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Best Practice and Recommendation Report

Coast4us Project



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Background

Territories in the Baltic Sea coastal areas that are rich with natural, cultural, economic, and social values usually have a diverse range of stakeholders with specific interests and needs. These include local inhabitants who live in the territory all year around, seasonal visitors, local municipalities, and representatives of local businesses based on the available sea resources. Local community life in the coastal areas is strongly dependent on seasonal visitors, tourism, recreation, work opportunities, and natural sea and water resources. Community life and longevity is also highly dependent on the ecosystem, existing biodiversity, and climate changes which are crucial factors that will affect the future.

More coherent planning is required within the Baltic Sea Region as human activities and environmental pressures go beyond administrative borders, promoting balance among nature, humans, and economic growth. Only such a balanced approach can provide a sustainable and smart society in the coastal areas. Using existing know-how combined with methodological and technological support can help to achieve this.

The spatial planning approach and its governance is different depending on the country. Coastal area spatial planning differs from regular spatial planning because it is connected with a specific waterbody. In the case of the Coast4us project, the Baltic Sea. Often waterbodies lie on the border between countries with different legislation, history and governance. In these circumstances it was especially important to analyze planning conditions and share knowledge across borders to achieve sustainable plans that develop the common resource and also provide development opportunities for coastal communities, regardless of political circumstances. In addition to the usual sustainability factors, particular attention should be paid to natural and environmental values, conservation and development of ecosystems. These specific features, as well as the changing and rapid growth of society for community development, open up new directions for spatial planning.

Aims

The aim of the project Coast4us was to develop a holistic and inclusive approach to the spatial and community development planning process by involving stakeholders of different interests in order to create sustainable marine and coastal development plans at different levels, including at community grassroots level. The project will contribute to development of better living conditions while ensuring a balance between exploitative activities and the preservation of biodiversity and essential ecosystem services. Exactly how a coastal development plan needs to be built depends entirely on the area's local and national conditions and specificities.

During the project, the participating partners in Estonia, Latvia, Sweden and Åland Islands of Finland created methods and tools to better visualize and evaluate different values and interests, as well as methodologies and guidelines for more efficient development planning. We have learned from each other and found new ways (methods and instruments) to communicate with local communities and involve them. This report is a summary of the Best Practices learned by the participating partners under this project. It is meant to be a reference tool and provide recommendations for future regions planning to develop.



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Key lessons learned

During this project, partners worked in three main, interlinked areas: 1) mapping and collecting data, 2) the planning process and the development of plans, and 3) evaluation of the tools and methods used. Mapping and assessment of values (e.g. ecological, cultural and social) as well as mapping of the present use of resources and local demands for economic development was done. Planning tools (e.g. GIS, planning IT tool, LEA and Smart City Planning) were developed in order to facilitate the planning process. Meeting points, both physical and web-based, were established. Education material was also prepared for the general public, planners, and politicians.

When working on gathering data and creating relevant maps for development plans, we realized that more data was always more helpful. It is important to bring information together about the territory. Accordingly, we strongly recommend collecting and analysing as much data as possible before proposing a development plan. An accurate mapping of different values - social, ecological, economic and cultural - is extremely important to create a sustainable plan that balances the different values.

Useful data from environmental surveys and inventories can inform about what valuable resources exist in the region, and where they are located. Survey information from the community can inform about what the challenges, needs and priorities are for the local society. GIS layers and other graphic tools can help to visualize plans and how the area will change over time, better connecting ideas with places. A combination of geospatial data and local knowledge gives good synergistic results.

It is important to collect information regularly and make it available in a way that citizens can understand. It is important to create a system that is citizen-friendly, allowing people to intuitively use it and glean answers from available data.

When working on optimizing the planning process, we learned that it is always good to act in a proactive way. It is important to initiate dialogue early and include all stakeholders, including non-standard stakeholders. This proactivity and community involvement require time, so be sure to account for it when creating timelines.

We learned about the importance of formal and informal planning approaches. Scholars and practitioners agree that spatial planning as a place-creating process must be understood from a multi-level perspective. Formal and informal planning practices differ in terms of their conceptions and applications in different countries. Nevertheless it was concluded that municipalities should be more active, involving informal groups (local communities) in the planning, implementation and control of municipal spatial planning, as this ensures a greater interest in the use of planning outcome as well as increases the trust in governance. Simply put, communities are much more excited about and invested in projects when they are part of the design and decision-making process.

All project partners widely used the classical methods of community engagement – workshops, meetings and trainings. These methods allow to make decisions and control the results achieved. Besides classical methods, different alternative methods have been used to get the public involved: walk and talks, informal meetings and early dialog meetings, hiking/cycling routes, special events like a Baltic Sea day and inspirational biodiversity day, idea collection



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and mind mapping, surveys, and activities with children. We also used web-based engagement such as workshop sessions with a combination of different tools and developed new methods such as the “demologue”.

We also learned that territorial development depends not only on governance activities, but also on engagement of a wider society, including entrepreneurs, non-governmental organizations and residents. Moreover, we concluded that viability of territories and resilience against unexpected circumstances depends on a large extent on how active the population is. Accordingly, there should be instruments to motivate residents not only to engage in municipal development plan preparation, but also to develop their own community development plans, as well as to initiate and implement various initiatives.

We also discovered during the project that sustainability is a hard concept to implement in small islands; plans focused on sustainability need to be re-thought and presented differently in these areas.

Finally, we found that the key to community cooperation, stakeholder involvement, and local ownership came from good communication. It is important to have many different types of meetings to include diverse viewpoints- from regional meetings, to meetings with politicians, to meetings with residents including school children. We can conclude that although we have similar challenges, we end up with different solutions due to national and local circumstances. Accordingly, we must keep an open mind and be flexible implementing the project activities- unexpected circumstances can appear (such as global pandemics, changes of staff, parallel activities etc.) that might have an impact on results.

Recommendations for other areas that will start their planning process

Throughout the process, we developed a list of recommendations for other areas that will implement planning processes:

1. Mapping and preparation for planning process

- Gather information via surveys and meetings. Present all available information to the public, using maps to visualize the information helps. This provides a clear view of the area and is a baseline for building upon.
- More data and knowledge are always good– use as much as possible within budget and timeline.
- Pay particular attention to climate change, water quality, reduced biodiversity and social and cultural values.
- There is local knowledge in every small territory, and this knowledge can be mapped.
- Avoid fragmentation of the landscape. Are there continuous green and blue strips through the landscape? If not create supplemental pollination plans.
- Use the planning portals to share, update, and access data and GIS layers. Ideally, the main datasets would be collected and provided by the state as open data and provided in a user-friendly way.



- Invest in digital visualization programs (and specialists who can use them) for getting public opinions and input to your planning process.
- Don't be afraid to use complicated methods to help you in your planning process (like mathematical modelling to predict possible future scenarios). If you cooperate with specialists, they can give you valuable information that will make your decision making much easier.
- Combine geospatial data and local knowledge to ensure meaningful synergistic results.
- Need to map the broader picture of the whole coastline to compare values in a local area with that of the greater Baltic region- models can be used for this step.

2. Planning process and development of sustainable plans

- Be very clear from the beginning about the goals and the expected result, what is the timeline of the process, and what kind of input is needed. It is important to think through ahead of time what you are offering in terms of interactions so that there will be no misunderstandings. The project plan should be clear, simple, and visual.
- Involvement will create a better relationship between municipality and public. Plan for different kinds of dialogue meetings – both open to anyone and more specific per stakeholder group. If ownership is not felt at the community level, the plan will not result in a particularly strong commitment to implementation from the community. In order to get support from the community, make it clear that their involvement and work is important by highlighting and praising the local effort and in some way physically manifesting the work done. Deliver some of the needs that have emerged in the community planning work- for example, place more trash cans on a beach. The important thing is that people can see and be reminded that commitment gives results. Providing incentive money makes it easier to get stakeholders engaged.
- Be careful to observe and manage both the formal and informal processes if you are aiming at real change. Provide regular feedback about the achievements. Regular communication between the community and municipality, including regular meetings regarding current and future collaboration, might increase mutual trust.
- To ensure quality and effectiveness of community involvement in the planning process, take into account specific issues, the level of participation desired, the time frame and the range of stakeholders affected.
- It takes a mix of different tools to engage as many people as possible. There are countless types of methods available. However, the ones used by each community must be meaningful and suitable to the community. An awareness and understanding of the identity of the community is essential here. During the global pandemics, better to use the online tools.



- To properly run successful meetings, it is important to have staff educated in how to handle public meetings and conflict-resolution. Having the right pedagogic tools makes meetings smoother and more productive, and helps all people feel included in the process. This also minimize chances for appeals of plans due to not having information, misinformation, or having the feeling of "not been listened to".
- When planning in remote areas where there is no housing, it is good to include "users" in the planning process. Areas can try to stretch out and actively involve visitors. These can be individuals, but also associations and companies- for example tour guide companies, kayak companies, etc.
- Children need to be involved as they are tomorrow's planners, politicians and citizens.
- Education, communication and information about biodiversity and valuable ecosystem services as well as what can be done for the environment is important to reach all target groups such as planners, municipalities, decision makers, business, culture and the general public, etc. Use tools such as maptionnaire, eco-mapping, study visits, marine pedagogy and websites as well as social media to spread information. It takes a mix of different tools to engage as many people as possible.
- The involvement of an independent expert as a moderator of the planning process can be very helpful. It has been valuable for us to have project partners from different levels (local organizations, municipalities, regional agencies, federal authorities, universities, and private companies) for the exchange of experience between both countries and parties. It can be messy in the beginning, but good overall.
- It is important to keep balance among nature, humans and economic growth. All areas are important. The ecosystem, existing biodiversity, climate changes, and natural resources are crucial factors that will affect the future of the local community and life in the coastal areas,
- A circular economy should be promoted, while reviewing opportunities to support local initiatives to increase the sustainable development of local small-scale food production, use of compost, local renewable energy production, etc.
- Detailed recommendations for the community level are defined in methodological material "Guidelines for Community Development Planning", 2020, created under the project Cost4us. Briefly, aim to answer Who, What, Where, When, Why and How in your plan, engage the local citizens as much as possible, and maintain the voluntary nature of community development planning.
- It is important to educate the community about the development planning processes and engagement opportunities. It is important that municipalities are interested in real cooperation with its citizens, so that public engagement in not seen as a formal burden, but as an opportunity to create favorable living and



working environment for citizens. It is important to understand that mutual cooperation will benefit both citizens and the municipality as governance institution. The municipality will have an opportunity to better understand the needs of the population, to ensure necessary support measures and thus increase society's confidence and trust in local governance. It is also an opportunity for citizens to participate more actively in decision-making processes and to the development of their own community, which leads to increased pride and local patriotism.

3. *Evaluation*

- During the project scientific evaluation of the spatial and community development planning among the partner countries was carried out. The main conclusions, which can serve as a source for further work in the field of spatial and community development, are as follows.
- The territory-developed methods for the evaluation of economic and social processes, as well as the methods of analysis for territory development data are widely studied. The obtained results (indicators) are used in forecasting, planning and in defining strategic directions of development at various territorial levels. The planning of smart and sustainable villages and neighborhoods in Baltic Sea coastal areas can be considered a sufficiently new concept, which needs to be further detailed with new approaches and examples.
- Establishing formal measures of indicators ranging from biodiversity to sea resources, from city green spaces to public infrastructure is crucial to an effective planning process. GIS is one of the best ways to present and process statistical and geospatial information using spatial analysis methods, e.g., geoprocessing. Being able to visualize and evaluate these different indicators allows planners and community members to determine crucial factors that will affect future community life and better balance among nature, humans and economic growth, thus creating plans that establish viable communities for future generations.
- It is important to work with communities and to use different methods to gain new knowledge and experience. The choice of methods may be related to the specific territory situation; the number of people acquiring information, knowledge and experience; the degree of human involvement.
- To increase the quality of life of the community members and preserve the diversity of the natural environment, especially those connected to sea resources, it is important to understand the specific spatial planning problems of coastal communities. Several problems have been concluded: (a) lack of communication, regardless of country and region; (b) the weak involvement of different social groups; (c) insufficient coastal and environmental management; (d) excessive regulatory enactments; (e) as well as summer-year-round population conflict. These problems must be taken in account.



- The information base is sufficient to initiate spatial planning at the municipal level, but municipalities should be more active, involving informal groups (local communities) in the planning, implementation and control of municipal spatial planning, as this ensures a greater interest in the use of planning outcome.
- Similarities and differences exist among our partner countries in their approach to spatial planning. All countries that have been analysed have hierarchical planning systems and historically have used formal “top-down” spatial planning approaches. Recently, spatial planning systems are changing to more “bottom-up” systems but each country is conducting these processes in different ways. This is a risk to sustainable governance of the Baltic Sea and coastal communities.

What needs to be done further on to continue the project achievements?

Based on our work during the Coast4us project, we concluded that it is important to maintain the work done during this project, including the collected information, created contacts and trained skills. It is important that all the hard work done in the planning and development phases is not lost but continued and further developed.

It was also concluded that it would be useful to create an online resource or toolbox to store the tools that have been used and created during this project, with suggestions about what methods were useful and in which situations. It is also important to keep the online portals active, so that new information is also added to the portal. Keeping the web resources active makes it easier for future projects and continued use by stakeholders. Data collecting for mapping and planning should be stored digitally.

In addition to updating the tool repository, it is also important to continue work with society engagement in the development process, both by educating and inspiring local municipalities to better involve society in local development planning, as well as by motivating and encouraging people to engage in local development and act. It is also important to continue to ensure feedback to the society regarding the progress of development projects, enhancing trust in local governance. The local, needs-based planning approach for smart and sustainable development in villages and neighborhoods can provide a more inclusive society in the coastal areas. Projects come and go but the local society remains and can keep developing the area.

It is necessary to further explore how formal and informal planning processes support the development and implementation of long-term strategies and plans, as well as how these processes interact and influence the sustainability of local communities. We need to answer these questions for sustainable planning process: Why we are losing community engagement step-by-step during full planning process? Are we too formal? Do we meet expectations? Do we fulfill dreams?

We also concluded that it would be useful to continue to create new surveys and gather more data, when possible. For example, it would be useful to develop new methods to reduce pollution or clean up polluted areas, such as constructing protection zones along ditches and watercourses, or wetlands.



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Overall, there is a need to strengthen multilevel approaches in development planning and implementation. It is important to continue to communicate with the local community, to have meetings and publish updates so that people know how the project is progressing. It is important that the established collaboration among governance (at all levels) society and other stakeholders remains.

Finally, it is important to also make a critical evaluation of the success of the planning process by asking yourselves: Were we able to implement all the items we planned? How successful were our implementations? Did our plans match our modelled expectations? Is our plan sustainable?

Conclusions

The main results of the Coast4us project were 8 sustainable development plans for pilot regions around the Baltic coast. These concrete plans were only able to be made because of all the tools and strategies we learned, developed, and used during the project and shared here. Our innovative technical tools, such as GIS tools and web-based platforms, allowed us to share, evaluate, and visualize different values and interests. A key activity, and new practice developed in the project, was informal local society involvement in the planning process, inspiring and motivating people to engage and act, as well as to strengthen collaboration between local communities and local governments. In that regard capacity and skills of various NGO's, local communities and local governments were improved regarding development planning and society involvement issues. In addition, the scientific studies put the work of the project in a broader context and pinpointed important parts of the processes. Coast4us allowed us to test new tools and methods and discuss and compare the process in different communities with different priorities and conflicts. The methods, knowledge gained, and plan guidelines created are all tools to help other communities create similarly sustainable plans for their areas.

We intend to continue to improve upon the groundwork established here by sharing results in online repositories and continuing our dialog with local governments, communities and other stakeholders. In particular, we plan to begin new collaborative projects to continue the work, such as testing methods to reduce pollution and rehabilitate coastal areas, improving our green and blue energy grids, developing circular economies, and many more. Additionally, some partners are developing publications and Open University courses so that the knowledge from the project can be incorporated into education programs and shared with students and so that the insight we have gained is of use to the next generation of project planners. Other partners, inspired by the results of the project, will work to foster more efficient collaboration among local municipalities and society. They will work to ensure the development and implementation of practical support mechanisms and measures to improve society engagement and the implementation of local initiatives at grass-roots level.