

First Baltic Sea NGO Forum Lübeck, 28-29 May 2001

Convened under the auspices of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS)
by the German CBSS Presidency in collaboration with the Land of Schleswig-Holstein and a
Preparatory Committee consisting of 15 NGOs

Conclusions by the Preparatory Committee

1. The First Baltic Sea NGO Forum, convened in Lübeck on 28 – 29 May 2001, provided a platform for 151 NGO representatives from 10 countries of the Baltic Sea region to discuss the substance of their work and to develop joint goals and visions as a framework for their activities. At the same time it gave an opportunity for a dialogue between NGOs and Government representatives from the area on future perspectives of NGO–GO co-operation. The Forum appreciated the input from the NGO Conference in Copenhagen on 24–25 March 2001. The Copenhagen Declaration (the Copenhagen NGO Initiative) served as a point of departure for several Forum workshops.
2. A vibrant, broadly based and well-linked NGO community is considered to be essential for **further democratic development of the region**. NGOs play an important role of watchdogs holding authorities accountable to civil society. For the citizens of all CBSS countries NGOs provide an important opportunity to express their general and specific interests through active participation in their respective societies. NGOs can provide decision-makers with information, which can be important and relevant before adopting decisions. As participants in the political debate in the CBSS countries, NGOs can help to reach solutions in contested issues, which satisfy and reconcile diverging interests. A specific asset of NGOs is their capacity for timely reaction to the interests and opinions of citizens and for delivering relevant messages to the various audiences. NGOs have the ability to act as intermediaries between the society and decision-makers and mobilise political and social engagement of individuals and groups, which is necessary for i.a. sustainable development. Within this context, NGOs can contribute significantly to the achievement of goals defined for the Baltic Sea region i.a. in the Kalmar Action Programme and the final documents of Baltic Sea States Summits and CBSS Ministerial Meetings. It is therefore necessary and useful for national authorities to learn how to co-operate with the NGOs' and use their great potential, their knowledge and expertise on specific subjects to develop a modern civil society.
3. The **Baltic Sea region** offers tremendous opportunities and already existing structures for a democratic sustainable development of its societies. These include the intergovernmental co-operation within the CBSS, with one of its priorities on democratic development and with specialised structures such as the Working Group on Democratic Institutions and the CBSS Commissioner on Democratic Development, the Baltic 21 process with its broad participation of NGOs, the long tradition of Ombudsmen in the region and the established role acquired by NGOs in some Baltic Sea countries. In recent years NGOs in the region have formed various kinds of networks. These include close co-operation in the fields of women's rights, environment and youth exchange. Despite these encouraging developments the relevant actors have not yet fully exploited this potential. There is a need for improved co-operation among NGOs at regional and national levels. NGOs could gain strength if they join forces and better understand the differences in and among nation states.
4. **Access to information** is part of freedom of expression, together with an active citizenry, and thus one of the preconditions for ensuring a vibrant and well-informed democracy. NGOs demand of

the governments to respect and comply with their obligations following national and international standards, promoting openness in state affairs thereby assisting the formation of transparent and responsible governments in the region. They remind the governments of their obligation to provide for unhindered access to information, which i.a. contributes greatly to environmental safety of all countries. The NGOs appeal to the CBSS Member States to engage in constructive dialogue with the civil society, thereby establishing a regional platform for access to, and exchange of, information. The need for access to information cuts across all sectors of society, and there is therefore a need for exploring the possibility of setting up broad and interactive information networks within the entire Baltic Sea region, which would help foster open societies by means of monitoring and providing training where needed, both for the civil society and state structures.

5. **Participation** of civil society is not only a matter of involvement in the political process - it also comprises social integration and the fight against social exclusion. Processes of social and political exclusion are mainly influenced by the individual political and social setting of the country concerned. However, there is a clear regional dimension to these questions. Growing economic and political interdependence in the Baltic Sea area can play a positive role in fighting political and social exclusion region-wide. The NGOs call on the CBSS Member States to make the realisation of **all human rights** – civil, political, economic, social and cultural – a top priority on their political agenda. They ask the CBSS to commission a study on the actual situation of economic, social and cultural rights. The NGOs demand the guarantee and respect of minority rights and the participation of all groups, including young people. The human treatment of refugees and migrants and combating the trafficking in women are important aspects of a broad understanding of human rights. People seeking security on their way to Western Europe are cast off the Baltic Sea region. The governments of the countries bordering the Baltic Sea deal with the refugee problem in the region only in the context of organised criminality and/or illegal migration (Task Force on Organised Crime). The Member States of the CBSS play an important role as target states, states of origin and states of transit of trafficked women. Trafficked women are working in slave-like conditions across the Baltic Sea states, unable to leave the brothels. The NGOs wish to be invited to the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference in Greifswald in September 2001 to present their analysis and priorities for action in the area. In continuation of the co-operation process, NGOs will meet on the same issue in November 2001 to develop regional networking (www.baltic-refugee.net). The NGOs ask the Baltic Sea states to review their present policies on migration, follow strictly international standards and ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of Migrants. They call for minimum legal standards of migrants' rights in the region as well as for the establishment of structures for social support of migrants.
6. NGOs in the region were the early stewards and still keep high on their agenda the **sustainability concept** and the concept of equal environmental space. The Agenda 21 for the Baltic Sea Region (Baltic 21) as the main instrument of the CBSS to implement the integrative approach of sustainable development is in general very much welcomed by the NGOs. It is a new platform for the dialogue, where the different actors are recognised and can keep their integrity. It is a new level of developed democracy, where dialogue replaces conflict. However, the entire Baltic 21 process with its eight sectors of agriculture, energy, industry, forestry, transport, fishery, tourism and education must be fully recognised and empowered by the CBSS and its governments. Today, the implementation of the proposed actions remains completely insufficient. The Baltic 21 process must invest in concrete measures and provide the different sectors with adequate support. To facilitate successful implementation of the Baltic 21, close co-operation with national activities of sustainable development and a public oriented marketing of the Baltic 21 process are recommended. The NGOs expect that the Baltic 21 process will be the forum for all stakeholders that reconciles the challenge of sustainable development in the Baltic Sea Region. It is of great concern that the Baltic Sea region is in many respects faced with immediate and increasing ecological risks. Regarding the factors that constitute threats to its natural environment, the Baltic Sea is the best investigated sea in the world. Political decisions for its protection that need to be taken will consequently be based on solid ground. Main urgent political decisions should with

priority focus on environmentally sound transport policies, an agricultural policy that decreases the eutrophication of the Baltic Sea, sustainable fisheries policies, integrated coastal zone management and protection based on natural dynamics and public participation, sustainable tourism policy and full and immediate financing of the HELCOM Joint Comprehensive Action Programme. Three immediate threats to the Baltic Sea ecosystem are eutrophication, over-fishing, and shipping. The NGOs appeal to the ministerial conference in Hamburg that firm actions will be taken in the EU pre-accession process, the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), and other fora in order to eliminate these threats. An environmental threat of a special dimension for the whole Baltic Sea region is the nuclear power, where the NGOs want to stress The Copenhagen Declaration of a nuclear free zone. An immediate problem in Russia is the lack of openness and transparency, which leaves the public with fear and suspicions that too big safety risks are taken by the Russian nuclear industry.

7. International youth work is a classic field of NGO based **youth co-operation** and has already developed institutional structures in the Baltic Sea region through the Baltic Youth Forum and the Baltic Sea Secretariat for Youth Affairs. The NGOs agreed that those organisations are important for ensuring the continuity in the work in the youth field. The principal goal of Baltic Sea youth co-operation is to develop, among young people, a common regional identity and understanding of the common cultural heritage while respecting the cultural diversity of the region. Furthermore, it aims to improve the living conditions of young people and the development of their potentials. The aim is also to promote an active participation of young people in the development of democratic and pluralistic civil societies in the CBSS Member States. The NGOs particularly focused on the topics of participation, continuity, and training. The idea to develop a Baltic Sea trainer pool was raised. The youth NGOs also raised concerns about the difficulties to get young persons involved in traditional NGO youth work. To ensure youth participation, the NGOs have to be more flexible and less structured. The NGOs request the Governments of the CBSS Member countries to increasingly recognise the importance of young people in society and give young people the opportunity to pursue a youth policy with a comprehensive approach and to make youth issues a cross-sectional topic within governmental policies.
8. **International Voluntary Service** is an important contribution to the civil society in the Baltic Sea region. The big potential for International Voluntary Service should be used especially by the NGOs in the Baltic Sea region while respecting the broad variety of forms of volunteering. Young people of all CBSS countries must be able to participate. Networking and the support of networks should reach out to increasing numbers of participants. Governments of the CBSS Member countries should ensure an appropriate legal status for volunteers and agree on liberal visa regulations.
9. **Co-operation between governments and non-governmental organisations** should be based on mutual understanding and equal dialogue. This includes free access to information, transparency and monitoring of GO and NGO activities and providing an NGO-supportive legal framework in the CBSS Member countries, including the right to institute proceedings. The main issues of such co-operation are the strengthening of civil society, sustainable development and an enhanced synergy with the EU Northern Dimension. The influence of NGOs on the government decision-making process should be strengthened and made more effective, including the transfer and learning of best practices. The legal and political basis of NGOs should be clarified in order to make them eligible for government funding. The NGOs stressed that a) priority has to be given to a more intensive dialogue with the aim to communicate priorities of the different partners and to identify options for joint programmes; b) the CBSS has an important role to play in improving the flow of information about, and channel applications for, funding to international programmes (EU Northern Dimension); c) the need to identify a national contact organisation to act as member and facilitator in an international NGO Forum and communicate with the CBSS in an effective dialogue. NGOs agree that national NGO strategies and models for their organisation are required, using the already existing structures. NGOs realise that funding (thematic topics, events, as well as organisational support) will have to come primarily from national sources or multi-lateral

programmes. NGOs put forward the idea to mandate the Preparatory Committee as a focal point and intermediate facilitating structure during the formation process of an international NGO structure in the Baltic Sea region.

Final recommendations

The Baltic Sea region offers a unique setting and exceptional potentials for NGO-related co-operation within and among the discussed subject fields. Subject areas with already existing co-operation structures and a potential and need for further developments include gender equality, social rights and conditions and cultural exchange. To exploit these potentials fully, NGOs might establish a Baltic Sea area-wide network to foster information exchange, further the development of joint goals for action as commenced during the Lübeck NGO Forum and provide a better-organised link towards government-level Baltic Sea co-operation. It is recommended to convene, on an appropriately regular basis, NGO Forums, which could address CBSS Ministerial meetings. NGOs could make use of the existing regional institutions, namely the CBSS Commissioner on Democratic Development and the CBSS Working Group on Democratic Institutions. A good basis for such an international umbrella might be an improved networking at the national level.