EU STRATEGY FOR THE DANUBE REGION

Guidance to the Priority Area Coordinators

This note responds to requests from Priority Area Coordinators for advice on their role in the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. In its role as a facilitator the European Commission provides this note as guidance. Drawing on experiences from the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea its aim is to assist Priority Area Coordinators in their coordination role. The advice below can be adapted further in the light of experience and of the specific needs of the countries involved.

1. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF PRIORITY AREA COORDINATORS?

The coordination of each Priority Area is allocated to Priority Area Coordinators. They are key actors in its implementation, making the Strategy operational. Their responsibility is to provide the best implementation framework so that the appropriate measures can be implemented as foreseen and on time. Committed, proactive and effective coordinators will make the Strategy a success.

Each Priority Area is coordinated by two Danube countries. This is an opportunity for cooperation and the Coordinators are expected to work closely together. Priority Area Coordinators are the prime contact for the Commission for the Priority Area concerned. They will furthermore work in close contact with all stakeholders involved, especially other countries, but also regional and local authorities, inter-governmental and non-governmental Bodies. Their work is trans-national, inter-sectoral and inter-institutional.

How the implementation of each Priority Area is best organised may vary, depending on the nature of the Priority Area or on already existing networks in the field. Based on the Communication adopted by the Commission on 8 December 2010, the discussion to date and the experiences from the Baltic Sea Region Strategy, the following steps might be considered helpful for Priority Area Coordinators in order to implement the Strategy:

a) Set up of an operational working structure

In their coordination role, Priority Area Coordinators are responsible for setting up an operational working structure best suited to implement the actions of the Strategy.

Experience from the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region

Different cooperation structures exist to implement the Baltic Sea Region Strategy. However, some common features can be identified:

- **Support to PAC from within the respective institution:** Experience has shown that good support from within their own institution, sufficient resources and a strong leadership of the PAC has accelerated the implementation of Priority Areas. Links to ongoing processes and policies of their institution are helpful. Different approaches exist in the different Priority Areas, but experience has shown that the coordination task needs between 0,5 – 2 full time employees.

- **The need to identify the relevant contact persons** in all the countries concerned by the actions (national, regional and local authorities, inter-governmental and non-governmental bodies, project leaders, etc.), with the assistance of the National Contact Points and the Commission.

- **Set up of a group to facilitate the coordination of work:** Steering Groups in the Baltic Sea Strategy are stable groups of representatives from all countries and relevant inter-governmental bodies who meet on a regular basis. The Steering Groups work on the implementation of the Strategy and are coordinated and chaired by the Priority Area Coordinators. The Commission (DG Regional Policy and/ or sectoral DG) participates whenever possible.

- **Agree a work programme between the parties involved to implement the Priority Area**, and take appropriate steps to be able to measure progress. One example how to establish the best way of working together was through a kick-off meeting.

b) Agree on (revised) targets and deadlines for actions and projects

In the Communication of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region it is indicated that the Commission strongly believes that setting targets is essential, to focus and prioritise efforts. Some targets are introduced as examples. If needed, these should be further developed and tailored to the Danube Region, together with stakeholders involved, by June 2011. The Commission is flexible in adapting targets following these discussions.
In order to facilitate implementation, each action should be transformed in operational steps, including naming responsible bodies and concrete deadlines for each action. To achieve this, projects need to be identified. Where these projects are already ongoing, they should be linked to the Strategy, where projects are still in the preparatory phase PAC, with the support of the PA Steering Group, should assist in their further development (project leaders and partners, funding sources, deliverables and deadlines).

Experience from the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region

- **Ensure that actions are implemented**: Once actions are transformed into operational steps (including responsible bodies and deadlines), all responsible bodies (national/ regional administration) in the countries need to be committed to implement the agreed actions. Experience in the Baltic has shown that Priority Area Coordinators, in their leading role, can accelerate the process by keeping track of the implementation in the countries. If problems or difficulties appear, the National Contact Points and the Commission assist by conveying the messages to the relevant body.

- **Ensure a good flow of projects**: To ensure ongoing implementation in the Baltic Sea Strategy, Priority Area Coordinators, with the support of the Priority Area Steering Groups compile a list of ongoing projects and possible project ideas. This list is to be continuously updated during the implementation. New projects are assessed according to whether or not the proposal is in line with the Priority Area, it is of relevance for the macro-region and it adds value in relation to existing projects. Some Priority Areas issue letters of recommendations for identified projects, so as to support their application process in existing funding programmes.

- **Follow the implementation of the actions/ projects**: While partners and project leaders implement the actions and projects it is seen as the task of the Coordinator to provide assistance to project lead partners where appropriate and to monitor progress (e.g. through meetings or teleconferences), review co-ordination of the work and seek to ensure that problems/ delays are resolved as they arise. A pro-active and supportive approach to problem-solving is highly appreciated.

- **Provide technical assistance and advice in respect of sources of financing:** Some projects arrive already financed; others will have to be financed. The financing sources are numerous, such as national and regional authorities, international financial institutions such as the European Investment Bank, private banks, European Union instruments (European Regional Development Fund, Cohesion Fund, 7th Framework Programme, LIFE programme, etc.). In the Baltic Sea Strategy, the INTERACT programme (financed by the European Commission to support the implementation of cooperation programmes) has set up a group to assist in identifying funding sources ("Baltic Lab-Group"). A similar group is foreseen for the Danube Strategy. In the Baltic Sea Strategy, specific attention is paid to the possible contributions of the Structural Funds programmes in the Region. These may finance projects linked to the Strategy if such projects satisfy the criteria of the programme in question.

c) ***Ensuring policy discussion and policy development*** and ensuring that results and policy recommendations from projects are taken into account in the relevant policy discussions.

d) Ensuring communication and visibility of results, specific to different target groups and making best use of different media channels, as appropriate.

e) Monitor and report to the Commission on the progress: As the Commission will have to report regularly to the Council, the Coordinators report to the Commission once a year.

Experience from the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region

- The **Annual Report** in the Baltic Sea Region foresees reporting from each Priority Area on the general progress. There is one report to the Commission on each Priority Area. A structure of the report is: (1) Overall state of play in the implementation; (2) Progress towards the targets; (3) state of play of each action; (4) description of the most important projects; (5) difficulties encountered and possible solutions; (6) organisational remarks; (7) next steps. As requested by the Council, the European Commission then prepares the overall progress report of the Strategy to be presented to the Council.

2. WHAT SUPPORT WILL THE COORDINATORS HAVE?

To implement the Strategy, the commitment and practical involvement of all authorities, at national, regional and other levels is needed. The Commission can help by facilitating and supporting the process. The Commission will

- Play a leading role in strategic coordination, in partnership with the Member States;
- Assist Coordinators in identifying partners for the specific actions and projects, together with National Contact Points;
- Safeguard the involvement of stakeholders concerned from all levels in the Region;
- Provide Coordinators, the Danube States and regions concerned with guidance on good practices from the implementation of the Baltic Sea Strategy and from territorial cooperation programmes;
- Provide expertise from sectoral DGs and disseminate best practice examples and expertise gathered from national authorities or inter-governmental bodies;
- Participate in the Steering Group meetings whenever possible;

– Provide support identifying potential contributions from Structural Funds programmes;

– Facilitate implementation through the INTERACT programme identifying sources of financing and addressing other technical issues.

3. TO WHAT EXTENT CAN THE ACTION PLAN BE MODIFIED?

The Action Plan adopted by the Commission, has been extensively discussed with Member States, stakeholders, and the relevant services of the Commission itself. Any changes should therefore be made with caution. However, when starting the implementation phase, certain adjustments may inevitably be necessary. Any adjustments should be discussed in the Steering Group of the Priority Areas and can solely be proposed by the Priority Area Coordinators.

These adjustments may typically be of three types:

1. Clarification/ correction of the details of an action or project in a way that does not change its scope or purpose;

2. Addition of a new action or project, or modification to the extent that the scope or purpose of the action is significantly changed;

3. Deletion of an action or project.

In the case of (1) above, which is effectively correcting errors that may be present or become apparent, the Priority Area Coordinator can, in agreement with the project leader where appropriate, make the necessary changes and inform the Commission (DG Regional Policy). In the absence of a rapid reaction, it will be assumed that the changes are accepted and the Commission will include them in the next revision of the Action Plan.

In the cases of (2) and (3), however, where the change implies a change of policy, at least to some extent, DG Regional Policy should be informed of the reasons for the proposed change, which will not be effective until the High Level Group has offered its advice (and also other parts of the Commission if necessary). These reasons should be substantial: in particular it should be remembered that there is no need for a project to be added to the Action Plan for it to be implemented – the Action Plan is only a selection of the myriad activities taking place for the benefit of the macro-region. Nonetheless, if it is clear that a given project will directly contribute to the objectives of the Priority Area in question, and that it is ready to be implemented, the High Level Group and the Commission should have the opportunity to consider it. Typical cases may arise from the successful development of some of the actions to a stage where specific projects can be identified and implemented.

Actions and projects should only be deleted if it is clear that they are no longer necessary, for example because of changed circumstances, or if there is no prospect of finding competent partners or sufficient funding within a reasonable time (in principle by the time of the first official report in 2012). In either case the deletion must be proposed to the Commission which will then decide with the High Level Group.