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The Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission, or HELCOM in short, is one of the 18 Regional Seas Programmes in the world. It is based on a convention, has existed for over four decades, and involves nine countries – Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia and Sweden - and the European Union.

A particular challenge in restoring the marine environment of the Baltic Sea is that the Baltic Sea is isolated from other sea areas and its catchment is substantially larger than the sea itself. The Baltic Sea thus serves as a sink for all kinds of pollution and it takes a long time for the environment to recover. Other semi-enclosed seas in the world face the similar challenge. Efficient regional level cooperation is in this case indispensable as most of the environmental problems are transboundary in nature.

The biggest transboundary environmental problem in the Baltic Sea is heavy eutrophication. The cost of degradation for the Baltic Sea region with respect to eutrophication is estimated at total losses of around 3.8 – 4.4 billion euros annually. Actions to reduce inputs of nutrients are thus necessary from all relevant human activities.

To this end, the Baltic Sea has recently been designated as a special area for sewage discharges from passenger ships under MARPOL Annex IV and NOx Emission Control Area under MARPOL Annex VI. The designation has been done by the International Maritime Organization, the global regulator for shipping.

However, work on these new measures has been organized regionally utilizing the HELCOM platform and involving competent maritime authorities from the Contracting Parties - from taking the first initiative and preparing technical documentation to negotiating and making proposals by the HELCOM countries to IMO.

In essence these two HELCOM initiatives have been about partnerships across three different dimensions:

- Firstly it is an example of how regional work can contribute as a constructive intermediary between coastal countries of a regional sea and the global level.
- It is also an example of close cooperation between transport and environment ministries – a form of “cross-sectoral cooperation”, taking place within a single regional organization, in contrast to more common cooperation between different organizations.
- And thirdly, a key to success has been that all major industry groups including shipowners and ports and environmental NGOs have been involved throughout the process as official HELCOM observers, forming true regional “public-private-partnerships”.

As a result of this work, the problem of nutrients from the shipping sector, including cruise industry, will be practically eliminated in the Baltic Sea, over a certain period of time.

Based on the HELCOM experience, one can conclude that effective cross-sectoral cooperation on ship-based pollution can be carried out on a regional level for the benefit of the marine environment and according to the existing maritime law.

A similar cross-sectoral cooperation mechanism or approach can be utilized for other topics that need to be addressed to achieve regional targets related to oceans and seas and thus contribute to the 2030 Agenda.