

POST-EVENT BRIEF

ESPON Roundtable on Post-COVID settlement patterns across urban and rural areas in Sweden

Virtual (MS Teams)

16 December 2021, 13.00-16.35 (CET)

Summary



The roundtable on **Post-COVID settlement patterns across urban and rural areas in Sweden** addressed the recent changes in territorial development in Sweden, with special attention to the effects caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It was comprised of three sessions.

The first presented the evidence from Nordregio research, focusing mostly on demographic trends and how these can be interpreted in the context of multilocality. The second session addressed the territorial challenges that changing settlement patterns bring. The focus here was on rural areas – including both those with a shrinking population that need adaptation measures and those that are exposed to immigration from bigger urban centres. The third session addressed the experiences of planners in the field, striving for potential solutions and policy responses. The roundtable provided an in-depth insight into current territorial development in Sweden, not only by presenting new evidence and defining new research questions but also by setting the foundation for adequate policy and planning responses.

Objectives

The objective of the roundtable was to reflect on the effects that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on settlement patterns in Sweden. Are there new trends in territorial development and, if so, what do they look like? Do people from urban areas move to sparsely populated areas? Are these trends already visible in statistics and which cannot be seen from statistics – e.g. living in second homes? Which are the parallels to the “green wave” in the 1970’s when people also moved from urban to rural areas. What are the differences seen when comparing the current COVID-related shifts and the “greenwave” process in 1970s (e.g. broadband connections)? Which urban patterns can also be kept in rural areas or how can we reap the benefits from both locations and lifestyles? What share of the population work in sectors that can work remotely and which groups can benefit from this? What type of societal support is needed to enhance these trends in a way that would be beneficial for rural areas? Which new services should be offered to rural areas (transport, services) and what will happen with business areas, office spaces, and services in the city centres?

The palate of questions is broad, indicating the relevance of these trends, the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic raises, and the swift adaptation of society to a new reality. Even the spatial structures, which seem to be resistant, can change in a short amount of time. Thus, the objective of the roundtable was threefold:

1. To present ESPON results showing the COVID-19 induced effects on the settlement system in Sweden;
2. To indicate territorial trends cities and regions in Sweden face during/after the COVID-19 pandemic; and
3. To exchange experiences on regional responses to the new trends driven by COVID-19 pandemic.

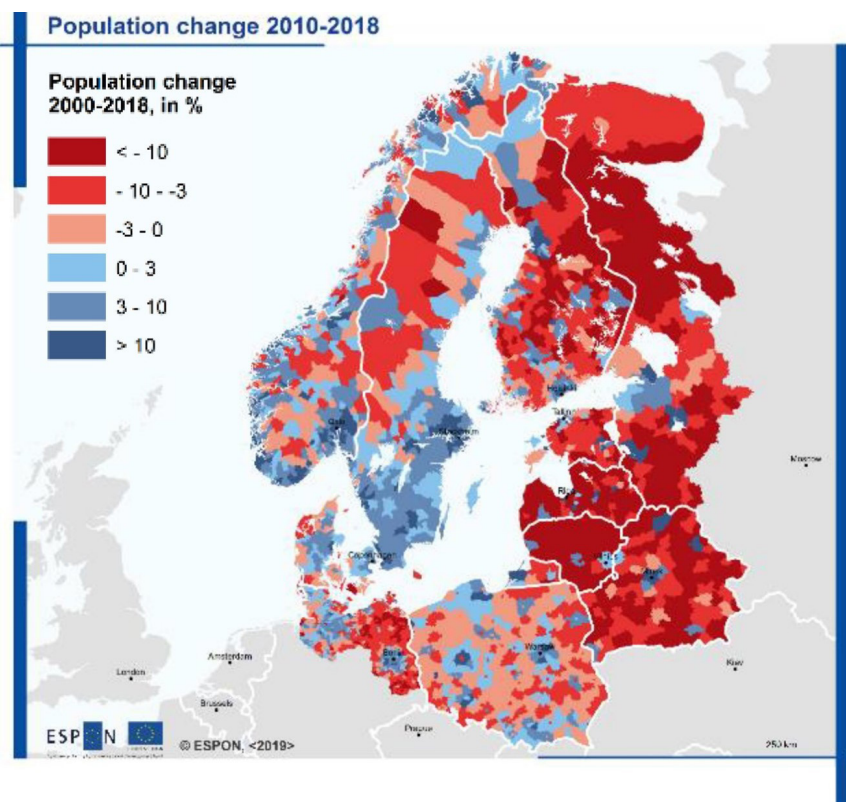
Programme and presentations

The online event was structured in three sessions, each of them diving into the specific field of post-COVID-19 reality.

The **first session** focused on ESPON results from emerging urban and rural settlement patterns across Sweden and the wider Nordic region. The Nordregio team (Elin Slätmo, Gustaf Norlén, and Linda Randall) presented the talk on “Post-COVID settlement trends in Sweden and their impacts on service provisioning in urban and rural areas”. They focused on three main topics: 1) Swedish population trends in a Nordic context; 2) Multilocality and Nordic urban-rural flows due to second homes; and 3) Implications of the pandemic on population trends.

As presented by **Linda Randall**, Sweden experienced one of the largest population growths in the Baltic Sea region between 1990 and 2018, however, it was not evenly distributed. Functional urban areas (defined as labour market regions) have been increasing by at least 5% on average in the period between 2010 and 2017. At the same time, many rural areas (Map 1) have a declining population. Compared to other Nordic countries, Sweden has many growing areas, however, a north-south divide in population change stands out.

Map 1: Population change from 2000-2018 (source Borges et al. 2019).



One of the reasons for the worse performance of northern areas is the outmigration of young people, where only very limited areas (on the country level) show a positive net migration of people aged 20-29 between 2010 and 2019. This process is less radical in the age group of 30 to 39, where supposedly 'footloose' people with the ability to work from anywhere move back to rural areas.

The second important population trend is the ageing of the population, presented by the old-age dependency ratio of the population (population aged 65+ vs. working-age population). Rural areas again show a greater share of the population aged 65 and more. If we look in the future, the projection for the year 2030 (for the same indicator) is even more extreme with the population aged 65+ is predicted to exceed the working-age population (15-64) in many municipalities. When comparing the last three decades (1990-2020) and the coming two decades (2020-2040), many areas will have the lowest population in the 2030s.

The second speaker, **Elin Slätmo**, presented "Multilocality and Nordic urban-rural flows due to second homes". According to Slätmo, there is a tradition in Sweden since the start of urbanisation to maintain a link to rural areas by using second homes (detached houses in rural areas where no one is permanently registered). This tradition enables new settlement patterns and flows to rural areas during the pandemic. This can be observed particularly in areas with sufficient broadband connections and sectors, allowing for remote work, and is strengthened by the fact that almost 50 % of the population in Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland have access to the second homes as owners or as family members. The reasons for possessing secondary homes are links to family and friends, retreat from a busy urban life, access to nature and recreational activities, investment, or (inter) generational living for some parts of the year.

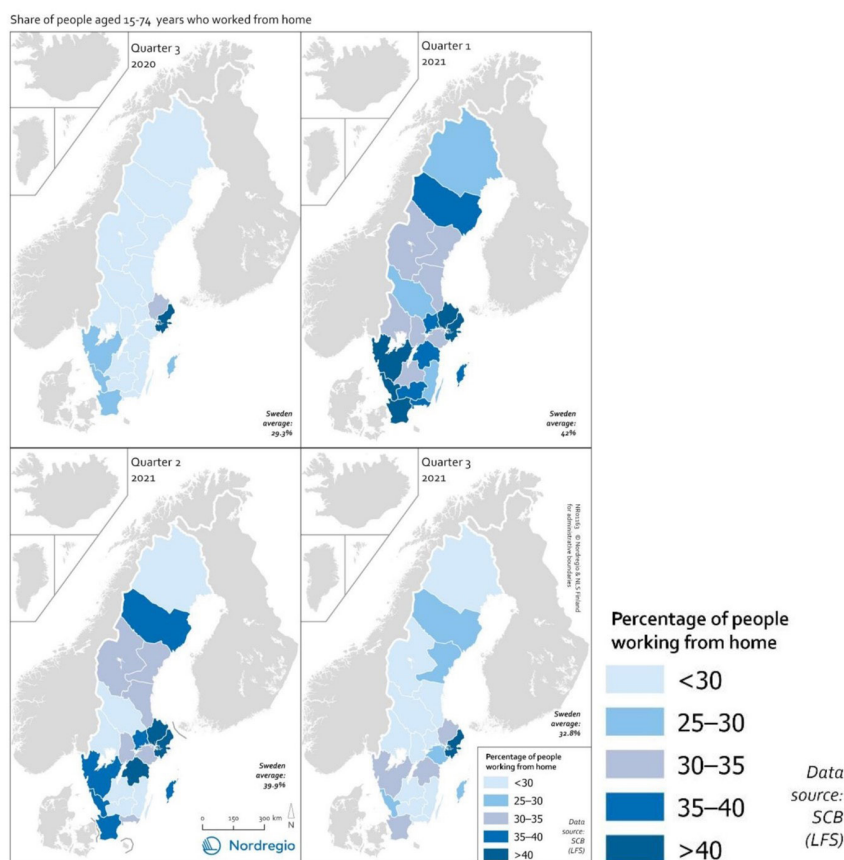
The main areas where second homes are located, in numbers and in relation to permanent inhabitants in Sweden (in comparison to other Nordic countries), is scattered. There is a higher density of these second homes in areas such as in the southern mountain area, the Stockholm archipelago, and also in Öland. In comparison to permanent homes, which are mostly located in urban areas, second homes are primarily located in rural areas. Consequently, there is a constant flow of people between urban and rural areas, a kind of counter-urbanisation process, not being observed in the statistics. On the one hand, this is a challenge for planning and services, but on the other, it can have a positive impact; a higher number of tourists leads to more shops and services. Therefore, regional planning and development should also consider this type of population. To do this, Nordregio constructed an indicator, called the *Community impact of secondary homes indicator* (comparing the annual population with the permanent population), that the planners could use to more accurately plan the infrastructure and services needed.

The positive impacts of second homes are job creation and increased regional consumption, demand for events and services, whereas the negative impacts could be the excessive use of infrastructure and services.

The third speaker, **Gustaf Norlén**, presented the talk on “Implications of the pandemic on the population trends”. During the pandemic many people work remotely, however, there is a lack of data on remote work. Sweden seems to be a good example – in the first quarter of 2021, 42 % of the workforce at least partly worked from home. There are geographical differences, urban regions having a greater share, and rural lower share, of the workforce working at home. This reflects the occupational structure, as remote work was mostly allowed in urban areas. In general, it is estimated around 37 % of jobs can be done remotely.

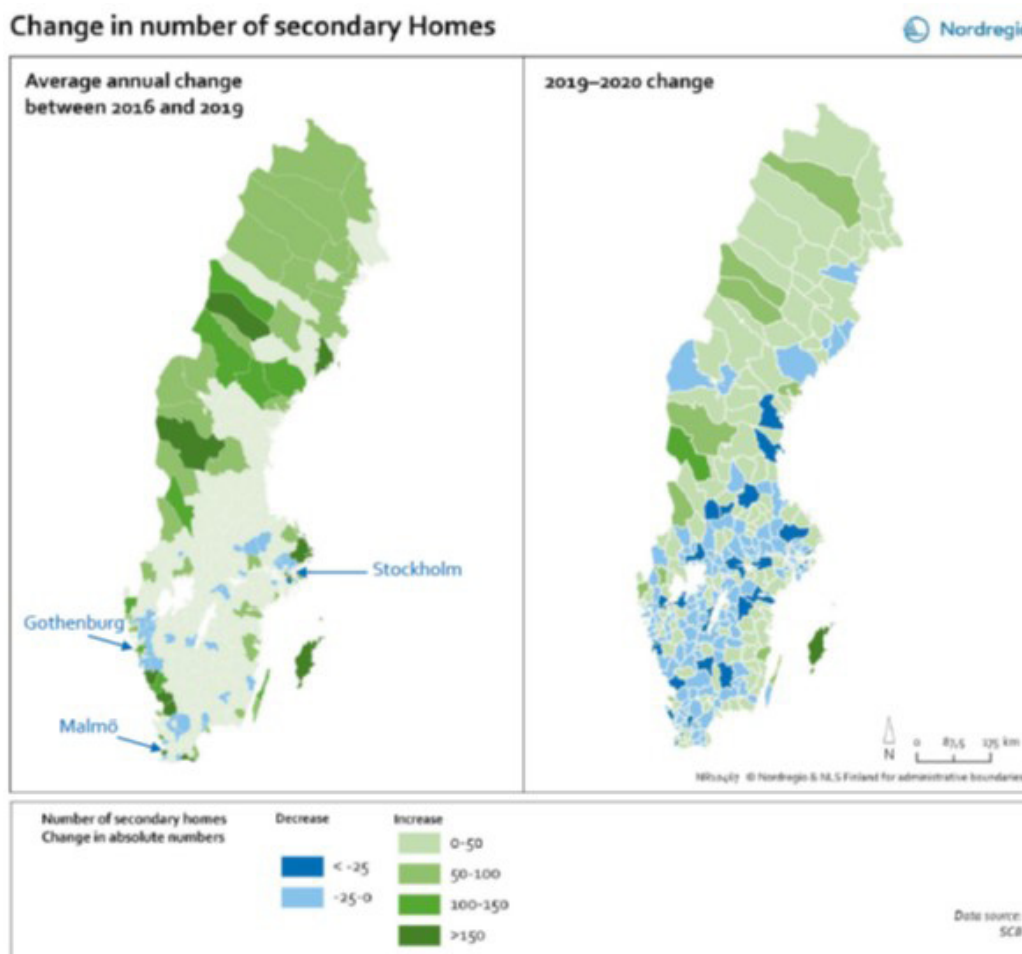
The share of those working from home (Map 2) depends on the situation/regulation, however, the comparison of Google data from before and during the pandemic shows a stable decrease in the number of travels to work. There are 20 % fewer travels to work compared to the median for January-February 2020, with the biggest decrease in Stockholm (30 %), followed by Gothenburg and Malmö (20 % decrease).

Map 2: Share of the workforce working from home (Source: Nordregio).



The question remains of how remote work will change migration patterns. There was net outmigration in bigger urban regions in Sweden (Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö) and also in other Nordic countries. The municipalities with bigger immigration rates are mostly located in the outskirts of Stockholm. In this case, these second homes may become permanent dwellings as they fulfil some basic criteria (heating, water, connection to telecommunication services,...). As a result, many second homes have become permanent dwellings during the pandemic (Map 3), often located in typical tourist destinations

Map 3: Change in numbers of secondary homes (Source: Nordregio).



There was also a price increase of 20 % for secondary homes.

Further information was presented by **Linda Randall** about the ongoing work in the Nordic cooperation programme for regional development and planning. Within this, three working groups (rural development, regional development, urban planning) have identified this (second houses/remote work) as an interesting issue they want to study.

A basic assumption is that the COVID pandemic has caused numerous workplace closures, mainstreaming remote work as a solution for some workers. If this becomes a longer-term trend, it will influence commuting patterns and new residential location preferences.

Concerning this, the question is what could be an impact for different types of regions and what are the planning implications? From the policy perspective, it is interesting to see how Nordic regions have approached remote work and settlement patterns. Using interviews at the national level, they looked at three perspectives: 1) the workers' perspective; 2) trade unions' associations and business associations; and 3) the perspective of the public. From the locality perspective, Nordic countries have different starting points:

Iceland: "job without placement" as a priority already before the pandemic;

Finland: "multilocality" is high on the political agenda;

Norway: a long history of "delocalisation" policy;

Sweden: clear evidence, but implications for policy remain unclear;

Denmark: reducing congestion.

There is a need for a more nuanced understanding of urban-rural relations. A first issue is the territorial unit that is used in research – e.g. municipalities, which might be urban and rural at the same time. The second activity is to define an urban-rural typology, classifying them at the grid level instead of municipality level. Together, both steps can provide a better understanding of the trends.

The **second session**, moderated by **William Kutz** addressed the territorial challenges that have arisen from the aforementioned settlement dynamics.

The presentation from **Josefina Syssner** (Linköping University) addressed “Local governments’ policy responses to long-term decline” where she focused mostly on the shrinking population areas by using qualitative research. She based her presentation on three arguments: 1) demographic decline is a fact in many rural areas; 2) demographic decline has vital consequences for municipalities and communities and has to be addressed; and 3) local governments need to develop policies on how to cope with demographic decline and post-pandemic order. Answering these starting points might bring new solutions to the old questions, but could also give rise to new questions that need a solution. The first question is how to promote growth. Another could be on how can local governments manage the absence of growth?

Demographic decline is and will continue to be characteristic of many rural areas. Almost half of the 290 municipalities in Sweden faced demographic decline between 1975 and 2021. Almost one-third of municipalities have fewer inhabitants today than before the pandemic in 2018.

Depopulation has severe consequences for the welfare sector, schools, finances, the labour market, social and cultural life. As municipalities set the taxes themselves, small shrinking municipalities often have higher taxes and lower access to welfare, although they pay more.

Politicians constantly hope for growth (reversing the trends), some of them even deny the negative population trends. Local governments try to adapt their organisation to a smaller and older population, but they have problems doing this strategically. Some decisions are taken late, and they lack adequate information (also due to small administrations and lack of resources). It is also very hard to communicate about depopulation and its consequences.

Local governments need to develop policies for coping with demographic decline, including the parameters that will result from the period after post-COVID-19 pandemic. Usually, politicians respond to the decline by reversing the trend – implementing branding, supporting entrepreneurs and improving the business climate, and aiming to enhance employment, incoming populations, and gain some returns. The expected results are a broader tax base and better prospects for the public and private sectors. However, local governments also need adaptation policies, with measures like inter-municipal cooperation, innovation, efficiency, savings, and tax raises, aiming to adapt administration and services to current demographic conditions that would balance the economy and provide governmental and welfare quality.

How can the depopulating areas develop strategies to benefit from the current situation? How can digital nomads, temporary inhabitants, second homeowners, tourists, guest workers, new immigrants, etc., be treated as resources for development even if they are not settled and are not taxpayers? This type of localisation policy can work on broadband connections, enhancing services, meeting the demands of those that are in the municipality faster, but also on how to use these types of inhabitants (transient or permanent) as a resource for when it comes to work, networks, competencies, and building a resilient and liveable community. They should not only be customers but part of society. It is also vital to enhance digitalisation with place-based activities.

Erika Sandow's (Umeå University) presentation on “Counter-urbanisation and development planning” further elaborated on possible adaptations to a post-pandemic reality. There is severe outmigration in three metropolitan areas in Sweden, and this outmigration has accelerated during the pandemic. The question is who are the movers, what are their destination choices and what are their motives for choosing these areas. Which are the questions to address as planners, if these trends continue? What is needed for them to move and what is needed to stay?

The area of observation is not on the suburban landscape, but on those moving beyond suburban boundaries.

Taking into consideration census data and the surveys/interviews among families who moved out between 2017 and 2019, no strong flow of migration to the countryside can be observed, but mostly to middle-sized cities and smaller towns. Families with young children are overrepresented, the majority are highly educated, but are not necessarily in creative or career professions. Most are common middle class, working in the public sector (teachers, doctors). Pre-pandemic, a large group could work from home – mostly in highly-skilled occupations, having great flexibility of where they can work.

One important part of the development that is now possible to see is that remote work and the possibility to work from home are increasingly expanding to many other professions – more groups of professions are likely to work in a hybrid way, combining office work with remote work. Still, we have to remember this does not apply to all occupational groups, and who can commute daily or a few days a week depending on where you live.

The destination choices are mostly middle-sized cities and small towns and we also see that many of them are return migrants. 50 % of them move to municipalities where their parents live and in the survey, it is also seen that family networks and support are important factors in the choice of where to move. The previous residential areas and experiences are also important for the selection of settlement type to move to, in the case of leaving a metropolitan area. This is not necessarily a childhood area, but if you have previously experienced living in a similar type of place, it is more likely you would move there.

Those who are not return movers (who move to new locations that they have never previously lived in or where there are no family relations) are overrepresented in commuting municipalities. There is also an increased immigration into more attractive rural areas. Åre is one example of that, as an area with a profile focused on tourism.

Motives for making moves out of the metropolitan area are the importance of accessibility, work opportunities, accessibility to schools and services, and leisure activities but, above all, transportation to get around between these daily activities. The majority of movers stated that long commutes and long stays in childcare were the main factors for moving. Place and space is another aspect that stands out – focusing on the quality of life. 85-90 % of the families rate nature and the built environment as important. They want access to nature and outdoor activities, but are also concerned about private space; they want a possibility of owning a home with a garden, but also wish for larger housing – for many this has not been an opportunity in the metropolitan areas due to high prices. The third aspect is safety – mostly related to the outdoor environment – less traffic, more green spaces for the children to play, but also social security – neighbourhood cooperation, the children can move on their own to and from school and activities, also giving the parents more time. Time is the fourth aspect that also stands out among the motives. Quality time with the family is especially valued very highly. Often this is a result of less stress and less time dedicated to transportation after they move. It is obvious that a counter-urban move for families is strongly associated with a phase in the course of their lives. The focus has shifted from adults' personal lifestyles to children's needs and 95 % of the respondents in the survey stated that the environment of their children's upbringing was the main reason for moving. This reflects a kind of trade-off for the adults between their career, friends and the children's upbringing. Looking at daily mobility after the move, around half of them experienced less stress in getting around in everyday activities. Those moving to rural areas state that they have less stress while those who moved to commuting municipalities have increased their stress, as well as those with longer commuting times after the move. Overall, the children's access to school and leisure activities has increased.

An interesting finding is that while a lot of respondents have the ambition to put the car away after moving, many of them actually bought an extra car and also use the car even more after moving. Looking at different destination types, regardless whether it is a middle-sized city or a rural area, they still use the car more often. The commutes get shorter and overall less stressful in mainly rural areas. When it comes to housing, the housing market in metropolitan areas with high prices made it difficult for many families to afford desirable housing. 73% answered that housing prices are very important. This applies to both groups – those who return and those who move somewhere else. During the pandemic, demand for bigger houses in Sweden was observed. The prices for larger detached houses and cottages have increased faster than the prices of apartments. The housing before the pandemic was also an important motive for families leaving the metropolitan areas, which poses a question, how will this affect people's future migration patterns? Will the housing prices continuously grow and push more people out of metropolitan areas, will smaller cities that are closer to metropolitan areas have an increased immigration, and will these cities be able to handle an increased pressure on the housing market, schools, and healthcare?

It is expected the pandemic will normalise remote work; this will affect commuting and migration patterns. More people will be able to realise a dream of living outside the big city in the post-pandemic future – this is similar to what was observed after the Spanish flu pandemic, where there was increased suburbanisation. We do not know if post-pandemic migration patterns will show an increased urbanisation or counter urbanisation but we will see changing migration patterns. For smaller and more rural municipalities this flow of young families can be vital to confront the ageing of the population and to boost the local economy with a more educated population. If remote work and changing commuting patterns are considered – who can work from home and how does it vary between regions? Not everyone will have the possibility to work from home and some still may need to commute longer distances. What influence will coworking spaces and improvements of telecommunications and infrastructure have on migration patterns? How will this affect the destination choices of inhabitants? From the research, we know what families are searching for, and they choose to leave a big city life. We know that the working opportunities, housing, accessibility to services, schools, etc. are important factors for family

decisions, and many municipalities can offer all of these amenities, but place attachment – the relation to a certain place via relatives, second homes, or tourist visits – will also affect the destination choice.

Session 3: Territorial Responses

Roundtable Discussion: Territorial actors respond: testimonies and practices since the pandemic

Tomas Ekberg (Chief Analyst for Regional Development, Västra Götaland Region)

The Västra Götaland Region is one of the most economically advanced regions in Sweden, with Volvo, Eriksson, and AstraZeneca located there. The region has a lot of high-quality companies and high investment in R&D (5% of GDP). Its 49 municipalities (almost 2 million inhabitants), span from areas with more than half a million people and labour market areas with one million people, down to small municipalities in the northern part which have four thousand people. This region is a good arena to observe the processes discussed.

When focusing on the economic sector during the pandemic, the region did not observe any change in the driving forces when it comes to how companies act. There are many new research facilities and new companies moving into regional centres, whereas this is not characteristic for other parts of the region (e.g. rural areas).

Also at the level of inhabitants, The region does a lot of research in collaboration with the SOM-institute of the Gothenburg University¹ focusing on how people value their quality of life. Results from surveys on how the people that work look at their work and life, comparing 2014 and autumn of 2020, nothing crucial has changed. It is not about the career or the money, it is about having good friends, using one's competencies, being able to meet family, and generally having a good life. Despite the fact that there are great differences in housing prices between the regional centre and the northern part of the region, with a ratio going up to 6:1, they have not noticed any change in trends in selling the houses in the city centres. Happiness or high satisfaction with your life is not dependant on aspects such as being the richest or being the most innovative. In fact, the most developed areas, such as the centre of Gothenburg, often have the lowest rate of life satisfaction. However, it is difficult to discuss this in the context of the COVID pandemic, as it is not over yet. Although, when talking about who has been affected by the COVID pandemic when it comes to life satisfaction, mental health or hope for the future, it is the young generation that has been hit the hardest.

The pandemic also had a major effect on is digitalisation. In the new strategy launched by the region for sparsely populated areas, policymakers/decision makers speak of digital decentralisation and have agreed between the region and the state that, in the long term, they will try to move jobs to these areas and try to build from there. This will create what these sparsely populated areas need, like more knowledge and support to better cope with businesses development.

Camilla Ottosson (Community Planning, Kronoberg Region)

The Kronoberg Region is a rural region in the southern part of Sweden with approximately 200,000 inhabitants. Recently they decided to lead a rural community fair that will be held in 2030 called a "village fair". This is a huge and complex initiative that will impact the region for several years ahead. It is the response to the challenges and changes concerning to population growth they have experienced for some years now that have also increased during the pandemic, especially in the smaller municipalities, such as housing shortages and the lack of human capital in the region. Today, the Kronoberg Region has the highest GDP growth and the most employment opportunities per capita in Sweden. However, people working in the region often do not live there due to low residential attractiveness. Thus, local businesses are screaming for highly qualified people to be able to expand their activities and at the same time most of the municipalities have housing shortages and difficulty financing the building of new houses. Accompanied by the green transition, these challenges and changes require everyone to work together and this is what the village fair is about. The concept and method of the fair have been developed through a broad dialogue during the past three years. There have been cross-sectorial and multi-level discussions including actors from the civil society, all the municipalities, national authorities, academia, and the private sector and together they developed two different reports exploring and explaining their concept further.

Today, planning is often equal to urban planning, but it is necessary to broaden the housing debate and challenge and complement today's planning to also include sustainable development in rural areas. For a long time exhibitions and housing fairs have been seen as an instrument to challenge and explore future urban planning, houses, and/or sometimes development for entire communities to meet new challenges and a new

1- <https://www.gu.se/en/som-institute>

way of living. Now is the time to use this instrument and method to explore the future sustainability and living environments in rural areas. The rural community fair focuses on strategic rural development issues and attractive living environments instead of focusing on the built environment. It puts people's needs at the centre of society's development to increase the quality of living and the attractiveness of a region. In doing this, social sustainability is the core issue for the fair. It can be a platform and test arena for multi-level and cross-sectoral collaboration and a way to explore and exchange knowledge concerning new planning methods, financial models, and various forms of co-design. It will also provide concrete examples of how the results of working with the designed living environments can contribute to viable and attractive communities in rural areas, and thus speed up the transformation towards a sustainable society.

Lina Wedin (Head of Regional Planning, Skåne Region)

The Skåne Region, with approximately 1.3 million inhabitants, lays in southern Sweden, close to Copenhagen. In the region, planners aim to develop a regional plan which will try to shape a polycentric region. As they head towards a new polycentric region, the countryside and urbanisation become central factors to consider.

In terms of the pandemic there are three perspectives: 1) planning, 2) housing, 3) work and commuting. The survey on Skånean housing and living preferences and their changes during the pandemic included two thousand residents of varying ages, housing situations, and income groups. In questioning their intention to move and the reasons for moving, the findings are that a very small change in preferences existed (practically none) due to the pandemic. This is an interesting result because there has been a lot of discussions about people wanting to move due to the pandemic. Another perspective is gained from using moving data where there is a certain trend of households moving from larger cities to the surrounding municipalities and, to a certain extent, also to rural areas. This trend could just as well be explained by the demographic structures and the baby boom of the 90's, where families are seeking affordable houses and are thus forced to move out of the costly city centres. The work and commuting aspects have shown that, on average, Swedes want to travel a maximum of 45 minutes each way to work. This affects where they want to live in each labour market area, so if more workplaces allow for remote work, resulting in fewer commute days, this might potentially change the tolerance in terms of time and increase the labour market area.

Daniel André (Boverkett - National Board of Housing, Building and Planning, Sweden)

In terms of strategic planning and trends that evolved during the pandemic so far, a better understanding of the long-term effects, the risks, and the potentials of remote work and multi-locality is necessary. Thus, evidence and data on spatial transformations are needed, in addition to the knowledge on changing norms and settlement preferences, as well as on how to make use of these new conditions to transform to climate-neutral and socially inclusive societies. To get more evidence and to promote mutual learning, Boverket collaborates with research organisations, gathers and presents the data on the housing market, and conducts yearly surveys. The latest survey with answers from 219 municipalities in Sweden supports the idea presented before, showing that many municipalities are reporting increased demand for small houses outside the city centres, also increased demand for second homes in some municipalities, however, due to the early stage of a pandemic it will be important to also observe these trends in the coming years.

Apart from the survey, Boverket meets with planning actors and discusses the changed planning conditions. The organisation also commissioned an interview-based study with planners from different levels in Sweden. The results suggest the presence of behavioural changes and point attention to the effects of social and spatial segregation regarding physical activity and health, but also unequal access to services, to public spaces and green areas, and for the future they highlight the need to develop attractive public spaces in cities and towns to meet the demand for better and more inclusive green space and recreational areas.

Concerning the pandemic, another relevant question is on what is a good population density, and an important issue in this regard is how to meet the increased demand for small houses without this leading to unsustainable urban sprawl. The results also raised the issue of internet-based consumption, (the changing consumption patterns and how to develop sustainable logistics solutions), how to work with local service centres (both in rural and urban areas), and how to strengthen accessibility and develop infrastructure for walking and cycling. New forms of hybrid meetings and remote working, caused by the pandemic, will also remain after it ends so this will be an important impetus for transformation across society.

Niels Boye (EU Interreg Öresund-Kattegat-Skagerrak)

The Interreg Öresund-Kattegat-Skagerrak programme covers three countries and eleven regions – four in Denmark, three in Sweden, and four in Norway, altogether comprising of 9 million inhabitants. It includes two capitals, Oslo and Copenhagen, as well as the second and third largest Swedish cities Gothenburg and Malmö.

Boye's presentation focused on cross border cooperation and commuting during the pandemic, thus addressing the international level from the policy and learning perspective. The crises (the migrant crisis, financial crime crisis, and COVID pandemic) have shown that Nordic cooperation in times of crisis has not developed the way the politicians and citizens have expected. In all the cases the first response was to close the borders. Reflections should thus lead to better Nordic cooperation in the post-COVID era. Due to COVID, the movement of people and goods has been limited because of government interventions and governments did not consult or even inform neighbours of their intentions. Crossing the borders was more difficult and time-consuming, and highly affected the daily life of commuters, as well as caused some goods to be left behind at the border (e.g. masks). Thus, the possibility to work remotely was welcome.

In November 2021, the recommendations for strengthening cooperation in Nordic countries were prepared, aiming to:

- enhance closer coordination and exchange of information;
- reform the rule for taxation and social security;
- ensure better emergency preparedness for a future crisis, giving the responsibility for civil emergency preparedness in the Nordic countries to the Nordic cooperation ministers;
- implement a common Nordic travel certificate;
- pilot test how to organise common procurement of a vaccine and
- modernise rules and regulations for the labour market, taxation, and pension schemes for cross border workers.

It is evident that countries need each other and have much more in common than the things that divide them. Differences in housing prices and wages make crossing the border interesting and thus are an important factor of further integration.

Concluding Remarks

As wrapped up by **William Kutz** and **Sverker Lindblad**, the objective of the debate was to understand rural and urban settlement patterns in Sweden and Nordregio provided an abundant source of information. What is important is the fact that rural depopulation is not only a current problem but is still going to be one of the major issues affecting rural communities in the future. The process is not uniform and it will be important to better understand this context to ensure that planning responses are adequate. An important question is also who is gaining and who is losing from these trends, as well as what types of provisioning of local services and infrastructure are influencing these dynamics and what types of supports are needed to improve rural dynamics in terms of planning infrastructure and services. The evidence presented also showed two different dynamics related to the governance and planning of rural environments. One is on rural depopulation and the effects that this is having locally and the other on counter urbanisation trends from larger municipalities to, not necessarily rural environments per se, but smaller and medium towns as well.

These rural-urban dynamics do not only happen in a linear direction – from rural environments to large cities, such as Malmö or Gothenburg – but also happen in the opposite direction and that creates new issues for planning and territorial development. Importantly, the push dynamics to these rural environments do not inevitably mean that rural contexts necessarily have the attributes or services that people from these urban environments are looking for.

Also, the responses from various regional contexts imply that several processes run in parallel, some taking place already before the pandemic and some new ones caused by the pandemic. The main question is on how to better understand them and how to address them as planners. This might be in setting alternatives to the question of growth as a priority by suggesting alternatives, deriving from the long-lasting trends of rural depopulation, but also in addressing the new trends identified during the COVID pandemic, which need to be further explored to develop better mechanisms to map and measure these territorial phenomena as well as to improve policy-making in the future. Nevertheless, this is a moving target, as it might be too early to speak about post-COVID trends. Still, we need to know more about what the trends are and what affects them, what is happening with these widening urban functional areas around the cities that tend to incorporate rural areas making the much bigger than today, what types of spatial planning interventions do we need for good development in such areas, and so on.

An outlook for the future research and planning

Both research and practice have provided important information on the role that the COVID-19 pandemic plays in changing territorial patterns. As argued by the speakers, the possibility to work remotely has sparked a new trend in urban-rural relations. On the one side, this opens opportunities to rural areas in addressing their development (immigration of young and educated people), but on the other also raises new challenges to planning practice (e.g. adequate housing and service provision).

Thus, the questions raised by Sverker Lindblad and summarised in Objectives, are to be further studied, differentiating the trends caused by COVID-19 pandemic from those already taking place, as well as examining the effects that might further change settlement patterns. Knowing the trends is of crucial importance to use them for the future – hopefully – more sustainable and balanced territorial development.



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