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To reach the SDGs globally the Baltic-wide actions need to be implemented first!

Today, high-level representatives of the HELCOM Contracting Parties will meet in Helsinki to discuss how the Baltic Sea Region can contribute to the global goals on the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans, seas and marine resources by 2030. Actions related to eutrophication, marine litter and climate change will be given special focus in the discussion.

On behalf of environmentally concerned citizens of the Baltic Sea catchment, Coalition Clean Baltic would like to share some input to this work and bring to the attention of regional decision-makers the urgent needs to be addressed in order to reach the Sustainable Development Goals, (SDGs) and, even more importantly, to save the Baltic Sea from further deterioration.

The Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP), which is based on ecosystem approach, is instrumental for reaching SDG targets. However, its performance should not be measured by ticking the box of implemented actions, but rather by monitoring the efficiency of undertaken measures and finding smarter ways in reaching the goals. This can be demonstrated for each segment of the BSAP, where in spite of certain achievements plenty of loopholes are still piling up.

...in Eutrophication segment

- With the understanding that demand-driven increase of food production in the BSR is not compensated by proportional decrease of nutrient loads, it is vital that the upcoming EU CAP reform better addresses nutrient efficiency and nutrient recycling in agricultural systems.
- Industrial farming not covered by current regulations (cattle, horses, goats, sheep, fur farming) still poses significant risks to the environment, both in terms of eutrophication and emissions of greenhouse gases. Thus, HELCOM has the chance of piloting environmental abatements in this field.
- It is not acceptable that one Contracting Party is still blocking the joint process of national commitments to reduce nutrient inputs.

... in Hazardous substances segment

- Leading countries in the BSR pursuing domestic bans of microbeads use in cosmetics should first make the regional efforts and then have the courage and propose concerted global action, otherwise national measures will bring only partial effect
- The problem of pharmaceutical residues should be addressed in a more comprehensive way, focusing on both source reduction through public awareness and efficient safe disposal systems, as well as end-of-pipe measures for sewage and sludge by its tertiary treatment.
- Additionally, abatement methods such as e.g. constructed wetlands are cost-efficient and has been proven to work through decades of studies. These methods can be easily applied across the region delivering synergistic effects to trap nutrients, microplastics and pharmaceuticals.

... in Biodiversity and nature conservation segment

- Concurrent with the designation of new offshore MPAs to protect critically endangered harbour porpoise we are seeing plans for large infrastructure projects threatening the existence of already established MPAs, for example the routing of Nord Stream II across Kurgalskiy Peninsula and the construction of the Navigation Canal across the Vistula Spit.
- While aiming at halting overfishing and prohibiting harmful fisheries subsidies by 2020, the Baltic Sea states keep on allowing cod fisheries even if part of the stock is already at the edge of collapse, as well as fishing on the endangered population of European eel.

... in Maritime activities segment

- Baltic ports should address other, earlier considered negligible sources of pollution, e.g. through development and implementation of BAT for ports facilities handling fertilisers to avoid losses of nutrients during loading operations.
- New knowledge on the impact of underwater noise on biota and especially on endangered species may require other management measures to avoid impact of shipping, e.g. changing deep-sea routes in the vicinity of offshore MPAs

... in Development of assessment tools and methodologies

- The joint HELCOM monitoring and assessment system loses its credibility if its application is constantly derogated by one or several Contracting
- With the Baltic Sea being fed by several major and numerous medium and small rivers it is impossible to underestimate the significance of riverine inputs of marine litter and particularly microparticles; a common harmonised methodology for its monitoring needs to be developed and implemented within pollution load compilations for other major contaminants, in order to efficiently address its sources.

... in Awareness raising and capacity building

- Public participation in the decision-making process, as well as transparency and accountability of public authorities, still remains unsatisfactory with concerns ranging from EIAs and permitting procedures to allocation of public money.

... in Financing segment

- There is an obvious need for regional financial institutions, including IFIs, to re-consider the term of 'sustainable investments' in order to ensure that environmental pillar of sustainability, especially in the BSR context, is not overtaken by purely economic short-term considerations. This applies to various projects e.g. contributing to increased food production (agriculture of aquaculture) or blue/green economy initiatives. Even more importantly, public money should never be spent on environmentally questionable projects (e.g. by investing into curbing internal loads and at the same time promoting pig production); and perhaps, it is even time to start implementing nutrient divestment initiatives, when alike carbon divestments, funders withdraw/avoid eutrophication-generating assets?

Summing up, at this stage with only a few years left before the original BSAP deadline in 2021, HELCOM Contracting Parties should strongly focus on implementation of already agreed commitments, instead of shifting the deadline towards 2030, relying on SDG process to solve all the Baltic problems.

The 2018 HELCOM Ministerial Meeting will demonstrate whether the countries are serious in stating that "protection and enhancement of the marine environment of the Baltic Sea Area are tasks that cannot effectively be accomplished by national efforts alone" as recognised by 1992 Helsinki Convention.