

# **Summer Course on Sustainability, River Basin Management and Climate Change in the Baltic Sea Region**

**Dealing with the Challenge of Climate Change  
in the Baltic Sea Region:  
Promoting Regional Sustainable Development**

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Hamburg, 26th of January 2010**

29.09.-02.10.2009

Hamburg

## Abstract

International cooperation is regarded as one of the most important solutions to mitigate or adapt to the impacts of climate change. The Baltic Sea Region serves as a good example in which many consortiums exist that deal with these impacts as well as other issues the area faces in order to achieve sustainable development. However, the numerous prevailing networks lack in coordination which complicates concrete actions. Therefore, the first EU strategy for the entire Baltic Sea Region was created and will be implemented in the next years to overcome these shortcomings. It seems to be a promising solution but will also face a number of challenges regarding the impacts of the economic crisis on the region, the existing gaps between the Baltic Sea countries, the intraregionalization of the EU, the level of governance within the strategy and the fact that the strategy is legally not binding, but, if implemented successfully, it may function as a blueprint for other EU regions.

## 1. Introduction

The Baltic Sea Region deals with a number of severe issues including demographic change, the growth of organised crime and pollution (EUROPA, 2008; EUROPA, 2009a). The latter has already led to additional environmental problems which are expected to increase in the future due to the impacts of climate change. Hence actions are required to cope with the current situation and to ensure sustainable development. International cooperation has been considered and is still perceived as one of the success factors on the way to achieve concrete common results and actions. However, past experience has shown that although numerous studies, reports, action plans and EU programmes had been created by various consortiums, they either did not cover the entire region or only had little impact on the Baltic's future development (EUROPA, 2008). In order to overcome these shortcomings the European Commission was asked to develop the first EU strategy for the Baltic Sea Region which was presented in autumn 2009 (Reinfeldt, 2008; European Union, 2009). This development raises the question whether this innovative macro-regional strategy is the solution to achieve regional sustainable development as an integrated approach or whether it will just lead to another period of report productions without concrete results and actions. It is the purpose of this paper to briefly describe the advantages and disadvantages of the existing networks in the Baltic Sea Region and to critically discuss the benefits but also the challenges of such an innovative strategy.

## 2. The Baltic Sea

The Baltic Sea, the second largest brackish water area in the world, comprises a surface area of 415,000km<sup>2</sup> (including the Kattegat) (HELCOM, 2007) and possesses a unique ecosystem based on the strong contrast of almost fresh water in the Northern parts and salty water at the Danish Sounds (European Union, 2009a). This delicate balance makes the ecosystem particularly vulnerable to changes. Such changes originated from e.g. pollution and above all the impacts of climate change (including a fluctuating climate, a warming trend of 0.08°C/decade, an increase in the frost free season and an increase in the frequency of precipitation events and their amount) affecting not only the physical and chemical composition of the Baltic Sea but also the structure of its food web (HELCOM, 2007). This in turn can have further impacts on the biological processes and biota affecting the sea's degree of brackishness and hence the species' composition, distributions and interactions. In addition, there is a risk of increases in storm surges and floods, posing further challenges to the coast and hence its management (HELCOM, 2007). Due to the fact that the issues the Baltic Sea deals with affect not only a particular country but the entire region, international cooperation is necessary to improve the condition of the Sea.

### 3. International Cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region

The Baltic Sea Region originated as a “bottom-up” movement in which the Baltic Sea played the common denominator to connect all bordering countries with one another (Bördlein, 2004). During the 1990s the region shared the mission to actively support the countries at the Eastern rim of the Baltic Sea in their transition from authoritarian to democratic rule and from planned to market economy. This common goal was achieved in 2004 with the Baltic States and Poland becoming a member of the NATO and the European Union (Schymik & Krumrey, 2009). According to Schymik and Krumrey (2009) the regional cooperation began to stagnate after this achievement. However, in the year 2000 approximately seventy networks were present in the Region coordinated by the umbrella organisation The Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) (Williams, 2000). Apart from the general advantages concerning international cooperation such as the exchange of knowledge, information and ideas as well as working towards a common goal, following benefits can be attributed in particular to the prevailing cooperation in the region:

- **Involvement of stakeholders from various different fields and countries**  
The existing networks of multi-functional cooperation (e.g. the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM), the Baltic Sea States Sub-regional Co-operation (BSSSC) and The Union of the Baltic Cities (UBC)) consist of a variety of experts from governmental and non-governmental organisations, regional authorities, companies and research institutions working in the fields e.g. economics, culture, education and ecology. Such a bottom-up approach facilitates the communication and understanding between the countries and the development of common goals from which the entire region has benefited (European Union, 2009b).
- **The participant’s strong commitment to the Baltic Sea Region**  
This is shown by the variety of cooperation frameworks and can be seen as one of the region’s strength and underlines the participants’ willingness to improve the condition of the Sea together (Bördlein, 2004; Schymik & Krumrey, 2009).
- **Successful achievements without a unified strategy**  
The lighthouse projects within the Baltic21 framework, as one example, achieved concrete results and actions although no unified strategy existed for the Baltic Sea Region (Baltic21, 2009). Williams (2000) states that such a bottom-up approach “...requires far more diligence and initiative than a system structured in a top-down manner” (p.22).

These aspects show the importance of cooperation and its success in the Baltic Sea Region. Nevertheless, it is also argued that despite the years of commitment and collaborative action, the condition of the Sea continues to deteriorate (European Union, 2009a). During the last years voices were being raised criticising the status quo of the cooperating networks and demanding to unify the entire Baltic Sea Region under one strategy because of the following reasons:

- **Lack in clarity of the existing projects and their actions**  
Due to the large number of projects which are rarely adequately coordinated, it is almost impossible to gain an overview of them or their results (Office of the Committee for European Integration, 2008; EUROPA 2008). This leads to e.g. duplications of work and competition between organisations regarding fund raising (Bördlein, 2004). Additionally, the existing frameworks of cooperation are not working properly (Bengtsson, 2009) and the numerous conducted studies, reports, action plans and EU programmes either did not cover the entire region or only had little impact on the Baltic’s future development (EUROPA, 2008). Projects also frequently focused on a thematic instead of sectoral approach to resolve problems which led not to the expected results (Baltic21, 2009).

- **No coherent initiatives and policies**  
The large number of the existing initiatives and policies in a variety of fields and countries are good but not coherent and hence not as effective as they could and should be (European Commission, 2009).
- **The highly diversified region complicates a true integration and hence a unified “bottom-up” approach**  
The region is highly diversified regarding living standards, economic development and social integration but also concerning political-administrative (e.g. the nature of their governmental systems, the maturity and strength of their democracy and their civil society as well as their degree of centralisation), legal and financial frameworks and previous experiences in cooperation (Baltic21, 2004; Bördlein, 2004; Engelen, 2004; EUROPA, 2008). Particularly transition countries lack in players capable of acting beyond governmental bodies and those countries with a young independence fear repeated assertiveness from outside (Ducrotoy & Elliot, 2008). Hence, currently the idea of a concept of true integrated cooperation is not implemented, which underlines the fact that the region is not as uniform as it may seem at first glance (Bördlein, 2004).

In order to overcome the mentioned shortcomings the European Commission was asked by the European Council to design the first macro-regional EU strategy to unify the entire Baltic Sea Region (Schymik & Krumrey, 2009).

#### 4. The European Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region

The objective was to develop a joint, integrated strategy to provide a more effective coordination of activities and thus to deliver higher standards for the citizens of the member states (European Union, 2009a). Commissioner Hübner (EUROPA, 2009b, p. 1) states that the strategy “... marks a new way of working together in the Union” to address the shared challenges in the region and to prepare the area “... to compete in the global marketplace while maintaining social and environmental standards” (European Commission, 2009, p. 2). The strategy shall fulfil the following objectives (EUROPA, 2009a):

- Tackling environmental problems resulting from high pollution levels in the Sea
- Strengthening the competitiveness of the regional economy
- Developing energy and transport links
- Improving the regions security, especially in maritime fields

The detailed action plan comprised of 80 flagship projects in 15 priority areas, each under the responsibility of a “lead country”, shall serve as an action-orientated instrument to achieve concrete results (Reinfeldt, 2008; EUROPA, 2009a). The EU authorities will function as a catalyst for new alliances and as a mediator but will not directly control the budget or legislation. Although the strategy has only been endorsed by the European Council in October 2009, already numerous different opinions exist on the potential success of the strategy and regarding expected challenges it may have to face:

On the one hand, the European Strategy is the first of its kind. It is innovative and experimental. First of all because it exceeds the scope of traditional EU regional policies and hence leads to a new governance level in the EU located between the nation state and the supranational community. Secondly, because of the special geopolitical feature of the Baltic Sea Region meaning the eastern enlargement as well as the EU-Russia relationship and thirdly because of its wide scope and integrated approach to improve the condition of the Baltic Sea (Schymik & Krumrey, 2009).

It is further the first strategy addressing the challenges of the entire Baltic region by focusing on the interrelation of all stakeholders to ensure sustainable development (Bengtsson, 2009;

European Commission, 2009). Already at an early stage of the preparation of the strategy, it was developed from a bottom-up approach through the inclusion of all institutions and organisations active in the region (European Commission, 2009). Such a consensus approach ensured that hardly any issues were neglected in the final strategy and hence covers a wide scope. Due to the realisation that the existing cooperation schemes were not effectively coordinated, it was decided to overcome this shortcoming by having no new funds, legislations or institutions but to focus on a better coordination of resources and a coherent implementation of regulations and laws. The designed action plan covers a large number of ideas and proposals put forward in the course of a public consultation and is the first document capable of capturing the essence of public opinion in the region (Schymik & Krumrey, 2009). Furthermore, the projects were selected according to their potential achievability with the available resources and within a relatively short timeframe making the action much more feasible and realistic. The Commission itself sees its role not as a control organ but as an overall coordinator and facilitator which has a 'soft power' capable of enhancing the strategic approach by empowering different levels (European Commission, 2009).

On the other hand, a number of objections regarding the strategy have already been identified. Its wide scope for example may lead to another complex web of institutional relations and may even make the Commission vulnerable due to the two-tier construction of coordination. Meaning that although the Commission is the overall responsible party, the different member states are responsible for the various priority areas and hence may be more influential (Bengtsson, 2009).

Additionally, although the strategy seems a brilliant solution to most of the issues related to the Baltic Sea Region, it is not legally binding and might be used as "... a kind of watering can to transfer money into the region for funding all different kinds of business-as-usual projects" (Röpke, 2009, p. 11). Only very strong administrative involvement of the Commission will help to keep an eye on the sectoral integration and cross compliance (Röpke, 2009).

The opinions regarding governance also vary to a great extent. On the one hand a "bottom-up" approach is preferred but on the other hand many stakeholders are in favour of a top-down leadership approach from the European Commission in hope of a more effective and secured implementation of the action plan (Schymik & Krumsey, 2009). According to Schymik & Krumsey (2009) the Union of the Baltic Sea States goes even further by emphasising the need of "... adequate instruments to exercise pressure to those who are responsible for implementation" (p. 10). However, the EU authorities see themselves as a mentor but not as a ruler and will neither directly control the legislation nor the budget (European Union, 2009b). Kozłowski (2009) adds that he doubts a successful implementation without proper funds allocated to it.

Furthermore, the action plan appears to be quite broad, complex and not sufficiently focused. This may lead to the creation of just another label for an already established cooperation, thereby losing out of sight the original motive behind the strategy, namely to revive the stagnating Baltic Sea cooperation by means of a clear, coordinated and action-orientated strategy (Schymik & Krumrey, 2009; Bengtsson, 2009). This issue is even further strengthened by the highly institutionalised region which may challenge the efficiency of the strategy and may run the risk of setting up another institution instead of getting the existing ones to work properly due to a lack of motivation, resilience, political will, unclear agendas and mandates of some various cooperation schemes (Bengtsson, 2009; Schymik & Krumrey, 2009).

The economic crisis could also have an impact on the stakeholder's commitment in particular the Baltic States. The only advantage is that tangible results are unlikely to be achieved within one to two years and hence may not be as strongly affected as assumed. Therefore, many opportunities exist to further develop the Strategy into the ongoing review of EU policies (Schymik & Krumrey, 2009).

Another difficulty will be to bridge the existing gaps within the Baltic Sea Region. Continuous investments are necessary in the less developed areas to tackle this problem, mainly

concerning the infrastructure (Röpke, 2009). But also the EU-Russia relationship has to be handled with special care as Russia is not part of the strategy (Schymik & Krumrey, 2009). This includes first of all a sufficient level of involvement from Russia to ensure a neighbouring basis and cooperation in all aspects within the region (Kozłowski, 2009). Many of the strong points and good intentions of the strategy may be jeopardised because Russia is a natural key actor in the region and because no agreement exists within the EU on how to treat Russia or how to engage it in the Baltic Sea Region (Bengtsson, 2009). The intraregionalization of the EU will also challenge the strategy. In order to secure the entire commitment, cohesion and solidarity of the union, all other EU countries need to be convinced that the Baltic Sea is a special case which has to be dealt with in a new way and can be used as a blueprint for other regions (e.g. the Danube basin) if implemented successfully (Bengtsson, 2009).

## 5. Conclusion

It is obvious that international cooperation is essential to deal with the impacts of climate change as well as the other issues the Baltic Sea Region faces in order to achieve sustainable development. However, as this paper shows, it is not always easy to achieve not only common goals and solutions but also concrete actions. The EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, as a novel approach to the transnational issues of relevance in the region covering several Community policies, seems to overcome these shortcomings (Joenniemi, 2009). It represents a serious effort to upgrade cooperation by better coordination and more efficient use of allocated resources (Bengtsson, 2009). If this can be accomplished, the EU strategy may not only function as a blueprint for other areas but the Baltic Sea Region may also develop into a kind of a core Europe in the Northern periphery and hence create a transnational area of enhanced cooperation (Schymik & Krumrey, 2009). Nevertheless, a number of challenges can be expected and will need to be met within the implementation process to achieve successful results. Otherwise it will just be another document in line with the numerous existing ones failing to meet concrete actions from which the environment and hence we will suffer most. It is going to be interesting what the first interim results which can be expected in 2011 will bring about – will it be curse or blessing?

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