HELCOM and inter-regional cooperation

The Helsinki Commission (HELCOM) is the Governing body of the Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area (Helsinki Convention), which was signed in 1992 and entered into force in January 2000. The original Helsinki Convention was signed already in 1974.

The aim of the Convention is to protect the marine environment of the Baltic Sea from all sources of pollution.

The Helsinki Commission consists of representatives of the nine Baltic Sea Coastal States and the European Community and is the major body of international environmental co-operation in the Baltic region. After the EU enlargement in May 2004, eight of the nine Baltic Sea Coastal States became members of the European Union.

Main threats in the Baltic Sea

The Baltic Sea is a semi-enclosed sea and it collects the runoff from 14 countries situated in its catchment area, which is four times larger than the sea itself. Due to the low temperature, low water exchange rate and low salinity of the water the Baltic Sea ecosystems are highly sensitive and susceptible to anthropogenic pollution.

Eutrophication, pollution by hazardous substances, decline of biodiversity and habitats and impacts of shipping are the major environmental problems of the Baltic.

HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan

At its Ministerial Meeting held on 15 November 2007 in Krakow, Poland, HELCOM adopted a strategic Baltic Sea Action Plan to drastically reduce pollution to the sea and restore its good ecological status by 2021.

The cross-sectoral Baltic Sea Action Plan, which HELCOM has been drafting since 2005, is designed to solve all major environmental problems affecting the sea. It will be a crucial stepping stone for wider and more efficient actions to combat the continued deterioration of the marine environment resulting from human activities. The overarching plan identifies the specific actions needed to achieve agreed targets within a given timeframe for the main environmental priorities, which are: 1) combating eutrophication, caused by excessive inputs
of nitrogen and phosphorous which mainly originate from inadequately treated sewage and
agricultural runoff; 2) curbing inputs of hazardous substances; 3) ensuring maritime safety
and response capacity to accidents at sea; and 4) halting habitat destruction and the ongoing
decline in biodiversity.

The HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan is the first attempt by a regional marine protection
convention to implement the ecosystem approach defined by the 1992 Rio Declaration and
the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. It will lead to
profound, innovative changes in the ways the coastal countries manage the environment in
the Baltic Sea region. The innovative plan is based on a clear set of 'ecological objectives'
declared to reflect a jointly agreed vision of 'a healthy marine environment, with diverse
biological components functioning in balance, resulting in a good ecological status and
supporting a wide range of sustainable human activities'. Example objectives include clear
water, an end to excessive algal blooms, and viable populations of species. Targets for good
ecological status are based on the best available scientific knowledge. With the application
of the ecosystem approach, the protection of the marine environment is no longer seen as an
event-driven pollution reduction approach to be taken sector-by-sector. Instead, the starting
point is the ecosystem itself, and a shared concept of a healthy sea with a good ecological
status. This vision will determine the need for further reductions in pollution loads, as well as
the extents of various human activities.

One of the major highlights of the new plan is that it opens a new era in marine environment
protection by including the concept of maximum allowable nutrient input. It also contains
provisional country-wise annual nutrient input reduction targets for both nitrogen and
phosphorus.

The action plan also distinguishes between measures that can be implemented at regional or
national level, and measures that can only be implemented at EU level (e.g. Common
Fisheries Policy, Common Agricultural Policy, controls over the marketing and use of
chemicals) or globally (e.g. the shipping controls defined by the International Maritime
Organization).

The HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan has already been widely supported by politicians at
various fora, and heralded as a pilot project for European seas in the context of the proposed
EU Marine Strategy Directive. The European Commission has described HELCOM's plan as
a cornerstone for further action in the Baltic Sea region, emphasizing that the plan is
instrumental to the successful implementation of the proposed EU Marine Strategy Directive
in the region.

The EU Marine Strategy Directive foresees such an action plan for each eco-region,
including the Baltic. HELCOM is in a unique position to deliver this already, given its
embracing of all the countries in the Baltic Sea catchment area. HELCOM is also in a unique
position to ensure that the special characteristics of the Baltic Sea are fully accounted for in
European policies. As a pioneer in the application of the ecosystem approach, the innovative
HELCOM action plan will also serve as a model example to be followed by the Regional
Seas Conventions and Action Plans under the auspices of the UNEP Regional Seas
Programme.

Specific recommendations for the OSCE

The ecosystem approach needs implementation at the regional level, which in turn
constitutes a major challenge for many regional communities. The experience gained in one
region should therefore be shared with others.

Sharing of experience between the regional networks strengthens identification of issues of
common interest and of cross regional character and thus best practices and models from
one region can be replicated in other regions, fostering even the development of Europe.
HELCOM’s experience in drawing up the Baltic Sea Action Plan and in putting the concept of
the ecosystem approach into practice can thus be replicated within other marine regions.