



Young people not thriving in rural areas

Despite relatively high standards of living, several indicators show that large groups of young people in the Nordic countries are not thriving. In addition, regional variations in the situation of young people across the Nordic countries are striking. Some attempts have been made to map the unhappiness among young people in the Nordic region. But so far, none have focused on regional variations within national boundaries or have taken the comparative Nordic perspective you will find in this policy brief.

> In the project, *Rural perspectives on spatial disparities of education and employment outcomes*, we focus on youth in rural areas of the Nordic region who are marginalised in terms of labour market participation, training

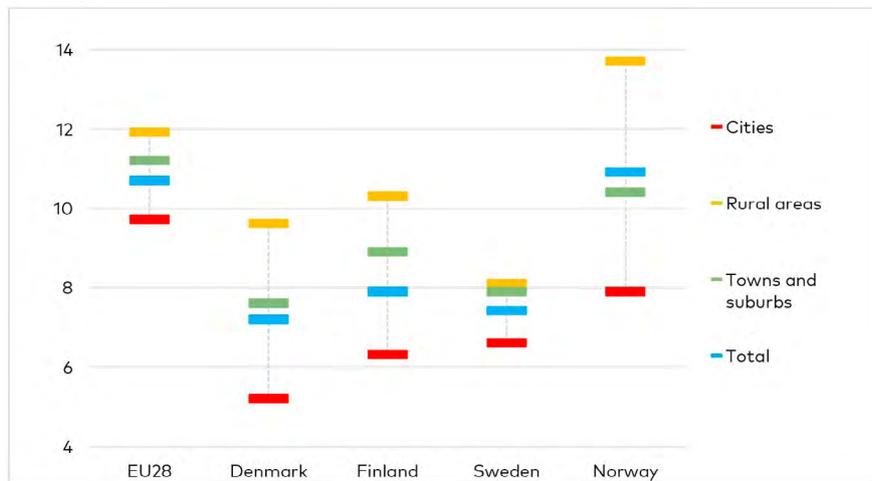
and education. The findings suggest that the living conditions that mainly influence displacement among young people are poor physical health, poor mental health, lack of income opportunities, unemployment and limited social contact.

Young people who are Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEETs) have existed for decades, and this group is in danger of social marginalisation. In the Nordic countries, many policy interventions have addressed and supported this group. There are local, regional and national projects to bring this group of young people into education and employment. So what actions have proven useful in re-engaging young people in rural parts of the Nordic region? When we compare some of the Nordic countries' key policies and their effects - as we are doing in the project (see

more in the upcoming report) - we are better equipped to understand the potential links between measures, interventions and outcomes in spatial terms.

REGIONAL VARIATIONS: THE YOUTH IN VULNERABLE AREAS

Early school leavers for the most part reside in rural areas. How come? Are there any demotivating factors? Is an abundance of work available for youths? Are specialised skills not in demand?

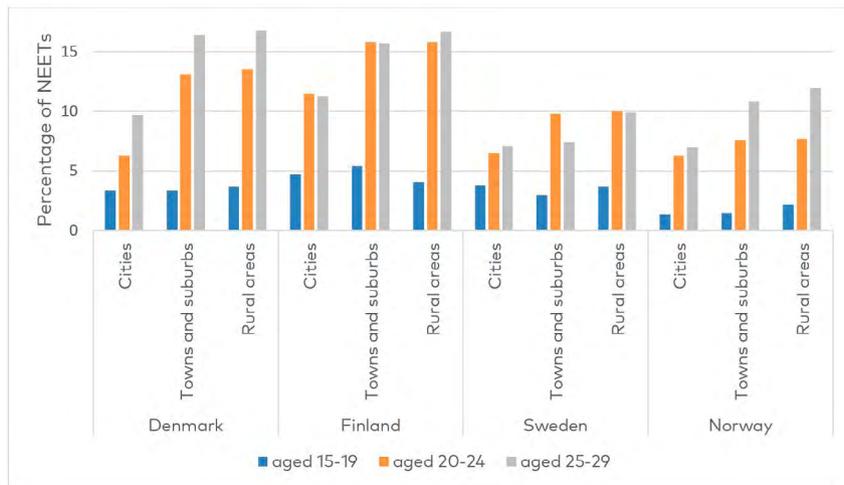


Cities: densely populated areas (at least 50% of the population live in urban centres).

Towns and suburbs: intermediate density areas (less than 50% of the population live in rural grid cells and less than 50% live in urban centres).

Rural areas: thinly populated areas (more than 50% of the population live in rural grid cells).

Percentage of early leavers of education and training by degree of urbanisation, 2016. Data source: Eurostat



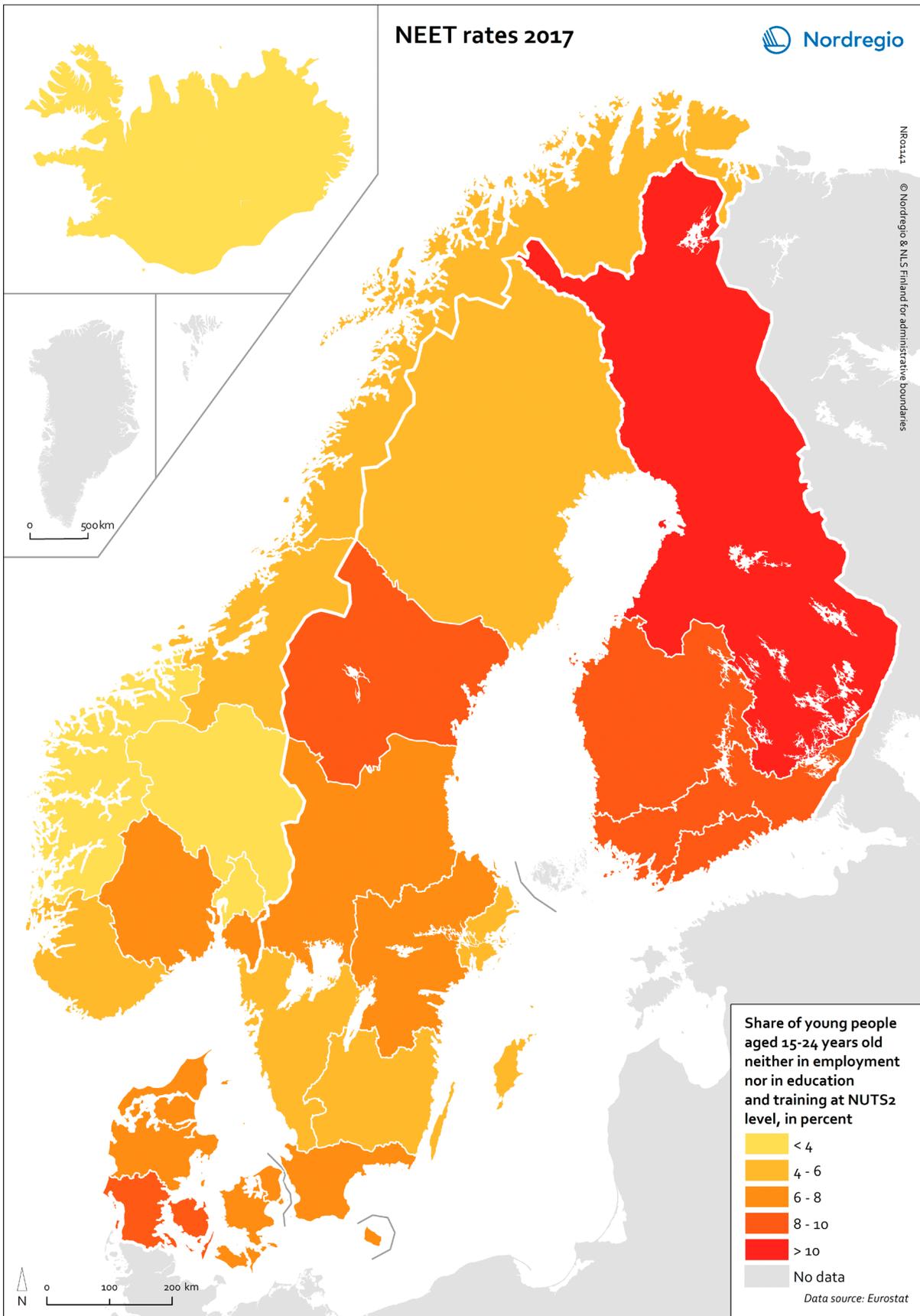
NEET rates by age and degree of urbanisation in Nordic countries, 2017. Data source: Eurostat

Eurostat's definition of NEETs: "the percentage of the population of a given age group and sex who is not employed and not involved in further education or training".

NEET rates tend to remain low for the 15–19 age group (see the figure on the left). This is because most of this population is still enrolled in education.

However, NEET rates increase steadily for every age group, so that those aged 25–29 years are the most affected.

Moreover, the percentage of NEETs is higher in rural areas than in cities.



NEET rates in Nordic countries, 2017

CASES OF NORDIC SUCCESS

Iceland: Fab Lab

The island of **Vestmannaeyjar**, lies to the south of Iceland (population 4,290). A Fab Lab was established in 2008, and it has proven to be an important space in which to re-engage young people by enhancing their education and providing social benefits.

“ The main achievement in these ten years has been to change the mindset of people towards raising self-esteem in the sense that they can learn, do, and be anything they want.

FROSTI GÍSLASON

This is an important aspect of re-engaging young people because of the transmission of both hard and soft skills required for the future. These are key skills to acquire, not least for those in a rural area connecting to the world while receiving training in innovation.

Faroe Islands: Fab Lab

Jóannes Djurhus teaches students with special needs at the high school and trade vocational school in Kambisdal, **Fuglafjörður** in Faroe Islands. The ability and engagement of supervisors are vital, and Jóannes is inspiring and generous with his knowledge of many

ABOUT FAB LAB

Fab Lab is the abbreviation of Fabrication Laboratories, an initiative pushed forward by MIT's Center for Bits and Atoms (CBA).

Fab Labs provide open and free digital technologies to everyone who wishes to engage with the creation of artifacts ready to solve commercial and personal necessities. This implies that Fab Labs are open to both businesses and the public, and often experts and amateurs meet and work with each other on the process.

Many laboratories have been setup around the world, from which at least 22 are in the Nordic region (<https://www.fablabs.io/labs/map>).

skills from previous work experience. This is important in mentoring the students to spur their creativity and teach them skills. The Fab Lab services the students when they need assistance with a feasible idea. Students have worked on all kinds of projects, such as posters: one is for an upcoming concert in town and another is an advertising banner for a local company that makes salmon cakes.

Fab Labs are very good for regional innovation and for teaching necessary skills for the 21st century. The supervisors at the Lab teach students design and ways to work in international teams.

Artwork by Fab Lab students for the local film festival in Fuglafjörður, Faroe Islands / Anna Karlsdóttir



FOUR APPROACHES TO RE-ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE

■ **Creative approach:** Fab Labs provide widespread access to modern methods of invention. As highlighted by the case of Vestmannaeyjar, the pedagogical model deployed at Fab Labs has proven to be an effective way for young people to develop their non-academic skills. With the opportunity to design, build and implement their projects, students at Fab Labs engage in creative learning experiences.

■ **Activating approach:** Læreplass-Guarantee, a local regional initiative, acts to reduce the high rates of drop-out and youth unemployment in Trysil. Similar initiatives in Iceland and Sweden include Menntun núna in Northwest Iceland and Biegganjunáðat in Sápmi.

■ **Caring approach:** Deterioration of the mental health of marginalised young people is a consequence of their situations. Exclusion from education or the labour market undermines self-esteem, self-confidence and motivation. In addition, it may increase drug abuse. As a response, some Finnish municipalities have focused on providing psychological support to the target group. Similar initiatives in Sweden include Ung i Gävleborg and Rampa at Svefi, Haparanda.

■ **Empowering approach:** The promotion of vocational education in rural areas, such as Sjælland in Denmark, has been a cornerstone of methods to re-engage marginalised youth. Providing youths with the skills required for the local labour market has increased their employability.

Nordplus logo designed by Fab Lab won the local competition in the Farore Islands / Anna Karlsdóttir



Finland: New Power and TOPIKS

The municipalities of **Äänekoski, Konnevesi, and Laukaa**, jointly with their employment services, developed the **"New Power"** project (Uutta Virtaa in Finnish) to re-engage excluded young people with educational activities or the labour market. They created a service chain between employment services and local governments to facilitate the flow of information between the actors involved in the process of rehabilitating young people. Participants' strengths were assessed through several face-to-face meetings to get to know them. One key aspect of the project was to take an informal approach with participants, which was based on the slogan:

"We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak".

This approach has proved successful as an effective way to help participants, and it has produced a snowball effect so that other excluded youngsters could join the project.

The public employment and social services of **Mikkeli** combined efforts to develop **TOPIKS**; a project designed to re-engage young people without formal qualifications through vocational education workshops. The project manager emphasised that the most common causes for dropping out of school related to low-income households, substance abuse or mental illness suffered by the target group. To help young people out of such scenarios, the project paid close attention to their well-being.

"We spent time with them, discussing their development. This is a powerful method, because that way, we let them explain their situation to us without pushing them" - she said.

The success of the project relied on two factors. First, the project leaders were willing to give enough time to the participants for them to find the best path for themselves. Second, the interest shown by project leaders in the participants' situations helped the young people realise their potential, thus achieving their goals more easily.

Denmark: SUME and Educational track to work

The **SUME project** has two aims; to increase the number of unemployed young people enrolling in vocational education and to help them find the right subject to study. The project builds on the assumption that vocational education can serve as an effective path to the labour market for unqualified youngsters who face harsh conditions at home, such as economic deprivation or substance abuse.

Educational track to work grew out of need in **Region Sjælland, Denmark**. This region has the highest proportion of youth on social transfers in the country and local companies report mismatch problems and failed recruitment (the skills of local human capital do not meet the needs of the firms). Odsherred, Lolland, Vordingborg, Kalundborg, Faxe, Guldborgssund and Slagelse are examples of places with high proportions of low-skilled people in the population. The negative effects of a mismatch in production potential were widely felt in the region. The strengths of the project are that it co-ordinates all the different partners in vocational education/training and the labour market that need to be engaged for a scheme like Uddannelsesvejen til vækst to work. Emphasis is laid on matching the needs of apprentices (who are mobilised by remuneration), companies that are remunerated by the municipality if they take on a trainee, and contacts enabled through the Coalition of Trade Unions (Fælles Fagligt Forbund) so that networks can be secured and expanded. A needs analysis has been conducted among 1000 companies located in the region. The project has received support from the European Social Fund since 2016 and is likely to continue in 2019. One of the aims of raising educational levels and contributing to a thriving and dynamic business life is to influence companies to think of education as a strategy and an intrinsic part of their plans. On a broader level, education and lifelong learning are sustainability markers benefitting both youth and local companies.



Questions for the live-long learning used in the programme "Educational track to work", Denmark



Trainees at the programme "Educational track to work", Denmark / Marie Bjørg Nordlund, project manager Region Sjaelland.



Norway: Training guarantee initiative

A **youth and vocational training guarantee** was initiated as a pilot in **Trysil, Norway**. The youth unemployment rate in Trysil is almost double the national average (21% vs. 11%). Moreover, the educational level of inhabitants is lower than the Norwegian average.

Trysil municipality was the first in Norway to initiate a youth guarantee for young people seeking vocational training. It entails co-operation with local companies that take on apprentices. Both the participating work places and the students are remunerated. Co-operation with the municipality is based on a set of requirements that have proven to work well. So far, the municipality and the companies have offered apprenticeships in 25 different vocations.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO COUNT ON THRIVING AND FUNCTIONING YOUTH IN YOUR REGION?

Many rural regions are experiencing unfavourable demographic development trends, an ageing population, outmigration of youth and a less diversified labour market. For some of the more sparsely populated areas, there is increased pressure on the welfare system, increasing demand for social services, amalgamations of municipalities and fewer school-age children, which has led to school closures.

For example, in the case of Finland, during the period 2000–2016, the number of schools in rural municipalities decreased by 50%. In Sweden, a similar trend in the same period was observed. The number of schools in rural municipalities fell by 20%. The same pattern emerges in Norway, where the number of schools in rural regions has decreased by 12%. According to research, the consequences of school closure in rural areas are a loss of social capital and local identity, as schools "bring local people together". Moreover, barriers to the education of young people

“ In the case of **Finland**, the EC's Employment Committee (2018) acknowledges the **"strong focus on personalized guidance"**. In the case of **Sweden**, NEETs continue to represent a problematic issue given that **"outreach to potential and unregistered NEETs continues to be a difficult task"**. Finally, in **Denmark**, the Commission recognizes **the need to enhance young people's skills and to improve the situation for NEETs.**

EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2018

increase, because they need to find schools in other municipalities. Therefore, school closure in rural areas can translate into fewer opportunities for young people in terms of both work and education.

All of these outcomes are contrary to future prospects. The regions with the highest potential and future prospects in terms of social cohesion and economic performance in the future are those with a high proportion of educated youth. ●

RECOMMENDATIONS

We have highlighted examples of four useful approaches to enable young people to become active citizens again. Re-engaging young people who have been left behind may be crucial for securing prosperity and future human resources in a region in population decline. Inclusion and social cohesion are also important elements in democratic societies and communities.

- Each region needs to consider carefully which approach fits its local and regional context. As a point of departure, reasons for inactivity need to be addressed by the actions taken (mental, abuse-related, disability of other types, low self-esteem, socio-economic or cultural reasons).
- Co-operation between government authorities and labour market partners is crucial to secure recruitment and to understand the engagement of youth in training.
- Local variants of youth guarantees tailored to regional or municipal needs for facilitating training of young people in vocations in demand are important.
- Collecting information (statistical and qualitative) on youths' situations and requirements in sparsely populated areas will enable further targeted actions.
- Creating communication channels between marginalised youth groups and public authorities (supported by infrastructure) is important.
- In the reforms for including young people who have been left out, it is important to maintain or focus on personal guidance.
- Engaged and inspiring teachers and supervisors are key to a prosperous path of re-engagement for young people.

ABOUT THIS POLICY BRIEF

This report is part of a broader project, [Rural perspectives on spatial disparities of education and employment outcomes](#).

Overall, the Nordic countries perform well on education relative to European and wider international contexts. Despite this, there remains alarming regional variation in the rates of young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs).

This project seeks to understand better the spatial and cultural dimension of this problem from a rural perspective, including urban/rural variations, variations between countries and differences between rural areas (e.g., north/south, sparsely populated/remote/urban adjacent).

Furthermore, the project explores the key policy differences between countries along with potential links between these and outcomes for young people. Finally, we will highlight examples of effective/innovative practices that can be found in the Nordic countries and autonomous regions.

See the full Nordregio Report in December 2018.

Research contacts

Anna Karlsdóttir
Senior Research Fellow
Phone: +46 735464872
anna.karlsdottir@nordregio.org

Alex Cuadrado
Research Assistant
alex.cuadrado@nordregio.org

Photos:

Front page: unsplash.com

ISSN 2001-3876
URL: doi.org/10.30689/PB2018:5.2001-3876
www.nordregio.org