

Stockholm Resilience Centre Insight Paper #1

November 2020



Nordic food system transformation series

Summary

This first installment of the Nordic food system transformation series introduces the project *Towards sustainable Nordic food systems*. The project aims to bring together policymakers and food system actors to explore ‘what’s next’ when it comes to sustainable Nordic food systems. This Insight Paper explores the motivation for the project and details the process used to gain insights from stakeholders across the Nordic region regarding next steps in Nordic food system transformation.

Key insights

- There was overwhelming agreement from participating stakeholders that **Nordic food systems need to change** to deliver on a range of sustainability goals.
- While there was great enthusiasm for food system change, **the paths forward are unclear**, and more work is needed to identify the most impactful pathways forward.
- There will be many **trade-offs to address and barriers to dismantle** along the way, but the Nordics have strong foundations in place to overcome these challenges.
- **We’re better together** – most project participants (88 %) support Nordic collaboration on food system challenges.

Towards sustainable Nordic food systems – project overview

Setting the scene – why focus on food systems

The sustainability of food systems is a rising priority on local, national and international agendas. This increased attention has been prompted by a growing body of evidence that demonstrates just how damaging our current food systems are to human health, wellbeing and the environment. The COVID-19 pandemic – which changed our day-to-day lives just after the stakeholder dialogues for this project were complete – has also highlighted many vulnerabilities within food systems and underscored the necessity of building sustainable and resilient food systems.

At the same time, citizens, decision-makers, businesses, producers, researchers and others are realising the extraordinary potential of food to address the multitude of crises we now face. Food is central to generating solutions to the sustainable development challenge.

What is a sustainable food system?

In this project, participants were asked to take a holistic view of sustainability. While the environment often comes to mind first when you hear ‘sustainability’, there is much more to it. The three accepted pillars of sustainability include environmental, social and economic sustainability. This means that everything from healthy people and thriving communities (social sustainability), prosperous societies and secure incomes (economic sustainability) and healthy soil, seas and air (environmental sustainability) is included in our conception of sustainability.

Across the Nordic region, individuals and organisations are galvanising around sustainable food. The five Nordic Prime Ministers have recognised the potential of food to progress their [Generation 2030](#) program, naming food as a thematic area of its [Nordic Solutions to Global Challenges](#) initiative. National food authorities – along with other public sector authorities – are increasingly providing [advice](#) on [sustainable diets](#). Mayors of several Nordic capitals have pledged to

ensure that all public kitchens are equipped to serve ‘[planetary health meals](#)’ in service of people and planet. Municipalities, citizens, chefs, farmers and young people are building bottom-up efforts to create sustainable food systems.

These individuals and organisations are building upon the already solid foundations of Nordic food systems. The region benefits from plentiful and safe food supplies, and all Nordic countries have evidence-based dietary guidelines that promote a healthy diet. In addition, Nordic countries are seen as leaders in animal welfare, and Nordic production is considered among the most resource-efficient in the world.

Despite this progress, unhealthy diets are still a [leading risk factor](#) for poor health across the region. These diets are also a driver of [environmental pressure](#) felt both at home and abroad. Tensions between social, environmental and economic goals are apparent in our current food systems, yet trade-offs have not been systematically assessed. Recently, the coronavirus pandemic has exposed existing [vulnerabilities](#) in our food system related to migrant labour, high consumption of unhealthy or animal-based foods and increasing distances between consumers and producers.

These challenges highlight that there is still room for improvement if we want our food systems to deliver on the region’s commitments to sustainability. These commitments include the [Nordic Vision](#) and the [Generation 2030](#) Program of the Nordic Council of Ministers, the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) and the [Paris Climate Agreement](#). With less than ten years to achieve the ambitions of the SDGs, it is essential to find cross-cutting solutions to these many challenges. Food has come to the fore as a solution that we not only can but must pursue.

Despite enthusiasm to transform food systems, the paths forward remain unclear. There is no blueprint for specific actions or long-term roadmaps that can help us reach a sustainable food future. This project, *Towards sustainable Nordic food systems*, brings together policymakers and food system actors to explore ‘what’s next’ when it comes to sustainable Nordic food systems.

Project design

This project contributes to the [Generation 2030](#) program of the Nordic Council of Ministers, which focuses on how Nordic cooperation can address the SDGs. The guiding goal of this project was to contribute to the understanding of strategies to promote sustainable food systems (in the Nordics and globally) through stakeholder dialogue, knowledge sharing and consensus-building, thereby producing co-benefits across the SDGs. The specific objectives of the project were to:

1. Secure agreement on the scientific evidence underpinning food system change and the need to change Nordic food systems
2. Build coalitions of actors supporting food system change
3. Map blockages and barriers within food systems that need to be addressed
4. Deliver policy guidance on interventions and tools for use in the Nordics

This project ran in three phases:

1. *Outreach to food system actors* – Discussions among researchers and food system stakeholders were held across the Nordics. The goal was to share the latest research on Nordic food systems with stakeholders, and also to hear the concerns, questions and plans that stakeholders had regarding sustainable Nordic food systems.
2. *Multi-stakeholder dialogues* – A full-day dialogue was held in each Nordic country. The dialogues brought together policymakers, business representatives, civil society, researchers, producer organisations, consumer representatives, funders, youth organisations and more to discuss the benefits, trade-offs, uncertainties and barriers to food system change here in the Nordic region. The rest of this Insight Paper explores these dialogues in more detail.
3. *Dialogue and dissemination with key stakeholders* – In the final phase of this project, the findings from the dialogues were shared with all those who participated in the multi-stakeholder dialogues. Next steps in Nordic food system transformation were also discussed.

Nordic food system transformation dialogues

At a glance: the Nordic food system transformation dialogues

- **What?** A discussion about how changes to our food systems in each of the five Nordic countries would impact social, environmental and economic sustainability in the Nordic region and globally.
- **Why?** Nordic food system transformation is essential if we want to support healthy people and thriving societies on a healthy planet
- **Who?** Across the five Nordic countries, a total of 115 actors representing 86 organisations participated. These participants represented various parts of the food system
- **When?** One full-day dialogue was held in each Nordic country between October 2019 and January 2020

A full-day, multi-stakeholder dialogue was held in each Nordic country during late 2019 and early 2020. Table 1 provides an overview of each national dialogue.



Picture 1. Dialogue participants discuss future food system scenarios in small groups.

	Date	Location	Number of participants/ organisations	Partners in co-developing
Denmark	8 November 2019	Nordic Council of Ministers, Copenhagen	21/15	– Madkulturen – Nordic Food Policy Lab
Finland	26 November 2019	Kulttuuritalo, Helsinki	23/18	– Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
Iceland	19 November 2019	Matis offices, Reykjavík	22/15	– Matis
Norway	10 January 2020	Forskningsrådet, Oslo	27/22	– Forskningsrådet – EAT – Norwegian Institute of Public Health
Sweden	24 October 2019	Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm	22/16	– Livsmedelsverket – Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

Table 1. Overview of the five Nordic food system transformation dialogues.

Each dialogue brought together a mix of food system actors to discuss four food system scenarios that could move Nordic food systems in a more sustainable direction:

- 1) A reduction in red meat consumption
- 2) Increased consumption of nuts and legumes
- 3) A move to more local (national or Nordic) food systems
- 4) Fully integrating into a global food system

Scenarios were chosen that would resonate across the Nordics. While some issues were more or less relevant to countries, the debate at the heart of each scenario was echoed in all Nordic countries. The scenarios chosen were also informed by the growing body of research on sustainable food systems.

The purpose of the dialogues was to consider the benefits, trade-offs, uncertainties and barriers related to each of the four scenarios.

As mentioned, the dialogues took place before the time of COVID-19. While the four scenarios are still relevant to the discussion on sustainable Nordic food systems, there would undoubtedly be additional benefits, trade-offs, uncertainties and barriers identified for each scenario.

How was the discussion designed and facilitated?

A consistent format was used across countries to structure the dialogues. First, the lead researcher presented an overview of Nordic food system challenges and opportunities, and then introduced the four food system scenarios. The participants were divided into smaller groups of 4–6 people representing different parts of the food system. A professional facilitator then led these small groups through an exercise to explore the benefits, trade-offs, uncertainties and barriers to each food system scenario. Participants were asked to think about each scenario in a national, rather than Nordic context. In this way, the similarities and differences between countries could be explored in more detail.

Participants were encouraged to discuss what implications these food system scenarios would have across economic, health, environmental, production and social systems. To facilitate this, the idea of a ‘food system approach’ was introduced. This type of systems-thinking approach acknowledges the connections, interactions and feedbacks between the many different aspects of food systems. This includes, for example, the linkage between what we eat and environmental sustainability, health outcomes, and resilience. A grid (Picture 2) was developed to help participants adopt ‘systems-thinking’.

Participants had approximately 45 minutes to discuss each scenario and fill out the grid. At the end of the day, each group was asked to share their reflections on what they thought was missing from the discussions (e.g. certain participants or topics) and the ‘hottest’ discussions of the day where people had conflicting points of view.

After the dialogues were completed in each country, the research team conducted a rapid analysis of findings and sent a summary to participants. One summary was made for each country.



Picture 2. An example of the grid used to guide discussions on each of the four scenarios. For each scenario, participants discussed the trade-offs, co-benefits, uncertainties and barriers (listed in the rows of the grid). They considered the impacts across different parts of the food system (listed in the columns of the grid).

Who was there?

Each dialogue invited policymakers, business representatives, civil society, researchers, producer organisations, consumer representatives, funders, and youth organisations to jointly discuss potential food system shifts. Each dialogue included 20–30 participants representing between 15–22 different organisations related to that country’s food system. In total, 115 individuals representing 86 different organisations participated across all Nordic dialogues.

While a broad coalition of actors was brought together in these dialogues, not all food system actors were well-represented. In particular, participants at the dialogue identified the voices of the following individuals and groups as largely ‘missing’ or underrepresented in the dialogues: Farmers, food businesses (rather than associations), retailers, consumers, policymakers, innovation actors, marine and seafood sector representatives, young people, indigenous groups, immigrants, men and opponents to food system change.

What insights did dialogue participants share?

Nordic food systems need to change...

At the start of the dialogue, participants answered a rapid survey. This survey revealed that 88 % of dialogue participants agreed that their country's food system needed to change if their country is to reach its sustainability (health, social, environmental, economic) goals.

...But the path forward is unclear and contested

Despite the initial consensus, participants expressed the uncertainty of the next steps. Half (49 %) disagreed that the actions that could improve the sustainability of their country's food system are clear. In comparison, almost one-third (31 %) were unsure, and 20 % thought the actions were clear.

Further, our analysis highlighted that many food system shifts are contentious. For each of the four scenarios discussed, arguments in favour and in opposition were highlighted.

There will be many trade-offs to address and barriers to dismantle along the way

Participants' responses on the grids illustrated that change in the design and function of our food systems might benefit some and disadvantage others. For example, shifts towards plant-based diets might advantage entrepreneurs developing new food products to meet this demand while disadvantaging livestock producers with few resources to shift towards plant-based production. Participants' responses also highlight that the food system scenarios progress specific goals while working against others. For example, achieving the goal of lower energy intake in our diets might accomplish a reduction in health-care expenses and improve health outcomes while at the same time lowering revenues of food companies.

Responses also illustrated that there are social, political, economic, environmental and nutritional barriers to change. To date, an open discussion on trade-offs and barriers of food system change has been lacking, creating a 'gridlock' where issues are ignored because they seem too sensitive or complex. This lack of recognition prevents us from finding and pulling on the most powerful levers of change in our food system.

The responses also provided insights into how the Nordics can use their strong social, institutional and economic foundations to overcome barriers to change. The Nordics can, for example, build upon the Nordic Nutrition Recommendations for sustainable eating guidance, fund innovation in the development of new products or business opportunities, or use the education system as an avenue for experimentation with sustainable eating.

We're better together – support for Nordic collaboration on food challenges

Over the course of each country dialogue, the differences between the Nordic countries and distinct issues related to each national food system were discussed. At the same time, many common challenges were identified that could lay the foundation for a common Nordic agenda on food systems.

Almost all (88%) of participants thought it best (or mostly agreed) that the Nordic countries work together to improve food systems, while only 10% agreed a little, 2% answered that they weren't sure and no one disagreed.

The second Insight Paper of the Nordic food system transformation series explores eight tangible opportunities for Nordic collaboration to tackle shared food system challenges.

About this Series

The Stockholm Resilience Centre will release a multi-part series of Insight Papers related to Nordic food system transformation dialogues. Each Insight Paper focuses on a central theme or finding that emerged from the dialogues. All Insight Papers can be found on the Stockholm Resilience website: www.stockholmresilience.org.

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