

## **Minutes from the annual meeting of the Regional Councils of the North, Kirkenes, March 23, 2010, hosted by the International Barents Secretariat**

### **1. Tour de table: status and news of the Councils and the EU COM**

#### **BEAC**

Sweden took over the chairmanship from Russia in October, 2009. The aim is to make the economy of the Barents Region more eco-efficient by improving energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy. As environmental work is at the very center of the chairmanship the Ministry of Environment has published a chairmanship folder of its own. Climate change and climate related work in the working groups is now a permanent item on the CSO agenda. Another strong ambition is to strengthen the work on the environmental hot spots.

For the first time, there will be a Barents ministerial meeting on raw materials, energy efficiency and renewable energy. It will be arranged in May by the Swedish Ministry on Energy, Enterprise and Communications. The intention is also to assign fields of activity for the Working Group on Economic Cooperation which is in need of a renewed agenda. There are plans to highlight these issues in Brussels with the aim to strengthen the positions of the Barents Region and the Barents Cooperation on the political map of the EU in general but in regards to the upcoming EU Raw Materials Initiative in particular.

Lack of transport in the Barents Region is a well known problem. In June, the Ministry of Enterprise, Energy and Communications also plans a ministerial meeting on transport. In addition to the Barents member countries, the Baltic States, Germany, Poland and China will also be invited. Other examples of established fields of work are culture and health and related social issues. A declaration on prime ministerial level from 2003 emphasized the need of gaining control of the TB-situation in the Barents Region by 2013.

A general problem is the lack of resources for projects. An important part of the Swedish BEAC Chairmanship is therefore the recruitment of a financial adviser to the IBS adding to the capacity of the Barents Cooperation in the competition for project funding.

#### **AC**

Denmark took over the AC Chairmanship from Norway in April, 2009. The Danish AC Presidency has witnessed increased interest in the AC. China, Japan, Republic of Korea, Italy and the EU COM have all applied for observership. One of the reasons is the changing conditions in the Arctic Region due to climate change.

The applications have been put on hold as there is a need to find a consensus on the role of the observers in the Council. It is a priority of the Danish Chairmanship to find a solution to this difficult issue. The observership will be on the agenda of the next ministerial scheduled to April, 2011. Denmark supports the application from the EU COM.

Other priorities are the legacy of the Polar Year, integrated resource management, biodiversity, living conditions in the Arctic, indigenous peoples and operational cooperation at which search and rescue is at the very center of attention with the ambition to reach an intergovernmental agreement. A meeting on deputy ministerial level will take place in Copenhagen in late May on this issue.

The AC is a decision shaping body and there is agreement that it needs to improve its communication in order to reach out to decision makers and others.

The next SAO meeting takes place in April on Greenland. In late May, the AC will host an Arctic information day in Copenhagen aimed for exchange of information between the SAOs, the observers and the working groups.

#### **NCM**

Denmark took over the NCM Chairmanship in January 2010. *The Nordic region pointing the way forward* is the headline for the chairmanship. It is an extension of the Nordic globalization work developing a Nordic response to challenges and opportunities created by globalization. Freedom of movement for citizens and companies, finding joint solutions to problems such as the financial crisis, environment, and climate change related issues. Other focus areas are welfare, health, research and education. At the center of attention is the Top-Level Research Initiative.

Important upcoming activities are the Prime Ministers' Globalization Forum, a conference on languages in the Nordic region, a conference on the Arctic, a workshop in Brussels, and a meeting in the Faroe Island on fisheries.

### **CBSS**

Lithuanian Chairman of the CSO distributed paper on what has been done and on a status quo of the CBSS reform. The ongoing reform process will be completed as the Lithuanian Presidency expires with the 8<sup>th</sup> Baltic Sea States Summit. The CBSS is moving towards a more project and result oriented structure and focus on expert groups. The Lithuanian Chairmanship stresses the economic development through the Expert Group on Maritime Policy (the only group in the economic sphere) that was launched recently, and relations and concrete projects with the Kaliningrad region of Russia and Belarus. To find funding has become an increasing challenge as the CBSS is being transformed into a project oriented organization. The CBSS is well aware of the need for cooperation with the other councils and the ND and feels that the role of the CBSS in the latter needs to be determined. The CBSS is concerned of how to make practical use of the MFA meeting on deputy level in St. Petersburg, 2009.

### **EU COM**

The EU COM is satisfied with its cooperation with the four Regional Councils and has the ambition to participate in the meetings of the Councils' many structures where it is feasible. There is high interest in observer status in Arctic Council.

## **2. Northern Dimension: State of play and interaction with the Regional Councils**

The ND has gone through a remarkable change from low level activity to a number of recent initiatives from the MFAs.

The Environmental Partnership has been in force over 10 years and is a success story. There is funding available for environmental protection and nuclear security. Waste water projects will also be implemented. The disbursement of funds is rather slow. The ND has geographical priorities such as Kaliningrad, Arctic and the Sub-Arctic.

The Partnership on Public Health and Social Wellbeing has a leading role in the health action in the EU Baltic Sea Strategy. Its secretariat is hosted by the CBSS secretariat.

The upcoming Partnership on Transport and Logistics has run in to problems on funding and the establishment of a secretariat. The delay of potential projects is unfortunate.

The decision to launch a Partnership on Culture is taken and the ambition is to sign a MoU at a cultural forum in St. Petersburg in May. The intention is to set up a secretariat.

In addition, there are two civil society initiatives. The first is to set up a business council within the ND framework. The second is the establishment of a network of scientific institutions – the ND Institute – aimed at research in the fields of energy, water, health, culture and environment.

2010 must be a year of implementation. But it has become clear that agreeing upon establishment of secretariats and allocating funding to the partnerships are not that simple. Pragmatism on the establishment of secretariats would be preferred. It seems that each partnership will establish their own secretariat as there are no plans for a shared service organization. Using the experiences of the four Councils' on the best practices of setting up secretariats could be useful. The establishment of the CBSS secretariat serves as a good example as political decision only was needed. EC informed on the difficulty to establish secretariats for the ND partnerships.

**Interaction with the councils:** The partners of the ND have decided that the Regional Councils are ND-participants, the Regional Councils are invited to participate in the ND steering group meetings serving as good and efficient way of coordination. The decision is taken with full respect for the autonomy of the Councils but there is a wish that all the Councils will use this opportunity of joining forces. The next ND ministerial meeting takes place in Oslo in November which coincides with the Norwegian presidency of the CBSS.

The activities of business councils, such as the CBSS Business Advisory Council, the initiatives on business cooperation within the ND, and other events in the economic sphere such as the Barents Industrial Partnership, the International Economic Forum in Murmansk and St. Petersburg needs coordination in order not to run the risk of competing with each other.

ND partnerships are doing very well and pending establishment of secretariats for some ND partnerships should not hinder ongoing activities. Experience and assistance of already established secretariats of some councils in the North could help in solving this issue.

### **3. The Baltic Sea Region Strategy: State of play and interaction with the Regional Councils**

**State of play:** The starting point was the EU Council conclusions from October 2009. The work has started in a decentralized mode with 15 actions led by countries. Some actions are policy related and some are concrete projects. The action leaders report to the EU COM but the COM has no executing role in the strategy. The strategy is both opportunity and problem oriented focusing on cooperation on common interests and challenges, for example economic cooperation and competitiveness.

The external aspects are crucial as the strategy also concerns Belarus, Norway and especially Russia which has participated in the preparatory process indicating interest and providing knowledge. A common understanding on the strategy was recently confirmed in discussions with the Russian Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Ministry for Regional Development.

A meeting of the high-level representatives will be held in April. The EU COM has asked the member countries to report on the start up in June. An annual meeting of the stakeholders is scheduled to take place in Estonia in October. The EC will report to the EU Council in 2011. The strategy is seen as a test case with the possibility for duplication in other parts of the EU. There are plans to develop a strategy for the Danube region.

**Interaction between the Councils:** Non EU countries and international organizations are welcome to cooperate on common interests. The role of the CBSS has been discussed and it will be considered in what fields it can and will participate in the implementation of the strategy. BASREC, the cooperation in energy, and Baltic 21 have potential for being integrated in the strategy.

The ND Partnership on Public Health and Social Wellbeing has taken a leading role in the strategy and there is potential for other ND partnerships to join forces with the strategy where common interests can be identified.

The NCM has been active from the very beginning and thanks to its project budget it finances its own activities within the strategy. The Danish NCM-presidency will continue to prioritize participation in the strategy. Denmark is in charge of 6 of the 15 actions.

The Barents Regional Council contributed to the preparatory process of strategy.

### **4. Cooperation between the Regional Councils: follow-up to the meeting of the Deputy Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the countries chairing the Regional Organizations in the North, St Petersburg 29-30 September, 2009**

**BEAC** concludes that all the Councils are aware of the need to increase the efficiency of their own work and prepared to share best practices with other Councils

However, coordination and cooperation needs to be pragmatic and accepted by each Council not creating reasons to change mandates. The St. Petersburg meeting concluded there is no need for radical reform of the Councils and the current level of cooperation is satisfactory. The annual meeting of the four Regional Councils is useful for the exchange of information and it could be used – as the EU COM proposed at the St. Petersburg meeting – for coordination of activities between the Councils and within the ND as it is becoming more concrete in a number of fields. It is crucial to use shared opportunities and avoid competition. The BEAC environmental and health work are examples of coordination with the ND as there is permanent exchange of information between them and plans for joint activities.

**AC** agreed on the need for continued exchange of information but reminded of the different mandates, purposes, working cycles and memberships of the Councils and that the coordination and cooperation cannot be imposed from the top. All cooperation between the Councils needs to be pragmatic and based on a bottom-up model through contacts between working groups and experts.

**CBSS** believes there is a need for exchange of experiences and that the ND is a useful platform for the Regional Councils. This could possibly be improved through a checklist of efforts. It is however confusing to talk about overlap of work since the Councils are active in the same fields of expertise but in different settings. But cooperation through the ND has the potential of bringing regional bodies together for coordination of activities without creating new structures. The CBSS Expert Group on Sustainable Development - Baltic 21, the CBSS Expert Group on Nuclear and Radiation Safety and other groups could exchange information on their levels respectively. Also the secretariats of partnerships could be coordinated with the councils' secretariats.

**EU COM** stressed the need for informal activities not needing authorization or new structures.

**NCM** cooperates with the other Councils on project level. Some examples are the support for the CBSS EuroFaculty in Pskov, other CBSS projects as well as with the AC, project on environment and indigenous peoples with BEAC. The NCM has proposed a staff exchange schemes between the secretariats.

The criticism that the websites of four Regional Councils are designed only for internal use was discussed. The general opinion is that they are and should be a useful tool for those involved and interested in the Councils and therefore stick to their core business not trying to compete with other related sites (such as for example the [www.barentsobserver.com](http://www.barentsobserver.com) that are focusing on the same geographic region but with different purposes). The common understanding is that it is more efficient to make the web sites easy to find through search engines and use one-click-approaches than changing the sites radically hoping to reach out to a wider public. Social media provides potential for a wider outreach.

It was concluded that the council's websites can be better linked to each other. It was advised to establish direct links to websites of each sister councils. It was proposed that a common calendar of events for the four Councils could be useful increasing the potential for synergy between the activities of the Councils. A calendar could be a possible either on the Councils' websites or on a common portal to the four Councils. The secretariats were asked to look into how it could be arranged.

Exchange of staff between the secretariats was welcomed and to be continued.

Creating potential for improved cooperation between working groups and experts of the Councils was elaborated. It was concluded that the chairs of the Councils could promote potentials in their working groups respectively. It is then up to the working groups to decide on how to explore these potentials for example through meetings between working group chairs or back to back meetings between groups. Such an approach is in line with the bottom-up approach.

An idea to invite incoming chairs, the chair of the Barents Regional Committee and the Baltic Sea States Sub-regional Cooperation (BSSSC) to the annual meeting of the four Regional Councils was discussed.

Next meeting:

The AC will host the four Councils' meeting in spring 2011.