

# Journal of Rural and Community Development

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**Citation:**

Heleniak, T., Löfving, L., & Norlén, G. (2024). Spatial justice in sparsely populated northern Europe: The case of Västerbotten, Sweden. *The Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 19(4), 126–143.

**Publisher:**

Rural Development Institute, Brandon University.



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Founded 1899

**Editor:**

Dr. Doug Ramsey

**Open Access Policy:**

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## Spatial Justice in Sparsely Populated Northern Europe: The Case of Västerbotten, Sweden

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### Abstract

This paper examines spatial justice in Västerbotten County, a sparsely-populated region in northern Sweden. In Västerbotten, the population is largely concentrated along the coast and the inland communities have declining and aging populations, making basic service provision a challenge. The paper focuses on a project called *Digital Västerbotten*, which aims to provide services to inland municipalities through digital solutions that include a broad range of e-services. Much of the spatial justice literature focuses on cities, while this paper focuses on a 55,000 km<sup>2</sup> region consisting of 15 municipalities and 273,000 people, of which 80 percent live in the coastal municipalities. The paper situates place-based policies in Västerbotten within the context of the Swedish welfare state and Swedish regional development policy. Regional and national initiatives aimed at achieving spatial justice are examined. The increasing digitization of society has opened new opportunities for many, particularly inland, Västerbotten communities, which are challenging at the same time in terms of participation, connectivity, and skills availability in these areas. The paper concludes with an overview of possible future development scenarios for Västerbotten.

**Keywords:** spatial justice, e-services, welfare state, Sweden, sparsely-populated areas

## **Justice spatiale dans une Europe du Nord peu peuplée : le cas de Västerbotten, en Suède**

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### **Résumé**

Cet article examine la justice spatiale dans le comté de Västerbotten, une région peu peuplée du nord de la Suède. Dans le Västerbotten, la population est largement concentrée le long de la côte et les communautés de l'intérieur ont une population en déclin et vieillissante, rendant l'approvisionnement en services de base difficile. L'article se concentre sur un projet appelé Digital Västerbotten, qui vise à fournir des services aux municipalités de l'intérieur des terres grâce à des solutions numériques comprenant une large gamme de services en ligne. Une grande partie de la littérature sur la justice spatiale se concentre sur les villes, tandis que le présent article se concentre sur une région de 55 000 km<sup>2</sup> composée de 15 municipalités et de 273 000 habitants, dont 80 % vivent dans les municipalités côtières. L'article situe les politiques territoriales du Västerbotten dans le contexte de l'État providence suédois et de la politique suédoise de développement régional. Les initiatives régionales et nationales visant à parvenir à la justice spatiale sont examinées. La numérisation croissante de la société a ouvert de nouvelles opportunités pour de nombreuses communautés, en particulier à l'intérieur du Västerbotten, qui sont en même temps confrontées à des défis en termes de participation, de connectivité et de disponibilité de compétences dans ces domaines. L'article se termine par un aperçu des futurs scénarios de développement possibles pour le Västerbotten.

**Mots-clés :** justice spatiale, services en ligne, État providence, Suède, zones faiblement peuplées

## **1.0 Introduction**

In Västerbotten County, in northern Sweden, the population is largely concentrated along the coast of the Gulf of Bothnia. Inland communities are becoming depopulated, and the municipalities struggle to provide basic services because of long travel distances and limited resources. There is concern that the large rural portions of Sweden are being “left behind.” The issue of spatial justice is unique in such a region as both an academic inquiry and policy issue. This paper examines both place-based and Swedish welfare state policies and how they impact inland Västerbotten.

The choice of Västerbotten as a case study area within the RELOCAL (Resituating the local in cohesion and territorial development) project is grounded in the preconditions existing in the different municipalities in the region (European Commission, 2020). The central question of the project is whether localization and place-based public policy can be instruments for achieving spatial justice and democratic empowerment. The differences between the smaller inland municipalities and the larger coastal municipalities are relevant. Even though some inland municipalities are doing better than others, many are struggling to maintain the same public services as the rest of the country. This is mainly because of limited economic resources due to low tax revenues, aging populations, centralization, out migration, and difficulty attracting skilled labour.

Of the 33 case studies examined in the RELOCAL project Digital Västerbotten covers the largest area (Weck et al., 2020). Västerbotten is Sweden's second largest county by area, roughly the same size as Croatia. The 55,000 km<sup>2</sup> region consisted of 15 municipalities and 273,000 people in 2021, of which almost 80 percent lived in the four coastal municipalities. The case studies were selected to represent a broad array of issues of spatial justice across Europe. Each was to be based on an ongoing or recently completed project addressing issues of spatial justice, even if authorities did not explicitly state that they were doing so. Digital Västerbotten sought to develop a well-functioning IT infrastructure, raise IT skills, and increase the range and availability of IT services (Region Västerbotten, 2019). While the area follows the same trend as many European rural areas, with an aging population and young, skilled people leaving the inland, the long distances add another dimension to Västerbotten. It takes approximately six hours to drive across the region, and public transport, as well as trains and flights, are only available to a limited extent. As with other sparsely populated areas, long-distance commuting is common in Västerbotten, in particular to Umeå and Skellefteå, the larger cities on the coast. (Region Västerbotten, 2017).

The study was based on several different quantitative and qualitative sources. The quantitative analysis was conducted on population trends for Västerbotten over time and at the municipal level within Sweden, as well as economic indicators for the region. These are shown in figures and maps depicting trends. Qualitative analysis was based on interviews with civil servants in inland municipalities and Umeå who were involved in public service provision and the digitalization efforts (identified by title below). These included the digital strategist for Region Västerbotten, the Digital Västerbotten project manager, the head of the competence center for multilingualism, and local politicians. A meeting was held with municipal representatives from Region 10, where we heard about their views on the digitization process. Interviews and a site visit were conducted with the staff of the Centre for Rural Medicine in Storuman, a sparsely populated inland municipality (Region Västerbotten, 2022). We saw some of their e-health solutions, including “virtual health rooms,” where

patients can receive simple tests or speak to a doctor without travelling long distances to a hospital. We also reviewed policy documents describing the digitalization program. The results of the interviews informed our conclusions, and selected quotes are included. A presentation of the case study was made at Umeå University to get the perspective from researchers with local knowledge of Västerbotten.

The paper starts by situating Västerbotten, describing the economy and population of the region and providing an overview of local perceptions of spatial justice. This is followed by a discussion of the Swedish welfare state and Swedish regional development policy and how these both impact spatial justice. The next section analyses place-based spatial justice policies in Västerbotten, including digitalization efforts. The final section concludes with a discussion of possible future development scenarios for the region and the effectiveness of the project.

## **2.0 Region Västerbotten**

### ***2.1 Economy, Society, and Demographics of Västerbotten***

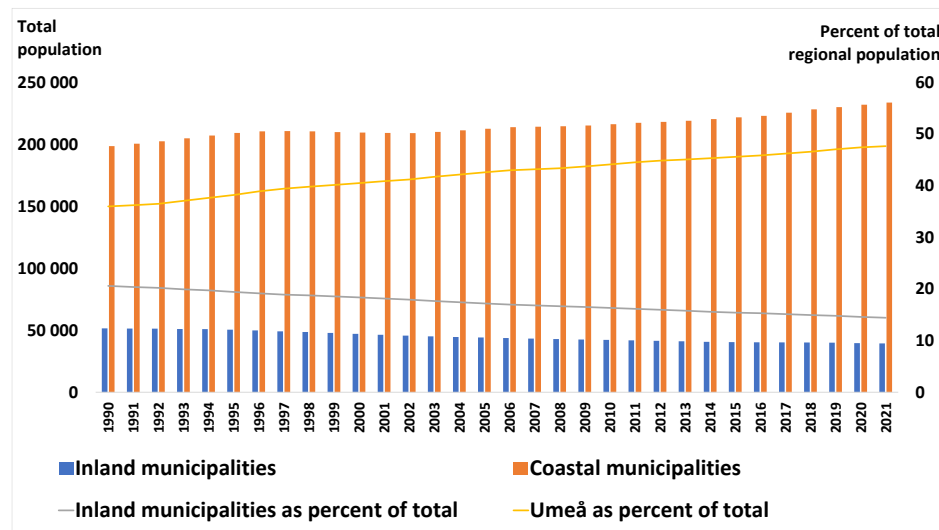
The economy of inland Västerbotten is based on forestry and other natural resources, as well as tourism. Currently, investments are being made in industries connected to the green transition. For example, a large battery factory is being built in Skellefteå to supply batteries for electric vehicles. It will employ 3,000 people, making it the biggest private employer in the region. To meet the demands of growing green industries, Norrbotten and Västerbotten, Sweden's two northernmost counties, will have to attract an additional 100,000 residents. (Garbis et al., 2024). In achieving this future, there is a question of whether, in the long term, the demands of a growing green economy can be met while delivering justice, both societal and spatial, to the rural and Indigenous Sámi populations of the region who have alternative visions for land use in the north.

Within Sweden, Västerbotten is not particularly disadvantaged. Its gross regional product (GRP) per capita is 94 percent of the national average. Other indicators, such as the employment rate, economic activity rate, and unemployment rate, are close to the national average (Löfving et al 2019a). Disparities are differences between regions in terms of underlying conditions or outcomes. For instance, the inland municipalities have lower shares of tertiary educated persons than the coastal municipalities and slightly lower levels of gross regional product per capita. A driver of disparities is the effect of the structural economic differences between coastal and inland municipalities. In addition to agglomeration effects, Umeå has a university, a large hospital, and several manufacturing and transport facilities. The issue of disparities within the region is not new and is well-known to local government officials. However, Västerbotten has a long tradition of creating digital solutions for the delivery of services and is a world leader in some areas such as rural medicine (Region Västerbotten, 2022). This will likely continue and, in the process, create some jobs and economic activity. Because of a high outflow of people, public authorities in the inland are struggling to provide the same services in health care, education, public transportation, and other public services. Also, private actors are affected by the trend of centralization, and many banks, offices, and shops have left the inland.

Between 1990 and 2021, the eight inland municipalities in Västerbotten went from having 21 percent of the region's total population to having only 14 percent (see Figure 1). The seven coastal municipalities continue to increase

in population and have almost 85 percent of the total population in Västerbotten. The largest city of Umeå has gone from having 36 to 48 percent of the region’s population. Most of the coastal municipalities have younger populations, and thus, there are more births than deaths and positive internal and international migration. The inland municipalities have older populations, and thus more deaths than births. They are losing people from migration both internally and internationally.

Figure 1. Population changes in inland coastal municipalities in Västerbotten, 1990–2021.



Source: Statistics Sweden, 2022.

## 2.2 Perceptions of Spatial Justice in Västerbotten

There is a long literature on the concept of spatial justice espoused by geographers such as David Harvey and Edward Soja. Spatial justice is often linked to social justice and can be defined as a fair or equal distribution of employment, access to services, and other public goods across regions. Spatial justice is often a goal of planners, though perhaps it is not articulated as such when planning or implementing social or economic policies. Concepts of social justice and social inclusion are overlapping, normative concepts with a wide range of interpretations, which share in their call for a more equitable future where the living conditions of the more disadvantaged and vulnerable populations could be improved. The concept of spatial justice emphasizes the spatial dimensions of this vision (Madanipour et al., 2017).

As discovered in interviews, the term spatial injustice is not commonly used by civil servants in Västerbotten since it has political connotations connected with the left of the political spectrum. There was some difficulty translating the academic concept of spatial justice into both Swedish and practical terms. The direct translation *rumslig rättvisa* was explained to our interviewees, and if clarification was needed, the broader translation *regional differences* was used. However, we found that many of our interviewees appreciated the term spatial justice since it gave greater emphasis on the distances that exist in Västerbotten. Since the regional authorities emphasize interregional differences and aim to reduce them, it can be interpreted as an awareness of a dimension of inequality, a digital strategist says:

I think the argument of spatial injustice is always present, even though we might not use the word injustice. We instead say there are different preconditions (digital strategist from Digital Västerbotten, personal communication, interview 4, November 2018).

Another regional project leader talks about spatial justice in relation to the libraries in the region:

I really like the word spatial justice, and I feel that the concept fits in very well. Today there is no infrastructure similar to the libraries where activities are prescribed by law and without any requirement of consumption. That infrastructure is very important to have in mind when discussing digital participation, competence and democracy (project leader from the digital service centre, personal communication, interview 9, November 2018).

The concept of spatial justice is an academic term and was not known to the interviewed chief administrative officers in the municipalities. When discussing regional differences, or even inequalities between the inland and the coast, many aspects were mentioned. These included high municipal taxes, centralization of services, lack of resources, lack of skilled workforce, and limited work opportunities. Structural inequalities were also brought forward in the form of a low education level, which does not influence young people to apply for higher education or gender inequality that appears in a situation where men work away from home during the weekdays, which ties women to the house and children.

An interesting aspect not mentioned by the project leaders in the region but brought forward by the chief administrative officers in the municipalities is the many benefits of living in the rural inland. This highlights the question of who defines the concept of inequality in the inland, the people living there or people working in public authorities in Umeå:

Now you're talking to somebody who lives outside a small municipality, and I have chosen to live here and move from Stockholm because I see the benefits (chief administrative officer in Region 10, personal communication, interview 15, November 2018).

The perception of Västerbotten as a region that is "left behind" is common in policy discussions (OECD, 2017b, p. 14). However, in interviews, many of the informants living in the inland municipalities did not view the area as being disadvantaged and were actively working to find pragmatic solutions to the small population sizes and great distances. These issues are not new nor unique to Västerbotten. People have been actively working on various solutions to overcome distances and provide a quality of life for people in Swedish rural areas for a long time. In general, people living in the inland municipalities recognize the difficulties of keeping the same service supply in rural areas as in urban areas. But when public services are downsizing and the last offices relocate, there is a feeling of being treated unjustly and a feeling of it having "gone too far."

From interviews with citizens and leaders of administration in Västerbotten, we can identify two different layers of spatial boundaries. The most emphasized spatial boundary is between the inland and coast. It is visible in terms of geography, infrastructure (e.g., limited public transport), political cooperation and economic differences. Since 2012, there is also a real geographic and political boundary between the inland and the coast in the form of the Region 10 cooperation (more below). The second spatial boundary is the north-south dimension, which is largely the result of the shape of Sweden with a clear north and south which are far away from each other, both geographically and figuratively. The south is usually exemplified as Stockholm since it is where the political power and media exist. Both within the local setting and in a larger national perspective these two dimensions can often also be interpreted as an urban-rural divide. The quote below shows how a man in Lycksele describes the different layers:

I think it is a common problem feeling that people in bigger cities don't understand. We here in our village feel that the politicians in Lycksele don't understand our situation here. In Lycksele they feel that the regional politicians in Umeå don't understand how it is in the inland, and in Region Västerbotten (office in Umeå) they feel that the national parliament and the people in Stockholm don't realise the situation in the north (man in Lycksele, personal communication, interview 20, May 2018).

### **3.0 Swedish Welfare State and Regional Development Policy**

Sweden is classified as a “society-based” welfare regime which has largely been under social democratic political governments since after World War II. As such, Sweden aims to be inclusive both socially and spatially, though commitment to these goals has been questioned (Löfving et al., 2019a). There is a social contract in Sweden and the other Nordic countries, which differs from elsewhere in Europe in terms of what people expect from the government (Svallfors, 2018). This is manifested in the government's commitment to equity and social inclusion, which combines high levels of per capita GDP and low levels of regional disparities (OECD, 2017b). There is high overall perceived life satisfaction in the country and low overall disparity among regions. There has been a focus on equity among regions since the 1950s as part of regional development and a vibrant, living countryside, often described as an essential part of Swedish identity (Nilsson & Lundgren, 2018). Despite this, there is persistent concern that Swedish rural areas are being left behind as the country's large metropolitan areas are the engines of innovation and growth. Population decline, aging, and out-migration of young, educated people are both the cause and symptoms of the perceived rural decline (Hörnström et al., 2015). Poor broadband and lack of other necessary infrastructure in rural areas contribute to the growing gap between urban and rural areas.

#### **3.1 Equal Services Across All Regions**

Sweden, in the RELOCAL typology, is characterized as one of the social democratic welfare regimes along with Finland (Löfving, 2019a). In comparison to many other European countries, Sweden still has a rather large



social welfare system built up by social democratic values, but the country is nowhere near the comprehensive welfare state it was from the 1960s to the early 1990s. Because of the economic crisis in the early 1990s and the general “neoliberal turn” spreading over the world, the social democratic party started the dismantling of the welfare system in Sweden. The following centre-right government continued the process which ended the former Keynesian economic system with “active labour markets measures aimed at full employment; industrial restructuring and maximal economic growth; and a continuous expansion of state welfare services based on taxation and aimed at reducing inequalities and individual risks through redistribution and universal public services” (Larsson et al., 2012, pp. 3–22).

Many have argued that the neoliberal turn, beginning in the 1970s, has been beneficial for the upper class and created large inequalities both within and between countries (Harvey, 2006). This has been caused by smaller redistributions and weaker insurance transfers to working-age persons. The neoliberal policies in Sweden increased private provision within health care, education, and social services. It is also argued that the political reforms in the housing market, with minimal state engagement, have increased inequality and social and geographic polarization in Sweden (Hedin et al., 2012). According to the OECD, the growth in inequality in Sweden increased by as much as one-third between the mid-1980s and currently (Pareliussen et al., 2018). The increase during this period was the largest among all the OECD countries, even though Sweden still belongs to the group of most equal OECD countries (OECD, 2015).

### ***3.2 Levels of Decision-Making in Sweden***

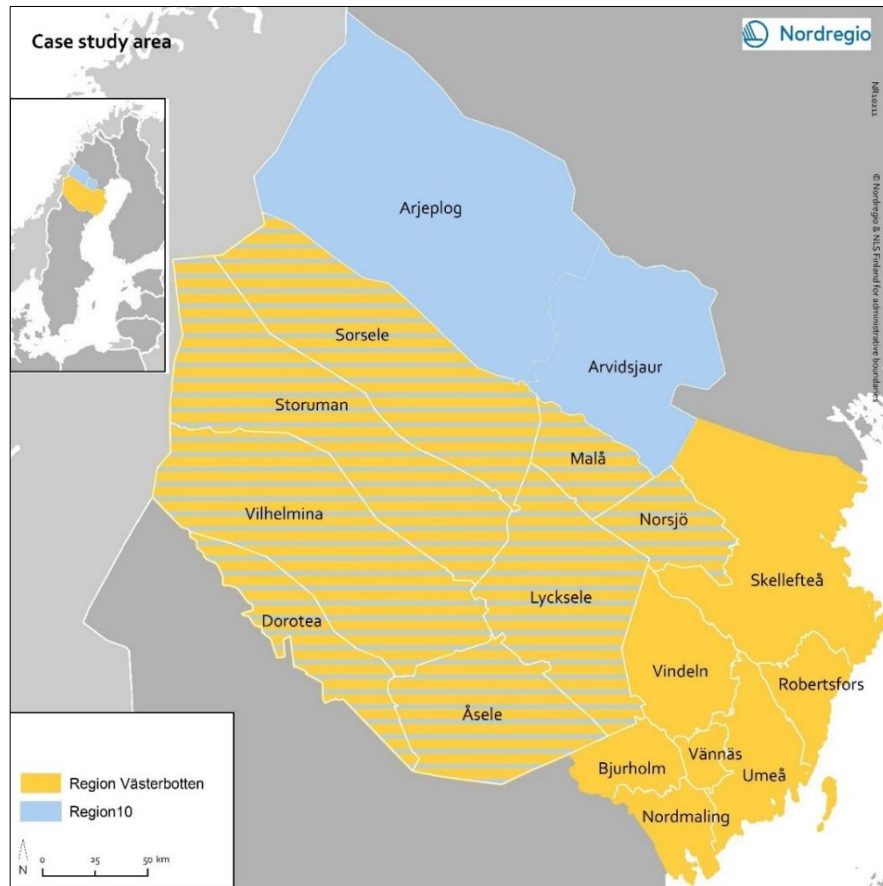
The administrative system in Sweden has been described as an “hourglass,” with a strong central government, considerable autonomy for the municipalities and limited responsibilities granted to regional authorities (OECD, 2017). Sweden has 21 regions and 290 municipalities, the latter of which are self-governing entities with many responsibilities. They manage schools and child care, support for the elderly and people with disabilities, physical planning, housing, and emergency services. By comparison, the regional level is small but has the responsibility for health care, public transport, regional development and culture, research and innovation, public health, and social welfare. The national level is strong but can, only with difficulty, intervene in local and municipal affairs. It can therefore be difficult for public policy initiatives to reach “down” from the national or regional levels to the local level, as municipalities might choose not to implement them.

### ***3.3 Region 10***

Region 10 is a collaboration of the inland municipalities in Västerbotten (Dorotea, Lycksele, Malå, Norsjö, Sorsele, Storuman, Vilhelmina and Åsele) and Norrbotten (Arjeplog and Arvidsjaur) (see Figure 2). The collaboration started in 2012 with the eight inland municipalities in Västerbotten (at the start called Region 8) and was extended with two neighbouring municipalities in Norrbotten in 2018. The aim of Region 10 is to strengthen the role and development of the inland municipalities and to express their similar challenges with a joint voice towards coastal regions (the other 7 municipalities in the region) and the rest of the county. The choice to focus the study on Region 10 had both a functional approach in terms of it being an area with similar challenges and characteristics, a territorial logic based on them being inland

municipalities, and that they had a previous history of cooperation when they were known as “the forest municipalities.”

*Figure 2:* Map showing Västerbotten County in yellow. The eight inland municipalities (striped) and the two extended municipalities from Norrbotten County (blue) make up Region 10.



Source: Löfving, 2019b.

### 3.4 Swedish Rural Policy

Rural policies have long figured in Swedish political debate, though the tenor of this debate has shifted over time (Holdo, 2020). In 2018, a new policy for rural areas was approved. This means that the political steering and goals aimed at reducing the urban-rural divide were decided over several terms and party lines in parliament. The reason for the long-term perspective is the statement that politics for rural areas have been subject to inconsistency and short-term solutions. The government stated that beyond previous investments, it will provide 1.5 billion SEK between 2019 and 2020. Thereafter, 400 million will be provided annually to implement the proposals suggested by a rural committee (Government of Sweden, 2018).

The overarching goal is to promote a sustainable rural area with equal opportunities to business development, work, housing and welfare, which will lead to a long-term sustainable development all over the country. There are three sub-goals mentioned that relate to the goals in Agenda 2030. The third—equal conditions for people to work, stay and live in the rural areas—speaks directly to the issue of spatial justice in a rural region and the inland municipalities of Västerbotten. The policy is, however, also conceptualized in

the framework of Sweden's economy. It states that Sweden's growth and development depend on the values that exist and are produced in rural areas and that rural areas provide energy, resources, and food, as well as innovative solutions necessary for future challenges.

The policy states that national politics have an important role in creating conditions for local and regional cooperation. Their starting point is that economic development and work opportunities must be created locally. The policy is meant to place the state closer to the citizens, especially the provision of state services. The policy also aims to increase work opportunities outside urban areas and increase the number of local service centres. When it comes to rural development, the government emphasizes the local characteristics in different rural areas and the need to include more place-based knowledge when policy is implemented. (Government of Sweden, 2018).

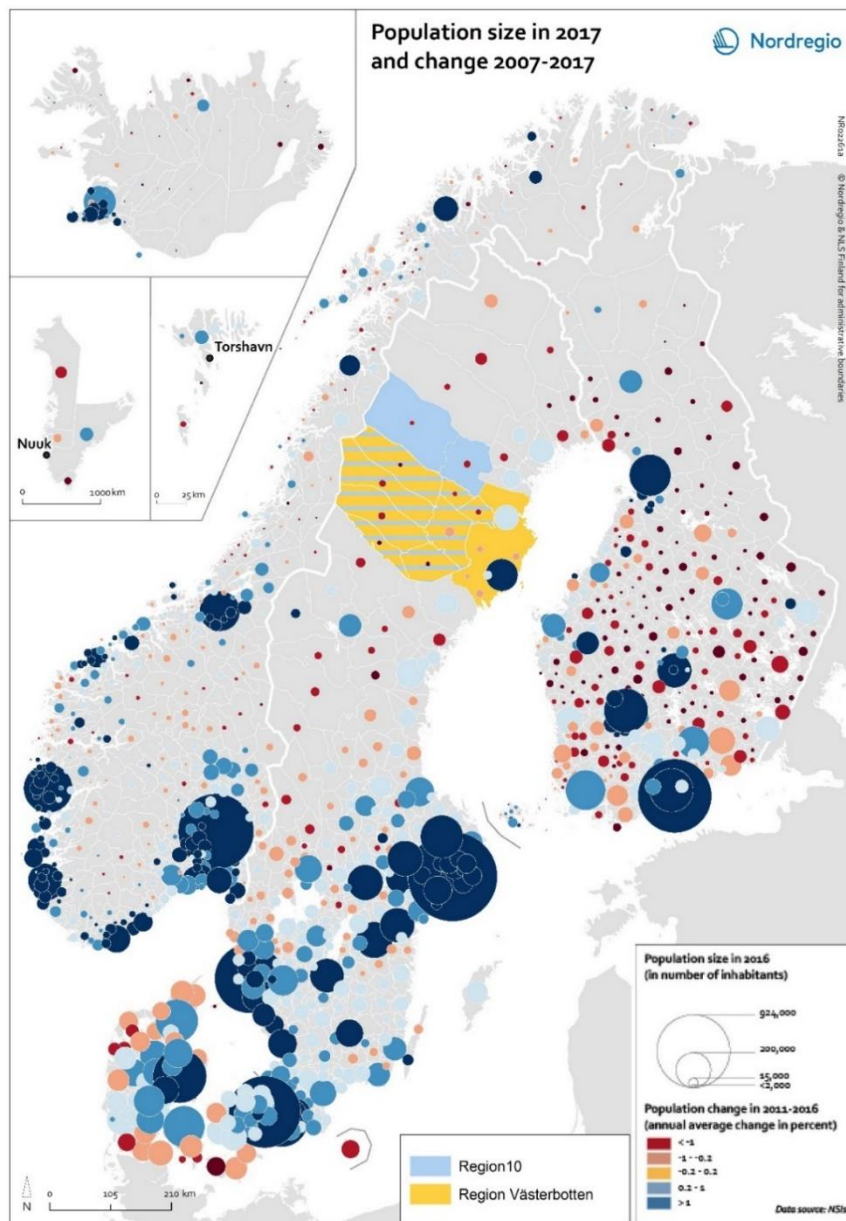
In 2021, the government decided on a new national strategy for sustainable regional development for 2021 to 2030, which was handed to parliament at the end of March (Swedish Parliament, 2021). The strategy has a clear focus on sustainable development and transition and has a strong connection to Agenda 2030, even more so than the previous strategy. There is a stronger focus on the rural perspective in relation to regional development and on the need for a territorial perspective. The aim of the strategy is to support a transition to sustainable development in all parts of the country, to reduce inequality gaps and strengthen drivers for development in cities, agglomerations, and rural areas, improve the possibilities to live and work in the entire country, and to strengthen the competitiveness of businesses.

Several of the administrative officers in the inland municipalities mentioned that the municipal tax system creates problems. The income of the municipalities is largely based on income tax, which means that the municipalities with fewer work opportunities and an aging population struggle with low financial resources. To overcome differences between municipalities in Sweden, there is an equalization system that redistributes money between municipalities. In 2019, the Swedish National Audit Office published a report criticizing the system for not having sufficient effect (Swedish Television, 2019) and the system was changed by parliament. During the coronavirus pandemic, the issue was raised again when Region Stockholm, the only net contributor, wanted to postpone the increase in payment in the equalization system because of the pressure on the health care system in the region and wanted the state to pay the cost during the pandemic (Swedish Television, 2020).

### ***3.5 EU Policies Towards Sparsely-Populated Regions***

Västerbotten is one of 14 northern counties in Norway, Sweden, and Finland, which comprise the distinct Northern Sparsely Populated Areas (NSPA) established in 2004 (NSPA, 2019). The NSPA share a similar natural environment—a harsh climate, abundant natural resources, relative lack of agriculture, a strong potential for renewable energy, long distances from markets, and high cost of land transport (OECD, 2017a). They are also specifically affected by globalization, energy supply, climate change, and demographic change. The Accession Treaty for Sweden and Finland to join the EU in 1995 included a special provision to promote the development and structural adjustment for these regions. This included dedicated funding for such regions in the first years after accession. Figure 3 shows the population size of regions in the Nordic countries, and the population change over the past decade (Västerbotten and Region 10 are highlighted in Figure 3).

Figure 3: Population size in 2017 and population change 2007–2017.



Source: Löfving, 2019b.

EU policies that focus on rural are part of the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Cohesion Policy. Rural Development Policy or CAP pillar 2 provide a range of support, including financial assistance, to farmers and rural communities to design and implement initiatives that meet a range of economic, environmental, and societal challenges through the implementation of national/regional Rural Development Programmes (RDPs).

Cohesion Policy aims to reduce economic, social, and territorial disparities of “less developed” areas through national, regional, and cross-border implementation projects. In the 2007 Lisbon Treaty (Art. 174), Cohesion Policy was extended by the addition of “territorial cohesion” to social and economic cohesion as overarching goals of Regional Policy. This places an EU obligation to consider the needs of “rural regions, areas affected by industrial transition and regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps” (European Parliament, 2020, para. 4).

#### **4.0 Regional Strategies for Balanced Development in Västerbotten**

Region Västerbotten has an overall vision to reduce spatial injustice, even though that specific term is not used. The action in focus in the RELOCAL case study, Digital Västerbotten, was active during 2016 to 2018. The project was created under the regional development strategy from 2014 to 2020 and the regional digital agenda. Even though the concept of spatial justice is not mentioned directly, both documents highlight aspects of spatial (in)justice. The regional development strategy is named “An attractive region from coast to mountains” and aims to “establish attractive living conditions regardless of town or municipality in the region” (Region Västerbotten, 2014a, p. 4). The strategy points to the differences between municipalities regarding demographics, education level, attractiveness, and competence. It emphasizes the need to reduce differences through local knowledge while taking the characteristics of the municipality into consideration. Digital solutions such as eLearning and eHealth are mentioned to reduce distances and overcome deficient competencies, as well as to expand the coverage and strength of broadband connectivity. At the same time, the regional digital agenda acknowledges that “the preconditions for the county’s municipalities are substantially different when it comes to resources and competence to be able to provide digital services for their citizens, business and visitors” (Region Västerbotten, 2014b, p. 8).

The main goal of the project is to implement e-services for citizens, businesses, and visitors in Västerbotten’s municipalities. This is done by strengthening the cooperation and increasing the digital competence between and within the municipalities. Though the end goal is to create as many e-services as possible, the project has an overarching goal of a more extensive digital transformation. The stakeholders affected by this action can be divided into two groups: the leaders in the municipalities in Region 10 who are directly affected through training and workshops and the citizens in the municipalities who are indirectly affected when the municipal leaders are implementing digital solutions because of the action (Löfving et al., 2019b).

Since then, a new regional development strategy for 2020 to 2030 has been developed called “Västerbotten – an attractive region where differences create forces for development.” Hence, the differences in the region are highlighted as advantages for regional development instead of challenges. The strategy has two overarching sustainability goals related to Agenda 203: to create a “living place” and a “circular place.” A living place refers to being a place where people want to stay, either for a visit or for their whole life and the place should have good conditions for tourists, for business growth, to work, and to grow old. A circular place refers to handling the climate transition in a way that both cares for economic opportunities and natural resources and ecosystems to be a living place for future generations. The strategy also has three perspectives that should permeate the process: a cohesive region, an equal and gender-equal region, and a frontrunner in transition. Furthermore, it has six priorities: (1) an innovative and smart region, (2) a region with place-based sustainable business development, (3) an accessible region, (4) a region with sustainable environments to live and work in, (5) a health-promoting region, and (6) a region rich in skills.

#### **4.1 Digital Västerbotten—A Place-Based Initiative?**

The action Digital Västerbotten is one of several projects that emanates from the Digital Agenda for Västerbotten 2014–2020 (Region Västerbotten, 2014b). Västerbotten's Digital Agenda was created in 2014. Since then, all work with digitalization has emanated from the goals stated in it, and the action Digital Västerbotten is one of several projects. The agenda was agreed upon and signed by the County Council, the County Administrative Board and Region Västerbotten. It is part of the regional development work and produced in parallel and in cooperation with the Regional Development Strategy and follows both the national (Digital Sverige) and EU digital strategies (Digital Europa). The aim of the action is to spread digital competence within the administration of the municipalities in the region and create digital services for the citizens.

The integrated processes of the strategy and the agenda enable the digital research areas in the agenda to be closely tied to the regional development goals and thereby establish a good foundation for project funding. According to the project leaders, the direct connection to the Digital Agenda for Europe through the national and regional level and to the local implementation is vital for the formation of projects which grow around the agenda. The Nordic countries are widely accepted as digital frontrunners in a European and global context (Randall et al., 2018). In Sweden, each region has developed a digital agenda based on the 2011 National Digital Agenda.

The digital agenda for Västerbotten emphasizes seven strategic areas where digitalization is said to have the highest effect. They are: (1) increase broadband capacity; (2) develop digital competence; (3) develop digital learning; (4) increase participation; (5) increase quality and efficiency in health and care; (6) strengthen research and innovation from a digital perspective; and (7) strengthen digital entrepreneurship and business development, and work for a sustainable and smart digital society. The project under study, Digital Västerbotten, is a regional top-down project installed in 2016.

To reduce disparities in Västerbotten and foster regional development, Digital Västerbotten in its three years of existence, aimed to improve access to digital services for citizens, businesses, and visitors, especially in the inland municipalities. To achieve this goal, inter-municipal cooperation and digital competence of municipal leaders were in focus. The project delivered approximately 50 new e-services developed by the coastal municipality Skellefteå, of which the participating municipalities could select the digital service that they needed locally, for example, services which facilitate applying for building permits and garbage collection to communication tools with schools and childcare (Region Västerbotten, 2019). Geared towards public actors in municipal administrations, the project was implemented from the regional level with low civic engagement. On a policy level, the action was well-integrated into higher-level strategies from the regional level up to the European Digital Agenda.

In the Västerbotten case, there seems to be no mobilization of place-based knowledge to initiate the action. Rather, the action, which is a regional measure, has led to a type of knowledge transfer *to* the municipalities. However, since it was the municipalities themselves that implemented the action locally, it has increased place-based knowledge of the issues at hand. As stated by a chief administrative officer in one of the municipalities, “the reason we reached another level in the digital transformation in our municipality is our local work” (Löfving et al., 2019a, p. 20). In that doing, the municipalities had to mobilize their own human resources, which, in the process, developed their collective capacities and organizational structures.

## **5.0 Conclusions**

Analysis of achieving spatial justice based on the actions of Digital Västerbotten was based on a scenario exercise to identify plausible changes in the case study locations (all 33 within the project), the potential to achieve or improve it in a ten-year period, and to assess the mid-term effectiveness of the actions in this regard. (Piras et al., 2020) The methodology of analysis includes elements of Theory of Change (ToC) and morphological scenario elaboration. A scenario and mechanism map for the case study was constructed, and the most likely outcomes were identified from these.

Based on current economic and geographic forces, it seems that continued concentration of economic activity in the coastal cities is the most likely outcome. Rural places such as the inland municipalities of Västerbotten are often depicted as “dying places” based on a linear extrapolation of population trends, which show that the peak size of a place was in the distant past and that if current trends continue, eventually the size will reach zero (Peters et al., 2018). Population loss combined with an aging population, high rates of youth out-migration, and loss of businesses and services paint a bleak picture of many rural areas in Sweden and elsewhere. However, the decline is not linear, and based on population projections, many rural settlements, such as those in Västerbotten, will continue to exist in smaller sizes and forms for quite some time.

The geographic, demographic, and economic structures of Västerbotten have, for a long time, added to the difficulty of upholding spatial justice in the region. For at least the last 25 years, practical solutions to those structures have made way for digitalization. The well-expanded broadband that was put in to enable industries and companies to stay in the region was the starting point. From a longer perspective, the centralization of offices and limited resources within the municipalities are drivers for digitalization. It is stated that digital solutions were first implemented as a necessary solution to survive in rural areas.

The implementation of digital services is presented by Region Västerbotten as a way of overcoming distances and reducing differences within the region. In that sense, digitalization can work to reduce spatial injustice. Implementation of digital services such as e-services, e-health, and remote teaching will make it easier for people in the inland to get a more equal supply of services without having to travel far. But as of now, there is a risk of creating a digital divide where those who cannot use digital services will be even more excluded from society. Depending on how this challenge is met, digitalization can be both a driver and an inhibitor of spatial justice in the region.

Based on population projections done by Statistics Sweden, the trend of demographic depletion and accelerated aging in the inland municipalities is expected to continue (Statistics Sweden, 2024). All the modest population growth in the region will take place in coastal urban areas. While the project Digital Västerbotten will allow an increased amount of services to become accessible to more of the population in inland communities, based on the case study and stakeholder workshops, this will also exacerbate the digital divide and, in fact, cut some people off from face-to-face services. While the new Swedish rural policy and the welfare state will continue to provide a minimum level of services throughout the country, there will remain disparities in the amount, accessibility, and quality of these services.

There is a tradition in Sweden of spending time in nature, and Västerbotten will remain an attractive place for many residents and tourists. Related to this is the state’s effort to support rural and remote areas, as witnessed in the new rural policy, which received broad support across political parties. Residents of

Sweden and the other Nordic countries have a long tradition of owning second homes and spending long periods of time in them (Slätmo et al., 2019). In 2020, Sweden, along with the rest of the world, was confronted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which impacted many social and economic spheres. Early during the pandemic, there was anecdotal evidence that people were fleeing the big cities to avoid crowds where the pandemic could spread more easily. This could make places such as Västerbotten more attractive, though it remains to be seen if this represents a reversal of long-term rural-to-urban migration trends.

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