

## 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.<sup>2</sup> 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'

<sup>2</sup> 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.

**Table 1**  
Summary of interviews in BALTSPEACE case studies carried out 2015–2016.

| Case                 | Public authorities/<br>Politicians | IGOs     | Sector<br>organisations/users | NGOs           | Science        |
|----------------------|------------------------------------|----------|-------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| HV WG                | 17 <sup>a,b</sup>                  | 6        | –                             | 1 <sup>b</sup> | 1 <sup>b</sup> |
| Latvia/<br>Lithuania | 21                                 | –        | –                             | 5              | 1              |
| Sweden/<br>Denmark   | 20                                 | –        | 5                             | 1              | –              |
| <b>Total: 78</b>     | <b>58</b>                          | <b>6</b> | <b>5</b>                      | <b>7</b>       | <b>2</b>       |

<sup>a</sup> Interviews partly undertaken by Baltic SCOPE, shared with BALTSPEACE.

<sup>b</sup> Interviews/Questionnaires/Personal communication.

behaviour in various ways, transnational collective action theory departs from the assumption that actors can adopt agency, and thus act strategically in relation to existing institutional boundaries and restrictions. In order to capture both the role of prevailing institutional structures and agency, the two approaches are brought together in the analytical framework presented further below.

Multilevel governance is captured by a broad body of literature covering varying issue-areas, but what ties it together is the emphasis placed on interaction between governance levels and the inclusion of non-governmental actors in policy analyses [15,24–27]. In the analytical framework elaborated here, the multilevel aspect is primarily used as an analytical vehicle to show how institutions at different governance layers are nested [28]. To preserve coherence, institutional structures at lower levels are adapted to structures at higher levels, which results in a hierarchical order where regulations become increasingly concrete and adapted to contextual conditions when moving downwards in the hierarchy.

The institutions referred to in this analysis are of two kinds; *organisations* (for example, the EU, HELCOM, VASAB) and *policies* comprising both binding and soft regulatory instruments (for example, treaties, EU Directives, regional conventions, action programmes, strategies, guidelines). With the partial exception of the EU, governmental organisations typically require consensus to operationalise decisions.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, most regulatory instruments are based on prior decisions taken under consensus, or near consensus, regimes. This means that the lowest common denominator effect often limits decisions to what is possible to find agreement upon among all participating countries [29].

Somewhat paradoxically, the boundaries that these agreements formalise comprise the main value to the actors of the established institutions. By agreeing on what is acceptable, and what is not, available strategies for others become more limited and expectations of future outcomes thereby more closely aligned [30]. To emphasise the importance of consensus in political decision-making processes, although background documents developed by permanent staffs are often less coloured by lowest common denominator effects, the alignment these hierarchical regulatory institutions lead to is henceforth labelled *collective action-driven* coordination.

However, collective action under consensus regimes seldom results in harmony, that is, absence of conflicts and of temptations to free-ride on others' efforts [31]. Moreover, while the boundaries provided by collective action regimes are valuable, the lowest common denominator effect simultaneously makes these boundaries less ambitious than what most actors would prefer, which in turn creates opportunities and incentives for actors to formulate and act upon diverse, and often more ambitious, interpretations of the agreement. Therefore, a dynamic element needs to be added to boundaries provided by hierarchically nested institutions. Because agreements are never completely

determined – policy space may be constrained, but is not reduced to only one available strategy – individual states can adopt unilateral, bilateral, or sub-regional strategies within existing institutional boundaries.<sup>4</sup> Transnational collective action theory provides instruments to conceptualise how these policy spaces are translated into incentive structures, and thus, how states form strategies to promote national interests.

Transnational collective action theory departs from the assumption that states primarily promote perceived national interests and from this deduce theoretical explanations for observed outcomes at the collective level [33–35]. The main value of the collective action component for the framework elaborated here is to provide an analytical lens that can help to discern how countries' national interests are linked to incentives to cooperate with other states, and how these cooperative efforts may contribute to horizontal coordination at bilateral, sub-regional or regional levels.

To capture the fact that a multitude of domestic stakeholders influence government policies, states are assumed to be so-called *composite actors*, acting as if they were individuals, rather than as de facto unitary actors.<sup>5</sup> Thus, they adopt *agency* and are assumed to be able to act on their own behalf. The composite actors are assumed to mainly be driven by rational (goal-oriented and instrumental) promotion of national interests, but these interests reflect a mix of government priorities and pressures from various stakeholders, rather than government priorities exclusively [29]. Similarly, governmental authorities at sub-national levels are assumed also to have a potential to be composite actors, within the boundaries given by collective action-driven coordination at higher levels. Thus, rather than focusing on finding the appropriate level of political decision-making to ensure a fit between social and ecological systems [36] or portraying vertical governance structures as mere hierarchical shadows [37], hierarchical governance structures are understood here as institutional boundaries to horizontal collaboration between composite actors such as states and municipalities. In other words, these boundaries define the arenas in which agency takes place.

To distinguish *collective action-driven* coordination from strategic promotion of state interests in collaborations with adjacent countries within existing institutional boundaries, the latter is henceforth labelled *agency-driven* coordination.

#### 4. The analytical framework

The analytical framework is built upon the conceptual distinction between, on the one hand, multi-level, collective action-driven coordination and, on the other hand, agency-driven coordination, together with the notion that both types of alignment are fundamental parts of overall regional governance systems. It is designed to capture the coordination efforts and potentials *within* established institutional structures, rather than the political processes that have led to those structures [38]. The hierarchical nature of collective action-driven coordination above the national level implies that all states are veto players [39], that is, they have the power to stop any proposal suggested. However, this universal veto right does not fully capture international negotiations, because incentives to veto a proposal can be influenced by, for example, side-payments or issue linkage [29,40,41]. Thus, a proposal that everyone accepts provides a base-line from which supplementary amendments can potentially be negotiated to find Pareto superior solutions.<sup>6</sup> Agreements formed in collective action-

<sup>4</sup> Conceptually, this is not very different from how institutional structures in the economic sphere are assumed to provide boundaries to what economic agents can do in “free” markets, and what they cannot do.

<sup>5</sup> In contrast with unitary actors, composite actors have internalised external pressures and can, therefore, under certain conditions, adopt agency, as if they were unitary actors [37].

<sup>6</sup> Pareto superiority: A proposal that makes at least one actor better off, without making

<sup>3</sup> Even though qualified majority voting procedures have become dominant in EU Council decision-making, consensus-building has been shown to *de facto* characterise most concrete internal policy negotiations [32].

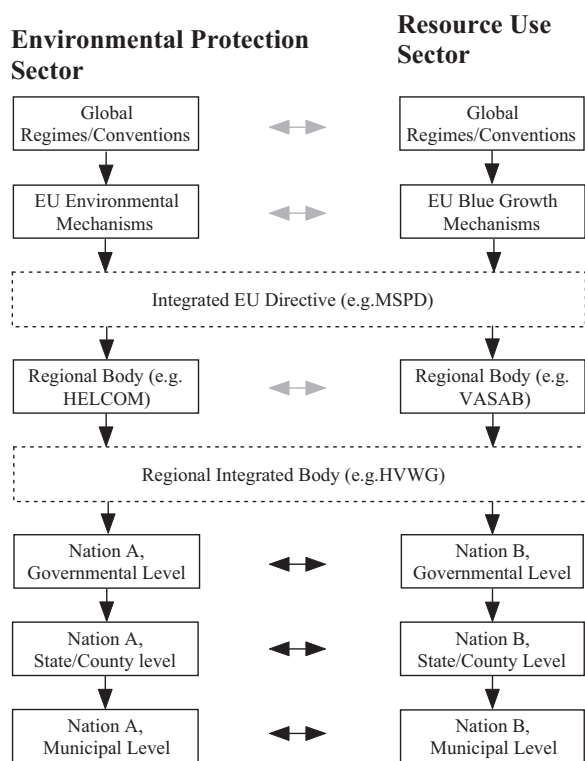


Fig. 1. A schematic portrayal of the hierarchical structure from global to local levels, possible interaction above the state level, and potential bilateral coordination at national and sub-national levels in Baltic Sea marine spatial planning.

driven processes comprise the institutional structures that define available policy space.

Governments are arguably the most important actors in agency-driven coordination of marine spatial planning, even though the EU and domestic authorities at lower levels can play important roles as well [42]. Although private and civil society stakeholders may influence public policies in myriad ways, public authorities (including IGOs) are in this framework assumed to feed this influence into political bodies and public authorities. Thus, governing authorities at national, county, and local levels can embark upon agency-driven coordination in the framework, although the policy strategies they adopt are assumed to be influenced by various stakeholder pressures.

Fig. 1 gives a schematic portrayal of the most important institutions and actors at global, EU, regional, national, and sub-national levels in Baltic Sea marine spatial planning. Because of the multi-sectoral character of marine spatial planning focusing on nature protection and blue growth, the framework has been built on two sectoral policy areas: environmental protection and marine resource use. Sector-bridging institutions (the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive and HELCOM-VASAB WG) have been placed in dotted boxes, indicating that the hierarchical and nested structure can include these integrated bodies, but does not have to do so in all cases.

Although influence is exerted both upwards and downwards in vertical governance dimensions, to simplify, this framework does not capture changes over time, and therefore has no feedback loops from lower to higher levels. Thus, it portrays situations where actors are bound by a specific set of existing treaties, directives, agreements, and other institutional structures that cannot be changed in the short run.

Uni-directional black vertical arrows portray *collective action-driven coordination* within individual sectors, where policy and regulatory structures at higher levels provide boundaries for policy spaces at lower

(footnote continued)  
anyone worse off.

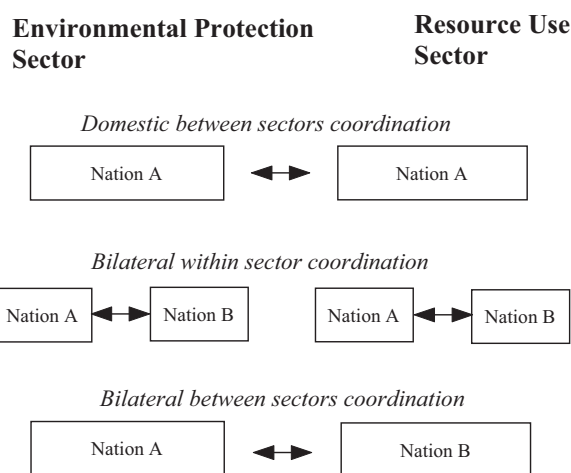


Fig. 2. Three forms of agency-driven coordination: Domestic between sector coordination, bilateral within sector coordination, and bilateral between sector coordination. All three forms of coordination can take place at state, county, and municipal levels, as well as diagonally across levels (not shown).

levels; institutions are nested. This is not to say that structures at higher levels cannot be influenced from below, but rather that the focus is placed on institutions as providers of boundaries in any given situation. Thus, how these institutions emerged is beyond the scope of the analysis presented here. Bi-directional horizontal grey arrows portray *institutional interaction* between different sectors above the state level. Most of these interactions are not intentional, although new institutions can be designed to avoid expected antagonistic interactions and make use of synergies [43]. Furthermore, new institutions can be established when pressures to overcome sector borders increase, such as in the case of HELCOM-VASAB WG.

Bi-directional, black arrows portray *agency-driven coordination* at state, county, and municipal levels and can be in the form of binding agreements, soft regulation, or deliberation. For simplicity, coordination between authorities in the same sectors in different countries or between different sectors within the same country are not shown in Fig. 1, but are found in Fig. 2 further down. Agency-driven coordination is more likely to emerge the higher the net benefits are expected to be as perceived among the actors. Compared with transnational collective action with many actors involved, bilateral collaboration tends to be more robust, because such coordination typically requires adaptation from both parties in order to be viable [35]. Fig. 2 shows a simplified portrayal of three possible forms of agency-driven coordination: between different sectors within a single state, between the same sectors in two states and between different sectors in two states. All three forms of coordination can take place at state, county, and municipal levels, and they have all been shown to be of relevance relevant in regional coordination of marine spatial planning [43].<sup>7</sup>

Coordination between different sectors in the same country (top row in Fig. 2) – *domestic between sectors coordination* – can be complicated, despite a shared language and national culture, because of differences in, for example, perspectives, practices and prioritisations. Coordination between the same sectors in different countries (second row in Fig. 2) – *bilateral within sector coordination* – can sometimes be less complicated than coordination of two domestic sectors. Crucial factors are how diverging national contexts are in comparison with domestic differences, and prior experience from transnational coordination [29]. The most complicated type of coordination tends to be between different sectors in two or more countries (the type of agency-driven

<sup>7</sup> County levels here refer to elected bodies that can adopt composite agency, situated between central and municipal levels, rather than administrative bodies that have been appointed by, for example, central authorities.

coordination portrayed in Fig. 1 above, and shown at the bottom in Fig. 2) – *bilateral between sectors coordination*. Sector borders as well as varying national policies and administrative differences must then be bridged in order to improve coordination.<sup>8</sup>

The analytical framework outlined has been designed to address the dual nature of emerging governance on marine spatial planning in the Baltic Sea region, where the key components comprise a hierarchical collective action axis and a horizontal agency axis. Arguably, these two forms of coordination are most fruitfully seen as complementary. Conflicts between them can emerge when, for example, benefits from bilateral collaboration induce changes which are not congruent with regional coordination strategies. But, refinement of overarching coordination strategies at the regional level in parallel with support of agency-driven initiatives at lower levels may be the most promising route to improved planning governance. In fact, from an efficiency point of view, one of the most significant qualities of collective action-driven planning policy is to facilitate agency-driven coordination, that is, to provide adequate institutional arenas for governments to collaborate in.

In the next section on results and analysis, the two thematic narratives based on BONUS BALTSPACE case studies portraying challenges to regionally integrated marine spatial planning in the Baltic Sea are presented: regional collective action-driven coordination (international institutions and HELCOM-VASAB WG), and agency-driven coordination (Denmark/Sweden and Latvia/Lithuania). These narratives do not capture the full complexity of marine spatial planning coordination, but have been selected because they illustrate key features and challenges to vertical and horizontal planning.

## 5. Results and analysis

### 5.1. Collective action-driven coordination of marine spatial planning in the Baltic Sea region

#### 5.1.1. Global, EU, and regional level boundaries

Apart from global conventions and agreements coordinated by the International Maritime Organization and the World Trade Organization, the most relevant collective action-driven regulatory (binding and soft) policy instruments for marine spatial planning in the Baltic Sea region are the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive [17], the Marine Strategy Framework Directive [44], the Blue Growth Strategy [45], the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region [46], the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan [47], and the VASAB Long-Term Perspective [48]. These instruments constitute the boundaries that define available policy spaces for domestic transposition in Member States as well as for agency-based coordination.

The comparably recent Maritime Spatial Planning Directive is especially interesting in relation to regional maritime planning, because it aims to bring environmental protection and *blue growth* closer together, and to establish sustainability as a shared end-point: “[it] establishes a framework for maritime spatial planning aimed at promoting the sustainable growth of maritime economies, the sustainable development of marine areas, and the sustainable use of marine resources” (Article 1).

The boundaries that the Directive establishes for transposition into national frameworks are wide, as resource management and prioritisation between sectors are determined by the Member States. However, all states are required to establish a national maritime spatial plan before the end of 2021. They are, furthermore, required to cooperate with adjacent countries in accordance with international

<sup>8</sup> In fact, a fourth, and even more challenging, type of interaction (not shown in Fig. 2) takes place when management responsibility is placed at different administrative levels (diagonal interaction), involving different sectors in two countries. This type of situation is exemplified below, in interactions between Sweden and Denmark, and between Latvia and Lithuania.

treaties and conventions, and with the overarching goal of improved coordination and coherence in planning across the region (Article 11). Moreover, all Member States must ensure that stakeholders and the public are given opportunities to participate in the formulation of the national marine spatial plan and have access to the final plan (Article 9).

The strategy in the Directive to use sustainable development as a shared goal of both environmental protection and economic growth is ingenious, as it creates a “fuzzy” focal point [49]. The fuzziness of sustainable development facilitates agreement, because different interpretations of the concept can co-exist. However, when the fuzziness is removed and it must be teased out how to balance conflicting priorities, the shared sustainability goal may not be very helpful, because its varying interpretations can mask concrete, underlying tensions. Because of the need to find consensus in collective action driven coordination, these tensions easily translate into watered down outcomes that often leave some participants dissatisfied.

#### 5.1.2. HV WG and the struggle for consensus on policy guidance for marine spatial planning

The<sup>9</sup> HELCOM-VASAB WG was established at the 7th VASAB ministerial conference in Vilnius, 2009. The working group comprises representatives from Ministries, national agencies, and experts from the Baltic Sea countries. A Marine Spatial Planning Data Expert Sub-Group was established to support the working group in 2015. The main objective of HELCOM-VASAB WG is to promote policy coordination among national marine spatial planning strategies, with sustainability and the Ecosystem Approach as the main conceptual foundations. The requirement on Member States to develop national plans provided the main rationale behind the launch of working group. The governance tool at their disposal are soft regulations such as forums for transnational deliberation that may lead to non-binding policy advice, such as the *Baltic Sea Broad-Scale Maritime Spatial Planning Principles* that was elaborated by the working group, and endorsed by both HELCOM and VASAB in late 2010. It delineates ten principles aimed to improve the coordination of national planning strategies. A key overarching ambition is that “*When balancing interests and allocating uses in space and time, long-term and sustainable management should have priority*” [50].

The problem area the HELCOM-VASAB WG is tasked with addressing is a difficult form of collective action-driven coordination, not only because of collective action challenges, but also because it necessitates simultaneous transnational and cross-sectoral coordination (Fig. 1). Although both dimensions comprise challenges to practical coordination as well as political balancing of competing interests, national barriers seem to have been easier to overcome than sector barriers. One reason for this may be that cross-border coordination has been limited to the Espoo Convention obligations to inform other countries about undertakings that may affect them, and to establish ad hoc-based coordination when needed. In contrast, competing claims in environmental protection and resource use sectors tend to cut into different views and priorities, which makes trans-sectoral coordination demanding, within, as well as between countries. Thus, this finding indicates that for regional coordination to be effective, the analysis of collective action challenges must be complemented with analyses of *between sectors* interactions to be convincing.

The concrete task to co-author a guideline document on how the Ecosystem Approach can be used as a foundation for marine spatial planning in the Baltic Sea region proved to be a case in point, where sector borders had to be crossed in order to succeed. According to our informants, a fundamental hurdle to overcome is the bridging of different perspectives in environmental protection and planning communities. While the dominating view among HELCOM representatives is that EA implies that ecosystem integrity represents boundary

<sup>9</sup> This section builds extensively on [51].

conditions, planners tend to be more inclined to see environmental protection as one sectoral interest among others. In the beginning, the two groups were cautious not to give in too much in relation to the “other side”, according to participants in the process of writing the Guidelines.

The discussions in the HELCOM-VASAB WG seem to be substantially influenced by the specific persons attending the sessions, and their ability and willingness to search for common ground in the two sectors. According to our informants, discussions sometimes become quite heated, with arguments representing sectoral as well as personal viewpoints. From this perspective, it was important to be able to agree on a joint guideline document, as a mechanism to codify how to better coordinate national frameworks, albeit in a soft way. Furthermore, considerable efforts were made to promote the legitimacy of the Chair by structuring meetings more effectively, and thereby facilitate leadership. Another strategy to keep up the momentum was to use mechanisms such as follow-up telephone decision meetings when it was not possible to reach agreements when meeting in person.

Timing of national policy processes on marine spatial planning and institutional incompatibilities were two other complexities in the development of the Guidelines. Because some countries (Germany and Sweden) are perceived to have advanced further than others in institutionalising domestic planning, tensions sometimes arose because those starting later do not want to see their hands tied prematurely. If frontrunners establish structures that reduce manoeuvring rooms for countries catching up, it may be tempting for them to attempt to slow down processes. However, this can in turn create frustration among those moving faster [20].

If the main responsibility for a new policy area such as marine spatial planning is placed on different sectors, institutional incompatibilities emerge when national frameworks need to be coordinated. Although this is most apparent in agency-driven coordination, such organisational differences may cast shadows over regional bodies such as HELCOM-VASAB WG as well, because participants typically represent the national authority in charge of domestic planning. In some countries, the main responsibility is placed with the Ministries in the environmental sector (Sweden, Latvia, and Lithuania, for example), while in others it is placed with, for example, the Ministry of Business and Growth (Denmark). Such organisational differences tend to trickle down to authorities at national, county and local levels. The HELCOM VASAB WG experience shows that such institutional incompatibilities where representatives can have quite different views on what marine spatial planning is, and ought to be, can make transnational policy coordination especially cumbersome.

Despite the dense regulatory structures provided mainly by the EU, transnational policy coordination boundaries continue to be wide. National frameworks, although directed towards sustainability and the Ecosystem Approach, are developing in different directions because of various contextual factors. So far, not much interest has been shown for transnational aspects in domestic frameworks. The HELCOM-VASAB WG was established to promote regional coherence with the use of soft mechanisms, deliberation, and sharing of experience. However, this proved to be challenging, because the differences between national frameworks unsurprisingly make the composition of the workgroup similarly diverse. Previous sectoral positions had to be softened in order to find an agreement on the Guidelines, and some members of the working group described the final document as watered down and not sufficiently precise, reflecting the collective action character of decision-making at this level. The non-binding nature of the Guidelines means that implementation cannot be enforced, but the concrete advice on how to include Ecosystem Approach perspectives in marine planning may, nevertheless, exert some soft influence over national policies.

However, a contrasting perspective also emerged in the deliberations of the work group, suggesting that, even though the Ecosystem Approach and functional spatial planning put boundary conditions against balancing of competing interests, pragmatism can make

practice work. From this perspective, environmental protection objectives are related to socioeconomic activities, and the key issue is to find political agreement on individual projects – rather than on principles – on how to balance environmental protection and resource use in sustainable ways. The concrete steps to implement the Ecosystem Approach in conjunction with planning processes described in the HELCOM/VASAB Guidelines may prove valuable in nurturing further discussions on how to bridge boundary and balancing perspectives.<sup>10</sup>

## 5.2. Agency-driven coordination: bilateral institutional incompatibility and priorities between the Ecosystem Approach and blue growth

Given<sup>11</sup> the collective action-based pressure on the Baltic Sea countries to harmonise domestic marine spatial planning policies, adjacent countries are expected to actively look for potential gains from bilateral policy coordination. Arguably, in areas such as offshore wind farms, energy infrastructure, shipping, nature protection, and resource extraction, strategic coordination across national borders can potentially increase efficiency and, therefore, provide fuel for agency-driven collaboration. However, surprisingly few such initiatives have been taken, also considering that domestic planning policies have only recently begun to be elaborated.

When bilateral policy coordination between, on the one hand, Sweden and Denmark and, on the other hand, Latvia and Lithuania, are compared, it was expected that the former would be more coherent than the latter because of their long history of dense cooperation. Although Latvia and Lithuania are neighbouring countries, they are quite different from each other in many respects, which presumably makes coordination more complex. In contrast, the long experience of cooperation between Sweden and Denmark, the dense civil society networks, their long-established democratic welfare systems and gains from bilateral collaboration seem to make them an ideal case of favourable conditions for agency-driven coordination. However, the in-depth case studies undertaken in the BONUS BALTSPEACE project showed that the favourable conditions in the Sweden–Denmark case have not led to significantly higher levels of coherence compared with the Latvia–Lithuania case. Two types of problem areas have been found to be especially important in relation to barriers to agency-based coordination; institutional incompatibilities and priorities of the Ecosystem Approach versus *blue growth*.

### 5.2.1. Institutional incompatibilities

Decision-making authority on marine spatial planning is differently distributed at local, regional, and national levels in both pairs of countries, which tends to make transnational coordination difficult. For example, Lithuanian stakeholder participation in planning processes can be characterised as *centralised*, *unidirectional*, and occurring *late* in the planning process. According to Lithuanian law (2013: 76–3824), there are no formal requirements to involve local authorities in planning processes, apart from in public hearings. The impressions based on interviews with representatives of authorities at county and local levels is that the few meetings they attended were not really part of a participatory process, but rather a way to become better informed on what was planned, or already had been decided, at higher levels. This is in line with earlier observations of the Lithuanian marine spatial planning process [55,56].

In contrast, Latvian stakeholder participation has been *less centralised*, *more interactive* and took place *throughout* the formulation of the national planning strategy. Several consultation rounds were held with stakeholders representing key sectoral interests [57]. According to our

<sup>10</sup> Guideline for the implementation of ecosystem-based approach in Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) in the Baltic Sea area. Adopted by the 72nd meeting of VASAB CSPD/BSR on 8 June 2016 and approved by HELCOM HOD 50–2016 on 15–16 June 2016. See also [52].

<sup>11</sup> This section builds extensively on [53,54].

informants, municipalities participated more actively in Latvia than in Lithuania, discussing issues related to tourism, recreation, local fisheries, and port facilities, although not all of them found marine spatial planning to be relevant to their concerns. The municipal right in Latvia to plan resource use in waters within 2 km from land increases the incentives to participate, as do the decentralised governance of coastal fisheries, where coastal municipalities – unlike in Lithuania – are responsible for management measures.

Institutional incompatibilities in Latvia and Lithuania have created challenges in trans-boundary planning at local levels close to the border between the two countries. Local planning rights in Latvia are not matched with similar competencies in Lithuania, which means that coordination between authorities at municipal levels on, for example, coastal fisheries, tourism and development, is complex. While negotiations between the two countries are undertaken at ministerial levels, Latvian municipalities have expressed concerns that their local development plans will not be appropriately considered in Lithuanian marine spatial planning at the national level. Because Lithuanian municipalities do not have similar local planning authority as those in Latvia have, local planners in Latvia depend more on Lithuanian national planning policy, than on what their neighbouring municipalities across the border do. This tends to create barriers to effective coordination.

Political and administrative structures are quite dissimilar in Denmark and Sweden too. Most ministries in Sweden are comparably small, while national administrative authorities like the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency and the Swedish Agency for Marine and Water Management are large. This gives central authorities in Sweden substantial influence over how marine spatial planning policies are translated into requirements, advice, and expectations on authorities at lower levels. However, in contrast with most other countries, Swedish municipalities are resourceful actors and play crucial roles in local resource management. Because municipalities have the right to levy taxes, they control substantial amounts of resources. In combination with their monopoly on local planning (overlapping 11 NM with national planning responsibility), they are therefore powerful composite actors with direct interests in how marine spatial planning plays out in territorial waters.

The situation is quite different in Denmark. Planning policies appear to be more centralised than in Sweden, with the main political authority placed with the Ministry of Commerce and implementation at the Danish Maritime Authority. Legal instruments with a bearing on marine spatial planning have now been established, but procedures for stakeholder and public participation are still under development. Because of the difference in balance between the Ministry and national authorities compared with Sweden, political control is tighter in Denmark and the Ministry is more directly involved. This seems to lead to more flexible and strategic considerations in individual cases, because policy-makers are closer to concrete planning processes. Furthermore, this influence is strengthened by the lack of local planning rights beyond the shoreline in Denmark.

Consequently, institutional incompatibilities between Sweden and Denmark at national, county, and municipal levels create challenges for, for example, how planning competence has been bestowed, what systems for strategic and operational planning have been established, and how resources are distributed among levels of authority. Therefore, compared to well established cooperation on land-based issues, for marine issues it is difficult for authorities to hook up effectively with their counterparts on the other side of the Sound, which means that potential gains from agency-driven coordination may not be realised. The results show that the agency-driven coordination can be even more complex than portrayed in Fig. 2, in which it was assumed that interactions only take place horizontally. In both cases analysed here, institutional incompatibility made *diagonal* interactions across country and organisational levels necessary, which made coordination especially problematic.

### 5.2.2. Diverging priorities between the Ecosystem Approach and blue growth

Although Lithuania and Latvia face almost identical collective action coordination pressures, key EU Directives, the HELCOM-VASAB process, and BSAP have been addressed and adhered to in dissimilar ways. In Lithuania, much of the initial work on marine spatial planning was carried out soon after the Marine Strategy Framework Directive was accepted, and before the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive was agreed upon. Therefore, the impact of these Directives on the Lithuanian planning approach was limited compared with that in Latvia, circumstances that were corroborated by statements in interviews with representatives of the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Energy. Furthermore, the limited impact that the EU Directives had on the initial phase of the Lithuanian planning approach, together with the urgency of planning for a quickly expanding offshore wind farm sector, resulted in a slight prioritisation of *blue growth* over the Ecosystem Approach.

In contrast, Latvia had set the stage for more direct regulation of domestic marine spatial planning in the 2011 Spatial Development Planning Law. Therefore, Latvia was in a better position to integrate relevant EU Directives directly into domestic planning policies. Furthermore, these Directives, together with EU strategic documents and VASAB perspectives, were used as a starting point for the elaboration of Latvian planning policies. According to informants in Ministries as well as in NGOs (Baltic Environmental Forum; BEF), municipalities (Liepāja), expert authorities (the Latvian Institute of Aquatic Ecology), the EU Directives provided a foundation for the further elaboration of the domestic planning framework. In other words, while Lithuanian planning was built on a traditional functional zoning approach, the Latvian strategy was based on the logic of the Ecosystem Approach, as elaborated upon in recent policy documents. Moreover, while the Lithuanian approach is closely related to the EU Integrated Marine Policy in which competing resource uses, including nature protection, are balanced against each other, the Latvian strategy uses ecosystem features as boundaries for *blue growth*, although it is hard to tell what extent these boundaries so far have influenced *blue growth* development paths.

According to our informants and observations, the comparably decentralised administration and decision-making system in Sweden co-exists with a seemingly high priority placed on nature protection and sustainability in the overall marine spatial planning approach. In contrast, the more centralised Danish structure is combined with more emphasis placed on *blue growth*. However, it is a complicated question in what ways, and indeed if, domestic political and administrative structures influence how nature protection and *blue growth* are prioritised. Political priorities may differ between the two countries, but it may also be that the centralised, “leaner” and more direct system in Denmark (for example the “one-shop approach” when applying for offshore wind power farm permission) has promoted *blue growth* initiatives, whereas the “thicker” institutional, regulatory, and jurisdictional system in Sweden creates higher transaction costs and may thus slow down project development. For example, project applications and environmental court procedures tend to take longer time in Sweden than in Denmark. However, it is also possible that the differences in political and administrative structures between two countries are not causally related to outcomes in terms of prioritisations between environmental protection and *blue growth*, but rather, for example, reflect different interpretations of sustainability.

To conclude, despite the elaborated collective action-based boundaries for marine spatial planning in contemporary Baltic Sea governance, institutional incompatibilities, and context-dependent perception of what role the Ecosystem Approach ought to play in sustainable planning create obstacles for improved transnational policy coordination. These obstacles seem to depend less on historic bilateral climates of cooperation and overarching societal similarities, and more on concrete factors such as political and administrative distribution of authority and political prioritisation of sectors. While benefits from

bilateral agency-based coordination can be clearly visible to involved actors and possible to compartmentalise, finding ways to effectively coordinate diverging understandings of the Ecosystem approach is more challenging, because overarching agreement at the regional level is required. Thus, the analysis shows that while bilateral agency-based collaboration within collective-action driven boundaries may be sufficient on some issues, regional agreement is necessary on others. Therefore, it is crucial to distinguish between issue-areas that benefit from improved conditions for agency-based coordination and which issue-areas that require overall agreements for coordination to be (cost) effective.

## 6. Discussion

This article started off from the observation that marine spatial planning and the Ecosystem Approach have become key concepts in the contemporary marine governance of the Baltic Sea, and that transnational policy coordination is pivotal for regional marine spatial planning to be effective. However, despite the integrative nature of these concepts and the almost universal call for coordination, national planning policies have up until now developed in quite diverging directions. While regional coordination must be balanced against domestic contexts, there is a risk – because of path dependencies – that too much focus is placed on internal factors, and that neglect of negative externalities upon adjacent countries leads to unnecessarily high transaction costs for coordination further down the road [58]. Therefore, the main objective in this article has been to deepen the understanding of how transnational policy coordination mechanisms work and to suggest potential paths forward. It was assumed that, to capture the depth and breadth of existing institutions influencing marine spatial planning governance, both hierarchical and horizontal governance interactions need to be part of the analytical framework. These dimensions were traced in the empirical themes of (a) regional institutions facilitating coordination of national 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). Furthermore, it was suggested that collective action-based hierarchical structures provide boundaries for the complex interactions among composite actors (governments under the influence of diverse domestic interests) that form existing regional planning governance.

### 6.1. HELCOM-VASAB WG – collective action between binding EU Directives and national planning policies

With the advent of the EU Maritime Spatial Planning Directive, a first formal and binding initiative was taken to bring marine environmental protection and *blue growth* closer together. Despite the shared goal of sustainability, it is apparent that sectoral tensions in combination with the consensual decision-making mechanism led to a rather imprecise regulatory instrument that establishes wide boundaries for emerging domestic policies. This has led to substantial heterogeneity in how the Baltic Sea countries have chosen to formulate marine spatial planning policies, under the influence of diverging domestic contexts, national interests, and political prioritisations. Although the Directive is likely to play a more imperative role as the Member States are approaching the deadline, the boundaries that the Directive provides will continue to be wide.

HELCOM-VASAB WG represents an institutional mechanism to tighten those boundaries and thereby define available policy spaces more precisely. This helps Member States to identify opportunities for agency-based bilateral cooperation. By reducing barriers between environmental protection and resource use sectors, an arena for discussion and deliberation is provided. It has been shown above that diverging perspectives characterised the initial phases in the attempts to formulate joint regional guidelines on how to implement marine spatial

planning based on the Ecosystem Approach. However, in the process of co-authoring the Guidelines, tensions decreased over time, although some participants found the final document too watered down. It can be noted that a group composition such as that of the HELCOM-VASAB WG, where administrators rather than political decision-makers convene, reduces the risks of politicisation. Thus, pragmatic perspectives are more likely to emerge. Gaining a better understanding of the “other side’s” interpretation of the challenges ahead seems to facilitate the identification of points of agreement. HELCOM-VASAB WG provides a forum for discussion between administrators from different countries and sectors, and thereby contributes to knowledge-sharing, identification of problem-areas, and facilitation of the construction of frameworks for their solution (see also [52]).

However, partial agreements among a rather diverse group of administrators in the HELCOM-VASAB WG do not necessarily greatly influence regional coherence. If experiences and converging points identified are not carried back home to domestic policy-makers and key administrators, it is not likely that the WG will be very effective in making effective use of the tightened policy spaces established by the EU planning Directive and other international policy instruments based on collective action decision-making. Therefore, implementation deficits may continue to abound.

### 6.2. Addressing institutional incompatibilities in bilateral agency-driven coordination

It was argued in the analysis above that, notwithstanding historical cooperation, agency-driven bilateral coordination between adjacent countries tends to be cumbersome, especially in cases where there are substantial institutional incompatibilities. These situations are even more challenging than the most difficult type portrayed in Fig. 2 (bilateral between sectors coordination) because of the diagonal collaboration required. Some alternative approaches can then be envisioned, which we label *functional*, *content-oriented*, and *communicative* mechanisms.

Functional mechanisms can be used in relation to components that are mandatory for EU Member States to include in domestic marine spatial planning frameworks, such as public consultations and prior information. To manage transnational institutional incompatibilities, permanent bilateral forums on such governance components can be established. In these forums, administrators directly involved in, for example, public consultations in the respective countries can share experiences and suggest transnational policy mechanisms. Sharing of experiences from somewhat different national contexts can here enrich domestic applications.

Content-oriented coordination is useful in cases when bilateral coordination beyond what is required in Directives or the Espoo Convention is needed. The focus is then placed on concrete coordination, for example, nature protection and tourism issues, where a transnational solution is called for. Project groups of limited size can be formed comprising administrators from both countries. To be effective and to stimulate learning processes, these groups preferably include experts from planning, resource use, and environmental protection sectors as well as stakeholder experts. Our results indicate that it is often possible to find mutually beneficial outcomes, especially when the task is clearly delimited and involves the same sectors in both countries. This type of coordination can be useful also at sub-regional and even regional levels, such as in the case of a joint Baltic Sea grid. However, it is a challenge to establish robust and sustained institutions, considering that funding typically is only given for limited time periods, and in form of projects.

Communicative coordination refers to how transnational interactions from other issue-areas can provide important clues to more effective coordination of marine spatial planning. International EC and Interreg projects that bring researchers, administrators and stakeholders together can serve as important knowledge brokers. However, it



can be difficult to know to what extent sharing of experiences gained in such projects is carried over into formal marine spatial planning processes. Indeed, what is possible to achieve in an informal project context may not be attainable at all in formal administrative settings. Therefore, experiences made in projects need to be refined into formats that can become useful input in formal processes.

## 7. Conclusions

Marine spatial planning is still at an embryonic stage in the Baltic Sea region, although the EU Directive on maritime spatial planning continues to fuel regional perspectives. A perspective that integrates boundary conditions formed under collective action premises and bilateral agency-driven incentives can be useful to better understand gaps between policy declarations on the importance of regional coordination and observed outcomes. Not least interactions between, on the one hand, bilateral alignment of domestic planning policies and, on the other hand, supranational policy boundaries seem to be important, and may pave the way for improved regional coordination, if governed wisely.

National marine spatial planning policies need to be further elaborated, adapted to national contexts, and anchored in domestic institutional structures in order to promote effective and efficient implementation. Furthermore, sustainability objectives need to become more concrete and precise, as do marine spatial planning-related descriptors within sectors. However, institutionalisation of domestic planning policies without consideration of interdependencies between adjacent countries may lead to decreased overall efficiency, as individual countries chisel out diverging national frameworks.

To address this conundrum, increased and sustained transnational, institutional coordination is called for as a mechanism to improve compatibility and coherence. The goal would not primarily be to increase integration between the Ecosystem Approach and *blue growth* directly, but rather to establish institutional *functional, content-oriented*, and *communicative* mechanisms that more continuously facilitate the identification of actual and potential incompatibilities, provide opportunities for administrators and stakeholders to communicate more effectively on transnational coordination and alignment, and accumulate gained experiences that can be fed into increasingly refined coordination efforts. In other words, while establishing the HELCOM-VASAB WG was an important first step to initiate a discussion on regional coordination of marine spatial planning, a reasonable next step could be to establish more specific transnational institutions that can target specific geographic or issue areas more effectively.

From a broader vantage point, the methodology adopted that integrates collective action- and agency-driven coordination is general, and can most likely be applied also to other regions and for issue-areas other than planning in marine settings. Whenever resource use and environmental protection are collective in nature, incentives for collaboration in general, and construction of regulatory boundaries promoting benefit-driven coordination in particular, are likely to exist. Furthermore, stimulation of iterative processes between bilateral alignment and collective action can provide a long-term mechanism for the refinement of transnational policy and more effective implementation of agreed upon coordination initiatives. However, to capture dynamic mechanisms of interlinkages between collective action- and agency-based coordination, a dynamic perspective needs to be added to the analytical framework elaborated upon in this article. Therefore, additional theoretical research is needed in order to extend the framework to, apart from institutions as policy boundaries, include mechanisms describing how such boundaries emerge and how integrative, iterative policy processes can be promoted.

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## Declarations of interest

None.

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