Project Memorandum

Nordic Food Partnership

Background

The Nordic Food Partnership was formed by members of the Nordic consortium of Food Nexus, who wanted to maintain a strong food network on a Nordic level after it was decided that a competing consortium was elected leader of the then Food-KIC. By joining forces, the founding partners wished to benefit from the combined networks and capacities to create new opportunities for the partnering organisations and their members, as well as for the Nordic Food System as a whole.

Hence, in 2019, the partnership decided to tackle common, big challenges in the Nordic food system. These challenges were highlighted in interviews of food industry representatives but also addressed in food strategies, national food policy documents or research strategies, depending on the individual country. The challenges identified were A) Well-being, B) Digitalisation, C) Automation & robotization, D) Sustainable food production and E) Food safety.

The working model was to engage industry bodies and food science communities in the partnership, rather than individual companies or researchers. These organisations then spread relevant information down in their member organisations. The partnership has been organised with a steering group with representatives from each nation’s industry-driven bodies/organisations and universities. Each country has two seats in the steering group which was chaired by RISE – Research Institutes of Sweden. The financial support to initiate the partnership was provided by the NKJ, Nordic Joint Committee for Agricultural and Food Research and former Food Nexus Nordic.

Aim and focus of the project

The aim was to support the growth and competitiveness of the Nordic agri-food industry, by facilitating knowledge exchange, interdisciplinary research and innovation challenges. By joining forces, the aim was also to make aware and facilitate the access to infrastructure in the Nordics. Through the partnership, the Nordic food system could be united and work together towards the UN sustainable development goals.

The focus was to bring key stakeholders of the Nordic Food System together and create conditions for a Nordic platform for knowledge transfer and collaboration between industry and research partners. The focus was also on strengthening the Nordic food industry by facilitating the implementation of emerging best practices and targeted R&D projects and spreading solutions and outcomes in international networks.

Results

Workshops

Outcomes from the project period were organising workshops, on the above challenge topics, and conducting interviews with Nordic food industry and ministries. The partnership organised a workshop on
new proteins, addressing the challenges well-being and sustainable food production. It was co-hosted with VTT and Luke of Finland in conjunction with the Nordic Food Industry at Svenska mässan in Gothenburg, Nov 5, 2019. Previous to that, the partnership got involved in the agenda of the workshop Sustainable Nordic Alternative Protein Industry organised by Climate-KIC and NKJ. The two workshops resulted in discussions on forming a Nordic supercluster on protein. The discussions are at the moment taken to a political level and the partnership awaits more information.

Engagement with Nordic stakeholders

During 2019 we travelled to Aarhus, Denmark; Ås, Norway and Helsinki, Finland to meet with representatives from the food industry and ministers together with local NFP partners. This was to listen in on industry and societal needs and create valuable connections for the future. In brief:

The collaboration model where industry and science bodies represent each country seemed to be the way forward for the partnership.

There was great interest from the industry to both get access to existing Nordic testbeds and pilot facilities and to collaborate more across borders, as well as getting access to a competence database where the industry could search for research competencies. The common view is that it is better to share resources as it is not possible for one region, or even a country, to maintain and run all kind of infrastructure. Certain testbeds could and should be accessible on a Nordic level.

A further common challenge added during the project was food packaging. It wasn’t mentioned extensively in the documents described in ‘Background’ but the partnership brought it up as an additional important common topic to address.

The partnership is also a relevant platform to spread information on addressed challenges by other organisations. The consortia Northern Lights on Foods focus on how ESS and MAX IV can boost Nordic food science and technology. With these powerful technologies, food structure can be seen in a way that was impossible before and gives insight on how to solve some big food processing problems. The Nordic Food Partnership acted as a gateway to the Nordic food industry so that relevant companies could be invited.

Conclusions and next steps

It can be concluded that there exists a need for Nordic cooperation. But, it’s not easy to maintain momentum and ownership from each partner. The working model used by the project seems to be valid but finding the right people to engage in the network has been hard.

Involvement from Iceland has been limited. The right Icelandic organisation was identified, but reorganisation made it difficult to retain the right contact person in the partnership activities. The greatest interest in continued collaboration seems to be found in Norway, Finland and Sweden. Denmark has also shown interest from an academic and political standpoint, but it has been harder to engage industry partners.

To continue the partnership, we propose to apply for funding to map research competencies in the Nordic countries, testbeds and maybe additionally start-ups in a database for the partnership’s member
organisations. A research competence database, we believe, would move the food industry closer to the science community and facilitate for new applied research projects. Together with easier access to Nordic testbeds, this would create a knowledge system and development forum. We also believe that it could create a place for recruiting new competences.

The partnership will also maintain a dialogue with members of the Climate-KIC to form a Nordic supercluster focusing on proteins. This could be one way to create more engagement by narrowing the scope of the partnership. All Nordic countries face challenges in the protein area, from what kind of protein should be used in feed formulation to creating tasteful, new protein alternatives. Joining forces with the Climate-KIC would strengthen both organisations and make a strong platform for an important area.

Additionally, we also see the potential for the partnership with the current working model to have a focus on how to handle adaptations in the food system, on a Nordic level, due to severe circumstances such as the drought 2018 or the Corona pandemic 2020. When certain parts of the value chain are taken out of a national system a Nordic partnership could be of help to restore stability.