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Nordic Council of Ministers

# A better life through diet and physical activity

Nordic Plan of Action on better health and quality of life  
through diet and physical activity



Short version



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## **A better life through diet and physical activity**

Nordic Plan of Action on better health and quality of life through diet and physical activity

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## **Nordic co-operation**

Nordic co-operation, one of the oldest and most wide-ranging regional partnerships in the world, involves Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland. Co-operation reinforces the sense of Nordic community while respecting national differences and similarities, makes it possible to uphold Nordic interests in the world at large and promotes positive relations between neighbouring peoples.

Co-operation was formalised in 1952 when the Nordic Council was set up as a forum for parliamentarians and governments. The Helsinki Treaty of 1962 has formed the framework for Nordic partnership ever since. The Nordic Council of Ministers was set up in 1971 as the formal forum for co-operation between the governments of the Nordic countries and the political leadership of the autonomous areas, i.e. the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland.

# Foreword

## **A healthy diet and lifestyle for everyone**

In July 2006, the Nordic Council of Ministers – the Ministers for Fisheries and Aquaculture, Agriculture, Food and Forestry and the Ministers for Health and Social Affairs – adopted a Nordic Plan of Action on better health and quality of life through diet and physical activity.

With this Plan of Action, the Nordic ministers emphasize the importance of working for better health and quality of life on equal terms for all Nordic citizens.

The challenges are daunting – unhealthy diet, physical inactivity, and overweight are growing problems. This is why work must be done regionally, nationally, and internationally to reverse the trend and ensure good health and quality of life for all.

The Nordic Plan of Action emphasizes efforts in which Nordic cooperation will create synergy and added value to the initiatives that the individual countries have already taken. The Plan of Action also comprises a common Nordic contribution to the international debate on preventing overweight and promoting a healthy lifestyle.

This publication is an abbreviated version of the Nordic Plan of Action that outlines the challenges we are facing, our common Nordic values and ambitions, areas of priority, and special common Nordic initiatives.

The full document, *Health, food and physical activity – Nordic Plan of Action on better health and quality of life through diet and physical activity* (ANP 2006:745), also contains an extensive description and evaluation of the status in the Nordic countries seen in a global perspective as well as detailed background information on the Nordic initiatives that have been chosen.

If we are to achieve the ambitions set out in the Plan of Action, it is decisive that we take action on many fronts. We will consequently place great emphasis on a wide-ranging, multi-sectoral approach within all related policy fields in the Nordic Council of Ministers and in collaboration with private stakeholders.

We look forward to working together to achieve the Plan of Action's ambitious goals to benefit the individual citizen and society!



For the Nordic Council of Ministers for Fisheries and Aquaculture, Agriculture, Food and Forestry

*Lars Barfoed, Denmark*

A blue ink signature of Lars Barfoed, written in a cursive style.



For the Nordic Council of Ministers for Health and Social Affairs

*Sylvia Brustad, Norway*

A blue ink signature of Sylvia Brustad, written in a cursive style.

## Statement by the Nordic Council of Ministers

It is an overall ambition of the Nordic Council of Ministers to ensure better health and quality of life on equal terms for all Nordic citizens.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has underlined the seriousness of the problem of an unhealthy diet, physical inactivity, and overweight at the global level. Projections made by WHO point to a major increase in mortality due to non-communicable diseases. An unhealthy diet, physical inactivity, and overweight are among the most important underlying determinants behind this trend. WHO therefore recommends the development of governmental strategies and policies on the promotion of a healthy diet and physical activity and the prevention of overweight and obesity.

The trend in the Nordic countries is just as alarming as the one described by WHO at the global level. Each of the Nordic countries has already implemented a broad range of policies and has developed or is in the process of drawing up comprehensive strategies.

The Nordic countries have a common ambition and a common view of the problems that need to be addressed. Solutions to the problems of an unhealthy diet, physical inactivity, and overweight must primarily be found in action at the national or local level, but action at the Nordic and the international level is needed to support these efforts.

The Nordic Plan of Action includes specific Nordic initiatives as well as a number of common positions on issues that are currently being discussed in the EU and WHO.

The Nordic Plan of Action presents common Nordic standpoints that will be put forward in the coming discussions on the Commission Green Paper and on a number of issues regulated at the EU level. It will also provide a Nordic perspective to the WHO ministerial conference in Istanbul 2006 on Counteracting Obesity and to the formulation of the WHO-Europe Strategy on non-communicable diseases that is to be submitted to the Regional Committee for Europe in September 2006.

The Nordic Plan of Action will thus support the respective national efforts by strengthening cooperation on the development of the best possible policies and by seeking influence on the international agenda.

*The Nordic Council of Ministers for  
Fisheries and Aquaculture, Agriculture,  
Food and Forestry (MR-FJLS) and The Nordic Council of  
Ministers for Health and Social Affairs (MR-S)*

*Approved July 6, 2006*





# Background

## – common Nordic challenges <sup>1)</sup>

Unbalanced diet, physical inactivity, and overweight are growing problems in the entire Western world, including the Nordic countries. The trend poses both a threat to the individual's quality of life and an economic threat to welfare in the Nordic societies.

Current data from the Nordic countries on diet, physical activity, and overweight point to a clear and alarming tendency that can be summed up in the following major areas of concern:

- A large number of citizens in the Nordic countries do not eat in accordance with the official recommendations regarding fat (especially saturated fat) and sugar. It is especially worrisome that children and youth consume too much sugar. Few meet the recommended intake levels of fruits and vegetables and many have a low intake of fish and whole-grain cereals.
- About 50% of the population does not comply with the recommendations regarding daily physical activity, and the decrease in the levels of activity among youth is especially critical.
- The number of overweight adults is increasing and now exceeds 40%. The number of overweight children is also increasing and now corresponds to between 15 and 20%.
- There is a clear social gradient in unhealthy eating, physical inactivity, and overweight. Groups with long education and higher socioeconomic status have healthier eating habits, are more active during leisure time, and have a lower frequency of overweight.



The economic costs to society are substantial and a continued negative trend will constitute a major threat to the level of welfare in the Nordic countries. The overall cost to society associated with an unhealthy diet, physical inactivity, and overweight must correspond to at least 1-2% of GDP.

The trend is alarming, and there is moreover a shortage of valid and comparable Nordic data that can be seen as a condition for addressing and following developments. There is also a shortage of more precise and qualified evaluations of the costs associated with an unhealthy lifestyle both for the individual and for society.

The Nordic governments agree that the nature of the problem and the alarming trends in this area make concerted efforts imperative. A common Nordic Plan of Action that includes ambitious goals is seen as an important instrument to support the policies and actions that have already been initiated in the individual Nordic countries.

(1) See Chapter 1, Health, food and physical activity – Nordic Plan of Action on better health and quality of life through diet and physical activity (ANP 2006:745).

## Nordic ambitions – 2011 and 2021<sup>2)</sup>

The Nordic governments have committed themselves nationally to make an effort to promote a healthier lifestyle.

The Nordic Council of Ministers has wished to underline these commitments by jointly formulating common Nordic ambitions and visions for the work to promote a healthy diet and physical inactivity and to prevent overweight. Common ambitions should make it possible to compare and assess national actions. Common ambitions will be a clear benefit for the Nordic countries when coupled with a common monitoring, an increased sharing of knowledge, a common effort to identify best practice, and increased scientific cooperation.

The common ambitions have been formulated on the basis of existing knowledge and data and will be reviewed, and changed where necessary, as new relevant data become available.



(2) See Chapter 3, Health, food and physical activity – Nordic Plan of Action on better health and quality of life through diet and physical activity (ANP 2006:745).







### The Nordic goals and visions are:

#### ***A clear improvement in the Nordic population's diet***

**Goal 2011:** *The consumption of fruits and vegetables and of whole-grain bread/cereals has increased, and the intake of fat, especially saturated fat and trans fatty acids, and added sugar has been reduced. The intake of salt has been maintained or reduced, depending on the specific national context.*

**Vision 2021:** *A major part of the population is eating according to the Nordic Nutrition Recommendations (NNR) applicable. The current references for the vision are:*

- *At least 70% of the population above 10 years has a daily intake of fruits and vegetables of at least 500 g/day. The average intake of children, 4-10 years, is at least 400 g/day.*
- *The average dietary intake of the population meets the NNR on fat and saturated fat plus trans fatty acids (respectively, max. 30 E% (percentage of the total energy intake) and max. 10 E% put together), and at least 70% meets the NNR on fat (E% between 25 and 35).*
- *80% or more meets the NNR on daily intake of added sugar (max. 10 E%).*
- *70% or more consumes fish or fish products, corresponding to a main dish twice a week.*
- *At least 70% of the adult population has a daily intake of whole-grain bread/cereals corresponding to at least half of their daily intake of bread/cereals.*
- *The average diet of adults meets the NNR on salt.*

### ***A vast majority meets the recommendation on physical activity and all children are physically active***

**Goal 2011:** *The current trend, where an increasing proportion of adults and children are physically inactive, has been brought to a halt and at best reversed.*

**Vision 2021:**

- *At least 75% of the adult population is physically active (moderate intensity) for at least 30 minutes every day.*
- *All children aged 1-12 and at least 85% of children and youth aged 12-16 are physically active (moderate intensity) for at least 1 hour every day.*

...

### ***A major success in reducing the number of overweight and obese***

**Goal 2011:** *The continuing increase in the proportion of the overweight and obese has been stopped and at best reversed.*

**Vision 2021:**

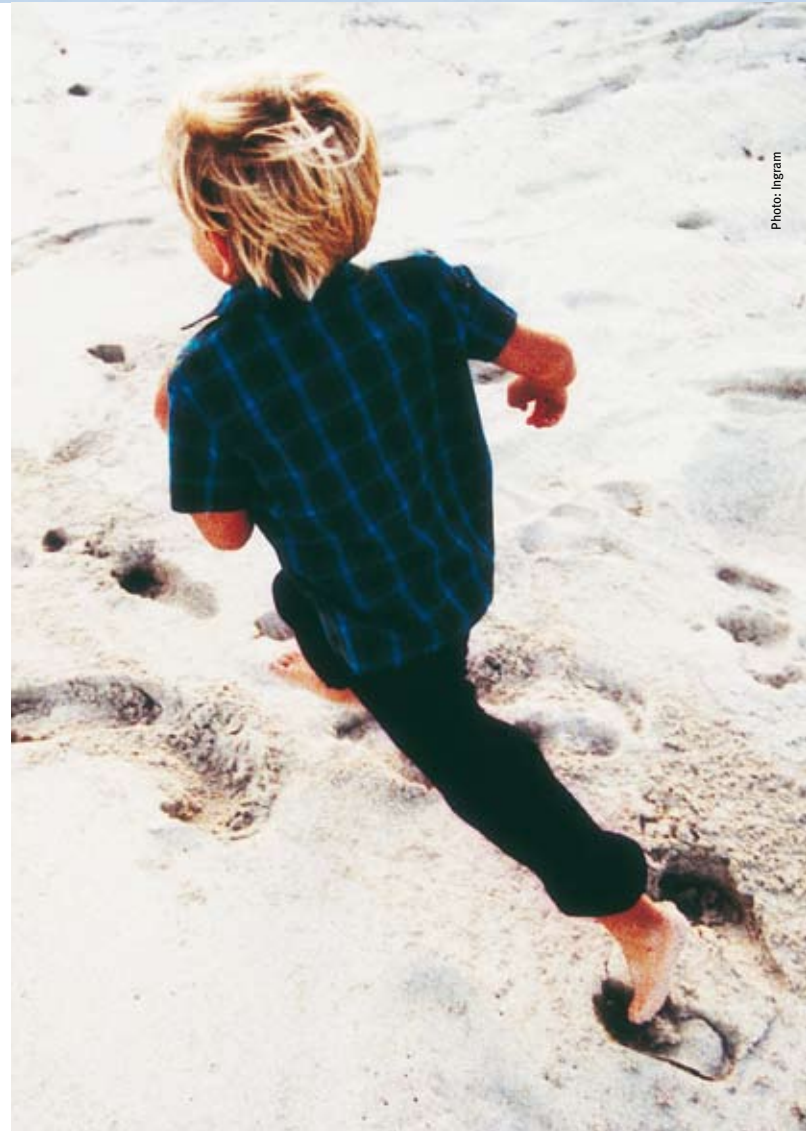
- *The number of overweight and obese adults has been reduced by at least 30% from the present level.*
- *The number of overweight and obese children and youngsters has been reduced by at least 50% from the present level.*

...

### ***A low tolerance for social inequality in health related to diet and physical activity***

**Goal 2011:** *Existing differences between different social groups with regard to overweight, obesity, unhealthy diet, and physical inactivity have not deepened further and at best have been reduced.*

**Vision 2021:** *The variation between different social groups on meeting the defined objectives with regard to diet, physical activity, and overweight/obesity is at most 20%.*



The initiatives in the Plan of Action will support the individual countries' efforts to fulfill these ambitions.

The success in achieving common ambitions will be reviewed continuously as the common Nordic monitoring system is developed (see page 21). A status report will be published every second year showing developments in relation to ambitions.



## Nordic values <sup>3)</sup>

The Nordic countries have a long tradition of cooperation in the fields of food safety, health, and nutrition. Since 1982, for example, the Nordic countries have drawn up common nutrition recommendations, which provide a scientific basis for the individual countries' dietary guidelines. A number of new initiatives have also been taken in other policy fields such as the environment, agriculture, and forestry that can contribute to a more active lifestyle and greater awareness of diet. Strengthening Nordic cooperation will make a positive joint contribution to national efforts in all the countries to promote healthy eating and physical activity.

In recent decades, the individual Nordic countries have adopted initiatives and policies both nationally and locally to promote a healthy diet and physical activity. Responsibility for the field is divided among various authorities on the state and municipal levels.

Most of the Nordic countries have drawn up national plans of action to deal with overweight, unbalanced diet and/or physical inactivity. These action plans differ with regard to scope, measures, and proposed instruments. They provide a fine platform for a Nordic debate and cooperation and for an exchange of experience.

### Nordic values and principles – who should take action?

The initiatives in the Nordic Plan of Action are based on a number of values that are shared by the Nordic countries and provide the foundation for national and common efforts in the field:

- **A multi-sectoral approach**

Promoting a healthy diet and physical activity and preventing overweight are a collective responsibility. If results are to be achieved, a large number of sectors and stakeholders must be involved at all levels of society.

The Nordic countries favor a multi-sectoral approach and support the current initiatives involving cooperation with both private stakeholders and NGOs at the international and EU levels, as well as in the individual Nordic countries at both the national and the local level.



(3) See Chapter 2, Health, food and physical activity – Nordic Plan of Action on better health and quality of life through diet and physical activity (ANP 2006:745).

Photo: Lars Bahl, Danish Veterinary and Food Administration



- **Individual responsibility**

The Nordic countries acknowledge that the individual choice of lifestyle is a central element in understanding the underlying causes of an unhealthy diet, physical inactivity, and overweight. The individual has the responsibility for his/her own choices. The consequences of an unhealthy lifestyle are not equally clear to all citizens, however, and external factors play a major role in individual choices, especially among children and youth.

In the efforts to create a supportive environment for healthy individual choices of lifestyle, the Nordic countries will pay particular attention to groups in society that have the most difficulties in making healthy choices.

- **Action at the local level**

The Nordic governments focus on providing the necessary support for the development of multilevel and multi-sectoral solutions in the local communities. Local governments have a crucial role to play in the promotion of a healthy diet and physical activity.

- **Stakeholder co-responsibility**

The food industry, retailers, the catering industry, and the media play an important role in the shaping of individual choices, among other things through their products, these products' availability, food portion sizes, advertising, etc. It is expected that private stakeholders take co-responsibility and that they participate in efforts to promote better dietary habits and physical activity in the Nordic population.

The Nordic countries wish to develop and strengthen public/private partnerships, as an important element in the effort to promote a healthy diet and physical activity, and the dialogue with the food sector will continue, with the aim of emphasizing the sector's role and co-responsibility.

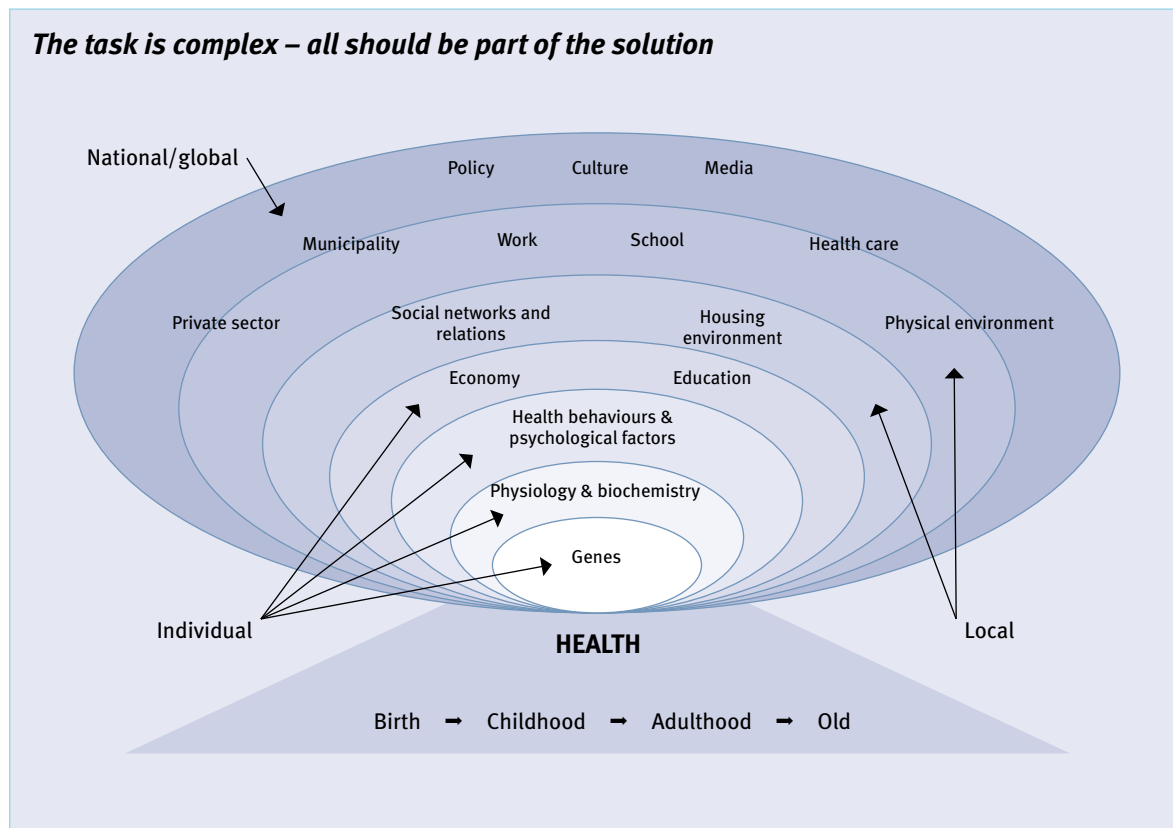
- **Supportive action at the governmental level, and a will to intervene if necessary**

The Nordic governments agree that the current trend with regard to dietary habits, physical activity, and overweight is unacceptable because of its negative effects on both the individual and society. The governments are consequently prepared to introduce relevant legislation if the trend remains unchanged.

The Nordic governments will intensify their work to ensure that legislation at the national, EU, and international levels is sufficient to support the common Nordic ambition to ensure the health and quality of life of the Nordic populations.

- Current Nordic cooperation and “Nordic added value”**  
 The Nordic countries will build upon the wide range of Nordic networks that involve health, diet, and physical activity in order to further strengthen cooperation to promote a healthy diet and a healthy lifestyle and to

prevent overweight. The countries will focus on areas with “Nordic added value,” where Nordic cooperation will create synergy and added value to the individual national initiatives.



## Areas of priority and Nordic cooperation – target groups and initiatives <sup>4)</sup>

The effort to promote a healthy diet and physical activity and to prevent overweight is based on a number of common areas of priority in the Nordic countries.

Efforts must focus on ensuring that:

- Children and youth are enabled to make healthy choices and are protected from an environment that encourages unhealthy choices.
- Healthier choices are made easier for all.
- Targeted actions are directed at vulnerable and risk groups.

The Nordic countries' efforts in the field and the initiatives in the Plan of Action are based on the view that in promoting a healthy lifestyle, there should be focus on making the healthy choice the natural, easy choice. Healthy living should be the favorite choice of lifestyle, not only because it is available, but also because it is the norm among one's peers.

**An important element in the Nordic Plan of Action will be a common catalogue of major initiatives taken in the Nordic countries to promote healthy diet and physical activity. The catalogue will be compiled before the end of 2006 and will be updated at least once every second year.**

There will continue to be both similarities and differences in the specific choices of action taken by each Nordic government. The establishment of a common Nordic monitoring and the development of evaluations of best practice will ensure that optimal solutions will be identified to the benefit of all. A presentation of data through a Nordic catalogue will ensure that experiences can be used by everyone.

### Children and youth

It is important to ensure children and youth an adequate knowledge of and easy access to healthy food and physical activity if lasting improvements are to be made in the population's diet and the level of physical activity.

Day-care institutions and schools play an important role in promoting healthy habits among children and young people. It is important to ensure that the quality and the quantity of offers in day-care institutions and schools are adequate to cover needs. It is also important that the teaching staff has proper knowledge and is educated in health, diet, and physical activity. None of the Nordic countries has so far made systematic efforts in this area. The Nordic Council of Ministers will seek cooperation with the education sector to intensify efforts in this field.

(4) See Chapter 4, Health, food and physical activity – Nordic Plan of Action on better health and quality of life through diet and physical activity (ANP 2006:745).





Photo: Lars Bahl, Danish Veterinary and Food Administration

The Nordic EU member countries will request that the EU Commission assess whether and how the regulations under the Common Agricultural Policy can contribute to the establishment of school fruit schemes in the EU, and whether the school milk schemes can be revised in order to promote the intake of low-fat milk products only. The Nordic countries will continue their efforts to limit the availability and consumption of drinks with added sugar and snacks in schools, day-care institutions, and other places where children spend time.

The advertising and marketing of less healthy foods affect children's and youth's consumption of and attitudes towards foods and should therefore be restricted. The Nordic countries will hold the EU Commission to its ultimatum to industry on stopping all advertising and marketing of unhealthy food directed at children, and will together demand EU legislation if the current practices are not brought to an end through self-regulation.

## Healthier choices made easier for all

The Nordic Council of Ministers will initiate the gathering of the relevant actors at the national level in the Nordic countries to elaborate a proposal on how the Nordic countries to a wider extent can benefit from each other's experience, materials from information campaigns, and so forth.

The labeling of food should make it easier for the consumer to choose healthier products and make a more informed choice of food. Surveys have shown that consumers request an easily understandable tool to interpret the information provided in nutrition labeling.

The Nordic countries will work together to promote the common Nordic proposal on better nutrition labeling in the forthcoming revision of the EC Directive on nutrition labeling, and to ensure that nutrition labeling becomes mandatory. The Nordic countries will explore the possibilities of harmonizing the criteria behind the signpost-labeling schemes used in each country.



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NÄRINGSINNEHÖLÖ / NÄRINGSINNEHÖLÖ	
RAVINTOSISÄLTÖ	
	Pr / Per 100g
Tyyppiset Værdier/ Typvärden/ Typilliset arvot	432kJ / 100
Energi/Energiaa	0,9g
Protein/Proteiinia	23,9g
Kulhydrat/Kolhydrat/ Hiilihydraatteja	0,1g
Fedt/Fett/Rasvaa	

Photo: Johannes Jansson



In the coming years, the Nordic countries will give priority to initiatives directed at inspiring workplaces to invest in measures to promote a healthy diet and physical activity among their employees.

Local initiatives to promote a healthy diet and physical activity will also be given priority. The active use of local surroundings should be promoted and more experience and knowledge should be shared to encourage a more active lifestyle in leisure time. The establishment of a common catalogue of major Nordic initiatives and good examples will reinforce the sharing of knowledge on promoting local action and especially on action that has proven particularly effective.

The Nordic countries acknowledge contributions from industry and retailers in promoting healthier choices, but also agree that there is room for strengthened efforts. Partnerships/cooperation efforts among the public sector, NGOs, industry/retailers, restaurants, etc. are an impor-

tant element in making healthy alternatives more readily available.

## Targeted action

High priority will be given to action empowering socially vulnerable groups and ethnic minorities. The aim is to reduce inequalities in health related to diet, physical activity, and overweight. The common Nordic catalogue of initiatives will contribute to closer Nordic cooperation and a sharing of knowledge on how to reach these specific groups.

The Nordic countries will continue to provide information to groups in the population with particular needs in terms of diet and physical activity. Particular attention will be paid to pregnant women and new parents to promote, safeguard, and support breastfeeding.



## Nordic efforts to further research <sup>5)</sup>

In addition to the forms of cooperation listed in the chapters on Nordic values and areas of priority, closer Nordic cooperation aimed at promoting a healthy lifestyle will focus on three main areas:

- Monitoring the trend in the Nordic population's diet and level of physical activity and in the prevalence of overweight
- Increased sharing of knowledge on the effect of existing initiatives and in the long range, collaboration on best practice
- Scientific research and developing methods

### A common Nordic monitoring

The Nordic Council of Ministers has decided to develop a common Nordic monitoring of diet, physical activity, and overweight. It is the ambition that data will be collected every second year and in a representative way cover gender, predefined age groups (e.g. children and youth), and social strata.

Existing national surveys on diet, physical activity, and overweight do not allow the Nordic countries to perform a continuous assessment of achievements, or to make comparisons among the Nordic countries. Access to comparable and valid data is an essential condition for monitoring progress in achieving Nordic ambitions.

(5) See Chapters 5, 6, and 7, *Health, food and physical activity – Nordic Plan of Action on better health and quality of life through diet and physical activity (ANP 2006:745)*.



The common Nordic monitoring will be based on current national databases and organized in the simplest possible way. The common Nordic monitoring system will not replace existing major surveys on diet, physical activity, or health in the Nordic countries. Detailed national surveys are needed to validate the common monitoring, provide more extensive information, and identify factors that may explain the trend that monitoring will depict.

Common monitoring will cover the following three areas:

- **Diet**

Surveys are currently published every three to ten years, which is not frequent enough considering rapid developments in the field. In addition, there are many differences between the surveys carried out in the different Nordic countries (year and frequency of collection, age groups).

- **Physical activity**

There are very few current surveys of physical activity compared with surveys on diet, and the different data are comparable neither over time nor across borders.

- **The prevalence of overweight and obesity**

The frequency and comparability of data on BMI and abdominal fat in the Nordic countries, collected through existing surveys, is inadequate to ensure a continuous assessment of the overall efforts.

The common monitoring would gather data on adults, children, and young people and give a representative picture of how ambitions in improving the population's diet and level of physical activity and reducing overweight have been achieved.

## Sharing of experience/best practice

The common Nordic monitoring on diet, physical activity, and overweight will make it possible to assess the best practices in addressing the issues. The results of the common monitoring, qualified by more detailed research and the larger surveys carried out in each of the Nordic countries, will bring the Nordic countries closer to drawing conclusions on what works and what does not.

Monitoring will be supplemented with an increased sharing of experience on the effect of action taken in the Nordic countries.

A first step will be to establish a common Nordic understanding on methods to assess the effectiveness of action taken to promote a healthy diet and physical activity and to prevent overweight.

In the longer term, the common approaches and cooperation on evaluations could lay the ground for the development of a common Nordic catalogue on best practices.

## Reinforced cooperation on scientific research

The Nordic countries will work to strengthen research and scientific cooperation in a number of areas, including:

- Validity and further development of the common Nordic monitoring
- Determinants of an unhealthy diet, physical inactivity, and overweight
- Health consequences and costs to society
- Comparative studies and innovation, focusing on the effectiveness of various efforts
- Multidisciplinary research on foods and food components with the aim of improving health
- New epidemiological studies, clinical tests, and interventions, and experimental studies on topics of common interest to the Nordic countries
- Methods to address inequalities in dietary habits and physical activity
- Research on consumer opinions of what initiatives are necessary to change lifestyles

Nordforsk, an independent institution operating under the Nordic Council of Ministers for Education and Research, has decided to grant EUR 2.2 million per year over a period of five years – EUR 11 million in all – to promote Nordic research cooperation in the field of “food, nutrition, and health.” Nordforsk’s “Nordic Centre of Excellence Programme on Food, Nutrition and Health” will cover some of the themes in the Plan of Action and by promoting top-quality interdisciplinary Nordic research teams will help generate the new information that is necessary if the Plan of Action’s ambitions are to be achieved.

Within existing resources allocated to research, the Nordic Council of Ministers will give priority to facilitate Nordic research cooperation related to the Plan of Action.



## Follow-up on the Nordic Plan of Action <sup>6)</sup>

The Nordic Council of Ministers for Fisheries and Aquaculture, Agriculture, Food and Forestry (MR-FJLS) has the overall political responsibility for the Nordic Plan of Action on better health and quality of life through diet and physical activity in close cooperation with the Nordic Council of Ministers for Health and Social Affairs (MR-S).

The Nordic Council of Ministers has delegated the overall implementing responsibility for the Nordic Plan of Action to its Committees of Senior Officials, i.e. the Committee of Senior Officials for Fisheries and Aquaculture, Agriculture, Food and Forestry, department CSO-FJLS (Food), and the Committee of Senior Officials for Health and Social Affairs, CSO-S. On an operational level, the implementation of the Plan of Action will be coordinated by the Nordic Working Group on Diet, Food, and Toxicology, again in collaboration with working parties and institutions in the field of social welfare and health. (See page 27.)

The working group will publish a report on status in the implementation of the Nordic Plan of Action every second year. Once the common monitoring has been established, the status report will be accompanied by a separate monitoring report on the Nordic population's diet, level of physical activity, and the prevalence of overweight in the Nordic countries.

(6) See Chapter 8, *Health, food and physical activity – Nordic Plan of Action on better health and quality of life through diet and physical activity* (ANP 2006:745).





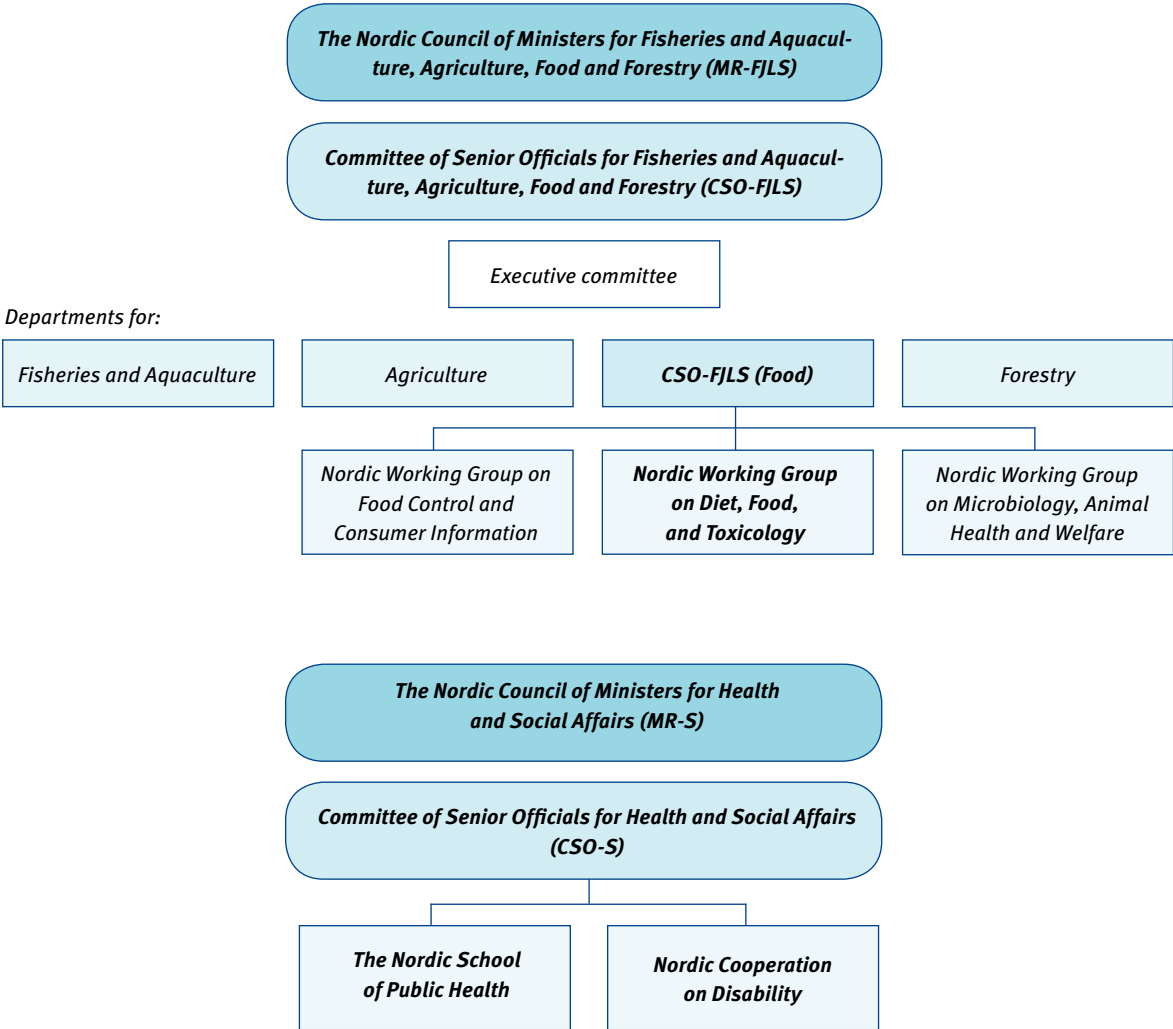
Photo: Karin Beate Møsterud



In follow-up, great emphasis will be placed on cooperation and potentials for synergy with other Nordic programs and policies, for example the “New Nordic Food” program and activities in forestry, agriculture, and fisheries, the environment, education, culture, research, and innovation. Collaboration with NGOs and public/private partnerships will also be highlighted.

Besides activities under the auspices of the Nordic Council of Ministers, activities at the national level in every Nordic country will play an important role in the implementation of the Plan of Action.

**The overall implementing responsibility of the Plan of Action in the Nordic Council of Ministers**





norden

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