

# Nordic Welfare Forum 2025: Nordic trust in a changing world

Conference report



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# Nordic Welfare Forum 2025: Nordic trust in a changing world

Trust is regarded as one of the strongest assets of the Nordic countries. However, as global trust declines, similar trends can be expected in the Nordics. The foundations of the Nordic welfare model are strained in an unpredictable global environment where autocratisation and warfare is on the rise. The increase of polarisation and unequal distribution of wealth are also world-wide trends that could come to influence Nordic welfare policies and, in the end, the levels of trust in the population.

At the same time, demographic and environmental challenges are pressing the Nordics. Birth rates are declining, populations ageing, and the impacts of the climate crisis is becoming more evident also in the Nordic region.

Against this backdrop, the Nordic Welfare Forum 2025 convened in Helsinki, Finland, on 10 September 2025. The agenda was ambitious enough: to explore how trust in the Nordic welfare model could be preserved and enhanced in the face of global change. The conference brought together politicians, researchers, civil servants, and representatives of civil society from across the Nordic region.

The Nordic Welfare Forum 2025 was organised by the Nordic Welfare Centre in co-operation with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health in Finland, on behalf of the Nordic Council of Ministers.



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# Welcome session

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## Secretary General Karen Ellemann, Nordic Council of Ministers

– Trust shapes our societies, our politics, and our everyday relationships. Trust is often described as one of the strongest common assets in the Nordic region.

In her inaugural speech at the conference, Secretary General Karen Ellemann emphasised that the overarching theme Nordic Trust in a Changing World could hardly be more relevant. Trust, she noted, is one of the defining features of the Nordic countries and a quality often admired from abroad.

– Today, the Nordic region has the highest level of trust worldwide. This benefits individuals, the economy, and society as whole. However, at a time of rapid global change, even trust is being put to the test. Digitalisation, climate change, migration, geopolitical tensions, and demographic shifts – including an ageing population and a declining birth rate – all present new challenges to cohesion, security, and institutional legitimacy.

Ellemann stressed that this development raises many questions: how can trust be maintained when norms change, societies become more diverse, and information and disinformation spread in entirely new ways?

– We know that high levels of institutional trust are not a given: they are the result of long-term efforts.

Nordic co-operation has always been based on a strong sense of community and mutual confidence, Karen Ellemann said.

– Through openness, dialogue, and shared responsibility, we have built societies that are not only effective and fair but also characterised by togetherness and care. And it is this trust – between countries and between people – that is our real strength, and which we must now safeguard together for the future.

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**Trust shapes our societies, our politics, and our everyday relationships. Trust is often described as one of the strongest common assets in the Nordic region.**

Secretary General Karen Ellemann, Nordic Council of Ministers



Photo: Mikaela Sonck

# Opening remarks

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## Minister Kaisa Juuso, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health in Finland

Minister Kaisa Juuso emphasised that social trust and cohesion were among the main priorities in the health sector during Finland's presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2025. She pointed out that the Nordic countries are seen as societies with high levels of social and institutional trust.

– Indeed, this high level of trust has been called the Nordic gold. It is a fundamental pillar of our welfare societies. But we must not take it for granted.

Juuso referred to several geopolitical risks that influence trust such as the war in Ukraine, domestic issues such as increasing polarisation, online crime that crosses borders, and neighbourhood segregation. Declining birth-rates and the fast-aging populations were also recognised by her as challenges to the Nordic welfare model.

– Safeguarding this welfare model is crucial, as it increases resilience and our ability to face future challenges and even crises.

According to Minister Juuso limited digital skills could leave some groups behind. During Finland's presidency in the Nordic Council of Ministers, particular attention has been given to enhancing digital skills and implementing technical accessibility across the healthcare sector.

The minister concluded that social trust and sense of belonging for all are vital to sustain resilience in uncertain times and deserve to be strengthened.



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# Plenary session | Trust as a concept in the world and in the Nordics

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## **Communications Associate Sami Husa, United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER) : Theory of trust and world trends**

Sami Husa presented insights from the [United Nations World Social Report 2025](#), the organisation's flagship publication on social policy. He summarised the findings by stating that the world is facing a trust crisis. More than half of the world's population report having little to no trust in their governments, while one in four people believes that most other people cannot be trusted.

Husa defined three dimensions of trust: institutional trust, interpersonal trust, and social cohesion. He emphasised that trust is not just a feeling, but a force that shapes societies, operating as either an upward or downward spiral.

– When trust is high, people are more willing to cooperate, participate in civic life, and follow rules. This strengthens accountable governance, fair taxation, and solidarity, creating a positive cycle of prosperity and social cohesion. This is a pattern often seen in the Nordics. When trust diminishes, the opposite occurs: polarisation grows, insecurity deepens, and mistrust spreads, leading to fragility.

Unequal distribution of wealth and poor governance, are the main threats to institutional and interpersonal trust, according to the report's most consistent findings across all countries.

– Inequality erodes solidarity, weakens cohesion, and undermines the social contract. Corruption erodes confidence in institutions and can also impact how people interact with one another. The key point is that people not only care about whether institutions work well; they want them to work fairly. Conversely, when people feel economically secure, such as in high-income countries like the Nordics, trust is stronger and social cohesion is more resilient.

Sami Husa noted that global trust is slowly crumbling. Each generation starts from a lower level than the one before. When trust collapses, societies not only become more cynical but also more divided, unstable, and fragile, allowing extremism to spread.

– The good news is that trust can be rebuilt. History shows that when institutions are fair, inclusive, and deliver on their promises, citizens respond with confidence and co-operation.

[The World Social Report 2025](#) calls for a new policy consensus based on equity, security, and solidarity. The report highlights four priorities: strengthening institutions through fair rules, anti-corruption, and effective services; tackling inequality and insecurity by investing in poverty reduction, social protection, and decent jobs; connecting society through free civil society and transparent media; and reinforcing global co-operation, as cross-border crises require multilateral solutions and international solidarity.

– Trust is more than an abstract concept, it can be built or broken by policy choices, Sami Husa concludes.



The good news is that trust can be rebuilt. History shows that when institutions are fair, inclusive, and deliver on their promises, citizens respond with confidence and co-operation.

Communications Associate Sami Husa, UNU-WIDER

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## Senior Economist Sarah Kups, OECD: Institutional trust in OECD and the Nordics

Declining trust is also evident considering recent data from the [OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions – 2024 Results: Building Trust in a Complex Policy Environment](#). Senior economist Sarah Kups presented statistics showing that across 30 participating OECD countries, low or no trust in the government now exceeds high or moderately high trust in the government. A marginally greater proportion trusts the government rather than mistrusts it in the Nordics.

– Across the Nordic countries, the national governments enjoy high or moderately high trust among 44% of the population, while 42% have low or no trust.

From the Baltics Estonia and Latvia participated in the survey. In Estonia 38% and in Latvia 29% report high or moderately high trust in the government.

Compared to all the 18 OECD countries that participated in the two latest surveys, the decline of high or moderate trust has been faster among the Nordics. This is especially true in Finland, Iceland, and Norway, whereas in Sweden, there has been a slight increase in trust in the government.

Different population groups show varying levels of trust. In general, women, individuals who feel financially insecure, and those with lower educational backgrounds tend to trust the government less. Sarah Kups drew attention to one finding in particular: trust in relation to perceived political voice.

– People who believe that people like themselves have a say in what the government does, are much more likely to have high or moderately high trust in the national government than those who do not.

Sarah Kups also identified two other major drivers of trust in the government within the OECD data: the belief that evidence and quality data inform policy, and the perception that the government genuinely considers the interests of different generations when taking decisions.

The findings in the survey underpin policy recommendations to enhance trust in public institutions. Engaging better with citizens, that is, creating meaningful citizen participation in decision-making, is a key recommendation. Others include strengthening the ability to transparently address complex policy challenges, supporting a healthy information ecosystem, investing in improving perceptions of integrity, and continuing to invest in reliable, responsive, and fair public services.

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**Across the Nordic countries, the national governments enjoy high or moderately high trust among 44% of the population, while 42% have low or no trust.**

Senior Economist Sarah Kups, OECD

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## **Professor Gert Tinggaard Svendsen, Aarhus University: The secret behind trust as the Nordic gold**

Although institutional trust seems to decline in the Nordics, Professor Gert Tinggaard Svendsen emphasised that interpersonal trust remains high in the region and considered it one of our most valuable assets. He referred to the 'Nordic Gold', a common perception in the Nordics that other people can be trusted.

– How come the Nordic region is so wealthy and so happy? The whole world is

watching us, but we do not think too much about it because it is just what it is. We take it for granted that people can be trusted and that a word is a word. This is quite exceptional.

Gert Tinggaard Svendsen argued that the high levels of interpersonal trust in the Nordics should not be taken for granted but must be recognised and safeguarded as a Nordic asset. Tinggaard Svendsen argued that the level of interpersonal trust depends on the perceived risk of being cheated, and in the Nordics, this risk is seen as low. Many in the Nordics seem to have 'inherited social trust' from earlier times when most people could not write or read, and agreements had to be confirmed by word or handshake. When partners and people trust each other, they tend to cooperate more effectively. Agreements and trade deals can still be made by word or handshake. Long and complex contracts can be avoided for simple and basic matters and life thus becomes easier, and society functions more efficiently.

In what constitutes the wealth of a nation, around half is attributed to labour and one quarter to physical capital, but the last quarter is a missing link. Gert Tinggaard Svendsen suggests that this missing quarter might have to do with trust.

Interpersonal trust is dependent on "hard riders", people that uphold common formal and informal civic rules that enhances social cohesion. Society also holds 'easy riders' or persons that ignore or actively break common rules. 'Easy riders' are endangering the preservation of the high levels of interpersonal trust in the Nordics. To protect Nordic trust as the 'Nordic gold', Gert Tinggaard Svendsen stressed the importance of 'tough riders' who dare to speak out when someone does not follow the rules. People should not quietly allow the rules to be broken. By acting, we teach the next generation how trust is upheld.

– The overall message is that we need to speak up when necessary, Professor Tinggaard Svendsen concludes.



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# Plenary session | The prerequisites for social cohesion and institutional trust

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## Professor Olavi Kangas, University of Turku: All you need is trust

Professor Olavi Kangas concurred with the previous speakers that trust is a crucial element of economic growth, citing the example of 2000 former engineers at Nokia Mobile in Oulu coming together after the company's collapse had led to their job losses. The engineers decided that they needed to trust each other, and handshakes were considered sufficient when starting new enterprises, with no formal documents needed.

– It is called the Oulu miracle. Today, high-tech employment in Oulu is higher than during the heyday of Nokia mobiles.

People from the Nordics, says Olavi Kangas, are sometimes seen as somewhat naive because they are usually happy taxpayers and have high trust in institutions. In Europe, the Nordics lead the statistics of both institutional and interpersonal trust.

When people move across borders, they tend to take their trust levels with them. Professor Kangas points out that the high Nordic trust in institutions also tends to rub off on people who move here from elsewhere. In the Nordics, foreigners tend to trust the institutions almost to the same degree as the

natives. When it comes to personal trust, there is a slightly greater difference between those born in the country and those who have moved there, but both groups still have high levels of trust compared to the rest of Europe.

Northerners who have moved away from the Nordic countries to other regions, tend to trust institutions less in their new home country, but yet more than the native population of that country. This also applies to interpersonal trust.

Trustworthy institutions create trust among the people, and vice versa. Higher trust in institutions is connected to a higher level of personal trust and cohesion in society. Olavi Kangas mentioned the Finnish basic income experiment from 2017 to 2018, when select groups received an unconditional basic income.

– The experiment taught us that the unconditional basic income increased trust in institutions that previously had not been that trusted because of bureaucracy. I'm not advocating for basic income here, but I'm saying that if social institutions are predictable and have less bureaucracy, people feel treated with more dignity.

– What makes us less trusting is selectivity, bureaucracy, unpredictability, and randomness, Professor Olavi Kangas concluded.

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## **Doctoral Researcher Oskar Rönnerberg, University of Helsinki: What about the neighbourhood?**

Life is local. Neighbourhoods matter. Oscar Rönnerberg delivered a presentation based on a research project, The Vulnerable Neighbourhoods Survey, which aimed to find ways to improve trust and cohesion in neighbourhoods where trust is low and people feel that they are not heard.

– For lower-income groups, lives are more locally bound to the neighbourhood. The small things in the immediate surroundings of our homes affect how we see our lives. Do we spend time in our neighbourhood, or do we always go somewhere else?

The Nordics stand out as societies where people trust each other and the government, partly due to their strong welfare state that cares for everyone. Nevertheless, in Finland, there has been a decline in trust in the institutions through which people often experience the state, such as the healthcare or

educational systems. As institutional trust and interpersonal trust are linked, this may lead to a lower level of trust overall.

– Our societies are now more polarised, diverse, and segregated than before. We live increasingly apart from people who are not like us. The growing disparities between areas cause disadvantages to accumulate in certain neighbourhoods, directly impacting people's equal opportunities, such as employment or education. In the long run, this can lead to more societal unrest, crime, and mistrust between social groups.

The Vulnerable Neighbourhoods Survey shows that trust in other people in these vulnerable neighbourhoods is lower than in Finland overall. The reasons for reduced trust could be ethnic diversity, segregation, accumulation of disadvantage and social risks, and changes in the neighbourhoods. Many people in such neighbourhoods also report that they do not feel safe. Still, institutional trust remains high in these neighbourhoods.

One problem in trying to strengthen social cohesion and trust in vulnerable neighbourhoods is that decisions are made by more privileged groups who do not have sufficient knowledge about the communities they are attempting to help. This can, in the worst case, lead to reduced trust and more conflicts.

– We need new ways to stop segregation; the current methods are not enough. When the problems are related to drugs and alcohol, for instance, we need the expertise of social workers in the area. National policies that are not tailored to local conditions will not help the situation.

In conclusion, Oskar Rönnerberg emphasised the importance of local schools in urban planning.

– The school is the key institution around which a neighbourhood is built and could function as a community hub also outside school hours.



**For lower-income groups, lives are more locally bound to the neighbourhood. The small things in the immediate surroundings of our homes affect how we see our lives.**

Doctoral Researcher Oskar Rönning, University of Helsinki

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### **Senior Researcher John Lapidus, University of Gothenburg: The hidden welfare state**

Except for Iceland, private health insurance has become increasingly popular in the Nordic countries over the last years. According to senior researcher John Lapidus, this erodes trust in the public healthcare system in the Nordics.

– For example, in Sweden, 800,000 people are now signing up for private health insurance, which means they will receive faster access to healthcare than others waiting in line. We are creating a parallel healthcare system that contradicts the Swedish Healthcare Act, which states that healthcare should be provided based on needs and on equal terms for all citizens.

John Lapidus states that we are creating business interests that benefit from a reduced trust in the healthcare system. This marks a move away from the Nordic welfare state, since the private healthcare system is primarily aimed at the healthier and wealthier segments of the population, rather than all social classes.

– This leads to the creation of divided welfare states, one visible and one hidden welfare state in the same country.

On the surface, private healthcare providers welcome both publicly and privately funded patients – creating two different entrances to the same clinic with different waiting times. On a deeper level, there are two types of privatisations: private provision and private funding, reinforcing each other.

Lapidus is concerned that Sweden's healthcare system may become more like those in countries such as the United States, where healthcare providers have

little incentive to treat poorer and older patients. Furthermore, private healthcare could reduce people's willingness to pay taxes, as they already feel their healthcare needs are catered for through private health insurance.

– All workers' unions claim to support the Nordic welfare model. However, when white-collar unions begin offering private healthcare insurance to their members, they find themselves in a hypocritical and odd situation where they are simultaneously undermining the Nordic welfare system.

John Lapidus suggests measures to counteract private health insurance, including tax reforms, legal changes, and ending profits in welfare.

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## Panel discussion

- **Member of Parliament Eva Lindh**,  
Swedish Riksdag, Committee for Welfare in the Nordic Region
- **Member of Parliament Eva Biaudet**,  
Parliament of Finland, Committee for Welfare in the Nordic Region
- **Senior Specialist Venla Bernelius**, Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture
- **Senior Researcher Mats Stjernberg**, Finnish Environment Institute (Syke)

In the panel discussion, participants were asked to identify a key message from the sessions so far. Mats Stjernberg and Venla Bernelius underlined the importance of local neighbourhoods and not letting disadvantaged areas fall behind.

– Neighbourhoods are in many ways the interfaces to society for a lot of people. Services really matter. People feel left behind when the services are far away from home, Bernelius said.

According to Eva Biaudet, authorities often assume people will trust them, yet we should be mindful that not everyone shares the same level of trust typically found in Nordic countries. Mistrust in authorities can sometimes be justified, especially when it comes to an immigrant's past experiences with the authorities. Such mistrust should not be taken as an insult.

Eva Lind feels frustrated that the Nordic countries are not focusing even more on trust.

– I feel we politicians are working very much against each other when we should in fact be working together; we are letting this 'Nordic Gold' slip away. As a social worker I have been working extensively with young people, so I understand why many of them are losing trust. We are not doing enough to help young people regain that trust.

Both Eva Lindh and Eva Biaudet mentioned inequity and segregation as a significant problem that is evident at various levels in society.

– In Sweden, segregation is now so high that people do not meet, and they do not know how others in different neighbourhoods or cities live. When the welfare state is crumbling, it also affects trust, according to Eva Lindh.

The notion by Oskar Rönnberg that schools could be developed as community centres was well received by the panellists.

– There are already excellent examples of this across all Nordic countries where schools have played multiple roles, and I think there is much to be gained from this, Venla Bernelius said.

– When many services have moved away from small towns, the school remains an important local institution. Considering how school facilities could be combined with other types of use might definitely help to make neighbourhoods more liveable and provide better access to various public services for residents, Mats Stjernberg concluded.

Eva Biaudet agreed and added that welfare services should be accessible in everyday life. Schools are an excellent place to reach young people with a low threshold for various services, such as mental health support and other assistance.

– I believe that schools and possibly early childcare are the best places to reach families and children.



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# Keynote presentation

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## **Professor Kenneth Nelson, University of Oxford: The longstanding challenges of the Nordic welfare model: Social policy and the green transition**

Before digging into the topic of social policy and green transition, Professor Kenneth Nelson gave a short overview of crises that have short, mid and long-term impacts on society. This constituted an important backdrop to the afternoon programme of the Nordic Welfare Forum 2025, focusing on trust and crises. Decision makers must deal with different kind of crises simultaneously to preserve the Nordic welfare model and well-being for all citizens.

Focusing on the Nordic welfare model as part of the transition to more sustainable living, Kenneth Nelson did not single out trust in his keynote speech but noted that trust is an underlying factor in how the challenges related to global warming should be tackled.

Kenneth Nelson stressed that all Western countries need to intensify their climate initiatives, as the promises they have made so far will not be sufficient to keep global warming within the targets of the Paris Agreement. Most governments aim for economic growth, social equity, and ecological stability, and are therefore facing a challenging 'eco-social-growth' trilemma, as Nelson put it.

– The problem is that these goals tend to be contradictory. Economic growth is not compatible with ecological sustainability. However, slowing down economic growth could harm the poor. Many ecological objectives are also regressive in

nature: they disadvantage poor people more than rich people.

To address this issue, many researchers tend to support radical reforms to the welfare state, replacing the current political system with free basic services, which Nelson describes as a Marxist argument.

– I do not believe in that solution, as it is not practical. We will not be able to completely change the Nordic welfare state in the next thirty years. Another problem I have with that solution is that it does not take social insurance into account.

Instead, Nelson is reviewing our current policies to see if they can partially address the trilemma, focusing on three studies that might suggest possible solutions. He maintains that the Nordic countries have the potential to solve the trilemma without resorting to free basic services.

– I believe we need to raise carbon taxes and find ways to encourage greater willingness among people to pay them.

Statistics indicate that carbon taxes are regressive, disproportionately impacting poorer individuals. The higher the carbon tax in a society, the more people are driven into poverty. However, Kenneth Nelson claims that effective social insurance can help ease this burden on the less wealthy and counteract their risk of falling into poverty when carbon taxes need to be significantly increased in the future.

Given that social insurance and social assistance are cornerstones of the Nordic welfare model, the Nordics may be better prepared to tackle the challenges of global warming, Kenneth Nelson argues.

Eco-social values within a population may serve as a support reservoir for climate mitigation policies. This group of people cares about the environment and the poorest in society. When faced with a choice between prioritising ecological and social values, they tend to choose social values. However, strong social insurance can make that choice beneficial for the environment as well and increase their willingness to increase carbon taxation.

When considering the need for economic growth in different states, Kenneth Nelson argues that de-growth is not politically feasible and could also negatively affect people with low incomes. However, if properly designed, social insurance offers significant possibilities for redistributing national wealth.

– My main message is that we should not only talk about totally reorganising

the welfare state to resolve the eco-social-growth trilemma. There is strong evidence that we can work with the policies we currently have in place. The Nordic countries are in a very good position because, when it comes to social security, it is both universal and generous.



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# Plenary session | Reproductive agency and social trust in the Nordics

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## Research Professor & Director Anna Rotkirch, Population Research Institute, Finland: Nordic fertility decline: drivers and policy challenges

Fertility trends have been declining in the Nordic countries for the last 15 years. The link between decreasing birth rates and social trust was discussed by the speakers at the conference, starting with Anna Rotkirch. Childbearing has become linked to societal polarisation, where those with more resources are the ones who want, plan for, and have children.

– When talking about reproductive agency, it is absolutely not the case that everybody can decide whether or not to have a family.

Anna Rotkirch has produced [two reports](#) on the decline of childbirth in Finland for the previous and current governments. Still, she says nothing has been done to alleviate the situation, even though everybody talks about it as a crisis. She urged the Nordic colleagues to join forces.

– Any specific government does not cause the big trend we observe; it is a pan-Nordic phenomenon.

In the first decade of this millennium, Anna Rotkirch says, it looked like the Nordics were stabilising and had found the right recipe: gender equality, inclusion, moderate economic disparities, and family-friendly policies. The fertility rate went up.

But then, around 2010, the decline began, and although the situation has stabilised somewhat in Finland and Norway, the overall trend is that of a crisis. This necessitates new explanations. Anna Rotkirch says the primary driver of fertility decline is a reduction in first births – once a person has a child, it is not comparably unlikely that they will have a second or third. But increasingly, more people are having no children at all.

– In Finland, half of the population in their early thirties have no children of their own. We have high levels of childlessness, most of which is unwanted. A significant change from previous generations is that young people are not having children. Behind this is a drastic decline in marriage.

The traditional pattern was a couple forming a cohabitation at around 25, then having a child, and possibly more children. Nowadays, the most common result of that first cohabitation is separation.

– They are not getting married, and they are not having children either. When asked why, most young adults say that the main reason is that they have not found a suitable partner.

Anna Rotkirch states that social loneliness is negatively linked to the desire to have children. The less social loneliness a person experiences, the more likely they are to plan for and have children.

– This relates to social trust. I hope we can continue this work at a Nordic level – we need to preserve and value Nordic family policies. Still, we also need to focus on family formation policies for young adults under 30.

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## **Assistant Professor Ásdís Aðalbjörg Arnalds, University of Iceland: Paid parental leave and social sustainability in the Nordics**

Ásdís Aðalbjörg Arnalds presented findings from the Nordic Council of Ministers report [Paid Parental Leave and Social Sustainability in the Nordic Countries](#).

The main aim with the report was "to address to what extent the Nordic countries have been able to create and reform parental leave policies that contribute to socially sustainable societies and make it possible to have children for those who so desire".

She argued that a well-designed and just paid parental leave system is a cornerstone of sustainable societies. It supports parents' labour market participation, and benefits parents' physical and mental health and well-being. It has the potential to promote gender equality and reduce inequality and poverty.

The Nordic countries have long co-operated on family policy. The collaboration began in the 1920s, and since the 1970s, paid parental leave with financial compensation for both parents has been in place. Quotas for fathers, and mothers, were introduced in the 1990s; these encourage both parents to utilise the leave. Specific quotas for fathers have had a positive impact on fathers' use of parental leave in all Nordic countries. Parents in families with high socioeconomic status are more likely to use and share parental leave in the Nordics.

Ásdís Aðalbjörg Arnalds pointed out that it is important to consider paid parental leave also in relation to the new labour-market order and declining fertility and ask: Who are the people refraining from having children? Parental leave entitlement and payments vary by employment and education. The population with the lowest socioeconomic status is the least likely to have children, but when they do, they less often share parental leave and are more likely to only get the minimum flat-rate benefits.

Ásdís Aðalbjörg Arnalds concluded that while Nordic parental leave-systems align with the social sustainable development goals, they also risk masking growing social and economic inequalities.

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**Senior Researcher Per Oleskog Tryggvason, Indikator Opinion, Sweden & Project Manager Edvin Boije, Indikator Opinion, Sweden: Love, Politics, and Polarisation: How Gender Divides Could Shape Our Demographic Future**

The Swedish survey company Indikator Opinion conducts hundreds of surveys annually, including the World Value Survey and the European Social Survey.

Indikator Opinion also carries out political polls, and its data is frequently used in research and public debate.

– In one of our latest surveys, we explored the intersection between love and politics, particularly how important political values are when forming relationships, Per Oleskog Tryggvason says.

The results reflect a significant trend over the past few decades concerning gender polarisation. This global phenomenon is particularly evident among young voters: a generation of young men and women are increasingly diverging politically.

Male and female voters have very different worldviews today. There is a significant difference, especially in cultural values and migration policies.

Polarisation centres on political views and cultural values that are difficult to compromise on. While some individuals do not consider sharing these values with their partner very important, about half of the population believe it is essential. When split by gender, women tend to view the importance of shared values as higher than men do.

– It's not only a big gulf between men and women and their political views, but it is also a gulf between the importance that you place on having these similar values, says Per Oleskog Tryggvason.

At the age when people typically find their partners and fertility is at its highest, this issue becomes especially important. Sharing values with your partner is particularly significant among the young, highly educated, and women and is more pronounced on the political extremes rather than the centre.

As many as 66% of women under 30 believe it is important to share the same political views as their partner, while the figure for men is only 28%.

– At least in Sweden, men and women are more divided than they have ever been before. They vote for different political blocs, and their worldviews differ. We find that, especially for young women, political kinship is crucial when starting a relationship. So, considering the fertility rate crisis, we may not have seen the worst yet.

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## Panel discussion

- **Project Manager Grete Maria Avent**, President Kaljulaid Foundation, Estonia
- **Board Member Lauri Salo**, Nordic Youth Council, Nordic Council
- **Development and Training Manager Joonas Kekkonen**, Miessakit ry, Finland
- **Assistant Professor Ásdís Aðalbjörg Arnalds**, University of Iceland

Moderator Heidi Orava opened the discussion by asking the panellists to comment on the fact that birth rate remains low despite reproductive freedom in the Nordics.

Lauri Salo did not see this as a contradiction:

– One perspective we often overlook is that it is not just a societal issue, but also a personal tragedy when people’s desires for a family are unfulfilled.

According to Lauri Salo, the society’s financial support needs to be in place and should also facilitate more opportunities for potential partners to meet, such as measures to encourage more men to pursue higher education and feminist regional policies. He argues that young people need to have more faith in the future, and many actions are needed.

Grete Maria Avent has conducted research in Estonia among 18–24-year-old males who support controversial influencers, such as Andrew Tate.

– We often discuss policies that can influence young women to have children, but before you become a mother, you need love and a trusting partner. If there’s no one to fill that role, there will be no babies, either.

Grete Maria Avent said the first step in overcoming the gender divide is always dialogue.

– Men are often excluded from these discussions. A fair and honest dialogue with men who are feeling left out would be the first step.

In his daily work with men, Joonas Kekkonen encounters the issue of not having children; for these men, childlessness begets sorrow and despair. He contends many men feel algorithmically excluded from the dating pool, since a lot of dating has been digitalised.

In the face of broader challenges such as environmental anxiety, loneliness, and cultural change, which affect young people's willingness to start families, many also consider they have no future. Many gay men also feel left out, as it is challenging to find ways to have children.

– Additionally, many men feel they cannot trust women or society. Even if they become fathers, they fear that fatherhood can be taken away from them. More and more men feel marginalised in this issue, and they do not know how to address it. They experience exclusion, and their longing for family and love seems to break them, Kekkonen says.

Ásdís Aðalbjörg Arnalds reminded the audience that voluntary childlessness, although on the rise, is still a matter of a relatively small group.

– In a survey, one third of the respondents said they did not want children, while a majority said they were waiting for the right time, such as secure housing. This indicates that we are not providing enough support for those who want children.

Ásdís Aðalbjörg Arnalds noted that there are also increased pressures on parents today, with many feeling they need to spend more time with their children and invest a significant amount of time and money in them.

– In interviews with women who have chosen not to have children, many say they would consider having children if they could be freed from some of these responsibilities, or 'if I could be the dad', as some of them phrased it. Despite being the most gender-equal region in the world, perhaps our societies are not providing enough gender equality.

The discussion concluded with a call for truly inclusive policies that recognise all family forms, from rainbow families to new community-based arrangements.



Moderator Heidi Orava (left)

Panelists Lauri Salo, Grete Maria Avent, Joonas Kekkonen and Ásdís Aðalbjörg Arnalds

Photo: Pia Nevala Westman



Photo: Mostphotos

# Plenary session | Institutional trust and crisis preparedness in uncertain times

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## **Senior Lecturer Minna Lundgren, Mid Sweden University: Uncertain plans for uncertain times: How can we secure the functioning of society**

In uncertain times, when societies prepare for future crises, institutional trust becomes crucial. Minna Lundgren focused on how healthcare and social care systems would be challenged in future crises, both in terms of environmental risks and global politics, such as the consequences of Russia's war in Ukraine.

– At a time of heightened alert or armed conflict, the Nordic countries face serious challenges in organising healthcare and social services.

Lundgren pointed out that Sweden dismantled much of its total defence system in the 1990s but has resumed planning, requiring authorities to assign staff to wartime roles. The demand for health and social care is expected to rise during a severe crisis or war, and there is uncertainty about how the responsibility for meeting this demand will be shared.

– The healthcare sector and the social care sector are fragmented and largely privatised. They struggle even under normal conditions.

One unclear aspect is how the legal obligations of private companies in the

health and social sectors require them to respond in the event of a serious situation. The system of total defence duty and wartime postings complicates this further, since regions and municipalities apply the rules differently.

– In some municipalities, almost all services are privatised, while in others, almost none are. There are also increasing disparities in access to social and healthcare services between urban and rural areas.

The so-called gig economy also has a part to play, involving individuals offering services to companies or private clients. How they should act during a crisis is an open question. Many of these individuals work for multiple employers, making it impossible to remain loyal to all of them during a crisis, Lundgren argues, adding that women as a group would be disproportionately affected.

Women dominate the workforce in municipal and regional healthcare – almost 90% of assistant nurses are women – while also carrying primary responsibility for childcare, household duties, and informal care for elderly relatives.

Changing family structures, such as single-parent households and couples where both partners work in essential services, make crisis preparedness even more complex. Healthcare jobs cannot usually be done remotely, which adds to the challenge, and would require a well-functioning public transport system, which is also lacking in many areas.



## Fire-side chat

### **Secretary General Jonas Rydberg, Association of Swedish City Missions & Senior Lecturer Minna Lundgren, Mid Sweden University: The fundamental role of Civil Society Organizations in times of crisis**

Secretary General Jonas Rydberg highlighted the growing networks within civil society, particularly the digital networks facilitated through social media. Often in significant crises, they are the first to react, and later, more established actors such as the Red Cross or City Missions come into play.

– There is a big problem in the planning for crisis preparedness, since the public sector does not understand the rapid changes in civil society.

Senior lecturer Minna Lundgren agreed, adding that the channelling of funds to

civil society organisations sometimes backfires. Active members may be overlooked while an inactive branch of an established organisation might receive funding. Generally, she believes we rely too much on civil society in crisis planning.

– When talking about civil society, we must remember that many people active in civil society also have a job during the day. Those who work 12 hours in elderly care, for example, will they, in a time of crisis, have the energy to do civil society work?

To be dependable partners during a crisis, civil society organisations need greater recognition, considers Jonas Rydberg. Unlike Denmark and Norway, where civil society plays a significant role in crisis preparedness, the Swedish civil society is not equally involved in welfare production.

– I think that Sweden needs to open the door to civil society, in the form of non-profit welfare. This would make the civil society stronger and more prepared for a crisis. In between crises, politicians often talk about civil society in terms of how important we are and thanking us. And yet they do not know how to strengthen us and make us vital.

As an example, Jonas Rydberg highlighted the fact that the country-wide fabric of different civil society organisations, could offer a quick mobilisation of safe shelters, clothes, kitchen utensils for cooking etcetera when a severe crisis hits. This could be an important asset to keep in mind for crisis preparedness.

In the end of the fire-side chat, moderator Sandra Kropa asked them to share a concluding message.

Jonas Rydberg reminded decision-makers of the importance of adhering to the Nordic welfare system, which safeguards people's basic social needs and meets them with dignity, rather than pushing vulnerable people into poverty.

Minna Lundgren reinforced this message from a crisis management perspective:

– We can see from previous crises and wars, that poor, disabled, and chronically ill people face the worst outcomes in different disasters and wars. We know that more equal societies, where people live under equal conditions and have access to good healthcare and education, are more robust during crises.

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Senior Lecturer Minna Lundgren, Mid Sweden University



Photo: Mostphotos

# Closing remarks

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## Director Eva Franzén, Nordic Welfare Centre

In her closing remarks at the conference on trust within the Nordic welfare state, Eva Franzén pointed out that public trust is under increasing pressure during a time of political uncertainty.

- Economic crises, the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, and the climate crisis have intensified all these challenges. Together they remind us how fragile trust can be and how essential it is for us to safeguard it.

Societies are becoming more uncertain, unequal, and polarised, eroding the social contract between citizens and the state. This is also evident in the Nordic region, where trust has traditionally been strong.

- It is important to remember that trust is not solely built by institutions; it is also shaped in our most personal relationships. Political values matter not only in the political debate but also in love and building partnerships. Trust begins with people and makes its way from the dinner table to the political arena.

Eva Franzén emphasised to the audience that trust must be earned, not assumed.

- As we look ahead, we must remember that trust is not a given. It is built through the choices we make, the systems we design, and the respect we show to every individual. Rebuilding trust requires inclusive governance, transparency, and fair economic distribution.

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As we look ahead, we must remember that trust is not a given. It is built through the choices we make, the systems we design, and the respect we show to every individual. Rebuilding trust requires inclusive governance, transparency, and fair economic distribution.

Director Eva Franzén, Nordic Welfare Centre

# About the publication

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