

Statement by the Executive Secretary, 5 March 2018

I would like to share with you my reflection on our joint work in 2017.

When I started as Executive Secretary six years ago, the streamlining process of HELCOM had been initiated. One of the aims of the process has been to maintain and strengthen the inter-linkage with other international frameworks. There are many benefits of cooperating, but the one I would like to highlight is an opportunity for increasing political support for HELCOM work and its policy impact, particularly in relation to the implementation of the Baltic Sea Action Plan. Through cooperation, HELCOM success stories and good examples are better known, and our own work can be inspired by best practices elsewhere.

Last year was particularly successful in terms of HELCOM increasing the cooperation with regional, European and global partners. In pursuing our goals, HELCOM was partnering with UN Environment and other Regional Sea Conventions and Programmes, International Maritime Organization, Convention on Biological Diversity, Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals, Sargasso Sea Commission, UNESCO, OSPAR, Council of the Baltic Sea States, and EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region.

HELCOM was represented at the UN Ocean Conference on Sustainable Development Goal 14 in June in New York, a major event launching world-wide implementation of the agenda for oceans, including partnerships. As HELCOM is an organization based on an international treaty, recognized under the UN system, we were given the possibility to speak both at the General Assembly as well as in one of the Partnership Dialogues. HELCOM work was promoted by Contracting Parties and the Secretariat in a number of workshops at the Conference.

Contracting Parties pledged voluntary commitments at the Conference, many of which were directly related to the protection of the Baltic Sea. HELCOM itself made four commitments, on which we are already following up.

The first commitment was about designating and enhancing the implementation of the Baltic Sea as NO_x Emission Control Area for ships and public-private partnership.

As a follow up, the first meeting of the HELCOM Maritime Sub-group on Green Technology and Alternative Fuels for Shipping (GREEN TEAM), in September in Sweden, included a dedicated session on a joint regional agenda for green shipping, technology, and alternative fuels. At the joint session, the nearly 70 registered participants from the networks of HELCOM, Council of the Baltic Sea States, and a number of other participating organisations, as well as other stakeholders, considered past progress and identified priorities for future regional work.

The second commitment was about identification of Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas (EBSA) in the Baltic Sea.

The Regional Workshop to Facilitate the Description of Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas (EBSAs) in the Baltic Sea was held on 20–24 February 2018, in Helsinki, Finland, hosted by Finland and with financial support by Finland and Sweden. The workshop was convened by the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity in collaboration with HELCOM. Nine EBSAs in the Baltic Sea were described by the workshop, highlighting the fact that despite the known marine environmental problems, the unique Baltic Sea does have a great ecological or biological significance.

HELCOM was praised in the workshop for its regionally harmonized data layers on the HELCOM Map and Data Service, which has been serving as one of the largest hubs of spatial data for the Baltic Sea marine environment since 2010, and which was completely redesigned and rebuilt last year, including for instance INSPIRE compliant metadata record of each dataset. HELCOM nowadays provides free access to more than 600 map layers in total, with maps ranging from biodiversity and species distribution to information on maritime traffic.

The third HELCOM commitment at the UN Ocean Conference concerned cooperation within Regional Seas Programme for ocean-related SDGs.

And the fourth commitment was on strengthening the implementation of the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan to support ocean-related SDGs. The first step towards this will be taken in tomorrow's Ministerial Meeting.

Cooperation with our neighbor continued in 2017. HELCOM and OSPAR joined resources for preparing a fully operational workspace for the evaluation of HELCOM indicators for hazardous substances.

A new online risk assessment tool for non-indigenous species transfers via the ballast water of commercial ships has been released jointly by HELCOM and OSPAR last year. The IMO Ballast Water Management Convention for ships entered into force on 8 September 2017, and efforts on its harmonized implementation will continue in HELCOM in cooperation with OSPAR.

Recently, IMO invited HELCOM to become a strategic partner of the new GEF-UNDP-IMO GloFouling Partnerships. This partnership will create new possibilities for cooperation, allowing biofouling issues to be better addressed within the context of invasive species management as a whole.

Another example of linking HELCOM work with other international activities was the workshop on eel hosted by Sweden and held in cooperation with the Convention on Migratory Species and the Sargasso Sea Commission. Furthermore, a recent status report on pharmaceuticals in the Baltic Sea region was jointly developed by HELCOM, Policy Area Hazards of the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and UNESCO.

The first version of the "State of the Baltic Sea" is in itself a major, if not the largest, collaborative HELCOM effort when it comes to producing assessments. The report was released last year, and serves as background information for tomorrow's Ministerial Meeting. The project of producing the report is in itself an achievement. Contracting Parties have mobilized the needed expertise, also across disciplines – for instance, this is the first time environmental economists have been directly engaged in HELCOM; in addition, we have a good team in the Secretariat to lead and execute the project, and we managed to obtain sufficient funding to ensure a higher than ever level of ambition, thanks to three EU grants topping HELCOM's own budget and to special contributions by Sweden, Finland, Germany and Denmark.

The report will be updated in a few months' time, and together with a new HELCOM report on the status of implementation of HELCOM agreements, will inform future decisions.

The HELCOM Maritime Working Group has been awarded the Baltic Sea Fund Prize 2017 for its persistent and long-term work to reduce pollution from maritime traffic in the Baltic Sea, including the ban of sewage discharges to international waters of the Baltic Sea and the designation of the Baltic Sea as a special area for nitrogen oxide emissions from ships exhaust gases.

Our colleague Hermanni Backer, whose term is coming to an end this week, has been Professional Secretary for the Maritime Group for the last 6 years, substantially contributing to the group's success.

During the last year or so, as many as four recruitment panels for new Professional Staff in the Secretariat were organized and successfully concluded, ensuring the work of the Secretariat can continue smoothly.

HELCOM is most of all its people, and in 2017, one of the HELCOM family members, Leonid Korovin, from Russia, passed away. We felt this loss very deeply, as so many of us knew him and appreciated his dedication to the protection of the marine environment.

Leonid's lifetime achievement was the International Forum "Baltic Sea Day", an annual forum devoted to the Baltic Sea and to HELCOM work. The organization of the Forum continues, but we will always remember the person who was behind one of the most important, long-standing and appreciated environmental events in the region.

Thank you.