



Roadmap: Building a Bio-district in Sweden.



This roadmap is written by PhD Sofi Gerber, BERAS International Foundation within the framework of the KISMET project and is co-funded by the European Union, Interreg Baltic Sea Region.

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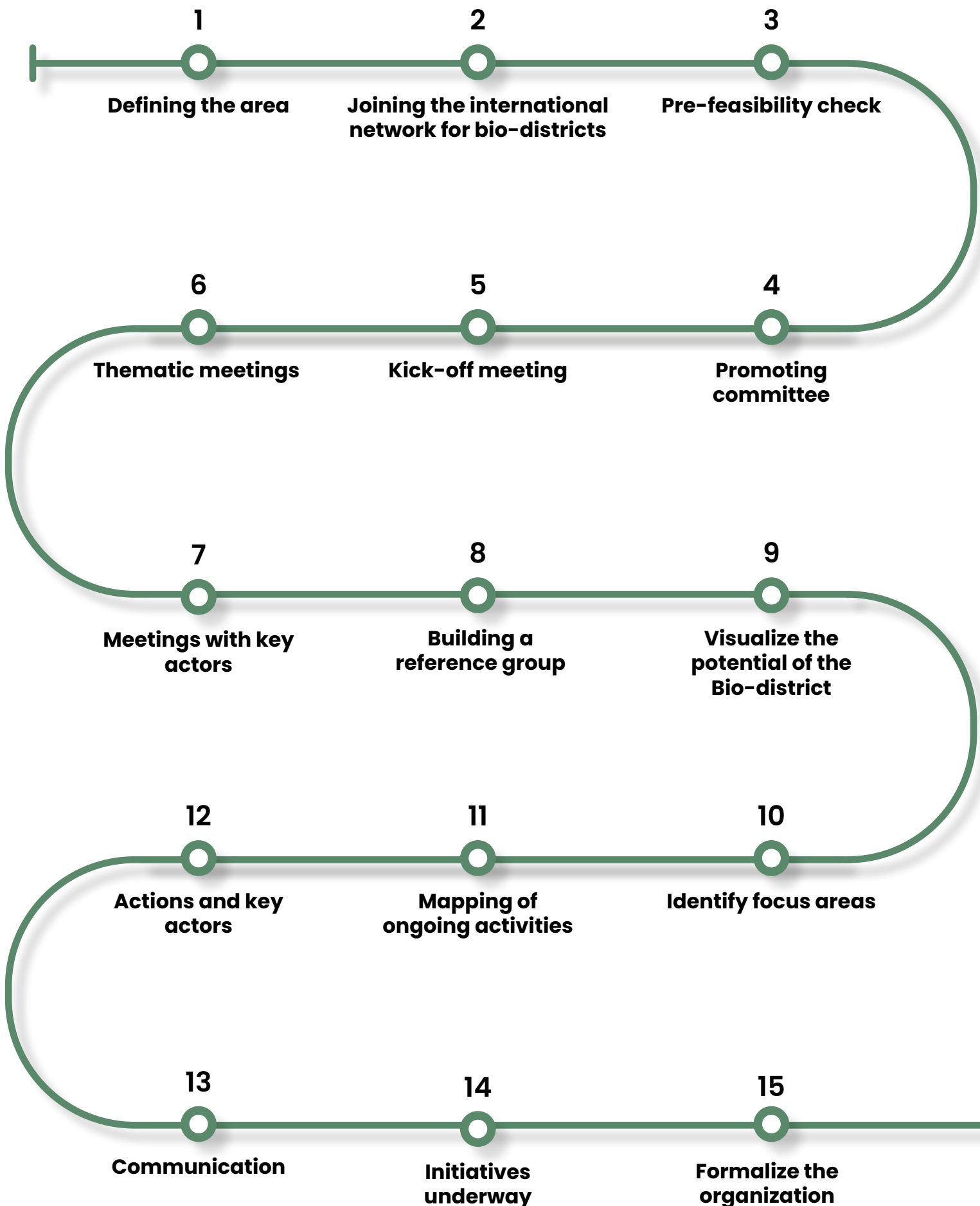
CIRCULAR ECONOMY



KISMET

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Introduction

Central to the creation of bio-districts is an inclusive systems approach encompassing local food, gastronomy, lifestyle, culture, urban-rural relations and tourism, based on ecological principles of Health, Ecology, Fairness and Care.

Bio-districts also have great potential to raise awareness of the importance of food for the climate, biodiversity and human health.

The creation of a bio-district is about bringing together different actors within a region to jointly find solutions to increase food security, create jobs and develop an ecologically, socially and economically sustainable food system.

How to use this roadmap.

This roadmap describes 18 steps, that we have followed to build the first Bio-district in Sweden.

Each step focuses on a different aspect of building a Bio-district, from understanding your context and involving actors, developing a Bio-district strategy to formalizing the organisation.

While the steps are presented in a logical sequence, feel free to skip to the sections most relevant to where you are in the process.



Getting started

Defining the area

Bio-districts take a territorial approach with the aim of managing the area's natural resources in the best way for current and future generations. In the Sörmland Bio-district, we have taken the old administrative boundaries "the landscape" as our starting point, with Sörmland stretching from Stockholm and Lake Mälaren in the north to the forests of Kolmården in the south. In between, a highly diversified landscape consisting of forests, fields, pastures, rivers, lakes and in the west the Baltic Sea. The area includes villages, small towns and the capital of Stockholm and its suburbs. It includes one and a half county and 21 municipalities.



The Sörmland Landscape

There is great potential in the Sörmland landscape, which comprises the Sörmland region and the southern part of the Stockholm region. There are many committed organic producers and established networks in the whole food chain to build on. With its about 20% organically cultivated area, there are great opportunities to work to increase the number of organic farmers to reach the EU goal on 25% within 2030 and even beyond that goal. There is also opportunities to develop the processing of locally produced food in the region and make organic products more accessible for consumers. Bio-district Sörmland also has the potential to connect rural and urban areas and raise people's awareness about where their food comes from and to this end raise the respect for our farmers.

Where it all started

A pre-version of Bio-district Sörmland was established in 2012 named " Järna/Södertälje Local Sustainable Food Society" with actors from the whole food chain, local and regional authorities, tourist operators, social and cultural initiatives, civil society, a bank based on values, education and R&D. Södertälje municipality and BERAS International Foundation have worked closely together since 2010 when the municipality joined the [Beras](#) project and developed the concept "[Diet for a Green Planet](#)" that includes a holistic approach to agriculture, food and society. Inspired by the EU [Action Plan for the Development of Organic Production](#), BERAS joined the International Network of Eco Regions (IN.N.E.R.) in 2021. Within the framework of EU Baltic Sea Region project [KISMET](#) we started the process for "Bio district Sörmland" together in 2023.

Joining the international network for bio-districts

Bio-district is a global movement that consists of local actors who aim to cooperate to change the food system into a sustainable ecosystem based on organic principles. The network consists of the International Network of Ecoregions [I.N.N.E.R.](#) and the Global Alliance of Organic Districts, [GAOD](#). GAOD has the function of arranging international conferences and will also be the driving force for establishing bio-districts in Asia.

The first bio-district was established in 2004 in Cilento, Italy. At present there are 60 bio-districts in Europe.

The international network is an important source of practical knowledge, concepts and research, so the first step of building a bio-district is therefore to join the network.



IN.N.E.R International Network of Eco Regions

IN.N.E.R. has developed a tool-kit on how to set up, manage and evaluate a bio-district that can be adopted to different settings. The procedure to adopt the “IN.N.E.R. methodology” is made of 10 points, described in their [Organic Districts Guidelines](#):

1. Joining IN.N.E.R. and sign of the request form by a promoter of Organic District. Delivery of the Tool kit.
2. Pre-feasibility check of the Organic District, by the IN.N.E.R. experts
3. Public forum and establishment of an official promoting committee of the Organic District.
4. Preparation of the first draft of the “strategic document”, which contains also the guidelines for communication and education.
5. Resolutions of the bodies in the establishment of the Organic District
6. Establishment of the Organic District.
7. First evaluation of the Organic District’s performances.
8. Definition of the action to be taken, as a consequence of the evaluation at point 7 and lastly an update of the “strategic document”.
9. Release of the “Organic District IN.N.E.R. certificate”.
10. Support actions to correctly manage the Organic District.



Pre-feasibility check

IN.N.E.R. also offers a pre-feasibility check with 22 indicators to evaluate if the identified area is suitable for starting a bio-district. It addresses both the present situation and the potential for development.

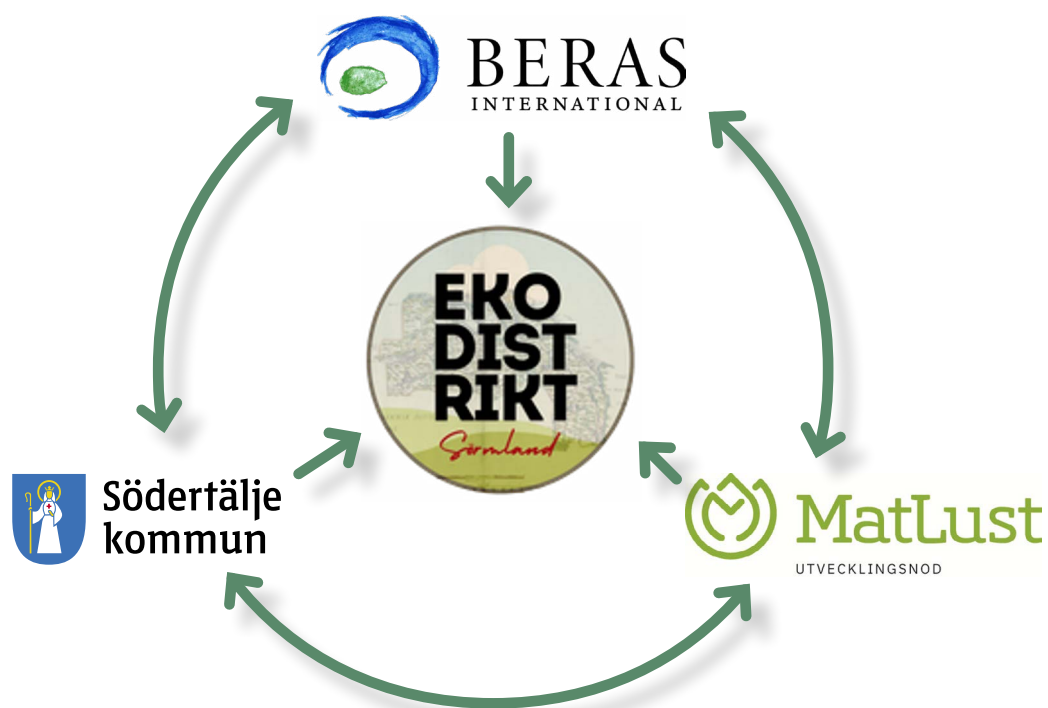
Pre-feasibility questionnaire

1. Is your area a rural area?
2. Is the local population characterized by a shared system of values such as an ethic of work and activity, of the family, of reciprocity, and of change?
3. Is there a group of local actors (farmers, local government members, associations, NGOs) actively engaged in, or willing to, promote the development of an organic district?
4. Is there a critical mass of organic farms inputs providers, infrastructures, regional/local governments, education, research and education and NGOs and other related activities able to support the development of an organic food system?
5. Are there enough organic farms/land/products able to support the different activities involved in an Organic district and their development?
6. Are there enough organic processors able to support the different activities involved in an Organic district and their development?
7. Are there enough retailers able to support the different activities involved in an Organic district and their development?
8. Are short food chain present? (e.g. farmers markets, restaurants and shops selling local products)
9. Are there enough infrastructures (roads, buildings, ICTs) able to support the different activities involved in an Organic district and their development?
10. Are there enough regional/ local governments able to support the different activities involved in an Organic district and their development?
11. Are there local human resources able to support the different activities involved in an Organic district and their development? (age- education-skills- attitude to innovation)
12. Are there enough education, research, and extension services) able to support the different activities involved in an Organic district and their development?
13. Are there enough inputs providers able to support the different activities involved in an Organic district and their development? (seeds, fertilizers, machinery, equipment, maintenance services)
14. Are there sustainable tourism activities present?
15. Are there enough NGOs able to support the different activities involved in an Organic district and their development?
16. Are there sources of financial support for the Organic District development?
17. Is the territory attractive? (Landscape cultural heritage, natural resources)
18. Is the organic gastronomic-sustainable touristic activity developed? (Typical local products-gastronomic tradition-sustainable tourism initiatives)
19. Is the local population aware of, and interested in, sustainability?
20. Are social agriculture/ social sustainability initiatives supported?
21. Are Green Public Procurement initiatives present?
22. Is animal Welfare actively pursued?

After filling out the form, it was sent to the experts in IN.N.E.R. who evaluate the result. While some areas were already well developed as a starting point, others had more room for improvement. All in all, the pre-feasibility check gave us a good overview of the area and its potential. Once bio-district Sörmland was approved in its initial phase, we also had the opportunity to discuss opportunities and challenges with professor Cesare Zanasi from Bologna University, on his visit to us.

Promoting committee

Initially, the promoting committee of Bio-district Sörmland has been formed by representatives from [BERAS International](#) and Södertälje municipality/[MatLust food development node](#). The start-up has been possible through the EU Interreg project [KISMET](#), in which the bio-district has been one of several activities in Sweden. The partner group in Sweden of the project has formed the promoting committee of the bio-district in its initial phase. To have one public actor and one non-profit organization, both deeply involved in transforming the food system to be more sustainable, has been instrumental in the acceptance and success of the development of our bio-district. The organizations complement each other in their competences, networks and tasks and have a history of cooperation in local and international projects. BERAS International has been the managing partner who has organized the specific activities.



Involving actors

Kick-off meeting

The bio-district concept involves all actors from farm to fork, including businesses, public actors, research and education as well as civil society. Therefore, we began our stakeholder involvement with a kick-off where all kinds of actors in Sörmland were invited. We presented the bio-district concept, the international network, our initiative to start a bio-district in Sörmland as part of the EU Interreg project KISMET. The event gathered around 50 people from the whole food system. The participants were divided in actors groups where they discussed which questions the bio-district should address.

The most important result of the kick-off, beside spreading the word about the initiative to start the first bio-district in Sweden, was to create a common ground among the actors. The participants were very enthusiastic to meet, exchange views and experience that they are not alone in striving for good food for people and the planet.

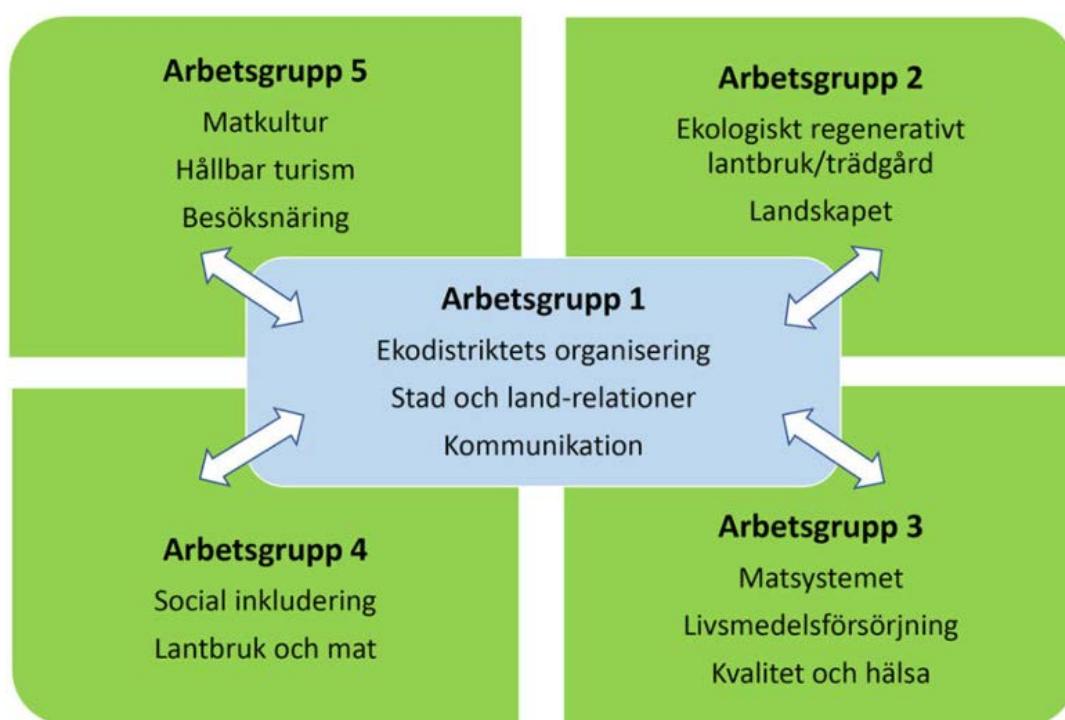


Group discussions at the Bio-district Sörmland kick-off meeting.

Thematic meetings

Attempts to form thematic working groups, following the IN.N.E.R. model, at an early stage were not successful. It was difficult to get people to take on responsibility for a larger area that was not clearly defined. We therefore changed our approach to more open meetings where we captured participants' perspectives on challenges and objectives in the local food system. Based on that, we continuously define focus areas and activities that different actors can take responsibility for in collaboration. It remains to be seen whether more comprehensive working groups will emerge over time.

Arbetsgrupper i Ekodistrikt Sörmland



Work Groups in Sörmland bio-district: WG 1: Governance, urban – rural relations, communication. WG 2: Organic Regenerative Agriculture/gardens, landscape. WG 3: The Food System, Food availability, quality and health. WG 4: Social inclusiveness in agriculture and food. WG 5: Food Culture, Sustainable Tourism.

Thematic meetings & Working Groups

The thematic meetings were based on the working group structure, thus gathering different kind of actors relevant for the different topics.

Thematic meeting 1

The first meeting at Hornudden garden focused on the role of organic/regenerative farming in the bio-district. It brought together about 40 farmers, advisors, interest groups and officials working on the farmed landscape. After an introduction to the bio-district concept, the meeting was devoted to identifying challenges and common goals for the ecological development of the food system in Sörmland in groups and plenary sessions.



Participants at the thematic meeting on ecological, regenerative agriculture at the Hornudden garden.

Thematic Meeting 2

A second meeting at Skäve farm in Järna was dedicated specifically to how the local organic food system can contribute to social inclusion. This brought together representatives from municipalities as well as social institutions, farmers, processors and wholesalers with a particular interest in including people in need of support in their businesses. The discussions identified both the great inclusive potential that the food system offers but also the obstacles in the form of silo thinking and short-termism that prevail today.

Thematic Meeting 3

A third meeting was held in the city of Nyköping where officials and policy makers from the 21 municipalities, 2 counties and regions were invited to discuss how they can contribute to sustainable food supply based on local and renewable resources in Sörmland. The meeting started with an introduction to bio-districts together with presentations of good examples of how municipalities can work with local, organic food producers. Afterwards, the approximately 45 participants worked in thematic workshops on the themes of municipal food supply strategy, organic in public procurement, investment in local food infrastructure and inclusion of unemployed people in organic food production.

Thematic Meeting 4

A fourth thematic meeting focusing on food culture and tourism is planned. There are several successful established organizations that bio-district Sörmland can link up with, such as Slow food Stockholm, Reformaten, Sörmland Foodcluster and Food at Södertörn. There is great potential here to link both public restaurants and restaurateurs with local organic producers to drive development towards a sustainable food culture based on organic principles.

Meetings with key actors

In addition to the thematic meetings, we have had a number of meetings with key players. These include interest organizations such as the Organic Farmers Association, Sörmland Food Cluster, Food at Södertörn, the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, the organic certification body KRAV, restaurants schools and others. We have also met with dietary managers, food strategists, regional developers, politicians etc. in municipalities and regions. The meetings have offered opportunities to publicize the bio-district, identify the challenges that these actors face and discuss what the bio-district could mean for them.

In parallel with these bilateral meetings, we have presented bio-district Sörmland in a number of contexts where rural development and sustainable food systems have been on the agenda, such as Sweden's Rural Riksdag, the region's conference for knowledge exchange in the green industries, the municipality's citizen dialogues for rural development, as well as in international bio-district contexts. These have been important opportunities to make relevant actors aware of the initiative to start Sweden's first bio-district in Sörmland.

Building a reference group

To ensure broad support and capture as many perspectives as possible on the transition to a sustainable food system, we decided to complement the promotion committee with a reference group. This consists of representatives from Ekologiska lantbrukarna Sörmland, two regional associations for local food (Sörmlands matkluster and Mat på Södertörn), county administrative boards, regions, two municipalities, a food supply chain researcher and a social/ecological bank. The reference group has been crucial in developing a strategy that corresponds to the needs of Sörmland, identifying challenges, what initiatives are already underway, and what activities the Sörmland bio-district should focus on. The reference group also helps to further broaden the network.

It has been important to have physical meetings with a social setting in different locations in Sörmland so that the participants get to know each other and can exchange experiences and perspectives. The bio-district addresses complex questions, sometimes involving conflicts of interests, so a basis of trust and a climate of free discussion are crucial. Between meetings, communication has continued digitally by inviting participants to fill in the emerging strategy document with information and views.



The reference group identifying goals and focus areas for Bio-district Sörmland.

The bio-district strategy – a living document

At an early stage, several stakeholders, in particular farmers and gardeners, made it clear that they were not interested in empty words. The bio-district should deliver concrete results, not policy documents that made no difference. We have therefore chosen to see the development of a strategy for Bio-district Sörmland as a living process, where the map is drawn as we go.

Visualize the potential of the Bio-district

A first step was to visualize the potential of the Sörmland bio-district in a number of areas. It was important to capture that the concept touches on a number of aspects of the food system and the relationship between urban and rural, production and consumption, lifestyle, the relation between human and nature, etc. Seven areas were identified and their development potential was illustrated in the form of a flower. Each area was given a short description of its objectives:



The Bio-district Sörmland flower for Sörmland showing the seven areas of development potential

1. Circular production

We use local and renewable resources to close nutrient cycles at farm level. We will limit mileage for transporting food. By methods for composting, organic farming also has the potential to store more carbon in the soil.

2. Living landscapes

A diverse living countryside offers recreation for locals and tourists. Organic farming with biodiversity is favored for a living landscape. When choosing to eat locally produced food, the business community can also thrive.

3. Food security

Working for local, organic food production, we enhance food security. With a diversity of actors a more resilient food system is also created.

4. Ecological economics

We facilitate local investments and generate green jobs for ecologically, socially, and economically sustainable development. By collaborating, the stakeholders in the food system can innovate new business models that enhance all aspects of sustainability from farm to table.

5. Social inclusion

Food brings people together, and locally sourced food can establish new connections between urban and rural areas. Moreover, food production from farm to table, generates employment opportunities for social inclusiveness.

6. Health

Adopting an organic lifestyle and dietary habits within planetary boundaries also has a positive impact on human health. Connecting to local producers and understanding where your food comes from can foster a sense of meaning for overall well-being.

7. Knowledge

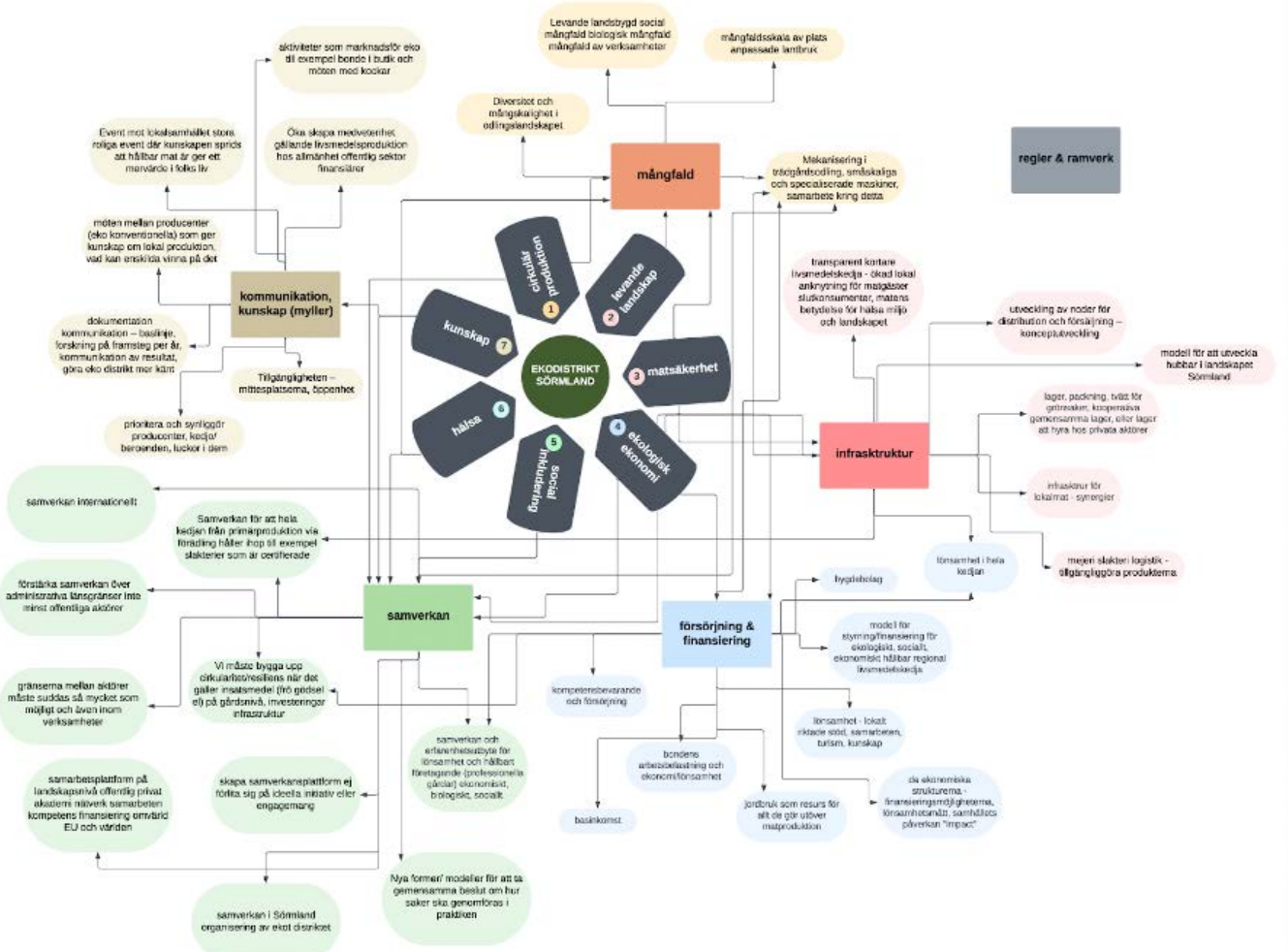
We want to increase knowledge about the importance of food for health, climate and nature so that people can make good decisions on an individual and societal level. Education and knowledge exchange is urgently needed to attract young people to work with food and farming.

Identify focus areas

With the bio-district flower as inspiration, the reference group has identified several focus areas that are particularly relevant in the context of Sörmland. The identified areas are:

- **Diversity:** Sörmland has a vibrant countryside with social and ecological diversity, diversity in businesses and site-adapted agriculture.
- **Infrastructure:** Sörmland has all the necessary infrastructure for a viable, regional food supply that is accessible to all.
- **Livelihood & financing:** Sörmland offers various innovative ways to make a sustainable living in all stages of food production and has good conditions for investing in food production from farm to fork.
- **Communication & knowledge:** Sörmland has meeting places that make visible where and how food is produced. Consumers and decision-makers understand the added value of local organic food production
- **Collaboration:** Sörmland has new cross-border forms for how decisions are made for sustainable food production. Bio-district Sörmland has developed into a collaborative body linking international, national, regional and local actors.

The map below shows how the input from the participants has been clustered in relation to the flower to identify focus areas. The clustering was made together during the reference group meeting and further organized by the coordinator and a researcher afterwards. Based on the participants' input and the discussions during the meeting, the objectives for each focus area were formulated. All members of the reference group were then given the opportunity to provide digital feedback.



Mapping of ongoing activities

The reference group has been important in identifying what is underway in each focus area. It is important to get a grip on what activities are already happening, so that the bio-district does not “reinvent the wheel” or compete with initiatives that are already working. It is also important to identify areas where the bio-district can link up with other actors and become a collaborative platform for good initiatives. Having a good representation of public stakeholders also helps to identify support functions and funding opportunities for future activities. This mapping has taken place digitally, where all participants of the group have had the opportunity to feed into a common document.

Actions and key actors

The next step was to identify which concrete activities the Sörmland bio-district should prioritize. This is an on-going process that began during a half-day meeting with the reference group, where the various focus areas were reviewed. The prioritized activities include:

- coordinating logistics of organic local produce
- cooperate to promote farm slaughter and local processing of meat
- organize a bio-district based organic internship year
- cooperative solutions for hiring staff in the food sector
- producer-consumer interactions in grocery stores
- creating trust funds for local, organic investments

For each activity, key actors and possible fundings need to be identified. Bio-district may facilitate the process, but stakeholder involvement is crucial to create long-term sustainable solutions.

Communication

An important part of the process has been to develop a communication strategy. Face-to-face communication has been of great importance in the start-up phase of the bio-district. As much of the work is about trans-sectional co-creation, it is crucial to get people around the same table to understand each other's perspectives and challenges. The bilateral meetings with key stakeholders have also been crucial in conveying the systemic perspective on which the bio-district is based. Parallel to these meetings, a digital communication platform has been developed.

The Bio-district Sörmland web page ekodistrikt.se contains information about the bio-district concept, information about the international network, Bio-district Sörmland's objectives, activities and current events, contact details, etc. Bio-district Sörmland also uses social media to communicate current events. Through stories, it highlights various actors in the area, their activities and how they collaborate with others to contribute to an organic, local food system.

See more at:

- Facebook: [Ekodistrikt.se](https://www.facebook.com/ekodistrikt.se)
- Instagram: [ekodistrikt.se](https://www.instagram.com/ekodistrikt.se)
- LinkedIn: [ekodistrikt-se](https://www.linkedin.com/company/ekodistrikt-se)

We have also communicated our events in traditional media such as newspapers, journals and radio. In particular, the start-up and the fact that Bio-district Sörmland won the EU Organic Awards for best bio-district 2024 has attracted attention both in press and social media.

As part of the communication, we have developed a logo for Bio-district Sörmland. It is designed in such a way that it can be modified and used by other bio-districts when the concept spreads to other parts of the country.

Bio-district Sörmland – ways forward

Initiatives underway

To ensure that Bio-district Sörmland does not become a paper product, we have been involved from the start in concrete activities that can contribute to a more organic, local food in Sörmland. Some initiatives are already up and going while others are in their infancy. Here are some illustrative examples:

One example in the focus area of infrastructure is “Local milk and social inclusiveness”: A local dairy was out of business and a major challenge was costs of distribution to end consumer. Within the framework of the KISMET project and establishing the Bio-district we made contact with some social institutions to look at opportunities. A group of actors made commitments for weekly purchase of milk as part of their daily social business. The dairy provided a small truck and so the business started up again. Happy consumers and happy coworkers at the truck made an important contribution in society. Following some month the good news spread to the city of Stockholm and deliveries started up to restaurants, bakeries, shops and an ice-cream maker. A food shop in Stockholm also offered to work as a logistic hub in Stockholm.



Restaurant students, teachers and the “Chef of the Year 2023” visiting the local, organic dairy and mill.

In the area of education, we have both been teaching the bio-district concept at the vocational education for gardeners, involving future food producers in developing the bio-district by discussing what they need to become successful in the future. A cooperation with the project “EkoBussen” also offered the opportunity to meet young restaurant and bakery students and talk to them about sustainable food production and how to purchase local, organic products. This was not only a theoretical meeting, but the students got to meet farmers and processors, buy their products and prepare the ingredients under the guidance of an established chef.

One of the most complex focus areas is livelihoods and financing in primary production. Here, coordinated efforts from different actors are needed to address the poor profitability of agriculture and the difficulty of releasing capital for sustainable investments. Bio-district Sörmland has begun activities that address these issues. This includes a study trip to southern Germany together with other actors to draw inspiration from local initiatives, such as Regionalwert AG, and investigate how these can be implemented in a Swedish context. We are also organizing a seminar on True Cost Accounting (TCA) of food and how organic food systems can help reduce external costs in the food system and free up resources for a transition. In dialogue with key actors, first steps for implementation of TCA in Sweden will be taken.

Formalize the organization

The next step in the formation of the bio-district Sörmland is to formalize the organization so that it can live on after the KISMET project ends in 2025. The current promoting committee will be replaced or expanded with other key actors to ensure a broad representation with the drive to contribute to an ecological transition of the food system. It is important that the committee is well anchored in Sörmland as well as in the international network of bio-districts and among Sweden’s organic actors.

Secure finances

We also need to secure funding for the continued operation of the bio-district. In addition to funds for various concrete activities, there must be funds for management, evaluation and communication. This also includes resources to be able to spread the concept to other parts of Sweden and the Baltic Sea region. In the next few years, development will depend on additional project funding in combination with stakeholders contributing smaller amounts. In the longer term, the aim is for stakeholders in the bio-district to bear the costs jointly, as the aim is to generate added value that exceeds the efforts.

Evaluation

After the establishment of the bio-district, a first evaluation of its performances will be made. The international network IN.N.E.R. has developed a monitoring tool that contains a multi-modal assessment tool, see [Organic Districts Guidelines](#). The next step is to adapt these tools to the Swedish context and fill it with criteria that are relevant in relation to the structure and strategy of Bio-district Sörmland. This will be done in cooperation with the Monitoring Tool Implementation Team and Swedish experts on experts in social, environmental and economic sustainability assessment.

Co-creation

Sweden has a long tradition of popular education and organizing change within the framework of non-profit organizations. When forming a bio-district in a Swedish context, it has therefore been important to have a bottom-up approach. There are already a number of organizations that work in various ways within the food system in Sörmland and nationally and it has been important to include as many of them as possible, without losing the ecological perspective and systems thinking.

Co-creating a platform for new ways of organizing the food system based on ecological principles of Health, Ecology, Fairness and Care means we need to include different perspectives and keep many avenues open. We need to trust the process and dare to live in uncertainty for something new to emerge. Not being locked into the current way of organizing the food system or trying to find quick-fixes is both challenging and inspiring.

We look forward to continuing on this path together with everyone who wants to be involved in Sörmland, Sweden and globally!



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