



Nordic cross-projects cooperation – remarks in Finland

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Project: The GSGF in Finland – Integration of geospatial and statistical information in Finland (GSFI)

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1. Introduction

Considering the far-reaching commonalities of the Nordic region in terms of data ecosystems, organisational setup and administrative history, the GSGF in Finland - Integration of geospatial and statistical information in Finland (GSFI) project seeks to use and provide synergies between the countries. In 2021, Finland, Norway and Sweden submitted national grant applications with partially overlapping content. The three countries agreed to coordinate the projects in order to maximise the benefit of the output and to learn from each other. The collaboration was also manifested in a common activity to organise Nordic meetings and host a common Nordic digital work platform.

Two seminars were organised together with other Nordic projects with the 2022 GEOS grant 2022 agreements. The first meeting was arranged in Kongsvinger, organised by Statistics Norway in September 2023. The following seminar in September 2024 was organised by Statistics Sweden in Stockholm. In both seminars, the fundamental idea was to benchmark and share ideas with the other Nordic projects.

The program and presentations of the two meetings are available on the website of the European Forum for Geograpy and Statistics (EFGS)¹.

2. The two Nordic Meetings

2.1. The Seminar in Kongsvinger

The first Nordic collaboration workshop was held in Kongsvinger, Norway, from 19 to 20 September, 2023.

The meeting introduced the three Nordic GEOS Grant 2022 projects focused on the integration of geospatial and statistical information, primarily from a spatio-temporal data management and processes perspective. On the first day, discussions covered the reconstruction of historical municipal boundaries, the status of historical geographies, and the georeferencing of historical maps through crowdsourcing. Some practical examples such as the Topographical register at the Swedish National Archives and a data model for a historical-geospatial-ontology were also presented. The second day focused on studying applications of the GSGF framework in the Nordic countries, addressing both challenges and successes. Additionally, the development of small area geographies in Sweden and Finland was discussed.

There were altogether five presentations given by the GSFI project:

- GEOS Grant (2022) project FI: The GSGF in Finland - Integration of geospatial and statistical information in Finland (GSFI) project (Mervi Haakana, Statistics Finland)
- The current status and challenges of the integration of statistics and spatial information in Finland – interpreted through the GSGF model (Rina Tammisto, Statistics Finland)
- National stakeholder networks as a key tool in the GSGF implementation (Panu Muhli, National Land Survey of Finland)

¹ NFGS Conferences & other Nordic Meetings (EFGS): <https://www.efgs.info/conferences/nfgs-conferences/>

- Management of location information of the business register using centralized geospatial repository (Godfrey Lowndes, Statistics Finland)
- Development of a new local statistic area definition for Finland (Ville Helminen and Eetu Jutila, Finnish Environment Institute)

2.2. The Seminar in Stockholm

The second collaboration workshop was arranged as the Nordic Forum for Geography and Statistics (NFGS) 2024, continuing a tradition of over 25 years. The workshop was held in Stockholm, Sweden, from September 11 to 13, 2024.

A meeting invitation was sent to representatives from the Nordic NSIs, i.e., Denmark, Faroe Islands, Greenland, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and Åland, Eurostat, and Nordregio, which co-hosted the conference. Furthermore, through the existing network of the NFGS (for example, based on previous NFGS participation), a number of Nordic mapping agencies and national statistical offices (NSOs) were also invited.

The sessions covered the results of three ongoing GEOS Grant 2022 projects, the state of geospatial statistics in different countries, and opportunities for collaboration.

In the seminar, GSFI project gave presentations linked to the project work and participated via panel discussions:

- GEOS Grant (2022) project FI: The GSGF in Finland - Integration of geospatial and statistical information in Finland (GSFI) project (Insight into GSFI project), Mervi Haakana, Rina Tammisto (Statistics Finland), and Ville Helminen (Finnish Environment Institute)
- Consolidation or survival? – Geospatial activities in Nordic NSI's session (Rina Tammisto gave Statistics Finland's answers)
- Cooperation between NSOs and Geospatial Agencies; Rina Tammisto (Statistics Finland) , Panu Muhli (National Land Survey of Finland) coordinated the session
- The future framework for longitudinal integration of geography and statistics (Rina Tammisto gave Statistics Finland's answers)

In total, there were thirty-five participants in the meeting, of which nine participated online only (through a Teams channel).

3. Experiences

The meetings provided a platform to share information, experiences, and best practices. Sharing tacit knowledge was also significant, as it brought up issues that might not be documented in reports. Collaboration with other countries helped in recognising one's own successes and expertise, which increased motivation and encouragement to progress. Exchanging experiences and knowledge also highlighted areas that different countries need to focus on in the future. For example, Norway's strong progress in cloud-based production, including geospatial data, has given Finland much to consider regarding the changes that need to be anticipated in the coming years. After the events, information exchange and collaboration continued, helping to build long-term cooperation.

Collaboration with other countries brought up concrete issues that supported the work done in Finland and helped to further develop or apply ideas in practice. For building GSGF Finland, collaboration with Sweden and Norway on issues included in GSGF Principle 3 brought new perspectives and concrete ideas, such as the connection between the management models of historical geospatial data and the small area division.

We urgently need ways to avoid overlapping work also in development. Discussions and information sharing like in these two seminars are one key tool for that.

One aspect missing from the planned collaboration was the use of a shared Teams channel. Since the Norwegian and Swedish projects already had their own communication channels, the shared channel wasn't effectively utilised. Notably, the EFGS web pages were also used for publishing materials from the Nordic seminars, and therefore a shared workspace was not as critical.

Both events were planned collaboratively among the three projects. This approach proved beneficial, allowing us to highlight aspects that most benefited the projects' work. Prior to the seminars, we held Teams meetings where we collaboratively developed draft versions of the program. Interestingly, this joint preparation prompted us to consider the projects' issues from a broader perspective that is often overlooked: how could our innovation or discovery benefit others? It is also important to remember that considering the potential benefits for others is possible when we have a better understanding of each other's projects.

The timing of the seminars was well-chosen. By the time of the first seminar, the projects were already underway, and by the second seminar, there were results to present.

The invited participants at both seminars were slightly different, but both were appropriate and supportive of the event's program. Therefore, when organising similar seminars, it is advisable to be open to inviting various stakeholders, such as the history-oriented participants at the Kongsvinger seminar.

Below are some more observations from both seminars. Overall, working together on the grants projects was a very promising experience, and we recommend this approach to other projects as well.

3.1. Kongsvinger

The Kongsvinger seminar focused on historical statistics production and related geospatial data. In the discussions that followed the presentations, it was emphasised that the national SDI should be seen more broadly than just current datasets. Researchers should be able to study spatio-temporal changes. This same issue has also been raised in the context of the Research Services maintained by Statistics Finland.

Initially, it appeared that the presentations from various projects would be significantly divergent. However, the workshop proved to be highly beneficial. It infused fresh enthusiasm into our work in Finland and directly contributed new content to the efforts of the National Network on Integration of Statistics and Geospatial Information. Notably, historical regional divisions were approached in a novel manner during the discussion in Finland. A subgroup focused on historical geospatial information was established in the network. Its goal is to improve the efficient use of historical geographic information in statistical production. Additionally, ideas regarding the structure of metadata related to regional classifications and the promotion of their use from national sources gained new perspectives. These ideas have already been compiled into the follow-up project of the GSFI for further development.

An immediate outcome of the Kongsvinger seminar was also the establishment of the Historical Geospatial Task Force within the National Network for the Integration of Statistics and Geospatial Information (NISGIF). Key leaders in this initiative are the National Land Survey of Finland, the National Archives of Finland, and the University of Tampere, with support from Statistics Finland.

3.2. Stockholm

The Stockholm seminar focused on the use of integrated data. The sessions highlighted several opportunities for future Nordic collaboration. Statistics Sweden's session on geospatial activities in Nordic NSIs marked the first mapping of its kind, suggesting potential for further comparisons and knowledge exchange. The discussion on urban areas and localities, 65 years after the common Nordic locality definition, brought forth ideas for future collaboration. Finland's NSI and Mapping Agency proposed cooperation between NSOs and Geospatial Agencies, which could also be a topic for future conferences. Statistics Norway showcased their pioneering move to a cloud-based, open-source system, setting a trend for other Nordic NSIs. Additionally, Statistics Norway and Statistics Sweden will explore a harmonised, API-based Nordic platform for geospatial data. Lastly, there was consensus that Nordregio could play a more active role in future NFGS planning, leveraging their use of Nordic harmonised geospatial data.

At the Stockholm seminar, the power of collaboration in the Nordic region was well highlighted in the discussion:

- The Nordic NSIs share a common general structure in terms of well-developed registries and easily accessible, high-quality geospatial information.
- However, the Nordic NSIs also share some challenges regarding geospatial information related to IT support, organisational issues, workflows, etc., sometimes forcing us into an organisational 'survival mode.'
- Could we consolidate our activities and learn from each other to make statistical-geospatial data integration thrive?

4. Conclusions

The Kongsvinger and Stockholm seminars provided valuable platforms for Nordic collaboration in geospatial and statistical data integration. The Kongsvinger seminar focused on historical statistics production and geospatial data, sparking new ideas and initiatives, such as enhancing the use of historical geospatial information. The Stockholm seminar emphasised integrated data and future collaboration opportunities, including developing harmonised, API-based Nordic platform for historical geospatial data. Both seminars highlighted the importance of collaboration, generating concrete development ideas that support future work.

For the three ongoing GEOS Grant projects, the seminars facilitated the sharing of information, experiences, and best practices, enhancing the projects' outcomes. Collaboration with other Nordic countries helped recognise and leverage each country's strengths, boosting motivation and encouraging progress. The exchange of knowledge highlighted areas for future focus and provided new perspectives and concrete ideas. This collaborative approach proved beneficial, enabling the projects to develop innovative solutions collectively.