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Elisabeth Nørgaard: AFI Director
hunting for impactful research

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for the second year in a row

News

Could we ask for your help? Take part in
our survey!

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Theme: The green transition and skills



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Green goals in a grey world

Few organisations have goals as ambitious as the Nordic Council of Ministers. In a time when a certain resignation is spreading about whether the green transition will be possible, the Council of Ministers is still holding the flag high.

EDITORIAL

25.11.2024

BY BJÖRN LINDAHL, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The Baku climate summit in Azerbaijan has ended in an agreement described by environmental organisations as a win for the richest countries.

The Council of Ministers has set several goals for the Nordic cooperation on environmental issues in the coming five years. One is that “The Nordic region will demonstrate that it is possible to live within the planet’s limits while maintaining high prosperity.”

Too often, the opposite is true: Only the richest countries can afford to think about the environment. Images from Indian cities where air pollution is so high that breathing equals smoking 25 cigarettes a day, show how expensive it is to be poor.

In our theme about environment and skills, we try to find examples of how doing something for the environment needs not be very difficult. The Norwegian company Miljø Norge has set up “Slåkkefabrikken” near Drammen, where they recycle used fire extinguishers.

Millions of extinguishers are thrown out every year. Each reused device means cutting 38 kilos of CO₂ emissions and giving new life to four kilos of steel.

In Åland, with its large ocean areas in the Baltic Sea, plans are afoot for offshore wind power production that will surpass the islands’ own needs. Meanwhile, the inhabitants ask: How much is the unspoiled sea horizon worth?

What was to become Europe’s largest battery factory, Northvolt in Swedish Skellefteå, has gone bust. Was that just because of competition from China, or was Northvolt driven by a kind of hubris, where they attempted to develop new technology at the same time?

Outside Arendal in Norway, Morrow began its battery production in August this year.

“Battery production is difficult, so we must not try to take on too much. We have chosen a well-known, proven production technology,” says CEO Lars Christian Bacher.

Norway does after all have two major advantages: plenty of clean energy and Europe’s largest fleet of electric vehicles. To succeed with the electrification of the transport sector, you also need a closed-loop system for recycling used batteries.

One of the green challenges facing the region which the Nordic Council is looking at is the falling number of birds in agricultural land areas. An index of the number of birds in agricultural land areas showed 100 in the year 2000 and 61.8 in 2022. Numbers improved somewhat in 2023, to 66.8.

KU Science – the Faculty of Science at Copenhagen University – offers the programme Agriculture – Production and Environment, which so far has had many applications from women living in urban areas.

Two of them are Andrea Topsøe Sloth and Maia Vial, who want to work as consultants for farmers when they graduate, helping them to use sustainable production methods to grow healthy foods.

“I have always been interested in fighting for the environment and food production is extremely important for the green transition,” says Maia Vial.

The fishing industry is still important to Iceland, even though tourism is more important for the country’s GDP. This year, for the second year running, no quotas were set for capelin, a fish species considered to be the backbone of the North Atlantic ecosystem because it is also food for the cod. When sea temperatures rise, the fish stocks also move.

We also take a look at working environments for two groups of people who so far have had little attention: menopausal women and trans people. The common denominator is hormones.

“Menopause issues have long been a private issue, but when it affects people’s ability to work it is no longer a private problem but a societal one,” says Stine Mathieu, a guide in natural hormone therapy.

If a person is going through gender-affirming care, it is important to know that this process takes years. When someone changes their name, there should be routines in place to quickly update email addresses and other administrative functions. This was some of the advice given at a conference on trans people and the labour market, organised as part of the Swedish Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers.

The Nordic Labour Journal is published by the Work Research Institute AFI in Norway, which celebrates 60 years this year. So we have also created a special theme looking at the institute’s research and we interviewed AFI Director Elisabeth Nørgaard, who is looking for research with real impact.

For 24 of the 60 years it has existed, AFI has published *Arbeidsliv i Norden* and the English edition the Nordic Labour Journal, on commission from the Nordic Council of Ministers. But the publications have a longer history. The first version from 1980 was an information magazine called NAUT information, an acronym for *Nordiska arbetsmarknadsutskottet* (the Nordic Labour Market Committee).

In 1987, the magazine was renamed *Nordisk arbetsmarknad* (Nordic Labour Market). When AFI got the commission, the title became *Arbeidsliv i Norden*.

I have worked with the publication since the year 2000 and I have been Editor-in-Chief since 1 July 2019. This is my last editorial as I am retiring on 1 January 2025. But I am confident that my successor Line Scheistrøen will carry the publications forward and that they will continue to provide a Nordic perspective on labour markets, working conditions and labour law in the Nordic countries.

Thank you to everyone who I have worked with during these years!



Åland's government open for major offshore wind projects

“Åland must be an active climate and sustainability player and for us it is natural to exploit the wind as a resource. We don't really have much else,” says Camilla Gunell, Minister for Infrastructure and Climate of the government that wants to open up for large-scale offshore wind power in Åland's waters.

THEME

25.11.2024

TEXT: HELENA FORSGÅRD, PHOTO: KJELL SÖDERLUND



Offshore wind power means billions of euro in investments. Any realised project would mean hitting the jackpot for municipalities in terms of tax revenues from power plants. But for now, it is not possible to provide an exact figure, says Camilla Gunell, Minister for Infrastructure in Åland's government. Photo: Government of Åland

“Establishing offshore wind power in Åland's waters is a future investment and the start of an industry that can be positive for the climate, the economy for the autonomous area and municipalities, for employment and the development of

Åland's business sector," reads the current government programme which was agreed on in December last year.

The government coalition comprises three parties – the Liberals, Åland Centre and Åland Social Democrats.

Minister for Infrastructure and Climate Camilla Gunell is a Social Democrat and the issue is primarily her responsibility.

"We have to reduce our dependency on fossil fuels to save the climate, and I cannot see a better alternative for us than wind power. Currently, the sea area to the north of Åland – known as Norrhavet – is under consideration, with water depths ranging from 10 to 80 metres.

"We have also looked at areas to the south of Åland, where conditions might be even better. But the Finnish defence forces have said no," she says.

A complex issue

The government's project Sunnanvind has a couple of employees and more are coming on. It is busy preparing the necessary documentation for future developments. There is already collaboration with the university and several consultancy firms covering different areas of expertise.

"There are countless issues to be solved, from the environmental impact to the potential for energy distribution and the expected economic consequences for both the autonomous area and the municipalities. One crucial point for Åland is establishing an energy distribution point on the mainland," says Camilla Gunell.

Although Åland owns the waters, the municipalities hold the planning rights and five of Åland's 16 municipalities are affected.



The wind farm in the Båtskären archipelago south of Mariehamn was established in the early 2000s and is small fry compared to today's huge plans for offshore wind power. The islands house six wind turbines, each measuring 65 metres tall. The planned turbines reach 420 metres.

"We are in constant dialogue with them. We do not wish to override anyone", says Camilla Gunell.

Cautious politicians

There are currently nearly 30 onshore wind farms in Åland of various vintages and sizes. According to a 2022 survey made by Statistics and Research Åland (ÅSUB), more than 60 per cent of Ålanders are positive to more wind power.

However, a survey of politicians holding municipal positions in the affected areas reveals a more cautious, if not negative, tone.

Geta municipality in northern Åland presents itself as "Norrhavet's neighbour" and Frida Sjöroos, chairperson for the municipality's council, says the planned initiative feels very big for small Åland.

"Many in our municipality want to protect the unspoilt horizon to the north and the environment as a whole. As far as I know, the majority of both citizens and holiday home owners are against the plans," she says.



Frida Sjöroos, chairperson for the Geta municipality council.

Uncertain millions

Similar arguments are made by other elected representatives, including Thommy Fagerholm, the chairperson of the Saltvik municipality.

"The project is enormous as is the economic uncertainty. From the start, municipalities were promised millions in tax revenues, but this has only been opinions and assumptions," he says.

Many municipalities in Åland are small and struggle economically. With that in mind, new income would be welcome.

"Sure, but at what price? Do we sacrifice Åland's unspoilt nature? We must have secure factual information before we can say yes or no," says Thommy Fagerholm.

Both Saltvik and Brändö, another affected municipality, have raised the possibility of taxing power plants, and the municipalities have said they wish to impose a tax rate of 3.1 per cent.

“We have not had a similar tax before but we wish to communicate already now that we will commit to the highest allowable amount,” says Thommy Fagerholm.

“Not in my backyard”

Minister Camilla Gunell says protests are part of the democratic process.

“As long as no information clearly says the risks outweigh the benefits, we will go ahead. Those who are opposed seem to be mainly concerned with the visual impact; the wind turbines that will be visible on the horizon.



Anders Wiklund at OX2's Åland office shows an area north of Åland which has been identified as suitable for offshore wind power. The company says a park here could house 340 turbines with a maximum height of 420 metres.

“But what is or isn't ugly is in the eye of the beholder. Every measure comes at a price, but it is extremely unfortunate if not-in-my-backyardism is allowed to determine the development,” she says.

Eager to bid

Two wind power companies have set up shop in Åland – OX2 which was established in Sweden in 2004 focusing on renewable energy, and Ilmatar, founded in Finland in 2011. All of Ilmatar's planned offshore wind power projects are run from their Åland offices, no matter where they will be built.

Both the competing companies have spent recent years gathering data for environmental analysis and business calculations for possible major developments in Norrhavet. Their current message is clear and can be summed up like this:

“If the conditions are interesting when the areas are put out to tender, we will bid.”

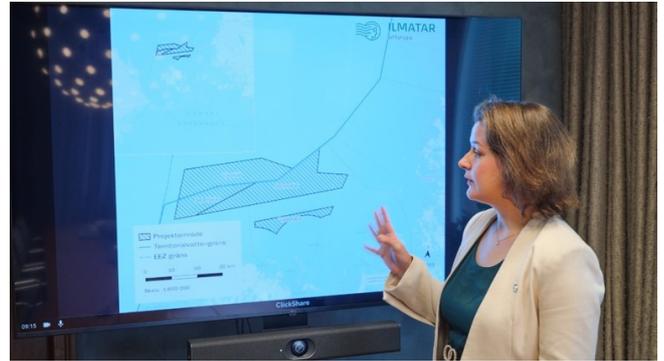
That does not mean, however, that they will be the only ones bidding. There are many other players who might want to join in on the fun.

Anders Wiklund is the island ambassador for OX2. If they were to win the bid, he believes construction could start no earlier than 2027 because further comprehensive surveys and analysis are needed.

“We have taken part in several municipal meetings, met residents, presented data and answered questions. We have had a good dialogue and hope public opinion will settle on the main question – how big a project can Åland accept?” he says.

Showing decisiveness

Anna Häger, Ilmatar's head of region, is convinced there will be offshore wind power in Åland's waters in the future.



“I meet resistance but also a lot of support from both politicians and business leaders,” says Anna Häger, head of region for Ilmatar Offshore. The company plans and constructs large-scale wind farms in Finnish and Åland territorial waters.

“We must dare take risks and show decisiveness. Our future energy supply is the greatest challenge we face right now. It is OK to be in doubt, but it is not OK to postpone difficult decisions and hope someone else will solve the problems.

“There is opposition to large-scale offshore wind power, but there is also no other solution that absolutely everyone likes. As I see it, the benefits of wind power far outweigh the harm for many people,” she says.



In Norway, fire extinguishers have entered the circular economy

Each year, millions of fire extinguishers that could have been reused are thrown out. At “Slåkkefabrikken” outdated extinguishers get a new lease of life. The circular economy is one of the tools used to reach climate goals. Still, the Nordic countries are lagging behind the rest of Europe.

THEME

25.11.2024

TEXT AND PHOTO: LINE SCHEISTRØEN

It is as good as new, points out Petter Mathisen, brandishing a fire extinguisher that has got new life at “Slåkkefabrikken” at Miljø Norge in Lier near Oslo.

That extinguisher you have had at home for many years which perhaps needs changing does in fact not have to be thrown out. It can be reused. Not just parts from it either, the entire fire extinguisher is reusable.



Some work still needs to be done manually. The plan is for the production line to be fully automated.

“Slåkkefabrikken” – or the extinguisher factory – accepts fire extinguishers from the whole of Norway and some from Sweden. Here they are emptied and dismantled, inspected and cleaned before being readied to serve again, and the extinguishers – renamed “Slåkke” – are wrapped up and sent out to shops.

The production line at “Slåkkefabrikken” is the first of its kind. Petter Mathisen actually drew the first draft. Most of the job is automatic and just a few tasks are performed by hand.

The production line cost 70 million Norwegian kroner (€6m). The project got millions in support from Innovation Norway while the biggest investment came from the owners of Miljø Norge – the company Mathisen and his brother set up in 2021, to develop ways of improving the circular economy.

An environmentally friendly fire extinguisher

But does the reused fire extinguisher work as well as a new one which (mainly) is produced in China and shipped to Norway?

“Absolutely! It is as effective and has the same extinguishing power, approximately the same price and is far better for the environment,” says Mathisen.



Petter Mathisen believes in highlighting what we save the environment for when we reuse fire extinguishers.

And let us look at the figures right away: Reusing a fire extinguisher saves 38 kilos of CO₂ and four kilos of virgin steel.

But, you might think, that is not very much? Well, there are between 8 and 10 million fire extinguishers in Norway alone. Every year, around one million of these must be changed. Not all can be reused. But let us say around half can, and then imagine the amount of CO₂ that is not emitted into the atmosphere.

Started in granny's basement

The story of Miljø Norge and «Slåkke» actually started more than 20 years ago, in the basement of Petter and his brother Geir's grandmother. This is where the brothers established their first company, Norsk Brannvern, or Norwegian Fire Protection.

In the workshop, that is granny's basement, the boys were busy filling fire extinguishers before going door to door in Drammen and Lier to sell the product.

After a while, fire extinguishers were bought from China and sold in Norway. The company grew, both in terms of the number of employees and sales.



Fire extinguishers come in different shapes and colors.

The Mathisen brothers sold Norsk Brannvern to a Swedish company. They were left with a good sum of money.

Most extinguishers were thrown away

During their years working with fire protection, they noticed an enormous number of fire extinguishers were being discarded. They had to be reusable, the brothers thought and set about creating a new startup – Miljø Norge and Slåkke – in 2021. Now there are 22 employees.

Most fire extinguishers have so far simply been thrown away.

“What usually happens then is that the powder ends up in a landfill (stored in a large pile), the plastic is burned and the steel is chopped up and used in products like reinforcement bars,” explains Mathisen.

Reuse has so far not been profitable.

“It costs money for fire safety companies and businesses to hand in old pressurised extinguishers. That's why many empty their devices before handing them in so that they get money for the steel. A rubbish solution for the environment, but money talks,” he says.

The Slåkkefabrikken production line has made reuse profitable.

"You also get far higher quality by refilling devices automatically on a production line compared to doing it manually. We are now approved by the county governor to work with hazardous waste, we are ISO-certified and have good quality routines.

"With one fire extinguisher leaving our production line every 50 seconds, the circular economy becomes a good economy. Scaling is key in the circular economy," says Mathisen.

Some devices cannot be reused because of rust and damage.

"Then we have to ensure that the powder, plastic and rubber is used for something else. We have plans to do this, and doing it large-scale it will also become profitable to create new products from these raw materials," says Mathisen.

Need a lot of used extinguishers

The fire extinguisher "Slåkke" and Miljø Norge have been well-received in the market. They have entered into close cooperation with Norway's large recycling companies, like Stena, RagnSells, Franzefoss and Norsk Gjenvinning, which are now all partners.

Miljø Norge has become a kind of national centre for receiving fire extinguishers. Which is good, because they are dependent on big volumes.

"To make circular economy profitable you need volume. And to achieve that you need cooperation in the sector," says Petter Mathisen.

Ready for the world

They have been compared with Tomra, the company behind Norway's bottle recycling scheme. Mathiesen thinks that is kind of OK. You have to be allowed to think big, he believes.

"There are fire extinguishers all around the world. We can set up shop wherever and more or less whenever. There are big international opportunities," he says.



Here, an old fire extinguisher begins its journey to becoming new. Josef Adhanom works on the production line.

Miljø Norge can make a production line for all types of fire extinguishers, whether they are from Norway or for instance a different European country.

So far, Miljø Norge has operations in Sweden in addition to Norway. Mathisen is a bit impatient to get going.

"We have been welcomed in Sweden but it takes some time to get running properly," he says. Mathisen argues that players in the market must seek collaborations, whether this is internally in Norway or across borders.

"I am convinced that we have to work together in the Nordics on circular economy. The Nordic countries represent a small market with just a few million people. On our own, we don't get the volume of waste that makes it profitable. Everyone cannot do everything. We have to cooperate," he says.

Bottom of the pile

One of the most important ways of reaching the climate goals is the change to a circular economy. We must use and throw away far less than today. But for now, we are pretty poor at this in the Nordics.

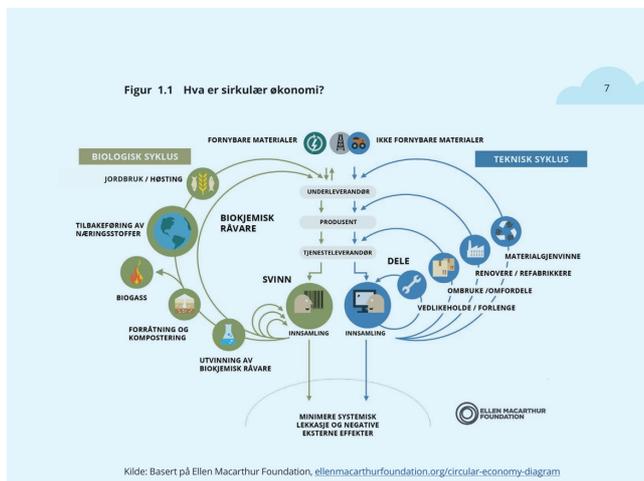
According to The Circularity Gap Report, Norway is one of the least circular countries in Europe. Norway also has one of the world's highest levels of consumption. Norwegian's consumption of natural resources (including everything needed for the production of the stuff we buy) is estimated to be 44.3 tonnes per person annually.

In Norway, just 2.4 per cent of resources are returned to the circular economy, while countries like the Netherlands are at 24.5 per cent and aim to reach 50 per cent by 2030.

Things are not much better in Sweden and Denmark, where the figures are 3.4 per cent and 4 per cent respectively. The global average is 8.6 per cent.

The waste cannot continue

In 2024, the Norwegian government presented an action plan for the circular economy. It follows up on the national strategy for the circular economy from 2021.



To help us understand what circular economy is all about, several people have created diagrams and drawings explaining it. This one is taken from the government's strategy and action plan, which in turn was inspired by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation.

“We live in a society that throws away resources we cannot afford to waste. In the past 50 years, the world's resource use has more than tripled. We have to turn this trend, we must stop use and discard.

“The action plan shows that the government is willing to use a broad set of measures to set the economy on the right path,” said Norway's Minister of Climate and the Environment Andreas Bjelland Eriksen when he presented the action plan.

The government also established an expert group to examine measures aimed at reducing the use of resources and promoting a more circular economy. The expert group will present their report in the spring of 2025.

More startups?

At Miljø Norge they have already been planning their next circular product for a while. “Slåkke” will not be their only product by any means.



With the motto "We save lives and the environment," Petter Mathisen and Miljø Norge are aiming to conquer more of the market in the Nordic countries and hopefully also elsewhere in the world.

“Our aim is to give new life to a range of products that are currently being treated as waste,” says Petter Mathisen. They do not talk about things as waste but as raw materials and residual resources.

“Many things can be reused. We just have to look at the possibilities. Generations before us were better at doing this. We have been terribly bad. Now we must use and discard less and reuse more,” argues Mathisen.

Could we ask for your help? Take part in our survey!

We would like to improve the websites for Arbeidsliv i Norden and the Nordic Labour Journal and would very much appreciate if you took time to answer some questions.

NEWS

25.11.2024

The survey will take less than five minutes to complete.

You can find the survey [here](#).



More investments needed for Norwegian battery production to fuel the green transition

If the three Nordic countries Finland, Sweden and Norway worked together, they could become a major supplier of batteries and fuel the green transition, but professor Odne Stokke Burhei believes this requires a much greater willingness to invest than we have seen so far.

THEME

25.11.2024

TEXT: BJØRN LØNNUM ANDREASSEN

Some argue that battery production could be Norway's next industry fairytale when the oil and gas era comes to an end.

“But for that to happen, we need to start seeing bigger investments soon. 12 to 13 battery factories could create a similar annual export value to what oil and gas has had until 2022. That is 300 to 500 billion kroner (€26bn to €43bn),” says Odne Stokke Burheim.



He is a professor at the Department of Energy and Process Engineering at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology NTNU in Trondheim. Burheim has worked with research, teaching and entrepreneurship in the field of batteries for more than 10 years.

The largest battery factories currently at the concept stage are one by two kilometres in size.

“A gigafactory like that could create batteries worth 20 to 30 billion kroner (€1.73bn to €2.6bn) in annual exports,” says Burheim.

Would that really be possible in Norway?

“I believe we will get there, but it will take time,” says Stokke Burheim.

It is also necessary to bring some nuance into the comparison with oil and gas, he argues. The point is not only how much battery capacity Norway can export. You also have to consider how profitable that export can become. Oil exports are very profitable.

Burheim explains that battery recycling also plays a crucial part in the green transition and that Norway has enough clean energy to do this too. Then there is the security policy perspective.

“That’s why China and the USA subsidise the production of battery cells, systems and green value chains,” points out Odne Stokke Burheim.

The “starting gun” for the race to produce the world’s best electric vehicles at the lowest price was fired in China in 2004.

Several startups

Burheim was central when Freyr established what was to become a major EV battery production in Mo i Rana in Norway.

“We did the preliminary study of what became Freyr. We have worked on the modelling of the value chain needed to produce batteries,” he says.



Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre laid the corner stone for the first phase of Morro’s battery factory in Arendal in September 2022. In August this year, he conducted the official opening.

Parallel with Freyr making an attempt, Elinor and Morrow are also trying to increase the production of batteries in Norway. Morrow opened the first part of its factory in August.

“These are three separate companies with separate capital. Freyr failed to raise enough money when they operated out of Norway, but managed to get money from the US stock exchange and moved their business to the USA.

“The two other companies have capital with more locally rooted mandates, as I see it. They seem to take a fairly long-term view on establishing production in Norway,” explains Burheim.

Very energy-intensive

Norway’s hydroelectric energy production represents a major advantage to energy-intensive battery production.

“Imagine you are manufacturing a 1 kWh battery. You need 40 to 50 kWh to do that. In other words, 40 to 50 times more energy than the actual battery capacity is needed to produce the battery cells. In Norway, the environmental cost is not that big.

“But globally, energy production is linked to CO2 emissions. Norway also has ample access to electricity, as well as skilled labour and expertise in advanced material processing,” he says.

Burheim envisages a Nordic perspective.

“Norway has explored oil and gas while Finland and Sweden have explored minerals. Together we could have a green value chain. You could imagine getting minerals from Sweden and Finland for battery cell production in Norway and Sweden, countries with a lot of hydroelectric power,” explains Burheim.

Technical solutions

Another more technical issue he is working on is how rechargeable batteries lose capacity through use. Burheim is the deputy leader for one of the eight Centres for Environment-friendly Energy Research (FME), financed by the Research Council of Norway. The research programme receives 1.28 billion kroner (€110m) over eight years.

“We will have between 20 and 30 PhD candidates working,” he says.

“A third technical aspect is achieving efficient production. Today, perhaps 70 to 80 per cent of batteries made in one factory can be sold. Creating good enough quality batteries for sale is a challenge,” he says.



This is what is needed – large-scale battery production. Photo: Morrow

Access to raw materials is a fourth and crucial issue. Global mineral access is key.

“China controls much of the mineral market. Access and price have varied in recent years,” explains Burheim.

Big on the green transition

The US Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) impacts what is possible to achieve in Norway.

“IRA is the largest investment in climate and energy in American history, with a total of 369 billion dollars allocated to trigger investments in zero-emission renewables. China offers 30 dollars or maybe more in state support per kWh battery,” he says.

The US and Chinese subsidies make the situation in Europe challenging.

“The situation will be challenging but also different in three to four years. 2027 is very soon if you are to build factories and get production going in Norway.”

This autumn, the Norwegian state broadcaster NRK focused on batteries and regulatory frameworks in its main TV debate programme.

Some participants expressed confidence that battery production will gain momentum using a development approach similar to how the oil and gas sector was built up in Norway.

“The professional community in Norway learned the craft from those coming from abroad, even though many didn’t even speak English. Today Morrow works with people from Korea. We envision that battery production will grow, but it will be difficult to develop this without a production value chain,” says Burheim, and points out that some have managed to achieve this on a smaller scale.

Companies like ABB, Siemens and Corvus make batteries for ferries and other vessels.

Not plain sailing

In June 2022, the Norwegian Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries published the report “Norway’s battery strategy” which points to strengths and opportunities as well as several possible weaknesses.

One is the lack of competencies in large-scale production. Another is limited Norwegian influence when it comes to developing a regulatory framework in the EU. The report points out that few subcontractors in Norway produce technical components.

The processes for obtaining permits for power usage, emissions, and other regulations are also described as time-consuming. For example, if an industrial company needs access to larger amounts of power, it cannot connect to the electricity grid before securing the necessary permits.

The report also points to possible problems like a lack of power and customs barriers to the EU and UK. Production in Norway is also running out of time because the starting gun for the competition has already sounded.

A major debate

One of the points of contention during the NRK TV debate was state intervention versus private initiative.



Lars Christian Bacher from Morrow outside the factory during construction in Arendal. Photo: Morrow

Morrow Batteries' CEO Lars Christian Bacher is among those who strongly support cooperation with the state. He has worked for Statoil and Equinor for 30 years.

“We need a lot of capital to scale up Morrow. We must do the same as when the Norwegian oil and gas industry was established. Technology and skills were brought in from abroad. We became skilled because we have some of the world's best-skilled workers, engineers and researchers,” Bacher told NRK.

The much larger company Northvolt tried in Sweden but went bust. Bacher believes there are several reasons why Morrow should be able to become profitable in Norway.

“Battery production is difficult, so we must not try to take on too much. We have chosen a well-known, proven production technology. This type of battery chemistry is the easiest to produce – LFP, lithium iron phosphate,” says Bacher.

“We have the world's best skilled workers and engineers. And finally, we target segments in the market where the willingness to pay is large,” he told NRK.



Five years left for Nordics to reach aim of being world's greenest region

For five years, the Nordic Council of Ministers has been working with a vision to make the Nordics “the world’s most sustainable and integrated region”. This work has now reached its halfway point. Only five more years remain before the 2030 deadline.

THEME

25.11.2024

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL

COP24 became COP29 from work on the vision started until today. The world’s most important climate meetings also have a Nordic pavilion. At the latest gathering, in Baku, Azerbaijan, representatives from the Nordic Council of Ministers tried to show the way towards a climate-neutral and socially sustainable future.



The Nordic pavilion at COP29 in Baku. Photo: Andreas Omvik/Norden.org

“The Nordic countries are working to lead by example, taking on the global challenges shared by every nation. Our ecological footprint remains high, but we are committed to reducing it. Not only to lessen the strain on Earth’s resources but also to show that sustainable, prosperous societies are achievable,” Secretary General Karen Ellemann wrote in an op-ed when the meeting started.

But sometimes, things feel difficult. Donald Trump has been re-elected US President. That probably means the USA will withdraw from the Paris Agreement again, like Trump did the last time he was President.

The war in Ukraine has been raging for more than 1,000 days. The weapons being used are more and more powerful, and another country, North Korea, has entered into the conflict. This means Europe’s leaders are thinking more about security than the environment.

A trade war between the USA and China is brewing, and Europe will get caught in the middle. China is close to dominating the world market in green technology. Chinese electric vehicle manufacturer BYD has overtaken Tesla and Chinese companies lead in solar, wind and batteries.

As if this was not enough, there have also been negative developments in the Nordics.

Sweden’s big, green hope, Northvolt’s battery factory in Skellefteå, has gone bust. In Mo i Rana in Norway, the Freyr battery company constructed a factory costing nearly three billion kroner (€259m), before competition from China meant the plans had to be put on hold.

There has been no breakthrough in carbon capture and storage, a technology described as essential for keeping the temperature increase to a maximum of 1.5 degrees.

The Greta Thunberg generation is older, while others take more extreme action like throwing paint at artworks.

Is that too negative a summary?

Environmental efforts are rarely in lockstep with an impatient media that wants results now and has not got the patience to wait for five years. It is rare to see new technological innovation that both helps save the environment and works well.

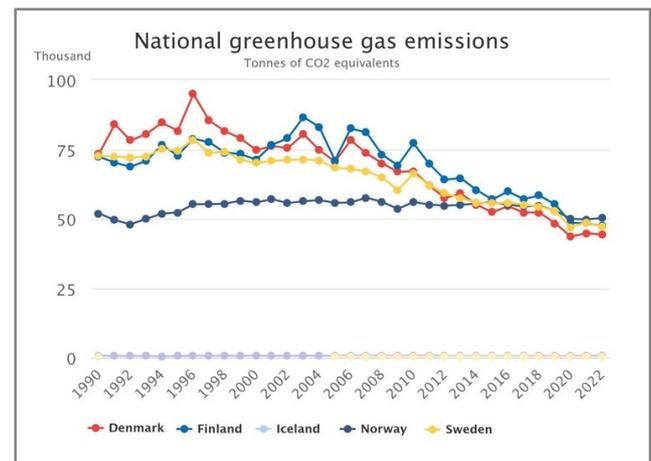
But this summer, I saw the new drinks can and bottle reverse vending machine from Norwegian company Tomra for the first time.

This is not like the traditional machines where you feed bottles and cans one by one through a hole, which quickly leads

to queues when sports team volunteers bring large plastic bags filled with empty bottles.

On the new machine, you simply open a lid and empty the entire bag into it. The machine then quickly sorts out the empty goods and calculates the return.

Looking at the wider picture, quite a lot has happened, even though what has been achieved varies between different countries:

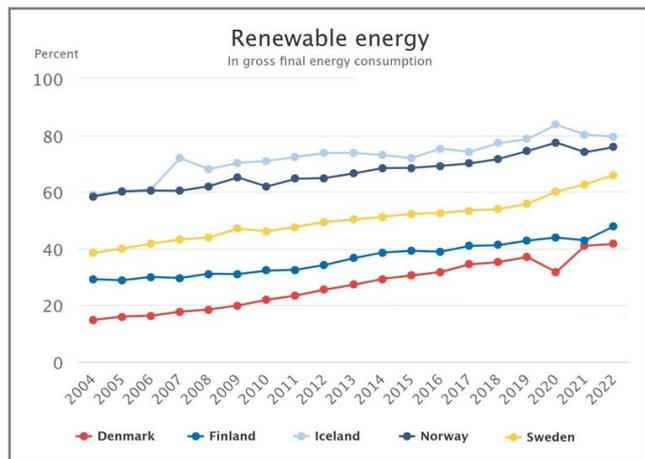


The graph shows the Nordic countries’ greenhouse gas emissions. 1990 is the benchmark used as a starting point in international negotiations. Source: Nordic Statistics.

Greenhouse gas emissions have fallen. The reference point is 1990, the year of the big environmental conference in Geneva. Everything is measured and negotiated against that level. Measured in CO₂ equivalents (where all greenhouse gases are converted into CO₂), countries have by and large achieved a quarter of the reductions needed to reach net zero.

Since 1990, the Nordic countries have reduced their territorial net GHG emissions from 203 million tonnes of CO₂e to 150 million tonnes of CO₂e by 2021, which equals a 26 per cent reduction.

Denmark has come the furthest. Their emissions have been cut by 59 per cent on 1990 levels, while Norway is almost level. Emissions in Iceland have increased.

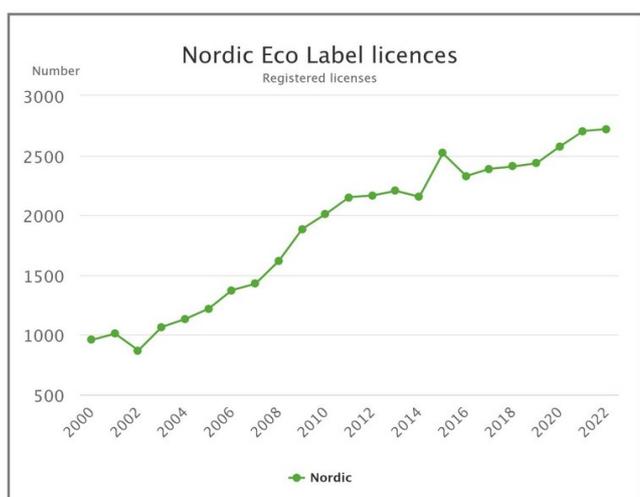


The graph shows the proportion of renewable energy as part of the total energy consumption. Source: Nordic Statistics.

The proportion of renewable energy has also increased. Here Iceland is on top, but Norway too – with its hydroelectric power – features high up.

To place the responsibility for influencing these trends only on the shoulders of the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic Council is asking too much of institutions with a combined annual budget of less than one billion Danish kroner (€134m).

However, if you consider more limited measures, like how many licenses have been issued to use the Nordic Swan – the official environmental label that reviews the environmental impact on goods and services throughout their life cycle from raw material to waste – the development has been encouraging.



The number of licenses awarded to products that meet the Nordic Swan label criteria. Source: Nordic Statistics.

But how does the Council of Ministers plan to reach the goals of Vision 2030? This is outlined in the cooperation pro-

gramme for 2025 – 2030. Each council of ministers has developed its own sectorial policy programme, totalling 14 programmes, that “with a common focus, clear priorities and targeted measures will guide government cooperation in the Nordic Council of Ministers until 2030.”

The program for the labour market says that much points to there being fewer jobs in some sectors and more in others as a result of the green and digital transitions. So it will be important to help those who risk losing their jobs find new ones in other sectors with growth potential.

To manage this, more knowledge is needed about which skills are in demand. It is also important to ensure green and digital transitions also happen outside of the bigger cities.

That is about all the labour market programme says about the green transition. Since education is a separate sector, we move on to the cooperation programme where one of the sub-goals is:

“There must be a good match between the education system and the available jobs and skills needed to realise the green transition and maintain a strong welfare society.”

There is not that much about the green transition in this programme either, but we presume there are more concrete measures listed in the cooperation programme on the environment and climate. Certainly, the ambitions are high:

- “The Nordic region will demonstrate that it is possible to live within the planet’s limits while maintaining high prosperity.”
- This sounds a bit like having your cake and eating it. But if we sum up the many goals it looks like this:
- The Nordic countries will work for an ambitious implementation of the long-term goals set out in the Paris Agreement.
- A transition to completely fossil-free transportation requires infrastructure for sustainable fuels and a transformation of the vehicle fleet. The Nordic countries will share information and work together to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from global shipping and aviation.
- The Nordic countries will support new technology and the development of infrastructure for the capture, use and storage of CO₂. Solutions based on natural carbon sequestration will also be promoted.
- There will be Nordic cooperation to influence and accelerate efforts to stop biodiversity losses.
- The Nordic countries will continue to develop their cooperation on marine environmental issues. Sustainable fishing is a prerequisite for future generations’ ability to use fish stocks as a source of income.

- The transition to a circular economy means changes to design, production, the choice of production methods and consumer patterns. A common Nordic market can facilitate the development of solutions like reuse and recycling not least in the construction industry. Important policy instruments include public procurement, environmental labelling, financial incitements, education, eco-design and producer responsibility.
- The Nordic countries will continue to work to prevent the presence of hazardous products and ensure that problematic substances are not found in the circular economy.

These goals of course require that there are enough people with the necessary skills. You could almost wish there were a machine where you could pour in all the problems and after it had churned for a while, it would produce clear solutions to each problem.



Icelandic fisheries risk zero capelin catch for the second year in a row

Capelin has been one of the most valuable species for the Icelandic fisheries industry and general economy this past decade. Its importance has varied, but throughout this century capelin products have accounted for 17 per cent of fisheries exports and 8 per cent of the market value, making it an important part of the industry.

NEWS

25.11.2024

TEXT: HALLGRÍMUR INDRÍÐASON

Heiðrún Lind Marteinsdóttir, CEO of Fisheries Iceland, says a season where no capelin is caught is not entirely unknown. It last happened in 2019 – 2020 (the annual fishing season runs from 1 September to 31 August).

“Right now, the Marine & Freshwater Research Institute (MFRI) recommends that no capelin is caught during this

season. However, we still have hope since the MFRI conducts its main capelin search in January and February.

“Of course, we hope that goes well but sometimes it’s like looking for a needle in a haystack. We know it’s there, ships spot the capelin and we even see it in the stomachs of cod. So we have a clear indication that it’s there, the challenge is

finding enough of it for the authorities to assign a quota. But we are optimistic.”

Capelin boosts GDP

If no capelin is caught it will affect the economy. A recent economic forecast from the bank Landsbankinn indicates that if the authorities opened up to catch capelin it could increase GDP by 0.5 to 1 per cent for the year.



Heiðrún Lind Marteinsdóttir, CEO at SFS, still hopes there will be a capelin catch in 2025. Photo: SFS

“A good capelin season means 20 – 50 billion ISK (€137.6m –€344m) in export value. That represents value not only for the fishing industry but also for fishermen, people working in fish processing and so on. This means huge tax revenues for the state and municipalities. So everyone benefits from this,” Marteinsdóttir says.

And for the fishing companies, the effects can be huge.

“Capelin is the industry’s second most valuable fish export after cod. So this has a huge impact on company finances and their investment capabilities. It also creates challenges when it comes to keeping staff on the books.

"And there are secondary effects on businesses that service the fishery industry, like machine shops, electricians and fishing net makers which all count on fisheries doing well. So the effects are huge.”

More funds for research needed

The fisheries have long asked for more funds for marine research. This applies especially to capelin since it is not clear where the fish ends up or what causes it to end up where it does.

“We believe there is limited understanding of what it takes to provide good recommendations on catch limits for various species. Marine research has suffered flat budget cuts, and we can understand that the operations need to be streamlined.

“But we know that research ships spend fewer days at sea than before, the species are not monitored as well as earlier

and fewer samples are taken. All this means we know less about what is happening in the sea.

“That leads to more uncertainty which means more cautious scientific recommendations. So I strongly believe that the recommendation is lower because of a systematic uncertainty.”



Capelin is Iceland's second-most valuable export after cod. Photo: Erlend Astad Lorentzen/Havforskningsinstituttet

Marteinsdóttir adds that when fishing regulations were revised 10 years ago, it was widely believed that more ships were necessary to gather the required measurements.

“That hasn’t happened. MFRI has the same number of ships now as before and only one of them is used for capelin search. And one ship is not enough. So MFRI has had to rent ships from fishing companies.

“In some cases, the fishing companies have financed the search themselves. This is very unfortunate when the institute is required by law to carry out this work. But this is the problem and we are not seeing this change any time soon.”

In danger of losing market share

Marteinsdóttir says not many companies would survive for long without capelin.

“It would be very difficult to keep the investments and the machinery going. But the big risk is that as soon as the product is off the market for some time, the consumers go elsewhere.

“Buyers of products like capelin roe simply find a replacement. Then two things can happen; the consumer will stop using these products altogether, or they will be very difficult to access again in high-price markets when things start to improve.

“So it becomes very costly for us if we can’t deliver this product regularly in line with market demands. This can affect prices and our access to a good market, leading to considerable long-term effects. It can take a long time to work our way out of such damage.”

Marteinsdóttir has a recent example – the effects of a two-month strike among fishermen in 2017.

“It took a long time to get the markets back after that – to reclaim space on the store shelves, to get back in the restaurants and so on. Keeping these markets requires constant work.”



Urban women in Denmark want to reform agriculture

Women from urban areas make up a majority of students in the Natural Resources bachelor's programme at Denmark's largest scientific research and educational institution, KU Science. The female students want to work towards healthier food systems, and job opportunities are good.

THEME

25.11.2024

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER, PHOTO: TOMAS BERTELSEN

Andrea Topsøe Sloth and Maia Vial have a bachelor's degree in Natural Resources and are about to complete a master's programme in Agriculture – Production and Environment.

They grew up in Copenhagen but both moved to the countryside and want to become consultants for farmers and work with the sustainable production of healthier foods.



Andrea Topsøe Sloth and Maia Vial sorting seeds for their specialisation in the master's program Agriculture – Production and Environment.

“I have always been interested in fighting for the environment and food production is extremely important for the green transition. So it made sense to me to study plant production and I can definitely see myself getting a job afterwards at a consultancy firm advising farmers,” says Maia Vial.

Andrea Topsøe Sloth nods in agreement:

“It is not entirely easy to see myself in a job afterwards because agriculture is so chemistry-based, but I can also see myself in a job as an agricultural consultant. I would like to get my hands dirty and meet farmers to advise them on topics like soil health.”

Low unemployment

Both emphasise that they do not want to spend their days filling in questionnaires, fertilisation plans and EU applications for farmers, which are some of the services that farmers pay agricultural consultants to do.



Several of Andrea Topsøe Sloth and Maia Vial's fellow students have quit because they found chemistry too hard.

“Plans and questionnaires will probably be part of the job as an agricultural consultant, but the important thing for me is to spread new knowledge about sustainable cultivation methods and to get a personal relationship with the farmer,” says Andrea Topsøe Sloth.

Both are 30 and grew up in Copenhagen. They are part of a new group of students studying agricultural topics, explains Kristian Holst Laursen, associate professor at the Department of Plant and Environmental Sciences at KU Science and head of the bachelor's program in Natural Resources – which nearly 20 years ago changed its name from the Agronomy program.

“This used to be a programme that attracted many students with links to the farming occupation. I am myself a trained agronomist and grew up in the countryside working on a farm from the age of ten. Now, most of the students come

from cities, and there are far more female students than before.”

Right now, there are more spaces than students on this programme. Kristian Holst Laursen believes this is due to a lack of knowledge about what the course entails.

“A course like biology is far more popular because young people know biology from school and upper secondary education. However, unemployment is often higher among newly graduated biologists than among those graduating from programmes that prepare students more directly to work with the green transition, such as Agriculture.”



Kristian Holst Laursen heads the bachelor's programme Natural Resources at KU Science. It now has more female students than earlier.

His students can almost pick and choose between jobs when they graduate.

“All sectors are honing in on the green transition and this has created a lot of new job opportunities in forestry and agriculture both in the public and private sectors. Unemployment is therefore extremely low, students find it easy to get part-time jobs during their studies and some have job offers before finishing their education.”

Want to make a difference

Another challenge for KU Science is that young people today have high expectations for being able to make a difference in their studies and working life while also having time for family life, friends and spare time activities, explains Kristian Holst Laursen.

“Young people no longer identify with work like I and my generation used to. They want to work with something meaningful, but work is not necessarily the most important thing in their life.”

This is something the education system and the labour market must adapt to.

“That’s why KU Science has started a dialogue with employers of graduates about how we can adapt to the expectations that young people today have to working life.”

The young people’s desire for meaningful work makes them impatient with their studies, says Kristian Holst Laursen.

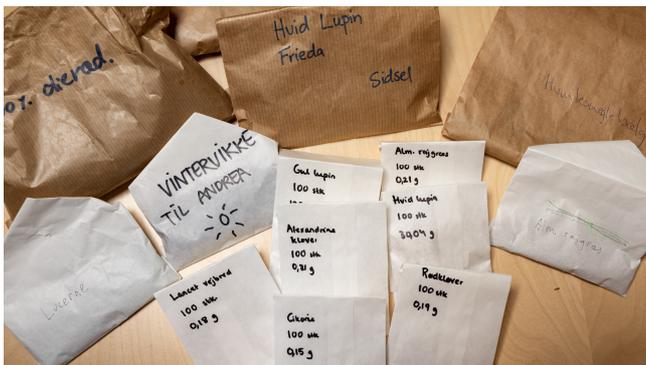
“It is a real challenge that our students today are so keen to make a difference in society that they struggle to see the purpose of learning basic maths and chemistry which they must study during their first year at Natural Resources.

“They want to find solutions immediately to challenges surrounding the climate, environment, biodiversity and food production, but their basic knowledge must be in place first, of course.”

This impatience is something Andrea Topsøe Sloth and Maia Vial know well.



Plant experiments aim to determine whether the yield increases with the use of 'cover crops'.



Contributing to healthier food production is an important motivation for the two master's students.

“We are both a bit nerdy, so chemistry comes easy to us. But some of our fellow students left early because they found chemistry difficult and boring even though they were passionate about the green transition,” says Maia Vial.

The good life in the countryside

The last stop before working life is their ongoing master's thesis, where they are using plant trials to see whether the yield in crop production increases when the farmer plants certain crops after harvest – so-called 'catch crops'.

Both Andrea Topsøe Sloth and Maia Vial have moved out of the capital city and to a farmer’s life in the countryside while studying at KU Science. They each live in separate cohousing communities around one hour from Copenhagen.

There, they grow their own food that is healthy for both people and the planet, explains Andrea Topsøe Sloth, who studied organic agriculture for three years before starting at KU Science.

Both their choice of studies and their rural communal living arrangements help to keep climate anxiety in check, they explain.

“I don’t lose sleep over the state of the planet, but I do feel sad about it. It also helps that, through my studies, I now know a lot is happening in agriculture – even if progress is slow – and that I am part of pushing that development forward,” says Andrea Topsøe Sloth.

Maia Vial adds:

“There is a lot that we can do to improve diversity in food and agricultural production, and that gives me hope. On a more practical level, we can also do a lot where we live, focusing less on consumption. For example, we grow our own vegetables and make juice from surplus apples with our children.”

They both make sure their working lives are compatible with their family life. They also dream about having time to run a hobby farm and contribute to local rural communities.



Difficult conditions for trans people in the Nordic labour market

Trans people are a particularly vulnerable group in working life and face higher unemployment levels, often insecure employment, lower pay and higher rates of sick leave than the majority population. This is according to the report "Trans People's Working Life Conditions in the Nordic Countries", which was presented at a Nordic conference in October.

NEWS

25.11.2024

TEXT: : GUNHILD WALLIN, PHOTO: MAJA BRAND, NIKK

The conference "Improving Working Life for Trans People" was held as part of Sweden's Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers, and was hosted by Paulina Brandberg, Sweden's Minister for Gender Equality and Working Life.

"All people should have good working conditions and opportunities to develop at work regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. This is an important issue for me and the government.



Paulina Brandberg, Sweden's Minister for Gender Equality and Working Life, in conversation with Aaron Kroon during the conference. He runs Black Batman, a business helping leaders, leadership groups and entire organisations to understand the link between diversity, inclusion, profitability and business value.

"This Nordic conference creates opportunities for all of us to learn from each other with the aim of promoting trans people's equal rights in working life," said Paulina Brandberg as she opened the conference.

Much interest in a rarely prioritised group

Around 100 participants from across the Nordic region gathered to listen to the latest on trans people's workplace experiences, an area where knowledge so far has been quite limited. A conference focusing on trans people and the labour market is also unusual.

Surveys are often made about the LBGQT community as a whole, but the report "Trans People's Working Life Conditions in the Nordic Countries", which formed the basis for the conference, shows that trans people are particularly vulnerable.

"There has been so little focus on this group whose members are often excluded from the labour market and the difficult conditions this creates.

"But the conference created a lot of interest and gathered employers, trade unions, researchers, politicians and representatives from civil society," says Susanna Young Håkansson, the report's author.

She is a researcher at the Nordic Information on Gender (NIKK), a cooperation body under the Nordic Council of Ministers.



Susanna Young Håkansson is the author of the report on trans people's working conditions in the Nordic region.

Trans people are vulnerable in the labour market

The report gathers information on trans people's situation in the labour market from all of the Nordic countries and Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland. It shows that trans people are the most vulnerable in the LBGQT group. The sit-

uation is more or less the same across the Nordics but also elsewhere.

Trans people as a group find it harder to enter the labour market, are more likely to be unemployed and are more often in insecure employment compared to other workers. As a result, many of them also struggle with a poorer economy and live in the lower income bracket.

"Ultimately, it's about poverty, exclusion and a labour market that takes a lot of energy to navigate in and around. I had hoped things would be better in the Nordic region with our welfare systems.

"Sadly this is not the case. European statistics show that Sweden, for instance, is the EU country where most trans people have experienced some type of homelessness," says Susanna Young Håkansson.

So why do trans people face a more difficult situation than for instance gay people?

"Many are excluded early on because of rigid gender norms already in school. For some, this leads to isolation at an early age. This again makes it harder to enter the labour market, also for temporary jobs.

"When it comes to gay people, there has been a lot of work done around norms and sexuality over a long period of time, and this has not happened to the norms governing gender. That's why many face discrimination, threats and hate," says Susanna Young Håkansson.

Rigid norms for gender

She says there is a growing resistance to trans people's rights. This was clearly seen during the American presidential election, where trans people became the subjects of misinformation that spread widely among the general population.

When this happens, the debating climate changes and becomes difficult for trans people. Susanna Young Håkansson quotes Edward Summanen who pointed out during the conference it is important to presume there is always a trans person present or someone whose close friend or family is trans.

Many of the obstacles faced by trans people in and around working life are rooted in rigid norms about how men and women are supposed to behave, as well as narrow cis norms saying only two genders exist and that they are static.

"If you go against these ideas, you are punished by society. The consequences for a trans person living in a society where many are ignorant, prejudiced or in the worst case hostile towards trans people often negatively affects both working life and life outside of work in many different ways."

Specific advice for a better workplace

During the conference, the Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise, Mynak, presented its new guide "A Good

Working Environment for LBGQT People, a Research-based Guide for the Workplace”.

“This offers specific advice for how a workplace can approach these issues and become a more inclusive workplace, which is good for both trans people and everyone else,” says Susanna Young Håkansson.

Edward Summanen and Mynak have created a guide for what a workplace can do when an employee is transitioning. Summanen is a social worker who has worked with trans people’s health and living conditions since 2008.

Today he works at Transammans, the organisation for trans people and their families, where he mainly works with suicide prevention and mental health for trans people. He reflects on what is particularly important to create a good and safe working environment for trans people.



Edward Summanen, holding the microphone, is a social worker and gender expert who has worked with support and health issues for trans people since 2008. To his left is Sølve Storm, a psychologist specialising in gender and sexuality. To his right, the moderator Ugly Stefanía Kristjónudóttir Jónsdóttir.

“Overall, it’s about fostering a respectful dialogue where no jokes are at the expense of any group, and people refrain from airing their personal opinions that contradict the idea that everyone is of equal worth.

“Many also feel safer when they don’t have to feel lonely. This could be about others standing up for your rights, or correct colleagues who use the wrong pronouns. It makes a big difference.” says Edward Summanen.

The importance of leadership

He sums up the leader’s role. If a person is going through gender-affirming care, it is important to know that this process takes years. In such cases, it could be necessary for the leader to check with the individual to discuss how the workplace can offer support and how things can be communicated within the organisation.

When someone changes their name, there should be routines in place to quickly update email addresses and other administrative functions.

“For many it is difficult to have to see their old first names. You might even be ‘outed’ if new colleagues have joined and the old name pops up in documentation. This is a violation of integrity, says Edward Summanen.

He also recommends that leaders prioritise employee training and dedicate enough time for equality work. Additionally, he believes that unions and workplace safety representatives may need further training in equality work with a focus on gender identity and gender expression, to guide employees effectively and understand the demands that can be made.

“Overall, leaders have an important role in setting the norms. The clearer the support from a leader, using the correct pronoun and so on, the quicker it has an impact.

“I also believe that all workplaces should assume that there are employees who have trans experiences, whether they are open about it or not. This often contributes to a better dialogue and atmosphere,” says Edward Summanen.

He is happy that the conference highlighted the problems that trans people face in the labour market.

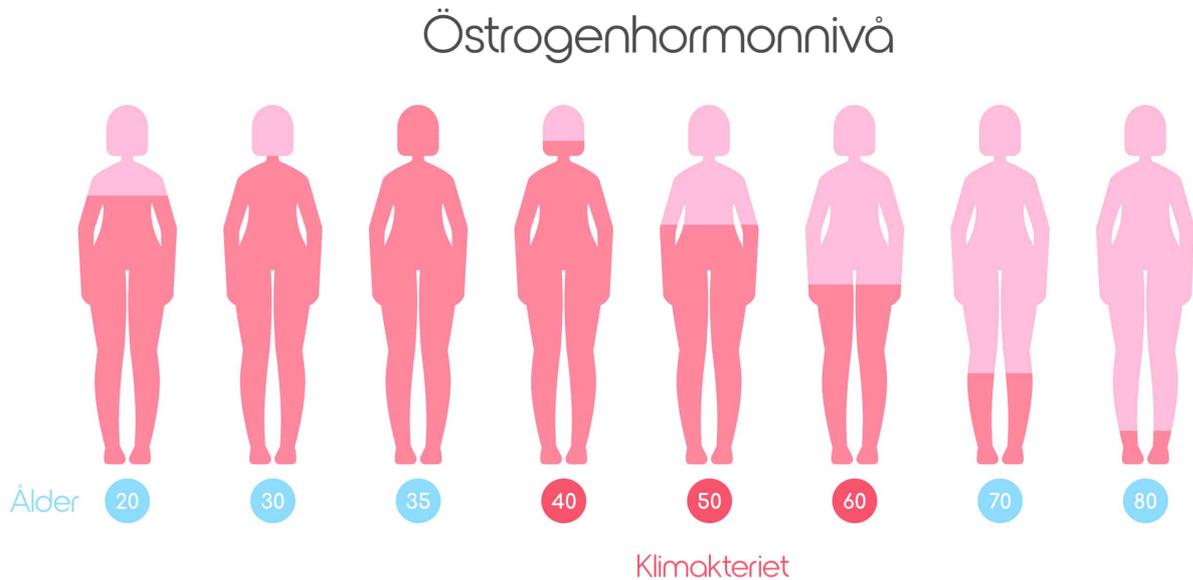
“The NIKK conference did a fantastic job showing the breadth of this issue. First the challenges in finding a job, then securing safe employment and equal pay as a trans person.

“The conference also showed how incredibly varied the experiences are when it comes to trans people’s work environments. Some experience harassment, while others receive support and thrive, feeling very comfortable,” says Edward Summanen.

Susanna Young Håkansson sees the need for further studies. What is the situation for trans people with immigrant backgrounds, for instance, or for those with disabilities?

“Much more work has been done on this in other countries and in the EU than in the Nordics,” she says.

We need more Nordic knowledge to be able to improve working conditions, which are always closely linked to living conditions, for all trans people in the Nordic region.



Menopause initiative saves millions in sick leave costs for Swedish municipality

The traditional phase which sooner or later affects nearly half of the Nordic workforce has long been viewed as a women’s issue. New initiatives are about to change that.

NEWS

25.11.2024

TEXT: FAYME ALM

Private businesses in Denmark are offered lectures and Partille municipality in western Sweden has made permanent a wellness programme which has benefitted both women and the economy.

For a long time, menopause has been a taboo subject in the Nordics that only women spoke about amongst themselves.

The exception is Iceland, where the Association on Women’s Menopause was established back in 2013. The NGO is presented on the Icelandic government’s website.

However, interest and discussions about this transitional phase for middle-aged women have increased significantly in the other Nordic countries. Reports, analyses, online seminars, articles and social media posts about menopause are becoming more frequent, although it can still be a challenge for women to receive adequate care.

The Nordic Labour Journal has examined Denmark and Sweden to focus on initiatives that might reduce sick leave among women with menopausal challenges and, in turn, make things easier for both individuals and employers.

No longer a private problem

“Menopause issues have long been a private issue, but when it affects people’s ability to work it is no longer a private problem but a societal one,” Stine Mathieu tells the Nordic Labour Journal.

She is a trained guide in natural hormone therapy, based in Copenhagen, and every day she meets women with different symptoms caused by menopause.



*Stine Mathieu trained as a journalist. She later trained to become a natural hormone therapist and practices holistically. Today, as a partner in the company *Hormoner på Arbejde ApS* ("Hormones at Work Ltd."), she works on creating menopause-friendly frameworks in workplaces. Photo: stinemathieu.dk.*

Together with her sister Maja Aagaard, Stine founded "Hormoner på arbejde" (Hormones at work) in 2022, which offers guidance on how workplaces can become menopause-friendly. On their website, they write about "creating a framework and work environment where there is room for your skilled employees in all phases of life".

"Symptoms vary but all women can be affected, experiencing sweating, incontinence, sudden tears, sleep problems or other symptoms.

"It's part of our female biology and sometimes women who are on the verge of reaching their career peak are held back when they enter menopause. It's both humiliating and a loss for the business," says Sine Mathieu.

Identifying shortcomings

How menopause affects women varies according to different statistics. One estimate suggests one-third of women notice nothing, one-third have symptoms but can work and one-third have symptoms that are so severe that they are unable to perform their regular work.

Another estimate says 25 per cent of women in menopause experience no symptoms, 50 per cent suffer mild discomfort and 25 per cent suffer severe symptoms.

Whether the percentage of women who struggle to perform their work is 25 or 33 per cent, the size of this issue is obvious. Despite this, it was not until 2023 that the Swedish parliament adopted a motion to "...review the possibility of conducting more equal and improved menopausal care". The motivation was:

"Sweden's menopausal care is neither equal, accessible or sufficient. Surveys show that the treatment offered to women

varies greatly across the country and that hormone treatment is primarily prescribed in larger cities."

Also, referencing the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare's survey from 2021, it was stated that there is "a need for both improved information and guidance for women in menopause, as well as national support for the health sector to help it offer advice, support, and treatment. Women in or approaching menopause need access to high-quality care, regardless of where in the country they live or their prior knowledge."

The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, SKR, has also reported shortcomings in how women in menopause are treated. In their 2022 report "Women's sexual and reproductive health throughout life", their write:

"Women want to and can benefit from more information about menopause. Many experience a lack of knowledge about menopause and about how the symptoms can be alleviated."

Stine Mathieu sees similar gaps and a need for knowledge in Denmark. Through her business, she and her sister meet many women in menopause who have had to take responsibility for their health on their own.

"The women talk to their HR department, and go to see their GP, their physio and their gynaecologist without being offered active treatment. Who you meet and what treatment you're offered is coincidental.

"So many women create their own online communities to ask what other people do. Others do their own research and then ask their doctor to order the hormone treatment they want," she says.

The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare is currently working on national guidelines for menopausal care. These include recommendations primarily aimed at decision-makers and healthcare workers. The publication date is set for the autumn of 2025.

The benefits of information

"Hormones at work" have given lectures at several of Denmark's largest trade unions to spread information about what menopause is and which preventative measures might be needed in the workplace.

As a result, there are now campaigns aimed at securing women the right to a so-called menopause conversation in their employment contracts, explains Stine Mathieu.

But even if menopause has become a more accepted topic of conversation, Stine Mathieu and her sister are met with resistance when they offer Danish businesses lectures and workshops.

“Some become upset, arguing that if we focus on menopause challenges we ruin women’s opportunities – that no employer will hire women over 45.”

That is an argument that the two consultants have no problem countering.

“Capitalist countries like the USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia have been working with menopause challenges for several years and have realised it would be more expensive not to. They don’t want higher rates of sick leave or risk losing their staff, and see people as labour and not as an expense,” says Stine Mathieu.

There is also domestic research on this issue. Lasse Gliemann and Ola Ghatnekar at the University of Copenhagen have produced a report detailing the loss of production related to menopause. They estimate the annual production loss to be between 3.6 to 4.3 billion Danish kroner (€482.6m to €576.5m) with an average productivity loss of 12.2 per cent per person per year.

Municipal project made permanent

Partille municipality has just over 40,000 inhabitants and lies around 10 kilometres north-east of Gothenburg. Kristina Svensson is the municipality’s head of culture and leisure.



“When I was 47, I had severe symptoms. I became anxious and experienced a personality change that I couldn’t understand. After several visits to healthcare providers, I was final-

ly told I had entered menopause and could get help,” she tells the Nordic Labour Journal.

Kristina Svensson contacted the chair of the municipal board Marith Hesse, and the wellness initiative for municipal employees focusing on menopause began to take shape. The aim was to provide managers with more knowledge and offer support to affected women. The initiative consisted of four parts:

- Training for municipal management.
- Lectures at the workplace for female staff aged 40 to 60 providing basic information about what menopause is and might entail.
- Access to personalised menopause counselling with a specialist nurse.
- Fast-track guidance to healthcare services for those wanting that.

“We needed more knowledge before we could see that more women than men were off sick. Many of our women were also on long-term sick leave due to pain or depression,” says Kristina Svensson.

Saving over three million

When the menopause initiative was evaluated, it turned out that sick leave among female employees aged 40 to 60 fell by one percentage point. This saved both the state and municipality money.

“The municipality has saved over three million Swedish kronor (€260,000)*. The total saving for society is double, since the cost of sick pay after day 14 is covered by the national Swedish Social Insurance Agency, Försäkringskassan.”

The municipality has not yet evaluated the factors that led to the fall in sick leave, but Kristina Svensson thinks that it might be a combination of increased knowledge, reduced fear and anxiety of being seriously ill and the awareness that the boss also understands the situation.

“This can make it easier to endure the symptoms and know that you are not alone but going through this together,” she says and adds:

“And of course, the opportunity to receive advice from a specialist nurse in a calm setting and quickly access hormone therapy is something that reduces sick leave.”

Grassroots movement

The initiative has been made permanent in Partille and has spread to other municipalities. There is now more pressure on healthcare centres around Sweden to educate staff on menopause issues.

“What we see most clearly here in our municipality is an attitude change. People now naturally discuss menopause in the workplace. Our project seems to have been a door-opener and is also spreading from person to person,” says Kristina Svensson.

To share Partille's good examples nationally, Marith Hesse participated this autumn at a seminar in the Swedish parliament about menopause alongside doctors, researchers and politicians.

*CALCULATION BY PARTILLE MUNICIPALITY ECONOMY UNIT

"We calculated the cost for employees in the target group, which includes the average salary + social security contributions x the number of employees in the target group.

The sick leave decreased by one percentage point within this group, resulting in a cost saving of 7 million SEK.

Regardless of whether substitutes cover for the sick employee, the value of having people working rather than on sick leave is 7 million SEK.

Since the municipality covers sick pay only from day 2 to day 14, and long-term sick leave (absence exceeding 60 days) in Partille accounts for approximately 45 per cent, we estimated that the municipality's cost savings are about half of this, i.e. 3.5 million SEK."



Special edition: AFI at 60

The Work Research Institute AFI in Oslo is 60 years old this year. It has been celebrated by a conference which presented some of the projects AFI researchers are currently working on. Sick leave is a hot political potato in Norway, and what is the true impact of working from home? The Nordic Labour Journal was there when State Secretary Per Olav Skurdal Hopsø opened the conference and we have also interviewed AFI Director Elisabeth Nørgaard.

THEME

17.11.2024

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL, PHOTO: ILJA HENDEL



Elisabeth Nørgaard: AFI Director hunting for impactful research

“It is not always the freshest data that has the greatest impact in research,” says Elisabeth Nørgaard, Director at the Work Research Institute AFI at OsloMet.

PORTRAIT

17.11.2024

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL, FOTO: ILJA HENDEL

We are in the middle of a debate about how labour market research has changed over the years and what it will look like in the future. A natural theme as AFI turns 60.

Anniversaries represent a good time to reflect on what has happened in the past, but they can also act as a mirror of the times. After 60 years, you also have a sense of how far that period stretches into the future.

Those of us who were born in the 1950s feel WWII was something that happened a very long time ago. When I was ten, it was 20 years since the war, twice as long as I had been living. AFI's first leader, Einar Thorsrud, was 17 when Norway was invaded in 1940 and he was deeply affected by the war.

A teacher in Lillehammer recruited him into the resistance movement.



AFI celebrated its 60th anniversary on 7 November with a half-day conference at Sentralen in Oslo.

A few days after our interview, Elisabeth Nørgaard welcomed people to the 60-year celebrations at Sentralen in Oslo and started by talking about AFI's first year.

"Thorsrud has said that working in the resistance during the war gave him experience with how much small, independent groups can achieve when fighting for a common goal. That gives you an idea of how it is to be the head of AFI!"

When AFI was founded in 1964, it had three employees and was called *Arbeidspsykologisk institutt* (Institute for Work Psychology). Thorsrud has been described as a charismatic person by those who worked with him.

He became central to the so-called collaboration efforts in the 60s. Norway's two main labour market organisations – LO and NHO (known as NAF at the time) worked together to see if democratising the labour market could help reduce alienation, increase engagement and thereby boost productivity.

The researchers at *Arbeidspsykologisk institutt* developed what came to be known as action research. The term was used to indicate a research approach that not only gathered knowledge but also engaged actively with the research process itself.

"Action research became very important and had a lot of impact, as it's often called. Another important example of impact is the contribution of Bjørn Gustavsen, who led the institute between 1962 and 1983.

"He maintained links to AFI until he died in 2018. Gustavsen played an important role in bringing in the Working Environment Act of 1977," Elisabeth Nørgaard reminded the attendees at the 60-year anniversary event.



"The action research still exists but we don't necessarily use that name. Anyone working with youth engagement or other engagement processes is using a variant of action research," says Elisabeth Nørgaard.

But back to our conversation a few days earlier. We understand that "impact" is a bit of a favourite word for Elisabeth Nørgaard. When used in a research context, it points to results that really have influenced social structures, got media attention and become part of public debate.

But why is it not always the freshest data that has the most impact?

"The fact is that one result from one single survey does not always tell us that much. If a high percentage of young people say they fear entering working life, it doesn't mean much if we don't know what young people have said earlier."

That is why long-term studies are important and AFI has published several of them. The most well-known is the Working Life Barometer which each year poses the same questions.

"The latest Working Life Barometer showed big changes among young people. They worry about their own health and working life, and they are uneasy about the future. It is very important to find out whether this is just a dip and whether things turn and they become optimistic and young again. And carefree? Or has something changed? If this is a lasting change, it is worrisome," says Elisabeth Nørgaard.

One of the first examples of AFI's current research presented at the anniversary conference came from Mari Amdahl Heglum who talked about her study. Has it become harder for young adults to establish themselves in working life? She has studied the cohorts born between 1971 and 1987.

"We have not seen an increase in the number of those who are socially excluded. A minority are excluded long-term. A debate built on the wrong premises leads to the wrong solutions," she concluded.

That is why research must also focus on the longer term and make sure answers in big surveys are kept so that it is possible to see how things develop.

"But you must of course also bring in new issues and have rotating themes, this is important too," says Elisabeth Nørgaard.

Her own background is at Statistics Norway, where she worked for 25 years. She has always been interested in statistics.

"I have developed statistics on the international balance of payments and national accounts and hospitals, municipalities, GPs, for Longyearbyen in Svalbard and all kinds of groups. I have always promoted the importance of statistics and believe it is still important.

"It's basically important for democracy. I believe Statistics Norway has an important social mission."



Swedish Facit was a world leader in mechanical calculators, but that was before digitalisation. An old calculator still has pride of place on a bookshelf in Elisabeth Nørgaard's office.

What made you apply for the job as Director of AFI?

“After having had many jobs and positions at Statistics Norway, I was simply ready for something new. I had turned 50 and then this opportunity arose. I remember really well the first interview I attended and I thought: This is a job I want. This sounds exciting. It just felt right.

“So when Kåre Hagen (Head of Research Centre at the Centre for Welfare and Labour Research at OsloMet) rang and offered me the job, I was really happy. I guess something clicked between me and AFI.

When you came to AFI, was it like you had imagined or totally different?

“It was both what I had imagined and some things that were completely different. It felt like I had been there for only a very brief period when the pandemic hit. It had a big impact on the things I was to work with. All the things that had to be prioritised, all the crisis management and planning and working from home. All that took an enormous amount of time.”

But the pandemic also meant new research areas, and for one AFI researcher – Social Geographer Sverre-Erik Mamelund – it became a transformative time. He had spent 20 years studying the Spanish flu. Now, a similar pandemic had arrived, and Mamelund quickly became AFI's most interviewed researcher.

How did he manage to get funding for his research?

“It was to be very topical, of course, but nobody could have known that. Yet a pandemic was considered a threat to society even before the Covid-19 pandemic. It was talked about as one of the things that would hit society,” says Elisabeth Nørgaard.

Other things that followed in the wake of the pandemic were the rapid digitalisation of meetings on various platforms and how working from home functions. During the anniversary conference, Elisabeth sportily appeared in a video where she showed off her own home office – a small desk in the guest room.

“When one of the children come to stay over, I have no home office,” she said.

But the opportunity to work from home also makes it possible to take the dog for an extra walk. Siri Yde Aksnes and Cathrine Egeland follow up the video featuring Elisabeth by presenting figures and responses from their studies. As always, there are several sides to the story – some love working from home because of the independence it brings, others hate it.

AFI began researching work-life balance early on, and it is as topical as ever. 88 per cent of people in knowledge-based occupations believe checking work emails “is not real working”. Online 24/7 – is it time to log off? asked Wendy Nilsen during a presentation at the anniversary conference.

Another AFI study shows – surprisingly – that 12-hour shifts in the health service have many advantages.

“Long shifts mean employees can move tasks around without it affecting other employees. They can for instance wash a patient when they are more cooperative, and there is no disruption during shift changes.

“People with dementia often become uneasy when this happens, and it can take up to two hours before they calm down. Some figures show that the intake of Valium falls by 95 per cent on some wards when long shifts are introduced,” said Vilde Hoff Bernstrøm and Andreas Lillebråten.

But how much is working life really changing? As we go outside with photographer Ilja Hendel to take pictures at the OsloMet campus, it is obvious that taking many pictures no longer represents a cost.

When I was a journalist intern and worked with photographers, they told me that they used to only take two, three exposures per job in order to save on film. When they were back in the dark room, they would pull out the film and only develop those images while leaving the rest of the role of the film in the camera.

“My father always used to say “five kroner” when he took a photo of the family when we were children and went on camping holidays,” says Elisabeth Nørgaard, pretending with her hands to take a photo.

Ilja adds – as part of the debate about how job and private life is becoming intertwined – that he tries to limit himself when on holiday.

“I have this rule that I only take two pictures of each motif then,” he says.

Our small talk continues when walking around to find a good location for the photo shoot at the OsloMet campus is not only about the fact that language changes.



The photographer asks Elisabeth to sit on a round, yellow bench. Yellow is OsloMet’s colour, the same hue used on New York taxis. The university markets itself as “the metropolitan university”. Perhaps there is a link there? We point out that there is no sign outside in Stensberggata 26. But there is a large yellow OsloMet logo.

How is AFI’s relationship to OsloMet really?

Elisabeth Nørgaard told the anniversary conference that it has not always been a bed of roses for AFI.

“After nearly 25 years as partners, in 1987, *Arbeidspyskologisk institutt* was divided in two – a divorce that resulted in us changing names to the Work Research Institute and the other part became what is today the National Institute of Occupational Health in Norway, STAMI.

“AFI has been evaluated several times and in 1992 one evaluation was particularly rough. It strongly criticised action research for lacking documentation and publication. AFI’s method of developing projects together with those the projects concerned was also criticised.

“Tough times followed, with reduced base funding and a need for restructuring in the form of a more market-oriented approach. Acquisition, project follow-up, quality assurance, publishing and recruitment – these were important then and are still important now. And then we fast-forward to 2005, when Arild Steen becomes Director of AFI and there were again demanding times.”



Arild Steen was invited to AFI’s 60-year anniversary conference. He was the director between 2005 and April 2018, when Elisabeth Nørgaard took over.

It became clear that AFI needed a bigger family. The projects that were announced grew bigger and the demands for academic standards were increasingly strict. In 2014, AFI moved into the precursor of OsloMet – the Oslo and Akershus University College – together with the NOVA research institute.

“Moving into a collective at age 50 was cool and clever. Then the gang was extended with NIBR (the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research) and SIFO (Consumption Research Norway) in 2016.

“Like most cohabiting couples we argue; we discuss order, money, where we want to go – but mostly, and primarily, it is incredibly great to be part of what has become Norway’s biggest social science research environment. And not least what is now Norway’s third largest university, OsloMet,” says Elisabeth Nørgaard.

A few days earlier she had told me about the journey AFI has been on – from being an institute where contract funding was a foreign concept to today where all research is externally funded.

“All partnerships have challenges, but AFI has been used to working through networks and collaborations, used to getting commissions, used to being flexible. I absolutely believe it has been positive for AFI to be part of a university. And I think it is positive for the university to house a group of contract researchers. Not just from AFI, but all four institutes.”

At the anniversary conference, she ended like this:

“The institute and the research have developed theoretically, methodologically, and practically over these years. Our research must be relevant, of high academic quality, and contribute to practice and policy-making.

“And we achieve that. Having a clear goal and developing projects together with those it concerns has become modern again, so it comes in waves.”

Hopefully, there will be more research projects with real impact in the next 60 years as well.