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Background

This document provides an overview of the marine litter issue casuistic in the Baltic Sea to serve as background information for the Contracting Parties in preparation of the upcoming HELCOM Ministerial Meeting.

Action requested

The Meeting is invited to take note of the information and make use of it as appropriate when considering topics and possible outcomes of the upcoming HELCOM Ministerial Meeting.

Background document on marine litter

A large number of measures have been undertaken by HELCOM over the past years, which directly or indirectly can be expected to have resulted in reducing amounts of marine litter. The HELCOM Ministerial Meeting on 3 October 2013 in Copenhagen decided on the need to develop a regional action plan on marine litter by 2015 at the latest with the aim of achieving a **significant quantitative reduction of marine litter by 2025, compared to 2015**, and to prevent harm to the coastal and marine environment. The **Action Plan** has been adopted as **HELCOM Recommendation 36/1**.

The regional action plan for marine litter aims at concrete measures for prevention and reduction of marine litter from its main sources; development of common indicators and associated targets related to quantities, composition, sources and pathways of marine litter; and identification of the socio-economic and biological impacts of marine litter.

Work is ongoing to establish regional monitoring for marine litter as part of the HELCOM Monitoring and Assessment Strategy. Currently no coordinated monitoring of marine litter exists in the region. However, there are various national monitoring programmes in some countries concerning macroscopic litter on the beach, water surface, on the seafloor and in biota, and microlitter in the surface water and sediments. The first HELCOM marine litter monitoring guidelines, related to beach litter, are under preparation, aimed to be finalized for the next State and Conservation meeting.

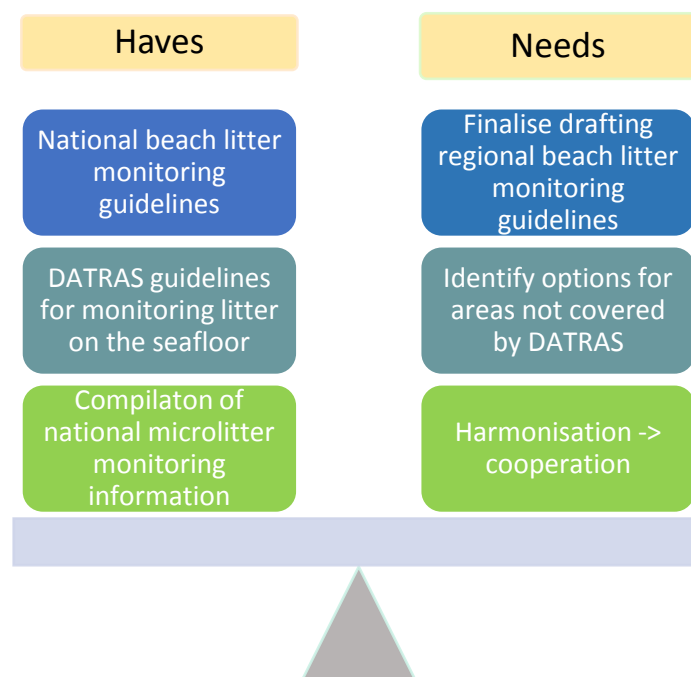


Figure 1 – Proposal of haves & needs on the status of the marine litter monitoring in the Baltic Sea. [DATRAS](#) is the Database of Trawl Surveys hosted by ICES.

The currently available national data and information is being compiled to define a **baseline for beach litter and explore possibilities to define such a baseline for litter on the seafloor for the Baltic Sea**. This work, initiated as part of the regular activities of HELCOM through the HELCOM EN-Marine Litter is currently supported by the EU co-financed HELCOM SPICE project. Once the baselines are set, it will be possible to follow up on the Ministerial commitment to achieve significant quantitative reduction of marine litter by 2025.

The available national beach litter data has been grouped into categories according to the type of material the marine litter item is made of. A data call has been recently launched (deadline 1 September 2017) to collect raw beach litter data aiming at identifying the top items present in the Baltic Sea beaches. These data may subsequently be used not only for establishing of a baseline but also for establishing reduction targets for items of special concern (e.g. cotton butts).

There are differences between the existing master lists for coding litter items found at beaches (i.e. EU, OSPAR, UNEP or national master list). Further, a data analysis process still needs to be developed and agreed, however, the HELCOM EN-Marine Litter is currently working on this issue. MSFD Technical Group on Marine Litter (TG ML) is currently reviewing the EU master list and also working on the definition of a baseline for beach litter through testing of different scenarios with real data. A progress report on the testing of the scenarios will be presented at the TG ML meeting (9-10 June 2017, in Gdansk, Poland) and the EU guidance for baseline setting is planned to be finalized by early 2018. In HELCOM, a first proposal for baselines at different geographical scales (regional, sub-regional and national) is to be drafted as part of the SPICE project by the end of June 2017. Subsequently, the work will continue as part of the regular activities of the HELCOM EN-Marine Litter.

Options for setting up a **regional database for beach litter and microlitter** are being explored within the SPICE project with the aim to make a proposal by the end of the year.

National data on **litter on the seafloor** is already compiled through the **DATRAS database** hosted by ICES. This database contains information on trawl hauls where litter on the seafloor is currently monitored (twice a year), which is all Baltic Sea countries except for Finland and Russia. While use of combined monitoring for fish stock assessment and marine litter assessment is a cost efficient solution, the location of trawling stations is set by requirements for fish stock surveys (through the so called “Baltic International Trawl Surveys - BITS protocol”) influencing the representativity in the litter assessment. Furthermore, any future changes in the fish stock assessment programme will also have an influence on the assessment of marine litter. It is therefore important that national experts involved in the design of the BITS programme are aware of the needs for marine litter monitoring. Furthermore, the BITS programme covers stations with a depth ranging from 13 to 118 m and does not give information on the amounts of litter on the seafloor at shallow depths. Alternative methods for monitoring marine litter in shallow waters and areas not covered by the programme exist (i.a using ROVs/video) but require further testing in the Baltic before proposing regional implementation.

The work has progressed to develop HELCOM indicators on marine litter. There are now two **pre-core indicators (on beach litter and litter on the seafloor)** as well as one **candidate indicator (on microlitter in the water column)**. The microlitter indicator is at an early development stage as national protocols are not harmonized. A workshop to fill in knowledge gaps in microlitter sampling matrix, sampling and analytical methods etc. is planned for November 2017, as part of the SPICE project. No Baltic indicator **on ingestion and entanglement** has been developed yet. HELCOM follows the recently started INDICIT Project (“Implementation of the indicator of marine litter on sea turtles and biota in Regional Sea Conventions and Marine Strategy Framework Directive Areas”) and there is an evident gap to identify biota relevant for such an indicator in the Baltic Sea region.

Based on this recent work it has been possible, for the first time, to cover marine litter as a descriptive section in the “State of the Baltic Sea” report. The aim is to advance common indicators on marine litter and associated threshold values for future qualitative assessments of marine litter. It is foreseen that the update of HOLAS II in 2018 could include additional quantitative information on beach litter and litter on the seafloor.

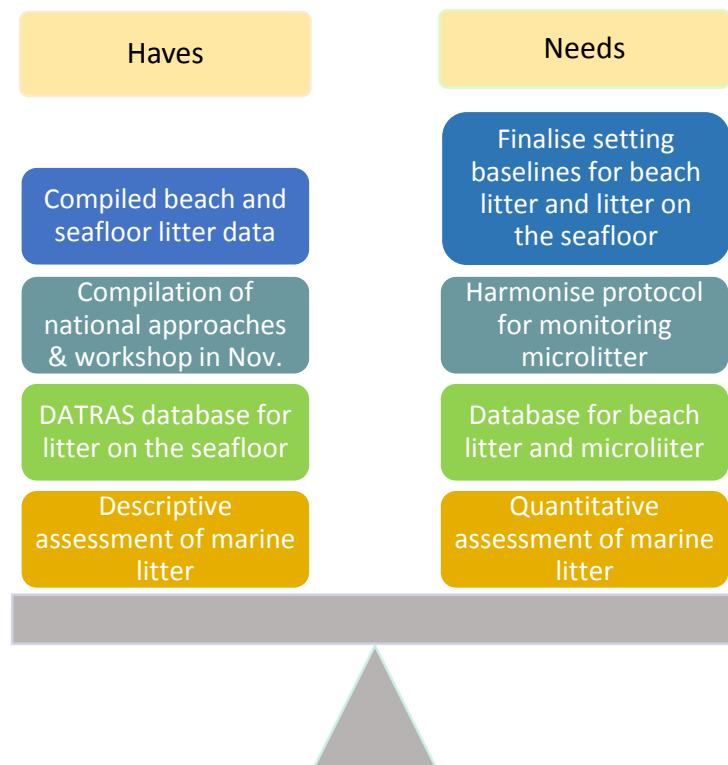


Figure 2 – Proposal of haves & needs on marine litter indicators.

The high-level segment during HELCOM 38-2017 pointed out the need to speed up the implementation of the **regional action plan for marine litter**. The implementation of the plan is a priority of the EU Chairmanship in HELCOM. According to the EU Chairmanship's work plan the actions of 'RAP ML' Recommendation 36/1 are to be developed into measures, and more specifically:

- Reporting on implementation of RAP ML is carried out, utilising the ongoing follow-up organised by the leads of the individual actions and the mapping progress made around the Baltic Sea.
- RAP ML Actions are developed into a first set of concrete national and regional measures based on results of new studies, stakeholders' input and experiences from countries, other sea regions and relevant international work. The scale of micropollutants problem in waste water effluents is identified and possible measures are considered, including but not limited to microplastics.

A regular follow-up of the agreed regional actions in RAP ML is organized within HELCOM EN-Marine Litter and Pressure working group, utilizing the HELCOM marine litter website and workspace for sharing information and reporting progress. Twelve out of the thirty regional actions within the plan still do not have any lead.

Based on the regular follow-up some adjustments to the action plan and further actions could already be foreseen, such as an assessment of sources of primary and secondary microplastics in the region or review and possible revision of HELCOM Recommendations addressing different issues related to storm water and wetland management so they would also cover microplastics. The Contracting Parties have been invited to offer a lead for the revision of Recommendations in PRESSURE 7-2017. It is also worth mentioning the ongoing work on removal of abandoned, lost or discarded fishing gear in the Baltic Sea region: a methodology for designating derelict fishing gear hot spot areas is under development, as well as a map on the potential locations of underwater objects, shipwrecks and hooks, and a methodology on retrieval of fishing gear has already been developed.

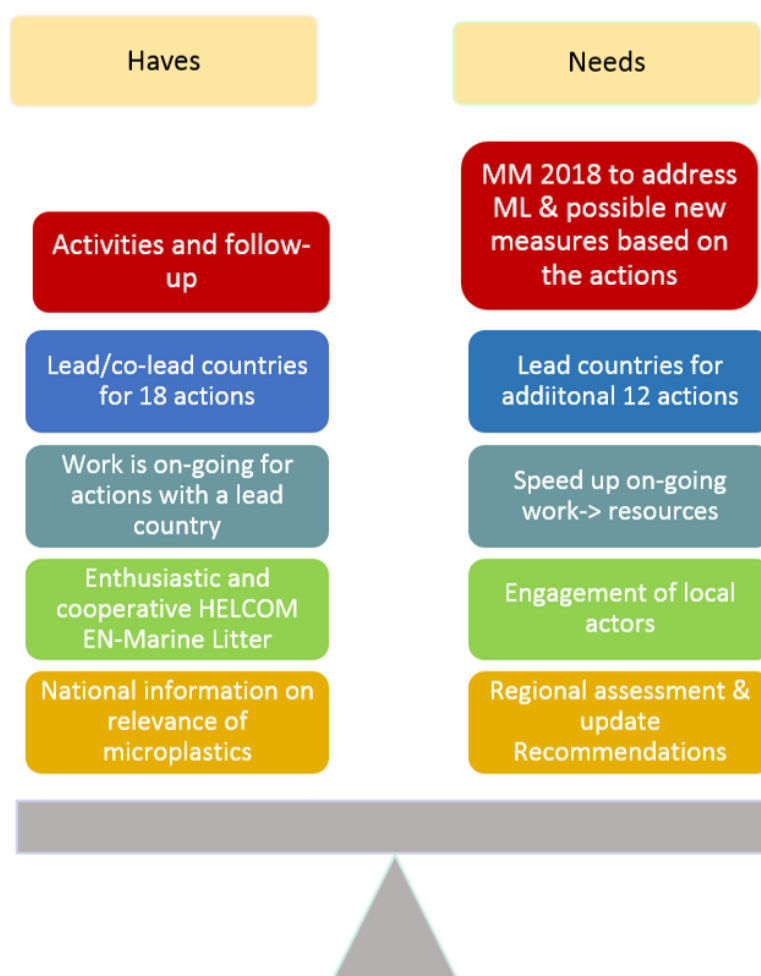


Figure 3 – Proposal of haves & needs on the status of the implementation of the Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter.

Many developments related to marine litter take place at **international level**. HELCOM cooperates with and contributes to the work under the United Nations Environment Program (UN-Environment) and other fora such as:

- review of UNEP publications like the report on marine plastic debris and microplastics – Global lessons and research to inspire action and guide policy change (2016),
- contribution to the assessment of the effectiveness of relevant international, regional and subregional governance strategies and approaches to combat marine plastic litter and microplastics (as per UNEP/EA.2/Res.11 para 21, attending the workshop held on 29-31 March 2017 in Nairobi, Kenya),
- presentation of the status of the implementation of the HELCOM plan on marine litter in the G7 Workshop "Mainstreaming the work of the Regional Sea Programmes towards the better implementation of the G7 Action Plan and the achievement of the global commitments on marine litter" (Rome, Italy, 20-21 April 2017),
- ongoing informal cooperation between OSPAR, UNEP-MEDPOL and HELCOM, including annual meetings since 2014, aiming to identify possibilities for cooperation and synergies in implementation of respective action plans on marine litter. The next meeting is envisaged in autumn.

The upcoming scoping study on Processes Relevant to the Implementation of the OSPAR and HELCOM Regional Action Plans on Marine Litter commissioned to EUNOMIA by Sweden and Netherlands could be utilized to focus future work of HELCOM with regard to marine litter in such a way that HELCOM contributes most where there are the greatest regional needs and where it can create added value.