

From Haga to COVID-19

Summary of webinar on Nordic societal security research

On 12 January 2021 NordForsk hosted a webinar on Nordic societal security research. Around 30 people from all the Nordic countries participated. Politicians, academics, preparedness professionals and staff from ministries, parliaments and the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers.

The purpose of the webinar was to both provide information about NordForsk and our Nordic research programme on societal security, and to have a dialogue with the participants about the challenges and initiatives for future research in the area.

Key points from invited speakers

Ingibjörg Lilja Ómarsdóttir, University of Iceland

Natural disasters and Nordic resilience:

- The objective of NORDRESS, the Nordic Centre of Excellence on Resilience and Societal Security, is to find ways to enhance the resilience of the Nordics to withstand crises caused by natural hazards.
- The researchers in the project have explored resilience from four different perspectives: Communities, institutions, individuals and infrastructures.
- They have had a multidisciplinary approach to the project and transferred knowledge into practice.
- Nordic research cooperation on natural hazards is important because of mainly two aspects: Exchange of knowledge and experience, and secondly, because the countries have similar concerns regardless of the nature of the hazards.
- Ingibjörg has also been practically involved in the work after the Seyðisfjörður mudslide and in the government's information about COVID-19.

Wouter Stol, Open University of The Netherlands

The importance of academic micro communities:

- The Police detectives on the TOR network (PD TOR) focuses on police detective work on the dark web.
- The main question is how the police keep the balance between crime fighting and human rights.
- Since the police are not really at home on the dark web, it is important that law enforcement activities are accompanied by academics, as academics from a certain distance can reflect on existing police strategies.
- Since the dark web is relatively new to all countries, we can learn a lot from each other.
- The aim for academics is to stimulate a social debate about law enforcement in our digital society.



- An important effect of the project is that the participants have formed an international network – a micro-community. A micro-community can serve as a platform for help, trust, discussions and tips without the risk of participants misusing the shared information.
- According to the researchers in the TOR project, traditional academic micro-communities like European or world-wide academic societies have two main disadvantages: They are too big and therefore too superficial in character, and they are strongly mono-disciplinary.
- The TOR project calls for a multi-disciplinary approach based on the mutual trust that we find in a micro-community. Thereby, it is easier to come up with preliminary ideas and ask “stupid” questions.
- To ensure a free exchange of ideas and an open academic discussion and debate about workable and ethical solutions, it is important that multi-disciplinary, academic micro-communities can flourish, and we should prevent that these develop into formal macro-communities.

Tore Bjørge, University of Oslo

Nordic multiagency approaches to handling extremism:

- Differences in how Nordic countries and cities handle violent extremism are higher than expected.
- Comparison of legal frameworks, action plans and institutional setups show Sweden is very different from other countries by having a stronger emphasis on social care logic and the responsibility of welfare services.
- The police in Sweden is less involved in this collaboration than the police in Denmark, Finland and Norway.
- In Denmark, the exchange of sensitive personal information between agencies is easier than in the other countries, especially Sweden.
- In policy documents, the police in Norway and Denmark have a much stronger preventive mandate than is the case in Sweden.

Bengt Sundelius, Swedish Defense University

COVID-19 and societal security:

- NordForsk is working to launch a new research programme on COVID-19 and societal security in 2021.
- Focus on comparing national responses and communication strategies, competing values (health, economy, democratic legitimacy), ethical dilemmas and enduring effects on societal security.
- The accessibility of Nordic data, our openness, and the fundamental faith and trust in academic research in the Nordics, provide a good opportunity to ensure that we will learn lessons, build new evidence that can be used so that next time we have a similar event, a pandemic, or any other threat to our societies, we will do even better.



Key points from breakout sessions

Climate-related challenges and adaptations to climate change:

- The discussion elaborated on Ingibjörg's presentation and her key points about emergency response in general but also how the research project Nordress has been brought into practice e.g. with the Seyðisfjörður mudslide in December 2020.
- The discussion focused on trust and transparency as a strength in the Nordic countries and for Nordic cooperation.
- It is unique for the Nordic countries that we do not only share success stories but also when we face challenges or make mistakes.

Cyber security and technological challenges:

- The group started off by shortly discussing the two recent cyber-attacks on the Norwegian and the Finnish parliaments and how they were both serious attacks on our democracies and our democratic institutions.
- In the light of this, they also discussed how the Nordic countries can collaborate to strengthen their preparedness for future cyber-attacks. And, in connection to this, how Nordic research collaboration can be beneficial.
- Wouter Stol said that to do this it will be fruitful to bring together people with different knowledge backgrounds. We need to bridge the gap between practitioners and the academic world.
- Differences between the Netherlands and the Nordics: Wouter pointed out that we are very similar in our approach to cyber security and that we can learn a lot from each other in finding solutions.

Radicalisation and social exclusion:

- Tore Bjørge points out that further Nordic research is needed on the theme: Threats and harassment against politicians. He mentions numerous examples of this such as the murder of Anna Lindh, former Minister of Foreign Affairs in Sweden, and the terrorist attacks in Norway in 2011.
- Previous research shows that politicians who have experienced threats and harassment consider quitting politics. This is a threat not only to the politician but also to the democracy.
- According to Bjørge, we need research like this on a Nordic level in order to compare the countries, improve our knowledge and increase our understanding of the consequences the threats and harassment may have on politicians and our democracies.
- The question was raised if there are any tools that have been implemented in the Nordic countries to prevent political threats and harassment.
- Tore Bjørge mentioned Norway as an example. The police are contacting people who threaten and harass politicians and in many cases that approach has proved to be enough. In Norway and Denmark, the police is more proactive in this behalf compared to the other Nordic countries.



NordForsk's societal security programme

NordForsk has funded societal security research since 2013. The programme has its basis in the so-called Haga declaration from 2009. In cooperation with the UK and the Netherlands, the Nordic countries have invested approximately NOK 200 million in 13 projects in societal security research. About 200 researchers participate or have participated in the research.

Read more about NordForsk's commitment to societal security research and the projects we have funded at nordforsk.org/societal-security.