

A MACRO-REGIONAL STRATEGY FOR THE NORTH SEA AND THE ENGLISH CHANNEL AREA – SUMMARY OF THE OPINION OF THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

I. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

When launching the macro-regional strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, the Commission made it clear that it could serve as a model for similar approaches in other European macroregions as an innovative form of interregional and transnational European cooperation and provide the right framework for cooperation between regional and local authorities, Member States and European Union.

II. THE MACRO-REGION

A macro-region is an "elected" and not an "ordained" "functional area" whose borders need not, therefore, coincide with administrative or political borders. It is a level at which various players decide to work together to solve shared problems which would not be solved – or would be solved less effectively – at other territorial levels.

A macro-region is not an additional institutional or constitutional level of the European Union. It should, instead, be organised as a mode of action, platform or network in which local and regional, national and European partners can work together – with the participation of players in society – in pursuit of jointly agreed goals within a specific area.

III. THE STRATEGY

The North Sea-Channel area comprises the marine area of the North Sea and the passages to the Baltic Sea (Skagerrak and Kattegat), to the Atlantic (English Channel) and to the Norwegian Sea, as well as the coastal regions that surround it to the extent that they are directly or indirectly connected with the sea, influence it or are influenced by it. The EU Member States Sweden, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France and the United Kingdom and their local and regional authorities are politically linked with these macro-region. So, too, are Norway and, in a broader sense, Iceland, which have close links with the EU through their EEA membership. All these countries are facing shared crossborder difficulties and challenges that cannot be solved and surmounted by individual regions or Member States. Prime among them are:

- a distinct and uniform ecosystem and the threats that beset it;
- climate and geology (use for renewable energies such as wind and tidal energy; new challenges for coastal protection);
- intensive use of natural resources (fishing; oil and gas extraction, etc.);
- intensive and mutually antagonistic uses of the area (wind energy, shipping, nature conservation);
- the economic traditions on the coasts (shipping, shipbuilding, tourism);
- the creation of crossborder infrastructure and spatial planning: shipping corridors, transport networks, cable- and pipe-laying routes, and networking of marine protected areas.

IV. KEY AREAS FOR ACTIONS

The shared priorities for action in the North Sea-Channel lie predominantly in the areas of marine policy, environment, energy, transport, science and industry and the impact of these on social cohesion. The added-value of successful collaboration will be clearly visible in these policy areas. It will also, however, have beneficial effects on policy areas that are not directly dependent upon territorial characteristics and traditional development;

a. SHIPPING AND PORTS

Shipping is a key part of the European economy, an important factor in employment and, notwithstanding the strain on the environment, the most environmentally friendly mode of transport. The aim is therefore to shift transport – primarily freight – onto water and to better connect waterways and rail routes to the hinterland. In the same way, improving and monitoring maritime safety, especially in high-risk areas of the sea such as the English Channel or in offshore wind parks, require joint civil defence strategies.

b. SKILLS

As maritime transport and offshore operations again become more important, the demand for workers – and the demands placed on them – will increase; there will be tougher international competition for highly skilled labour. The maritime centres in the North Sea-Channel area face the common challenge of ensuring the training and certification of workers specialising in a very broad range of maritime roles. Therefore the idea of a "sea academy" – which would be a shared virtual training centre for traditional and new maritime trades in which common curricula and standards would be developed and then recognised by all sides – should be tried out.

c. INDUSTRY AND THE ECONOMY

The coastal regions in the North Sea-Channel area are being hit by the turmoil in the distribution of labour in the industry internationally, especially in shipbuilding. Therefore high-tech specialist shipbuilding and low- or zero-emission ships have to be promoted in order to help shipyards compete and at the same time make maritime transport safer and more sustainable;

d. INTEGRATED MARITIME POLICY

The EU's integrated maritime policy highlights the need for solutions that are tailor-made for the (geographic, economic and political) characteristics of regional seas and that the North Sea-Channel area is just such a regional sea. The development, implementation and monitoring of an integrated maritime policy for this area is an important component of a European strategy for the North Sea-Channel area, whose need is also set out in the Commission communication on the Integrated Maritime Policy in the Greater North Sea area.

e. FISHERIES

Over-fishing of many kinds and in many regions, the parlous state of many stocks – in some cases below the biological limit –, the still unduly high fishing capacities, and illegal and unregulated fishing which has so far not been effectively curbed. Each fishing area should be studied and assessed to ascertain which form of management best suits the sea region, the kinds of fish caught and the type of fleet.

f. ENVIRONMENT

Economic development and the increasing incursions of man have placed a great burden on the North Sea-Channel ecosystem and led to major environmental problems: the contamination of sea and beaches, increased pollution of waters with chemicals and heavy metals and from shipping and the extraction of natural gas and oil in the sea and dangers from munition remnants that still litter the sea bed. The only way of achieving a sustainable improvement of the marine environment is if all the countries bordering the North Sea and the English Channel pledge themselves to common goals and their coordinated implementation and monitoring.

g. CLIMATE CHANGE – ADAPTION AND MITIGATION

The rise in the sea level and the increased danger to coastal areas from flooding at times of extreme weather conditions caused by climate change have a specific and similar effect on the countries bordering the North Sea and English Channel. A synergy between research and knowledge update in this sphere could therefore contribute to greater competitiveness and protection of the environment and make the most of their regional capacity to cut greenhouse gas emissions. This is done through increased energy efficiency, the promotion of renewable energies, both offshore and onshore.

h. SPATIAL PLANNING

Combating cross-border impacts, above all in a space so heavily used as the North Sea-Channel area, calls for increased coordination on spatial planning issues at the coasts and in the water. The still increasing uses to which a specific vulnerable area is being put must be assessed and weighed against the backdrop of sustainable development and the preservation of the natural environment. A joint "mining code" should be constituted for the North Sea-Channel area to establish a common law – with norms for permits and safety issues – on exploitation of the seabed.

i. ENERGY

The sea and the coastal area can become a site or raw material for new technologies and industries (offshore technologies, "blue" biotechnologies, water- and delta technology, maricultures) and the potential extraction of further raw materials from the sea bed. This would be in line with the Commission's announcement in its 2010 work programme of a communication on "Blue growth" – a new vision for sustainable growth in coastal regions and maritime sectors. The North Sea and English Channel have huge potential for renewable energy. From waves, tide and currents and it is in the interests of all in the region to conduct further research into this and to promote it. Planning for a North Sea grid – a comprehensive energy transport network – has been set in motion to realise the full potential of renewable forms of energy which could make the area a pilot region for e-Mobility.

j. RESEARCH

Marine and maritime research has to be promoted more vigorously in the Eighth Research Framework Programme and support to be given so it can be networked. The reason is that the basis for all the areas of action mentioned is scientific knowledge about the ecosystem of the North Sea and the state it is in, about the consequences of climate change, about the reciprocal impact of competing uses, and so on.

k. CULTURE

Life and work on and by the sea have given rise to a long cultural tradition. Land reclamation, shipping and seafaring have done much to shape the self-awareness and identity of the people that live around the North Sea and the English Channel. Bringing these traditions to life and developing them as a shared identity is one of the assets in making this area stand out from competition.

l. LINKS TO OTHER EU POLICIES

There is a high degree of convergence between the North Sea-Channel area strategy and the goals and guidelines of the Europe 2020 strategy and specially its flagship initiatives "Innovation Union", "Resource-efficient Europe", "An industrial policy for the globalisation era" and "New skills and jobs". Therefore the macro-region could be important for the efficient and successful implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy "on the ground" and the way it is lived by the public in their experience at regional and local level.

The North Sea-Channel area already has EU cross-border, trans-national and interregional cooperation programmes – above all the Interreg Programme IV B for the North Sea and the Atlantic Arc – which promote cooperation and assist the closer cohesion of regions. These programmes – more closely and more flexibly interlinked or of longer duration – could be carried forward and turned into an important instrument for the development and implementation of a strategy for the North Sea-Channel area.

m. GOVERNANCE

The Commission gives "three no's" when it comes to taking macro-regional strategies forward: no new regulation, no new institutions and no additional funding. Instead there should be "three yeses":

- jointly agreed application and monitoring of existing rules in the macro-region;
- creation – for which EU bodies should be responsible – of a platform, network or territorial cluster of regional and local authorities and Member States which also brings in stakeholders;
- agreed use of existing Union funding for developing and implementing macro-regional strategies;

New forms of governance (such as networks and platforms) that are geared to joint action and specific goals must be developed and put in place for implementing macro-regional strategies without undermining existing powers and prerogatives. A better synergy between the funds available at Community level can be engineered until funds are specifically available for macro-regional strategies.

V. THE WAY AHEAD

- The EU Member States should support further steps at the European level to develop a macro-regional strategy for the North Sea-Channel area.
- The European Council should task the Commission with the drafting and asks the European Parliament to work closely on it.

- As far as possible, cohesion policy after 2013 should include macro-regional strategies in its areas of territorial cooperation (in crossborder, transnational and interregional cooperation) and advocates the adoption of a macro-regional strategy before 2013.
- A broad public consultation must accompany the drafting of the strategy.
- The European Commission is asked to make the technical assistance resources for the drafting of macro-regional strategies available even before 2013 so that these can be included in the European Union's future financial perspectives.
- The European Commission should promote the development of a macro-regional strategy for North Sea-Channel area before 2013, including within the programmes promoting territorial cooperation, especially Interreg IV B and other programmes such as ESPON; in this way the European directives and conventions that already apply to the area become clear.
- The European Commission should examine and establish the role and function of macroregions more precisely in a green paper.