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**Maritime and Inland Waterways Co-operation in the OSCE Area:
Increasing Security and Protecting the Environment**

Session IV –

Promoting regional and inter-regional co-operation on environmental security

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HELCOM and inter-regional cooperation

The Helsinki Commission (HELCOM) is the Governing body of the Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area (Helsinki Convention), which was signed in 1992 and entered into force in January 2000. The original Helsinki Convention was signed already in 1974.

The aim of the Convention is to protect the marine environment of the Baltic Sea from all sources of pollution.

The Helsinki Commission consists of representatives of the nine Baltic Sea Coastal States and the European Community and is the major body of international environmental co-operation in the Baltic region. After the EU enlargement in May 2004, eight of the nine Baltic Sea Coastal States became members of the European Union.

Main threats in the Baltic Sea

The Baltic Sea is a semi-enclosed sea and it collects the runoff from 14 countries situated in its catchment area, which is four times larger than the sea itself. Due to the low temperature, low water exchange rate and low salinity of the water the Baltic Sea ecosystems are highly sensitive and susceptible to anthropogenic pollution.

Eutrophication, pollution by hazardous substances, decline of biodiversity and habitats and impacts of shipping are the major environmental problems of the Baltic.

HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan

At its Ministerial Meeting held on 15 November 2007 in Krakow, Poland, HELCOM adopted a strategic Baltic Sea Action Plan to drastically reduce pollution to the sea and restore its good ecological status by 2021.

The cross-sectoral Baltic Sea Action Plan, which HELCOM has been drafting since 2005, is designed to solve all major environmental problems affecting the sea. It will be a crucial stepping stone for wider and more efficient actions to combat the continued deterioration of the marine environment resulting from human activities. The overarching plan identifies the specific actions needed to achieve agreed targets within a given timeframe for the main environmental priorities, which are: 1) combating eutrophication, caused by excessive inputs

of nitrogen and phosphorous which mainly originate from inadequately treated sewage and agricultural runoff; 2) curbing inputs of hazardous substances; 3) ensuring maritime safety and response capacity to accidents at sea; and 4) halting habitat destruction and the ongoing decline in biodiversity.

The HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan is the first attempt by a regional marine protection convention to implement the ecosystem approach defined by the 1992 Rio Declaration and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. It will lead to profound, innovative changes in the ways the coastal countries manage the environment in the Baltic Sea region. The innovative plan is based on a clear set of 'ecological objectives' defined to reflect a jointly agreed vision of 'a healthy marine environment, with diverse biological components functioning in balance, resulting in a good ecological status and supporting a wide range of sustainable human activities'. Example objectives include clear water, an end to excessive algal blooms, and viable populations of species. Targets for good ecological status are based on the best available scientific knowledge. With the application of the ecosystem approach, the protection of the marine environment is no longer seen as an event-driven pollution reduction approach to be taken sector-by-sector. Instead, the starting point is the ecosystem itself, and a shared concept of a healthy sea with a good ecological status. This vision will determine the need for further reductions in pollution loads, as well as the extents of various human activities.

One of the major highlights of the new plan is that it opens a new era in marine environment protection by including the concept of maximum allowable nutrient input. It also contains provisional country-wise annual nutrient input reduction targets for both nitrogen and phosphorus.

The action plan also distinguishes between measures that can be implemented at regional or national level, and measures that can only be implemented at EU level (e.g. Common Fisheries Policy, Common Agricultural Policy, controls over the marketing and use of chemicals) or globally (e.g. the shipping controls defined by the International Maritime Organization).

The HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan has already been widely supported by politicians at various fora, and heralded as a pilot project for European seas in the context of the proposed EU Marine Strategy Directive. The European Commission has described HELCOM's plan as a cornerstone for further action in the Baltic Sea region, emphasizing that the plan is instrumental to the successful implementation of the proposed EU Marine Strategy Directive in the region.

The EU Marine Strategy Directive foresees such an action plan for each eco-region, including the Baltic. HELCOM is in a unique position to deliver this already, given its embracing of all the countries in the Baltic Sea catchment area. HELCOM is also in a unique position to ensure that the special characteristics of the Baltic Sea are fully accounted for in European policies. As a pioneer in the application of the ecosystem approach, the innovative HELCOM action plan will also serve as a model example to be followed by the Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans under the auspices of the UNEP Regional Seas Programme.

Specific recommendations for the OSCE

The ecosystem approach needs implementation at the regional level, which in turn constitutes a major challenge for many regional communities. The experience gained in one region should therefore be shared with others.

Sharing of experience between the regional networks strengthens identification of issues of common interest and of cross regional character and thus best practices and models from one region can be replicated in other regions, fostering even the development of Europe. HELCOM's experience in drawing up the Baltic Sea Action Plan and in putting the concept of the ecosystem approach into practice can thus be replicated within other marine regions.