



COMMON WASTE SORTING SYMBOLS IN NORDIC COUNTRIES

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Introduction



Examples of pictograms

Until recently, communication on waste sorting and treatment differed from country to country, and often from municipality to municipality in the Nordic countries. Now there is a Nordic joint system for labeling of waste sorting!

In 2017, Dansk Affaldsforening (the Danish waste association) launched a national pictogram system (terminology, symbols and colors), which is currently used by 90 municipalities (92 %) in Denmark, a large number of companies and on more and more packaging. In 2020 Avfall Norge (the Norwegian waste association), Avfall Sverige (the Swedish waste association) and Samband (the Association of Local Authorities on Iceland) launched the same system in each country. KIVO (the Finnish waste association) are working on implementing the system in Finland¹. The same symbols can be found at recycling centers, recycling stations and residential refuse bins, but also on packaging, especially important for products sold throughout the Nordic region. This way, there will be a visual link between the package and the waste bin.

Using the same waste symbols, citizens in these countries can receive the same communication on waste sorting, making it easier for all citizens to sort their waste correctly and thereby contributing to an increase in material recycling. Some national adaptations of the symbols have been made to meet dissimilarities in national legislation.

The pictogram system consists of three units; symbol, color and fraction name. Anybody is welcome to use the waste symbols free of charge. The municipalities introduce it if and when they want, in the pace they want and they use the number of pictograms they think is necessary – in total there are approximately 100 pictograms all together to choose from. It reminds of a lego-brick system, which means you combine the pictograms to suit the local requirements. This ensures a flexibility in the system.

To aid the users, the project partners provide user manuals and guidelines in their respective languages.

1. These five organizations are hereafter referred to as the project partners. LOOP has been a project partner to Avfall Norge. In Norway,

The Project

To investigate if the Danish pictogram system was relevant to introduce to the other Nordic countries, a project was formed by the project partners, with co-funding from the Nordic Council of Ministers. The project was carried out between August 2020 – August 2021, but the work started before that in all the Nordic countries and will continue well after. The project partners formed a project group, for which Anna-Carin Gripwall, Avfall Sverige, has been the project leader.

The project is a particularly good example of co-operation on a Nordic level as well as of how the public and private can work together to contribute to the circular transition that our societies need and to how waste can be sorted and disposed of in an environmentally sustainable way. Through the collaboration, we conclude that there is a great potential to develop the dialogue concerning design of packaging so that these are made more durable and recyclable, not least those made of plastic. The aim of the project is to make it easier for everyone, from consumers to producers to support the proper sorting and recycling of waste in the Nordic region.

The project has also included developing a Nordic legal platform for the development and dissemination of the pictogram system in the respective countries. Clear rules for all parties (municipalities, producers and other companies, organizations, etc.) are required, for future use, development and ownership of the common pictogram system. Therefore, an investigation of the legal conditions was conducted in the project.

Results

Developed source separation and a sustainable waste management is a long-term commitment and it is still too early to evaluate what effects the introduction of the system has had in the Nordic region, since the project still is in an early phase of introduction in the respective countries. Experiences from other project show that stringent communication results in more waste being sorted and higher quality of separated waste fractions.

Sub-goal – Introduction of a Nordic forum for the development and dissemination of the pictogram system to all interested Nordic countries or partner countries

The pictogram system has now been launched in four of the five Nordic countries (Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden). KIVO in Finland, plans to start implementing the system in 2022. All four countries have published user manuals and user guides in the same manner, to support users as an introduction to the system.

A common website is under construction, as a forum with general information about the system. From this site there are links to sites directly to the respective national organizations, which are members of the association. Furthermore, as soon as the association is formed, the association will employ a person who will work to provide support in terms of answering questions, posting information on the website etc.

Sub-goal – A major impact on waste labeling on packaging and products in companies at national level and on the Nordic market

Meetings and presentations have been held by all project partners, with and for municipalities, producers, community stakeholders such as members of parliament and government officials to spread and anchor the system. Overall, the system has been very well received.

Dialogue and meetings have been held with for example food and grocery trade companies, the packaging industry and housing companies and many more, to show the possibilities and advantages of using a joint Nordic label system for waste sorting. The discussions with these parties will continue an increasing number of stakeholders have shown great interest in the system, for applying and communicating it on their products and in dialogue with their customers.

Sub-goal – a legal platform

An important and fundamental part of the project and the continued work is to establish clear rules for all interested parties (municipalities, producers and other companies, organizations, etc.) and to establish a legal platform which will enable the participating countries to administer, develop and otherwise manage the common system. One of the goals of the project has been to establish a long-term cooperation between at least three of the participating Nordic countries. Before deciding on establishing this legal platform, an investigation of legal conditions for ownership and use of the system, with possible national adaptations, has been conducted by a Danish law firm. Two proposals have been examined; an Association and a Collaboration Agreement. Dansk Affaldsforening, Samband, Kivo and Avfall Sverige have agreed to establish a joint association to support the implementation and the continued development of the system. Avfall Norge has chosen not to be a part of this association and has instead chosen to focus on national adaptations of the system in consultation with several national stakeholders.

Introduction of the system in each of the Nordic countries



Example of how citizens can sort their waste. Photo: Vand og Affald

The project partners in all of the Nordic countries have conducted a thorough process, investigated the interest and opinion of the different stakeholders, before starting the implementation. The preparatory work has included mapping of the existing pictogram system in the Nordic countries. Even though our countries have quite similar systems in place, it is important to understand the differences between the waste management systems in each country.

All Nordic project partners in our countries have actively promoted the system through meetings with key stakeholders, presentations at conferences and seminars, press, a dedicated Instagram account etc. All countries have or will produce user manuals for their respective country and provide the symbols free for download on a website².

To facilitate the use of the pictogram system it is important that the system is free to use, voluntary and very open to the pace at which municipalities and companies will choose to implement the system. Since it is freely available, it is hard to know exactly how many companies and producers that have implemented the system.

2. <https://danskaffaldsforening.dk/faelles-piktogramsystem>
<https://loop.no/prosjekt/merkeordningen/>
<https://www.samband.is/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/fenur-endurvinnslumerkia4-loka-27-nov-2020.pdf>
<https://www.sverigesorterar.se>



Example of pictogram on packaging.

Photo: Ritzau/Scanpix

Denmark

The first pictograms were developed in Denmark in 2016, by Dansk Affaldsforening in co-operation with KL, with additional pictograms developed in 2017 and 2018. During the whole development processes, thorough stakeholder involvement was conducted, thus paving the way for early commitment by many municipalities, companies, producers, events. etc. prior to the launching of the pictograms. Since 2018, the number of users has continuously increased. Today, 90 out of 98 municipalities have implemented the pictogram system. By law, the last municipalities will be obliged to implement the pictograms by 2023.

More than 200 additional users, such as manufacturers, festivals and public events, universities, museums and cultural institutions, railway services and public transportation, hospitals as well as commercial waste companies and providers of waste collection systems, are using the pictogram system in Denmark. Also several food and packaging producers, supermarkets and retailers are using the pictograms, including Dagrofa, Salling Group, Orkla, Danish Crown, Smurfit Kappa and many more.

Examples and links:

[instagram.com/dansk_affaldsforening/](https://www.instagram.com/dansk_affaldsforening/)
danskaffaldsforening.dk/faelles-piktogramsystem
dagrofa.dk/om-dagrofa/csr/affaldssortering/

Dansk Affaldsforening's web site and user manual:

danskaffaldsforening.dk
affaldspiktogrammer.dk

Finland

In Finland, the preparations for the development of a national pictogram system started in 2020 by KIVO. So far, the system has been introduced to many key stakeholders and a lot of background information has been gathered prior to the development work with stakeholders. The development work will start in the fall of 2021. The work has raised a lot of interest among stakeholders.

Background work on a national level has included mapping of existing terminology and labelling systems used in the local municipal waste companies, which has made it possible to identify the main issues of the future stakeholder negotiations. The system has also been introduced to Finnish municipal waste companies as well as other stakeholders, such as private sector companies and producer responsibility organizations. Two key players from the private sector, Finnish Commerce Federation and Finnish Food and Drink Industries' Federation who represent most companies, have shown interest in using the pictogram system in Finland.

Based on this background work, together with experiences from the other Nordic countries, KIVO has compiled a proposal for a national system with necessary pictograms listed as well as the terminology for each type of waste. This will serve as a basis for the development work with stakeholders. A survey on the expectations and potential concerns related to the pictogram system among key stakeholders is planned in September 2021.

KIVO's web site (no user manual yet):

kivo.fi

Iceland

Samband in Iceland launched the system in November 2020. Many inquiries have been received and the interest is great. Already, two municipalities (of 69 in total) have started implementing the system, one is the capital Reykjavík.

The largest dairy product producer in Iceland as an example, Mjólkursamsalan, has shown interest in using the system on its products. Also, products from the Nordic countries with the symbols are already available in stores in Iceland which have attracted attention. Attached article shows an example of the interest of one of the largest news media in Iceland: frettabladid.is/frettir/morg-taekifaeri-til-ad-tengja-saman-tunnurnar-og-urganginn/

In total, the system in Iceland contains 8 pictogram categories curbside/close to household, 12 categories in total, total of 78 pictograms. The pictograms are all translated into three languages: Polish, English, Icelandic languages.

Fenur's web site and user manual:

fenur.is

fenur.is/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Fenur-endurvinnslumerki.A4.pdf



Pictogram and text in several languages. Photo: VA Syd, Skåne

Norway

Avfall Norge and LOOP, in collaboration, launched the pictogram system in April 2020. LOOP is now responsible for the further strategic work and implementation of the labeling scheme in Norway. 13 14 municipalities have started implementing the system in some way or another. 50 companies answered a survey (March 2021), which shows that 75 percent have or are in the process of introducing the system. Those who have or will introduce the system work with information, stickers, testing, applying it on different collection points, collaboration with other companies to develop and use it the best way.

In collaboration with several private waste companies, 21 new symbols have been developed. The symbols can also be downloaded from Green Dot Norway 's website for producers. grontpunkt.no/emballasjemerking

Several large producers have started using the system and you can find the symbols on most of the packaging in the stores. 433 downloads of symbols in total since the launch (intermunicipal companies, design and advertising agencies, companies, manufacturers, suppliers of source sorting systems).

LOOP's web site and user manual:

loop.no

sortere.no/sorteringsmerker



Environmentally friendly garbage trucks pick up waste from households. Photo: Sönderborg Forsyning

Sweden

In Sweden the pictogram system was launched by Avfall Sverige, in July 2020. Since then, about 200 municipalities and 400 producers, property owners and others has taken part of the system. Many have implemented the system or are in the process of implementing it shortly. Since July last year, Avfall Sverige has continuously informed about the new system through presentations at conferences, press releases, webinars and more. Avfall Sverige has held many meetings with representatives for producer responsibility organizations, food and packaging industry, for example Arla Foods and Tetra Pak, who has expressed an ambition of using and promoting the system among their customers.

The municipalities have started rebranding their recycling centers and will implement the system on their kerbside collection and many property owners have started implementing it in their garbage rooms.

The producer responsibility organizations have started to implement the pictogram system on all 5.000 recycling stations around Sweden as well as on bags used for collect on demand-services, kerbside. Also, the food and packaging industry is starting to pick up the symbols, such as Cloetta, Orkla and Evanoff Group.

For good examples, visit:

sverigesorterar.se/kommun/goda-exempel/

sverigesorterar.se/andra-organisationer/goda-exempel/

Avfall Sverige's web site and user manual:

avfallsverige.se

sverigesorterar.se

sverigesorterar.se/media/vthlcdqj/anvandarmanual_sv_version1_4.pdf



Example of the use of pictograms at a recycling centre. Photo: Sønderborg Forsyning

Experiences and continued development

Although there are many similarities between the Nordic waste management systems, we have become aware that there also are some differences. The background work of mapping the existing label and sign systems in the Nordic countries has been important to identify the variations in the management of waste. This has been an informative process, which has helped to clarify valuable facts before introducing the system in all the Nordic countries. It is important to accept some national adaptations to the system according to national laws and regulations, but never to the extent that it is violating the system or the principles behind it!

During the work of this project, it has become clear that the governance issues are crucial to establish the system in different countries. Since there is an interest from other countries for the system, this has become even more important. In order to keep the system intact, there need to be clear rules and regulations of the development and of how to use the system. This is in the interest of everyone investing time and money in the system.

Both the Baltic countries and the EU-commission are involved in a dialogue with the project partners about the Nordic pictogram system. The Baltic countries are carrying out a project where they are looking into the possibilities of implementing the symbols in their respective countries. In the EU-publication "Circular Economy Action Plan 2.0", the EU-commission is tasked to investigate the possibility of establishing a harmonized collection system within all the EU. One way to accomplish this is by using the same labeling for waste collection all over the EU – just like the Nordic pictogram system. The possibilities of using the Nordic pictogram system within all the EU is currently thoroughly investigated by EU's Joint Research Center, JRC, a work where some of the Nordic countries are actively participating.

Also China, South Africa and Brazil, for example, has shown interest in the pictogram system as a concrete measure for establishing a visible, easy accessible system for waste sorting and tool to rise awareness among people.

Since the project started, it has been clear that labeling and sorting of waste are issues quite high up on several government's agendas and that we can expect labels and kerb-side collection to become mandatory to be used in several countries. Therefore, this project has increased in importance and will continue to be on the political agenda for a foreseeable future.

The Nordic countries have jointly set a very good example of co-operation to achieve a more sustainable society, and received recognition for it, and it would be a shame not to keep developing this initiative. A possible continuation of this work would be to support JRC and its various project groups in their work according to the Circular Economy Action Plan and thereby promoting the Nordic pictogram system in an EU context. Here the communication of more good examples from the Nordic countries would be desirable, not least to assist the EU in the work of examining the advantages and difficulties of establishing an EU-wide labelling system. The Nordic countries could also support by shedding some light on how the governance of a

harmonized labelling system best would work at an EU-level etc. The continuation of the work within the new association after its establishment and the continued development of the pictogram system will also most certainly arise many important questions that will deserve specific attention over the months to come. There will certainly be an array of questions on the pictogram system and how it can contribute to a more sustainable society, that the waste management associations in the Nordic countries would like to revert to a future dialogue with the Nordic Council of Ministers about.

It is against this background that the waste management associations in the Nordic countries would like to express their sincere appreciation for the support from the Nordic Council of Ministers to this project, which has strongly promoted the development towards a harmonized waste labelling system and a circular economy in the Nordic region, and possibly beyond.

About this publication

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Nordic co-operation

Nordic co-operation is one of the world's most extensive forms of regional collaboration, involving Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland.

Nordic co-operation has firm traditions in politics, economics and culture and plays an important role in European and international forums. The Nordic community strives for a strong Nordic Region in a strong Europe.

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