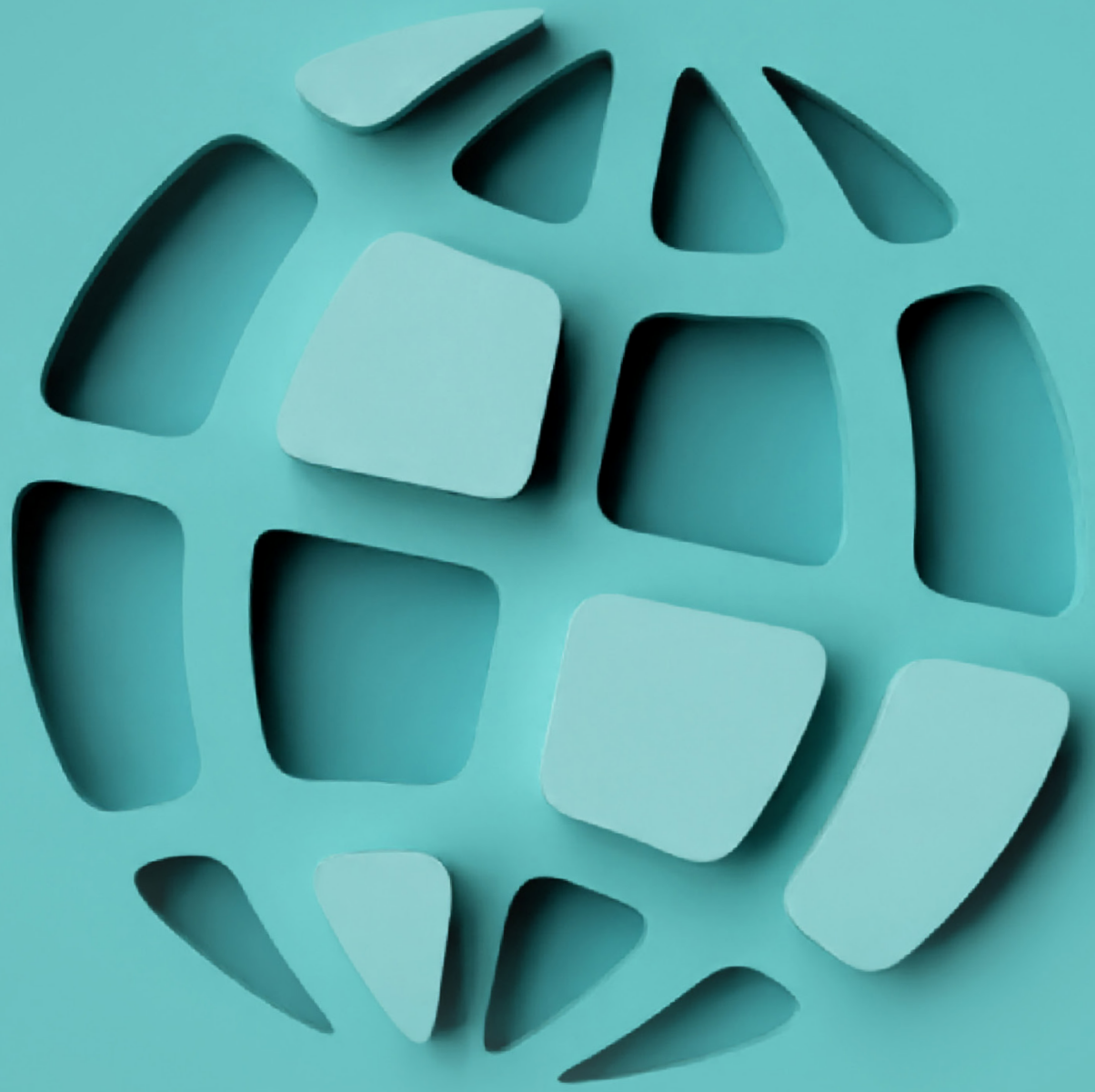
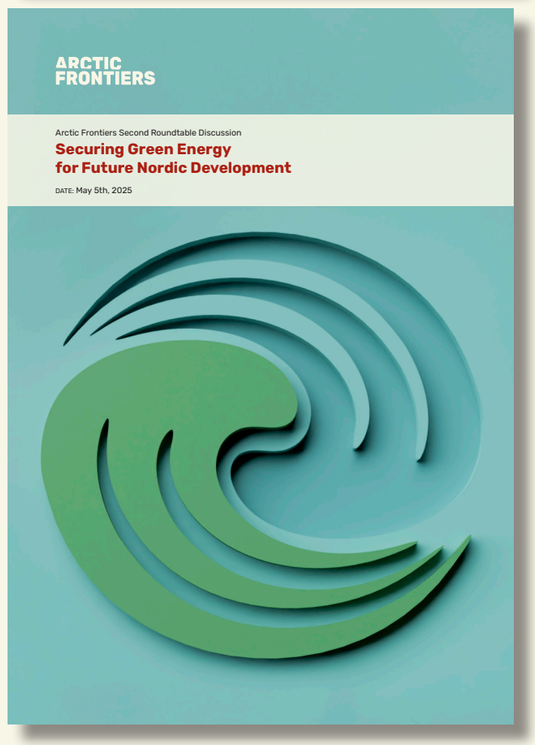
ARCTIC FRONTIERS

The Northern Pathway

Recommendations from local and regional actors on the green transition in the Nordic Arctic

DATE: May 2026





ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Nordic Arctic is warming faster than anywhere else, while facing rising pressure from energy transitions, defence investment and economic competition. A credible response requires meaningful coexistence between industry and traditional livelihoods, and coordinated attention to regional resilience, security of supply, societal welfare, nature protection and national defence.

These recommendations are based on four moderated roundtable discussions held across northern Norway, Sweden and Finland, addressing four sub-themes: economic demands and investments, securing green energy, accessing critical minerals, and coexistence along the coasts. In total, 78 participants contributed, representing research institutions (21), businesses and business-interest clusters (32), government agencies (4), local, regional and national policymakers (16) and non-governmental organisations (4). Some recommendations are longer term solutions and aims, whereas others are more targeted, manageable and achievable in the short term. The discussion reports, on which these recommendations are based, were written by Senior Researcher Marja Helena Sivonen, who served as rapporteur at each discussion, together with Senior Advisor Jenny Turton and Executive Director Anu Fredrikson. The work was generously funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The roundtables themselves illustrated one of their own findings: the difficulty of travel within the Arctic, particularly east–west, made convening participants a recurring challenge. The connections built across borders during the discussions are part of what the region needs.

OBJECTIVES AND DELIVERABLES

The primary objective of this project is to define what the green transition looks like in the Arctic by producing a comprehensive policy roadmap for sustainable development. This roadmap will guide policy-makers and stakeholders in implementing strategies to achieve economic resilience, energy security, and environmental sustainability across the region.

Norwegian Ministry
of Foreign Affairs

Rapporteur: **Marja Helena Sivonen**,
Senior Researcher, Finnish Environment Institute, Visiting reseacher, Arctic Centre

Recommendation 1 provides the institutional vehicle.
Recommendation 2 is a cross-cutting principle.
Recommendations 3 to 6 are the four substantive domains the strategy addresses with some examples as key words.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations synthesise findings from four roundtables held across the Nordic Arctic in 2025–2026, bringing together local and regional stakeholders from across the region. They intend to inform Nordic decision-makers both on national and regional level as well as regional actors with the range of views and consistent calls that emerged from these discussions. The recommendations are intended to be read together rather than as a menu of discrete asks. The numbered ordering does not imply priority: all six recommendations matter, and their combined effect is greater than the sum of the parts.

Before publication, the pathway was circulated to all roundtable participants for review, to confirm it fairly represented the substance and spirit of the discussions.

1. Strengthen shared governance through a joint Nordic Arctic strategy

ACTION POINT:

Establish a joint Nordic Arctic strategy with a dedicated just transition fund, developed jointly by national, regional, Sámi and local actors, to coordinate the green transition across the Nordic Arctic.

A joint Nordic Arctic strategy would give the Nordic countries a shared long-term framework for the region. The strategy would integrate climate change mitigation, economic development, infrastructure, inclusive knowledge base and governance, and complement existing work under the national governments, Nordic Council of Ministers, the Arctic Council, the Sámi Parliaments and EU frameworks. Participants across the four roundtables consistently called for clearer, more coordinated long-term direction for the Nordic Arctic region, from shared vision to practical cross-border alignment in areas such as taxation, mobility and regulatory processes.

The strategy should be developed in dialogue with regional authorities, Sámi Parliaments, and local community representatives, and with sustained attention to the pressures currently placed on municipalities, which handle significant zoning and environmental-assessment responsibilities in the green transition. Participants held differing views on where governance authority should primarily sit, from national-level direction to strengthened regional governance to bottom-up approaches rooted in local and Indigenous communities. The strategy would be an opportunity to clarify roles across these levels.

As a practical foundation for the strategy, participants proposed a dedicated Nordic just transition fund to provide independent legal and financial support for communities and Indigenous peoples to participate meaningfully in planning from the earliest stages. Financing mechanisms for the strategy could draw on existing Nordic instruments, whose operations participants suggested could be made more flexible for Arctic needs, alongside dedicated new financing where gaps are identified, including support to apply and manage EU funding.

Shared understanding of challenges and opportunities across the Nordics would strengthen resilience and competence building during the Green transition. Based on this, shared governance systems would strengthen security of supply and preparedness across the region's interconnected energy systems.

2. Ground justice and fairness in every dimension of the green transition

ACTION POINT:

Apply as a binding principle across all Recommendations.

Across the four roundtables, justice and fairness emerged as concerns cutting through every dimension of the green transition, rather than as a separate policy area. The green transition must be built on justice from the outset, not added as an afterthought. Participants repeatedly raised concern that formal democratic procedures alone do not ensure meaningful participation, particularly where communities lack the financial and legal resources to engage.

Free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) must be respected and upheld by all actors, including multinational companies, and should include genuine opportunities to amend or decline. Justice includes issues such as protecting cultures, livelihoods, languages and ways of life connected to nature and community. Participants emphasised that trust requires structural investment in who holds decision-making authority and who is resourced to participate, alongside broader efforts in telling a shared story and communication within and outside the area.

3. Invest in people, communities and the conditions for northern life.

ACTION POINT:

Invest in education, housing, healthcare, transport and cultural infrastructure that make the Nordic Arctic a place where people choose to stay and build a life.

Create the social, economic and cultural foundations that make living and working in the north genuinely attractive and sustainable. This means expanding education and research capacity, building functional social infrastructure including housing, healthcare, childcare and transport, and supporting inclusive communities where both modern industries and traditional Indigenous livelihoods are valued and resourced. Cultural infrastructure deserves equal attention to physical and social infrastructure: investment in Sámi-language education and institutions, in support for traditional cultural practices, and in visible cultural life across the region is part of what makes the north a place where people choose to stay.

Education policy deserves attention distinct from national frameworks designed for southern-centred systems. Participants raised consistent concern that tuition fees for students from outside the EU are reducing talent inflow to the North. At the same time, the brain drain from North to South nationally is particularly acute because there are not enough educational or career opportunities.

The north must also tell its own story, investing in narrative and storytelling that authentically reflects the richness, diversity and opportunity of northern life. Storytelling and structural investment work together: they help attract people and shift perceptions, while investment in housing, services and infrastructure makes the north somewhere they can stay and build a life.

4. Foster sustainable and inclusive economic opportunities across borders.

ACTION POINT:

Develop cross-border investment frameworks with regulatory clarity, scrutiny of foreign investment, and FPIC-based decision-making on extractive and critical minerals projects.

Economic and financial opportunities in the Arctic must be developed across borders in a manner that is sustainable, legitimate and beneficial to local and Indigenous communities. Collective funding mechanisms for cross-border projects must be strengthened, and cross-border competitive dynamics, where regions pursue the same investments at each other's expense, should be actively managed rather than left to market forces.

Investment requires regulatory clarity, predictable frameworks and reduced uncertainty, shielded from short-term political fluctuation. Foreign investment must be scrutinised for legitimacy and alignment with local and national interests, including through robust background checks. An Arctic financial advisory function, developed jointly across Finland, Norway and Sweden, could provide centralised research, guidance and investment-environment knowledge to regional actors.

On critical minerals and extractive industries, participants surfaced a range of positions, from managing environmental and social costs through mitigation, to conditioning mining on genuine refusal rights under FPIC, to prohibiting the most damaging activities (including oil and gas extraction, bottom trawling and seabed mining) in designated biodiversity-rich areas. A credible framework would combine area-based protection, consent mechanisms with a genuine right to decline, traceability across mineral value chains, and local value capture, distinguishing clearly between activities subject to mitigation and activities ruled out entirely.

5. Build the physical infrastructure that the Arctic green transition depends on.

ACTION POINT:

Coordinate Nordic Arctic energy, transport, housing and digital infrastructure investment, holding defence-driven and civilian projects to the same environmental, consent and sustainability standards.

Infrastructure gaps in the Nordic Arctic materially constrain the green transition and require coordinated action. Energy grids, particularly the weak Norway–Finland interconnection and Norway's ageing hydro infrastructure, need sustained investment and cross-border planning. Transport connectivity within the Arctic, including east–west connections beyond the capital hubs, is essential for mobility and community viability. Housing, digital connectivity, water and sewage systems, and port and transmission capacity for offshore energy development all require coordinated attention.

Infrastructure planning in the Arctic cannot be separated from defence and security planning. Rising defence investment is driving infrastructure development, including the Kiruna–Narvik and Swedish–Finnish rail connections and road upgrades serving both civilian and evacuation purposes, and many assets serve dual functions. This interconnection works both ways: green transition infrastructure can benefit from alignment with defence priorities, and defence-driven infrastructure decisions should be held to the same environmental, consent and sustainability standards as civilian projects.

Infrastructure investment should align with area-based protection. Some areas, particularly those rich in biodiversity or of cultural significance to Indigenous communities, should be protected from infrastructure intrusion. Environmental assessments should be conducted at regional rather than project-by-project scale to enable holistic evaluation and consistent criteria across the Nordic Arctic.

6. Ground Arctic development in science, traditional knowledge and nature protection.

ACTION POINT:

Secure dedicated Nordic funding for Arctic research that integrates local, traditional and scientific knowledge, applies the precautionary principle, and addresses the specific knowledge gaps and technology needs the green transition depends on.

The precautionary principle must be applied as a baseline in all decision-making affecting nature and biodiversity, prioritising protection and restoration of natural environments alongside development. Dedicated funding must be secured for research into nature, biodiversity and spatial planning, including identification of areas requiring protection from infrastructure and extractive development. Research investment should also target the specific emerging technologies and energy types the Arctic green transition depends on, including hydrogen production and infrastructure, offshore wind siting and ecological impact, battery systems for remote applications, and carbon capture, alongside substantive evaluation of their trade-offs. Social sciences and historical perspectives must be supported alongside technical research, reflecting that the questions before the Arctic green transition are as much about people and institutions as about technology.

Engagement with EU instruments remains essential for the Nordic Arctic knowledge and nature-protection agenda, given the scale of EU research funding and regulatory influence. Nordic Arctic actors need to advocate actively within EU fora for continued attention to climate and rights commitments that affect Arctic communities directly, particularly as broader EU priorities evolve.

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