

Nordplus for a greener future!

transformative education
in a world in need of change

Interview with Karen Ellemann,
Secretary General of the Nordic
Council of Ministers and project
stories from Nordplus projects.



Nordplus



Nordplus

NORDIC AND BALTIC COOPERATION educational cooperation starts with Nordplus!
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Contents

The Nordic region's most important resource and defence is our well-educated population	4
Walk with a whale and see the pollution below the surface of the sea	7
Frontrunners in local food production create a bridge between culture and tradition	10
Icelandic Teaching Material is Translated into all Scandinavian Languages, Finnish and Faroese	13
Nordplus green transition project encouraged mobility and STEM education	16
Students are working on the future's most serious challenges	19



The Nordic region's most important resource and defence is our well-educated population

Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers, Karen Ellemann, sees cooperation in education in the Nordics and The Baltics as one of the mainstays of the cultural and professional community. In that light, Nordplus is an important player, and she would like to see even more people become involved in Nordplus projects.

By Joan Rask

"We are fully aware of the huge value created through Nordplus programs, i.e. with regard to their very broad spectrum and how they deliver."

This is how Arja Andersson from Lappajärvi Upper Secondary School in Finland talks about the Nordplus project, in which she was the coordinator and an active participant. The project "From the Bottom to the Surface" ran over three years, and more than 110 school students and teachers from Finland, Estonia and Lithuania visited each other. In addition, the schools' other students and teachers were also partially involved, there were public exhibitions, a joint website and Facebook pages containing presentations.

So says Karen Ellemann, Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers says. It is just a little over a year since Karen Ellemann took over primary leadership responsibility within the Nordic Council of Ministers and, at the same time, waved goodbye to a life as an active member of Danish politics. The past had seen her in several ministerial positions, minister for Nordic cooperation and a member of the Nordic Council. She could easily have continued in that career.

"When I saw that a new secretary general was needed for the Nordic Council of Ministers, I got that bubbling feeling in my stomach, wow - I would really like to do this full time," says Karen Ellemann, who in the same sentence explains that she does not miss her old life as a politician.

She sees it as an advantage that she has many years' knowledge of the entire Nordplus organisation and of the political dynamics. Karen Ellemann's first four-year term as secretary general will be very different from her predecessor's, because high on the agenda of national governments now is an accelerating climate crisis, demands for a green transition, increased demands for welfare, the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the war in Gaza and a completely different security situation for the Nordic and Baltic countries.

"We all have deep concerns and frustrations about the geopolitical situation. In that sense, it is important that we in the Nordics are resolved to be a strong region, that we prioritise strong cooperation and that the Nordic governments support this with funding and continue to think it is a good idea," she says.

But does it make any sense to spend money on the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic Council with all their underlying programmes?

"Not everything can be weighed and measured, but the effect - the benefit to the Nordics is really big and really significant. We are countries that have something very valuable in common; our strong democracies and in many areas strong, well-functioning institutions and also strong, deeply committed civil societies," says Karen Ellemann.

Cooperation is changing

Everyone who is interested in the Nordics knows that there were challenges in the Nordic family just a few years ago.

"A crisis is the best opportunity for development, and the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that there is room for improvement. Therefore, it is also my ambition that we continue to build on our good cooperation and make it even better, so that together we can withstand future crises. These are also the political indications I get from our countries," says the Secretary General.

She is extremely aware that this can change, and so can the prioritisation and distribution of the funds that the countries provide each year for Nordic cooperation. As it is now, close cultural cohesion carries great weight, but where does that leave the many educational activities in Nordplus, which in this light are tiny?

"If Nordplus is not Nordic in a broad sense, then I don't know what it would be! The task of the Nordic institutions is to deliver on the vision of becoming the best integrated and most sustainable region in the world, and I clearly see that Nordplus is part of the infrastructure on which all our official Nordic cooperation is based. I don't know any government in the Nordics that is not a supporter of lifelong learning," she says.

Most recently, the Nordic Council of Ministers has delivered a huge piece of work on Nordic dietary advice that is based on solid expert knowledge and professional input from all Nordic countries on nutrition and health. This time it was put together with recommendations on environmental considerations.

"It is the researchers' best recommendation as to what, for example, meat does to your intestines, your state of health, and how we can get proteins in other ways than via meat. I'm no longer a politician, but I bring knowledge to the table, and I share something that sets the agenda in our countries," says Karen Ellemann.

It is well known that the basis for creating new knowledge is a well-educated population, skilled teachers and that learning is part of all societal processes. Some can be weighed and measured, while others are about upbringing and values. The teachers who choose to get involved in a Nordic and Baltic education project invariably give themselves more work and many put in a degree of effort that goes beyond the norm. Karen Ellemann has a simple message for them:

"Thanks! Keep going - you are an indisputable success and your work has huge value."

Lifelong learning together with the Baltics

Nordplus is one of the few programs that equates Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia with the other Nordic countries. This means that all Baltic educational institutions have exactly the same opportunity to apply for educational projects as the Nordic countries and the autonomous regions.

That system was put in place 16 years ago, and it has become part of Nordplus' DNA. In the other programs under the auspices of the Nordic Council of Ministers, there is only one ministerial council with equal Baltic membership, namely the Nordic Council of Ministers for Digitalisation, which was formed in 2017. In addition, there is a Nordic-Baltic mobility program for culture. The question is whether the Nordic family should accept that Nordplus has paved the way for cousins from the Baltics to be invited more often.

"I can clearly see that it might be possible - that the Baltic countries get even more involved in joint cooperation. It's not relevant at the moment, but I am deeply grateful that they are there. I think we have a duty to do that, and it is not only the Baltic countries that benefit from cooperation. On the contrary! It is very inspiring for us to see how they work and develop," says Karen Ellemann.

In the Secretary General's view, it would be irresponsible to take cooperation with the countries that share a border with Russia too lightly. This knowingly pulls the old Nordic members and their common working language in the direction of even more internationalisation, where English becomes the de facto working language in several contexts.

Language fitness for beginners and experts

The formal working languages in the Nordic Council of Ministers are the three main Scandinavian languages, Norwegian, Swedish and Danish. In official contexts, things are interpreted into Icelandic, Finnish, Greenlandic and/or English depending on the situation. This is not the case when participants meet for Nordplus projects and for the many other programs, as here there is no money for interpreters, so many resort to English, and there are some who would like the working language changed to English.

"It is clear that when I participate in meetings where one of the participants does not speak a Scandinavian language, we use English. But I don't see us moving away from the Scandinavian language community, that would be a huge loss! I know it causes difficulties, but yes, it's worth it!" she continues.

Karen Ellemann experiences for herself how the pace of conversation automatically slows down when the participants speak different Scandinavian languages, and that there is a common acceptance that everyone can interrupt and ask people to speak more slowly or for sentences to be repeated.

Everyone who works across Nordics knows that English is of course spoken when there are participants who do not speak one of the three Scandinavian languages. The difficult thing is the grey area, especially for the Finnish, Icelandic, Faroese and Greenlandic participants who are not necessarily fluent in a Scandinavian language. It is often an extra challenge for them to participate in conversation. So how does Karen Ellemann tackle that challenge herself?

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"You have to take a view of the situation, because it must not exclude people! This is exactly why everyone has the opportunity to switch to English. I insist that it must not become an either/or scenario. I think one can say quite honestly and straightforwardly that we have something valuable in the Scandinavian language community that others should not be angry about, i.e. saying that it is unfair that we speak these languages," she says.

Love and defence

There is no doubt that Karen Ellemann is enthusiastic about the Nordic and Baltic region, and that she speaks and understands more languages than most. Nevertheless, it's challenging for her and difficult for her to find the words that best describe what many people experience when they interact with people, institutions and companies in the Nordics and Baltics.

"There's such a strong vein of enthusiasm, together with an interest and love for one's nearest neighbours. A kind of attitude to life and joy towards the region you are a part of - and which at the same time shares the Scandinavian language that enables most people to make themselves understood. Think how amazing that is!"

Karen Ellemann was originally trained as a teacher and taught at a Danish primary school for a few years, but she has never come across Nordplus through her work as a teacher or as a school student. Even so, she was struck by Nordic lightning when she was in year 5.

"It was a youth meeting in Haugesund, organised by twin cities and in a typical format; knowledge creates friendships. I came home and thought it was the coolest thing in the world and fascinating, because we could chat together like that," she says.

The joy of the Nordics accompanied her through school, high school and teacher training, and it still burns happily, and she would like to see more children introduced to their neighbouring countries at an early age.

Nordplus cooperation receives over 10 million Euros annually, the vast majority of which goes to education and mobility projects for children and young people. Karen Ellemann hopes that in the future many more people will experience a Nordic and Baltic project via Nordplus – even if you live in a sparsely populated area.

"There are some areas where we have not succeeded in getting the potential of joint education projects out there more widely. I would ideally like there to be a little more targeted focus on those areas. I know that Nordplus is already looking at this – I also know that it is extremely difficult and that there is competition for funds," she says.

For Karen Ellemann, it is not just about broadening out geographically. She would like to see Nordplus spread into sectors that do not have a tradition of Nordplus projects, because the cultural identity is so fundamental to the Nordic and Baltic democracies' ability to cooperate.

"Even though we have many resources in the Nordic region and in the Baltics, our most important resource is the raw material that each individual is made of and also our most important defence in a tumultuous time!" says Karen Ellemann.



Walk with a whale and see the pollution below the surface of the sea

Marine researchers, school students, teachers and museums have worked together to create a whole new learning and communication tool, based on data from the research ship Barba. Interactive communication tools with VR glasses create completely new experiences for both school classes and museum visitors.

By Joan Rask, journalist

Whales are for experts, and the sea around the arctic is too dangerous for school trips and ordinary visitors to museums, but how do you convey all the amazing things that happen under the surface of the sea? And how do researchers best reach the populations of the Nordic countries? This is the question Marianne Rasmussen asked herself. She is a research professor at the University of Iceland and head of University of Iceland' Research Centre in Húsavík, located on Iceland's north coast. She is from Denmark, but has worked permanently in Iceland since 2007.

"I think it is important to get the research out to a wider audience. It is important that both children and adults have the opportunity to understand what climate change is all about and also that they can experience the completely unique and utterly fantastic marine environment that we have around the Arctic," she says.

Marianne Rasmussen knows what she is talking about. The centre was established when she was appointed in 2007. Since then, activities have grown, and today the centre houses both postdocs, PhD students and approximately 10 exchange students. The centre has a well-developed collaborative project with the local whale museum and also the research ship Barba, which often makes



the ship and its equipment available for the researchers' work - but collaborating with schoolchildren and their teachers is not something that is usually on Marianne Rasmussen's agenda!

"I developed the idea for this project by using my network, and the association Whale Wise in particular was very active and a big contributor. We got together with schools, universities and museums in Denmark, Norway and Iceland and applied for funding from Nordplus, which fortunately chose to support us. Funding is the vital prerequisite for such a project to be carried out," says Marianne Rasmussen.

The purpose of the project was to develop teaching packages for school children and communication packages for museum visitors with the use of VR (Virtual Reality) glasses, and it was the Nordplus program HORIZONTAL that supported the project. HORIZONTAL supports innovative projects across traditional categories, education levels and sectors that address new, broader and more complex issues and challenges. The content of the project had to be created on the

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research ship Barba, which had already had agreements with universities and foundations, etc. with regard to a four-month expedition in the Arctic Ocean with a focus on the distribution of whales and plastic pollution. What they had never tried before was to let children, teachers and museum staff follow along with the work while it was in progress. This was a time that generated lots of discussion about the choice of approaches and about what benefits children and museum visitors should have - and of course what material was needed in the whole communication package.

"We wanted to see if we could capture the interest of children aged 10-12, so we came up with the idea of using VR glasses. When they use the VR glasses, it almost feels as if they themselves are swimming with the whales. They experience something that you would never otherwise have the opportunity to do up close," explains Marianne Rasmussen.

28 children with VR glasses – all at the same time!

One of the participating schools was Atlanten Lower Secondary School in Kristiansund, located on the west coast of Norway, just south of Trondheim. Bjørn Sørli is the principal, and he had no doubts when he was asked if the school wanted to be part of the project.



"It sounded very exciting! Because we had the opportunity to work together with other nations with sustainability as a common theme. And, in addition, in a way we were involved in planning some of the expedition! Here at the school we had already purchased two sets of VR glasses for class and had been about to give up on getting started, so we saw an opportunity to resurrect it," says Bjørn Sørli.

The school had two teachers on the project. One of them was Fredrik Elias Rekkedal, so it was him who suddenly found himself standing in the classroom with 28 expectant children.

"It was almost a challenge in itself when we were sent all the VR glasses and tablets for the project. It went well! We tested it in four classes – in the beginning it was over a whole day and later we changed it to half a day. It was a bit too much with whole days," he says and smiles - and admits that there were some initial difficulties.

"In the beginning, we gave the children access to the tablets that control the programs, so they could move around everywhere in this universe. But it didn't work, because they fiddled with the settings and it became too complex. When we gave them just the VR glasses, and we teachers managed the overall assignments and trips, there was much better progress," he explains.

Bjørn Sørli made sure that he and the two teachers had the opportunity to participate in all the preparations before the expedition ship set out on its journey. Later, time had to be found for the teachers to thoroughly test the teaching material and write feedback on the various presentations of the teaching material.

"It was very important for us to work together with universities in Iceland and Denmark. Development projects of this type are important sources of inspiration for us, and we are happy to be able to tell students, parents and politicians that we are part of an international collaboration," says the principal.

Bjørn Sørli and Fredrik Elias Rekkedal tried the VR glasses and all the teaching materials themselves.

"There were really great pictures and cool videos. It was absolutely incredible. The sound and the sea – one moment you were at the top of a mast and the next you were looking down! Then you were in the sea, there was a whale alongside you, and the next moment you are inside a shoal of fish. For someone like me who is interested in all this, it was a pretty cool experience. Many students said the same, especially those who are interested in the subject," says Fredrik Elias Rekkedal.

He feels certain that the VR glasses create a different dynamic for the students and that the glasses and the interactive space were of great importance.

"The students have seen so much video in the past, and it's a bit dull. But when you can suddenly turn around and there's a whale swimming up behind you, you feel a little more that you yourself are there. This is also true for me! It has been so interesting to be involved from the beginning, and it has been really energising," he says.

Swim with whales

Museum visitors were also invited to test the new equipment and three museums in Norway, Denmark and Iceland respectively were partners in the project. At the Whale Museum in Húsavík, managing director Eva Björk Káradóttir went all in during the development, testing and feedback phases.

"I believe that we were the first location to experiment with this project. So we got a chance to see how we could lay everything out and work with this material. The founders of Whale Wise were here with us at the beginning of the test phase, just discussing the project with the guests and explaining how everything worked. And then afterwards we had the exhibition for a few weeks just as a standalone experience at the museum. It went quite well and from our side it was a success," she says.

However, the approach also caused problems at the museum. On the one hand, it was sometimes difficult to navigate and sometimes the visitors' use was too heavy-handed for the rather expensive and also pretty sensitive equipment.

"I really enjoyed trying everything myself. The VR equipment was impressive. Unfortunately, we had to constantly go into the room, just to make sure that everything was working properly, so I saw it all and I would really like to be able to use it more in the future. But we need to work out how we can use VR in a successful way," she explains.

The museum director has a particular dream for a 360-degree experience, preferably in a form of dome, where several visitors experience the films at once, and where the visitors do not have to do anything themselves.

"The guest really enjoyed it and we got a lot of positive feedback. But maybe the only downside of this project is that it's so big. You don't really have time to look at everything because there are so many videos and they're long. So I think it might be better to just have fewer options and shorter videos. So you feel like you had the chance to explore everything," she says.

Right now, the VR glasses are in Húsavík at an educational institution in natural sciences. Eva Björk Káradóttir is in the process of investigating whether she can use the VR glasses and film material at summer schools, where groups of students come to the museum for more focused educational courses.

"I think it's always really interesting to be a part of something like this. It is a very good learning experience for us, and it brings up so many ideas about how we can use this technology. It is a new way of storytelling, and as our focus is on the North Atlantic we also try to talk about the Arctic and the changes there and of course also climate change – and this material suits that very well," says Eva Björk Káradóttir.

Yes, please – to more!

At Atlanten Lower Secondary School, they are also ready to continue working with the learning material. Fredrik Elias Rekkedal emphasises, however, that there were some language problems.

"We had decided that it should be in English to optimise the interdisciplinary aspects that came with it, but that made it even more complex because much of the content was technical language. Perhaps the children need to be a little older, maybe to get the full benefit. Otherwise, it needs to be translated," he says.

A school in Denmark did that. Here, the teacher simply translated everything, and it was probably the school that used the material closest to the way it was intended, says researcher Marianne Rasmussen.

She is happy that the evaluation reports from the three schools and the three museums unanimously show

satisfaction and a desire to continue working with the material. She herself actively uses the experiences from the project in her content when she gives lectures and professional presentations.

"It is particularly important that we reach out to a wider audience about what is happening in the Arctic, i.e. with climate change," she says.

She herself thinks that one of the most rewarding things was experiencing the school children's reaction. She took part in the test phases in Denmark and Iceland herself and experienced their reactions.

"The children were so excited! I was happy about that! With children, you really get that instant reaction with outbursts and shouts of joy," she says.

Marianne Rasmussen points out that it was not only museums and schools that got something out of the collaboration. It went both ways.

"It is of great importance to us researchers, the crew and all the volunteers that our work reaches wider sections of society. We really hope that we will find a way for all images, films and learning material to be accessed by museums and schools in the future," says the head of research.

More information:

Research Centre Húsavík

The Research Centre directs and supports marine biology research in cooperation with universities and other institutions in Iceland and abroad, with both teaching and research projects.

Whale Wise is an international community and NGO that works to protect whales and, among other things, examines the impact between humans and whales.

Barba is an expedition ship and a fully equipped field station.



Frontrunners in local food production create a bridge between culture and tradition

Food with a short journey from field to table is in demand by consumers in both the Nordics and the Baltics. This led food producers in Lithuania, Iceland, Norway and Denmark to come together in a Nordplus Adult project with a focus on learning from each other – both in relation to production and to sales.

By Joan Rask, journalist

Food that tastes good! Food that is healthy, and food that is produced sustainably with a short journey from field to table. That is the focal point for the participants in the Nordplus Adult project "Short Food Supply Schemes in the Nordics-Baltics", where smaller food producers exchange experiences and teach each other methods for production and sales.

Association Viva Sol in Lithuania is the coordinating institution. Initiator Lina Gumbrevicienė has worked as an administrator in the field of agriculture and food production for more than 20 years. Today she is a member and director at Viva Sol, an NGO membership organisation in Lithuania with a large active community around it.

"A short food supply chain is one of our key focus areas at Viva Sol. And our member farmers are all small-scale producers. The Ministry of Agriculture has made an effort to inspire farmers to start selling directly to consumers because it opens up new possibilities to earn more money," Lina Gumbrevicienė says.

She explains that food grown or produced locally is also almost always a more sustainable choice than industrially produced goods. The reason is that transportation



is minimal, the need for packaging is often reduced, and the shelf life is longer than if the products have a long transportation and packaging process behind them.

But how do you do that in practice? And which foods are suitable for it? And can the local food producer really create a product that consumers want to buy? These were some of the questions that the partners behind the Nordplus project wanted to investigate together.

It is not only about the production itself, but also about transport, because of course the producers often farm in remote regions far from any cities. In addition, there are the production and processing methods that are chosen, because if a cheese is to be produced locally, it requires different processing methods than those used in the large industrialised dairies.

"In Lithuania, for example, there is no school where you can learn to make cheese, so we had to find out what we could do! Fortunately, we have practitioners who are very skilled in cheese making, so we started to organise training courses. One of our members produced cheese very professionally and he was very good at teaching and

sharing his knowledge with others. In fact, trainees came from all over Lithuania, and we even had trainees from Ukraine as well," she explains.

In addition to the workshop and training course, several educational videos were produced for YouTube, where the experienced producer showed and explained exactly how to do it when, as a producer, you only have ordinary everyday resources available. It doesn't help to rush here. Cheese takes its time.



The pandemic gave rise to new ideas

It was the COVID-19 pandemic that forced many smaller Lithuanian farm owners to think differently because their sales channels suddenly disappeared – and with them the customers disappeared too. It led them to open their eyes to the fact that the neighbouring countries around them could perhaps contribute with new perspectives. This was one of the reasons why Viva Sol entered this Nordplus project. Here the Lithuanian participants met, amongst others, Berit Kiilerich, who is a shepherd and owner of Lystbækgaard farm, a former heath farm in West Jutland in Denmark that has been converted into a visitor centre for wool, sheep and old heath crafts. There is also a community and an association here that supports the work.

"Hardly a day goes by without me thinking about how valuable the Nordplus project was for us! And what great inspiration was shared amongst those of us who participated. There were super cool participants involved in the project," says Berit Kiilerich.

She is one of the very few Danes who is educated as a shepherd and who farms exclusively with sheep. She herself learned her trade in England, and today she herself educates young people.

"There are a lot of young people who are attracted to this line of work. It's almost crazy how it has exploded! I get more than one enquiry a week. They write and call, and they all want to come and work for free. They want to learn, and they want to go out into the fields with our shepherd," says Berit Kiilerich.

She is a little surprised at how great the interest is and guesses that it is also about the possibility of connecting with the animals and to nature in a way that humans

have done for centuries. Lystbækgaard lies on the Jutland heath, where sheep farming has been carried out for hundreds of years and where the landscape is characterised by flocks of sheep that grazed the heath in earlier times. Today, a sheep farm is a distinctive feature in Denmark.

"Out in the world the work we do here on the farm is recognised, but in a Danish context not many people know about us," says the Danish shepherd.

Perhaps that is precisely why the Nordplus project became so significant.

"We have taken part in other international projects with several European participants. These quickly turn into projects where men-and-machines become the dominant thing. That is why we as Nordic participants decided to apply for a project at Nordplus. We took part in a contact seminar 10 years ago and now this is our second Nordplus project," explains Berit Kiilerich Mouritsen.

Where the other partners are from, sheep farming is more widespread.

"It was very inspiring to be in Lithuania. The old craft traditions are used much more in everyday life and we saw how they could shape tools from wood and how they cut grass with scythes. It's much faster than with a brushcutter once you've really learned how to do it!" she says.

Products for locals - a scarce commodity

Together with the Lithuanian farmers, Lina Gumbrevicienė participated in visits to the partners in Denmark, Norway and Iceland. Here she was both coordinator, co-organiser and often also an interpreter. In the conversations with the farmers, they discovered a particular issue together.

"Even though the Nordic countries are very, how do you say it - prosperous countries, we understood that the farmers are struggling everywhere, in the Baltics and in the Nordics. Of course, the farmers' situation is different in each country, but they all have to work a lot, they need to find customers to sell to and they need to have sufficient incomes on a daily basis all year round," says Lina Gumbrevicienė.

It was not the only common reflection that the participants encountered. Everyone – across the nationalities – could nod in recognition of a particular buying pattern.

"It is very strange but locals do not buy local! Nobody knew why! All farmers from different countries agreed on that. For example, in Norway there were a lot of different shops with a lot of local products but they looked very touristy, as if they were made just for people who come to a rural area for the weekend. The products did not look like they were produced for daily consumption," she explains.

Another thing also made a big impression on the Lithuanian farmers after the visits to Iceland, Norway and Denmark.

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Roadside stalls alongside trust and security

"One farmer, Rasa Griežėshe is a cheese maker and she also produces a lot of vegetables and other dairy products that she sells at the local markets. She said; It is very interesting for me to see, that the farms are open, and on almost every farm you can find a small marketplace and that many farms had open doors so that customers at road stalls and at farm shops could see part of the production," Lina Griežė recounts.

The phenomenon of small road stalls is well known in all the Scandinavian countries. The producer displays goods and trusts that the customers will pay. The flavours and products are often of high quality.

Good taste trumps everything

Both Berit Kiilerich Mouritsen and Lina Gumbrevicienė had taste experiences that they still dream about. They were impressed by the high quality and diversity to be found from farm to farm, and how in Iceland and Norway they had refined the taste experience.

In Norway, they met the couple Karin Axelsen and Christoffer Hønsen, who run the smallholding "Delbekk husmannsplass" together, based in Fenstad in Akershus. They bought the farm in 2018 with a dilapidated house that had been uninhabited for 50 years, and with six

hectares of land leased out for cereal production. Today there are 2,000 apple trees in even rows, 1,500 currant and blackcurrant bushes, plus a little rhubarb and pear trees, and before the end of the year they expect to plant another 800 apple trees.

"Starting next year, the trees will be planted according to old-fashioned methods, so that they will have up to 9-10 meters around them, and they won't be in rows! It looks as if you can reduce the use of pesticides in this way - because nature itself manages to keep fungi, grass and weeds at bay. We use as few pesticides as possible, but we still can't completely do without it," says Christoffer Hønsen.

The couple joined the Nordplus project because they hoped to gain inspiration and learn about other forms of production.

"All our expectations were met, and it was an experience to see how they farm in a very down-to-earth way in Lithuania. We were also fascinated that mutton in Iceland was sold in a government funded shop on wheels! We met so many dedicated and lovely people everywhere," he says.

Karin Axelsen adds:

"I am proud to be part of the community of smallholders and that we produce sustainably. It meant a lot to meet like-minded people and to be together both professionally and socially," she says.

The couple are convinced that they want to continue working with more sustainable forms of production, and they remain active in the network that was created. Berit Kiilerich Mouritsen feels the same.

"It created an enormous sense of belonging for us as farmers that we could talk together and swap experiences and ideas about processing, about how meat was smoked, which spices were used, etc. In Iceland, they showed us how they worked and they explained to us how everything from a sheep was used - ears and tongue too! During the visits, I experienced a deep sense of the generations and of skills being passed down. I know that Danish emigrants from West Jutland went to Iceland, so maybe now it is us Danes who need to learn from the Icelanders, so we can rediscover some of the skills we have lost," says Berit Kiilerich Mouritsen.

She saw it as an advantage that it was described as a Nordic and Baltic project, because the examples, tips and recommendations were much easier to share than with southern European participants who produce in a completely different climate and for a different cultural environment.

"We achieved the goals! It was a fantastic project and today we still have the community. I think about it every day. Everyone put their hearts into it, and we visited places and met people that we would never have done if this Nordplus project had not been established," says Berit Kiilerich Mouritsen.

More information:

Viva Sol, Lithuania
Lystbækgaard, Denmark
Delbekk husmannsplass, Norge

Facts:

Nordplus project "Short Food Supply Schemes in the Nordics-Baltics" is financed via the program Nordplus VOKSEN. It is a thematic learning network between NGOs, associations and smaller local producers. Four farmers from each country participated and they visited Norway, Iceland, Lithuania and Denmark. Each visit lasted five days.

Curious about a thematic network?

A Nordplus project can be a one-off collaboration between institutions that typically runs for 1-2 years, but it can also be a long-term kind of collaboration that is set up as a network.



Icelandic Teaching Material is Translated into all Scandinavian Languages, Finnish and Faroese

A common Nordic teaching material about the pollution of oceans and seas has taken teachers and students by storm. Development of the teaching material in all Scandinavian languages, Finnish and Faroese was made possible via Nordplus Nordic Languages collaboration between "Norden i Skolen" and the Icelandic interest organisation Landvernd.

By Joan Rask

It's probably the best e-book I've ever seen! So says Tinna Steindórsdóttir, who is a teacher at Brekkubæjarskóli elementary school located in Akranes, a town on the west coast of Iceland.

Tinna Steindórsdóttir talks about an interactive teaching material that was developed for school students throughout the Nordics. The material was created as part of the Nordplus project "Digital language meet-ups and Nordic cooperation for a greener future" in the programme Nordplus Nordic Languages. The task was to create a digital teaching package with e-books, animated films, interactive solutions and action-based competitions. The first teaching material was created in Icelandic and then everything was translated into Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish and Faroese.

The project had two partners. One was the Icelandic environmental organisation Landvernd, which has existed since 1969 and has specialised knowledge on the protection of nature in Iceland. The other partner was Norden i Skolen, which was also the coordinating institution. The two partners also developed teachers' material together, with questions for reflection.



A big topic in year four in the Akranes fishing village primary school Brekkubæjarskóli is the sea, so for Tinna Steindórsdóttir it was a bound assignment to teach the students about the conditions in the sea.

"I googled and tried to find materials suitable for the students' ages, because they didn't have any books that I felt were accessible enough. I wanted to teach them about how our country has survived and depended on the sea over the centuries – and then I stumbled across this material – and I thought, wow, this material is absolutely perfect!" she says.

Tinna Steindórsdóttir is actually a trained English teacher at upper secondary level, but wanted to try her hand at a school class she could accompany over several years as class teacher and get involved with at a deeper level.

"For me, this is not just teaching about the sea. It is about something that really, really matters to me. My dad's a fisherman, so I've grown up in close contact with the sea and the life of my family and our wellbeing has sort of relied on the sea," she explains.

Nordplus for a greener future!

At one time, Akranes was a proud fishing village, where virtually all inhabitants were involved in the fishing industry. Today, a lot of the commercial fishing has moved elsewhere, but the sea still surrounds the town on three sides.

"I wanted the children to really understand that they are children of a fishing community, to gain factual knowledge about the marine environment and our shared history. I mean if it weren't for the fishermen, the Gulf Stream and clean and healthy seas around Iceland, we wouldn't be here," she continues.



Teaching with facts and feelings

Tinna Steindórsdóttir points out that it was of great importance to her that the teaching material was academically sound and that the e-books, video, fact boxes and teaching materials were thoroughly tested, and she also emphasises that teaching guides helped her organise the education programme. Her colleagues at another Icelandic primary school are delighted by the news. It is no coincidence that the teaching material was good, as many contributed to the development and testing phase. The interactive teaching material was created in close collaboration between Landvernd, Norden i Skolen and several Icelandic teachers and school students. One of the Icelandic teachers was Guðrún Jenný Sigurðardóttir, who works at Snæfellsbær Elementary School.

"I enjoyed working with Landvernd. They had so many ideas and got the students engaged in doing research at home. The course was very inspiring and also fun for both me and the students. Once they had to write down how much plastic they used in one day, and they woke up and realised, 'I can't brush my teeth and I can't use the toilet seat!' because plastic was all around them. That was fun. And they did it. And they did it well," she says.

Guðrún Jenný Sigurðardóttir attaches great weight to the fact that the material for reflection works well both for her as a teacher and for the students:

"We made the students think. Can I get rid of some plastic? Or can I use something else instead? And also that we

need to be careful, because plastic isn't all bad. It's also good, for example, for making heavy things much lighter. And of course plastic is necessary for medical use. The material opened up discussion on both the good and the bad, and of course about plastic pollution in the sea," she explains.

She also emphasises that the material combines the physical and the virtual world. One of the tasks in the test phase was, for example, to go to the beach.

"We also had to check the state of the trash cans in a certain area and we also did beach cleaning. I remember that there was about 500kg once! There were shoes, clothes, fishing nets and a car tyre. All kind of trash, and we made the pupils think. Because where did it all come from? And how can we ensure that these things do not end up in the sea?" says Guðrún Jenný Sigurðardóttir.

The teaching material has been available for approximately two years, and Guðrún Jenný Sigurðardóttir has used the finished material several times in her teaching.

"The students are very interested in subjects related to clean seas. In one class we worked on global goal no. 14, 'Life in the Sea'. The material worked really well for that. We used teaching methods such as: what do I know, what do I want to know and what have I learned. It was so easy to work with and it all went really well," she says.

Translated and reused across the whole Nordic region

Norden i Skolen was the coordinating institution, and Anna Foucard was the project leader here and editor of the project.

"Norden i Skolen's contribution was to distribute the material! We translated it into the other Nordic languages, and we made all the teaching material accessible to our existing online platforms. This was only possible because the Nordic countries are so similar that we often have the same needs with regard to teaching plans and also to the classroom teaching itself," she says.



Norden i Skolen has extensive experience in developing teaching material for use by schools in all the Nordic countries. They have offerings within almost every subject at almost every class level. Anna Foucard explains that when the topic is, for example, history teaching, there's often a need for a very thorough adaptation, be-

cause the shared Nordic history also contains conflicts and therefore also different points of view. But within natural sciences and global societal issues, it is something else.

"Actually I think it's really fantastic that it's possible to take material that was put together in a small country like Iceland, translate it with very few adaptations, and then use it right across the Nordics," she says.

Anna Foucard is educated in environmental sciences. She is Swedish, grew up in Uppsala, lives in Malmö and works in the office in Copenhagen, where there are several other employees who are not Danish.



"The Nordic aspect is one of the most rewarding things about this work. It's fun to have a network in the various nations and it's fantastic that I can combine my passion for both environment and sustainable development with my interest in languages," she says.

Anna Foucard places great emphasis on the societal importance of school students being introduced to sustainable green solutions early on. She shares this view with Jóhanna Ásmundsdóttir, who is a school teacher and works at the primary school in Síðuskóla in Akureyri. Also, she got her hands on the teaching material by coincidence:

"I felt that the students enjoyed looking at the live images and that they could use interactive words to find explanations. Sometimes they forgot themselves because they were so busy looking at the objects and reading. I really liked working with this material," says Jóhanna Ásmundsdóttir.

She also highlights the value of teaching early on about the sustainable use of the sea, and of the children understanding the subjects regardless of how good they are at reading.

"The more capable children were particularly interested, and they read every single word and all the explanations they could find. But those who are not such strong readers, they did it a little slower, but they still stayed with it," says Jóhanna Ásmundsdóttir.

The three Icelandic teachers all agree that the potential of looking at the marine environment across the Nordic countries, through collaboration with school classes in other Nordic countries, will add an extra valuable layer to their teaching.

"We hope that the teaching can be instrumental in changing something in them, at their home, at school and in their local community," says Guðrún Jenný Sigurðardóttir, and Jóhanna Ásmundsdóttir nods in agreement.

They are ready for that step.

"I would like to have more of this kind of material, and I hope I'll have the opportunity to work together with teachers from, for example, Norway on sea pollution. That would be hugely exciting and a fantastic opportunity for the students," says Tinna Steindórsdóttir.

Facts:

The Icelandic e-book: Hreint haf (Cleans seas)

Norden i Skolen

Norden i Skolen is a common Nordic interest organisation formed by Foreningen Norden's national branches in all the Nordic countries. They work to strengthen Nordic cooperation at all levels in Nordic primary schools and to share knowledge about the language, culture and history of the Nordic countries. The main funding comes from the Nordic Council of Ministers and is administered by Foreningerne Nordens Forbund.

- Teaching materials in nine languages (everything is free)
- More than 33,919 registered teachers
- Offerings from year 1 to 10 and for upper secondary education
- Activities such as school chats, friendship classes, films and much more

Landvernd

Landvernd, the Icelandic Environment Association, is a national non-governmental environmental organisation based in Reykjavík. Landvernd was founded in 1969 with a main emphasis on nature conservation, in particular on the conservation of soil and vegetation.



Nordplus green transition project encouraged mobility and STEM education

Nordplus green transition project encouraged mobility and STEM education

The Baltic Sea was the physical setting for students discovering everything water can do - and everything we do with the sea, lakes, rivers and drinking water resources. From very different angles, they looked at opportunities and challenges and gained new knowledge in biology, physics, art and language.

Af Joan Rask, journalist

"Our chemistry and physics teachers were involved. Our biology teachers were involved. Everybody had their role. And the teachers even went out to collect water samples, to make sure it was done properly! And they carried out lab work with the students - I couldn't have done that!"

This is how Arja Andersson from Lappajärvi Upper Secondary School in Finland talks about the Nordplus project, in which she was the coordinator and an active participant. The project "From the Bottom to the Surface" ran over three years, and more than 110 school students and teachers from Finland, Estonia and Lithuania visited each other. In addition, the schools' other students and teachers were also partially involved, there were public exhibitions, a joint website and Facebook pages containing presentations.

Arja Andersson is an English teacher and, together with the school's management, she initiated the project. The background to this was a related project in the local area with Finnish pupils and a desire - for the first time - to try their hand at a Nordplus project.



"We were really thrilled to learn that Lithuania and Estonia would be participating. I organised quite a lot of activities here at our school, just as they did in their countries. It was good that we had three years and didn't have to do everything at the same time," she says.

Water as a theme

This project is rather special because so many students and teachers had the opportunity to visit their neighbouring countries, and because it highlighted a required common theme across all school subjects in natural sciences and humanities.

"The theme was easily integrated into different classes, like biology, history, chemistry and geography, of course, but also into art, literature and religion. In between visits, we studied the topic of water and, for example, in religion they examined the areas relating to water, for example, in ceremonies, and we created quite a lot of art, too. All the pupils took pictures of water in different seasons in different countries, and they brought the pictures with them for the exhibition in Finland," explains Arja Andersson.

Her own students wrote haiku poems in English, for example, with water as the theme. For the teachers who were not directly involved in the Nordplus project, it was also possible to work with the water theme and participate in some of the events together with the guests. They could choose for themselves whether they wanted to get actively involved. But for Arja Andersson there was no doubt about the importance of water as the overall theme.

"I think the use of water and taking care of our natural resources is one of the most important topics that students need to learn about. That is why we looked at water from very different angles and saw how water is purified and how water is a habitat for different types of fish. We went to some purification establishments and water bottling firms, and we saw how water is treated to make it drinkable," says Arja Andersson.

The Baltic Sea - a resource for life

Finland, Lithuania and Estonia all have borders along the Baltic Sea and all three countries have used the waterway actively and today have well-developed ports, industrial facilities and recreational spas, hotels and protected areas of natural interest along the coasts. For Anja Andersson, the shared geography added something extra.

"The Baltic Sea isn't clean, and we need to take care of the water! We need it for so many purposes. We are here in the north and then Lithuania is in the south and Estonia is in the middle. We visited the coast in all three countries and it was quite an amazing experience for me, because I saw how nature and the use of the coastline changed, depending on where we were," says Anja Andersson.

Together with the other teachers and students, she visited areas of natural interest and businesses they would never have had access to themselves. The many practical activities were the focal point of the project - both during the physical visits to each other and also during the periods in between.

Saloméja Krencienė is a teacher at Seduva Gymnasium in Lithuania, and she also actively participated in the project.

"I think the topic was very interesting. We could see it from a historical point of view, look at the borders created by rivers and coastlines and analyse how clean and how polluted the Baltic Sea is today. The pupils analysed water in a myriad of ways! They also dissected a fish. All the other teachers were chemists or technologists, so they guaranteed high-level teaching," she explains.

The same - yet very different

The situation in each of the three schools was both very similar and yet very different, the teachers explain. A challenge was that some of the Lithuanian teachers in natural sciences were not that strong in English. This was turned into an additional cultural and linguistic accomplishment.

"When they participated in meetings or talks our students helped translate. It was definitely not like a holiday. The students gained practical skills in speaking English and a new confidence in their own language competency - and of course they had to understand the technical issues as well," says Saloméja Krencienė.

Saloméja Krencienė is an English teacher and her professional focus was around culture, learning methods and language comprehension. Here the students had another extra challenge in their spare time, because several host families in Lithuania could not speak English themselves. Many older people have Russian as their second language.

"I think the students mostly enjoyed the communication across borders, and they even helped their parents. When the foreign guests said goodbye, they were hugging each other like their own family members. Some made friendships and I know some went back during the summer," says Saloméja Krencienė.

The teachers who were involved from all three countries emphasise that they and their students received great hospitality - not only in the private accommodation, but also at the schools and at the companies and areas of natural interest they visited.



"One mother who hosted the foreign children crossed the border into Russia every evening to spend the night with her mother. In the morning, she came back and made breakfast for the guests and her own children. The flat was too small to host them all. It shows how devoted the families were to this project and for our guests it was very interesting to learn that, in our part of the world, we just walk over the border into Russia," she explains.

Competitive competences - education with opportunities

It is typical in Lithuania that many young people leave and take up work abroad. For the Lithuanian language teacher, it is an extra dimension to take into account in teaching. Saloméja Krencienė believes that the Nordplus project has helped prepare the students for cultural and language differences - both the positive aspects and the challenging ones.

Nordplus for a greener future!

"Perhaps this project will inspire them to study for a semester abroad, because you can't show during lessons at school what we have seen in real life. You can't teach such things. You can't visit so many places, and you can't give the students the practical language use they experienced during the project," Saloméja Krenciené says.

Both Arja Andersson and Saloméja Krenciené are sure that the project opened the students' eyes to alternatives in solving global pollution problems, converting production to more sustainable methods and protecting natural resources. Everything that the so-called STEM programs, which embrace science, technology, engineering and mathematics, are about. Saloméja Krenciené is grateful for both the experiences and for the extra boost the project gave to daily teaching.

"The students opened their minds to a new way of working, seeing how they can use their language skills in connection with an engineering education and seeing the importance of having well-educated experts as part of sustainable solutions," says the Finnish teacher.

Both Saloméja Krenciené and Arja Andersson believe that this project has left a lasting impression on the young people. Their experience is that many suddenly understood that the subject of biology is not only about animals and plants, but also embraces the entire biotech field and its potential within the green transition, the effects of which we as a society have not yet seen.

"The students were introduced to the world of STEM education and I had a feeling that they felt encouraged to pursue further studies in the field of science", says Arja Andersson.



Students are working on the future's most serious challenges

Art and design schools in the CIRRUS network want to be part of the race towards green and sustainable choices - the choice of material in a product determines how easy it is to recycle. It is a responsibility that both institutions and teachers take very seriously, and they have completed several successful Nordplus projects.

Af Joan Rask, journalist

"Our chemistry and physics teachers were involved. Our biology teachers were involved. Everybody had their role. And the teachers even went out to collect water samples, to make sure it was done properly! And they carried out lab work with the students - I couldn't have done that!"

By Joan Rask, journalist

Shoes, boots, stilettos – all kind of footwear ought to be recyclable, but it is actually very difficult in general, because the materials need to be durable, and footwear is often made from many different types of materials. So says Stella Runnel, head of accessory design at the Estonian Academy of Arts.

She was among the initiators of the Nordplus project "Recycled Materials for Creating Footwear", which was established in 2022 within the collaborative network CIRRUS. Students and teachers from art and design schools in Sweden, Norway, Lithuania, Latvia, Iceland and Denmark also took part in it.

"I think it was a good exercise for the students' minds and brains, because the next challenge is how do you recycle the materials? How do you design them without using

glue, and what materials should be used in the first instance, so that you can redesign things later," asks Stella Runnel.

Students and teachers from seven different Nordic and Baltic countries participated in the footwear project. The idea is that the students get together in person and work together on solving different challenges. During the project week, there are guests and presenters and, according to Stella Runnel, this has a big impact on the students:

"When you have a working designer in your group as well as a tutor that you see every day, the designer has more influence than the usual teacher. This is completely understandable, and when the students realise that what they are doing is relevant to designers who actually work in the shoe design industry, it becomes a kind of milestone in their studies that opens their eyes to what might be possible in the future – both for themselves and in the use of sustainable materials."

Fresh and imaginative solutions

Seen from the outside, one might wonder how Stella Runnel and her colleagues at various faculties and art and design schools across the Nordics and the Baltics find the time and energy for a project like this. For the Estonian participants, there is no doubt in their minds.

"First of all, we are all excited by the subject! And seeing the incredible power in the students' work and the freshness of their designs is hugely rewarding for teachers. Alongside that there are opportunities to invite guests you admire and would like to collaborate with. You have a budget for it, so it is quite different to having to beg for someone's time," says Stella Runnel.

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She is sure that the Nordplus projects in the CIRRUS network are of enormous importance.

"Participating in a workshop can actually change your life, so there are usually a lot of students who want to take part," she says.

It is the casual interaction between professionals in the industry, in the international environment and in the formal and informal networks that build up between the students, teachers and managers from widely different cultures, nations and backgrounds, that brings the most meaningful advantages, explains Stella Runnel. She shares this view with many others too. One of them is Karl Mihhels, who among other things conducts research into developing basic elements for the materials that will later be put into production.

Are the ocean's microorganisms the key to the future?

Karl Mihhels is a chemist and is working on a PhD in algae at Aalto University in Helsinki, Finland. He is also part of the CIRRUS network. He has not designed footwear, but has instead met with designers, other researchers and fellow students researching the use of the algae that live in the sea. Algae is a relatively unknown product in the Nordics and Baltics, but the green algae that grow in the Baltic Sea have, according to Karl Mihhels, enormous potential both as a foodstuff and as a substitute for plastic, sub-components in materials and much more. He has participated in the CIRRUS project "Bio-Integrated Design".

"It was liberating to work with others who were interested in algae. I didn't have to start each and every discussion with a kind of two-hour presentation about why working with algae makes sense, and so it's easier to delve deeper into the challenges," says Karl Mihhels.

He was co-author of the application to Nordplus and participated in the intensive course in Estonia, where representatives from universities in Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greenland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Sweden also took part. The workshop brought him together with experts in Estonia, where research into the use of algae and its industrial production is much more advanced than in Finland.

"We are sitting twiddling our thumbs while research and production are booming in China. In the Nordics and the Baltics, there are only a few who work professionally in

algae research, despite the fact that we have plenty of sea around us and that algae can grow almost as fast as bacteria. The algae I'm working on now are reported to have a growth rate that doubles in biomass every 72 hours."

Karl Mihhels is concerned about the state of the planet. As part of the workshop, the participants visited companies in Estonia that actually produce algae in the sea and also do product development in recycling waste for production. He explains:

"If Europe wants to take advantage of the huge potential of algae as food for animals and fish and also as a much more sustainable element in packaging materials, e.g. egg cartons, then we really need to speed up."

Karl Mihhels is an unlikely participant in a CIRRUS project that focuses on art and design, and so his participation is inextricably linked to the choice of materials and their recyclability. It meant that he collaborated with designers and artists from all over the Nordics and the Baltics.

"One of the challenges was that all the others were from arts backgrounds and I was from a chemistry background, so it was a little bit challenging for me to get familiar with their ways of working. Their methods are much more about trying out different things, instead of developing a theory and then doing experiments," he says.

CIRRUS – the backbone for collaboration

A Nordplus project can be a one-off collaboration between institutions that typically runs for 2-3 years, but it can also be a long-term kind of collaboration that grows into a network. Some of these networks have existed for more than 20 years, and CIRRUS is one of them. Right now, the network consists of 20 institutions from art and design programs in the Nordic and Baltic countries. The Estonian Academy of Arts has coordinated the network over these years, and head of International Office Sandra Mell takes care of the practicalities.



"CIRRUS is really dear to me. It's so small that you know the people who are in the network. CIRRUS and the other Nordic and Baltic partners are important for our institution on a strategic level," says Sandra Mell.

She explains that in Estonia there is only one art academy and therefore the academy is very keen that the stu-

dents, teachers and also the management are exposed to and aware of what's happening internationally. Participating in the Nordplus project and being part of the CIRRUS network is therefore part of a strategic decision to be both international and sustainable.



"CIRRUS is only a small part of my work, and the workload isn't that heavy. The main thing is to facilitate writing the application and arranging the annual network meetups for teachers and deans. These meetings are a kind of cornerstone in setting up a project," she says.

The last network meeting was held in Helsinki, Aalto University. The primary purpose is for all institutions to meet and jointly develop ideas for new projects, for which they can apply for support. Here, meeting up in person is important, emphasises Sandra Mell. The goal is that all institutions are always represented, preferably with two teachers and a management representative. She is convinced that a wide degree of diversity among members is crucial, as the largest Nordic universities are represented together with smaller institutions that may offer only art and design courses.

"At the meetings we see various kinds of bottom-up initiatives, for instance there is a subgroup of visual communication teachers who share how they teach, so it's really valuable. The current board has also initiated a network meeting for deans and heads of academic divisions only. I

took part in that, and they really appreciated this opportunity," Sandra Mell tells.

International on purpose

Kenneth Lundin is a long-standing Nordplus administrator within Higher Education and actively participates in the presentation and selection of the projects that are nominated to the programme committee that distributes the funds. He is aware that many educational institutions are not aware of the possibilities, nor do they see the positive potential of a professional education network that has existed for several years.

"There are always projects that get money from Nordplus, and the networks seek support on an equal footing with everyone else, but we often receive high-quality projects from the networks. There are new students all the time, and the teachers also often swap around, and so the vast majority of participants are new," says Kenneth Lundin.

Kenneth Lundin and his colleagues at Nordplus, together with the programme committee that ultimately distributes resources for the projects, would like to see more new networks established. The reason is simple:

"The thinking behind the networks is long-term cooperation that leads to in-depth knowledge of the partners' competencies and that builds confidence. The networks generally have a high completion rate, because the parties know what it takes to complete a good project and how to secure management support. This means that they both plan and describe the projects well – and that the funds are used as planned and that they reach their goals."

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE SEMINAR,
INCLUDING VIDEO RECORDINGS AND PRESENTATIONS, PLEASE VISIT:

<https://www.nordplusonline.org/projects/green-projects-in-nordplus/>



