

Overcoming barriers to social inclusion in Nordic cities through policy and planning



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Outline of the study

This executive summary is produced by Nordregio for the Nordic Welfare Centre and the project Nordic co-operation on integration of refugees and immigrants. For more information, please visit: www.integrationnorden.org

Nordic cities have traditionally been characterised by low levels of segregation and inequality. However, in recent years there has been growing concern about increasing disparities between different population groups, which is reflected in increased socio-economic and ethnic segregation in many cities. Against this backdrop, Nordic governments and cities have taken action to promote social inclusion and to reduce segregation through their approach to policy and urban planning.

This study examines how Nordic governments and municipalities seek to overcome barriers to social inclusion. The notion of overcoming barriers to inclusion encompasses the aim of improving the terms upon which different individuals and groups can take part in society, while at the same time counteracting the negative effects of inequality and segregation. The focus is particularly on small and medium-sized cities. These have received less attention than larger urban areas in policy and scholarly debates about urban inequality, even though they often face similar challenges to those of larger cities, and play an important role in working towards inclusion.

Different examples of policy and planning initiatives to create more inclusive cities and communities can be found across all the Nordic countries. However, inclusion is a multifaceted issue and dealing with it is a complex and challenging task. To capture the diversity of different approaches to promote social inclusion within the Nordic countries, this report examines five different but interrelated case studies, each of which are outlined in the following pages. These cases deal with two main themes. The first concerns urban regeneration, focusing on certain neighbourhoods facing diverse challenges and considered to be requiring policy and planning intervention. The second theme concerns the integration of different types of immigrant groups and their descendants. However, these two themes are closely related, as exemplified in several of the cases. This is because area-based policies for urban regeneration often also aim for the social integration of people from immigrant backgrounds.

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NORDREGIO REPORT 2020:9



For more in-depth analysis, see the original report, *Overcoming barriers to social inclusion in Nordic cities through policy and planning*, available at <http://doi.org/10.6027/R2020:9.1403-2503>

Neighbourhood regeneration in Pori, Finland: Evolving regeneration policies and practices in post-war suburban housing estates

The Finnish case addresses post-war suburban housing estates in the city of Pori. Areas of this type have been prominent on the Finnish urban policy agenda almost since their construction in the 1960s and 1970s. Many have also been targeted by a variety of redevelopment initiatives over the decades. This case study investigates how area-based policies and practices to revitalise suburban housing estates have evolved over time in Pori and in Finland generally since the early 1980s. The focus is on how these projects and their implementation have developed, as well as their main successes and shortcomings.

Key learnings

In the numerous regeneration projects carried out in Pori over the decades, a wide range of measures have been implemented in the targeted neighbourhoods. These include physical measures to renovate and upgrade the built environment and housing stock, and improvements to the outdoor environment, as well as social measures towards strengthening community activity and participation. Other aims have included improving services and amenities, addressing unemployment, and enhancing well-being, for example. The findings show that the aims and implementation procedures of these projects have not changed radically over time, and that there is a clear path dependency through which earlier regeneration initiatives have influenced later projects. Most of these projects have been part of wider national regeneration programmes. Indeed, the measures carried out in Pori have been greatly influenced by national policy discourse concerning the regeneration of post-war housing estates in Finland.

Regeneration projects carried out in Pori since the 1980s have produced several positive outcomes, not least improving local conditions in the targeted areas. The findings suggest that a long history of successive projects, has contributed to more favourable development in the areas, keeping the neighbourhoods involved in the spotlight and stimulating dialogue within the city administration over sectoral

boundaries. This has also accustomed residents in the targeted neighbourhoods to these types of projects, which has contributed to an increase in active participation overall.

Remaining challenges

Despite these successes, addressing challenges connected to broader structural causes has proved more difficult. For instance, unemployment rates have remained comparatively high in Pori's post-war housing estates since the deep economic recession of the early 1990s. Another major challenge concerns the shift in population composition. Initially, these areas were often inhabited by families with children; but as the children have grown up and moved out, the population has gradually aged. This has resulted in a noticeable decrease in population, which poses a challenges for maintaining vitality and services. Suburban housing estates have been a central focus of Finnish urban and housing policy for decades, and the most recent government programme for housing estate regeneration launched in 2020 indicates that they are still considered in need of intervention. Since a significant proportion of the Finnish population lives in these neighbourhoods, and since they also constitute a high percentage of the overall housing stock, it seems that post-war housing estates will remain a core issue for policy and planning aimed at creating more inclusive cities in the years to come.



Figure 1. Pormestarinluoto, in Pori, pictured in 1973. Source: Satakunta Museum

Photo: Sven Raita

Planning for social inclusion in the neighbourhood of Fjell in Drammen

The Norwegian case focuses on urban renewal measures which have been underway in the suburban neighbourhood of Fjell, in the city of Drammen, over the past decade. The Fjell 2020 project was initiated by the municipality in 2008, aiming to improve the attractiveness and socio-economic status of the neighbourhood. This case study examines the project and its various interventions. It also looks more broadly at the possibilities and limitations of addressing challenges related to segregation through area-based strategies.

Key learnings

Various measures have been implemented, or are currently planned, in Fjell. These include interventions in the built environment, such as improving public spaces, carrying out renovations, and building new affordable terraced houses to diversify the housing supply. Other measures include ones aimed at increasing home ownership among immigrants, and strengthening collaboration with sports associations to allow children and young people to try sports for free. One of the central strategies has been encouraging the inclusion of residents by allowing them to participate in the regeneration process through meetings and workshops. These interventions have been based on the belief that an attractive neighbourhood requires quality public and green spaces, a decent supply of local activities, and stimulation for education and employment – all of which are seen as the basis for good public health. Evaluation of these measures suggests that many of the targets have been reached, and many of the improvements made to the built environment have been considered successful in making the neighbourhood more attractive (Rambøll, 2020). However, the degree to which the principal goal of increasing the level of employment and income has been achieved is less clear. This points to the challenge of evaluating such projects, because of the shortage of data and statistics, as well as the difficulty of separating these projects from other developments in terms of their impact.

Remaining challenges

In Norway, as in the other Nordic countries, challenges related to segregation are often addressed through area-based strategies. This study highlights the limitations of such interventions, and while they may prove to be effective in improving the local conditions of a neighbourhood, there is a risk that such area-based approaches become largely symbolic – addressing symptoms of segregation in a specific locality. In fact, however, these problems need to be addressed beyond the boundaries of

certain delimited areas. The Norwegian case study shows that, despite the predominance of home ownership in the country, socio-economic segregation still exists. Due to the high proportion of privately-owned housing, compared to other Nordic countries, local government in Norway has fewer opportunities to use housing development as a tool for inclusion. This case study suggests that planning more inclusive cities and neighbourhoods requires long-term effort and that social inclusion should not be seen as a project goal to be evaluated in isolation, but rather as a long-term objective requiring continuous work by planners and other public officials. It concerns all the inhabitants of a city, not just residents in 'segregated' areas, or those coming from an immigrant background.



Figure 2. Aerial image of Fjell in Drammen. Source: Drammen24

Urban planning policy in the Danish 'ghetto' – overcoming or creating barriers to inclusion?

The Danish case study addresses the so-called 'ghetto' policies which emerged as a key policy response to urban segregation in Denmark during the 2000s. These policies have been promoted by the national government as a way of increasing the social mix in cities, and revitalising vulnerable neighbourhoods that have been labelled ghettos. This case study examines national policies focusing on these ghetto areas since the 1990s. It discusses how the term is used, and what consequences this terminology has for urban development activities.

Key learnings

In recent years the concept of the ghetto has become increasingly prevalent in Denmark – in policy-making, in use by the media, and in everyday language. In the 1990s, the term was still considered inappropriate within the national policy framework. However, since 2010, the designation of 'ghetto' has been given to certain vulnerable neighbourhoods which are deemed to require particular planning interventions. Since becoming more widely adopted, the term now plays a role in shaping a broader urban discourse, legitimising specific urban policy measures in certain areas. While many of the aims and measures that form part of the Danish policy response to ghettos resemble the ambitions of area-based regeneration approaches elsewhere, the explicit use of the term 'ghetto' clearly sets the Danish situation apart from the other Nordic countries – along with the approach of radically reshaping the overall urban structure, including the demolition of designated housing units. In the Danish context, the use of the term 'ghetto' makes it possible to talk about, and create, a common understanding of certain problems and measures as they relate to specific geographical areas. While these policies are primarily related to housing and urban planning, they also address the question of integration, social issues (including education, language and social welfare), and crime and punishment. The specific interventions implemented in targeted neighbourhoods often address several policy areas at once. For instance, measures related to the built environment are often looked at from a social perspective.

Remaining challenges

Defining a neighbourhood as a ghetto does not constitute an objective description of a place. Rather, the use of this particular term encourages people to look at these areas as places that are excluded from society. This construct arguably contributes to the perpetuation of ghettos as a reality, and actually hampers the regeneration of these areas. In addition, the narrative surrounding these areas and their problems

increasingly focuses on non-Western immigrants and their descendants. The problems of so-called ghettos are seen as coming from other parts of the world, through immigration. The problems manifested in these areas are therefore externalised, and viewed as not being part of what is supposed to define Danish society. Measures carried out as part of the 'ghetto policy', may have had both positive and negative effects for the neighbourhoods concerned, their residents, and the people who have had to leave them when their houses have been demolished. But for non-Western born residents, whether residing in ghettos or not, how does being regarded as problematic citizens affect their experience of integration into what might be called 'Danish majority society'? This is a question that needs to be further investigated in order to help determine the effects of national ghetto policies on Danish society as a whole.



Figure 3. New residential houses in Gellerup, in Aarhus, one of the largest 'ghettos' in Denmark.

Photo: Sandra Oliveira e Costa

From military base to neighbourhood or segregated area? Socio-spatial integration in Reykjanesbær, Iceland

The Icelandic case study focuses on the municipality of Reykjanesbær, and explores two key issues. Firstly, it investigates how the local authorities address the challenges and opportunities posed by a sudden increase in labour migration over recent years. Secondly, it examines how the municipality is seeking to prevent segregation through converting a former military base, currently known as Ásbrú, into an ordinary neighbourhood. These two issues are interlinked. This case therefore examines strategies for social inclusion from both an integration viewpoint and from a spatial planning perspective.

Key learnings

Due to its unique history, the Ásbrú district differs greatly from the rest of the town. The former military area remains physically secluded and has a distinctive built environment, including an unusually high proportion of rental housing. The composition of the population consists of many residents from an immigrant background, as well as households with relatively low incomes. Against this backdrop, the municipality has established ambitions for developing the neighbourhood into a more attractive, inclusive and integrated part of Reykjanesbær. One main focus is on diversifying the housing stock by introducing a more mixed tenure structure. This is because the proportionately high share of rental housing is considered unfavourable for future, more balanced development. In parallel, local authorities have placed an emphasis on strengthening integration and social inclusion, particularly among the municipality's large Polish population, many of whom live in Ásbrú. Hiring a project manager to promote activities aimed at diversity and inclusion, and providing high-quality teaching in Icelandic, are among the measures adopted by the municipality to counteract exclusion and to encourage everyone's participation in the community at large.

Remaining challenges

Despite taking these initiatives, a number of notable challenges still remain. One of the main barriers to strengthening social inclusion in Reykjanesbær seems to be a lack of funding for implementing some of the ideas and measures identified as necessary. In Ásbrú, the ambition is to create a more attractive neighbourhood by increasing services and density, and making the surrounding areas more appealing. While the area as a whole currently has a high population turnover, the ambition of

the municipality is that Ásbrú should become a neighbourhood where people choose to stay longer and envision their future lives as being located there. However, one of the challenges for the municipality is getting private housing developers to commit to engaging with long-term inclusion issues related to housing costs, service accessibility and better public spaces in the neighbourhood. Ásbrú's future development will therefore depend greatly on how the municipality's emphasis on mixed housing can be integrated with the revenue-seeking agendas of private housing companies.



Figure 4. Aerial image of Ásbrú in Reykjavík.

Photo: Reykjavík

Establishing housing for newly arrived refugees – experiences of critical local reactions in 60 Swedish municipalities

The fifth case study deals with housing for newly arrived refugees. It examines the experiences of Swedish municipalities in handling local resistance towards this type of housing. The focus is on 2012–2018, a time when there was a significant increase in the number of asylum seekers arriving in Sweden. Using survey responses from 60 municipalities, this case investigates the degree to which municipalities experienced critical local responses to refugee housing, the nature of those reactions, and how this opposition affected the options for arranging appropriate housing.

Key learnings

In Sweden, new construction commonly sparks a response from the local community. However, the settlement of newly arrived refugees differs from other planning and building processes, as does the nature of the reactions. A clear distinction from reactions against other types of planning processes is that the settlement of refugees is connected to politically sensitive issues, including migration and integration policy. So, both the character of local reactions, and the arguments used, differ. When planning refugee housing, a clear socio-ethnic dimension is added to the usual array of possible challenges, and public officials are not always prepared to handle the reactions this generates. A noteworthy distinction is the use of overtly racist responses, reported by a quarter of the municipalities surveyed. This case study shows how opposition to refugee housing has impacted the work of the municipalities, but also that there are clear differences between municipalities in the kind of housing solutions offered, as well as in the impact and character of local reactions. More than a third of the municipalities reported that protests had a slight impact on their construction plans, but not to the extent where they were greatly affected. In contrast, in the cases where protests had a significant impact, they resulted in delaying the completion of the housing units. This study therefore shows that local reactions can have quite different outcomes. In some cases they contributed to a worsening of housing quality, while in others to improved quality. Overall, the findings suggest that if newly arrived refugees are settled within the existing housing stock, and with access to important infrastructure, then integration with the majority population in the community tends to be more successful.

Remaining challenges

Swedish municipalities are responsible for providing housing for newly arrived refugees who chose not to make independent arrangements. However, this has been

a challenge, due to the shortage of housing in many parts of the country – and sometimes also due to opposition from the local community. The starting point for this case study was the notion that integration is a two-way process which involves mutual adaptation between immigrants and the receiving society. When refugees settle in Sweden, the focus is in relation to the surrounding community. The surrounding community is a key part of the two-way integration process. Hence, planning and building processes can become an arena for enhancing meaningful two-way integration. For any future research, the survey method used in this study would benefit from complementary interviews with public officials, with those opposing the policy, and with newly arrived refugees themselves. This would help establish a deeper understanding of applied processes, and of many of the questions emerging from this study.



Figure 5. Plans for modules for newly arrived refugees by a school in Haninge were halted due to reactions from the community.

Photo: David Larsson

Concluding discussion

Inclusive cities can be seen as places where all people feel integrated within society, regardless of their resources, lifestyle or background. The focus in this study is on a variety of policy and planning measures employed for helping to create more inclusive cities across the Nordic countries. The examples examined in this report also show how the ambition of creating more socially inclusive cities is closely connected to the aim of reducing urban inequalities and segregation. However, inclusion is a complex and multifaceted issue, and the specific challenges and approaches to address these challenges vary between countries and cities. The five case studies examined here address policies at national level, as well as the more localised policies and planning practices adopted by local authorities in the cities. In some of these cases, national level policies coincide with policies and practices at the local level. The five cases cover two main themes. The first concerns urban regeneration, focusing on certain specific neighbourhoods facing a variety of challenges which are considered to require policy and planning intervention. The second concerns the integration of different immigrant groups and their descendants. However, as illustrated in a number of cases, these two themes are closely connected, and area-based urban regeneration in specific neighbourhoods also often aims towards the integration of people from immigrant backgrounds.

Urban regeneration initiatives as a means to strengthen inclusion

The first of the two main themes, urban regeneration, is addressed in the case studies from Finland, Norway, Denmark and Iceland. These are examples of places where an array of regeneration measures have been employed, or are being planned, in order to resolve a variety of problems. They are being designed to achieve lasting improvements in the socio-economic, physical and environmental conditions across the targeted areas. A common characteristic of the examples from Denmark, Finland and Norway is that the regeneration efforts have been focused on suburban, post-war neighbourhoods. This corresponds to the situation more generally in Western Europe, where these types of neighbourhoods are increasingly related to socio-economic and physical decline, and have therefore been targeted by area-based regeneration efforts in many cases (see e.g. Hess et al., 2018). These types of areas are commonly associated with problems related to, for example, the built environment, the range and quality of housing stock, and overall socio-economic composition. The problems that regeneration initiatives often seek to address include high unemployment, social stigmatisation and high population turnover, as well as physical problems such as a lack of variety in building types and physical isolation, plus a low level of neighbourhood amenities and services (Hall, 1997). These problems are often interlinked and, in many cases, reinforced by broader societal trends. Since the neighbourhoods designated for urban regeneration initiatives are

often confronted with multiple challenges, they often pursue several objectives simultaneously, through a combination of different measures within the same project. Among the common aims found in neighbourhood regeneration projects across Europe are improving the socio-economic characteristics of an area (and therefore the opportunities it provides for inhabitants), improving overall quality of life, upgrading public spaces, and diversifying the housing stock in order to attract a population with a more favourable socio-economic status (Verhage, 2005).

Several of the previously highlighted problems, as well as objectives and measures to deal with these problems, are reflected in the Nordic examples examined in this study. The neighbourhood regeneration initiatives discussed in the context of Pori, Fjell, Ásbrú, and the so-called Danish 'ghettos' have all been initiated with the purpose of addressing multiple, interconnected problems. Many of these problems are considered as being directly related to the neighbourhoods themselves, their physical structure, their housing stock and their residents. However, it is also evident that a number of the challenges faced by these areas are tied to broader structural developments within their wider urban, regional and national contexts. Hence, these projects can be viewed as simultaneously aiming to achieve place- and people-based results, since their aims and objectives focus both on the physical conditions of the areas involved, and on their residents.

Findings from the Finnish and Norwegian case studies correspond with previous studies concerning the strengths and limitations of area-based regeneration initiatives. For instance, it has been suggested that area-based approaches often have a rather limited impact on problems where the broader causes are located outside the neighbourhood (e.g. Andersson, 2006; van Gent et al., 2009). The observations from Pori and Drammen point towards the limitations of area-based measures in dealing with structural problems such as a lack of employment or educational opportunities, for example. On the other hand, they have been more effective in addressing local problems. Therefore, if the intention is to address the problem of segregation specifically, there seems to be a risk that an area-based approach will merely address the *symptoms* of segregation in a specific area, rather than the more complex root causes that inevitably influence neighbourhood development.

Integration policies for social inclusion

The second main theme of this study concerns policies for the integration of immigrants and people from immigrant backgrounds. As demonstrated in several of these cases, this theme is often closely connected to area-based regeneration policies which seek to enhance social inclusion. The Danish, Icelandic and Norwegian examples all include elements of (or are supported by) broader strategies for integration of immigrants, although these are highlighted differently in the three examples. A common, continuing challenge is how to bridge the gap between an immigrant population and the majority indigenous population, both geographically and socially. In the case of Reykjanesbær, there is a strong focus on the integration of labour migrants, while the examples from Drammen and from Danish ghetto policies illustrate clear differences between Norwegian and Danish discourses on the

question of integration. In the Norwegian case, immigrants are not viewed as separate from the majority population, whereas the Danish approach clearly treats non-Western immigrants as a problem, and Danish immigration policy as its source. In the Danish case, there is also a clear connection between local area-based policies, national immigration policy and national settlement policy. As refugees cannot settle in neighbourhoods which are on the national ghetto list, Danish national settlement policy essentially regulates local policy. Hence, settlement policy and ghetto policy intersect, and are used together to influence the distribution of residents.

In general, settlement models for refugees differ between the Nordic countries, but there has been something of a convergence of policies in recent years. In Norway, local authorities have the autonomy to decide on their refugee numbers, and refugees who independently choose the municipality they will settle in risk losing the right to language training and economic support provided through the obligatory introduction programme (Steen, 2016). In Finland, regional centres negotiate with the municipalities, who themselves can decide on the number of refugees to accommodate (Greve Harbo et al., 2017). After previously having a policy of not restricting settlement choices of refugees, the Swedish government decided in 2019 to restrict the settlement of asylum seekers. They now risk losing economic subsidies if they settle in certain socio-economically disadvantaged areas (Riksdagsförvaltningen, 2019/2020). This indicates that the Nordic countries, while still applying different policies, have increasingly started to pursue similar models for similar reasons. In Sweden, the policy of distributing newly-arrived refugees across all municipalities may contribute to better integration, but this study also shows that municipalities still face challenges with regard to integration, especially when the settlement of refugees occurs during times of housing shortage. These are periods when what could be termed 'unconventional solutions' are required. By comparison, in Denmark and Norway there has not been as widespread opposition to the situation brought about by an influx of asylum seekers in 2015. That this did not have a major impact on the municipalities is also due to the fact that they were much fewer in number than in Sweden.

A need for long-term strategies and continuous efforts

By focusing on five different thematic and geographical cases, this study examines a variety of policy and planning measures for overcoming barriers to social inclusion within Nordic cities. The examples discussed here should not be viewed as a collection of best practices for creating more inclusive cities, but rather as an exploration of how social inclusion is addressed in different Nordic countries and cities, specifically through policy and planning. Although strategies for inclusion differ, depending on the wider context and local conditions, the ultimate aim of each of the examples discussed in this study has been to counteract inequality and segregation, while also improving the terms on which individuals and groups can take part in society. These examples generally have a strong territorial focus, since they deal with specific neighbourhoods. At the same time, they also address broader people-based strategies for integration and inclusion. This study highlights the fact that planning for inclusive cities is a complex and challenging task. The different examples included indicate that there is no universally applicable recipe for creating

more inclusive cities. They show that different approaches have their own specific advantages and disadvantages. Overall, it seems evident that an inclusive city cannot be created through an individual project. Rather, it needs to be pursued holistically, through long-term planning and continuous efforts capable of combining both people- and place-based perspectives.

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About this publication

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Nord2020:057

ISBN 978-92-893-6839-1 (PDF)

ISBN 978-92-893-6840-7 (ONLINE)

<http://dx.doi.org/10.6027/nord2020-057>

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Layout: Louise Jeppesen

Frontpage photo: Iceland, Vaida Razaityte

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