

NSPA forum 2022 - highly topical conference on northern Europe in the Arctic where many eyes are focused

On March 24-25, the Northern Sparsely Populated Areas (NSPA) Forum 2022 took place in Skellefteå. During the 1.5 days of the programme, participants were given discussions based on how the NSPA can deepen its cooperation between national borders and with the EU by being an important player in the Arctic. Since it was three years since the last forum in 2019, there was an extra pressure at this year's conference where Region Västerbotten and North Sweden hosted with up to 90 participants from northernmost Sweden, Norway, and Finland.

For all presentations and documents, go to the bottom of the page.

On 24-25 March, it was time for the annual Forum for Northern Sparsely Populated Areas (NSPA), which brings together representatives from the northernmost regions of Sweden, Norway and Finland, as well as the Brussels offices of the regions. Since the network has not met physically for three years due to the corona pandemic, the need to meet was strong, whereby about 90 people gathered in Skellefteå. The conference, which lasted for 1.5 days, took place at the Wood Hotel in Sara Kulturhus, one of the world's tallest buildings constructed of wood. The Brussels offices of the NSPA held discussions with Region Västerbotten as host. There was a full programme under the leadership of Mikael Janson, North Sweden European Office.

Pre-conference on skills supply in Skellefteå linked to Northvolt

Before the forum started in the afternoon of March 24, Skellefteå municipality invited to a pre-conference during the morning, focusing on the city's need for skills supply with the establishment of the battery factory Northvolt. From Skellefteå municipality, Joel Hedlund, strategist, and Helena Renström, communications manager, held a conversation where questions about collaborating on the competence supply issue were raised from participants from both Finland and Norway as most municipalities in NSPA have similar challenges in attracting competence.

Joel Hedlund told us that Skellefteå municipality is primarily trying to attract labour from southern Sweden and not from northern Sweden, with the aim of avoiding competition between neighbouring municipalities. According to Joel, the municipality also needs to work more towards other countries to attract labour and that is something NSPA can work with together. Helena Rönström talked about how Skellefteå has built its brand both at home and abroad for ten years but pointed out that there is still a lot of marketing work needed to get people to want to settle in the north. Then a bus took the participants to the enormous construction site for Northvolt's battery factory outside Skellefteå.

Introduction with words from regional leaders and the European Commissioner for Regional Policy

The forum was opened by Rickard Carstedt, regional councillor in Västerbotten, who stressed the importance of northern Sweden and the entire NSPA in the EU's green transition. Carstedt said that NSPA is a very important network for Västerbotten's cross-border cohesion where the region aims to reach new heights by bringing people together. Tomas Norvoll, regional councillor in Nordland and chairman of the NSPA, stressed that the EU's green transition is not possible without northern Europe and said that the outside world is finally starting to see the Arctic for what it is - "a cool and not a cold region".

Elisa Ferreira, European Commissioner for Cohesion and Reform, then joined the meeting digitally for a keynote speech and offered praise to the NSPA, which she said is a region that has succeeded in turning challenges into opportunities and is also an expert in the EU on the EU's Green Deal.

- NSPA is a key player in the implementation of EU regional policy. You promote collaboration between national borders and regions by talking to each other as you do today, which is very important. One challenge you should continue to work on is to continue to build on strategic benefits in the Arctic to make NSPA attractive," said Elisa Ferreira.

Ferreira also stressed that the NSPA should mobilise all the resources offered by the EU, not only regional policy and highlighted, in particular, the project through the new so-called Technical Support Instrument, which is under her responsibilities, which the eleven regions of northern Sweden and Finland are now entering into to tackle specific territorial challenges. In a supplementary question, the Finnish side highlighted the problems that result from the halting of all exchanges with Russia and the support for new cooperation in northern Europe.

Presentations of working groups in four areas with potential for NSPA in the EU

There followed four interactive sessions conducted by staff from the NSPA's Brussels office, which together formed themselves into four policy areas with the potential for the NSPA to cooperate on issues related to EU policies. The focus areas of the working groups were 1) Arctic natural resources with a focus on bioeconomy 2) and minerals, 3) Arctic conditions as well as strategic advantages in identified areas of strength and 4) the construction of attractiveness in the Arctic linked to skills supply.

Through four short mini-seminars and discussions, the audience was invited to participate in continued dialogue and activities to strengthen cooperation and strategic development work in not only the Brussels arena with the EU, but also at home and cooperation with the support of EU programmes aimed at the NSPA regions. It also laid the foundation for further discussions during the forum.

Investments in the Arctic and NSPA

The first day of the forum was rounded off with discussions on the need for capital and investment in the European Arctic region to which the NSPA is included. Based on the previous OECD study on NSPA and NSPA's involvement in the EU's Arctic policy work, a discussion on the need for investment capital to develop the region and a work to establish an Arctic Investment Platform (AIP) was launched between the regions of the NSPA which has since continued.

Mika Riipi, Regional Council of Lapland and Chair of the Steering Group for AIP presented the work with AIP and noted that the large companies and investments we have seen in recent years are getting hold of capital, but the challenge is for the rest of society and small companies to get funding for their needs for investments. To get a better picture of the situation and establish a cooperation with the EU, a collaboration with the European Investment Fund (EIF) has also been established.

Minna Leisvuori from the EIF then presented the study EIF just completed with analyses of the conditions for contributing to an Arctic investment fund within the AIP. She highlighted that NSPA needs a systematic approach to promote entrepreneurship and innovation as the conditions for actors to invest in the Arctic need to be improved. She noted that there is a challenge to get external risk-averse capital to invest in NSPA as they basically do not understand the market based on working in more urban environments. It therefore needs work from AIP and NSPA to in a next step

be able to allocate external funding in an NSPA-wide fund, which the EIF may also consider contributing to.

Jörgen Larsson from Inlandsfonden and Region Jämtland Härjedalen filled in with perspectives from reality and that there are challenges but also opportunities with an AIP to build on in the continued work to free up investment capital in northern Europe.

A new Arctic policy for the European Arctic and the NSPA

The following morning was initiated by **Mads Qvist Frederiksen from the Arctic Economic Council (AEC)**, which is a business collaboration across the Arctic region, and the Arctic Council, who told us that many banks and investors choose not to invest in the Arctic because of prejudice or for no real reason. Therefore, he stressed the importance of changing the way we talk about the Arctic even among those who live and work in the Arctic or work to market the region.

"It requires the NSPA to describe itself from a different point of view to attract investors. Highlight everything interesting that we are talking about here today than the territorial challenges and problems that are often highlighted," said Mads Qvist.

Following this, EU's **Arctic ambassador Michael Mann** connected himself to present the EU's new Arctic policy and he praised the active and constructive work of the NSPA and the EU offices to contribute to the policy, which in addition to focusing on security policy and the climate challenge also highlights the need for sustainable growth in the Arctic regions with its large natural resources but also unique competences for the benefit of the entire EU. He pointed out the importance of the NSPA remaining committed and putting pressure on the EU to deliver what is said in the policy and is himself prepared to contribute to opening doors in the EU. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, of course, also greatly affects the Arctic and not least the European Arctic to which the NSPA belongs. It is now even more important for the EU, in cooperation with its actors, to maintain a peaceful, climate-smart and prosperous region. NSPA is a designated partner to the EU.

Support from the EU for a forthcoming OECD follow-up study on NSPA

The last part of the forum was devoted to the follow-up study to the previous OECD study that NSPA is now entering. Mikael Janson, North Sweden, began by talking about the background and how the office drew attention to the Technical Support Instrument (TSI) handled by the European Commission's Directorate-General for EU Reform Agenda (DG Reform) mentioned by EU Commissioner Elisa Ferreira the day before in her speech. From that, an application had been drawn up for the Swedish and Finnish regions and dialogue had been conducted with the Swedish and Finnish governments, which are formally the applicants for this money. The application has now been approved by DG Reform and the OECD has been engaged to carry out the process. Mikael pointed out that this is not just a study, it is more a project and a process that over the next two years will lead to strategies and action plans to build capacity for regional sustainable development in cooperation across the NSPA and better use of the EU's various support for it. The Norwegian regions will also participate, although they cannot benefit from the direct EU funding for the project.

Thomas Giacometto, Policy Officer at the European Commission's DG Reform, talked about the TSI funds and what they are being used for to support reform efforts to achieve the EU's goal of a green and digital transition across the EU and that it is a tool to really contribute to change. He had gained a lot from just the days in Skellefteå and was looking forward to working with all the participants who in one way or another will be involved in the work, even if it is the OECD that holds it. He also welcomed the Norwegian involvement to be part of the process.

It was followed by **José-Enrique Garcilazo, head of the OECD's Regional Development and Rural Affairs Unit**, from Paris and who many who participated in the previous OECD study recognize since he oversaw it as well. He gave an overview of the previously so-called Territorial Review and how it forms a basis for further work, with the need for updated documentation and studies, but also more hands-on discussions and capacity-building activities to improve the ability to hold change processes and develop the regions' growth capacity. By the summer, the more concrete project plan will be developed and it is important that everyone is heard with their input to formulate it so that it captures the needs and wishes of the NSPA regions. The intention is to be in full swing with the work from September.

Thereafter, a dialogue was conducted with input from the forum participants about their wishes and expectations for the work and both DG Reform and the OECD took notes. Finally, **Daniele Dotto, Head of TSI at DG Reform**, who sent messages about the importance of everyone's commitment and that there are expectations from the European Commission in supporting the NSPA in building capacity to contribute to the EU's green and digital transition in the European Arctic. There is a great interest in following this work on the part of the European Commission.

Consequently the 1.5 intensive days ended, and moderator Mikael Janson pointed out how the discussions led to what will now be a new process with the OECD to take forward.

/Julia Hanson and Mikael Janson

Documents

Read the program for NSPA forum 2022 [here](#).

Read the document sent out to the forum to participants about the focus areas of the NSPA's four working groups [here](#).

Read the speech made by European Commissioner Ferreira at the forum [here](#).

Read Mikael Janson's "State of Play" about the OECD study [here](#).

Read North Sweden's news about the EU's Arctic policy [here](#).

Presentations at the forum:

[NSPA WG 1 on bioeconomy.](#)

NSPA WG 2 on minerals.

[NSPA WG 3 on Arctic conditions as well as strategic benefits.](#)

[NSPA WG 4 on attractiveness and skills provision.](#)

[Georange.](#)

[Arctic Economic Council \(AEC\).](#)

[European Investment Fund \(EIF\).](#)

[Inland Fund.](#)