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Background

The first version of the 'State of the Baltic Sea' report was made publically available in June 2017.

The HELCOM Secretariat has organized a regional consultation as agreed by HELCOM Heads of Delegation.

The regional consultation was directed towards HELCOM Observers and a number of additional international stakeholders working with a Baltic Sea perspective. This document briefly summarizes the main reflections made by the respondents to the regional consultation. Comments and concrete proposals are being further considered by the HOLAS II project for possible uptake in the final version of the 'State of the Baltic Sea' report.

Action requested

The Meeting is invited to take note of the HOLAS II regional consultation summary.

Summary of the regional consultation on the State of the Baltic Sea report

Background

The first version of the 'State of the Baltic Sea' report was made publically available in June 2017. The launch of the first version of the report marked the culmination of a 2.5 year working process by the HELCOM HOLAS II project, involving more than three hundred topical experts and national representatives from marine management authorities around the Baltic Sea. The report presents the HELCOM second holistic assessment of environmental status of the Baltic Sea and addresses the status of pressures, their impacts on ecosystem components, their spatial distribution, and economic and social analyses of selected human activities.

In June 2018 the report will be finalized, including additional data from the year 2016 and tentative updates in associated assessments results. During the intersession, the report is also subject to public consultations: national consultations are organized by a number of Contracting Parties while the HELCOM Secretariat has organized a regional consultation as agreed by HELCOM Heads of Delegation.

The regional consultation was directed towards HELCOM Observers and a number of additional international stakeholders working with a Baltic Sea perspective. This document briefly summarizes the main reflections made by the respondents to the regional consultation. Comments and concrete proposals are being further considered by the HOLAS II project for possible uptake in the final version of the 'State of the Baltic Sea' report.

Process and respondents

The regional consultation took place October to December 2017. The selected organizations were first approached with an invitation letter in September 2017, providing information on the scope of the upcoming consultation. 1st of October an online consultation form was opened at the HELCOM site for 'State of the Baltic Sea – first version 2017' and a second invitation letter was submitted. The full list of invited organizations is provided in **Annex 1**.

The response form included a set of specific questions as well as the opportunity to provide open-ended comments to the respective chapter of the report. The specific questions were formulated to gain information on the overall perception of the report and to the communication of results. The questions are outlined in full in **Annex 2**.

Eighteen out of the 69 invited organizations responded to the consultation, with 13 organizations providing substantive comments to the chapters of the report and five organizations responding to the specific questions or providing general comments only. The respondents covered non-governmental organizations with both environmental (5) and sector orientation (4), networks of local and regional authorities (2), intergovernmental organizations with environmental (3) and science orientation (1), a specialized environmental agency (1), and other partnership and cooperation frameworks both regional and with a wider geographical scope (2).

The comments received have been sorted as a) generic views and proposals, b) concrete proposals to revise the text of the report c) proposals to add information. This summary focuses on the generic views and proposals by the respondents. The responses are available in full in a separate excel file.

Summary of the feed-back

What are the main strengths of the Second Holistic Assessment of the Baltic Sea?

The assessment report is in general well received with several respondents highlighting the usefulness of such comprehensive report as a reference document to the state of the Baltic Sea. 80% of the respondents agrees unreservedly that the assessment provides good direction for the protection and sustainable use of the Baltic Sea and 87% that the assessment results are useful for their work (Figures 1 and 2).

Respondents are in agreement that the main strength of the report is its holistic approach, the broad scope of topics, and the large amount of data and information that is used to support the assessments. Many respondents also recognize and appreciate that the assessments are based on up to date knowledge and research. The vast number of experts that have been involved in and consulted in the production of the report is also recognized as a strength.

Individual elements that are highlighted as welcome include the expansion of social and economic analyses compared to the initial HELCOM holistic assessment, the focus on additional pressures such as marine litter and underwater sound, and that an evaluation of confidence is included for the status assessments.

Quotes on main strengths:

“Comprehensive overview of the knowledge available at this stage”

“The sheer scope of the report and amount of data sources, expert consulted and work put is its biggest strength”

“The state-of-the-art integrative tools and use assessment indicators and indexes”

“We welcome the extensive report about the status of the Baltic Sea, which will give us useful base facts for our future activities and priorities”

“It is actually very impressive to read a document that encompasses such a wide range of issues, with many different sources of scientific information/ methods and different countries, and still provide a clear overview of the State of the Baltic”

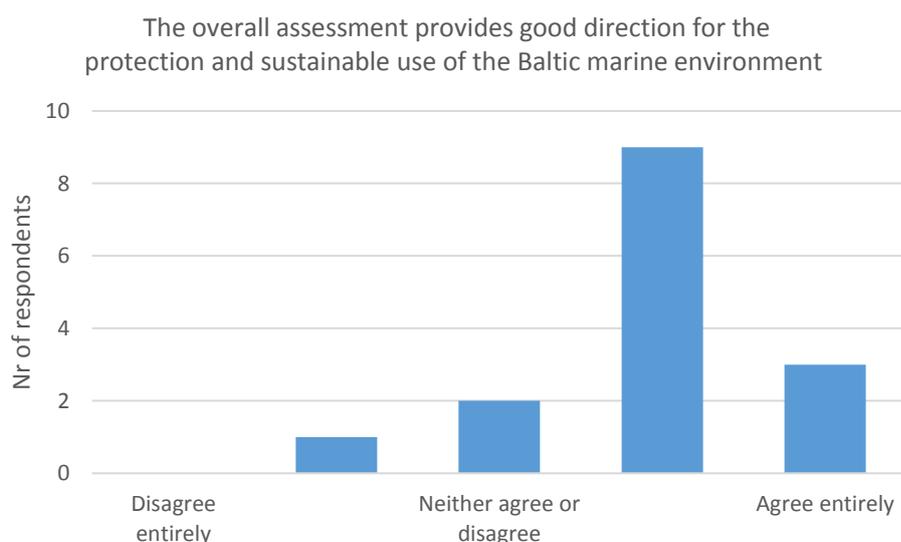


Figure 1. Response to the question “The overall assessment provides good direction for the protection and sustainable use of the Baltic marine environment”

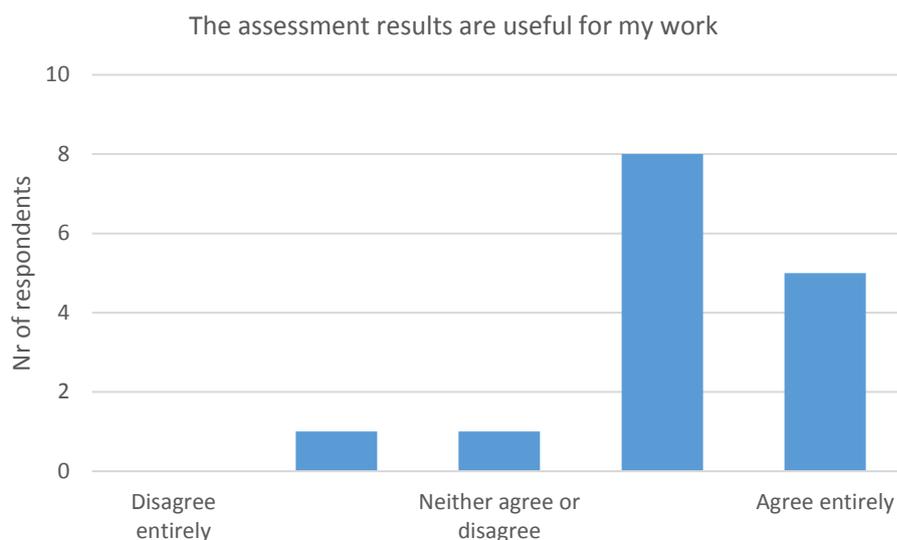


Figure 2. Response to the question “The assessment results are useful for my work”.

What are its main weaknesses?

The majority of responses on weaknesses of the report are related to limited coverage of data. Indeed, although a vast dataset has been used, there are evident gaps for specific species, pressures, sub-basins and countries. These weaknesses are also demonstrated in the respondents view on how well the report covers information on pressures and their impact: 60% agrees unreservedly that the assessment sufficiently covers existing and emerging pressures on the marine environment (Figure 3) and only 47% that it sufficiently covers problems associated with the pressures (Figure 4).

Another data related issue that is raised is the ‘age’ of data where in particular the data on fish stocks is highlighted as being rapidly outdated due to the dynamics of fish stocks, thus underlining the need of interim update of results between main HELCOM assessments.

The information on decrease in pressures on the Baltic Sea and signs of improvement in some sub-basins are highlighted as important for motivation by sector organizations. Several respondents would however like for the report to include a clearer explanation as to why the effects of reduced pressures are not yet seen in the results of the integrated status assessments.

The respondents have also highlighted a number of elements that they would have liked to see more of, for example:

- information on several additional sectors and activities with current limited information e.g. transport, tourism, recreational fisheries, fisheries,
- measures still needed to achieve the goals of the BSAP and way forward,
- a more comprehensive comparison with the initial HELCOM holistic assessment,
- more explanation on internal nutrient cycling,
- reflection on the HELCOM/OSPAR approach and why the HELCOM and OSPAR assessments are different in the Kattegat area.

The lack of indicators for some topics is also noted and stressed as important to finalize as soon as possible, e.g. on the number of drowned mammals and birds in fishing gear, cumulative impacts on benthic biotopes, and marine litter.

Quotes on main weaknesses:

“There are significant data gaps and a lack of time series data which makes it difficult to assess the effectiveness of the management measures applied since the last assessment”

“In parts it not comprehensive enough, data for many species or sub basins are missing and it is not always explained why the data is missing, some important indicators are not operational yet”

“Lack of analysis of regional environmental policy impact on progress towards good environmental status”

“Missed opportunity to outline what actions should be done in the future to achieve the original goals of the BSAP”

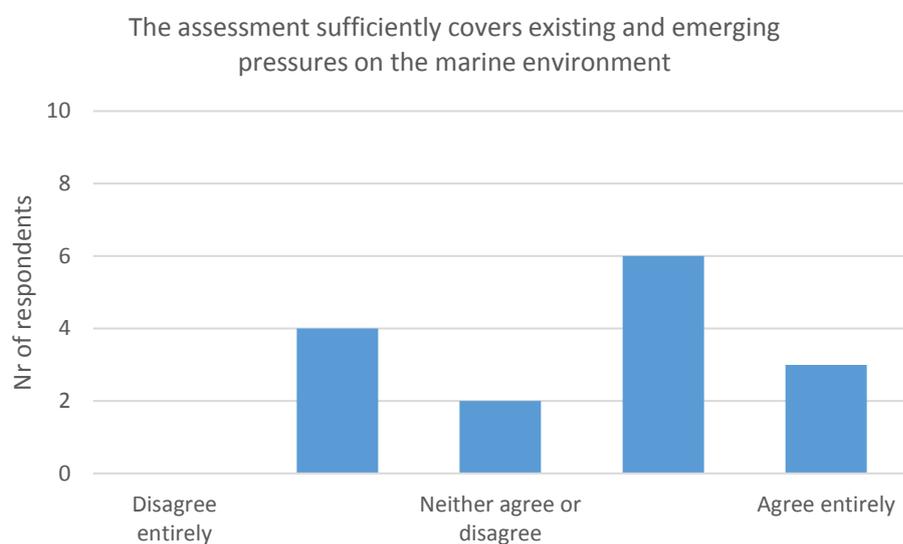


Figure 3. Responses to the question “The assessment sufficiently covers existing and emerging pressures on the marine environment”

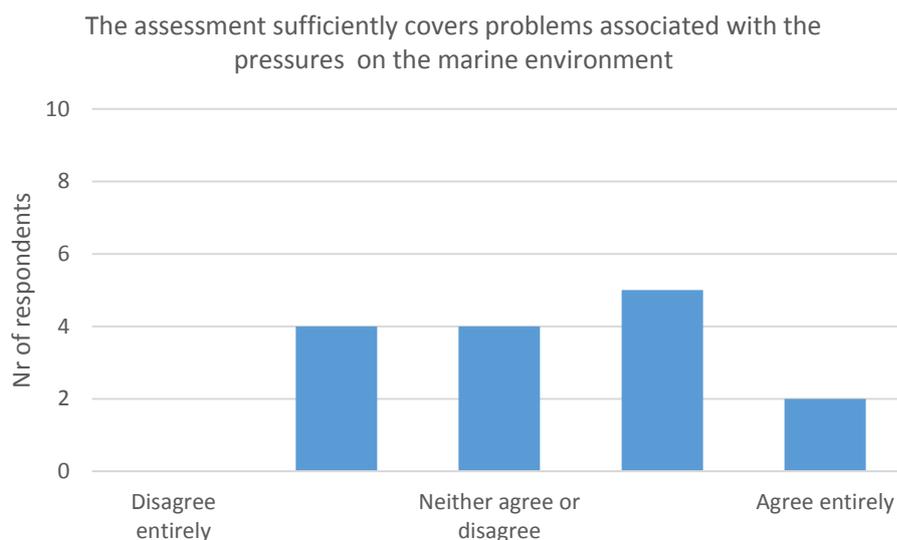


Figure 4. Responses to the question “The assessment sufficiently covers problems associated with the pressures on the marine environment”

Communication of results

Several respondents find that the report is well balanced in terms of use of text and illustrations and 93% of the respondents (all except one) find that the language of the report is clear and comprehensible (Figure 5). Regarding the overall success of communicating the results the views are somewhat divided as indicated between different category of respondents; organizations where the review is likely to have been carried out by persons with scientific background are predominantly positive, while organisations involved in e.g. policy and sector activities find that illustrations are sometimes complex and that the textual parts could be shortened. To develop a separate summary for policymakers and to provide more concise key messages has been proposed by several respondents.

One respondent is of the view that a main weakness of the report is that problems are not spelled out with sufficient clarity thus making it difficult for the reader to understand the current status and how far the Baltic Sea is from achieving good status. Another respondent highlights that the objective narrative invites to a collaborative approach.

Quotes related to the communication of results:

“The report is successful in combining the data used with reader-friendly illustrations, figures and graphics. It gives a solid understanding of the analysis without long texts”.

“There is a great deal of text which can be rather overwhelming. Perhaps more pictures/graphics in the main part could keep people more engaged”

“The report can contain conclusions, a summary or a separate fact sheet for policymakers”

“The neutral and cautious tone of the informative chapters in the beginning seems out of place, as the aim of the BSAP and the HOLAS is to highlight the current situation and give guidance how to improve the state of the Baltic Sea”

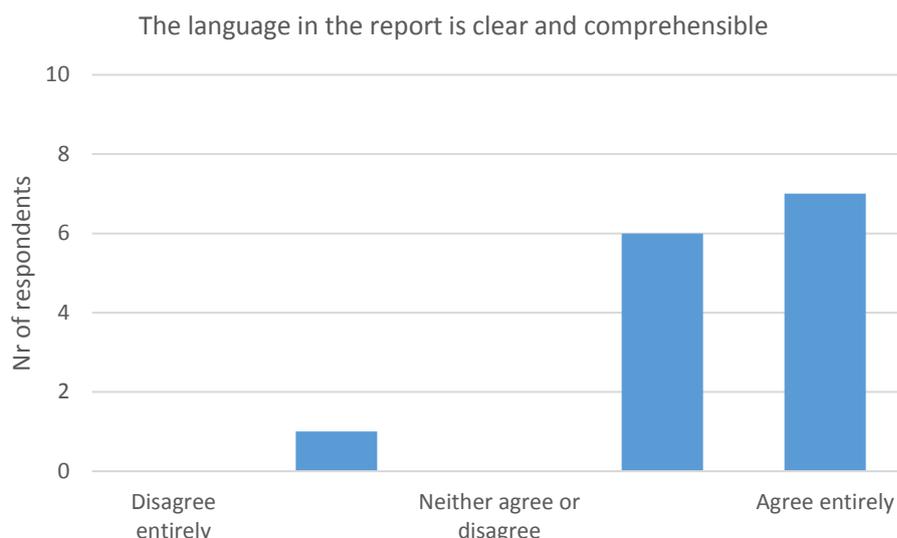


Figure 5. Responses to the questions “The language in the report is clear and comprehensible.

If a new, Third Holistic Assessment were to be carried out in a few years, what should that assessment do differently?

To this question, numerous proposals on what to include in the next assessment have been provided. Considering the main weaknesses expressed, to improve availability of data has been highlighted as an obvious task for future. Other proposals for a future assessment include to;

- ensure comparability of results between assessment periods so that improvements can be assessed,
- put more emphasis on implementation of necessary measures,
- relate results to the delivery of SDG objectives and describe the extent to which the region, contributes to SDG14 and other relevant goals,
- provide linkages to EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region,
- rank pressures and impacts clearly,
- focus on pressures and impacts of climate change on biodiversity and the marine environment that could prevent achievement of a good environmental status of the Baltic Sea,
- focus more on the results and leave out some of the background/enrichment information and highlight even more the key findings,
- regional reporting of relevant indicators from the Contracting Parties to UN custodian agencies and facilitate joint implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

To remedy that data is quickly getting old, it is also proposed to set up a supplementary website, where indicator evaluations and associated information are provided in "living" tables, updated frequently during the years between Holistic Assessment.

One respondent proposes that the next HELCOM holistic assessment could include a "get involved"-button during the assessment stage to clarify how stakeholders can contribute and share ideas.

Further use of consultation responses

In addition to the general comments on the content of the report many valuable comments have been provided on how illustrations and communication of results can be improved as well as concrete proposals

to revise the report. These comments will be considered by the HOLAS II core team and those that cannot be accommodated in the finalization of the 'State of the Baltic Sea' report will be noted for the future.

The possibility for stakeholders to comment on the draft is positively mentioned by several respondents and several organizations has furthermore indicated specific willingness to continue the cooperation with HELCOM.

Annex 1. Recipients of the invitation to the regional consultation on the HELCOM State of the Baltic Sea report, first version 2017

Organizations who provided their response are underlined.

HELCOM observers (57)

Intergovernmental Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans of the Baltic and North Sea (ASCOBANS)
 Expert Group on Sustainable Development- Baltic 30 - CBSS
 Baltic Pilotage Authorities Commission (BPAC)
 Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC)
Baltic Sea States Sub-regional Cooperation (BSSSC)
 Black Sea Commission (BSC)
 Bonn Agreement
 The Great Lakes Commission
Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) of UNESCO
 International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)
 International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES)
 International Maritime Organization (IMO)
 Oslo and Paris Commissions (OSPAR)
African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (UNEP/AEWA)
United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)
 United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UN/ECE)
 World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe
 World Meteorological Organization
Baltic Farmers' Forum on Environment (BFFE)
 Baltic Operational Oceanographic System - BOOS
 Baltic Ports Organisation (BPO)
Baltic Sea Advisory Council (BSAC)
 Baltic Sea Forum (BSF)
BirdLife International
 BONUS Baltic Organizations' Network for Funding Science (BONUS EEIG)
 The European Chemical Industry Council (CEFIC)
Coalition Clean Baltic (CCB)
 Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions of Europe - Baltic Sea Commission (CPMR)
 European Anglers Alliance (EAA)
European Boating Association (EBA)
 European Chlor-Alkali Industry (EURO CHLOR)
 European Community Shipowners' Association (ECSA)
 Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA Europe)
 European Dredging Association (EuDA)
 European Network of Freshwater Research Organizations (EurAqua)
 Fertilizers Europe
 European Sea Ports Organisation (ESPO)
 The Coastal and Marine Union (EUCC)
 EUREAU (European Federation of National Associations of Water and Wastewater Services)
 Federation of European Aquaculture Producers (FEAP)
 Federation of European Port Operators (Feport)
Global Water Partnership Central and Eastern Europe
 Interferry
 INTERTANKO
 International Association of Oil and Gas Producers (IOGP)
International Chamber of Shipping (ICS)
 International Dialogue on Underwater Munitions (IDUM)
 John Nurminen Foundation (JNF)
Local Authorities International Environmental Organisation (KIMO International)
 Low Impact Fishers of Europe (LIFE)

Marine Stewardship Council (MSC)

Nordic Hunters' Alliance (NHA)

Oceana

PlasticsEurope

Sea Alarm Foundation

Union of the Baltic Cities (UBC)

World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)

Additional stakeholders cooperating with HELCOM (12)

Nordic Council of Ministers

Arctic Council

UN Environment –Mediterranean Action Plan (Barcelona Convention cooperation)

European Environment Agency

European Chemicals Agency

EUSBSR policy areas and horizontal actions coordinators (one PA Coordinator responded)

VASAB

The Baltic Sea Fisheries Forum (BALTFISH)

World Maritime University

Interreg Secretariat

Nordic Environment Finance Corporation (NEFCO)

Nordic Investment Bank (NIB)

Annex 2. Questions posed in the regional consultation

With open-ended response

- What are the main strengths of the Second Holistic Assessment of the Baltic Sea?
- What are its main weaknesses?
- If a new, Third Holistic Assessment were to be carried out in a few years, what should that assessment do differently?

With given response options

To what extent do you agree with the following? 1 = Disagree entirely, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 5 = Agree entirely

- The overall assessment provides good direction for the protection and sustainable use of the Baltic marine environment.
- The assessment results are useful for my work.
- The assessment sufficiently covers existing and emerging pressures on the marine environment.
- The assessment sufficiently covers problems associated with the pressures on the marine environment.
- The language in the report is clear and comprehensible. It is easy to find what I am looking for in the PDF report.
- The State of the Baltic Sea website is a good complement to the PDF report.
- It is easy to find what I am looking for on the website.