

Project description

1. Who makes the proposal (country, member, sub-group?)

Programme for Small Communities in the Nordic Region / Programmet for Småsamfund i Norden (SSN)

The Programme for Small Communities in the Nordic Region strengthens the capacity of smaller communities to address environmental and climate-related challenges and to promote sustainable development. It supports locally anchored solutions and knowledge sharing on topics such as nature-based tourism, biodiversity, and the circular economy. The programme represents Greenland, Åland, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, and Bornholm.

2. Project name

Strengthening Administrative Capacity in Nordic Island Communities

3. Project period

2026/2027

4. Project purpose

The project will develop a comprehensive knowledge base and practical solutions to simplify and strengthen nature and environmental management, as well as climate-related work, in small Nordic island communities.

The project aims to develop a robust understanding of the international environmental, nature, and climate-related obligations, conventions, agreements, reporting requirements, and standards applicable to Greenland, Åland, Faroe Islands, and Iceland, and how these are translated into national and local administrative responsibilities. Building on this analysis, the project will provide innovative toolsets and targeted recommendations to support small administrations in the four countries, in fulfilling these obligations while strengthening and enhancing their administrative capacity and efficiency. The focus will be on effective governance, organisational restructuring, and other strategic administrative initiatives, with the objective of better aligning policy ambitions with implementation capacity, in order for small administrations to pursue ambitious political objectives in the fields of nature, environment, and climate.

A central deliverable of the project will be a main report, which will provide a comparative analysis and overview of each country's international obligations and responsibilities under relevant

environmental and climate conventions, agreements, and standards. The report will also identify and assess key day-to-day nature and environmental management responsibilities that place demands on administrative capacity. The project should identify the barriers with the most significant structural and systemic impacts on the participating countries' administrative capacities, through a comparative analysis.

The second key deliverable will be country-specific policy briefs and toolboxes, outlining actionable and scalable measures that enable smaller Nordic countries to pursue ambitious goals and strategies in their policymaking, development, and implementation, despite constraints related to time, financial resources, expertise, and staffing.

Through this, the project will also generate evidence-based knowledge on the extent to which limited administrative capacity constrains smaller Nordic administrations in achieving their strategic objectives and visions within policy areas. This includes examining challenges related to, for example, policymaking for environmental issues, implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), compliance with international conventions, management of protected areas, stakeholder engagement processes, communication measures, contributing to international policy discussions, advancing and securing national policy priorities at the international level, and sustainable natural resource management/governance.

It is a mandatory requirement that the project includes all four countries represented through the SSN programme: Greenland, Åland, Faroe Islands and Iceland.

While not a requirement, it will be considered an advantage if the project also includes Bornholm, to the extent relevant and applicable for an administration operating at a local governmental level. This may include lessons learned from the participating countries that could also be relevant to Bornholm.

5. Background

Smaller countries and administrations – particularly those in geographically remote contexts – often operate with limited institutional capacity. This includes limited human and financial resources, challenges in attracting and retaining specialised expertise, high staff turnover, and a high degree of task complexity and volume relative to administrative size. Smaller countries and regions are also often disproportionately vulnerable to sector-specific changes and/or external shocks, which can greatly impact small and vulnerable economies and societies. In the administrations of larger states, responsibilities are often distributed across specialised departments and teams, allowing individual employees to develop expertise within a narrow policy area. In contrast, officials in smaller administrations frequently serve as generalists, covering a broad range of nature, environment, and climate-related work simultaneously that would typically be handled by multiple specialists in larger states.

Despite these constraints, the administrations of smaller Nordic island communities such as Greenland, Åland, Faroe Islands, Iceland, and to a certain extent Bornholm, are required to fulfil many of the same international environmental and climate-related standards, reporting frameworks, and obligations as larger states under a wide range of international environmental and

climate conventions and agreements, while having limited administrative capacity and more restricted access to specialist knowledge and support. This includes, but is not limited to, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Paris Agreement, the CITES Convention, the OSPAR Convention, the Convention on Wetlands, EU-legislation, the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution, and so forth.

There is generally limited knowledge and understanding on how administrative capacity affects smaller administrations' ability to design, implement, and manage policies and initiatives addressing the triple planetary crisis. This project seeks to address this gap by strengthening the Nordic knowledge base on administrative capacity in small administrations within the fields of nature, environment, and climate. The project aims to identify approaches to better accommodate differences in capacity between larger and smaller administrations, as well as provide practical and realistic solutions to better equip small communities to pursue ambitious policymaking.

6. The content of the project

The project shall assess the extent to which limited administrative capacity constrains smaller Nordic countries' ability to achieve their objectives and visions within key policy areas. The assessment shall identify and analyse the barriers with the most significant systemic impacts on the administrative capacity of the four participating countries. In order to do this, the project shall provide a detailed overview over each country's international obligations within nature, climate, and environment.

The project shall deliver concrete and actionable recommendations on how to improve the efficiency and value of nature and environmental management, policy development, and administrative case processing within small administrations. Project deliverables may take the form of guidelines, a toolbox, policy briefs, policy reports, and/or recommendations.

Where relevant, the analysis and recommendations shall address the following focus areas. However, it is important to note that some focus areas may be more relevant for specific countries than others, and the project should therefore adopt a **country-specific lens** in its analysis:

- Identifying and presenting opportunities for enhanced cross-national cooperation, including relevant forums, working groups, and multinational or bilateral initiatives, as well as recommendations on how such cooperation can be organised and maintained with minimal resource requirements.
 - Where applicable, the project shall present and analyse existing examples of effective collaboration among smaller Nordic countries and regions, including the visions, governance structures, and operational modalities underpinning successful outcomes.
- Exploring strategies to strengthen engagement and active involvement of municipalities, local communities, the private sector, and academia in environmental initiatives and management,

including the potential for delegation of responsibilities and mechanisms to secure external support, sustained commitment, and long-term action.

- Examining how ambitious policy objectives can be pursued under conditions of limited resources (financially and administratively), with particular emphasis on scalability, strategic prioritisation, strong project leadership, and long-term planning, supported by case studies and practical examples.
- Examining challenges related to high staff turnover rates, employee attrition, and brain drain, and identifying potential solutions suitable for small administrations.
- Identifying organisational structures and management practices that can improve internal communication, coordination, and workforce planning within public administration.
- Identifying and assessing opportunities for applying new technological solutions and systems (or to utilise them more effectively) to streamline administrative workflows and improve the efficiency, consistency, and quality of case handling.
- Evaluating methods and tools for prioritizing activities/efforts/commitments in a resource- and personnel-constrained environment.
- Examine how small administrations can meet international reporting and monitoring requirements, for example regarding species stocks and climate monitoring and reporting.
- Identify methods for how responsibilities can be allocated appropriately and effectively across administrative levels.

Evaluate the potential for informal networks and forums to support knowledge sharing on international obligations and reporting across countries.

Raising awareness

In addition, the project will contribute to raising awareness and strengthening understanding within the Nordic Council of Ministers and other relevant international forums of the specific conditions, structural challenges, and opportunities characterising small Nordic communities and their administrations. The project shall highlight the distinctive characteristics of small Nordic communities with regard to resource availability and conduct an analysis of real-life examples of the participating countries' existing international obligations, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Paris Agreement. The project shall also highlight the disproportionate impact that changes in a limited segment of the economy or external shocks can have on society as a whole.

The project shall therefore provide a knowledge base that enables island communities to better articulate and highlight their particular situation at the international level. This includes recommendations on how smaller administrations can be better equipped to participate in international policy discussions and advance their national policy priorities and needs.

The project shall provide an analytical foundation for strengthening cooperation frameworks and establishing work practices that ensure equal opportunities for participation in relevant initiatives, processes, and projects across the Nordic region and multilateral agreements, despite differing administrative capacities.

7. Method

The applicants shall propose and justify the most appropriate methodological approach to the project. The methodology can, for example, consist of:

- Literature review of relevant academic research, policy documents, strategies, existing global recommendations/guidelines, and evaluations.
- Analysis of best-practices and experiences from relevant countries/islands globally.
- Desk top analysis of existing data, reports, legal frameworks, and administrative capacities.
- Interviews with relevant institutions, experts, and stakeholders.
- Survey questionnaires targeting relevant institutions.
- Workshops to support stakeholder engagement, knowledge exchange, and validation of findings.
- Comparative analysis across the participating countries and regions: identification of common patterns, differences, and transferable solutions.
- Benchmarking against relevant international or regional best practices.
- Gap analysis per country/region, to assess discrepancies between current capacity and policy ambitions/obligations.
- Focus groups with selected stakeholder groups (civil servants, municipal staff, agencies, etc.).
- SWOT analysis applied to administrative capacity solutions.
- Cost-benefit or resource-efficiency analysis (where data is available).

8. Project goal (which change shall the project contribute to)

The overall goal of the project is to strengthen the ability of smaller Nordic island communities to effectively develop, implement, and enforce environmental and nature- and climate-related policies and obligations under conditions of limited administrative capacity, by providing them with clear, realistic, and achievable solutions and initiatives.

The specific goals of the project are:

- 1) To provide an overview of each country's international obligations and responsibilities.
- 2) To generate a solid and comparable evidence base on the administrative capacities, constraints, and operational conditions of the five participating countries/regions.
- 3) To identify, develop, and propose concrete solutions, tools, and approaches to strengthen their administrative capacity and improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and resilience of public administrations in the participating countries.
- 4) To advance and increase holistic knowledge on how the triple planetary crisis can be addressed through legislation, policy development, and management, considering different national contexts, resource constraints, and levels of administrative capacity.
- 5) To increase awareness and understanding of the specific challenges and contexts faced by small administrations that are required to comply with the same international conventions, legal obligations, and political commitments as larger states, despite fundamentally different structural conditions.
 - a. The project shall provide a knowledge base for how smaller communities can better articulate, highlight, and advocate for their particular situations, priorities, and views at the international level.

- 6) To provide knowledge-sharing between the four participating countries on best-practices, experiences, and lessons learned, and to explore opportunities for collaboration and resource-pooling between smaller communities when pursuing the same goals.

9. Target group

The project will be most relevant for authorities directly involved in the administration of environmental, nature, and climate-related policy development and management in the four countries.

Primary target groups:

- Policymakers
- Local and regional authorities
- National authorities
- Municipalities
- Professional and expert communities working with the implementation of nature, climate, and environmental obligations

Secondary target groups:

- International convention secretariats, committees, and working groups

10. Which Nordic countries will benefit from the project and how?

The project will directly benefit the participating countries of Greenland, Åland, Faroe Islands, and Iceland, and to a certain degree the region of Bornholm (Denmark).

Beyond the direct beneficiaries, the project will also generate transferable insights, knowledge, and recommendations of relevance to other small communities across the Nordic region that are not directly represented through the Nordic Council of Ministers' SSN programme.

By addressing common structural challenges related to limited institutional capacity, the project will contribute to increased knowledge within the Nordic region on how to improve administrative capacity in order to achieve ambitious nature, climate, and environmental policymaking across comparable contexts.

11. What is the project budget?

800.000 Danish Kroner (DKK)

12. How should the project results be communicated and to whom? Should funds be earmarked for communication purposes?

The final project report must include a comprehensive and finalised communication plan outlining the objectives, target audiences, and appropriate channels for disseminating the project's findings and recommendations.

The communication plan may include, inter alia, the following activities:

- a) A report with main findings and recommendations, written in English but with summaries in the native languages of the four countries, respectively.
- b) An illustrative summary/overview of each country's international obligations (e.g. reporting, status, membership, etc.)
- c) Targeted written communication products such as pamphlets, policy briefs, condensed reports, and other engaging and accessible information materials to support the sharing, uptake, and long-term impact of the project results.
- d) Online webinar(s) designed to introduce core topics, share key findings, and ensure broad and inclusive participation across regions;
- e) National workshops (delivered in the country's official language and/or in English (and where possible supported by interpretation), as relevant);
- f) Multinational workshops aimed at exploring opportunities for cooperation and further knowledge-sharing among the participating countries and regions (where possible, these should include presentations of real-life best-practice examples to ensure a practical, hands-on, and inspiring learning experience);
- g) A recommendation for the Nordic Council Ministers and potentially other international forums/conventions.

Appropriate funding for communication activities shall be earmarked within the project budget. Throughout the project duration, priority shall be given to the development of materials, documents, and other knowledge dissemination tools that effectively communicate the project's findings to the defined target audiences.