

Report from the NSC Environment Group to the NSC Annual Business Meeting, June 9, 2000.



Since the previous NSC General Assembly the NSCEG has held one meeting of the full group, in Suffolk, England (see below!). The Project Working Group (PWG) has had three meetings: in October in Ipswich, England, in January in Halmstad, Sweden and in April in Kristiansand, Norway. In connection with the April meeting, the PWG also met with the NSC Communication & Transport Group (see below, Projects!) These meetings were attended by a representative of the NSC secretariat, which is essential for the effectiveness of the group.

- **New chairman;** Councillor Gunn-Marit Helgesen of Telemark fylkeskommune, Norway, was appointed new chair of the group in October, with Councillor Alison MacInnes of Aberdeenshire Council as deputy chair.

- **The 1999 NSCEG Annual Meeting and Conference;** This event was hosted by Suffolk County Council, October 18-20 in Ipswich, England. The topic of the Conference was "Regional Sustainability in Practice". A full report has been distributed to all NSC members, to all participants and to other interested parties.

One purpose of the conference was to take steps towards the implementation of the Porsgrunn Challenge of 1998. Thus a report on the sustainability questionnaire, which was conducted during the summer 1999, was presented to the Annual Meeting. Copies of that report were distributed to all attending the meeting, as well as to the NSC Executive Committee. It was concluded that priority areas for work in the near future were "Auditing and Sustainability Indicators", "Green purchasing", "Sustainable Development in Rural Areas" and "Training". A number of members had also identified areas of work, where they were prepared to contribute to an exchange of experience.

Four workshops preceded the Conference day, dealing with "Green Purchasing", "Sustainability Indicators and Monitoring", "Sustainable Transport" and "Waste Minimisation". From the workshops - and from the envisioning exercise on the second day of the Conference - a number of project ideas were born. Some of these have since been carried further, such as the Waste/Resource Minimisation project and the Agenda 21 Network project (see below, Projects!). Some of the results of the envisioning exercise still have to be developed, such as the "Flexible Working Time project", aiming at modelling the effects if the staff of a regional authority were to work in a more flexible way – and possibly work less – in order to be able to devote more time and energy to a sustainable development of their community as a whole.

In the evaluation of the 1999 Conference, performed during the Annual Meeting, requests were made to make next Conference programme more suitable for politicians. Plans for the Conference 2000 - to be held in Aberdeenshire, September 21-23 - include a number of speakers and a special workshop session particularly intended to give room for political envisioning of a sustainable future in the North Sea area.

- **Projects.**

Project initiatives have been distributed and promoted in the NSCEG framework. This has led to a number of running projects, co-funded mainly by the EU Interreg IIc Programme for the North Sea. In the Interreg secretariat's final list of 45 projects in October '99, seven projects had directly or indirectly been developed through the NSCEG, some times in co-operation with other technical groups. Examples of such projects are:

- Water Cities International; www.watercity.org
- Restoration of Transnational Ecological Networks (wetlands) TEN, www.ten-project.net
- NORCOAST, www.norcoast.dk
- SEAGIS, www.hordaland-f.kommune.no/seagis
- Green Ports, www.greenport.org/
- Sustainability Centres in the North Sea Region, www.northseanet.org

Other projects are under development, possibly for co-funding through the upcoming Interreg III programme:

- Waste/Resource Minimisation Project; With financial support from the NSC Executive Committee, a preparatory meeting was held in March, connecting partners from Scotland (Highlands), England (Suffolk), Sweden (Halland), Denmark (North Jutland) and Germany (Schleswig-Holstein) with the initiators from The Netherlands (Friesland).
- North Sea Agenda 21 Network Project; Great interest has been expressed in forming a network of people working in different North Sea regions with Agenda 21 related issues. Highland Council has offered to take the lead.
- "Green Purchasing" Project; With an annual European public purchasing of some 612 billion EUR, there is great potential for improving the environmental performance of many products and suppliers by introducing environmental criteria in purchasing.
- Conference on "Sustainable Transports"; an initiative from the NSC Communications & Transport Group for a joint arrangement, focusing on how future transports can be made more long term sustainable than today's transport system. The NSC Executive Committee has agreed to help finance this event, and a joint working group met on May 5th in London to prepare conference programme and other arrangements. The conference is intended to take place in Aarhus, Denmark, November 16-17, 2000.

• **The "Good Practice Exchange Programme", GPE.** The NSCEG had received funding from the European Commission, DGXI, to arrange one conference and six seminars on various environmental topics. The conference and some of the seminars were successfully arranged during 1997, '98 and '99. A final report to the European Commission was produced by the coordinator and Sønderjyllands Amt in July 1999. This included a project evaluation, which showed a.o. the following:

One general very positive outcome of the GPE project was the co-operation with stakeholders/persons/organisations outside of the public sectors, as well as the co-operation between more than one public authority in common arrangements. The project showed that there is great interest in co-operation networks – something which today stands largely without supportive funding from the EU. It is essential that money always is available for small scale environmental co-operation projects.

With two exceptions (the 1997 Conference and the 1999 Dutch seminar) the GPE events failed to attract a sufficient number of participants. There are reasonable explanations for this failure in part. At least two factors were frequently mentioned:

- a) The first invitations did not reach the relevant persons/officers within the NSC member authorities. This was improved considerably in renewed invitations, where more and better addresses were used. Also, the arrangers then had a better time margin for registrations.
- b) Members found it too expensive to participate. The GPE project funded the participation fee for the seminars. Still, apparently, the total cost for sending a delegate, including travel and accommodation, was considered too great by many NSC members. Further more, the staff situation in many public authorities is such that even if the total costs for sending a delegate to a specialist seminar were covered, the regular work load at home would still make it impossible to send a delegate – no matter how interesting and rewarding the event may be. There would simply not be anybody available to do that delegate's regular work in the meantime! If North Sea co-operation is ever going to become a reality on a larger scale, it is necessary that NSC members let staff devote more time to preparations and arrangements – and to actual participation.

The seminars and conference arranged were considered very interesting.

Some suggestions for future arrangements were:

- must be continued exchange of experience - not least between NSC members!
- link seminars to other arrangements (on similar topic) taking place at the same time and place,
- seminar topics should originate from the hosting region(s),
- seminars could be longer and originate in ideas which come up locally.

• **Member Profiles.** The NSCEG Member Profiles are available on the NSC Home Page. The purpose is to facilitate for colleagues in various fields and in all NSCEG regions to find each other directly. All NSC members are invited to supply information to Fife Council, Scotland, for inclusion in future updates!

• **Observership status at the North Sea Conference.** CONSSO met in Oslo, Norway, in October. (CONSSO is the group of Senior Officials preparing and following up on the North Sea Conferences.) The next North Sea Conference will take place in Norway early 2002. There will be reporting on the implementation of decisions made at earlier Conferences, notably the one in Esbjerg in 1995 (The Esbjerg Declaration, stating a.o. "the generation goal" for the elimination of discharges of hazardous substances, etc.) and the one of Environmental and Fisheries Ministers in Bergen in 1997. Among issues discussed at CONSSO were anti-fouling paints containing tin (TBT) and the harmonizing of reporting procedures for nutrients and hazardous substances.

The NSC introduced its political statement on the reduction of hazardous substances, adopted by the General Assembly in June 1999. The NSC observer pointed out that in order to achieve the goals set out in the OSPAR and North Sea Conference frameworks, it was essential that work was speeded up considerably - possibly by treating substances with similar and suspected harmful properties as groups, instead of assessing them as individual substances, which is much more time-consuming.

In the discussion of this statement it was pointed out that it was important to maintain the definition of hazardous substances agreed within OSPAR and that the DYNAMEC process was the keystone of future work on this issue. CONSSO welcomed the involvement of the North Sea

Commission and agreed that there was need to speed up the important work on hazardous substances.

KIMO, Local Authorities International Environmental Organisation, another observer, presented a report on the costs for coastal communities of marine litter. The report is available on KIMO's home page: <http://www.zetnet.co.uk/coms/kimo/> More information about CONSSO/The North Sea Conferences is available on the home page of the Norwegian Department of the Environment: <http://odin.dep.no/md/publ/conf/index.html>

• **Service to the NSC Executive Committee and secretariat.**

The NSCEG assisted in the preparation of various letters:

To influence radioactive discharges from the reprocessing plant at Sellafield, UK:

The NSCEG assisted in the preparation of letters to the UK Minister of the Environment, Mr. Meacher. In November a letter was sent, including the resolution adopted by the General Assembly in June. Soon after new discharge permits were granted Sellafield by the UK government. In April, prompted by government reports about insufficient safety at Sellafield, another letter was sent, urging the UK government to speed up the work to reduce discharges of a.o. radioactive technetium-99.

To encourage an efficient reduction of discharges from ships to the marine environment:

In May letters were sent to the EU Environmental Ministers and to members of the European Parliament, encouraging them to support the proposed EU Directive on Shore Reception Facilities for Ship-Generated Waste. This proposal prescribes that all ports should have such facilities, all ships should be obliged to use them, and ships should be able to use them without paying any special fee. If adopted as proposed, this Directive could lead to less ships dumping waste illegally into the sea – a constant threat to the environment and life quality of all coastal regions.

Great efforts were made to ensure NSC representation at a conference held by Nuclear Free Local Authorities in Northern Ireland in April. Eventually "North Sea opinions" on a.o. the reduction of radioactive discharges could be presented by a representative from SAVOS, the organisation of Southern and Western Counties of Norway.

The co-ordinator took part in an increased number of meetings with the secretariat and the other Technical Group co-ordinators. The co-ordinator also assisted the secretariat in the production of a gift mouse mat, as well as with material for the NSC Newsletter and the Anniversary booklet.

Borås, May 13, 2000.

Per Hörberg, co-ordinator of the NSCEG