
VII BALTIC SEA NGO FORUM, *Citizens' Participation for Sustainability in the Baltic Sea Region*, May 11th – 13th, 2008, Riga - Final document

On 11-13 May 2008 the Baltic Sea NGO Network gathered for the VII Baltic Sea NGO-Forum in Riga, Latvia and brought together Civil Society Representatives from all the Baltic Sea countries, representatives from the Council of the Baltic Sea States, specialists and advisors on actual matters of the Baltic Sea Region, as well representatives from international organisations and guests.

The Forum is convinced that civil society is based on active public participation and aims to strengthen citizens' capacity to take part actively in democratic processes. Civil society facilitates public discussions and is a meeting place for people to define and formulate common interests in relation to the state, local authorities and market forces. Civil society will have an increasing role to play in the region by enhancing peoples' will to take part in their respective communities.

The Baltic Sea NGO network was established in Copenhagen in 2001 and since that time has developed cooperation with the aim of strengthening civil society in our common region. NGO Forums in Lübeck, St Petersburg, Turku, Pärnu, Gdynia and Stockholm have developed and stabilised the process and created networks in several fields.

The overall theme for the VII Forum in Riga was "Citizens' Participation for Sustainability in the Baltic Sea Region".

The Forum operated in plenary sessions and working groups dealing with the following issues: NGO Sustainability and Legislation, Climate Change and Energy, Social Inclusion and Human Rights, Non-Formal Education and Cultural Diversity. Each group dealt with its item taking into account the role of NGOs and the resources and tasks to be improved. Each working group also adopted a statement of objectives, addressed to Heads of States of the Baltic Sea region.

The working groups came up with the following suggestions:

NGO sustainability and legislation

Call upon CBSS, BSPC and BSR countries for the following reforms:

- To implement legally binding participation rights for NGOs in their constitutional framework, that they should be consulted regularly on cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region. The first step: to hold an Annual Joint Meeting of NGO and Government representatives on Baltic Sea Region cooperation.
- To provide diverse and relevant financial resources for NGOs and to increase decision-making power of NGOs.
- To improve NGO legislation by use of Guidelines – CM/Rec 2007 Council of Europe.

Climate change & energy

- Urges governments to prioritize energy saving and renewable energy as the most efficient way to meet increasing energy demand while also limiting hazardous climate change; requests governments at all levels, in cooperation with NGOs, to develop the means to informing the public on current energy use.
- Calls upon governments to halt development of new nuclear power plants and European Spallation Source in the region as there are better ways available for coping with climate change.
- Calls upon governments to prohibit construction of any final repositories for nuclear materials by the Baltic Sea, noting that it is the most radioactively polluted sea in the world according to Helcom¹; supports KIMO's demand² to ban shipping of radioactive materials through the Baltic Sea.
- Urges governments to investigate and de-classify information on the condition and locations of chemical and conventional munitions in the Baltic Sea and to put on hold any seabed infrastructure until appropriate investigations have been completed and proper action decided.
- Calls upon local communities in the Baltic Sea region to develop plans for sustainable energy supply and efficient energy use in cooperation with NGOs, using best available practices.

Social inclusion and Human Rights

Calls for the CBSS and the Baltic Sea states to take into serious consideration the problems of poverty and social exclusion. We stress the importance of social inclusion of all types of marginalised groups, the benefits this will give for the individuals themselves, but also for the stability and welfare of the societies of the Baltic Sea states.

Life-long learning

We recommend that governmental bodies of the Baltic Sea Region

- identify and remove unnecessary legal constraints on NGO activities and ensure equal opportunities for independent action for all,
- provide sufficient financial support for these activities, and
- promote a more common framework of multilateral programmes of life-long learning, especially the Nordplus Framework, so that these programmes include all countries in the Baltic Sea Region.

Cultural Diversity

The Heads of States of CBSS must give higher priority to cultural exchange and intercultural dialogue, as well as and strengthening the awareness of NGOs' role in society, promoting cultural exchange and cultural diversity.

¹ Hazardous Substances in the Baltic Sea – draft Helcom Thematic Assessment in 2006

² Local Authorities International Environmental Organisation, www.kimointernational.org/

The VII Baltic Sea Forum in Riga agreed the following:

(A) Continue the Baltic Sea cooperation!

The necessity of continuing the work of the Baltic Sea NGO Network based on previous Forum recommendations, with a view to further creating new networks and projects, based on present contacts with the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS) and good cooperation with its secretariat, seeking closer contacts also with national governments.

(B) Create connections between national and international experiences!

The participants of the Baltic Sea NGO FORUM 2008 declare their readiness to discuss proposals from national governments on national support strategies for Baltic Sea Cooperation, on continuous information exchange with the Focal Points of the Baltic Sea NGO Network, and on involving NGO representatives in national working groups on Baltic Sea Cooperation.

(C) Give Citizens a chance to learn cooperation!

The urgent need to get common training programmes supporting Baltic Sea Cooperation, which are open and affordable to all citizens of CBSS-countries.

(D) Involve Civil Society into reform of Baltic Sea Cooperation!

Its readiness to be involved in a process of reform of existing working structures and strategies of Baltic Sea Cooperation. This process should include a common strategy for citizens' participation, and establish functioning NGO-contacts with other institutions and networks of Baltic Sea Cooperation (Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference BSPC, Union of Baltic Cities UBC, Baltic Sea States Sub-Regional Cooperation (BSSSC), Nordic Council of Ministers NCM, Baltic Development Forum BDF), and other institutions.

(E) Develop common strategy, involving all Baltic Sea States!

An urgent call to the heads of Baltic Sea States to develop a new strategy of Baltic Sea Cooperation! Participating NGOs expressed deep concern about recent developments that could place NGOs in different positions and stated that the recent efforts to create support programmes for Citizens Participation and Civil Society should include equal opportunities for Citizens and NGOs in all CBSS-countries. The Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic Countries, the Governments of Germany and of the Northern German Federal States, the delegates of the European Parliament and of the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference, and bodies of the European Union should avoid further separation and segregation, but strengthen the integration of the whole Baltic Sea Region, by supporting development of the programmes which bring people together and foster mutual understanding on an equal and easily accessible base.