WORK IN THE NORDIC REGION – SOCIAL COHESION IN A NEW ERA

Voluntary work is important in itself, but it also creates cohesion and other important resources for society. In the Nordic region, voluntary work has also been a key feature in the democratic debate, and has been important for creating political inclusion. This report indicates that voluntary work in the Nordic region remains stable but, under the surface, structural changes are taking place that suggest that voluntary work and organisations are now finding a different role to the one they occupied previously.

Contents

04	Foreword
05	Summary
08	Introduction
09	Voluntary work and its role
11	History of voluntary work
12	Status of voluntary work in the Nordic region
15	Time spent on voluntary work
16	Voluntary work by area
18	Who are the volunteers?
21	Economic value of voluntary work
22	Structural changes
24	Conclusions
27	References
29	About this publication

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A significant proportion of the Nordic population devotes time to voluntary work. It creates considerable economic added value, and contributes to social trust and cohesion.



Foreword

The Nordic countries are well-functioning societies, equipped to meet political changes, and history has shown time after time that we in the Nordic region have been successful at carrying out major reforms.

As yet, we do not know the long-term consequences of the Corona pandemic for the Nordic region and the Nordic co-operation but, in the longer term, our greatest challenge remains the climate. Agenda 2030 and the Paris Agreement are showing the way, but we must raise the level of ambition and speed up the work. People are starting to realise that, because of the reforms that the climate issue will require, as well as the need for a widespread green transition, the Nordic societies need to prepare for significant changes. In the Nordic Council of Ministers, we are now facing a new vision for the Nordic co-operation in which we will be helping to shape the future into something even better.

The green transition will require strong participation by civil society and individuals in the Nordic region. Societal engagement of people is a goal in itself. It provides a place to meet with others, to discuss, and to activate people around a common issue. Voluntary work gives a purpose to many people's lives. It also creates cohesion and other important resources for society. In the Nordic region, it has also been an important channel for democratic discussion. In brief, voluntary work is an important foundation in a good society.

The Nordic region has been one of the most organised areas in the world, so is a region where voluntary work has been extensive. This report examines voluntary work in the Nordic region, more specifically whether its role in the Nordic societies is changing and, if so, what are the consequences. In brief, the report finds that voluntary work in the Nordic region is stable but, at the same time, changes are taking place below the surface, suggesting that voluntary work, and the organisational landscape at large, is taking new forms. This is creating opportunities, but also brings important challenges for societies.

The Nordic Council of Ministers will ensure greater involvement of civil society in the work with the new vision. The objective is to be an open, transparent and relevant organisation towards civil society. A close and strong partnership with civil society organisations is a strength that can enrich the Nordic work.

The report was written by Ulf Andreasson and Truls Stende at the analysis and statistics unit of the Secretariat of the Nordic Council of Ministers. The authors have been helped in the work by Andrea Skjold Frøshaug. The report is part of the series of publications issued by the unit, addressing issues that are important from a Nordic perspective.

Copenhagen, May 2020

Paula Lehtomäki
Secretary General, Nordic Council of Ministers



Neighbourhood Mothers in Copenhagen is an initiative primarily involving women who work voluntarily in their city districts to support other women who are often isolated. The established system may find it difficult to reach these women.

Photo: Scanpix.dk

Summary

The current status of voluntary work in the Nordic region can be summarised in a few key points:

- The Nordic countries rank highest in Europe in a measure of the proportion of the population working voluntarily. The proportion is relatively stable, and has even increased in some of the Nordic countries since the 1990s. Voluntary measures also have significant economic value, corresponding to approximately three percent of GDP.
- It can also be said there is a Nordic model for voluntary work that differs from that of other countries. Unlike many other countries, voluntary work has not always been based on altruistic grounds, providing help and support for groups in need. In the Nordic region, it has more often been a leisure-time activity. Voluntary work in the Nordic region has also had a close relationship to the political sphere.
- Previously, most of the people working voluntarily were middle-aged and men. However, in recent years, the differences in terms of gender, age and educational background seem to be disappearing. Many parts of society in the Nordic region contribute to the voluntary work.
- The link between voluntary work and organisations seems to be weakening, i.e. it is becoming less common for volunteers to be members in an organisation. Surveys also show that when fewer people are members of organisations, they spend less time on voluntary work. There are also signs that, in recent years, the individual citizen has had less time for voluntary work.
- The organisational landscape for voluntary work is also changing, in two ways. An increasing number of organisations are becoming professionalised by setting up secretariats that are responsible for much of the activities,

in contrast to the local base that was a historical characteristic. Local grassroots initiatives are growing, not least in areas such as climate, environment and activities in vulnerable areas, which only to a limited extent can be said to involve a formal organisation.

Consequently, the overall picture is that voluntary work remains strong in the Nordic region, and many people work voluntarily at some point during the year. At the same time, the centre of gravity seems to be shifting. The traditionally broader, often locally based, organisations are now being run more professionally, and are highly centralised. In parallel, less formal organisations have been formed, characterised by a narrower subject of engagement, and these are attracting an increasing proportion of the voluntary work. Voluntary work is also less strongly linked to membership in organisations than previously, and has become more spontaneous.

Overall, the stability shown by voluntary work in the Nordic region is striking, but under the stable surface it can be seen that structural changes are taking place. These changes suggest that voluntary work and organisations in the Nordic region are finding a different role to the one they occupied previously.

This type of change is natural in a dynamic society, and should be seen as positive. At the same time, the change inevitably creates a number of challenges. One concerns the function of the organisations in generating trust between citizens. The voluntary organisations helped create a type of cohesive glue in society in the form of strong social norms regarding trust and respect that support and facilitate collaboration. The new type of voluntary organisations, along with the more traditional organisations becoming more centralised and professional, risk reducing the role of civil society in generating societal cohesion. In a longer term, the social trust in the Nordic region is at risk of being weakened.

Another challenge is that the traditional voluntary organisations have served as a link between the individual citizen, active in the local organisation, and decision-makers, often at the highest national political level. This can be seen as a Nordic democracy model that enabled the voice of the individual citizen to be heard. At the same time, the traditional organisations have helped to ensure that political development is broadly anchored in much of the population.

In a wider perspective, the model has helped to tackle what can be described as a central problem of democracy: how to preserve a sense of community despite the conflicts and how to find a balance between collaboration and struggle. This is at risk of being weakened through the changes in civil society described in this report.

One possible way to strengthen societal integration is to find new forms for the meetings between citizens and between citizens and decision-makers. Here, social media allows interaction in ways that were not previously possible. In addition, innovative forms can be found for regular dialogue with citizens – some politicians in the Nordic region are already using these new platforms. However, it is difficult to see how such – although certainly very laudable – initiatives can fully replace the democracy model that has built up in the Nordic region.

Other ways forward are to try to avoid creating barriers for new organisations, for example in funding systems or when it is important to be able to offer other forms of relevant support. The regulatory frameworks for organisations can also be reviewed, and simplified as much as possible. Municipalities could also make it easier for civil society organisations by having just one point of contact in the municipal organisation.

However, the single most important thing is to make decision-makers aware of this development. Trust, the 'Nordic gold', has been the key to how the Nordic countries have been able to successfully bring about change and reforms. If the processes for ensuring political anchoring are weakened, there is a risk that politics will find it more difficult to understand the will of the people in any depth, with the associated risk that new major societal reforms are perceived as elitist projects.

Ultimately, it is about finding forms for capturing the positive engagement that exists in the Nordic societies, and channelling this into a constructive societal benefit.

This applies not least in the climate issue, where the Nordic collaboration, through Vision 2030, will also be an important part of the green transition in the Nordic societies. The Nordic Council of Ministers will ensure greater involvement of civil society in the work with Vision 2030. The objective is that the Nordic Council of Ministers will be an open, transparent and relevant organisation towards civil society. A close and strong partnership with civil society organisations is a strength that can enrich the Nordic work, and at the same time increase engagement of civil society in the Nordic co-operation.

Civil society is an especially important arena for children and young people. Consequently, the Nordic Council of Ministers must continue to support the various forms of organisation and participation of children and young people in the Nordic region. Plans are now advanced, through an increased budget, to ensure that we reach more children and young people.



A nationwide, voluntary clean-up action organised by the Danish Society for Nature Conservation involved 125,000 children.

Photo: Scanpix.dk

Introduction

In 2017, the Secretariat of the Nordic Council of Ministers published a report on social trust in the Nordic region – the trust that we have in other people and that is exceptionally high in the Nordic region in an international perspective. The report, which attracted a lot of attention, had the title *Trust – the Nordic Gold*¹, which reflected that social trust is a key resource and necessary for our Nordic societal model. Without trust, the societies would not work, similar to the way an engine would not work without lubricant.

Even if trust is an important resource, a kind of gold if you like, it cannot be taken for granted in the same way as a natural resource – trust is continually being created, or broken down, in society. In the report, two main mechanisms for creating social trust in a society were identified. One is that the population has confidence that public agencies and other central societal institutions are acting fairly, efficiently, and transparently, and cannot be suspected of corruption. This ensures that the societal playing field is perceived as being level for all citizens.

The other mechanism is through civil engagement, i.e. membership in the various associations and organisations that comprise the organised civil society. (Although more informal forms of engagement are usually included here.) Through the voluntary organisations, a cohesive glue is formed in society in the form of strong social norms regarding the trust and respect that support and facilitate collaboration.

It is this civil engagement that is the focus of this report, where we particularly focus on the current status of voluntary work in the Nordic region: Is it increasing or decreasing? Who does voluntary work? Is it possible that the voluntary work has changed in some way? The aim of the report is to highlight some of the challenges arising from the trends we see – not least on the basis of the role that voluntary work has historically played in the Nordic societies.

Social trust is a key resource, and is necessary for our Nordic societal model. It cannot be taken for granted – trust is being continuously created, or broken down, in society. One mechanism involves civil engagement, i.e. membership in the various associations and organisations that comprise the organised civil society.

1 Andreasson, U., "Tillit – det nordiska guldet", in NMR Analys 2017:1 (2017).



Slush in Finland is a student-driven, not-for-profit movement that works to influence attitudes to entrepreneurship and to help the next generation of entrepreneurs.

Photo: Riikka Vaahtera

Voluntary work and its role

In his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Robert Putnam describes an almost decaying society, where fewer and fewer people are engaging in voluntary organisations.² Voter turnout in elections and involvement in other political activities have also fallen over time. People are also participating less in religious activities. The book describes a general decrease in all forms of the type of personal interaction around which the US population previously built much of their social life. Putnam describes the development in terms of declining social capital.

In contrast, high levels of social capital can be linked to positive societal effects, such as cohesion and social control (which, in turn, can have positive effects in areas such as suppressing criminality). Just as important is that social capital should also be seen as a resource at individual level in the form of trust, confidence and productive social networks, which comprise a significant resource in terms of the ability to, for example, find work, the ability to be socially mobile, and the sense of freedom.³

In political science and democracy research, the concept of social capital is often used to understand how 'egotistic' citizens can be induced to act collectively. In the research literature, it is possible to discern an ambition to ensure good democracy. What the research indicates, reasonably consistently, is a type of obligation for citizens to engage actively in the society they live in. This civic virtue, which is most powerful when it is based on the idea that "I'll do something for you now and you do something for me in the future", is built on the premise that individuals are prepared to work voluntarily.

High levels of social capital can be linked to positive societal effects. This is also an important resource at individual level.

2 Putnam, R., *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000).

3 Lundåsen, S.W. & Trägårdh, L., *Civilsamhälle, social sammanhållning och tillit: Rapport till Kommissionen för ett socialt hållbart Stockholm* (2015).

In its most basic form, voluntary work refers to all types of activities that are carried out freely, without monetary compensation (or possibly just a symbolic sum), and with no fear of reprisals if the volunteer leaves the organisation.⁴

There is also a special Nordic form of voluntary work. Unlike many other countries, voluntary work has not always been based on altruistic grounds, that is to say in the form of help and support for groups in need. In the Nordic region, it has more often been a leisure-time activity. The fact is, and this will become clearer later in the report, much of the voluntary work is in areas such as sport, culture, hobbies, and other recreation.

Voluntary work in the Nordic region has also had a close relationship to the political sphere. There has been a strong relationship between being active in a voluntary organisation and being an elected representative. Not least, it has served as a communication channel from citizens at grassroots level up to decision-makers at the highest national level. In the other direction, politicians have had an almost direct channel to individual citizens, which for example has made it possible to implement the major societal reforms. In research literature, this form of societal organisation has been called a 'vertical integration'.

This is particularly clear in terms of patient organisations and organisations for people with disabilities, but it also applies to a high degree in other organisations. Even voluntary organisations that are less apparent, such as sports and scout associations, have had this role to some extent. Why this has become so important in the Nordic countries can partly be explained by a significant degree of openness in the political system, which has enabled civil society actors to exert pressure.

There are also national differences. For example, voluntary work in the welfare sector varies in scale and character among the Nordic countries. Despite the differences, it is still basically the same model for voluntary work that is found throughout the Nordic region – which also differs from the pattern seen in other countries.⁵

There is a special Nordic form of voluntary work that differs from many other countries. It does not normally have an altruistic base, and instead is more like a leisure-time activity. Voluntary work in the Nordic region has also had a close relationship to the political sphere.

4 Henriksen, L.S. et al. (ed.), *Civic Engagement in Scandinavia – Volunteering, Informal Help and Giving in Denmark, Norway and Sweden* (2019). The book has been a recurring point of reference in the work with this report, particularly in the introductory sections. (Unfortunately, the book does not include other parts of the Nordic region.) The fact that voluntary work is carried out in organisations is important, as most of the voluntary work in the Nordic region is done through voluntary organisations.

5 See the first two chapters in Henriksen, L.S. et al. (2019).



Voluntary work in a second-hand charity shop.

Photo: Scanpix.dk

History of voluntary work

Historically, voluntary work in the Nordic region has been based on a tradition from the popular movements that have been very important for our Nordic societies. The movements were found in all countries, but developed differently to a certain extent. In many places, a popular religious revivalist movement spread during the 19th century. This developed into further social and political engagement. The workers' movement, farmers' movement, temperance movement and the revivalist movement, etc. strengthened the self-trust in the working classes during the early phase of industrialisation. During the 20th century, the movements became increasingly formalised in organisations, often at local level, district/regional level, and national level. In many ways, these organisations formed the core of the Nordic democratisation process, and were also important in the formation of the Nordic nations.

As the welfare state grew strongly, particularly in the period after the Second World War, many voluntary organisations developed their roles as interest organisations. This has been further strengthened by the state making it possible for people to be active in associations.⁶

In a historical perspective, it can be seen that the Nordic societies, in the period after the Second World War, experienced a type of symbiosis between decentralised political structures and a local mobilisation through voluntary organisations that acquired genuine political influence.

The Nordic societies have been characterised as 'negotiation societies' between different stakeholders; in many other parts of the world this was regarded as an almost impossible combination. Not least, the labour market in the last 100+ years has gone from being conflict-intensive, even violent on occasions, to one driven by negotiations. In the 20th century, many Nordic citizens have worked voluntarily on both sides of the partnership structure in working life: in trade unions and employer organisations. Consequently, voluntary work was not only found close to the state – it became the core of the Nordic form of the market economy.

Historically, voluntary work has been based on a tradition from the Nordic popular movements. In many ways, these organisations formed the core of the Nordic democratisation process, and were important in the formation of the Nordic nations.

After the Second World War, voluntary organisations won genuine political influence, not least at local level.

6 Ibid., p. 10-11.



Push gathers young people in Sweden who want to see a sustainable world. The network is based completely on voluntary engagement and on the members engaging in the issues they feel strongly about, and feeling strongly about becoming involved.

Photo: Push Sverige

Current status of voluntary work in the Nordic region

Measuring how many people work voluntarily, who volunteers, and what they do, is not simple. The most common method is to ask a representative sample of the population about their voluntary engagement. Often, different surveys produce varying results within the same country, and the results are not always unanimous, with different surveys sometimes indicating conflicting trends. One explanation is that the results of this type of survey vary according to the questions asked and their context.

Voluntary work also takes different forms in different countries.⁷ However, despite some variation, the most respected surveys show the same patterns: the Nordic countries have the highest proportion of volunteers in Europe.

This is shown, for example, in the Eurostat survey from 2015, carried out on a representative sample of the population in 33 European countries. One of the questions Eurostat asked was on participation in organised unpaid work at some time in the previous year.⁸ The five Nordic countries were among the top eight countries with the highest proportion of volunteers. Norway had by far the highest proportion (48 percent) while the proportion varied between 32 and 38 percent in the other Nordic countries.

It is difficult to measure the actual scale of voluntary work, but studies show, in principle unanimously, that the Nordic region has the highest proportion of volunteers in Europe.

7 Fridberg, T. & Folkestad, B., "Methods Appendix: National Population Surveys on Civic Engagement in Denmark, Norway and Sweden", p. 213, in *Civic Engagement in Scandinavia – Volunteering, Informal Help and Giving in Denmark, Norway and Sweden* (2019); Andersen, R.F. & Dinesen, P.T. (2017), p. 161-173.

8 Some surveys, including the Eurostat survey, are not carried out annually, so the results are somewhat dated. At the same time, changes do not occur so rapidly that they become irrelevant. Eurostat, *Formal Voluntary Activities, EU Income and Living Conditions (SILC)* (2015).

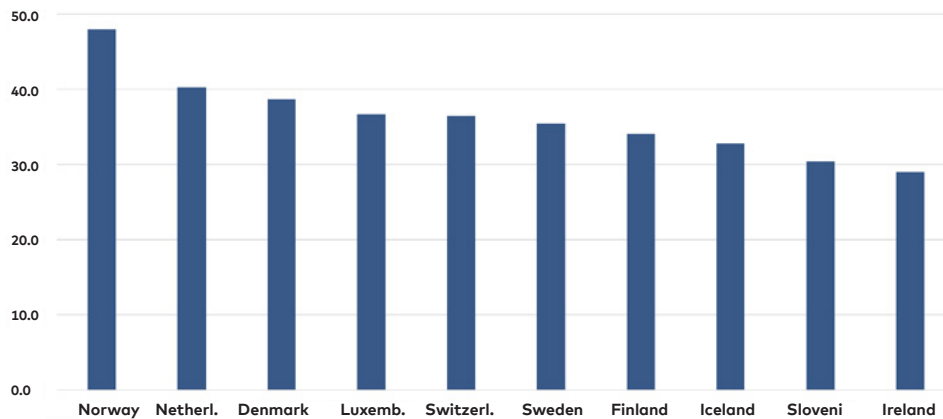


Figure 1.
The ten countries in Europe with the highest proportion of the population that had performed unpaid work at some stage in the previous year.

Source: Eurostat, *Formal Voluntary Activities, EU Income and Living Conditions (SILC) (2015)*.

Surveys often indicate a pattern in which North and West European countries, including the Nordic countries, have a high proportion of volunteers, while the proportion is lower for countries in South and East Europe.

Another survey, the European Social Survey (ESS), supports the general pattern. The survey, involving 24 European countries, also showed that the largest proportions of volunteers were in the Nordic countries (and the Netherlands). In Finland, the proportion was 38.1 percent, Iceland 37.6 percent, Sweden 36 percent, and Norway 32.5 percent. (Denmark was not included in that survey.)

These two European surveys are limited in that they only ask a question on organised voluntary work. Since the 1990s, national surveys on voluntary work have been carried out in Denmark, Norway and Sweden that examine the issue in more detail.⁹ These surveys show a larger proportion of volunteers in Norway (61 percent) and Sweden (53 percent) than in Denmark (35 percent) 2012-2014.^{10 11} The somewhat lower figures for Denmark can be attributed to the question possibly being perceived as being about regular voluntary work, so the figure may be higher in reality.¹²

9 Researchers have made the surveys from 2012 (Denmark), 2014 (Norway) and 2013 (Sweden) comparable, so we often refer to these surveys in this report. Since they are several years old, we also refer to more recent national surveys, which sometimes have a slightly different definition of voluntary work, to describe the situation in more recent years. For Finland and Iceland, we were unable to find much research on voluntary work, and what we did find was not directly comparable with the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish national surveys. Also, we were unable to find research on voluntary work in Greenland or the Faroe Islands.

10 Qvist, H-P.Y., Folkestad, B., Fridberg, T. & Lundåsen, S.W., "Trends in Volunteering in Scandinavia" in *Civic Engagement in Scandinavia – Volunteering, Informal Help and Giving in Denmark, Norway and Sweden* (2019).

11 The reason for the proportion of volunteers in Denmark, Norway and Sweden being higher in the national surveys than in the European surveys may be because they include more questions about voluntary work. The more questions asked, the more probable it is that the surveys will find the volunteers. Consequently, the national surveys certainly give a more realistic picture than the European. Folkestad B., Fladmoe A., Sivesind K.H. & Eimhjellen I., "Endringer i frivillig innsats – Norge i et skandinavisk perspektiv" (2017), p. 17.

12 Fridberg, T. & Folkestad, B. (2019), p. 213; see also Boje, T. 2017).

More recent figures from Norway, Denmark and Sweden suggest that the proportions are still at approximately the same levels.¹³

A survey carried out by Statistics Finland in 2017 showed that 28 percent had engaged in voluntary work in Finland in the previous 12 months.¹⁴ According to a study carried out by Statistics and Research Åland in 2018, slightly over 40 percent had done some voluntary work.¹⁵

Analyses also suggest that it is not always the same people in the population who do the voluntary work. There is a large turnover of volunteers, suggesting that many people carry out voluntary work at some stage in their lives.¹⁶

The surveys show that, overall, the proportion of people who have worked voluntarily at some stage during the year is stable, and has even increased – not least in Denmark – since the 1990s. This contradicts common assumptions, that the expansion of the welfare state, and a general individualisation in society, would lead to less voluntary work.¹⁷ Levels of voluntary work in the Nordic region have not just increased, they are also highest in Europe.

Voluntary work in the Nordic region seems to have increased since the 1990s, and levels are now the highest in Europe.

13 Fladmoe, A., Sivesind, K.H. & Arnesen, D., "Oppdaterte tall om frivillig innsats i Norge 1998–2017" (2018), p. 11; Ersta Sköndal Bräcke högskolas befolkningsundersökning 2019 (forthcoming); Rambøll, "Frivillighetsundersøkelsen 2017"; Center for Frivilligt Socialt Arbejde, "Tal om frivillighed i Danmark – Frivilligrapport 2016–2018" (2018), p. 24.

14 [Statistikcentralen Finland, "Miehet ja naiset tekivät yhtä paljon vapaaehtoistyötä" \(2018\).](#)

15 Statistics and Research Åland (ÅSUB), "Tillitsstudie för Åland 2018" (2018), p. 43.

16 Qvist, H-P.Y., Folkestad, B., Fridberg, T. & Lundåsen, S.W. (2019), p. 77; see also Boje, T. (2017), p. 302. As Boje also points out, one-third of the population in Denmark have never been volunteers.

17 Qvist, H-P.Y., Folkestad, B., Fridberg, T. & Lundåsen, S.W. (2019), p. 77.



Reykjavik Pride, largely run by volunteers, has become an annual event in Reykjavik since 1999, but its history goes back to 1993.

Photo: Square Lab, Unsplash

Time spent on voluntary work

So far, we have seen how many people have worked voluntarily at least once in the previous year (at the time the question was asked). This gives an impression of how many volunteers there are in the Nordic region compared with other countries, but gives no indication of how much voluntary work is actually carried out. For that, we need to look closer at how many hours the volunteers contribute.

The surveys of volunteer work in Denmark, Norway and Sweden showed substantial differences between the countries at the start of the 1990s, when volunteers in Denmark dedicated just under 16 hours on average a month to voluntary work. In Sweden, the figure was slightly under 12 hours and, in Norway, somewhere in between. At the start of the 2010s, the corresponding figures were around 14 hours a month in all three countries, so the differences had evened out.¹⁸ More recent surveys from Norway (2017) and from Denmark (2017) suggest that the number of hours has fallen somewhat in recent years.¹⁹

Based on the surveys, volunteers can be divided into short-time and core volunteers. Core volunteers are those who contribute more than ten hours per month, while the short-time volunteers contribute less than that. In Denmark, the proportion of core volunteers in the entire population was 11 percent, in Norway 19 percent, and in Sweden 24 percent (2012-2014). This means that, in Sweden, virtually a quarter of the population contributed more than ten hours per month.²⁰ An illustration of how important these 'enthusiasts' are can be seen from the figures for Norway: just under 20 percent of the volunteers do approximately 70 percent of the total voluntary work.²¹

Volunteers can be divided into short-time and core volunteers. The core group contributes much of the total time dedicated to voluntary work.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 78.

¹⁹ Fladmoe, A., Sivesind K.H. & Arnesen D., (2018), p. 19; Rambøll (2017), p. 14.

²⁰ Folkestad, B., Fladmoe, A., Sivesind, K.H. & Eimhjellen, I. (2017), p. 50.

²¹ Stortingsmelding 10 (2018–2019), "Frivilligheita – sterk, sjølvstendig, mangfaldig. Den statlege frivilligheitspolitikken", p. 24.



Many different festivals are held in the Nordic region. Fastlagsjippo at Observatorieberget in Helsinki is arranged by students and is one of the largest student events during the year. The programme includes sledging competitions, music, barbeques and parties.

Photo: Ethan Hu, Unsplash

Voluntary work by area

Voluntary work covers a large and diverse field. Many types of organisations run voluntary activities, everything from large aid organisations such as The Red Cross to local sports clubs, choirs and amateur dramatics. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between different types of organisations for which voluntary work is carried out, to obtain a more nuanced picture. Figure 2 shows the voluntary work divided by area, based on surveys from Denmark, Norway and Sweden; Finland and Iceland are not included in the diagram since comparable information is lacking from these countries.

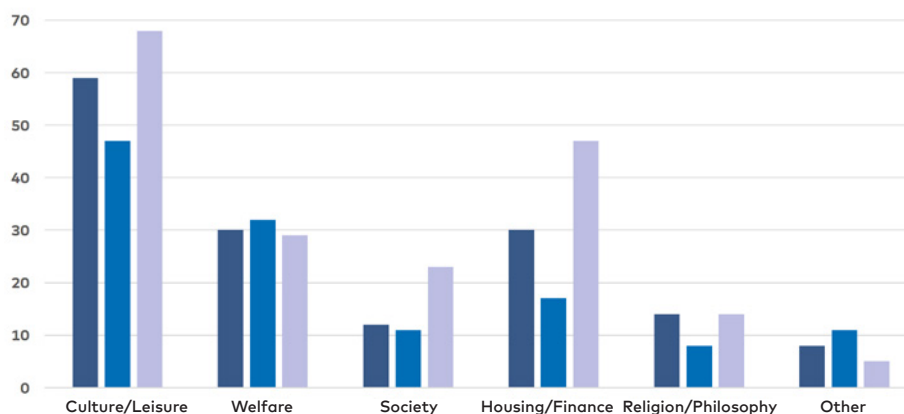


Figure 2.
Voluntary work by area

Source: Per Selle, Kristin Strømsnes, Lars Svedberg, Bjarne Ibsen och Lars Skov Henriksen, "The Scandinavian Organizational Landscape: Extensive and different", in *Civic Engagement in Scandinavia – Volunteering, Informal Help and Giving in Denmark, Norway and Sweden*.

■ Sweden (2014)
■ Denmark (2012)
■ Norway (2014)

NB.

Respondents could state several types of organisations, so the total for each country is not necessarily 100 percent.

The diagram shows a well-known phenomenon in the research in this field. The largest proportion of volunteers are in the category 'Culture and Leisure', with the 'Sport' category dominating. The figures in the diagram are from 2012-2014, but more recent surveys from Denmark (2017), Norway (2017) and Sweden (2019) suggest that no major changes have taken place since then.²² The pattern in the diagram is seen throughout the Nordic region, also in Iceland and Finland.²³ Much of the voluntary work in the area is 'parent voluntary work', i.e. parents who for example are trainers in their children's football teams.²⁴

The fact that so many volunteers work for organisations within culture and leisure is something that distinguishes the Nordic countries from other countries, where there is often a higher degree of voluntary work providing service in the health and social sector. (In the Nordic countries, voluntary work has not always been based on altruistic grounds, in the form of help and support for groups in need – instead, it has more often concerned a leisure-time activity.) So far, voluntary work in these areas has not been especially developed in the Nordic region.²⁵

At the same time, a change is taking place here, and voluntary work in the welfare area has increased somewhat in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway in recent years. This can be associated with political attention and greater focus on collaboration between voluntary organisations and municipalities, where volunteers can be anything from refugee guides, visitors to people in institutions, or homework helpers. The organisations in the welfare area have also created good opportunities for people to contribute alongside their work, and they are recruiting more and more people who are not members.²⁶

There is a considerable difference in the type of voluntary activity in the welfare area and that in the sport and culture area. The intention with the voluntary work in the welfare area can be said to be more outward looking, with a goal to help people who need it, while the motivation in the sport and culture movement is more inward looking, where the voluntary activities mostly benefit the members or the participants.²⁷

The largest proportion of volunteers are in the category 'Culture and Leisure', with the 'Sport' category dominating. Much of the voluntary work in the area concerns parents who, for example, are trainers in their children's organised sports activities. To a certain extent, this distinguishes the voluntary work in the Nordic region from that in other countries.

Voluntary work in the welfare sector has increased somewhat in recent years.

22 Fladmoe, A., Sivesind, K.H. & Arnesen, A., p. 15; Ersta Sköndal Bräcke högskolas befolkningsundersökning 2019 (forthcoming), Rambøll (2017), p. 20..

23 Hanifia, R., "Voluntary work, informal help and trust: Changes in Finland", p. 38, in *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 72 (2013), p. 32-46; Hrafnisdóttir, S., Jónsdóttir, G.A. & Kristmundsson, Ó.H., "Þátttaka í sjálfboðastarfi á Íslandi", in *Icelandic Review of Politics and Administration* (2015), Vol 10, Issue 2, p. 425-442.

24 Folkestad, B., Fladmoe, A., Sivesind, K.H. & Eimhjellen, I. (2017), p. 57; Hanifia, R. (2013), p. 38.

25 Henriksen, L.S., Strømsnes, K. & Svedberg, L., "Comparative and Theoretical Lessons from the Scandinavian Case", p. 200, in *Civic Engagement in Scandinavia – Volunteering, Informal Help and Giving in Denmark, Norway and Sweden* (2019).

26 Folkestad, B., Fladmoe, A., Sivesind, K.H. & Eimhjellen, I. (2017), p. 72.

27 Qvist, H-PY., Folkestad, B., Fridberg, T. & Lundåsen, S.W. (2019), p. 91.



Many cultural events, and particularly festivals, in Sweden and throughout the Nordic region depend on volunteers. One example is the Gagnef Music Festival.

Photo: Jens Johnsson, Unsplash

Who are the volunteers?

For a long time, most volunteers in the Nordic region were aged 35-50.²⁸ One explanation for this is that many people in this age range have children, and the activity can be regarded as 'parent volunteers'.²⁹

This picture became less clear during the 2010s when, in Denmark, Sweden and Norway, there was a tendency towards a more even distribution between the age groups.³⁰ In Sweden there was actually a greater proportion of volunteers among young people in 2014 (but this was within the margin of error). Some very recent surveys in Denmark indicate quite an even distribution between age groups, which strengthens the impression that this trend is continuing.³¹ (Despite this, new surveys from Norway and Denmark show that middle-aged people comprise a large proportion.³²)

In the Nordic region it has long been assumed that a greater proportion of men than women work voluntarily. This applies primarily in the sport movement, which comprises much of the voluntary sector in the Nordic region. Women have been more active in the welfare organisations.³³

28 Folkestad, B., Fladmoe, A., Sivesind, K.H. & Eimhjellen, I. (2017), p. 51; Hanifia, R. (2013), p. 38. Our own analysis of the Eurostat EU-SILC survey shows a similar pattern for the whole of the Nordic region.

29 Folkestad, B., Fladmoe, A., Sivesind, K.H. & Eimhjellen, I. (2017), p. 57.

30 Ibid., p. 51; Statistics Finland (2018).

31 Center for Frivilligt Socialt Arbejde (2018), p. 25; Henriksen, L.S. & Levinsen, K., "Forandringer i foreningsmedlemsskab og frivilligt arbejde", p. 230, in *Usikker modernitet – Danskerne værdier fra 1981 til 2017* (2019).

32 Fladmoe, A., Sivesind, K.H. & Arnesen, D. (2018); Rambøll (2017), p. 7.

33 Folkestad, B., Fladmoe, A., Sivesind, K.H. & Eimhjellen, I., (2017), p. 52-62; Hanifi, R., (2013), p. 32-46. However, a study from Iceland shows a pattern where the gender differences may have been less than in the rest of the Nordic region at the start of the 2010s. See Hrafnisdóttir, S., Jónsdóttir, G.A. & Kristmundsson, Ó.H. (2015), p. 425-442.

However, it seems that the genders are becoming more evenly distributed, at any rate in Denmark, Norway, and Finland. New surveys from these countries show that the proportions of women and men who worked at some time during the previous year are about equal.³⁴ The most recent survey from Sweden suggests that the gender distribution remains unchanged there.³⁵ On Åland too, more men than women engage in voluntary work.³⁶ A study from Norway shows there are still differences between the genders in terms of time spent on voluntary work – men devote more time to voluntary work than women.³⁷

Research has also shown that it is usually people with resources who carry out voluntary work. Many surveys show that, in particular, people with higher levels of education participate more than others in voluntary work in the Nordic countries.³⁸ The same pattern can be seen in the EU-SILC survey from 2015, where the results suggest that people with higher levels of education carry out most voluntary work in the Nordic region.

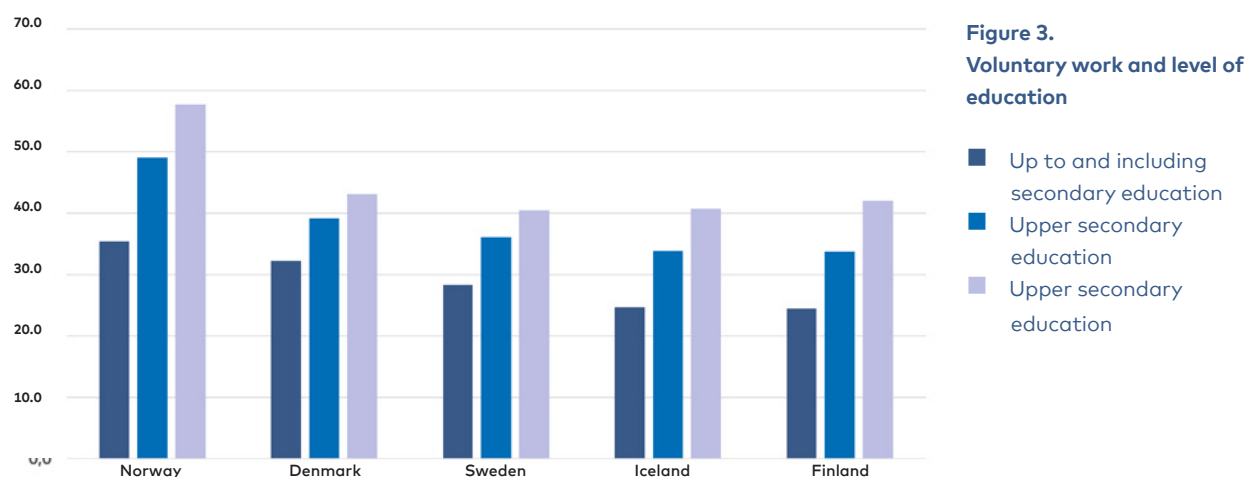


Figure 3.
Voluntary work and level of education

The diagram shows the proportion of people who have worked voluntarily in the previous year, divided by level of education in three groups: up to and including secondary education, upper secondary education, and tertiary education.³⁹

Not only is it more people with high levels of education who participate in voluntary work, education is also the most important explanation as to why the proportion working voluntarily in Denmark, Norway and Sweden has been increasing since the 1990s. The greater proportion of the population that has a

34 Statistics Finland (2018); Rambøll (2017); Fladmoe, A., Sivesind, K.H. & Arnesen, D. (2018); Center for Frivilligt Socialt Arbejde (2018).

35 Ersta Sköndal Bräcke högskolas befolkningsundersökning 2019 (forthcoming).

36 Statistics and Research Åland (ÅSUB) (2018), p. 45.

37 Fladmoe, A., Sivesind, K.H. & Arnesen, D. (2018), p. 35.

38 Folkestad, B., Fladmoe, A., Sivesind, K.H. & Eimhjellen, I., (2017), p. 54/69; Hanifia, R. (2013), p. 38; Hrafnisdóttir, S., Jónsdóttir, G.A. & Kristmundsson, Ó.H. (2015), p. 425-442. For a more detailed description, see also Boje, T. (2017), p. 283.

39 The categories are based on ISCED11: Less than primary, primary and lower secondary education (levels 0-2), Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education (levels 3 and 4), Tertiary education (levels 5-8).

higher education qualification is also an underlying reason why, over time, it has become more common to engage in voluntary work.⁴⁰

Although there are still more people with a higher education qualification who work voluntarily, education seems to be becoming a less important explanation as to why people are working voluntarily (or not).⁴¹ The levelling out in the education area has been explained by a general increase in well-being and better opportunities for education, so people with less affluent socioeconomic backgrounds are also now working voluntarily. The trend may also have something to do with more organisations targeting these more socially vulnerable groups, something that creates more opportunities for them to participate.⁴² The organisations' need for people with higher education may also decrease when there are more volunteers.⁴³

Nevertheless, it is indisputable that voluntary work in the Nordic region involves many people in broad layers of the population.

There has been a certain overrepresentation of well-educated men aged 35-50 who have engaged in voluntary work. Certain studies suggest the differences are levelling out, but the results are not unanimous. Nevertheless, voluntary work has broad support, and involves a large proportion of the population in the Nordic region.

40 Qvist, H-P.Y., Folkestad, B., Fridberg, T. & Lundåsen, S.W. (2019), p. 90.

41 Ibid., p. 70.; Henriksen, L.S. & Levinsen, K. (2019), p. 240.

42 Henriksen, L.S. & Levinsen, K. (2019), p. 241.

43 Qvist, H-P.Y., Folkestad, B., Fridberg, T. & Lundåsen, S.W. (2019), p. 71.



The scout movement attracts many young people throughout the Nordic region. It is run by a large number of dedicated enthusiasts.

Photo: Scanpix.dk

Economic value of voluntary work

In Sweden, the estimated value of the voluntary work was SEK 131 billion in 2014. This corresponds to 3.3 percent of the GDP.⁴⁴ In Norway, the corresponding value of the voluntary work was NOK 75 billion in 2017.⁴⁵ In Denmark, the value of the voluntary unpaid work has been estimated at 2.7 percent of the total GDP (2013).⁴⁶ An illustration of how much this is in reality is that the contribution from voluntary work in Sweden has been estimated to be somewhat higher than that of retailing, which comprised 3.27 percent of the GDP. Since the proportion of volunteers is approximately the same in the other Nordic countries, the same figures probably apply there. The economic value of the work carried out by people without pay is considerable, and comprises an important contribution to added value in the Nordic societies.

In comparison, the value of the voluntary work was 1.7 percent of GDP in Canada and 1.5 percent of GDP in the UK. Several different studies show values of 2-5 percent in the US and 7-8 percent in Australia.⁴⁷ The explanation for the figures being so high in the US and Australia is probably linked to voluntary work comprising a greater proportion of the welfare sector there than in the Nordic region.

Voluntary work in the Nordic region creates substantial economic value. Estimations suggest an overall contribution of approximately three percent of GDP.

⁴⁴ Statistics Sweden, "Svenskarna arbetar ideellt för 131 miljarder" (2018).

⁴⁵ Nickelsen, E., "Frivillige utførte 142 000 årsverk" (2019).

⁴⁶ Boje, T. (2017), Ch. 4.

⁴⁷ Segnestam Larsson, O. & Wagndal, M., "Det frivilliga arbeidet i Sverige som del av BNP" (2018).



The Red Cross in Norway sets up a contingency tent in conjunction with the Covid-19 crisis.

Photo: Scanpix.dk

Structural changes

So far, we have seen that voluntary work is relatively stable at a high level in the Nordic region. At the same time, a development is taking place below the surface. The relationship between the organisations and the volunteers is changing. From the 1960s onwards, many traditional popular movement organisations have lost ground to other organisations, particularly in relation to sport and culture. However, it is also possible to see – especially recently – an increase in memberships in non-profit organisations that are engaged in issues such as the climate, animal protection, human rights and international development.

There are several differences between the traditional popular movement engagement and the 'new' organisations. One is that the new organisations often have a narrower focus. Another is that membership in these organisations is often passive, where the most important activity is often simply to pay the membership fee. In general, they are often looser in form compared with the traditional organisations. Another difference is that the new organisations are often more informal and have no ambition to be anything other than a local grouping. At the same time, the traditional organisations have undergone a change, and are now often run by a professional secretariat with salaried officials rather than through the unpaid work of members. It has also become more difficult to recruit volunteers to positions on boards of directors.⁴⁸

In certain respects, voluntary work is changing. In recent years, there has been an increase in membership in organisations with a narrower focus than the popular movement organisations. The membership is more often passive, and the organisations are often more loosely structured. They are usually little more than a local organisation. At the same time, the traditional organisations are now often run by a professional secretariat.

⁴⁸ This development has been examined in many different contexts, and from various perspectives. See Henriksen, L.S. et al. Andersen, R.F. & Dinesen, P.T., "Social Capital in the Scandinavian countries", in Nedergaard P. & Wivel A. (eds.), *Routledge Handbook on Scandinavian Politics* (2017); Boje, T., *Civilsamfund, medborgerskab og deltagelse*, (2017); Brandsen, T. et al., "The state and the reconstruction of civil society", in *International Review of Administrative Services* 2017 Vol 88 (4); Ekström, M. & Svenningsen, M., "Young people's experiences of political membership: from political parties to Facebook groups", in *Information, Communication & Society*, 22:2 (2017); Guldbrandsen, T. & Ødegård, G., *Frivillige organisasjoner i en ny tid – Utfordringer og endringsprosesser* (2011); Papakostas, A., "De medlemslösa organisationernas tidevarv", in Wijkström, F. (ed.), *Civilsamhället i samhällskontraktet* (2012);

In both Sweden and Norway, it is generally a smaller proportion of the population than previously that are members in an organisation (but not in Denmark), and those that are members are not members in as many organisations as previously. However, it should be emphasised that there are still many people who are members of at least one organisation, between 80 and 90 percent in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.⁴⁹

We also see a weaker link between voluntary work and membership of associations in Norway and Denmark, where the proportion of volunteers who are members of at least one organisation is decreasing. In Norway, the proportion was 88 percent in 1998, and had fallen to 77 percent in 2014. In Denmark, the proportion was 79 percent in 2004, fell to 70 percent in 2012, and continued to fall to 57 percent in 2017. In Sweden, the same decrease has not been observed, and membership is still strongly linked to voluntary work.

In Norway, volunteers tend to work for organisations for shorter periods, there is a big turnover of volunteers, and the link to the organisations is becoming weaker. In addition, volunteers spread their engagement over more organisations than previously.⁵⁰

Studies show that membership is the most important explanation for how much time people spend on voluntary work. People who are members of an organisation dedicate more time and are more committed to the organisation in the long term.⁵¹

In Denmark, a link is seen between the fall in the number of members and the amount of time the volunteers dedicate to their work – when fewer people are members of associations, they spend less time on voluntary work.⁵²

The reduction in the number of members, and the proportion who are members in the organisation they contribute to, illustrates that voluntary work now has a weaker connection to organisations. At the same time, in the Nordic region there is still an exceptionally large proportion of the population who are members in an organisation.

There are indications that voluntary work now has a weaker link to organisations.

Senter for forskning på sivilsamfunn og frivillig sektor, Norsk frivillighet. Utviklingstrender og samfunnseffekter (2017); Turunen, J. & Weinryb, N., "Organizing service delivery on social media platforms? Loosely organized networks, co-optation, and the welfare state", in Public Management Review (2019).

49 Selle, P., Strømsnes, K. & Svedberg, L., "The Scandinavian Organizational Landscape: Extensive and Different", in *Civic Engagement in Scandinavia – Volunteering, Informal Help and Giving in Denmark, Norway and Sweden* (2019), p. 54.

50 Ibid., p. 54. See also Rambøll (2017).

51 Qvist, H-P.Y., Folkestad, B., Fridberg, T. & Lundåsen, S.W. (2019), p. 91.

52 Center for Frivilligt Socialt Arbejde (2018), p. 9.



Church organisations conduct extensive fund-raising activities for humanitarian work around the Nordic region, often with the direct support of youth organisations.

Photo: Mikkel Østergaard

Conclusions

Voluntary work in the Nordic region has deep historical roots, and has served an important function in the Nordic societies. The positive message from the report is that, generally speaking, the picture is that voluntary work is still strong. The Nordic countries score highly in Europe in surveys of the proportion of the population working voluntarily – for some countries, and in some surveys, the figures approach 50-60 percent. Tendencies regarding the people who engage in voluntary work show a levelling out in terms age, level of education and gender – but not completely.

It can be argued that, in the Nordic region, it is not just an exceptionally high proportion of the population that dedicate time to voluntary work, it also involves many parts of society. This also creates significant added value. One aspect of this is purely economic, where the contribution can be said to be significant. The historical importance of voluntary work is probably even higher in the Nordic region in creating social trust and cohesion.

Important changes seem to be taking place below the surface. The relationship between voluntary work and membership in organisations has become weaker in the sense that the proportion of people who are members of the organisation for which they perform voluntary work is decreasing. Surveys also show that when fewer people are members of organisations, they spend less time on voluntary work – quite simply, they do not feel as committed as previously. Voluntary work has become more spontaneous, and is characterised by more specific engagement in limited issues. Often, this takes place in looser organisational forms rather than through the traditional organisations, which often have a link to the popular movements.

Membership is also shifting towards a more passive type, unlike the traditional active membership. There is also a tendency towards greater elitism, through the

Voluntary work in the Nordic region is still strong.

A significant proportion of the Nordic population devotes time to voluntary work. It creates considerable economic added value, and contributes to social trust and cohesion.

At the same time, voluntary work seems to be changing. Voluntary work has become more spontaneous, and is characterised by more specific issues. Often, it takes place in looser organisational forms. Membership has also become more passive.

professionalisation that many organisations are undergoing, and the link to the local community is weakened.⁵³ (There are also signs that this is reversing.)

While voluntary work in the Nordic region seems stable, it seems that beneath the surface there are signs of changes at a more structural level. These changes seem to have been taking place slowly for a long time. One researcher has described this as, if membership in the popular movements was the obvious format for organising the relationship between the individual and civil society during the 20th century, "the new-old structure of 'the volunteer' seems to be the increasingly popular way".⁵⁴

Voluntary work will probably continue to find new forms. This is natural and a reflection of changes in the society in which the organisations operate, for example demographically, socioeconomically, and culturally. The changing form of voluntary work is also a sign of adaptable and vibrant organisations, and that citizens are innovative in terms of finding new forms of taking societal responsibility and influencing the development of society. The broader palette of organisations we see today gives greater opportunities for citizens to find suitable forms and purposes for voluntary work, which makes it easier to become engaged; quite simply, there are more models through which to channel engagement.

However, this also brings some challenges. One important challenge regards the function of the traditional organisations in generating trust between people. Thanks to the voluntary organisations, a type of cohesive glue developed in society in the form of strong social norms regarding trust and respect that support and facilitate collaboration. The new type of voluntary organisations, like the development that can also be seen in the more traditional organisations, risk reducing the role that civil society had in generating cohesion in society.

Another challenge is that civil society organisations in a Nordic democracy model have created links between the individual, who is active in the local organisation, and the highest national political level. The popular engagement that is captured in voluntary work has offered an anchoring model for politics during the relatively long periods between general elections in the Nordic countries. The structural changes have also weakened the traditional channels for individuals, not least otherwise excluded groups, to exert influence over societal development.

In a wider perspective, the model has helped to tackle what can be described as democracy's central problem: how to preserve a sense of community despite the conflicts and how to find a balance between collaboration and struggle. Here, civil society has played a key role. The development increases the risk that citizens are now becoming passive subscribers to politics, rather than participants who help to shape it.

Social media offers an opportunity for interaction in ways that were not possible earlier in terms of the links between the individual and the decision-maker. Other innovative forms for recurring dialogue between politicians and citizens are also

Membership in organisations is becoming less important. Instead, voluntary work seems to be a new-old way to handle the relationship between individuals and organisations.

A broader range of organisations makes it easier for citizens to find suitable forms of voluntary work, i.e. more channels through which to channel engagement.

The possibilities for individuals to exert influence over societal development may be weakened by the changes. The same applies for politicians' chances of obtaining broad support for political reforms.

53 A research project has also been started, led by the School of Social Work at Lund University, focusing on European civil society elites.

54 Wijkström, F., "Filantroper, frivilliga och sociala entreprenörer. Nya civilsamhällesmedborgare i ett omförhandlat samhällskontrakt", in progress (2015).

possible – for example, France's President Macron has tried to create a forum for conducting discussions around the country.

But even if the channels between elected representatives and voters have increased, for example through social media, the development described in this report has generally been at the expense of lower representativity, lack of understanding for opposing views, and simplifications with unilateral focus, without the trade-offs and compromises between different stakeholders that are generated in collective contexts.

Structural changes should be reviewed, not least in terms of governance. One aspect is to try to avoid creating barriers for new organisations, for example in funding systems or being able to offer other types of relevant support. The regulatory frameworks can also be reviewed and simplified. Municipalities could also make it easier for civil society organisations by having one point of contact in the municipal organisation. Another important measure is to find new forms for arranging the meetings between decision-makers and other representatives of the political power and civil society.

However, the most important task is to ensure that politicians are aware of the development. This report began by drawing attention to the fundamental role of social trust for the Nordic societies, emphasising that it would probably not have been possible to build such societies without a high degree of trust. Trust, the 'Nordic gold', has also been necessary for how the Nordic countries have been able to successfully bring about change and reforms. In a weakened participant democracy, there is a risk that politics will find it more difficult to understand the will of the people in any depth, with the associated risk that new major societal reforms will be perceived as elite projects.

The development described here increases the risks that politics will find it harder to understand the will of the people, which creates a risk that societal reforms will be regarded as elite projects.

That risk concerns not least the climate issue, where a green transition must not be seen as a top-down project – it must also include civil society. Here too, the Nordic co-operation has a role to play. A renewed vision for the Nordic Council of Ministers states that the Nordic co-operation will be a more efficient instrument than before in the work to make the Nordic region the world's most sustainable and integrated region by 2030. This work must also include those people who work voluntarily around the Nordic region.

The Nordic Council of Ministers will ensure greater involvement of civil society in the work with our Vision 2030. The objective is to be an open, transparent and relevant organisation working towards civil society. A close and strong partnership with civil society organisations is a strength that can enrich the work of the Nordic Council of Ministers, while also creating greater engagement for the Nordic co-operation.

Civil society is an especially important arena for children and young people. Consequently, the Nordic Council of Ministers must continue to support the various forms of organisation and participation of children and young people in the Nordic region. An example is the Norden 0-30 programme, which supports project and network activities by, with and for children and young people (up to the age of 30), enabling them to meet and participate in cultural, political and social activities. Plans are now advanced, through an increased budget for the programme to ensure that it reaches more children and young people.

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Voluntary Work in the Nordic Region – Societal Cohesion in a New Era

Truls Stende, Ulf Andreasson and Andrea Skjold Frøshaug

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This report relates to Vision 2030 by examining in depth one important aspect of social sustainability in the Nordic region - the role of civil society. The report links voluntary work to opportunities to bring about major societal reforms, not least in the climate field.

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