



Institutional stability and change in the Baltic Sea: 30 years of issues, crises and solutions

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ABSTRACT

The shift from a classic sector-by-sector management system to an operational ecosystem approach is perceived as the way forward towards sustainable use of marine systems. The nine states bordering the Baltic Sea as well as the European Community signed the Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP) in 2007, intended to provide practical means for implementing the ecosystem approach in the region. However, whether this shift towards a new governance approach also constitutes a case of institutional change remains unclear. This study evaluates institutional change over 30 years in order to understand the process of emergence of the ecosystem approach for this international institution. This study adds to the otherwise largely theoretical debate on institutional change by testing two models of institutional change – gradualist versus punctuated equilibrium – against data from the Helsinki Commission. Relying on a novel methodology involving quantitative text analyses of 574 documents this study suggests that the signing of the BSAP did not cause change in the institution, nor was it the cause of an abrupt institutional change. Overall, findings support a gradualist model of institutional change where the BSAP is layered upon preexisting institutional structures. Results also indicate that institutional change has occurred in some parts of the institution, whereas other parts remain remarkably stable. It proves that in order to intentionally change an institution it is vital that the change processes cohere at all levels of the institution. The study also underlines the mismatch between ecosystems and institutions. Given the relatively slow dynamics identified here, it is unclear whether institutions are able to adapt to rapid and unpredictable ecosystem shifts.

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Introduction

During the last decade scientists has proclaimed the need to embrace the ecosystem approach in order to improve the prospects for sustainable seas (e.g., [1–5]). Several management systems around the globe have, during this time and at least on paper, applied some form of integrated management approach analogues to the ecosystem approach [6–8]. However, limited research has been carried out to test whether this new management approach offers actual changes within the management practices, and if the changes have any long-term effects on the environment in focus for management.

The Baltic Sea has since 1974 been governed by the Helsinki Commission, HELCOM, the governing body of the Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area

(the Helsinki Convention), signed by the nine states bordering the Baltic Sea as well as the European Community. A characteristic feature of HELCOM's working structure is the division into different policy domains or sectors, such as fishing and agriculture [9,10]. This sectoral division has been the blueprint and strategy in HELCOM for almost 40 years, but in 2005 “an ambitious programme to restore the good ecological status of the Baltic marine environment” was launched [11]. This programme led to the signing of the Baltic Sea Action Plan (from hereafter termed BSAP) in 2007, by the Baltic Sea states and the European Community. The aim of the BSAP is to develop a practical implementation of the ecosystem approach in the region. The ecosystem approach aims to end the often used sectoral thinking and replace it by ‘system thinking’, wherein nature and man are interdependent [12]. In practice this means closer cooperation between the different policy domains, or a merger between several sectors to reach a holistic understanding of the Baltic Sea and its management. In the Baltic Sea region, the ecosystem approach includes new ways of modeling the ecosystem, where, based on the ecosystem capacity to absorb e.g.,

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nutrients without deteriorated environmental quality, new indicators of emission loads are stipulated. The BSAP also entails a more flexible and adaptive compliance system compared to the former HELCOM recommendations, by making emission targets cohere with national emissions instead of equal reduction targets [13–16].

HELCOM and governments around the Baltic Sea often describe the BSAP as an “innovative approach” or “a unique agreement”, and a radical shift from the old management tradition in the region [11]. This study aims to shed light on institutional changes within HELCOM due to factual changes in the organization – as the signing of the Baltic Sea Action Plan. *Is actual change ongoing within HELCOM? And if so, how can this change be described?*

To address this problem two models have been tested, gradual and abrupt institutional change, to assess if institutional change has taken place within HELCOM. Thus, the purpose is to understand processes of institutional change within HELCOM rather than using HELCOM as a case study for testing different models of institutional change. To achieve this have computer-assisted text analysis of 574 HELCOM documents been used in order to analyze changes in how HELCOM describe and perceive their issues, crises, and solutions.

Theory

Institutional theory focuses on core aspects of social structure. It considers rules and norms that become guidelines for human interaction, as well as how these rules and norms are created, adopted and changed over time and space [17–19]. To analyze how institutions change ‘abrupt change’ and ‘gradual change’ described by scientists questioning punctuated equilibriums and critical junctures have been used [20–22].

Institutions and international regimes

“International regimes are defined as principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actor expectations converge in a given issue-area.” [23, p. 1]

Krasner’s regime definition at first glance very much resembles the definition of an institution. The differences between the definition of regime of an institution lies in that “decision making procedures”, as Krasner defines them, includes both formal and informal ‘legislators’ but also that there are organized ways in which rules are created. This vouches for a degree of formality of the rules and the rule-making procedures. Convergence of expectations among legislators and people affected by the rules also means that there is some sort of formalized negotiation of the aim and purpose of the regime. Marc A. Levy et al. [24, p. 274] alter Krasner’s regime definition and state that “international regimes [are] social institutions consisting of agreed upon principles, norms, rules, procedures and programs that govern the interactions of actors in specific issue areas.”. Further, Breitmeier et al. [25, p. 3] add to Levy’s definition that international regimes “lack a centralized public authority or a government in the ordinary meaning of the term”.

While Finnemore and Sikkink [26] suggest that institutions are ‘aggregated norms’, Levy et al. talk about regimes as ‘aggregated institutions’. This means that several institutions act simultaneously within a given issue area. Aggregated, all these institutions are the basis of a regime. Breitmeier’s addition is also important as it clarifies the ‘governance without government’ component, which is vital to remember when analyzing international regimes.

The problem with analyzing HELCOM as an ‘aggregated institution’ or as a regime is that it requires HELCOM to consist of several social institutions. This would have made sense if the institutions within HELCOM had behaved differently. HELCOM on the other hand is very homogenous, which makes it natural to talk about a social institution rather than several social institutions.

This paper does not set out to analyze why or who caused a change within HELCOM, which would have been possible using the regime definition. Rather, this paper aims to describe if change has happened at all within HELCOM and, in that case, how a possible change can be described.

Abrupt institutional change

Rational choice theory, Historical Institutionalism, and Sociological Institutionalism form the leading approaches to institutional analysis. These theories actually focus on institutional stability, consistency, and continuity rather than change. Institutions, they describe, most often functions as a stabilizing force; they “reduce uncertainty by providing a structure to everyday life.” [18, p. 3]. They create continuity and stability as they often are designed to be resistant towards change. Moreover, formal barriers to reform institutions are often extremely high, such as the unanimity rules in the UN. Because of stability and continuity institutions can facilitate cooperation that otherwise would have been impossible to evoke. Without these stabilizing forces, much collaboration would collapse [27].

When these theories focus on change, they often study specific circumstances or events where changes can take place. The change events are described as exogenous shocks, ‘critical junctures’, or ‘punctuated equilibriums’. Change within an institution occurs as a reaction of changes in the institution’s context. It is also important to note that after the changing event the institution must appear and perform radically different from the way it did before the changing event. In other words, institutions have two phases; a stable phase and a short phase where the institution alters [28–31]. The shorter phase where change can take place is sometimes called a ‘window of opportunity’ [32]. After the change phase the institution again enters a stable phase.

Gradual institutional change

Scientists have during the last decade started to question Krasner’s ideas that change only occurs in rapid forms. Instead it has been suggested that institutional change also can take place gradually (e.g., [22, 33, 34]). Paul Pierson [35] and the path dependency theory confronts the punctuated equilibrium model and discuss slow-moving change processes over time. Breitmeier and colleagues [25, p. 8] state that “regimes – like all social institutions – change continually; they do not remain fixed in time following their initial formation.” Streek and Thelen [22] also underline the important patterns of gradual institutional change. Mahoney and Thelen [36] made attempts to explain different types of gradual change, calling them ‘displacement’, ‘layering’, ‘drift’ and ‘conversion’.

Displacement happens when new modes of practice or new rules replace the existing, previously taken-for-granted forms, settings or practices. This change can be both relatively rapid and very slow.

Layering means that new rules are introduced and put alongside existing ones. Paul Pierson has described this phenomena as ‘increasing returns’ and ‘lock-in effects’ [35]. Pierson describes that once one move down a certain track, the costs of changing track or moving back increases. While Pierson states that the institution is stable, the institution according to Mahoney and

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