

Northern Sparsely Populated Areas' (NSPA) views on the strategic orientations and future priorities for the Horizon Europe Strategic Plan 2025–2027

The Northern Sparsely Populated Areas network, NSPA, represents the interests of the four northernmost regions of Sweden (Norrbotten, Västerbotten, Jämtland Härjedalen and Västernorrland), the seven eastern and northernmost regions of Finland (Central Ostrobothnia, Kainuu, Lapland, North Karelia, Northern Ostrobothnia, Pohjois-Savo and South Savo), as well as the two northernmost regions of Norway (Nordland, Troms & Finnmark).

The NSPA Position

[The NSPA](#) welcomes the Commission's open consultation on the past, present and future of the Horizon Framework programmes and would like to put forward its views regarding the Strategic Plan of the Horizon Europe for the period 2025–2027.

The NSPA would like to highlight the following messages.

- The Arctic is a complex area with special conditions, sensitive nature and a wide range of economic activities. It is important that also the European Union's concept of Arctic research reflects this. A broad definition would make the EU's role in the development of the Arctic more visible and would also create more possibilities for synergies between the EU funding instruments.
- The Strategic Plan for Horizon Europe 2025–2027 should therefore include a broad perspective on Arctic research and innovation, with an especial focus on interdisciplinary research and innovation. This includes ensuring Arctic perspectives also in calls and projects not specifically aimed towards the Arctic. A broad perspective would also align the Strategic Plan better with the EU's Arctic policy.
- Climate change affects the Arctic dramatically. Science has demonstrated that the climate is warming up to two times faster at the Arctic compared to for example Central Europe and nearly four times faster than the rest of the world. The rising temperatures put the Arctic ecosystem in danger and are causing unforeseen threats to the whole planet. It is therefore important that environmental research remains an essential part of the Arctic research.
- However, the Arctic is not only about polar and maritime research – the Arctic is people. The consequences of the climate change heavily affect the people living in the Arctic. Therefore, it is crucial to strengthen the role of the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) perspectives, highlighting the importance of interdisciplinary projects in the Arctic.
- Increasing the knowledge on the effects of climate change in the Arctic is of vital importance. The research activities should include working with local communities and policy makers to

find solutions and increasing knowledge and work towards a resilient and climate neutral Arctic.

- The EU needs to take into account the changed geopolitical landscape of the Arctic. While there are many traditional research topics that continue to be essential, it is also important that the EU's research funding reflects the new reality. This should be done by allocating more funds to Arctic security-related topics.
- Place-based instruments such as smart specialisation strategies and territorial cooperation are useful for tailoring investments. Synergies between these instruments and the EU policy tools should therefore be further developed and linked more clearly to the EU's Arctic policy.
- Europe's Arctic regions are highly developed with access to rich natural resources, international acknowledged research institutions, innovative industries and a geographical location that is optimal for demonstration and pilot projects. Projects and development in these regions impact the whole Europe and are of vital importance regarding the objectives of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the EU Green Deal.

The Arctic is people

The European Commission's Arctic communication of 2021 highlights the role of the people living in the Arctic. However, this approach does not reflect the EU's general understanding regarding research in the Arctic. The European Commission services often equal Arctic research with polar research that uses the polar areas to study the global climate change or puts a strong emphasis on maritime research. This approach leaves a big part of research contributing to the sustainable development of the Arctic unnoticed. A recognition of a broader definition would help raise the EU's profile as an actor for the development of the Arctic and would help the EU Arctic actors to utilize research funding opportunities. The benefits of a joint Arctic strategy as a platform to coordinate efforts are lost when not all research fields are included in the implementation of the strategy.

It is also important to boost the effective integration of Social Sciences and Humanities in Horizon Europe. SSH should not be included as an "add-on" but should be a central part of the framework programme approach. The Strategic Plan 2025–2027 should emphasize the societal impact of Horizon Europe more clearly and that all disciplines, including SSH, are needed to help solve the fundamental, cross-sectoral challenges. Interdisciplinary and solution-oriented research creates more added value for EU funding.

This must also be reflected in calls aimed at the Arctic. Surveillance of climate change in the Arctic is indispensable, but so is research on its societal impact. In order to have thriving and sustainable communities in the Arctic, more knowledge is needed on how local communities are affected and can become more resilient regarding the climate change. This in turn is also important for both the geopolitical and security aspects of Europe and the Arctic.

The NSPA would like to highlight that the Horizon Europe Strategic Plan 2025–2027 needs to put people living in the Arctic at the centre of research and the benefits it creates – this applies especially to the indigenous peoples.

Topics for Research and Innovation:

The Strategic Plan for 2025-2027 should have a broad perspective on Arctic research

The changing geopolitical landscape challenges the traditional understanding of the Arctic. It is vital that the EU's research funding reflects the current situation and remains forward-looking with respect to the research needs. Security is one of the topics that today has a very different role in the Arctic due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine. It also links to many aspects, such as food and health security, energy, migration and the Arctic international relations. The NSPA would like to emphasise that Horizon Europe should have a holistic approach on security in the Arctic and this approach should also be included in the Strategic Plan 2025–2027.

Climate change remains a key topic for the Arctic. In research relating to the climate change, it is important to bring together different perspectives, such as natural, social, legal, economic, environmental, health, nutrition, and cultural sciences. This will support in creating a knowledge base for topics such as bioeconomy, circular economy, the energy transformation, sustainable mineral economies and water supply use, sustainable development, and building a carbon-neutral society. Climate change also links to the aforementioned security topic as it brings with it wide-ranging effects on security. Combining social sciences with research regarding the consequences of the climate change from the security perspective could open a lot of new possibilities for the European research cooperation.

Overall, the Arctic research should cover all applied and basic research activities that contribute to the sustainable development and the benefit of the people living in the Arctic. In addition to the topics already mentioned, indigenous peoples, blue economy, energy, digital transition, loss of biodiversity, ageing and shrinking population and healthcare systems, just green transition in the north (including sustainability and resilience), connectivity, atmospheric science and space ground infrastructure are important for the Arctic, Europe and globally.

Structure of the programme and synergies

While it is important to continue efforts to make the overall European RDI funding architecture more coherent and easier to understand and to further simplify the application procedures, the NSPA recommends that the Strategic Plan 2025–2027 would not introduce major novelties.

The NSPA would like to highlight the role of place-based instruments, especially smart specialisation strategies, the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Interreg instrument as key enablers in the European innovation ecosystem. In order to maximise the impact of the European funds, it is vital that continued measures are taken in Horizon Europe to create synergies with the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF). The EU's Arctic regions have made significant

investments using the ERDF. Strengthening the coordination and links between these investments and Horizon Europe projects would bring an even greater added value to the EU funds. It would also be important to strengthen the interaction between the European Research Area (ERA) and the European Education Area (EEA). Research and education should not be treated separately.