



Young people and the green transition

SUMMARY

Young people are a key group for the green transition, since they—more than any other living generation—will have to bear the consequences of climate change and the impact of current climate action. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, children and young people have the right to be heard in all matters which concern them (United Nations, 2023). Nonetheless, young people are underrepresented in political decision-making processes, including those dealing with the green transition.

This policy memo summarises eight key insights about the views, concerns, and expectations of young people in the Nordic Region towards the green transition. It also summarises several suggestions from youth representatives to Nordic policymakers on how to make the green transition a just process, including the importance of reaching climate goals in the first place, engaging young people, and investing in sustainability education.

KEY INSIGHTS

1. 74% of young people in the Nordic Region worry about climate change.
2. Young people face challenges in adopting greener lifestyles.
3. 51% of young people expect improvements in health and well-being.
4. 35% of young people expect that the green transition will create jobs.
5. Young people are more likely to perceive climate policies as unfair than the majority population.
6. 33% of young people think that the Sami population is disproportionately affected by climate policies.
7. Young people worry that Nordic societies are becoming more polarised due to the green transition.
8. Young people want more positive communication about the green transition.

Introduction

Young people are a key group for the green transition. They will experience the impacts of climate change and the green transition first hand in their lifetime. Young people today have grown up with news and information about climate change, and reports are describing rising levels of climate anxiety among young people in the Nordics and beyond (Burenby et al., 2021; Hickman et al., 2021). Some young people have found an outlet for their anxiety by engaging in climate activism such as the 'Fridays for future' movement, demanding more ambitious climate mitigation efforts from policymakers (de Moor et al., 2020).

Despite this engagement, young people are often underrepresented in formal decision-making processes that address climate change and the green transition. In its Youth Stocktaking Report, the OECD (2018) states that young people do not have sufficient influence on policies that affect them the most, including climate change. There is also little knowledge about the impact of green transition policies on this group. The research literature in this area is limited and fragmented (Tapia et al., 2022).

This policy memo aims to contribute filling this gap by summarising key insights about the attitudes, worries, and expectations of young people towards the green transition. It is based on a literature review, a Nordic survey and a focus group discussion with youth representatives (see Box 1).

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 youth representatives.

- Conducted: 20 June 2023
- Method: Discussion held via digital meeting platform Microsoft Teams (plus two youth representatives from Denmark and Finland supplied input to the discussion questions in written form).
- Target group: Six participants from Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden
- All direct quotes that are included in the following sections come from the focus group discussion.

Young people in the Nordic Region

In this policy memo, “young people” are defined as people between ages 15 and 25. People in this age group have been particularly vocal and engaged in climate action during recent years, for example in the international “Fridays for future” movement started by Greta Thunberg. According to recent research, youth aged 15 to 25 made up large shares among the participants, at least during the earlier demonstrations of the movement (Wahlström et al., 2019; de Moor et al., 2020).

In 2023, 3.2 million people were 15 to 25 years old in the Nordic Region, corresponding to around 12% of the total population (Nordic Statistics, 2024a). At a national level, the share of young people among the total population ranged from 9% on Åland to 13% in both Greenland and Iceland (Nordic Statistics, 2024a). Due to low fertility rates and population ageing, the number of young people is projected to slightly decline to 3.1 million people by 2040, making up around 11% of the total population in that year (Nordic Statistics, 2024b).

In the following sections, we present eight insights on young people and the green transition and share several suggestions made by youth representatives during a focus group discussion on how the green transition can be more just in the Nordic Region.

Box 2: Research limitations - Children and the green transition

It is important to acknowledge that young people are a diverse group with many different attitudes and expectations towards the green transition, and we may not have captured the entire spectrum of viewpoints through our sources (see Box 1).

Most importantly, due to data limitations, this policy memo does not capture the attitudes and concerns of children. The United Nations have defined children as a group that is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, for example extreme weather events, water scarcity, or air pollution (UNICEF, 2023). This makes it important to increase knowledge on the needs and perceptions of children in times of climate change and to include child perspectives into green transition policymaking (Pegram & Colon, 2019).

Nonetheless, as evidenced by the literature review conducted for this project (see Box 1), research on the impact of green transition policies on children is limited and fragmented (Tapia et al., 2022). Most of the available literature conveys that the impact of climate policies is largely driven by people's socioeconomic status rather than their age per se (Shea et al., 2020), implying that children living in poorer households are more vulnerable than their peers in richer households. Other than this, the available academic literature seldom elaborates on the impact of climate mitigation and adaptation policies on children or their views and expectations.

One reason for this lack of knowledge is that researchers have only in recent years turned to children as actors and respondents in their own right. Existing methods on surveying the adult population cannot be directly extrapolated to interviewing minors (Borgers et al., 2000). Importantly, study designs and interview questions need to be adapted to the cognitive and communicative skills development level of children (for an overview see UK Research and Innovation, 2024). In recent years, research attention and methodological tools to survey children have increased so that knowledge on children's perceptions of the green transition are likely to improve. In our own Nordic Survey (see Box 1), only adults aged 18 and older could be interviewed. This means that children and youth of younger ages are not represented in our dataset. At the same time, the youngest age group that we can study with our survey data encompasses the ages 18 to 29, i.e., we have to include 26-29-year-olds in our survey analyses, even though they are not in the focus of this policy memo.

Children have so far also largely been disregarded in policy discussions around the green transition (Pegram & Colon, 2019). They are often given no formal role in discussion and decision-making procedures, and their views are rarely considered when policies and initiatives around climate mitigation and adaptation are designed. In priority area 2 of this Nordic toolbox ("Engage people"), we include some information about how to include children and youth in policymaking processes related to the green transition and sustainability questions. We hope these may offer inspiration on how to streamline the inclusion of children – as well as youth – into deliberations on green transition policies in the Nordic Region. Policymakers have a responsibility and obligation to hear the views of children and young people in matters that concern them, including the green transition.

INSIGHT #1: 74% of young people in the Nordic Region worry about climate change.

In recent years, an emerging corpus of literature has documented an increase in climate anxiety among young people in the Nordic Region and beyond, with important implications for their mental health and well-being (Pihkala, 2020). In a survey conducted by Hickman et al. (2021), a majority of young people from ten countries around the world (including Finland) stated that they were moderately or extremely worried about climate change, and these feelings of distress were correlated with what they perceived as inadequate government action.

A pan-Nordic survey that was conducted in the autumn of 2022 (see Box 1) confirmed this finding for the Nordic Region. 74% of young adults stated that they consider climate change as a serious or very serious problem (Figure 1). Among all respondents to the survey (total population), 71% shared this opinion – a small but statistically significant difference. It implies that climate worries are more prevalent among the Nordic young people than among the population at large.

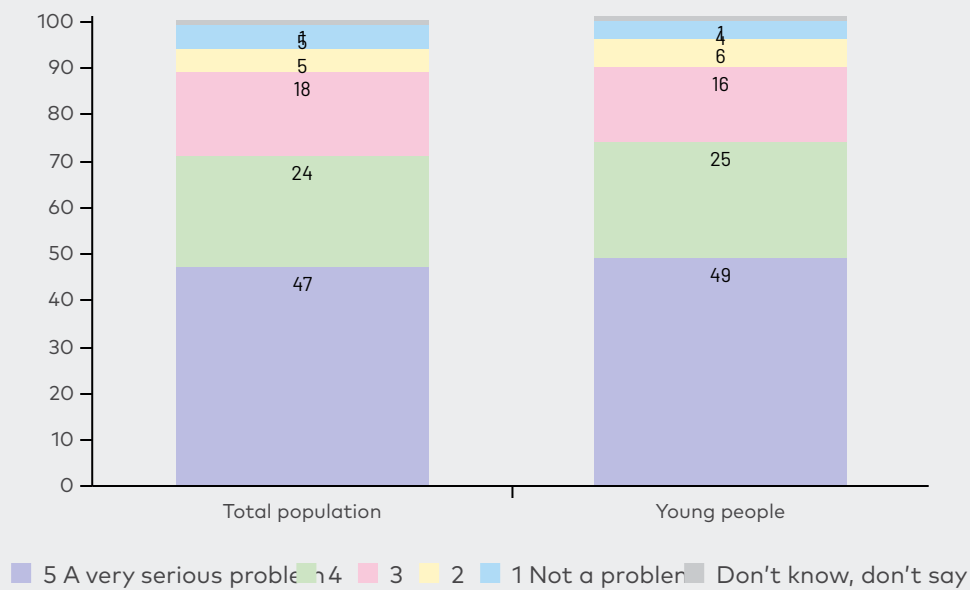
Around half of all young people in the survey (49%) also agreed that more public finances should be invested in preventing climate change, even if it means that taxes would increase. In this question, young people were in line with other age groups—49% of the total population shared this view.

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The uncertainty of the future due and the pressure to take personal responsibility for sustainability can lead to mental health issues, such as eco-anxiety and eco-guilt, affecting young people's overall well-being.

- Youth representative

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 18-29 years (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).

Given this backdrop, the green transition may have beneficial impacts on young people who suffer from climate anxiety. If green transition policies and initiatives lead to visible change and real improvements in lowering greenhouse gas emissions, young people may gain confidence. Getting engaged and participating in various forms of climate action is one coping strategy in combatting climate fears (Pihkala, 2020; Ojala, 2016). Engaging young people in the green transition should therefore also bring benefits to their well-being.

INSIGHT #2: Young people face challenges in adopting greener lifestyles.

Many young people are committed to playing their part in the green transition and embracing a more sustainable lifestyle. Nonetheless, this can be challenging. Youth representatives highlight the following obstacles:

Lack of infrastructure and public transport

In remote and rural areas in the Nordic Region, public transport options are often scarce, requiring young people to rely on cars for their mobility. Recycling facilities may also be few and far apart, making it more difficult to contribute to the circular economy.

Higher prices

Many sustainable products, from groceries and technologies to vehicles and clothing, are more expensive than their conventional counterparts. Since most young people are still in education or just starting a career, they often have less income than other population groups. This can make it challenging to switch to eco-friendly alternatives.

Inconvenience

Youth representatives argue that it needs to be easier and more convenient to adopt green lifestyles. Too often, it is time consuming, complicated, or it requires too much effort from people to adopt environmentally friendly behaviours into their daily lives. Youth worry that this may deter many people from playing their part in the green transition.

Green washing

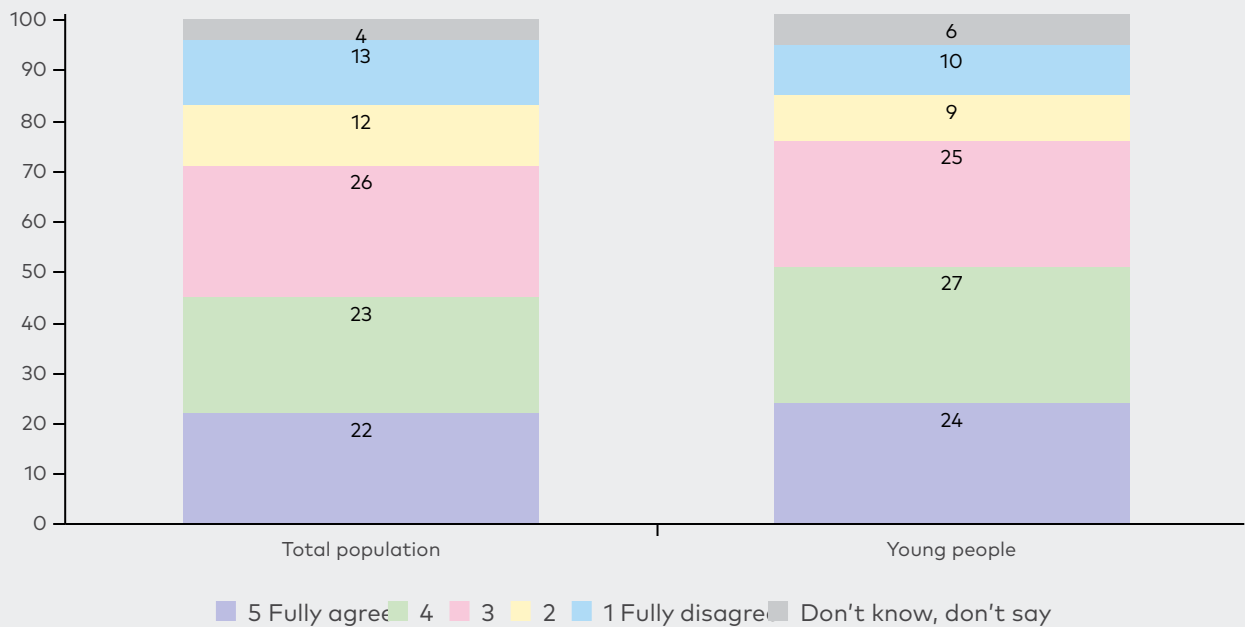
Youth representatives identify greenwashing as a key challenge. They argue that too many companies make unsubstantiated claims about the sustainability of their products or services. For the individual consumer, it can be tedious, time-consuming, and often even impossible to validate sustainability claims.

INSIGHT #3: 51% of young people expect improvements in health and well-being.

Despite these challenges, young people are optimistic about the impacts of the green transition, for example in terms of health and well-being (Figure 2). More than half of all young respondents in the Nordic survey (51%) state that they expect improvements in these areas. Only one in five (19%) explicitly disagree. These results imply that young people are more optimistic about the potential health

impacts of the green transition than other age groups. Considering all Nordic respondents that were interviewed, 45% say that they expect improvements in health and well-being, and 25% disagree. During a focus group discussion, youth representatives in particular stressed the beneficial impacts which may come from cleaner air and water.

Figure 2: 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.”



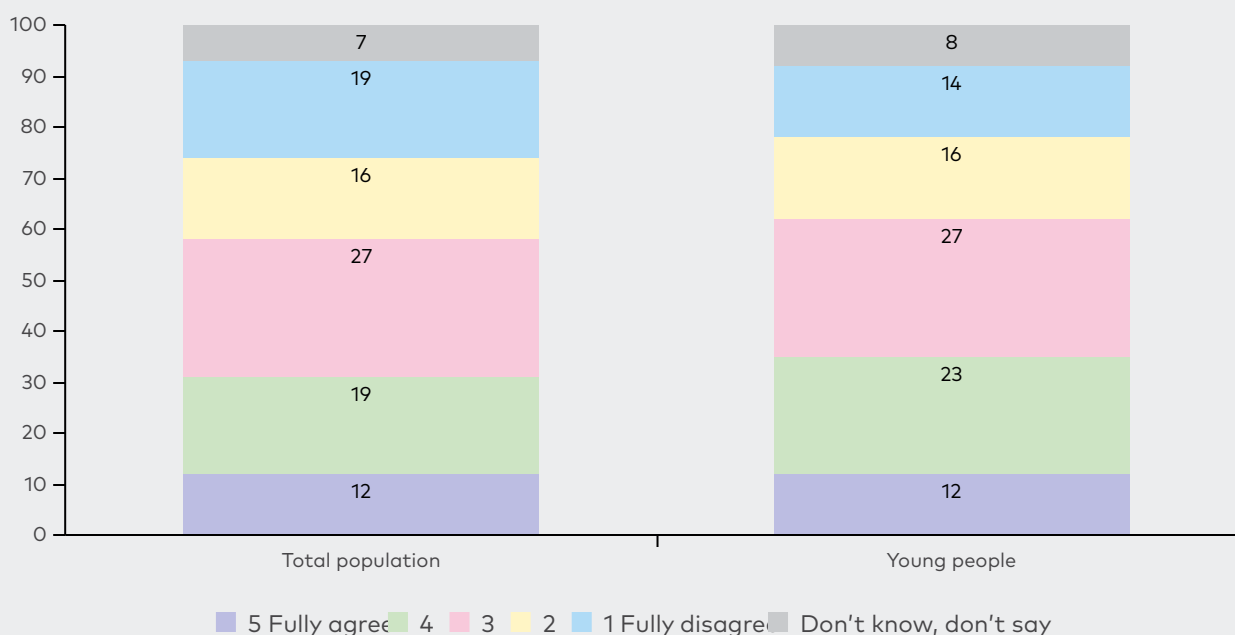
Note: The figure shows the survey answers given by all respondents in the Nordic Region (left-hand side), and respondents in the age group 18-29 years (right-hand side). Respondents could answer the question on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 meaning that they “fully disagree” and 5 meaning that they “fully agree”. The results described in the text are calculated by adding the percentages of respondents who chose answer options 1 and 2, and 4 and 5. Hover over the legend to see the results.

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

INSIGHT #4: 35% of young people expect that the green transition will create jobs.

Young people are also rather optimistic about the labour market impacts of the green transition (Figure 3). When confronted with the statement that initiatives to fight climate change will help create new jobs, more young people say that they agree (35%) than disagree (30%). When considering all respondents in the survey, the reverse is true – here, 31% say they expect job creation while 35% disagree. This suggests that young people are less worried about the labour market impacts of the green transition than other age groups.

Figure 3: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? – “Initiatives to fight climate change will help create new jobs 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 18-29 years (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 initiatives to fight climate change will lead to job creation – and 5 meaning that they “fully agree” and expect new jobs. The numbers given in the text are calculated by adding the percentages of respondents who chose answer options 1 and 2, and 4 and 5. Hover over the legend to see the results.

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

In a focus group discussion, youth representatives did not only reflect on the quantity but also the quality of the new green jobs. Their expectation is that new jobs in green sectors will be meaningful and allow young people to contribute to sustainable societal development in the Nordic Region, thereby also giving them a sense of purpose and benefiting their own well-being.

Some sectors of the Nordic economies that heavily rely on fossil fuels will have to change their production routines and/or product palette during the green transition. This may lead to changes in tasks, requirements, or even job loss. Since polluting industries are often concentrated in specific regions or municipalities, potential job losses could affect some areas more than others. When confronted with the fact that impacts could be spatially uneven, youth representatives do not question the need for a green transition per se. Instead, as evidenced by the quote, they reflect on how alternative careers and livelihoods could be offered to those affected, including considerations about financing and reskilling.

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The green transition creates more meaningful jobs than we had before. People can engage in something that they feel is important for our society, not just themselves.

- Youth representative

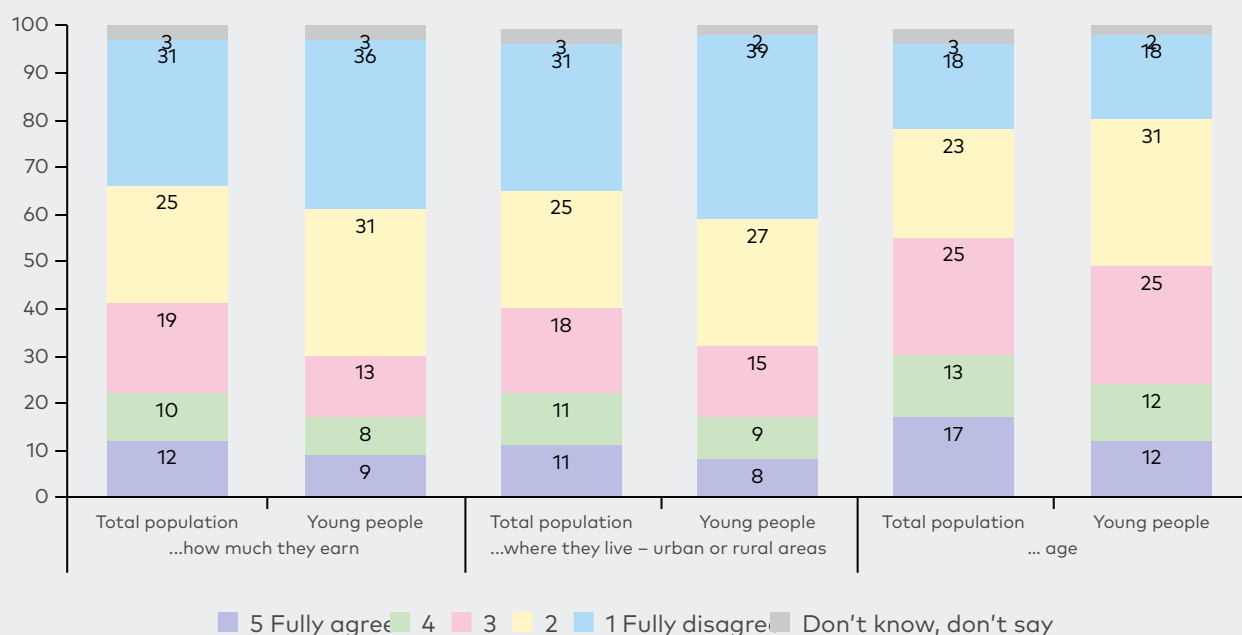
INSIGHT #5: Young people are more likely to perceive climate policies as unfair than the majority population

While many young people are rather optimistic about the impacts of the green transition on health, well-being, and job creation, they are less convinced that current climate policies are fair. In the Nordic survey, respondents were confronted with the statement that everyone in society is equally affected by climate initiatives, irrespective of how much they earn, where they live (rural or urban areas), or their age (Figure 4). Two out of three young people (67% and 66%, respectively) disagreed with the first two statements. In other words, they think that the benefits and challenges of the green transition affect people to different extents, depending on income and area of residence. 49% also think that age matters.

Young people are more doubtful about the fairness of the green transition than the rest of the population. When considering the answers of all respondents to the survey ('total population'), 56% stated that the impact of climate initiatives differs by income and place of residence, and 41% said that age matters.

One of the goals of the green transition is to leave no one behind. Based on the survey results, young people in the Nordic Region send the message that there is room for improvement in this area.

Figure 4: 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. / ... age”



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 18-29 years (right-hand side in each panel). 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.

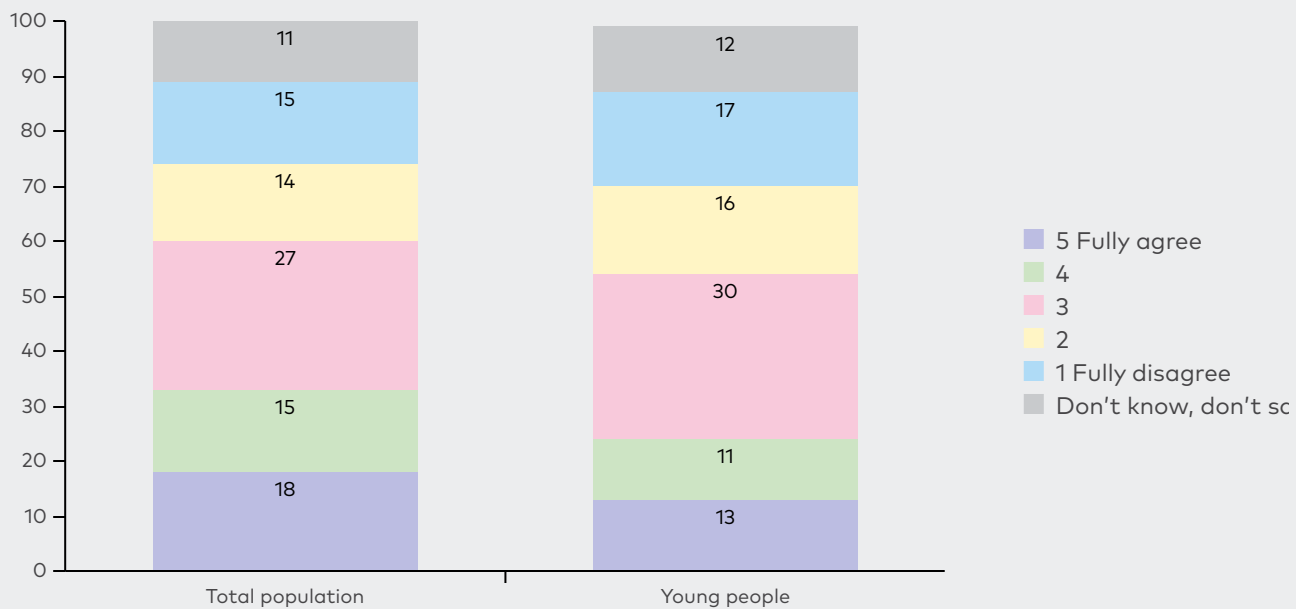
Source: Tapia, Sánchez Gassen, & Lundgren (2023).

INSIGHT #6: 33% of young people think that the Sami population is disproportionately affected by climate policies

Young people are more likely than other age groups to think that the Sami people are disproportionately affected by climate change initiatives. Survey respondents in Finland, Norway and Sweden were asked if they agree that the Sami population in their country is equally affected by climate initiatives as the rest of the population (Figure 5). Thirty-three percent of young respondents in the three countries disagree with this statement (total population: 29%). A smaller group, 24%, agree and think that the Sami are affected by climate initiatives to the same extent as others (total population: 33%). Notably, the largest group—42% of young respondents—give a neutral answer to this question (answer option 3), say that they “Don’t know” or choose not to answer. This suggests a widespread uncertainty among young people about what the green transition de facto means for the Sami people.

Youth representatives express their concern that the green transition, and specifically the transition to green energy, often comes at a cost to the Sami people and their lifestyles, which they perceive as an important injustice to address. They argue that the Sami, and especially young Sami, need to be included and empowered during the green transition so that they can maintain their traditions and culture.

Figure 5: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? – “The Sámi population in my country is affected by initiatives to fight climate change to the same extent as the rest of the population.”



Note: The survey question was only posed to respondents living in Finland, Norway and Sweden. The figure shows the survey answers given by all respondents in these three countries (left-hand side of each panel), and respondents in the age group 18-29 years (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, 4 and 5, as well as the answer options 3 and ‘Don’t know, don’t say’. Hover over the legend to see the results.

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

INSIGHT #7: Young people worry that Nordic societies are becoming more polarised due to the green transition

Many young people in the Nordic Region not only doubt the fairness of climate policies; they also worry that the green transition may lead to stronger societal polarisation. Youth representatives share their impression that young people are more and more divided when it comes to the green transition and sustainable development.

Youth representatives say that they see a counterculture forming against the green transition and see this as an obstacle to achieving climate goals. They worry that it may become more difficult to find compromises between these divided perspectives going forward. As illustrated by the quote, youth representatives stress the importance of maintaining democratic discussions about the green transition.

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The green transition and the green movement have a responsibility to think about how we communicate in order to get people with us and not against us.

- Youth representative

INSIGHT #8: Young people want more positive communication about the green transition

Youth representatives assert that one approach to counteract the polarisation among young people and society at large is to change the political communication about the green transition. In their perception, public and political discussions too often revolve around potential negative impacts of the green transition, describing it as a process that threatens people's comfortable lifestyles. Too often, key messages focus on restrictions and behavioural changes, making people feel patronised, ashamed, and exhausted.

According to youth representatives, not enough attention is paid to the many benefits that the green transition can bring to Nordic economies and societies. Youth representatives stress that policymakers should focus on creating a positive vision of the green transition and highlight the benefits. Future life in green Nordic societies should capture the population's imagination, inspiring and motivating

both young people and other groups to participate in the transition to get there. Creating such a positive vision may also have positive effects on youth struggling with climate anxiety.

Similarly, youth representatives argue that policymakers need to stress the necessity of the green transition. It may entail costs and require changes, but not doing anything will be even more expensive and have devastating effects. In other words, the green transition is not an optional pursuit; it is essential for the future of the Nordic Region.

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Suggestions from young people for a just green transition

Youth representatives who took part in the project focus group make the following suggestions to national policymakers in the Nordic countries to ensure that the green transition is just:

1: Focus on achieving the green transition

Youth representatives stress that first and foremost, greenhouse gas emissions need to be reduced. Achieving the green transition is, in itself, a just pursuit, since impacts of climate change fall disproportionately on poorer world regions, vulnerable groups and future generations. The green transition should be justly executed, but the aims of making it fair and balanced cannot be an excuse to slow down the process. Redistributing the financial resources from climate taxes is one of several approaches that could be taken to mitigate the impact of policies on the most vulnerable regions, sectors, and groups.

2: Make sustainable options affordable for all

It is important that sustainable choices become more affordable and convenient so that more people can take part in the green transition and switch to more sustainable consumption patterns. This may include improving access to public transport, providing subsidies for and/or removing taxation on vegetables and legumes, financially supporting organic farmers, installing more recycling stations in walking distance from people's homes, and making it cheaper to repair and upcycle existing products.

3: Invest in education on sustainability

Youth representatives argue that sustainability education and environmental awareness training is crucial for children and young people and should form a central part of school curricula. It can empower young generations to learn about the benefits of environmentally friendly choices and to adopt sustainable consumption patterns from an early age. It can also support young people in taking an active role in the green transition and qualify for a career in the green economy.

4: Listen to and involve young people in policymaking.

Since the current generation of children and youth will have to live with the consequences of global warming for the rest of their lives, youth representatives stress that they should have a central role in developing and adopting climate policies and initiatives. The right to be heard in matters that concern them, including environmental and climate issues, is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. All Nordic countries have signed the convention and therefore have a duty to consult and involve children and young people during green transition policymaking, in line with their age and maturity (United Nations, 2023). Participation processes respect the diversity of children and young people by accounting for different age groups, genders, abilities, areas of residence and socio-economic backgrounds. Including young people in climate-related decision-making processes should, however, not depend on their free labour. Young people should be valued and compensated for their efforts, particularly if their engagement is time-consuming.

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Create platforms and mechanisms for young people to participate in discussions and decision-making processes related to the green transition. We are the ones who have to live of the consequences of climate changes, we should be heard.

- Youth representative

5: Assess the impact of climate policies on young people

Youth representatives stress that policymakers should more systematically conduct impact assessments of green transition policies to analyse how planned policies would affect youth but also future generations (European Commission et al. 2024). Options include to conduct a Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) and a Child Rights Impact Evaluation (CRIE) (Daly and Lundy, 2022). Children's right to be heard is central to these assessments.

6: Allow for compromises

Not all countries, regions, and groups will be able to contribute to the green transition to the same extent. For example, people in Iceland are more dependent on air travel and people living in rural areas depend on their cars to move around. It is important to recognise that the green transition may look different due to the diversity of regions, population groups, and existing conditions. This means that local, place-based policies will play a major role in the transition, and national policies need to remain flexible and allow for customised applications to achieve the common transition goals.