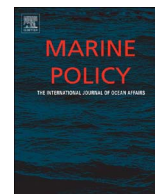




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Collective action and agency in Baltic Sea marine spatial planning: Transnational policy coordination in the promotion of regional coherence

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ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing attention given to marine spatial planning and the widely acknowledged need for transnational policy coordination, regional coherence has not yet improved a great deal in the Baltic Sea region. Therefore, the main objectives in this article are: (a) to map existing governance structures at all levels that influence how domestic marine spatial planning policy strategies are formed, (b) to identify specific challenges to improved regional cooperation and coordination, and (c) to discuss possible remedies. Based on data from in-depth case studies carried out in the BONUS BALTSAPACE research project, it is shown that, despite the shared goal of sustainability and efficient resource use in relevant EU Directives, action plans and other policy instruments, domestic plans are emerging in diverse ways, mainly reflecting varying domestic administrative structures, sectoral interests, political prioritisations, and handling of potentially conflicting policy objectives. A fruitful distinction can be made between, on the one hand, regulatory institutions and structures above the state level where decision-making mechanisms are typically grounded in consensual regimes and, on the other hand, bilateral, issue-specific collaboration, typically between adjacent countries. It is argued that, to improve overall marine spatial planning governance, these two governance components need to be brought together to improve consistency between regional alignment and to enhance opportunities for countries to collaborate at lower levels. Issue-specific transnational working groups or workshops can be one way to identify and act upon such potential synergies.

1. Introduction

Marine spatial planning has been heralded as a key initiative to improve marine governance of nature protection and sustainable resource use [1–5]. To protect ecosystem integrity, the Ecosystem Approach has been conceptualised as a boundary condition for *blue growth*, that is, economic development based on marine resource uses and other maritime activities must be undertaken within the limitations of the ecosystem [4–7]. Stakeholder participation is considered a key mechanism in both marine spatial planning and in the Ecosystem Approach that complements scientific knowledge in policy-making, and furthermore increases legitimacy and facilitates implementation [8,9]. Moreover, these three components – marine spatial planning, the Ecosystem Approach, and stakeholder participation – have developed in

parallel in various contexts and with somewhat different objectives, and are now brought together in order to promote ecological, economic, and social sustainability in contemporary marine governance [10].

Because of the collective nature of marine resources and the need for effective maritime infrastructure, cooperation among countries is pivotal in effective governance [11,12]. Ecosystem services as well as various forms of societal pressures and impacts from transportation, pollution, fisheries, agriculture and other sector activities tend to transcend marine national boundaries [13]. Furthermore, investments in, for example shipping infrastructure and offshore wind farms, often benefit from effective and efficient transnational coordination [14]. Thus, effective and efficient transnational cooperation is necessary in marine spatial planning.

However, despite the wide-spread agreement among scholars and

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practitioners alike that transnational cooperation and coordination are pivotal in making marine spatial planning and the Ecosystem Approach into more effective policy instruments there are few concrete examples of successful policy coordination initiatives. Furthermore, the few examples that have been successful have often been carried out in an ad-hoc manner rather than as part of over-arching strategies [14]. Moreover, national marine spatial planning approaches are not chronologically synchronised and have evolved in diverse directions, which makes regional coherence hard to improve. This development may lead to tensions between countries, because of institutional incompatibilities that may become increasingly entrenched over time, and therefore harder to solve. Thus, there is a need to address the question of how to better understand, and potentially enhance, regional policy coordination so as to improve coherence in Baltic Sea planning, while national planning approaches are still being elaborated.

The Baltic Sea region has been selected as the empirical case in focus in this article, because of its dense environmental governance structures on the one hand, and the development of diverse national marine spatial planning frameworks on the other [15]. Several governance layers at global, EU, and regional levels contribute to contemporary coordination of national policies, with the aim of promoting key, but diverse, policy objectives such as environmental protection, efficient and sustainable resource use, as well as inclusive and legitimate stakeholder participation mechanisms. The Espoo Convention and its Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment [16] stipulate that neighbouring countries shall be informed at an early stage, when projects with possible effects on them are being planned. At the EU level, the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive [17] stipulates that all EU Member States must have a national plan no later than 2021, and that transboundary and especially cross-border cooperation are important parts of such plans. Furthermore, recent collaboration between the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM) and Visions and Strategies Around the Baltic Sea (VASAB) to promote coherence in Baltic Sea environmental and planning perspectives has, among other things, resulted in the establishing of the HELCOM-VASAB Maritime Spatial Planning Working Group (HELCOM-VASAB WG) in 2010 that is tasked to “...ensure cooperation among the Baltic Sea countries for coherent regional Maritime Spatial Planning processes” [18].

The main objective of this article is to analyse how international, bilateral and national institutional structures influence the formation of national marine spatial planning policies, and how these processes influence coherence at regional and transnational levels, as well as to identify problems and challenges in relation to expressed policy objectives. More precisely, focus is placed on:

- 1) *To what extent, and in what ways, do formal and informal regulatory structures above the national level contribute to increased coherence among domestic policies on marine spatial planning?*
- 2) *To what extent, and in what ways, do bilateral collaboration between adjacent countries contribute to more coherent planning at the regional level?*

After a brief section on methodology, a background section provides a basis for key theoretical underpinnings of the study. Thereafter, the analytical framework is presented. This framework is then used as a vehicle to structure the analysis of marine spatial planning in the Baltic Sea at international, regional and national levels. The article is rounded off with a discussion and conclusions section.

2. Methodology

Two theoretically derived *themes* are used as conceptual instruments to determine what aspects of empirical information are needed for the analysis. These themes reflect key components in multilevel governance and transnational collective action theory, mainly related to the two-dimensional (vertical and horizontal) character of international

governance structures and to various forms of collective action challenges. Theoretically, there is a need to distinguish between, on the one hand, multilateral, regional, EU and global regulatory initiatives that influence regional coordination of domestic marine spatial planning strategies, and, on the other hand, cooperation between adjacent countries based on bilateral agreements, because political decision-making mechanisms differ between the two forms of interactions. A major difference between them is that, whereas multilateral regulations are typically formed under a consensus regime where the *lowest common denominator* plays a key role in terms of ambition levels [19], bilateral agreements tend mainly to be driven by perceived benefits from concrete and clearly defined coordination undertakings [20]. This distinction between multilateral and bilateral cooperation and coordination is used as a key conceptual distinction in the analytical framework.

The empirical focus of the themes is placed on (a) regional institutions facilitating coordination of domestic planning strategies (HELCOM-VASAB WG as an example), and (b) the role of institutional compatibility in bilateral policy coordination (Denmark/Sweden and Lithuania/Latvia as examples). Based on the themes identified, three out of a total of five in-depth case studies undertaken in the BONUS BALTSAPACE research project during 2015 and 2016 are used as the primary empirical sources for the analysis.² These case studies target marine spatial planning-related policies and strategies in Latvia, Lithuania, Denmark, Sweden, and the HELCOM-VASAB WG, and are based on an extensive set of primary data comprising written documentation (regulations, strategy documents, work plans, roadmaps, minutes from meetings and other relevant sources), as well as on interviews with experts, stakeholders, policy-makers, public administrators, sector and NGO representatives, and users. Moreover, data from stakeholder forums arranged by BONUS BALTSAPACE, including direct observations from these forums, were fed into the case studies. Project researchers were also admitted to meetings such as those of HELCOM-VASAB WG, which made it possible to directly observe how group members from different countries and sectors interacted.

Table 1 summarises the number and type of interviews carried out in the case studies drawn upon.

3. Background

The emerging pattern of national marine spatial plans and regional coordination processes is complex and influenced by a multitude of governmental and stakeholder interests, as well as by continuously evolving institutional structures at many levels [21,22]. A substantial variety of policy instruments with diverse applicability and scope are used, and varying administrative systems, historical trajectories, and path dependencies can have considerable impact on governance outcomes [23]. However, despite variations on what integration and sustainability mean more precisely, and ought to mean, there is a widespread agreement that increased coordination and coherence would improve overall governance. This is explicitly called for in, for example, the EU Maritime Spatial Planning Directive. Thus, the dominating discussions concern *how* and *where* increased coordination can reduce regional coherence gaps, including assessments of potential side-effects from such increased coordination, rather than *if* such coordination efforts are called for.

Two established strands of theory, *multilevel governance* and *transnational collective action* are drawn upon in the analysis of how inter-governmental and bilateral coordination influence coherence of regional planning. While institutional structures are emphasised in most governance approaches arguing that these structures influence actors'

² BALTSAPACE is an international research project on Baltic Sea marine spatial planning that is being carried out 2015–2018 (see <http://www.baltspace.eu>). BALTSAPACE received funding from BONUS (Art 185) funded jointly from the European Union's Seventh Programme for research, technological development and demonstration, and from Baltic Sea national funding institutions.

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