

Nordic Economies and Welfare States: Free and sustainable lunches?

Call for papers

Accepted Session, World Economic History Conference, 28 July - 1 August 2025, Lund, Sweden

Since the late 19th century, Nordic countries have managed to build prosperous societies with generous welfare states and large public sectors. “The Nordic model” has often been declared to be highly successful, but some of its aspects, for example high taxation, have received criticism. Many scholars have also questioned whether “a Nordic model” exists at all. The whole concept was rarely used before the 1970s. As Koivunen, Ojala and Holmén, 2021 have argued “the Nordic model concept was born during a period when the Nordic societies saw their model threatened by an economic recession, the rising tensions in the Cold War and the conservative or neoliberal offensive from Reaganism and Thatcherism.”

Peter H. Lindert (2003) famously called the welfare state a “free lunch” and argued that high taxation and an increase in social spending have not harmed the growth of GDP. He presented Sweden as a prominent example of this. Lindert’s conclusions have received criticism (e.g. Bergh 2006), but there is a lot of evidence of successful co-evolution of Nordic states and economies and their ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Nordic countries have export-oriented, innovative, and relatively open economies, and hence Susanna Fellman et al. (2008) have argued that Nordic capitalism has been highly competitive, despite its peripheral geographic location in the world.

The Nordic societies are stable, too. When Francis Fukuyama (2011) explored ways to create democratic, peaceful and stable societies, he called this “getting to Denmark.” Yet, the Nordic countries are not immune to the 21st century threats like deglobalization, the rise of populism, demographic challenges and climate change.

This session is organised jointly by the Danish, Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish economic history societies and will present work by members of these associations, and others interested in the evolution of welfare states. We are interested in issues such as (but not limited to):

Is there in fact a Nordic model or rather several different national ones?

How did the Nordic countries become “Danish”? Can they remain “Danish”?

Have the Nordic countries enjoyed “free lunches”, and can they continue to do so in the future?

Is the Nordic model sustainable? Does it promote sustainability around the globe?

Please send a paper proposal (max 2 pages, including your affiliation and contact information) to Niklas Jensen-Eriksen, niklas.jensen-eriksen@helsinki.fi by November 1, 2024.

The organisers will evaluate the proposals and notify their decision by December 2, 2024

If there are too many high-quality proposals, preference will be given to the members of Nordic national associations.

Organisers

Paul Sharp, University of Southern Denmark, Chair of the Danish Society for Economic and Social History

Niklas Jensen-Eriksen, University of Helsinki, Chair of the Finnish Economic History Association

Eivind Thomassen, University of South-Eastern Norway, Chair of the Norwegian Economic History Association

Erik Green, Lund University, Chair of the Swedish Economic History Association