

From Knowledge to Policy

- Strengthening the role of research and higher education in Nordic decision-making

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Content

1. Who I am
2. Purpose of Presentation and Why this matters
3. What can research do for policy
4. The Nordic advantage
5. NordForsk's role
6. Barriers, challenges and opportunities
7. Key messages
8. Q&A

Who I am

35+ years of experience in several ministries, Nordic Council of Ministers, public funding agencies and private foundations.

Expert in impact management and assessment, policy strategies, theory-of-change, evaluation, innovation and research policy and international collaboration.



Purpose of my presentation

Contribute with thoughts which are relevant for the discussion on what shall be NordForsk strategy beyond 2026.

Key questions in that discussion include the following:

- What kind of policy influence should NordForsk aim for?
- Which policy processes can NordForsk support best?
- How explicit should the policy role be in the new strategy?
- What capabilities would be needed to make it work?



Why This Matters



- Policy problems are increasingly complex, cross-sectoral, and fast-moving.
- Research and higher education are part of democratic problem-solving infrastructure.
- The Nordic region has a strong tradition of using evidence, but the link is uneven.
- The question is not whether evidence matters, but how it travels into decisions. – and how we can make it travel faster

What Research Can Do for Policy



- Set a policy and societal agenda by identifying emerging risks and opportunities.
- Influence and improve policy formulation through breakthrough discoveries, comparative analysis and scenario thinking.
- Support implementation by clarifying what works, for whom, and under what conditions.
- Strengthen evaluation by showing effects, unintended consequences, and trade-offs.

Why the Gap Persists between Policy and Research

- Political decisions are shaped by timing, values, institutions, and incentives, not only by evidence.
- Research often arrives too late, too abstractly, or in hard-to-use formats.
- Decision-makers rely on trusted networks under time pressure.
- Academic reward systems still favor publication and bibliometric performance over policy relevance and impact in society.





What Makes Evidence Useful for Policy?

- **Relevance:** it answers a real policy question.
- **Credibility:** the methods and sources are trusted.
- **Accessibility:** the findings are understandable and usable.
- **Timing:** they arrive when decisions are being made.
- **Relationships:** they reach the right people through trusted channels.



Success Example 1: Finnish Comprehensive Schools

- 1960s–70s: Research showed streaming disadvantaged low-achievers.
- Policy shift to single-structure schools for all, equal resources.
- Key: Longitudinal studies, expert committees, broad political buy-in.
- Result: Finland leads PISA rankings for decades.

Success Example 2: Norwegian Oil Fund



- 1990s research warned oil boom risks: overheating, Dutch disease.
- Established Government Pension Fund Global (1990), strict fiscal rules.
- Key: Expert analysis, long-term framing, institutional safeguards.
- Result: World's largest SWF, stabilizes economy (Oljefondet).



Success Example 3: Danish Wind Energy

1. 1970s–80s research on energy independence, wind tech feasibility.
2. Policies: Subsidies, local ownership, R&D support.
3. Key: Public engagement, evidence on costs/benefits.
4. Result: Denmark is among the leaders of global wind power capacity.



Failure Example: Sydney Airport Rail Link

- 1980s project ignored research on ridership, costs, and alternatives.
- Overpromised benefits, underdelivered; cost billions, low usage.
- Key failure: Selective evidence use, political expediency over feasibility.
- Lesson: Ignoring full evidence leads to sunk costs.

Risks of Research in Policy

- Misinterpretation: Selective use distorts findings (e.g., ignoring uncertainty).
- Politicization: Research weaponized for partisan ends, erodes trust.
- Over-reliance: Evidence paralysis when data conflicts with values/timing.
- Bias: Researcher agendas or funding influence perceived neutrality.





Barriers to Stronger Research Impact in Policy

1. Access: Policymakers lack time, skills, or easy access to relevant evidence.
2. Relevance: Research not framed for policy questions or local context.
3. Dissemination: Poor communication, no trusted intermediaries.
4. Organizational: Staff turnover, competing priorities, weak incentives.

The Nordic Advantage

- Nordic countries can compare policies, systems, and outcomes across similar welfare states.
- Regional cooperation can create scale that individual countries cannot easily achieve alone.
- Common data traditions and public institutions make comparative research especially valuable.
- The Nordic level is ideal for learning, alignment, and strategic anticipation.



Funding opportunities Research are



What NordForsk Already Does

- Coordinates Nordic research calls and funding priorities.
- Translates ministerial and national priorities into research investments.
- Produces statistics, impact reporting, and communication products.
- Creates networks between researchers, funders, and policy actors.

NordForsk's Policy Role

Should NordForsk sharpen its policy-facing profile?

- A stronger policy role does not mean becoming a political actor.
- It can mean being a more strategic knowledge broker and agenda enabler.
- The goal is more value from research.

Gains of a Stronger Role

- Better alignment between research funding and societal needs.
- Greater visibility for Nordic knowledge in political processes.
- Stronger long-term intelligence for ministries and funders.
- More systematic use of impact, statistics, and synthesis in decision-making.



Key Challenges

- Mandate drift: NordForsk must stay anchored in the Nordic ministerial system.
- Political sensitivity: stronger policy engagement can be misread as advocacy.
- Capacity: meaningful policy work requires analysis, communication, and synthesis skills.
- Fragmentation: national priorities and rules can limit common Nordic action.



Theory-of-Change tool NordForsk could use more

Level	Components	Indicators
Inputs	NordForsk research funding, policy partners, data access, analytical capacity, convening support	Budget allocated; staff time; partner agreements
Activities	Produce or identify policy-relevant Nordic research; synthesize evidence; convene Nordic and European policy dialogues; co-develop briefs; test recommendations with stakeholders	# of Nordic studies completed; # of policy briefs; # of Nordic dialogues held
Outputs	Research products tailored to decision-makers; translation materials; policy-facing relationships; evidence packages	# briefs delivered; # ministries engaged; # Nordic stakeholders reached
Outcomes	Increased awareness, improved relevance of evidence, greater uptake in policy drafting, stronger cross-sector alignment	# citations in policy docs; # recommendations adopted; stakeholder feedback
Impact	Policies are more effective, legitimate, and responsive to societal challenges because they are informed by robust research	Long-term policy quality; improved public outcomes; greater trust



Opportunities Ahead

- Strengthen analysis and foresight capacity.
- Make impact and statistics more policy-relevant.
- Create realistic and relevant impact pathways through systematic use of theory-of-change in new funding decisions
- Create regular Nordic policy-facing products and forums.
- Link research and analyses more closely to ministerial priorities and international developments.



Closing Message

- Research influences policy best when institutions are designed to make that influence possible.
- NordForsk can be a stronger bridge between knowledge and decisions without becoming a political actor.
- NordForsk must find its unique position, collaborate and not compete with other funding agencies.
- The main task is to turn indirect influence into more systematic and visible policy support.
- Use theory-of-change to make NordForsk's next strategy important, relevant and impactful: Ask
 - What challenges for use of research in policy we see,
 - What are our hypotheses of solving this problem,
 - What is our long-term goal,
 - What does success look like for NordForsk, and
 - Which output and outcome are important?



NordForsk should be the crowning jewel supporting the use and dissemination of Nordic research.



Q & A