



Older adults and the green transition

SUMMARY

Despite their significant experiences, older adults' voices and concerns are frequently overlooked in climate discussions. In this policy memo, we present statistics and experiences of older adults towards climate change and the green transition. We also offer suggestions on how policymakers can better engage older adults in the green transition, for example by involving the civil society organisations that represent their interests and by providing clear information on how all can contribute to achieve more sustainable lifestyles.

Our research shows that more than two thirds of older adults worry about climate change, many are trying to make climate-friendly choices, and they generally see climate policies as fair. However, older adults report challenges like increasing costs and accessibility issues, and they worry that increasing digitalisation will lead to exclusion or isolation.

KEY INSIGHTS

1. 68% of older adults in the Nordic Region worry about climate change.
2. Many older adults care about the environment and try to make more climate-friendly choices.
3. Older adults experience obstacles to choosing a greener lifestyle.
4. 53% of older adults think that the green transition will be beneficial for the economy.
5. 44% of older adults expect benefits for health and well-being.
6. 24% of older adults say climate policies have negative effects on their household finances.
7. 51% of older adults worry that the green transition may lead to price increases.
8. Older adults are more likely to perceive climate policies as fair compared to other age groups.
9. Representatives of older adults worry that digitalisation will lead to isolation and marginalisation.
10. Organisations and representatives of older adults want to be more involved in the green transition.

Introduction

Older adults are important agents in the green transition. They are a growing demographic group in the Nordic Region, and their lived experience spans decades. In their lifetimes, they have witnessed structural change and historical shifts in our environment and climate as well as changing climate policies to address them. Nonetheless, their involvement in the green transition remains limited, and their knowledge and experiences are often not fully recognised (OHCHR, 2021; Tapia et al., 2022). There is also only limited knowledge on how green transition policies^[66] influence older adults and their attitudes towards the green transition.

This policy memo aims to address this gap and present some messages from older adults to Nordic policymakers. What are they worried about? What are their expectations? The policy memo is based on a literature review, a Nordic survey and a focus group discussion with organisations representing older adults (see Box 1).

⁶⁶. By "green transition policies" we mean economic or environmental policies designed to lower greenhouse gas emissions and enable a transition to more sustainable economies and societies.

Box 1: Sources behind this policy memo

1. Literature review about the impacts of climate mitigation policies on different social groups in the Nordic Region

- Conducted: Spring 2022
- Method: A systematic search of academic papers, legal documents, and grey literature using a set of keywords

2. Nordic survey on the green transition

- Conducted: October – November 2022
- Interview method: Computer-assisted telephone interviews
- Target group: A representative sample of the adult population (interlocked gender-age quotas) in the Nordic Region
- Number of completed interviews:

Country	Number of completed interviews
Denmark	910
Finland	901
Iceland	380
Norway	909
Sweden	908
Faroe Islands	382
Greenland	405
Åland	383
Total	5178

All figures shown in this policy brief are based on the Nordic survey.

3. Focus group discussion on the green transition with civil society associations representing older adults.

- Conducted: 2 May 2023
- Method: Discussion held via digital meeting platform Microsoft Teams (plus one civil society organisation from Sweden supplied input to the discussion questions in written form.)
- Six participants from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and the Faroe Islands
- All direct quotes that are included in the following sections come from the focus group discussion.

Older adults in the Nordic Region

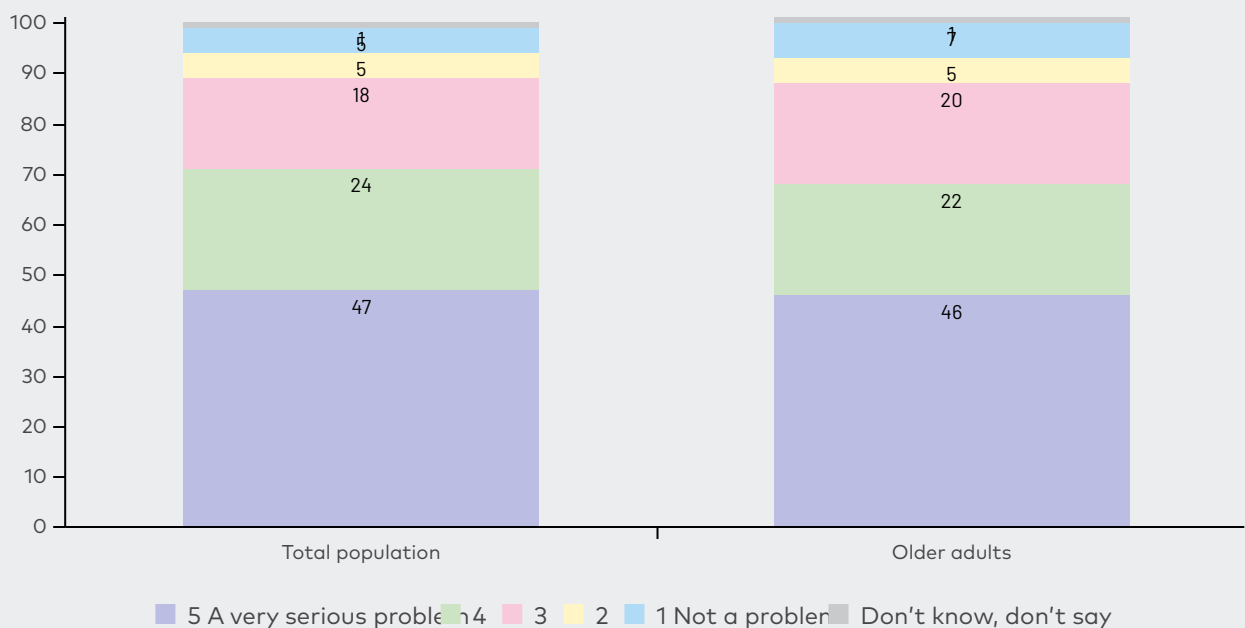
In this policy memo, "older adults" are defined as people aged 65 years and older. In the Nordic Region, 5.7 million people belonged to this age group in 2023, or 21% of the total Nordic population, with women making up 54% of the group due to their higher life expectancy (Nordic Statistics, 2024a). In the coming years, older adults will become an even larger demographic group; by 2040, the group will consist of 7.2 million people, meaning 25% of the Nordic population (Nordic Statistics, 2024b). In other words, older adults constitute an increasingly important demographic group with voting power, and green transition goals will be difficult to reach without including and mobilising them.

It is important to stress that older adults are not one homogenous population group. They differ in terms of employment status and living conditions, social networks and health, income, education, and values and political orientation – as well as in terms of their attitudes, worries, and perceptions of the green transition (Haq, 2021). This also implies that green transition policies can have different effects on older adults and their lifestyles, depending on their individual contexts. This is reflected in the survey results where older adults show the same variation in attitudes and diversity in how they answer the questions as people in other age groups.

INSIGHT #1: 68% of older adults in the Nordic Region worry about climate change

In a pan-Nordic survey that was conducted in the autumn of 2022, 68% of older adults stated that they see climate change as a serious or very serious problem. Among the total Nordic population, 71% shared this opinion (Figure 1). The difference is statistically significant and suggests that older adults are slightly less concerned about climate change than the general population. Nonetheless, older adults are somewhat more likely than the general population to agree that more ambitious climate policies are needed, even if this means that taxes increase. Fifty-one percent of older adults shared this opinion, compared to 49% among the total population.

Figure 1: To what extent do you think climate change is a problem?



Note: The figure shows the survey answers given by all respondents in the Nordic Region (left-hand side), and respondents in the age group 65+ (right-hand side). Respondents could answer the question on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 meaning that climate change is "not a problem" and 5 meaning that climate change is "a very serious problem". The numbers given in the text are calculated by adding the percentages of respondents who chose answer options 4 and 5. Hover over the legend to see the results.

Source: Tapia, Sánchez Gassen, & Lundgren (2023).

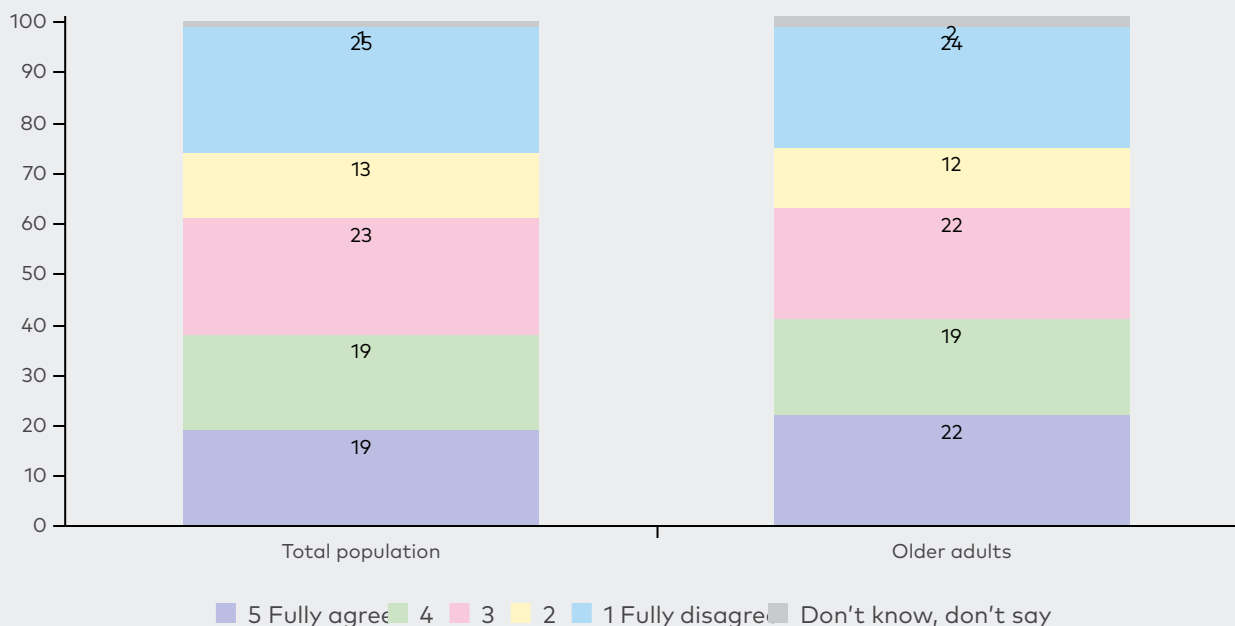
Research indicates that older adults have good reasons to be concerned about climate change. Numerous publications point out that older adults are generally more sensitive to environmental changes and climate events due to age-related health issues (see, for example, McDermott-Levy et al., 2019). If health and care services are disrupted due to climate emergencies, older adults may not get the treatment and care they need. Older adults who are in poor health, housebound, living alone, economically disadvantaged, and have few social contacts are particularly vulnerable (WHO, 2014). However, it is also important to note that many older adults today are more affluent and mobile than previous generations, giving them better resources to adapt to climate change (Hitchings & Day, 2011).

Age discrimination can worsen vulnerabilities towards climate change (United Nations General Assembly, 2021). For example, if older adults lack access to climate warnings and information on evacuation procedures, they may be slow to respond in emergencies. This issue is heightened if critical information is provided via apps and other digital tools, which some older adults are less comfortable using.

INSIGHT #2: Many older adults care about the environment and try to make more climate-friendly choices

Many older adults in the Nordic countries try to play their part in the green transition by changing their consumption behaviour and making more environmentally friendly choices. In the Nordic survey, around 40% of older adults state that they buy fewer products with a big carbon footprint, such as flight tickets or meat, due to climate concerns. This share is somewhat bigger than among the total Nordic population, where 38% say that they have changed their consumption choices (Figure 2).

Figure 2: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? – “I buy fewer products with a big climate footprint, such as meat or flight tickets, due to climate concerns.”



Note: The figure shows the survey answers given by all respondents in the Nordic Region (left-hand side), and respondents in the age group 65+ (right-hand side). Respondents could answer the question on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 meaning that they “fully disagree” – and have not changed their consumption behaviour – and 5 meaning that they “fully agree” and buy less products with a big climate footprint. The numbers given in the text are calculated by adding the percentages of respondents who chose answer options 4 and 5. Hover over the legend to see the results.

Source: Tapia, Sánchez Gassen, & Lundgren (2023).

In the survey, one in six older adults (16%) also state that they have recently renovated their home to make it more energy efficient with the help of financial support from the government. This share is higher than among other age groups. It may reflect the fact that older people are more likely to own their home than people in younger age groups and therefore may be more likely to invest in home improvements (Huynh et al., 2022).

INSIGHT #3: Older adults experience obstacles to choosing a greener lifestyle

While many older adults try to lead more environmentally friendly lifestyles, this can be challenging. Some of the key obstacles identified by civil society associations include:

Mobility

Buying an electric car is expensive, making it a challenging investment for older adults with a lower income. Public transport options, especially outside cities, may be limited and are not always accessible for older adults with mobility limitations. Cycling and walking can be difficult or impossible for older adults experiencing frailty or other health issues. If parking and driving opportunities in cities are reduced, this may limit older adults' participation in society.

Heating

Changing heating systems to more sustainable options implies long-term and expensive investments for households and may be unaffordable for older adults with limited income. Obtaining bank loans at a reasonable cost can also be difficult for older people, preventing many from making the necessary investments.

Recycling

Recycling stations can be difficult to reach for older adults who have mobility issues. Without help, they may not be able to dispose of their waste and recycle it according to the regulations.

As Nordic economies and societies are increasingly trying to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and people are encouraged to adopt more environmentally friendly lifestyles, it is important to ensure that all groups in society can contribute. This includes identifying obstacles such as those mentioned above and implementing targeted solutions.

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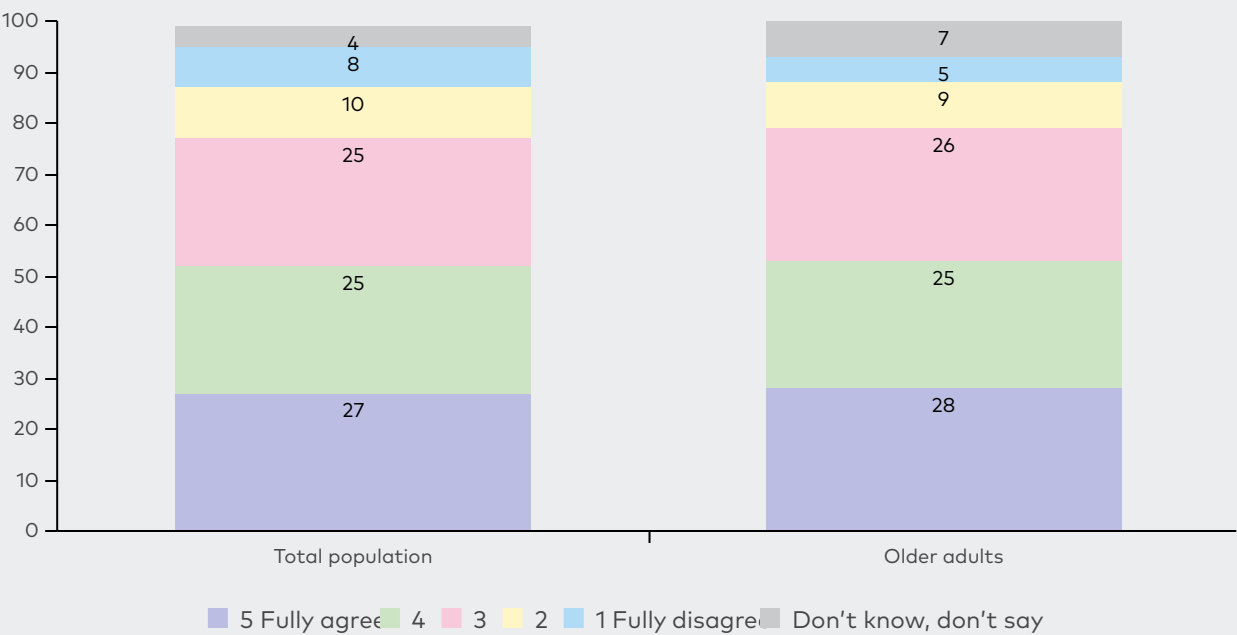
People with mobility problems cannot get rid of their waste. Our Council had to go to the municipality board to recommend that home helpers carried it 100 metres to recycle it.

- Older adult representative

INSIGHT #4: 53% of older adults think that the green transition will be beneficial for the economy

Despite these difficulties, many older adults are cautiously optimistic about the possible impacts of the green transition. For example, 53% of older adults state that action against climate change would be beneficial for their country's economy, and only 14% disagree (Figure 3). The rest of the Nordic survey respondents hold very similar views.

Figure 3: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? – “Taking action on climate change would be beneficial for the economy in my country.”



Note: The figure shows the survey answers given by all respondents in the Nordic Region (left-hand side), and respondents in the age group 65+ (right-hand side). Respondents could answer the question on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 meaning that they “fully disagree” – i.e. they do not think that climate action is beneficial for the economy – and 5 meaning that they “fully agree” and expect positive economic impacts. The numbers given in the text are calculated by adding the percentages of respondents who chose answer options 4 and 5 and 1 and 2. Hover over the legend to see the results.

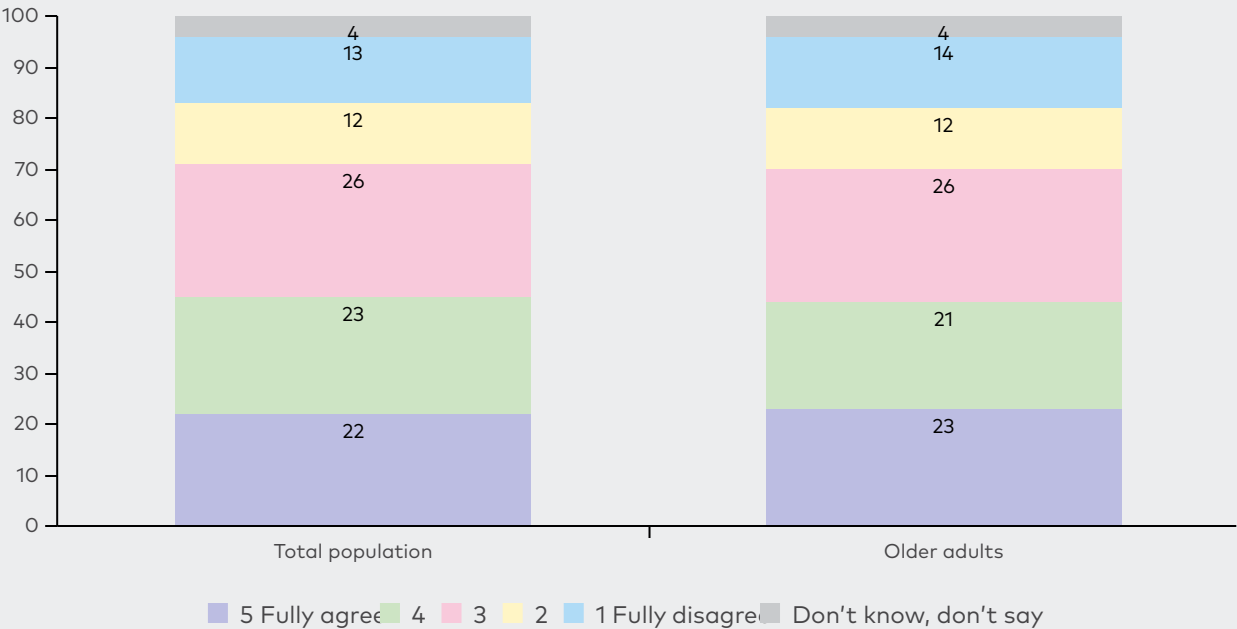
Source: Tapia, Sánchez Gassen, & Lundgren (2023).

INSIGHT #5: 44% of older adults expect benefits for health and well-being.

Almost half of all older adults (44%) responding to the Nordic survey expect that initiatives to fight climate change will improve health and well-being in the area where they live, compared to 45% among the total population.

Civil society associations and representatives of older adults argue that such health benefits can arise from, for example, a reduction of fossil-fuel car traffic in cities, which will improve air quality and reduce noise levels.

Figure 4: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? – “Initiatives to fight climate change will improve health and well-being in the area where I live.”



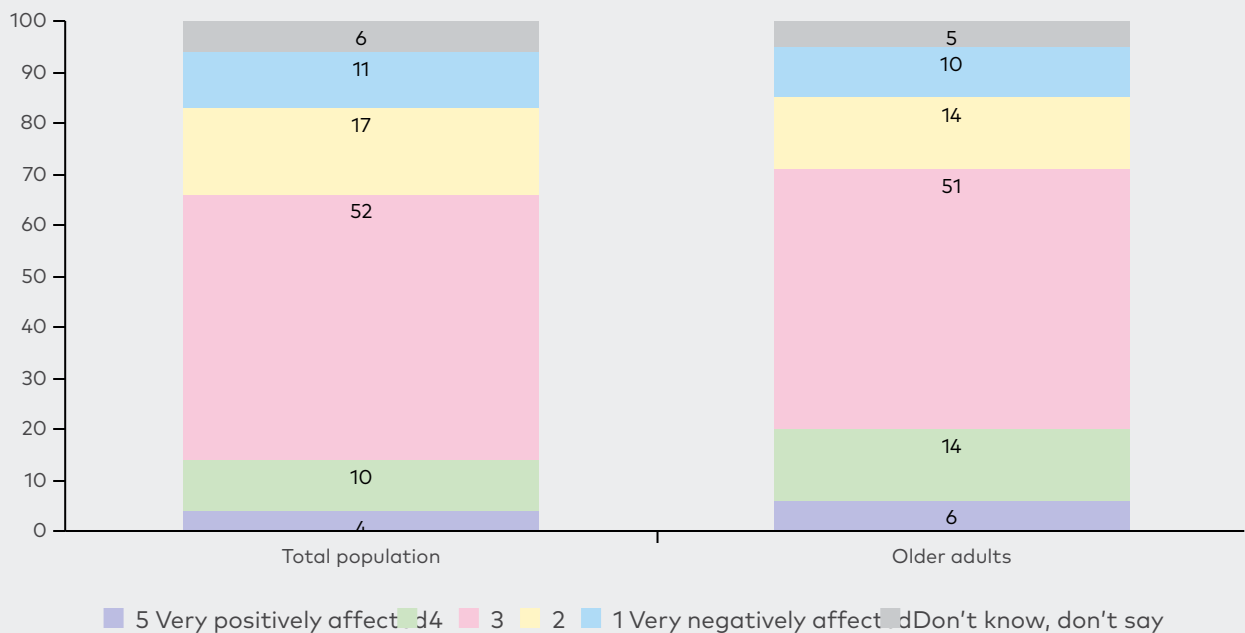
Note: The figure shows the survey answers given by all respondents in the Nordic Region (left-hand side), and respondents in the age group 65+ (right-hand side). Respondents could answer the question on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 meaning that they “fully disagree” and 5 meaning that they “fully agree”. The results described in the text are calculated by adding the percentages of respondents who chose answer options 4 and 5. Hover over the legend to see the results.

Source: Tapia, Sánchez Gassen, & Lundgren (2023)

INSIGHT #6: 24% of older adults say climate policies have negative effects on their household finances

While older adults see many positive impacts and opportunities from the green transition, some of them also worry about more challenging consequences. When asked how climate policies affect their household finances, 24% state that they experience negative effects (Figure 5). This percentage is significantly lower than in the total Nordic population, where 28% experience such negative impacts.

Figure 5: Overall, how do you think that climate policies affect your household today in economic terms?



Note: The figure shows the survey answers given by all respondents in the Nordic Region (left-hand side), and respondents in the age group 65+ (right-hand side). Respondents could answer the question on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 meaning their household is “very negatively affected” and 5 meaning that it is “very positively affected”. The numbers given in the text are calculated by adding the percentages of respondents who chose answer options 1 and 2. Hover over the legend to see the results.

Source: Tapia, Sánchez Gassen, & Lundgren (2023).

Two areas are particularly relevant in this context:

Heating

If energy costs increase during the green transition, this may make it more challenging for older adults, particularly those with lower incomes, to keep their

homes warm in winter and cool during heat waves. Indeed, in the Nordic survey, 22% of older adults state that they struggle to keep their home at a comfortable temperature due to higher energy and electricity costs (total population: 23%).^[67] This is worrisome since older people are, on average, more sensitive to extreme temperatures than their younger peers. They therefore have a stronger need to maintain agreeable temperatures in their homes (Evans, 2013). On the other hand, it should be noted that older adults are a very diverse group. While some may be vulnerable to increases in energy costs, more affluent older adults may be able to afford higher costs. Some groups are even able to travel to warmer climates in the winter to avoid the cold and, in doing so, further contribute to ongoing climate change (Hitchings & Day, 2011).

Mobility and transport

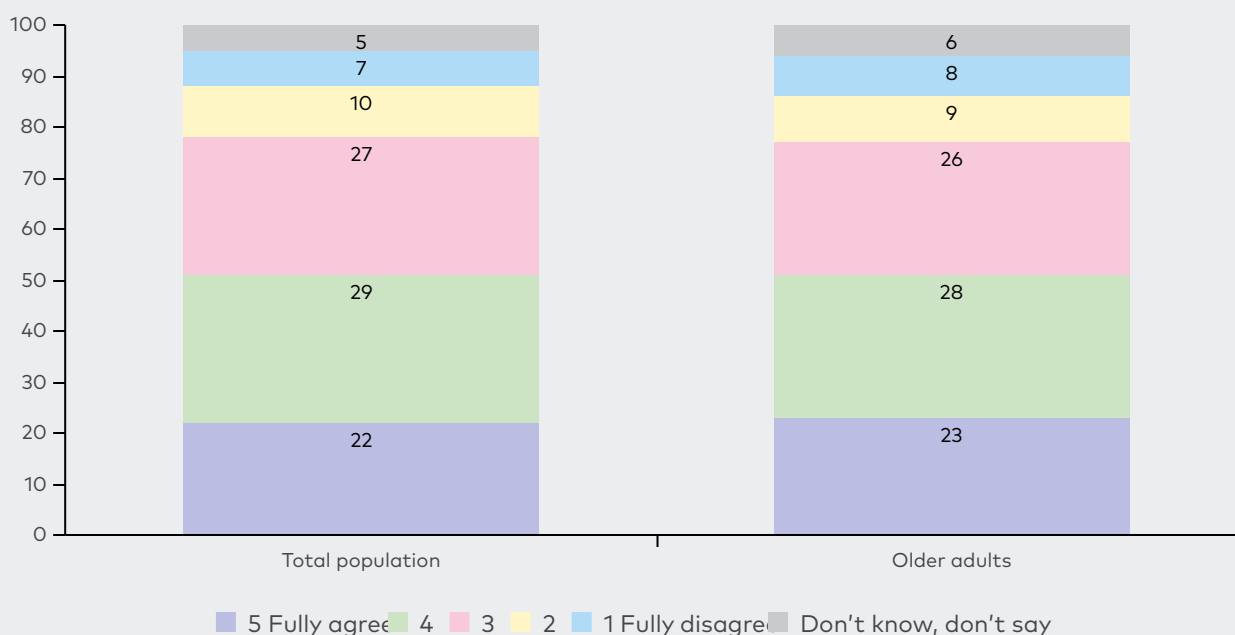
If transport costs increase during the green transition (e.g., due to rising fuel or electricity prices), this may limit the ability of some older adults to move around. In the Nordic survey, 30% of older adults (compared to 27% among the total population) say that they have already changed their transportation behaviours due to increases in fuel prices during 2021/2022. Changing transportation modes (e.g., from personal car use to public transport) is more likely to be an option for older adults living in towns or cities. For older adults living in rural and sparsely populated areas, public transport is often limited, and they may be more dependent on their cars. Increasing fuel prices may then limit their ability to move around and participate in social activities (Martiskainen et al., 2021).

INSIGHT #7: 51% of older adults worry that the green transition may lead to price increases

Looking forward, many older adults are also concerned about the impact of the green transition on cost of living (Figure 6). In the Nordic survey, 51% of all interviewed seniors expect that initiatives to fight climate change will lead to further price increases (total population: also 51%). Again, price increases would affect less affluent groups most strongly.

67. Note that the Nordic survey was conducted in the autumn of 2022, when energy prices rose steeply as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Figure 6: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? – “Initiatives to fight climate change will increase prices and cost of living in the area where I live.”



Note: The figure shows the survey answers given by all respondents in the Nordic Region (left-hand side), and respondents in the age group 65+ (right-hand side). Respondents could answer the question on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 meaning they “fully disagree” and 5 meaning that they “fully agree”. The numbers given in the text are calculated by adding the percentages of respondents who chose answer options 4 and 5. Hover over the legend to see the results.

Source: Tapia, Sánchez Gassen, & Lundgren (2023).

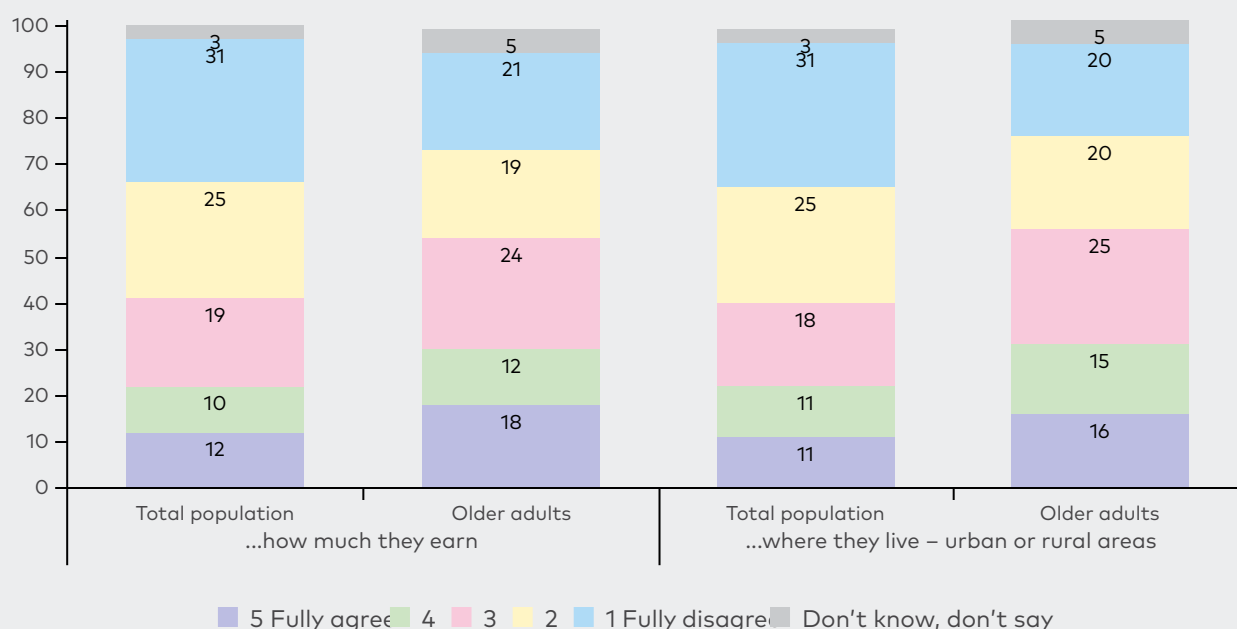
INSIGHT #8: Older adults are more likely to perceive climate policies as fair compared to other age groups.

One of the aims of the green transition is to leave no one behind and to ensure that no group will be disproportionately affected by climate and green transition policies. Older adults are more likely than other groups to perceive that these goals are met in the Nordic Region and that climate policies are fair.

In the Nordic survey, participants were asked about their views on the impact of climate policies and whether they think that all groups are equally affected by them, regardless of age, gender, income, country or origin, or place of residence. Thirty percent of older adults agree with the claim that climate policies affect everyone equally, irrespective of how much they earn, and the same share (31%) agrees with the claim that everyone is equally affected irrespective where one lives—in rural or urban areas (Figure 7). Among the total Nordic population, fewer respondents agree to these claims only 22% agree that everyone is equally affected

by climate policies, regardless of income or place of residence. This implies that older adults are more likely to perceive climate policies as fair than people in other age groups.

Figure 7: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? – “Everyone is equally affected by initiatives to fight climate change regardless of ...how much they earn. / ... where they live – urban or rural areas.”



Note: The figure shows the survey answers given by all respondents in the Nordic Region (left-hand side of each panel), and respondents in the age group 65+ (right-hand side). Respondents could answer the question on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 meaning they “fully disagree” and 5 meaning that they “fully agree”. The numbers given in the text are calculated by adding the percentages of respondents who chose answer options 1 and 2. Hover over the legend to see the results.

Source: Tapia, Sánchez Gassen, & Lundgren (2023).

INSIGHT #9: Representatives of older adults worry that digitalisation will lead to isolation and marginalisation

In parallel to the green transition, a digital transition (or digitalisation process) is taking place in the Nordic Region, where digital technology is increasingly integrated into all areas of our professional and social lives. This process is intertwined with the green transition. For example, in an effort to reduce the use of paper, more and more information is only available online. Similarly, it is becoming increasingly common to hold meetings, appointments, medical consultations, etc. through digital meeting tools to save travel time and costs.

While these transformations have many good effects—allowing people to save time and resources—they are challenging for older adults who do not feel comfortable using digital tools. Representatives of older adults express concerns that these groups are at risk of being left behind, with less access to information and an increased risk of experiencing isolation and loneliness. For example, for some older adults, appointments at their doctor's office are one opportunity to leave the house and meet people. For others, meeting a healthcare worker or nurse during check-ups at home can be a valuable human contact in everyday life. If such meetings are increasingly held on digital platforms, there is a risk that it reduces the already limited human contact that some isolated older adults have. Older adults who are less familiar with digital tools also risk marginalisation, since they may no longer have the same access to information and services as other social groups.

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A large part of older people don't communicate digitally and are not even capable of doing so.

- Older adult representative

INSIGHT #10: Organisations and representatives of older adults want to be more involved in the green transition

Many older adults play important roles in their communities through volunteering and local engagement. Many are also driven by thinking about their legacy and feel an obligation to leave the world as intact as possible for future generations (Frumkin et al., 2012). This potential can be mobilised for the green transition. Indeed, some groups of older adults have already become active and support ambitious climate goals, for example in Norway through the "Grandparents' Climate Campaign" or the Swedish "Grandparents for Future" who support Greta Thunberg's "Fridays for future" movement (Benediktsdóttir & Gíslason, 2023).

To be successful, ambitious climate goals and the transition towards greener societies and economies should be based on broad public support and engagement. Since older adults are a growing demographic group, they hold considerable electoral power, and their contribution is important. Researchers, interest groups, and international organisations alike stress the need to better include older adults and their interest organisations in policymaking processes to ensure that climate policies consider their diverse needs, capacities, and resources (see, for example, Pillemer et al., 2021; Haq, et al., 2008). Increasing the involvement of older adults in

discussions about the green transition can also help to avoid unintended consequences and to find approaches that limit negative impacts.

Councils for older adults (as they exist at the municipal level in many countries) and civil society organisations representing the interests of older adults can be first contact points for more closely engaging with this group. To empower older adults in the green transition and increase their involvement, it is important to fight ageism and abandon outdated stereotypes that describe them as passive, disinterested, or incapable of playing a key role (Hitchings & Day, 2011; OHCHR, 2021).

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When you get older, you get more concerned. Even if you are not going to live in this world so long, you are more concerned because you think of people coming after you.

- Older adult representative

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Suggestions from older adults for a just green transition

The representatives of older adults who took part in the project focus group make the following suggestions to national policymakers in the Nordic countries to ensure the green transition is just:

1: Systematically assess the impact of green transition policies on various age groups, including older adults

An easy approach to obtain information on likely impacts would be to collaborate with organisations who represent this group. Other suggestions would be to conduct regular surveys to understand how different groups experience and contribute to the green transition, to establish a permanent council of older adults at the national level, or to create a national ombudsman position who could represent the interests of older adults during discussions and policymaking processes related to the green transition.

2: Acknowledge the nuances within the group of older adults, and target solutions accordingly

Older adults are a diverse group with people differing, for example, in terms of their health status, educational and professional background, social networks, socio-economic condition and area of residence. This diversity needs to be respected when considering the interests and requirements of older adults during the green transition. For example, targeted loan schemes may help older adults with lower incomes to make green investments. Making exceptions for older adults with disabilities so that they can still drive and park in city centres may help them to maintain their mobility and social contacts.

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To maintain social justice I think it's important to distinguish between older people who are working and not, and between socio-economic groups.

- Older adult representative

3: Provide older adults with accessible information on the green transition and climate change

This should include information on how older adults can contribute to the green transition and protect themselves from the impacts of extreme weather events and emergencies. Information could be provided, e.g., via short, instructive videos on YouTube or other digital channels but also through non-digital channels such as radio, TV, or newspapers. It is equally important that information on public funds and subsidies to implement green solutions or investments (e.g., improvements of housing insulation, subsidies to buy electric cars, etc.) are accessible to older people so they do not miss out on these opportunities.

4: Consider providing support for a Nordic Network of Senior Councils

Such a network could link the councils of older adults that exist in the Nordic countries at the local level. It could provide a platform for exchange and learning for the council members but could also be a dialogue partner for Nordic policymakers who want to engage older adults in the green transition. It is important to draw on the wealth of experience and knowledge unique to older adults; their experience can help identify impacts and develop targeted solutions to move the green transition forward.

5: Create a green compensation fund at the national or Nordic level

The idea of green compensation funds is to compensate negative impacts of the green transition on particular industries or social groups through government subsidies. Resources from the funds could be allocated at local and regional levels.