**A Shared Mission to Transform the Nordic Food System**

Perhaps the Nordic countries’ most important global contribution to achieving the Paris Agreement and the SDGs will not be any specific technology, business model or policy innovation, but rather to demonstrate how a strong public innovation ecosystem is the missing link to overcome the complex societal challenges defining our times.

To that end, research and innovation agencies from the Nordics and EU have joined forces with EAT and the Nordic Food Policy Lab to co-create a first-of-its-kind shared mission on food systems transformation, demonstrating the role of public agencies in orchestrating the research, innovation and public participation necessary to accelerate a shift towards a more equitable, sustainable and prosperous society for all.

**Innovating how societies innovate**

Missions are bold research- and innovation strategies with clearly defined and time-bound goals, that are inclusive, explorative, and transdisciplinary in nature and able to leverage an array of policy instruments and methods.

By pooling existing knowledge and testing new approaches to mission design, this collaboration will produce practical guidance on how to set up shared missions using methods that are adaptable to different country contexts, with food system transformation in the Nordics as the pilot case. Key insights from this work will feed into relevant EU, Nordic and national policy processes, to help set direction and purpose of sustainable transformation efforts both within and beyond the Nordics.

**First-ever regional mission collaboration**

In 2021 we hope to collaboratively resource and implement the first shared mission to transform the Nordic food system, and to bring our shared learnings to the forthcoming UN Summit on Inclusive and Sustainable Food Systems. To achieve this aim, we aim to deliver four outputs in 2020:

* **Mission Proposal**: provide a detailed recommendation on how a shared mission on food systems transformation can be launched in the Nordic region;
* **Policy input**: coordinate and align agency input into EU, Nordic and national policy processes on missions for sustainability;
* **Pilot**: test how a shared mission can be operationalized across countries, focusing on unlocking synergies across place-based demonstrators in at least two Nordic countries;
* **Systems Innovation Cookbook**: publish a practical guide on how to design, implement and evaluate innovation-led missions, with food system transformation as the pilot case.

We recognise that in setting up this collaboration, we are charting new territory and necessarily learning by doing. Only time will tell us if our process leads us to our intended destination. Our aspiration is that others will not only learn from our final outputs, but also be inspired to embark on a similar common and explorative journey.

**Why the Nordics?**

The Nordic region is an ideal place to demonstrate the types of collaborative systems change needed to meet the existential challenges we are currently faced with. The Nordic countries are wealthy welfare states characterized by relatively small social differences, high levels of trust and a strong civil society.  These factors and more have contributed to endowing the Nordics with a uniquely strong public innovation ecosystem, which in turn has played an instrumental role in advancing the common economic, social and ecological success for which the Nordic countries have been globally recognized for. In addition, there are some common values around equality and horizontal decision making that are found across the Nordic countries that makes it an interesting testing ground for new collaborative work on systems change. While our practical work will be centered in the Nordics, we very much hope to collaborate with EU-level actors for amplified knowledge sharing and impact.

**Why a shared mission?**

*“The important thing for Government is not to do things which individuals are doing already, and to do them a little better or a little worse; but to do those things which at present are not done at all.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) call for transformation at the level of whole systems. To achieve these complex and co-dependent goals by 2030, societies must innovate how they drive innovation. Established financial and regulatory tools must be complemented by, and integrated with, new public policy instruments fostering collaboration, participation and exploratory approaches.

The SDGs provide a powerful framework for designing innovation-led missions. Innovation agencies can be key enablers as they were created to de-risk (and increasingly orchestrate) strategic investments in socially beneficial innovation by actors in both the public and private sectors. It is therefore a paradox that in global conversations on how to achieve sustainability, the role of public innovation agencies is given relatively little attention compared to more conventional policy instruments.

While mission-approaches are receiving much attention in policy circles at national and EU levels, they are still largely defined as an intent to do things differently. An important inhibitor in going from intent to action is that there is no existing playbook. This in turn means that mission thinking is still often overlooked in new policy proposals. This Shared Mission to Transform Our Food System can become a new point of reference, both in terms of new insights on how to improve the food system as well as on how to build experiences and new skills in research and innovation system.

Human-centered design sits at the core of the work we are proposing: the process of co-designing a mission itself, and the way in which it can be implemented. Research- and innovation agencies can achieve greater impact more effectively by; pooling resources, unlocking synergies across current project portfolios, avoiding duplication of efforts, and systematically sharing lessons learned and establishing best practice for how to approach and collaborate on missions.

Our mission exploration recognizes that deliberate societal transformation consists of a series of well-orchestrated, incremental changes towards a shared goal. In our approach to developing and implementing a shared mission, we will emphasize:

* Connecting our already existing projects and act on synergies across our portfolios to optimize research and innovation impact
* Collaborating on projects across the Nordics that help us better understand the most significant levers for larger food systems change
* Gathering insights on how the power of new consumer demand can drive systems change
* Selecting mission areas using robust scientific justification
* Defining mission outcomes through active citizen involvement, especially youth
* Recognizing the joint Nordic and EU priority of an equitable transition, particularly for the farming sector
* Taking a holistic approach to food system transformation (on both land sea) from multiple entry-points
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**Why food systems?**

Food systems lie at the heart of many of our most pressing global challenges in health and nutrition, livelihoods, climate change and environment. As organizations we are inspired and motivated to use food and food systems to bring together a range of priorities that can help deliver Agenda 2030. As has been increasingly evident, sustainable and well-functioning food systems are also essential for building resilient and just societies.

Today, with the new strategies for economic recovery to the COVID-19 crisis there is a window of opportunity for deliberate large-scale citizen involvement to shape recovery policies. Such policies will have long-term implications, for example rapid determination of priority infrastructure projects, which will in turn shape the environments in which we live in. Additionally, such investments will incur significant debt, which will effectively be passed on to younger generations to pay off over time. For these two reasons, it is more important than ever that citizens, especially youth, have a say in which investments for the future are made today.

As the WHO recently confirmed, the promotion of healthy, sustainable food systems is one of six prescriptions for a healthy, green recovery from COVID-19: Diseases caused by either lack of access to food, or consumption of unhealthy, high calorie diets, are now the single largest cause of global ill health. They also increase vulnerability to other risks - conditions such as obesity and diabetes are among the largest risk factors for illness and death from COVID-19.

A Shared Mission to Transform Our Food System also answers the Nordic prime ministers’ new vision to make the Nordic region the most sustainable and integrated region in the world by 2030:

**A green Nordic region**: The transition to healthy diets from sustainable food systems is necessary to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement. Global food production, both by land and sea, is currently contributing substantially to global warming, and land use change connected to agriculture is the single largest environmental driver of new disease outbreaks and biodiversity loss.  Food production must be a part of the solution in combating climate change and ecosystem degradation.

**A socially sustainable Nordic region**: There is a need for a rapid transition to healthy, nutritious and sustainable diets. If the world could meet WHO’s dietary guidelines, this would save millions of lives, reduce disease risks, and bring major reductions in global greenhouse gas emissions. In 2017, the total expenditure on preventive health in the Nordics was 0,3% of regional GDP. At the same time the expenditure for sick care was 9,8% of GDP. OECDs projections indicate that, by 2060, the cost of long-term care will double in the Nordics. The same projections indicate that demographically, the proportion of the population contributing towards the system will have reduced during the same period. Health differences are also growing between socio-economic groups, driven by among other things unequal access to and adoption of healthy diets. Finding new ways to promote healthier eating is part of the solution if we are to uphold a socially sustainable Nordic region. A shared Nordic mission will also be able to answer to the call for a socially and economically just transition, recognizing that change will be challenging for some and that new, more inclusive, approaches and ideas are needed.

**A competitive Nordic region:** A change in the food system is needed for combating global warming and promoting healthier eating. While change will be a challenge for some, it represents an opportunity to future proof our food systems. Nordic companies and institutions can achieve a first mover advantage as other regions catch up to mitigate challenges science confirms are coming. A shared mission can grow into a common Nordic platform for companies working as a system to turn food into a key strategy for achieving the SDGs, creating a launchpad to access global markets.

A Shared Mission to Transform Our Food System also answers to the recently released **EU Farm to Fork strategy** which is highlighted as a key pillar of the **EU Green Deal** and Green Recovery plan. With its focus on protecting ecosystems, making food systems more sustainable and ensuring a just transition for farmers the Farm to Fork Strategy presents a long-term vision for European food systems who should:

* Have a neutral or positive environmental impact
* Help to mitigate climate change and adapt to its impacts
* Reverse the loss of biodiversity
* Ensure food security, nutrition and public health, making sure that everyone has access to sufficient, safe, nutritious, sustainable food
* Preserve affordability of food while generating fairer economic returns, fostering competitiveness of the EU supply sector and promoting fair trade

It is encouraging to see that the new Farm to Fork Strategy describes a new Horizon Europe partnership for “Safe and sustainable food systems for people, planet and climate” with an **R&I governance mechanism** engaging Member States and food systems actors. Through our work we hope to be able to contribute to the ambition of ensuring delivery of innovative solutions that provide co-benefits for nutrition, quality of food, climate, circularity and communities.

**Who is collaborating on the Shared Mission to Transform the Nordic Food System?**

The following organizations are actively contributing to this work, in alphabetical order:

* Design and Architecture Norway
* Danish Design Council
* EAT Foundation
* EIT Climate-KIC
* EIT Food
* Formas
* Innovation Norway
* Nordic Food Policy Lab
* Nordic Innovation
* Matis
* Research Council Norway
* Sitra
* Stockholm Resilience Center
* Vinnova

We encourage additional public research, innovation and design agencies to join. Please get in touch to learn more:

* Ove Kenneth Nodland, Innovation Manager, EAT Foundation ovekenneth@eatforum.org
* Marie Persson, Project Manager, Nordic Food Policy Lab marper@norden.org
1. Keynes, John M., *The End of Laissez Faire*, 1926 (p. 44) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)