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Theme: The lack of assistant nurses



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Nordic visions of more children and fewer suicides

The Nordic cooperation's symbol is a swan. But black swans also symbolise the unexpected. This newsletter is about both birth and death. Assistant nurses play an important role in what happens between those two events.

EDITORIAL

16.02.2020

BY BJÖRN LINDAHL, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The Nordic cooperation is based on gathering knowledge and sharing it between the five countries and the three autonomous regions. One of its most important reports is the annual State of the Nordic Region Report produced by Nordregio.

This year's report warns too few children are being born in the Nordics, despite generous parental leave provisions and child benefits. Fertility rates in Finland, Iceland and Norway are at a record low. Only in Greenland are there twice as many children as old people, and the Faroes is the only place where more people are born than die.

At the same time, many people die unnecessarily by taking their own lives. 3 500 people die in the Nordic region each year through suicide. The Nordic Council's session in Copenhagen presented a vision for reducing suicides with 25% by 2025. One in twenty suicides happens on railways, and become a strain also for train drivers, other personnel and other passengers. Some can be avoided by the use of platform barriers. A new vision zero is being launched for this kind of suicides.

Right now the news cycle is focussed on the spread of a new virus in China, which has also reached the Nordic countries. The coronavirus might not be an unexpected event, as each year sees the emergence of new viruses. But the political and economic consequences could be a black swan, impossible to predict. The Nordic Council of Ministers still appears somewhat visionary when establishing a new Nordic disease control training programme in Gothenburg. The first 35 students started in the autumn of 2019, and the second group have started this year.

Assistant nurse is the most common profession across the Nordic region, known in Sweden as undersköterska, SOSUs in Denmark, närvårdare in Finland, helsefagarbeidere in Norway and sjúkrálfar in Iceland. This profession suffers

from having too few people, as our story out of Denmark shows, and it needs improved status to get more people to choose it. A Swedish proposal is to make assistant nurse a protected title.

We also take a historic look back at one of the more remarkable and extreme professions – the North Sea divers. They have had books written about them, but never before has a book been written by one of the divers themselves. They were all crucial to the oil industry.

Norway got a new Minister of Labour and Social Inclusion in Torbjørn Røe Isaksen on 24 January, as the Progress Party pulled out of the coalition government. In Iceland, the ASÍ and BSRB trade unions are establishing a new research institute.

Finally, the Nordic Labour Ministers have jointly invited the EU's new Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, Nicolas Schmit, to Copenhagen on 2 April. Kerstin Ahlberg explains why the Nordic countries are nervous about some of the EU proposals.

Less part-time work to secure more “warm hands”

A major and urgent lack of trained social and health care assistants – so-called SOSUs – has led to a heated debate over the widespread use of part-time jobs in Denmark’s social and health care sector.

THEME

16.02.2020

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER

In 10 years, Danish hospitals and the municipal nursing sector might be short of some 40 000 trained social and health care workers. There is already a shortage of so-called “warm hands” to look after the sick and elderly. At the same time, the majority of SOSUs work part-time.

The social partners are discussing this dilemma, and agree that the lack of SOSUs represents a serious social problem which must be solved. They do not agree on how, however.

Municipal and regional employers who run the country’s hospitals say getting more SOSUs into full-time jobs rather than having them work part-time is key. Today nearly all SOSU positions are part-time, which means they cover less than 37 hours a week – the standard for a full-time job in the Danish labour market.

The right to a full-time hospital job

Nine in ten social and health care helpers work part-time. Eight in ten social and health care assistants do the same. In December 2019, the regions made a clear decision to change that. SOSU assistants and nurses who work part-time in hospitals are now free to choose to go full-time. Their employer is not allowed to say no to a request for a full-time job, and new positions must be offered as full-time jobs.

The agreement is with the Danish Association of Local Government Employees Organisations (Forhandlingsfællesskabet), which represents 51 trade unions and negotiates with municipal and regional employers – including FOA, Denmark’s third-largest trade union. FOA represents SOSU helpers and SOSU assistants, and is happy with the fact that the agreement gives hospital SOSU workers the right to full-time jobs they can make a living from.

In FOA’s view, this is far from enough, however. Municipal employers are still offering more part-time than full-time jobs. FOA says work environments must improve too, before

SOSUs can comfortably take on full-time employment. FOA also calls for systematic skills development and further education for SOSUs.

Confronting the part-time culture

Municipal employers do not accept that work environments are worse for people in full-time jobs. Michael Ziegler is the chief negotiator at KL – Local Government Denmark. In January 2020 he told the A4 website that experiences from Norway and Sweden showed that spending more time at work could actually improve the work environment, because the working day is more predictable and because tasks can be more evenly spread throughout the day.

Mr Ziegler has also said that municipalities do not plan to introduce a general right to full-time work, because it is unlikely that many part-time workers would choose to go full-time. He does, however, think it is time to tackle the part-time culture within the social and health care sectors – both among employers and employees.

This is particularly relevant for women who work part-time out of choice because it gives them a better work-life balance, according to an analysis from the Confederation of Danish Employers of part-time work in the Danish labour market.

More in education

To work as a SOSU helper and SOSU assistant you need vocational training consisting of two basic courses divided between theory and work practice. SOSU helper training lasts one year, while it takes up to two years to complete SOSU assistant training. There has been increased interest in both, unlike other vocational training schemes which have experienced stagnation or a reduction in applications. This has happened despite a new vocational training reform aimed at getting more young people to choose this type of education.

Yet the increased number of young SOSU students is not enough to solve the severe shortage of trained care workers, according to Lisbeth Nørgaard. She heads the association for Danish SOSU schools. It has called for SOSU schools to become even more attractive training choices for people who have lost their jobs in abattoirs, unemployed people with immigrant backgrounds and other groups outside of the labour market.

The government, KL and Danish Regions have established a task force to discuss concrete initiatives that might attract more people to the elderly care and health sectors. FOA has come up with a range of proposals, including paying SOSU students during their basic training and to strengthen student support in order to prevent students from leaving prematurely.



An assistant nurse with a patient at Karolinska sjukhuset in Stockholm

Swedish nurses want higher status through legal recognition

Assistant nurse is one of the most common professions in Sweden. 180 000 out of a total of 200 000 workers in elderly care are assistant nurses, but unlike their other Nordic colleagues, their profession is not regulated. Making this happen has long been a trade union demand and right now legislation is being prepared which might give them a protected title.

THEME

16.02.2020

TEXT: GUNHILD WALLIN, FOTO: YADID LEVY/NORDEN.ORG

The Swedish Municipal Workers' Union – Kommunal – represents assistant nurses, and has been arguing for legitimising the assistant nurse title since 2016. There are several reasons why. Recruitment has become increasingly difficult. Increasing numbers of older and increasingly ill people in care create high expectations for quality and skilled personnel.

And the number of older people will increase. Sweden is expected to have 255 000 more octogenarians by 2026. There is a great demand for care and the issue of quality and skills

provision is important to both national and municipal politicians.

“We believe recognising the title assistant nurse will elevate their status and make their profession more attractive. We will also link certain working tasks to the assistant nurse title so that people can see that taking this education means something and that assistant nurses will be performing different tasks compared to what they do in the current system,” says Mari Huupponen from Kommunal.

A profession under pressure

Sick leave is high within the care and health sector, and many are contemplating leaving their profession. In the report “Who will work in elderly care in the future?”, published a few years ago, the authors from the Stockholm University showed that the number of elderly care staff who have seriously considered quitting their jobs is higher in Sweden than anywhere else in the Nordic region.

49% had considered leaving, while the number in other Nordic countries was 10% lower. More considered leaving than ten years ago, both in Sweden and in the rest of the Nordic region. The reasons given were conditions of employment, the number of dependants, physical and psychological strains at work, support and development opportunities, relations to the elderly and reactions to working conditions.

Since the report’s publication, municipalities’ economy has deteriorated, and according to the newspaper “Kommunalarbetaren” (the municipal worker) six in ten municipalities will make cuts to elderly care in 2020. There will be fewer staff, no more temporary workers or further training, more shared rotas and more weekend work. Old people’s housing is also being cut, which means more pressure on home care services.

“Many municipalities struggle to find trained assistant nurses, and this will become even harder when assistant nurses are not offered good conditions and salaries,” says Mari Huupponen.

Protected title

There has been focus for some time on the importance of securing skills provision and guaranteeing safe nursing and care. A range of proposals have focused on this issue, most recently “Strengthened competencies in nursing and care” which the government presented in 2019. The proposal aimed to identify ways to regulate the assistant nurse profession in order to improve quality and safety within the care and health sector.

Lead author Harriet Wallberg wrote that there were “widespread gaps in competencies” among people in the profession, which had “direct consequences for the execution of the work tasks”. She concluded that this might be a result of the fact that the job as assistant nurse has not been regulated, meaning anyone could be employed as an assistant nurse and carry out jobs on a ward with no relevant education.

Different paths to the profession

Training to be an assistant nurse takes many forms. It is unclear what tasks assistant nurses actually should perform, and employers do not know exactly what an assistant nurse applying for a job can do either.

Most assistant nurses train in municipal adult education programmes, but it is also possible to study nursing and care topics as part of the upper secondary education. There are al-

so nursing and care colleges, a platform for cooperation between employers, trade unions and education officials from the nursing and care sector. This training is also a mark of quality which shows that those who have attended a nursing and care college has taken an education in close cooperation with the labour market, which should increase their chances to get a job. A school can be part of a nursing and care college, but not be such a college on its own.

The main result from the government proposal was two ideas which will be implemented by in January 2025. One is to give assistant nurses a protected job title, but not to formally legitimise them. A protected job title means you need certain qualifications in order to take up the title or execute the work.

It means that an assistant nurse who has finished his or her training can apply for a certificate which would allow them to use the job title assistant nurse. Without this certificate, no-one can call themselves an assistant nurse, and such misuse should be punishable with fines, according to the proposal.

In order to secure and maintain a long-term competencies level, it is also suggested that the Swedish National Agency for Education and the National Board of Health and Welfare together identify what the assistant nurse training should contain. This would allow for the creation of a national assistant nurse training programme. The government has already presented a new vocational programme for upper secondary education.

Consultation threw up different views

Last autumn the proposal was out for consultation among Swedish municipalities and regions, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions SKR – the main employer of assistant nurses – and to the Kommunal trade union.

Mari Huupponen from Kommunal is quite happy with the proposal. Kommunal had wanted the profession to be legitimised, but thinks a protected title is better than what came before.

“Legitimation would have been the more attractive option since people understand this better, and it exists for other nursing and care professions. But a protected title together with regulated working tasks still amounts to approximately the same thing. We are also positive to the proposed nationally regulated assistant nurse training,” she says.

In later years, Kommunal has notes that municipalities are hiring more unskilled people for work in the care sector. This is a threat to the quality of care and creates uncertainty, not least because many home carers look after of people with multiple ailments.

“Municipalities are hiring more and more unskilled people, but the employers should hire trained assistant nurses – not least when you consider they have to deal with medica-

tion. They should also to a greater degree be able to allocate work according to skills,” says Mari Huupponen.

Would like a nationally coordinated training programme

At SKR, Katarina Storm Åsell has been part of the expert group assisting in the work on the government proposal. SKR’s input to the consultation underlines the importance of creating a nationally coordinated training programme for assistant nursing. Today’s system has far too many variations both in scope, quality and content. That is why it is important to start with the training before considering creating a protected title. SKR therefore opposes the proposed legitimization and the alternative – a protected title.

“We believe it is important that the training is of good quality, that it is national and that these prerequisites are clear before you consider protecting the title. A majority of those who train to be an assistant nurse do this through adult education, so the ability for adult education to deliver quality is crucial here,” says Katarina Storm Åsell.

SKR also opposed the idea of linking a certain number of working tasks to the role of assistant nurses.

“It would be difficult to make this work in the workplace. For employers it is important to be able to use the existing competencies in the best possible way,” says Katarina Storm Åsell.

“We want the training to be regulated rather than the profession itself. Such regulation of for instance the “job package” offered by adult education should make it more transparent and help employers’ organise work in the best possible manner. It would also allow them to work systematically with for instance career development models. It is important that employers know what those who have passed the exam can do,” she says.



Nicolas Schmit

Labour Ministers invite Nicolas Schmit to meeting

Nordic governments are joining forces to explain the Nordic labour market model to EU lawmakers. The Labour Ministers have sent a letter to the new Commissioner Nicolas Schmit, inviting him to a meeting in Copenhagen in early April to discuss the Nordic countries' chosen priorities.

NEWS

16.02.2020

TEXT: KERSTIN AHLBERG, EDITOR EU & ARBETSRÄTT, PHOTO: JANEK SKARZYNSKI

The European Commission published two documents in January detailing how it imagines putting into practice the principles contained in the so-called social pillar. One was a communication headlined 'A strong social Europe for just transitions', the other a letter to the social partners on an EU level to ask them about their views on the Commission's plans to present proposed legislation for European minimum wages.

The latter is not a finished bill, but an explanation for why the Commission believes such rules are needed and what prob-

lems they would solve. The purpose has not been to decide right now on a set minimum wage for the whole of the EU. The rules were also not meant to establish a common method for setting the minimum wage and the aim was most definitely not to introduce a legally binding minimum wage in countries with widespread collective agreements, where wages are exclusively set through collective bargaining.

Finally, the Commission asks whether the parties recognise the reality as described, and whether they, in that case, might

consider to try to negotiate an agreement on some of the issues it presents.

The Commission always has to confer with the social partners in this way before presenting proposed legislation covering social issues. If the partners say yes and manage to enter into an agreement, this can then be elevated into a directive which member states must implement.

It is not news that the idea of European minimum wages has created unease in the Nordic countries, particularly in Denmark and Sweden. The seemingly meek consultation document does not appear to have calmed the nerves of those who are already worried. Despite all assurances to the contrary, employers' organisations, trade unions and government representatives fear that such rules would undermine the national collective agreement systems.

What is the problem? They will not accept any assurances that it would absolutely be possible to regulate wages only through collective agreements also in future. What the Commission proposes is still some kind of legal document which determines how the minimum wage should relate to market wages in a country in order to be "adequate", and how often it should be revised. If the EU adopts binding rules on this, it would erode the collective agreements' partners' freedom to act.

Member states who do not have collective agreements (for instance Denmark and Sweden) would probably also be forced to adopt complementing legislation so that "all" workers are guaranteed at least this wage.

In order to explain the Nordic countries' points of view, the Labour Ministers have invited the Commissioner responsible, Nicolas Schmit, to their meeting in Copenhagen on 2 April. The letter is written in a positive tone, and welcomes several of the Commission's planned initiatives:

- Based on Nordic experiences, the Labour Ministers for instance look forward to continued cooperation and the sharing of experiences on the topic of labour market adjustments, as well as on "the future of work", including the platform economy.
- They also support the Commission's ambition to adopt a new EU strategy for health and safety at work. The promoting of health and safety should be based on the latest research while involving the social partners.
- In a Nordic spirit, it is also essential to strengthen the social dialogue both nationally and at EU-level, including by encouraging higher union density and promoting the possibility for the social partners to find solutions to labour market challenges, many of which require nationally tailored measures. Therefore, the ministers write, we very much welcome the assurances you gave

inter alia at the hearing in the European Parliament of your respect for systems based on collective bargaining, i.e. that any future initiative on minimum wage will not interfere with labour market models where wages are regulated by collective agreements.

- Finally, the Labour Ministers stress that it is imperative to strengthen gender equality in the EU. Therefore they welcome the Commission's plan to set forth a gender equality strategy and suggest that Nicolas Schmidt contributes actively to the realisation of this. The strategy should have clear goals, be followed up, and its implementation evaluated and reviewed within the Council of Ministers.



The Nordics lack children – only Greenland stands out

The Nordic countries often top global rankings for happiness and gender equality. But who will benefit from this in the future, when fertility rates are falling and populations are ageing? According to the State of the Nordic Region 2020 report, only in Greenland are there far more children than old people.

NEWS

15.02.2020

TEKST: LARS BEVANGER, FOTO: KITTE WITTING/NORDEN.ORG

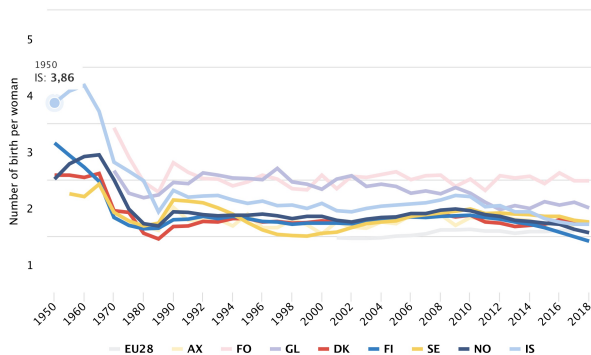
You would think that people would not hesitate to have children when living in a region with low unemployment, high levels of gender equality, low wage gaps and generous parental leave.

Yet despite an overall growth in the total population in the Nordic countries, fertility rates in Finland, Norway and Iceland have never been lower. Greenland stands out because children there outnumber old people by more than two to one. The only place where more people are born than die is the Faroe Islands.

“We’re moving towards a China-like situation but without any sort of one-child policy,” said Senior Research Fellow at Nordregio, Anna Karlsdóttir at the launch of the report State of the Nordic Region 2020 on 4 February. Nordregio produces the report on commission from the Nordic Council of Ministers.

Lower fertility rates than the European average

Iceland’s fertility rate has fallen from 2.2 to 1.7 child per woman in ten years. In Finland and Norway, the average is 1.41 and 1.56 respectively – lower than the European average.



The total fertility rate in the Nordic region from 1950 to 2018. Source: NCIS and Eurostat

On the positive side, the report's authors highlight the fact that fathers now take more responsibility for raising the next generation thanks to paid paternity leave. The Nordic countries continue to be world leaders in the work towards full gender equality.

Karlsdóttir is nevertheless surprised that the generous provisions for parental leave and childcare in the Nordic countries have not had a greater impact on birth rates. She believes this might have had a reverse effect, with women choosing to give birth later in life as they opt for an education and a career first. Today, the average age of a first-time parent in the Nordic Region is 30.

A need to plan for an ageing population

At the same time, all of the Nordic countries are facing ageing populations, and it is a trend that looks set to continue.



Although there are some significant differences between the different Nordic countries when it comes to the number of older people, their health status and quality of life, the report points out that it becomes increasingly important for the entire region to plan for a future with an older population.

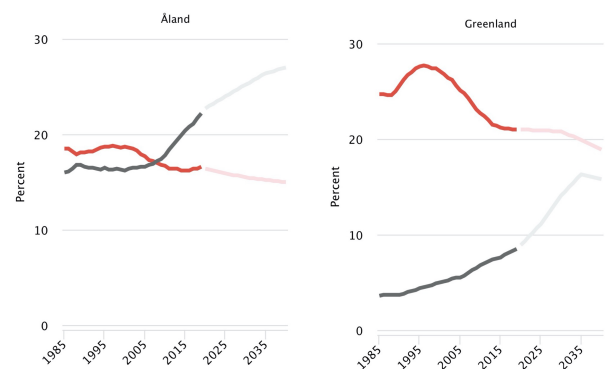
“You must for instance create more age-friendly living conditions and make urban configurations, public transport systems and housing stock more accessible for people of all ages and abilities.”

An older but healthier population should not be seen as a burden, but as an untapped potential, the report says.

Fewer children than older people

There are now more older people (above 65) than children (0 to 14) in both Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Åland. Norway has approximately the same number of old people as children, but the old are expected to overtake the young in a few years.

The situation is different in Iceland, the Faroes and Greenland, where there are still more children than older people. Greenland differs the most in a Nordic context, with more than twice as many children as older people.



The number of children (red line) and older people (grey line) as a proportion of the total population in Greenland and Åland, 1985–2019, and projections to 2040. In Åland, the number of older people bypassed the number of children already in 2009. Greenland still expects to have more children than older people in 2040. Source: Nordic Statistics.

“This can be related to Greenland having a combination of comparatively high fertility rates and the shortest life expectancy in the Nordic Region,” write the report's authors.

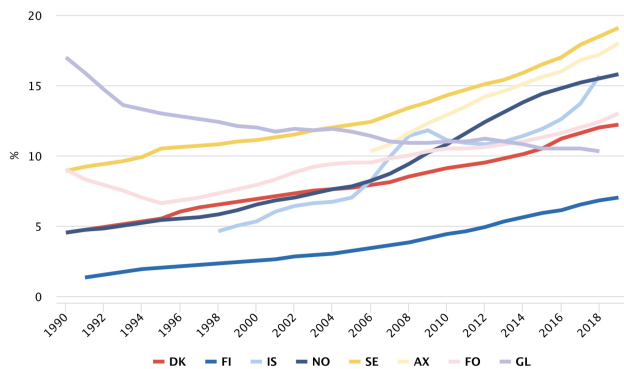
Immigration helps fight depopulation

Despite low fertility rates and ageing populations, the total population in the Nordic region has grown by 18% since 1990 – much thanks to net migration.

Most immigrants are younger and of working age, but they still cannot stop the trend of the Nordics' ageing populations. The region's generous welfare systems are dependent on high employment levels, and it is therefore important that immigrants find work as quickly as possible.

According to the report, immigrants and refugees have had a positive effect on several regions in the Nordics. They have helped increase the population in one-quarter of Nordic mu-

municipalities, many of which had struggled with depopulation and an ageing population.



Immigration has been behind two-thirds of the population growth in the Nordic region since 1990. The graph above shows the percentage of the population that is foreign-born as a share of the total population, from 1990 to 2019. Source: Nordic Statistics.

That means that the successful integration of migrants is crucial if the trend in sparsely-populated areas is to be reversed, the report underlines.

“When given the opportunity to get an education, to become self-sufficient, and to be considered on an equal footing with others, migrants make a truly positive contribution to development,” said Anna Karlsdóttir from Nordregio.

The robots are coming

The ageing populations and fewer births will also have an effect on the Nordic labour markets. The report points out that the average Nordic employment rate is nearly 80%, well above the EU average of 67.7 %. But what does the labour market look like in 2040?

The report’s authors have estimated that nearly one-third of Nordic jobs could be at “high risk” of automation in the future. Municipalities in Denmark appear to be most heavily affected, along with many rural municipalities in the other Nordic countries. The report points out that these changes to the labour market are unlikely to be evenly distributed from a spatial perspective.

“As such, it is necessary to consider the capacity of different types of regions and municipalities to adapt to new labour market structures. Part of the challenge will be ensuring that skills and knowledge in a region are consistent with the employment opportunities on offer. This is particularly relevant in the Nordic region’s sparsely populated areas,” write the report’s authors.

What else will the future bring?

The total Nordic GDP for 2018 stood at \$1.64 trillion, which makes the Nordic region the world’s 12th largest economy. Yet although the Nordic economies are strong on a global scale, all of them face challenges linked to demography, technology and the exploration of natural resources. Norway has long had a debate about what should “replace” oil and gas.

State of the Nordic Region 2020 highlights the fact that the Nordics are already considered to play a unique and innovative role in developing new economic models.

“The new, more refined and extended bioeconomy has a positive effect on regional development and economy, jobs, innovation and knowledge,” the authors write. They point to a 15% increase in jobs within the bioeconomy over ten years, with the greatest growth in Sweden, Denmark and Norway. The bioeconomy is considered to be a necessary replacement for the fossil economy.



Torbjørn Røe Isaksen

Torbjørn Røe Isaksen takes on tricky government post

Torbjørn Røe Isaksen became Norway's new Minister of Labour and Social Inclusion on 24 January. It is the least sought-after government post right now, after the biggest legal scandal in the country's history. But Isaksen has ambitions.

PORTRAIT

12.02.2020

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL, FOTO: ØYVINN MYGE/NFD

He has already signalled he would not mind running for the Conservative Party leadership when Erna Solberg one day steps down. That might be a question for debate during this spring's party congress. Solberg has been party leader since 2004.

"Erna stays for as long as she wants. Even if we lose our majority after the 2021 election, she can carry on as leader. But I am considering the possibility of taking over," Torbjørn Røe Isaksen recently told the newspaper Telemarkavisa.

He also added that he was considering leaving politics altogether.

The "NAV scandal"

Whether he gets the chance to be elected party leader depends on how he handles what has become known in Norway as the NAV scandal. But the scandal is also about mistakes that were committed by different governments and the judiciary.

In October 2019 it became clear that Norway's welfare authority NAV, which is responsible for both job centres, social care and welfare rights, had been misinterpreting the EEA agreement. Norway had made it a prerequisite that in order to receive certain kinds of unemployment benefits, a person must be present in the country.

According to the EEA agreement, which secures the same free movement of capital, goods and people as within the rest of the EU, Norway cannot impose such a rule. Everyone should be able to travel freely within the EEA.

So far it has emerged 75 people have been found unjustly guilty of fraud. 45 of them were given prison sentences. 2 400 have unfairly been forced to pay back up to several hundred thousand kroner.

Prime Minister Erna Solberg promised to put all the facts on the table but has refused to provide parliament with email exchanges between the government ministry and NAV from the time just before the legal scandal was uncovered.

After the Progress Party left the government on 24 January this year, a government re-shuffle saw the departure of the previous Minister of Labour and Social Inclusion, Anniken Hauglie.

A former trade minister

Torbjørn Røe Isaksen has so far not been involved in this case. He became an MP in 2009, and a government minister in 2013 – first as Minister of Education, and then Minister of Trade from 2018.

He grew in Porsgrunn in Telemark with parents who were both teachers, and studied political science at the University of Oslo. His main thesis was on the Austrian national economist Friedrich von Hayek, who is considered to be John Maynard Keynes' opposite. Hayek was a classical liberalist who opposed state intervention in the market economy.

The top ideologue

Torbjørn Røe Isaksen has been described as the Conservative Party's top ideologue. The VG newspaper named him the country's top young political talent in 2007. At the time, he was the head of the Conservatives' youth wing, and wrote a book in which he claimed the party had allowed its politics to be too focused on money rather than ideology.

Røe Isaksen is still struggling with the fact that he is still, 12 years later, more known for that than what he has achieved as a government minister.

The NAV scandal will surely change how he will be seen in the future.

"I'm not here to have fun at work," he said when he received the keys to his new ministerial office.



Ekofisk field

The North Sea Diver – working under pressure

There are few stories describing working life in Norway's offshore oil industry, despite the massive impact the sector has had on the country's economy. Now a new book details one of most remarkable new occupations that emerged from the industry – the deep sea divers. The author is Swedish Hans Claesson.

INSIGHT

11.02.2020

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL, PHOTO HANS CLAESSON.

This year, Norway celebrates 50 years since the discovery of oil in the North Sea. At the same time, the country's third-largest oil field ever – Johan Sverdrup – has opened.

The Norwegian state earns some 250bn kroner (€25.3bn) a year from taxes on oil and a 67% state ownership in Equinor. This represents nearly a fifth of the country's income. None of this would have been possible without the North Sea divers. Books have been written *about* them, but none have been written *by* them, points out Hans Claesson.

He is now 69, and gets in touch with the NLJ in connection with Norway's state broadcaster NRK's TV series "Lykke-land", which focusses on the first few years after oil was discovered on the Norwegian continental shelf.

"Do you want to know how it really was?" he asks.

The "Norwegian oil adventure" as it is known in Norway started when an American head of the Phillips Petroleum oil company holidayed in the Netherlands in 1960. In the middle

of tulip field, he saw the same types of oil derricks that he was used to seeing back home in Oklahoma. The Dutch had found one of the world's largest natural gas fields, Groningen.

Nobody had expected to find oil and gas in that part of Europe. But then it hit him: what if the same geological structures carried on out into the North Sea? Several oil companies had had the same idea, and had already explored the possibility of looking for oil off the UK. But Phillips Petroleum were the first to contact Norwegian authorities.



Hasse Claesson was there when it started. At 22, he was Sweden's first US-educated deep-sea diver, and nearly crushed his leg during his first job in the North Sea when a wave hit the operating deck of the diving vessel, dislodging a cargo of gas containers.

At the same time, young Hans Claesson dreamt about becoming a scuba diver. He had read *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* by Jules Verne and *The Silent World* by Jacques-Yves Costeau. In the middle of Stockholm, divers were looking for the royal Wasa ship, which had sunk more than 300 years ago.

He trained to be a sports diver early on, before applying to serve as a clearance diver in the Swedish navy as part of his military service. He was not accepted. After finishing his military service he travelled to California where he could get vocational training as a deep-sea diver. On 6 February 1973, he went to Stavanger for a job interview. He was hired immediately. Eight hours after leaving Stockholm, he was already in a helicopter on his way out over the North Sea.

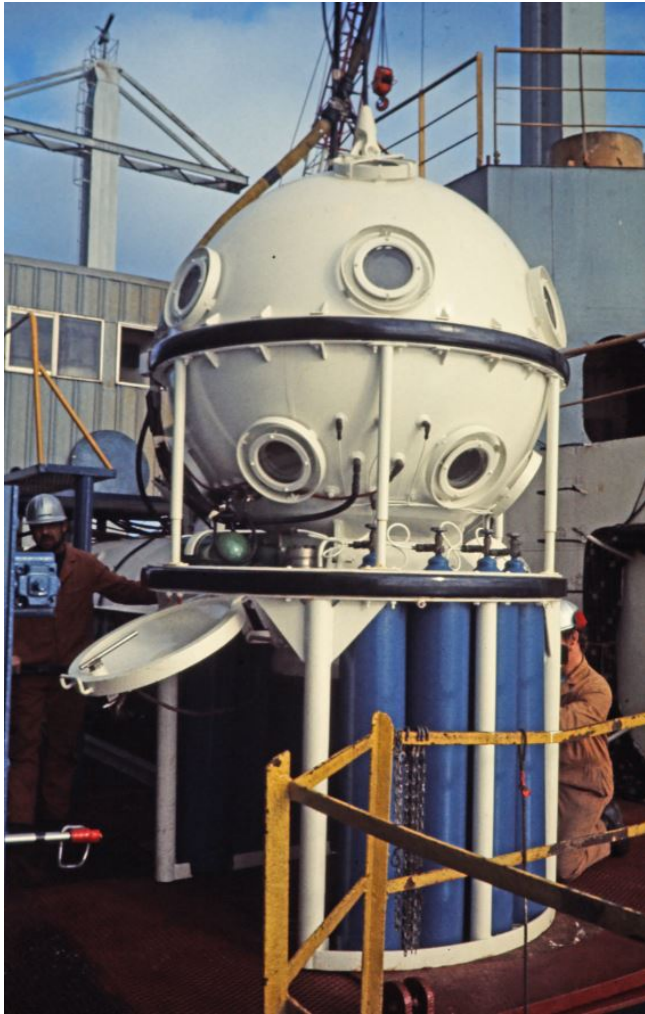
When the oil industry began looking for oil and started building production platforms in the North Sea, the only experience came from shallow water exploration in the Mexican gulf. In the North Sea, the first fields were found 70 to 80 metres down. That might not sound much, but one unit of atmospheric pressure at sea level – or one bar – increases by one bar for every ten metres. At 80 metres, the pressure is nine bars.

“Air becomes so compressed and thick that it feels like it is trickling through your fingers when you move your hand inside a diving bell,” says Hans Claesson.

When diving, human tissue absorbs the air you breathe. If you surface too quickly, gas will be released to form small bubbles which could quickly grow big enough to cause pain or prevent blood flow. It is known as divers' disease and can be fatal.

This is why it is necessary to ascend gradually, allowing the body to adjust. But the deeper you dive, and the longer you spend down there, the longer it takes for the body to adjust. A half-hour dive to 80 metres means you need over two hours of decompression. A one hour dive means ten hours decompression.

The solution is to use a pressure chamber at the surface, on a platform or a vessel. The diver is taken there in a diving bell at the end of the job, and can go through a gradual decompression.



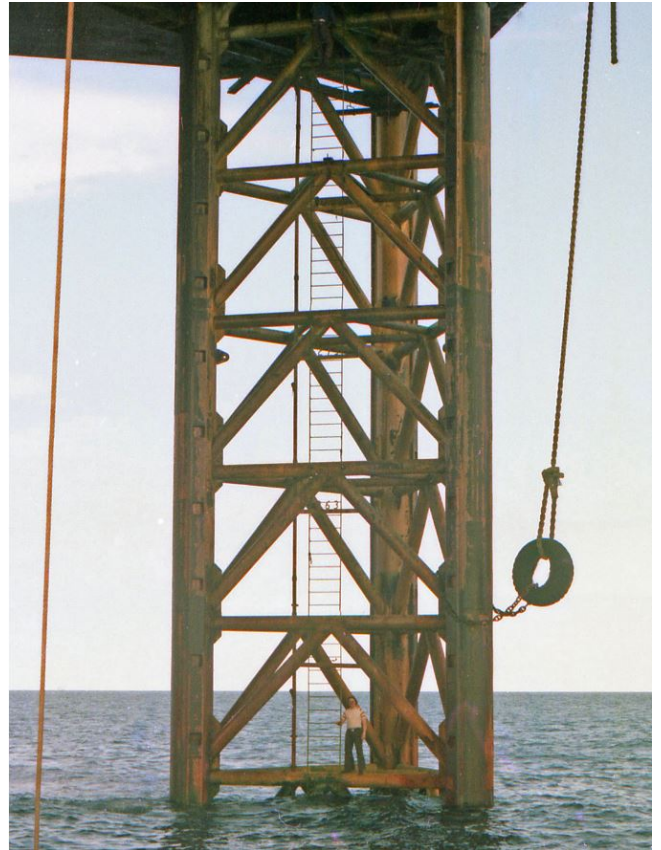
The diving bell is used to transport the divers up and down in the water. The bell is linked to a pressure chamber on deck, where the divers can enter as they maintain the same pressure as they experience when they are working. The divers then gradually decompress inside the bell.

In order to breathe under such high pressure, the light gas helium is mixed into the air which the divers are breathing in. This gives them a “Donald Duck” voice, just like when you breathe in helium from a party balloon.

All this has been described many times before, but Hans Claesson now describes in great detail how the jobs were carried out, the wait, the jargon, the dangers and also the boredom and monotony of being locked in a pressure chamber, always a bit cold and eating food which tasted nothing there unless it was very spicy.

“The aim has been to include as many details as possible, and to describe things just the way they were. I have many notes, logs and my own diving logbook where I wrote down what was happening,” says Hans Claesson.

He also has several hundred letters which he sent home to his fiancé and later wife, Tuulikki from Finland.



Hans Claesson’s picture of a colleague standing on a platform leg at the Gulftide production platform, whose base – high above – would be hit by breaking waves during severe storms. The dimensions were already huge during Claesson’s time as a North Sea diver.

Claesson describes the period in great detail, and although conversations have been reconstructed they do reflect the way things sounded at the time. One of the jobs was to find a leaking pipe which was used to fill crude oil into an oil tanker vessel.

“Then suddenly the bottom latch loses its seal. He immediately sinks down into the dark water, and is left standing at the bottom right under the bell.

“‘Diver left the Bell’ he manages to say, and hears Norman answer ‘Roger, diver left Bell’. Let’s see, he thinks, and tries to orient himself. It is dark as hell. He can see less than one metre in front of him. But wait, the spotlight is over there. Looks more like a candle than a 1000 watt torch.”

After scarping off the sediment from the pipe in order to read its markings, he follows the pipe and uses his hands to feel his way and make sure he does not miss where the leak is.

“Then he can hear it, and soon he can see the bubbles rising. Yes, there is a clear breach in the pipe!

“Surface! Breach on the outside of the first flange, by the welding point. I carry on outwards!”

The divers were not only the eyes and ears of the platform builders. They also repaired any damage that occurred. One of the most dangerous jobs was cutting anchor chains when new platforms were getting ready to be towed into the North Sea. Burning the massive chains was a manhood test, he says.

“To cut it correctly, you needed to burn it off evenly all the way round, or you risked creating pockets of vapour which could explode. You got very nervous sitting there, hollowing out the six inches thick chain. It could take five to ten minutes. The coarse anchor chain was so tense that it would be there one minute and gone the next.”

Hans Claesson quickly climbed the grades and became a divemaster. He also invested in and equipped a diving vessel in Stavanger for the final assembly of the concrete platforms Cormorant A and Brent C. Tuulikki joined him there. His responsibilities as divemaster were considerable.

“As he watches the divers on the TV monitors, the thought hits him that the divers somehow must have taken the terms patience, tolerance and trust to a new and higher level. Or perhaps a deeper one? They are trapped inside a steel tube together with people someone else have picked, and they are completely dependent on the outside support team getting everything right.”

None of the diving teams Hans Claesson worked on or was responsible for experienced a fatal accident. Ten divers died on the Norwegian sector between 1967 and 1979. 34 people died in helicopter transport accidents in the same period. 25 people died from falling from great heights while working on platform construction or maintenance. 19 people died during loading and unloading, or as a result of explosions.

The largest accident happened one year later, when the Alexander L Kielland platform, serving as living quarters for oil workers, capsized in a storm killing 123 people. By then, Hans Claesson had already returned to Sweden, after spending five years as a North Sea diver.

So what does he make of the NRK series “Lykkeland” which has been broadcast in several Nordic countries?

“I think it’s a good drama all in all, which has captured that period of time well. But you can always pick on details. The scene where a diving bell is torn loose under water is not so realistic, as it weighs next to nothing submerged. It would have been more realistic if the wire snapped when it was lifted out of the water,” he points out.



Hans Claesson today. The full title of his book is The North Sea Diver. A novel about an occupational journey from dream to reality. Read more about the book here (in Swedish)

Varða – Iceland's new labour market research institute

The Icelandic Confederation of Labour ASÍ and the Federation of State and Municipal Employees BSRB have agreed to set up a new institute for labour market research in the country.

NEWS

05.02.2020

TEXT: GUÐRÚN HELGA SIGURÐARDÓTTIR

The Varða institute will encourage independent research projects. The results might have considerable influence on workers' wage and employment conditions.

“Setting up the labour market institute has been planned for some time. There has been an enormous interest in creating an institute like this,” says the new institute's Managing Director Kristín Heba Gísladóttir.



Kristín Heba Gísladóttir, Managing Director for the new Varða research institute

The idea emerged as Iceland's labour movement watched how results from labour market research were being used in the public debate on social and economic issues by colleagues elsewhere in the Nordics.

It is important to establish an institute like this, according to Kristín Heba, who says those who hold power in a society decides which knowledge should be considered relevant and important. With their own research institute, the labour movement can wield some influence over what shape that knowledge takes.

“An institute like this gives us the chance to get a better overview and to gather all research results in one place,” she says.

Getting to know the grassroots

Kristín Heba's first task as Varða's Managing Director is to get to know the labour movement and the grassroots for whom she will be working. Task number two will be to visit similar institutes in Norway and Sweden to get ideas for how to shape the Icelandic labour market institute.

The agreement between ASÍ and BSRB states that the labour market institute Varða should increase knowledge about workers' environments. Varða will be an independent research institute working on its own terms.

How to prioritise

In the beginning, the main priority will be to create research projects in cooperation with different partners. The work will be project-based and will depend on which partners can be found.

BSRB leader Sonja Ýr Þorbergsdóttir says the goal is to increase the knowledge about workers' wage conditions and their environments. Researchers can come from different parts of Iceland's university community, they can be foreign experts or experts from trade unions.

There is a lot of interest for cooperation within academic circles. There are also plans for research cooperation with similar institutes in Scandinavia. Sonja Ýr believes the main challenge could be how to choose which research projects to include from the start. Trade unions are growing in strength thanks to publicity and getting their message across, and they are given more influence over wage and employment terms. Varða will also build a contact network between researchers, the academic world and the labour movement in Iceland and in other countries.



Rail suicides: a joint Nordic approach to reduce numbers

Every year, 3,500 people in the Nordic region take their own lives. The Nordic Council Welfare Committee wants to stop this happening and has presented a vision to prevent all suicide. One of the group's proposals is a vision zero for rail suicides by 2025.

NEWS

28.01.2020

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

The Nordics usually top various world rankings for happiness. But suicide statistics sadly do not reflect that.

“Greenland has the highest numbers of suicides in the world [per capita], and possible explanations include high levels of depression, alcoholism and violence. Among the Nordic countries, Finland has the most suicides per 100,000 citizens, followed by Sweden, Iceland, Norway and Denmark,” the Social Democratic group wrote in a proposal to the Nordic Council.

There has been a lot of focus on suicides in Norway lately, after Princess Märtha's ex-husband Ari Behn took his own life on Christmas day. The royal family and Behn's parents and

children were open about the fact from the outset. King Harald started his annual new year's eve speech by talking about the suicide, and Behn's daughter Maud Angelica gave a stirring speech at his funeral, which was carried live on TV. 91% of Norwegians told a survey they felt the openness had been positive.



Two Oslo women light a candle for Ari Behn in the Palace Square.

Suicides have an effect on more than loved ones, families and friends. When someone throws themselves in front of a train, the train driver is also affected. If it happens on a busy platform, many other travellers might also witness the tragedy.

“It is very shocking for the victim's family and others who are close to them when someone takes their own life. It is also deeply traumatic for train drivers, those who are standing nearby and for those who are involved afterwards, when someone takes their own life in front of a train,” the authors of the proposal write.

Rail suicides are only a small part of the total number. In Sweden, they represent approximately 5%.

Platform barriers are efficient

Putting up obstacles near railway tracks and on platforms is an efficient way of reducing the number of rail suicides.

Platform barriers only open when a train has come to a full stop by the platform, and the train doors line up with the barrier doors. That makes it impossible for anyone to throw themselves in front of the train, as long as the barrier is high enough.



The Woodleigh stop at North East MRT line in Singapore. The platform doors only open when the train has come to a full stop. This prevents any travellers from falling or jumping in front of the train. It also allows the train to approach at a higher speed. Photo: Seloloving, Wikipedia.

A Chinese study covering 2008 to 2017 showed the number of suicides at metro stations fell by 91% when barriers, or platform screen doors (PSD), were installed.

In South Korea, suicide rates fell by 89% at 121 Metro stations in Seoul between 2003 and 2012. Because some of the platform barriers were not full-height, it was still possible to climb over them. The study concluded that full-height screen doors could completely eliminate subway suicides.

The first platform screen doors were installed on the Singapore Mass Rapid Transit (SMRT) as early as in 1987. Statistics from Metrobits.org shows that 87 metro systems around the world now have platform barriers. Only 18 are found outside of Asia.

One of the reasons why the barriers were first introduced in Asia is that train and metro systems there are often very crowded. This increases the risk for someone to be accidentally pushed off the platform and onto the tracks. In China, all railway stations are obliged to install platform barriers.

Copenhagen leading the way

Copenhagen's Metro is one of the systems in Europe that has installed platform screen doors in all underground stations. The company which constructed and runs the Copenhagen Metro system does not talk about suicides as a principle, however.



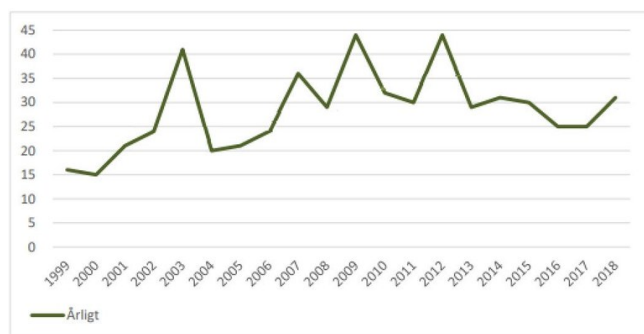
All Copenhagen's underground metro stations have platform screen doors. There are also barriers where the tracks run overground, like in Amagerstrand. The barrier is not as high, however, and it is possible to scale it.

Existing statistics show that 31 people committed suicide on Danish railways in 2018. Copenhagen's Metro and commuter trains – the so-called S-togsnettet – are included in this. That

was six more suicides than the year before, according to a safety report from the Danish Transport, Construction and Housing Authority.

Between 2000 and 2015, a total of 232 people killed themselves on railways, according to the report “Suicides and attempted suicides on the tracks”, compiled by Centre for Suicide Research, on commission from Danish Railways DSB.

THE NUMBER OF SUICIDES ON DANISH RAILWAYS AND METRO LINES



Oslo’s Sporveien, which is responsible for the metro network, register approximately two suicide on the network each year.

“Sporveien always puts safety first. Our measures to prevent suicides on the metro is part of the general metro safety work. We have security guards in station areas, alert and trained drivers, CCTV, an emergency number and various measures aimed at securing tracks in more exposed areas,” says Terje Sandhalla, Sporveien’s head of security.

The Stockholm metro provides the most openness around suicides, where annual statistics not only show suicides but also those who survived but were injured.

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Jumps, injured	5	6	7	2	8
Jumps, dead	12	4	9	6	10

“Our safety central operates 4,500 cameras across the metro and commuter train stations, and can follow what is going on in real-time on platforms, in waiting areas and other spaces. The safety operators, like the traffic staff – train drivers, station officers and security guards – are trained to be able to identify people who display ‘suicidal’ or other unusual behaviour,” says Claes Keisu, press officer at Region Stockholm’s department for public transport.

“In 2019, 239 suspected suicidal people were caught in the subway thanks to the reactions from personnel or fellow travellers. In 2018 they prevented 194 suspected suicidal persons.

Two newbuilt commuter train stations have been equipped with platform barriers – Stockholm City and Stockholm Odenplan.



The newbuilt Stockholm Odenplan commuter station has been equipped with platform barriers. Photo: Gustav Kaiser.

“Those stations have not seen any deaths at all. We also have a project to build platform barriers in a metro station. The problem is that our metro system has several different types of trains with varying distances between doors,” says Claes Keisu.

All the 129 commuter trains are identical, so platform barriers work well at commuter train platforms. The metro has a further problem – certain platforms are curved, which means barriers would have to be tailor-made.

In the subway there is an additional problem. Most of the stations were built 70 years ago. Many stations are outdoor and many platforms are curved. It is technically difficult to build new technology in existing environments and it is a challenge to find solutions for platforms that are curved.



The Stockholm metro (above) has nearly 1.3 million travellers in a 24 hour period. Commuter trains have around 400,000. Photo: Gustav Kaiser.

- In Stockholm the metro is being expanded with new lines and 15 stations. Those are being prepared for platform doors to be installed.

In the winter of 2014/2015, there was a small-scale trial of three different types of platform doors at the Åkeshov metro station.

“We will run a full-scale test at the Bagarmossens metro station in 2021. The estimated cost is 101 million kronor (€ 9.5m) and the procurement process starts this year,” says Claes Keisu.

Marie Preisler has provided information for this article.