



III BALTIC SEA NGO FORUM

8 – 11 May 2003, in the City of Turku, Finland

Conclusions

The Third Baltic Sea NGO Forum was held in Turku, Finland 8 – 11 May 2003 under the patronage of Mrs Tarja Halonen, the President of Finland, and as a highlight of the Finnish Presidency of the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS). The main theme of the Forum was “Northern Dimension - Human Dimension? Strengthening of the Civil Society in the Baltic Sea Region.”

The Turku Forum brought together over 400 representatives of NGOs and other civil society organisations from all countries participating in the Baltic Sea cooperation and adjacent areas. Also a large number of representatives of public authorities - intergovernmental and national as well as regional and local - contributed to the success of the Forum.

The Forum was cross-sectoral and brought together representatives of NGOs working in different fields, including environmental questions, women’s rights, human rights, various social and health issues, culture, and youth, as well as trade unions and national umbrella organisations. Both the geographical spread as well as the diversity of organisations present in the Forum gave their flavour to the outcome of the Forum.

An international preparatory committee representing nominated NGO contact points in all countries around the Baltic Sea planned the Turku Forum. The Finnish Organising Committee, consisting of a great number of NGOs in the host country, had the coordinating responsibility.

The Turku Forum is a direct continuation of the process started by the Copenhagen NGO initiative, which led to the organising of **the NGO Conference in Copenhagen on 24 - 25 of March in 2001**. After Copenhagen, **the First Baltic Sea NGO Forum was organised 28 - 29 of May in 2001 in Lubeck** during the German CBSS Presidency. The Lubeck Forum not only served as a meeting point for NGOs but also offered an opportunity for dialogue between NGOs and public authorities in the Baltic Sea Region.

The Second Baltic Sea NGO Forum was held in St.Petersburg on 19 - 20 of April in 2002 as a direct follow-up to the previous Fora. Participating NGOs confirmed the intention to organise Baltic Sea NGO Forums on an annual basis, under the auspices of the rotating Presidency of the CBSS.

The **Third Baltic Sea NGO Forum in Turku** was a meeting point for non-governmental organisations from the countries surrounding the Baltic Sea. It provided a platform for representatives of NGOs working in different sectors of the society to discuss the substance of their work and to develop joint goals and visions. The aim of the Forum was to strengthen the civil society in the region by offering the NGOs in the Baltic Sea countries the opportunity to meet and develop new networks.

This process of annual Forums gives continuity to the contacts between NGOs in the region and helps to create a basis for shared values and a common language for dialogue and action.

In addition, the Forum served also as a useful platform for dialogue between civil society organisations and various public authorities. We believe that by open discussion, we can reach a mutual understanding of the role of NGOs in today's society, and to build co-operation, which is beneficial to the society as a whole.

Co-operation in the Baltic Sea Region is gaining in importance in the enlarging European Union. It is essential that the European Union enlargement process does not build new barriers, but increases the cooperation between countries of the region. It is very important that in this process Russia is not isolated and left outside of the European space but is actively engaged in many international and regional programmes of cooperation at the level of both governments and NGOs. In the spirit of Baltic regional cooperation we stress the importance of developing a multitude of trans-boundary joint projects across the region. It is these activities that are essential to giving life and meaning to the motto of our Forum "Northern Dimension - Human Dimension."

Strengthening of the civil society is an integral and important part of the enlargement process. Strong and independent civil society organisations are an indispensable element of the European societies, today and tomorrow. They enable participation of citizens, provide useful services but also function as critical watchdogs of public authorities when need be. Without a lively civil society, democracy cannot function properly.

The Forum also emphasises the necessity to include civil society in the discussions concerning the Northern Dimension, the need to emphasise its human dimension. Further, the Forum emphasises the role of NGOs in the process of enhancing and supporting peace, security, and sustainable development, human rights and all aspects related to human security in the region.

The Forum emphasised the great significance of the work by the CBSS Commissioner on Democratic Development in the field of enhancing democracy and human rights in the region. The Forum calls for the strengthening and further development of activities in these important fields and asks the CBSS also to include the Baltic Sea NGO Network and other civil society organisations in the work.

II Common values of the NGO cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region

The NGO community in the Baltic Sea Region is very diversified in its outlook. NGOs are active in various fields of activities; they differ in size, resources, orientation and goals. Furthermore, the situation in various countries differs greatly and influences the operational environment of civil society organisations.

However, civil society organisations participating in the Baltic NGO Fora share common values on which they build their networking and co-operation. We work to promote peace, security, democracy, human rights and sustainable development in the region and beyond it, develop international co-operation to the benefit of all peoples of the region, work for the protection of the Baltic Sea - our common resource that unites us.

Furthermore, we all want to promote the rule of law and democracy, as well as social cohesion, tolerance and pluralism and to end social exclusion in our societies. Human rights - civil and political as well as social economic - including the rights of minorities as well as gender equality, are all vital elements of democratic society. They must be promoted, respected and protected at all levels.

We, participants of the Forum, emphasise that overall strengthening of the civil society organisations, as well as creating of favourable conditions for their functioning, including simple registration procedures, taxation system supporting non-profit character of their work and philanthropic giving, non-interference of public authorities in their work, transparency of public decision-making and access to public information, are all goals which unite us. These conditions are pre-requisites of democratic society and should be guaranteed by our governments by law and practice. NGOs see strong civil society as a vital dimension of and a guarantor for democracy. They are not, and should not be seen, as competitors of the elected democratic structures.

III Theme seminars: main objectives and proposals for measures

The work of the forum was divided into four thematic groups:

Sustainable lifestyle in the Baltic Sea region

Regarding the environmental issues, the Forum urges the CBSS governments to

- sign, ratify and fully implement the Espoo and Aarhus Conventions.
- implement the HELCOM recommendations on Baltic Sea Protected Areas (BSPA). At least 60 % of the BSPAs should be put into force until May 2004.
- to apply the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) for granting the Baltic Sea the status of Particularly Sensitive Sea Area (PSSA) and propose strict regulations for the IMO.
- launch pilot projects on Integrated Coastal Management (ICZM) under equal joint leadership of NGOs and GOs.
- improve the state of region's ecosystems and fisheries by banning driftnets and stopping regulation and damming of rivers that can adversely affect natural values of river valleys.
- initiate moratorium on oil extraction in the Baltic Sea as environmentally, economically and socially dangerous activities. Single hull tankers have to be phased out in the Baltic Sea by year 2005.
- effective implementation of new economic and regulatory instruments, including corporate responsibilities and ecological taxation in order to decouple economic growth from environmental and social degradation. Social and environmental authorities shall be given powers to ensure by these means that global trade cannot compromise human rights, environmental protection or livelihoods of local communities.

Forum participants urge CBSS Prime Ministers to reinforce the Baltic 21 process by setting up a time schedule, a budget line and target values for selected indicators for the agreed sector-specific and cross-sector action plans. Sectoral ministers should ensure adequate high-level input to push sustainable development within their sectors of Baltic21.

From social exclusion to participation

The theme seminar "Social exclusion and NGOs - From Social Exclusion to Participation" gathered more than one hundred participants representing all Baltic Sea Countries. In the first session the following question was raised: How is the concept of social exclusion understood in different countries and who are in greatest risk to be excluded from the society and why? The discussion also took up the theme about the risks that cause social exclusion.

Keynote speakers referred to the problem of definition: social exclusion is a concept the definition of which differs depending on the speaker and is very much cultural related. The speakers agreed,

however, that poverty is the main cause of social exclusion and that it is also the main task of NGOs to find and develop effective means to combat poverty.

It was also stated that at the same time we are facing economic and social problems and spiritual and moral crises.

In the second session of the theme seminar discussed exclusion and inclusion and how participation can be enhanced by NGOs.

The common understanding was that NGOs are needed and the work done by them is very important and helps the people in crisis and in threat to be excluded. Many speakers and participants took up the importance of cooperation between the first, second and the third sectors (NGOs). It was agreed that in the future Fora would provide opportunity for discussions with the other sectors of our societies.

Gender equality and human rights in changing societies

The theme seminar agreed with the words of the Minister for Foreign Affairs Mr. Erkki Tuomioja: "I should like to emphasise that moving towards gender equality is not a technocratic goal – it is a political and social process. It requires a new way of thinking in which the stereotyping of women and men gives way to a new philosophy that regards all people, irrespective of sex, as essential agents of change. CBSS has tried to work as such an agent by proposing the Northern Dimension Action Plan 2004 – 2006 to be gender mainstreamed so that both women and men are equal participants and beneficiaries in its programmes."

Initiatives of the working group:

- CBSS should gender mainstream its all programmes and activities.
- Support and enlarge networking using the existing NGO networks, associations and organisations and their best practises via existing information channels, homepages and newsletters locally, nationally and internationally. Special focus should be on the needs of immigrant women in all countries around the Baltic Sea.
- All governments in the Baltic Sea Region should adopt national action plans to stop violence against women including trafficking in women and children, increase the cooperation between governments nationally and locally and to promote NGOs cross-border cooperation. The NGOs are willing to exchange good practises and they need for that funding as well.

Open Sesame! Promoting transparency in cooperation between NGOs and authorities

The thematic group Open Sesame! Promoting transparency in cooperation between NGOs and authorities emphasised that open contacts and dialogue between civil society actors and authorities as well as open access to the information concerning decision making process are essential for democracy.

The thematic group wants to underline the importance of continuation of the Baltic Sea NGO networking on annual basis. The group wants to see Baltic Sea NGO Forum recognised by the CBSS and asks for support from the CBSS Ministerial Meeting for being able to continue the process: especially the difficult question of financing has to be solved. The CBSS study group of experts should examine conditions for strengthening NGO activities including reviewing the CBSS member states' existing legislation on taxes and other legal provisions of relevance for strengthening the independent financial basis for NGOs.

Cooperation between NGOs and already existing different Baltic Sea organisations should be improved, first of all with the Council of the Baltic Sea States but also with the Baltic Sea States Sub regional Co-operation (BSSSC) and the Union of the Baltic Cities (UBC). Cooperation between all the levels is essential for the stability and democratic development of the Baltic Sea region.

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The Forum expressed its gratitude to all those who by their invaluable support made the Forum possible. In particular the Forum thanks Minister of Foreign Affairs of Finland, Mr. Erkki Tuomioja – who opened the Forum – and the Foreign Ministry of Finland, the CBSS, the City of Turku and the National NGO preparatory committee of Finland for their material support and efforts for the success of the Forum.

Special plenary session on the access to information

At several occasions, the CBSS governments have discussed different aspects pertaining to access to information in and between the member states. It has been announced that governments and NGOs share the conviction that public participation in decision-making, transparency of governance and free access to information provide a strong basement of stable democracies. But to ensure the sustainable follow-up developments of these principles, they are to be made binding for all the parties concerned. Therefore our Forum appeals to all CBSS member states:

- to comply with the principles they have set forth themselves in the previous CBSS documents by bringing their legislation regulating access to non-classified information and practice of its implementation in conformity with international standards and principles, thus promoting openness in state affairs;
- to abolish all excessive secrecy laws;
- to refrain from attempts at restricting public access to Internet;
- to engage in constructive dialogue with civil society by establishing a regional platform for access to and exchange of vital information;
- to issue a joint statement recognizing the linkage between access to information and the state of the environment and to issue a statement recognizing that governments which limit access to environmental information endanger the regional environment;
- to refrain from persecuting journalists and civil activists who expose activities detrimental to environment in the Baltic Sea region and produce indisputable evidence to prove their point.

IV Developing NGO cooperation in the Baltic Sea region and the structure of the future cooperation - forming the Baltic Sea NGO network

The Baltic Sea NGO network is an open and transparent NGO structure, which aims at promoting civil society and cross-sectoral NGO cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region. It can also significantly enhance overall regional co-operation by ensuring public participation and support.

The Baltic Sea NGO network shall work closely with other relevant structures and organisations. Of special importance is good and close co-operation with CBSS. To ensure this, the Baltic Sea NGO network is requesting an officially approved consultative status in the CBSS.

Our aim is to create an open but clearly defined network structure, not any fixed organisation. The Baltic Sea NGO network does not claim to represent all NGOs in the region but it is permanently open for any NGO willing to join the process and accepting the basic values of cooperation set up in this

and the previous Baltic Sea NGO Fora. The working possibilities of smaller and larger initiatives and organisations shall be equally considered and promoted.

The priority goal of the Baltic Sea NGO network is to improve the possibilities of participation of Baltic Sea NGOs in their respective countries as well as common regional endeavours and projects and common advocacy work by the NGO sector to strengthen the participation of civil society organisations in the strategic decision making that is important to solve the problems of the excluded from society and thus stabilise the civil society. The common goals are phrased in the Copenhagen Declaration of the NGO Initiative (March 2001), and in the in the conclusions of the Lubeck and St. Petersburg Fora.

Structure:

The Baltic Sea NGO Forum will be organised annually during the second quarter of the year. It will be hosted by the NGOs of the country in charge of the rotating CBSS Presidency. The NGOs of the hosting country will be responsible for organising the Forum, in cooperation with the NGO Consultative Committee.

The National Focal Points are formed independently in Baltic Sea Countries. NGOs of each CBSS country decide on structures and responsibilities of Focal Point - while ensuring its open character. The Focal Points are working according non-profit making principle, which ensures all NGOs – whether members or not – access to information and a right of cooperation at any time.

Common tasks for the Focal Points are:

- to participate in evaluation and analysing of the working conditions of NGOs in their respective country and in regard to the wider Baltic Sea co-operation. Focal Points make this information available to interested parties
- to provide NGOs of their country information on the Baltic Sea cooperation and possibilities to cooperate in the Baltic Sea NGO Network
- to co-initiate national NGO meetings on Baltic Sea cooperation and to contribute their results to the Baltic Sea NGO Network
- to provide basic information from the NGOs to the Baltic Sea NGO Network and vice versa in National languages and to establish and update an Internet web-site in order to provide information on projects and individual topics
- to ensure all NGOs access to information and a right to cooperate
- to organise partner search at the request of other Focal Points

A Baltic Sea NGO Consultative Committee is formed. It consists of the representatives of the Focal Points, one person per country. In addition there is possibility for each Focal Point to send 1-2 experts. The role of the Consultative Committee is to coordinate and to cooperate during the period between the Fora and to participate in the preparations of the Fora together with the national organizing committee to be formed by the NGOs of the host country. It shall also act as liaison with other organisations and networks.

Common tasks for the Consultative Committee of the Baltic Sea NGO Forum:

- the Consultative Committee is responsible for the flow of information, the professional preparation of workshops and special meetings and the implementation of the NGO Fora decisions. Common efforts for fundraising for projects and activities should be started
- the representation of the Consultative Committee on behalf of the NGOs is limited to the internal work of the NGO network. The decisions on representation of the NGO network towards

governments and other authorities and its other activities have to be in accordance with the decisions of the Baltic Sea NGO Fora.

The Consultative Committee does not have its own legal status. Baltic Sea NGO Consultative Committee meets twice a year and the meetings will be held in the country responsible for organising the next Forum. Meetings are held in the autumn and in the early spring. A representative of the host country of the forthcoming NGO Forum chairs the meetings and communicates with international and regional organisations on behalf of the Forum and Consultative Committee unless decided otherwise.

Financing

The NGO Forum requests the Baltic Sea States to ensure the financing of the work of the Baltic Sea NGO network, its annual NGO Fora and the meetings of the Consultative Committee twice a year. The Forum also asks national authorities to ensure proper financing for the work of the Focal Points in their respective country. In the future the NGO Fora will have more detailed discussion on financing the work.

Estonia will succeed Finland as the next Presidency of the CBSS. The participants welcomed with great pleasure the initiative of the Estonian NGO community to organise the Fourth Baltic Sea NGO Forum in Estonia.

We are confident that when we meet in Estonia, many new and significant steps have again been taken in promoting mutual cooperation and strengthening the human dimension in the Baltic Sea Region!

This document is drafted taking into consideration the comments received by the participants of the Forum according to the decision of the final plenary session of the Forum.