EMPOWERING LOCAL ACTORS: COMMUNICATION STRATEGY FOR LOCAL LEVEL WATER PROTECTION ACTIVITIES

Strategy document

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IMPRESSUM

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Preface

This document will introduce a communication strategy for local level water protection activities. The aim of this strategy is to enable and enhance the use communication as a tool for local level organizations to make sense, to increase knowledge and to activate and inspire people to participate in environmental actions in the responsible way. This strategy will define six strategic communication goals and discuss possible activities for achieving them.

This strategy is based on the problems and practices identified by two surveys. One of them (Kaal, Olesk, Tampere 2015b) was looking at the water protection related attitudes and activities of coastal municipalities in three Baltic countries and Finland. The other (Kaal, Olesk, Tampere 2015a) presented similar questions to the citizens of the three Baltic countries. The survey results revealed various ways in which local water protection activities could be improved with the help of strategic communication.

This strategy and surveys are part of the European Union Life+ program co-funded project *CITYWATER – Benchmarking water protection in cities*. The project aims to implement and facilitate municipal water protection measures in the Baltic Sea region.

The project partners are the City of Helsinki (coordinating beneficiary), City of Turku, City of Tallinn and Tallinn University. The project also closely collaborates with the initiative called the Baltic Sea Challenge, launched by the mayors of Turku and Helsinki in 2007.

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Introduction and background

Objectives

Many water protection activities depend on the support and activity of citizens. Whether allocating resources for building or renovating waste water treatment systems or making environmentally friendly everyday consumer choices or actively participating in water protection activities, communication forms a major part in the success of any activity. The successes will depend on the awareness, knowledge and behaviour of people. Communication, especially in the form of dialogue, and education are the main tools in achieving change in these aspects.

This is especially relevant on the local level where the successes often depend on grassroots support and activity. This document aims to empower local governments, NGOs and other organisations dealing with environmental issues to develop their activities in order to make the environment better around the Baltic Sea.

The desired state envisioned by the strategy is local communities with a shared vision for the clean Baltic Sea and active collaboration of various actors for improving the state of water systems.

The mission of the strategy is to enable and enhance the use of communication as a tool for local level organizations to make sense, to increase knowledge and to activate/inspire people to participate in environmental action in the responsible way.

Theoretical background

In the context on environmental knowledge, attitude and behaviour we discuss strategic communication from the theoretical perspectives of organizational communication and social practices. The first is more relevant for local municipalities to manage information flows and participate in the communication process as a trusted actor. The second approach, social practices, deals with the question how to achieve behaviour change in the target groups (citizens and other stakeholders).

Organizational communication

Communication is both an activity and the encompassing process. Relations with stakeholders and interest groups (such as media, businesses, NGOs, scientists, citizens) are always the result of those activities and processes. Irrespective of the specific format the communication process always ends with relationships between the communicants whether on a personal, organisational or societal level.

The paradox inherent to the communication flow is that it is never empty. In the public sphere there is a constant competition to fill this flow with information. Due to the volume of information in the flow, organisations (and individuals) benefit from being able to control their communication process and therefore manage their social or organisational (also personal) relations. The biggest practical problem for any organization is the ability to fill the communication flow with effective messages and thus maintain control of their relations. In this way, mutual understanding of the ongoing environmental, economic and other processes can be achieved between organizations

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and stakeholders, for example citizens.

To facilitate understanding among people and other systems such as organizations, the public, and society, Grunig (1989) proposed the two-way symmetrical communication model. The key preconditions of this symmetrical model are that communication leads to understanding and that people and organizations have to be interested in the consequences of their behaviour and try to avoid unfavourable consequences (Sharpe, 2000).

The two-way process (dialogue) enables participants to create a new shared meaning, a consensus (Van Ruler, 2004). It can be said that for dialogue to be successful, the most important factor is comprehension, which leads to the integration of the information and lays the basis to the achievement of agreement between the parties.

It must be noted, however, that it is not always easy for an organization to use dialogue, when it is accustomed only to inform people and may not be ready to apply the two-way symmetrical model (Grunig & Jaatinen, 1999). According to Vos and Schoemaker (1999) "it is sometimes difficult to use the symmetrical communication, for example in situations

where the discrepancy of viewpoints between the two parties is considerable; interest and activity groups are not always interested in opting for symmetrical communication, which, if used, needs to be desired by both sides" (p. 23).

This problem is relevant for public consultations that have now become a required component for many governance processes both on the national and local level. The dialogue in these processes will be successful if it is based on honesty and ethical principles, achieves transparent communication which leads to greater understanding and increased competence. Thus it is important to obtain systematic feedback and to correct procedures on the basis of stakeholders' reactions.

The increase in competence, in turn, leads to results, i.e. a consensus on a certain matter. The pedagogical role of communication can be expressed in the following key concepts:
» 1. Dialogue: equality of the parties; the creation, in co-operation, of an interactive program of action; following the viewpoints of the public; giving constructive feedback; explanation through situations familiar and important to the target group; following ethical

standards; and validity (truth, rightness, sincerity, comprehensibility);
» 2. Achieving results: mutual understanding; consensus; admitting the inevitability of change.

Social practices

Practices can be defined as routinized ways "in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood" (Reckwitz 2002). It connects the individual's physical and mental activities, understanding and knowledge about the world which results in conventionalized ways in which we, for example, cook, consume or engage in water protection. A practice represents a pattern which can be filled out by a multitude of single and often unique actions reproducing the practice (ibid.). All of these are shaped by the social world.

A model by Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012) and Vihalemm, Keller, Kiisel (2015) defines three key areas for social practices which are connected via social interaction:
» Meanings – social norms, rules, understandings, ideologies;
» Things – material environment, infrastructure;

» Skills and competences.

Moulding these three dimensions on the individual (or organizational) level is the way to achieve social change, for example induce environmental behaviour. Communication, according to Vihalemm, Keller and Kiisel (2015: 103) is like glue that "keeps practices together, contributes to their development and dissolution". As also emphasized in the previous section about organizational communication, communication must be understood as occurring everywhere and all the time, not just in the context of specific conscious acts such as campaigns.

The development of these three dimensions needs to be complementary to achieve social change. For example, waste recycling facilities may be useless if people lack skills using them. Or, awareness campaigns may increase people's motivation to change the behaviour but the actual change will not occur unless there is also suitable infrastructure.

Vihalemm et al. (2015) consider actual hands-on experience as the most powerful initiators of change. Creating "environments and spaces for trying new activities literally „hands-on" by observing

the doings of experts are nessessary for the practical socialisation" (ibid.: 115). Training and personal consulting are effective, although resource-demanding methods. In this approach, practices should also be the centre of networks or coalitions that engage the relevant stakeholders. This kind of engagement does not necessarily have to be initiated by a central organization but can also be created „bottom-up".

While communication must be planned purposefully, each programme designer has to live with the complexity and ambivalence of communication, Vihalemm et al. (2015) conclude. The communicator must be aware of the limited capacity to control actual sense-.making, let alone the ensuing behaviour.

Communication strategy for local level water protection

The implementation of a communication strategy contains several important stages:
» defining problems;
» setting goals for communication;
» formulating possible messages to different stakeholder groups;
» selecting potential activities on the local community level;
» identifying potential resources ;
» analysing communication actions to make the communication process more effective.

Defining problems

This communication strategy is based upon the problems defined during research conducted by Tallinn University Institute of Communication. We surveyed the people in all three Baltic countries about their water protection related attitudes and behaviour (Kaal, Olesk, Tampere 2015a, 2015b, see page 12). In addition, we surveyed coastal municipalities in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Finland and also discussed related issues in several Estonian and international workshops.
As a result, we are able to highlight the following problems:

» People consider water protection as necessary but have low belief in their own capabilities in water protection and knowledge about possible measures. When asked "What can you do to protect the local water environment", half of the people either say they cannot do anything or say "don't know".

» People consider national governments, European Union and industry as actors with most responsibility in protecting the Baltic Sea. Local municipalities, however, see more responsibility for themselves and for the citizens.

» For people, local municipality is the most important point of contact for environmental matters. As a way to influence environmental decisions, people prefer notifying local municipality (34%) or media (17%). At the same time, they are little aware of water protection activities of the municipality and just a fraction has participated in such activities.

» Local municipalities see pollution risks related to citizens as substantial and therefore raising the awareness of people as one of their main responsibility in environmental protection. They have such activities high in their agenda. However, lack of resources – money, knowledge, and human resources – often hinders the successful implementation of these activities.
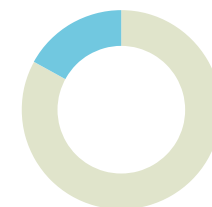
50%
say they cannot do anything to protect the local waters or say "don't know

34%
prefer notifying local municipality about pollution

17%
prefer notifying media about pollution

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Strategic communication goals in the Baltic Sea region

The problems highlighted in the previous section can be summarized as reflecting mismatches between the understandings of citizens and local municipality about the nature of problems related to water quality, ways of dealing with them and the roles and responsibilities of various actors. Achieving a common understanding and a shared vision in the local communities is the central part in the successes of water protection.

We propose six major communication-centred activities that can contribute to creating this shared vision and thereby lead to a better health of the Baltic Sea and local water systems. These goals are complementary, meaning that none of them is individually powerful enough to help solve the highlighted problems but several need to be enacted in a concerted way. For each goal we list a possible action or actions that could be used to achieve this goal, including also the list of relevant actors, required resources and possible method for analysing effectiveness.

1

To raise awareness about the problems of the Baltic Sea

Baltic Sea has been called the most polluted sea in the world. Its problems, however, are not easily noticeable for a common person on its shores and understanding about the nature of these problems varies. The same can be true for local level waster issues. All local level water protection issues are related to more global problems, especially to the state of the Baltic Sea. Those problems are influencing our social, economic, ecological, recreational etc. conditions. These connections are often not fully perceived; therefore it is the task of communication to point out the relevance of the Baltic Sea and the benefits of water protection and do so in a manner that shows their connections to people's everyday life.
Next to big and attractive events it is also necessary that these ideas are integrated into municipality's everyday activities and expressed

in all environment-related communication by the municipality.

Action 1: Baltic Sea Celebrations: dedicated days in organizations, municipalities, regions.
Involved actors: Municipalities, activists, scientists, schools, media, local businesses.
Required resources: Municipality budget, sponsors, project funding, volunteers.
Suggested frequency: Once per year
Analysing effectiveness: Public opinion surveys, attendance

Action 2: Environmental communication strategy of the municipality
Involved actors: Municipality communication team, civil servants
Required resources: Municipality budget
Suggested frequency: Continuous
Analysing effectiveness: Public opinion surveys, public sentiment at events

2

To increase citizens' knowledge

Factual knowledge alone is not enough to trigger change in behaviour but is a potent tool to raise awareness and create motivation for people to become active. Various events or educational programs – exhibitions, lectures, workshops, and regular courses – can help the person to learn about their impact on the environment (e.g. the Baltic Sea) and ways how to become more environmentally friendly, whether at home, at workplace or on vacation. For example, one focus can be giving specific tips for everyday behaviour.

Action: Educational programs for adults, distribution of factual material
Involved actors: National and local governments, NGOs, media, experts
Required resources: Government and local budget, project funding
Suggested frequency: Regularly (e.g. once or twice per month)
Analysing effectiveness: Media monitoring and analysis, feedback at events

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To engage public in the environmental risk management

Public discussions prior to various decisions with an environmental impact are mandatory. If used skilfully, these can be powerful tools for empowering the local community and leading them to adopt environmentally friendly behaviours. Such events, as well as other acts of engagement, can help to provide the necessary trust and are a forum where to discuss the wider environmental issues while also taking into account the local concerns. Here it is especially important to follow the principles of two-way communication.

Situations of crises (such as pollution cases or oil spills) play an important role in managing trust in the local community. The local municipality needs to be prepared, not only to handle the problem but also to adequately communicate with public and stakeholders and engage them into solving the crises.

3

Action 1: Public discussions prior decisions, engagement events, engagement skills trainings
Involved actors: Local government, NGOs, local community organizations
Required resources: Municipality funding, volunteers
Suggested frequency: Continuous, Depending of decision-making
Analysing effectiveness: participation, level of engagement, consideration of community problems in decision making

Action 2: Risk and crises communication plan for municipality
Involved actors: Municipality communication team, civil servants
Required resources: Municipality, media, stakeholders (potential polluters)
Suggested frequency: Continuous
Analysing effectiveness: Response to environmental problems, level of trust in community

4

To increase citizens' activity and change behaviour

Translating awareness and motivation into actual change often required moulding social practices. Meanings can be targeted with the help of events or campaigns, for example those that allow people to have personal experiences related to the subject such as clean-up events. The key is to empower people, i.e. to make them feel responsible for their environment and capable of changing it for the better. These attitudes will increase likelihood of environmentally-friendly behaviour (if supported by motivation to engage in water protection related activities and the material aspect, for example relevant infrastructure such as well-placed recycling bins or possibility for ships to dump the waste water for free in ports).

Action 1: Active participation campaigns with different water /sea/environment related topics
Involved actors: Local municipalities, schools, NGOs, local community organizations
Required resources: National budget, local municipality budget, project funding, volunteers
Suggested frequency: 1-2 times per year
Analysing effectiveness: Number of participants, observing behavioural outcomes

Action 2: Creating supportive infrastructure for behavioural change
Involved actors: Local municipalities, experts, local communities
Required resources: National and municipality budget, project funding
Suggested frequency: continuous maintenance and improvement
Analysing effectiveness: Use of infrastructure, observing behavioural outcomes

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To engage stakeholders groups

Agriculture, local industry and other groups are both a key part in the local community and can play a big role in supporting water protection. While much of their activity is regulated by local of national regulations, engaging them can lead them to contribute beyond this and, for example, exercise their corporate social responsibility. The aim, with the help of various events but also daily communication following the dialogue principles, is to increase their knowledge about their responsibility and provide tools that help to decrease their environmental load.

Action: seminars and others engagement events, discussions prior decisions
Involved actors: Municipalities, stakeholders, experts
Required resources: Municipality budget, project funding, civil servant dedication
Suggested frequency: Continuous
Analysing effectiveness: Participation, level of engagement, feedback analysis

6

To build up local networks

Co-operation always works better if people know and trust each other. On local level, this is often the most crucial factor. Therefore it is vital that people engaged in water protection activities on various levels – officials, NGOs, volunteers etc. – regularly communicate and engage the local community in the activities. If the same vision is shared by key actors in stakeholder organizations or communities then those key actors will themselves also become promoters of the same goals. This way the messages can reach groups that are not directly reached by the local municipality or other communicator and support behavioural change in these groups.

As the success of this type of activity is less dependent on individual events and more on everyday communication and engagement skills, the improvement of the skills to initiate public activities, promote

environmental issues and engage citizens to participate becomes important. In the development of such skills and learning about best practices, international co-operation networks such as The Baltic Sea Challenge network are useful.

Action: Regular seminars, informal events and interaction
Involved actors: Municipality, stakeholders, NGOs, local community organizations etc
Required resources: Municipality budget, civil servant dedication
Suggested frequency: Continuous
Analysing effectiveness: Activity and size of the network, feedback analyses

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Further comments on implementation

Key components

Key structural components of success of planned communication activities are identifying and allocating resources and performing effectiveness analysis.

Resources

Our surveys show that lack of resources is a constant challenge for local municipalities. Therefore any allocation of resources needs to be carefully planned and the need for this widely accepted within the organization or community. It all begins with the awareness among the municipalities themselves.

Financial resources for environmental communicative actions should be planned in the local government budgets but also at the national level. While it is possible to smartly use free possibilities, such as social media for regular communication, a steady funding allows reaching strategic goals more effectively than single random campaigns.

Social resources mostly mean dedication of municipality civil servants, good co-operation between different actors, well-organized networks and participation of volunteers. It also means the communication and engagement skills of the actors. An active local network can also allow using the resources available to other actors, both financial and social. Collaboration with local businesses as part of their social responsibility strategy is one example.

Effectiveness analysis

All activities should be evaluated for their effectiveness and factors of success or failure carefully analysed. Analysis and establishing different feedback systems need to be elementary for all communicative actions and educational programs.

Messages

Messages are always specific to the local context and stakeholder groups. There are no universal messages that work everywhere. But we still offer some examples that could be used and adapted:

- » Our welfare and good health depend on the health of the sea and other water bodies;
- » We all matter. Every action counts in preventing pollution and keeping the environment clean;
- » All is connected: what we do in our home will also affect the Baltic Sea and thereby contribute to a better or worse life for us and our children.

If possible, the messages could be accompanied by facts that specifically relate individual behaviour and ecological effects. For example: If you would like to use fishing to compensate for your annual personal load of phosphorus to the Baltic Sea, you would have to eat 100kg of fish per year.

Implementation

The activities presented here should not be treated as recipes for success but rather a list of possibilities that need to be analysed from the perspective of each individual situation. Identifying local problems, key actors and available resources will help to formulate the complex measures that can be hoped to work best in this particular area. These measures do not need to be , effort should be made to analyse how existing activities could be transformed into benefitting water protection aims. This may mean integrating water protection theme into activities where local municipality and citizens or other stakeholders already regularly come into contact, or adopting new approaches for current environmental activities that can enhance the effectiveness of engagement.

It is important that hopes are not placed on one single activity and results are expected to be

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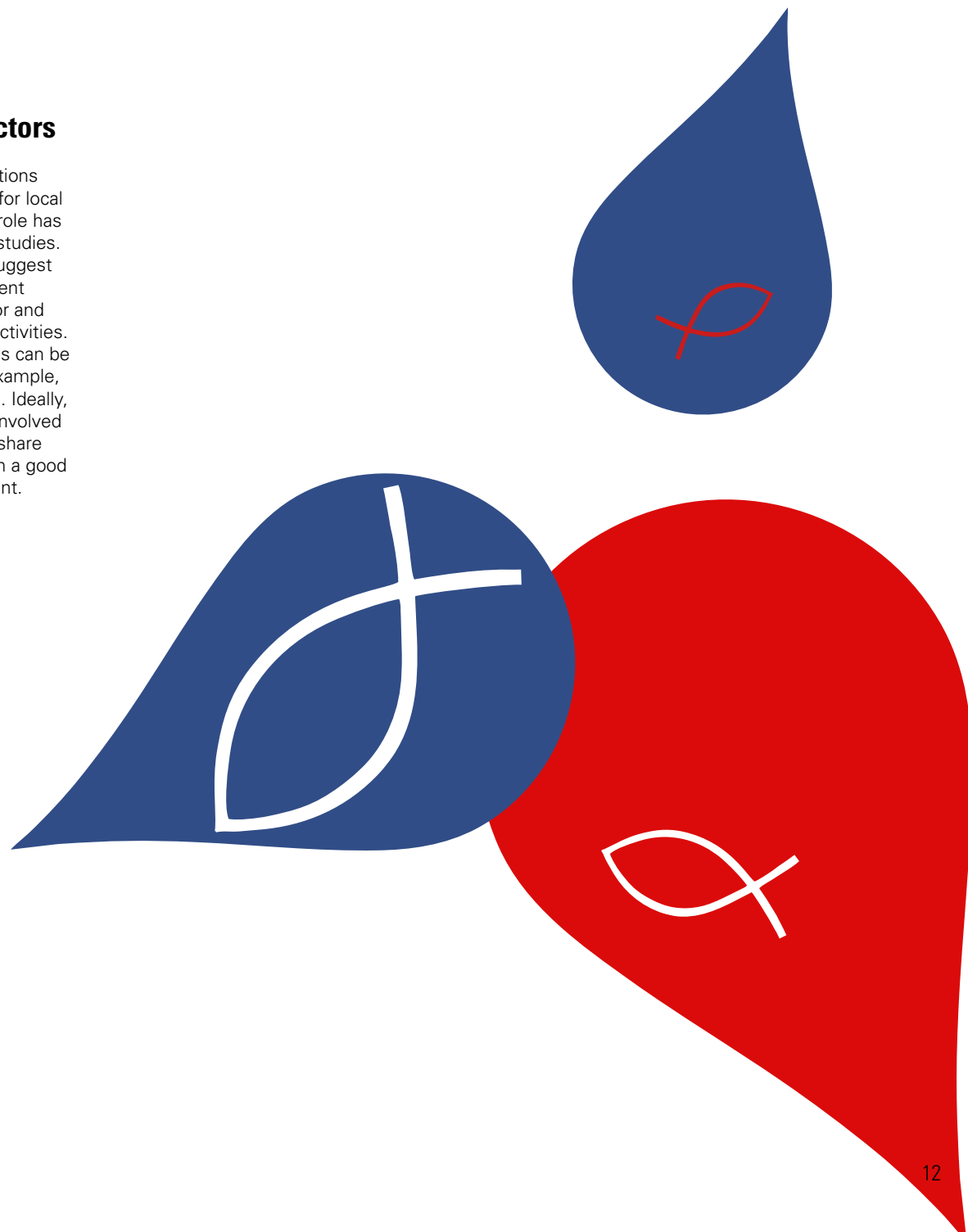water protection activities

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achieved quickly. Most often
the change needs years of
persistent work and the use of
several simultaneous activities.

Role of education

In the interviews conducted
and workshops held during
our project, the important
role of education was often
mentioned. An efficient way
to reach the strategic goals
presented in this report is to
work with kindergartens and
schools in developing special
events/courses/classes to
inspire young people about
environmental issues. The
awareness and behaviour of
children will also influence
their families and other people
around them and therefore
it is an important component
of environmental change.
We fully acknowledge this
and encourage the use of
environmental education as
part of wider environmental
communication framework.
However, educational measures
are not a focus of this report.

Role of other actors

The presented suggestions
are formulated mainly for local
municipalities as their role has
been the focus of our studies.
However, we do not suggest
that the local government
needs to be the initiator and
primary actor in such activities.
Many of these activities can be
put into practice, for example,
as grassroots activities. Ideally,
all relevant actors are involved
in these activities and share
the vision how to reach a good
state of the environment.

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Conclusion

This document emphasizes the importance of dialogue and strategically planned communication for successfully implementing local level water protection activities. We present six communication goals and offer possible activities to reach those goals.

The theoretical framework describes the principles of how to design the relations of an organization with its stakeholders and discusses social practices as means for behavioural change. The problems in local level water protection, as identified by our previous surveys, largely stem from different visions about water protections or from the fact that awareness and motivation do not necessaruly translate into behaviour. This points to the need of striving towards a shared vision which can help to overcome hese barriers and become a basis for effective actions for the benefit of the Baltic Sea.

The presented communication tools suggest to use a combination of creating awareness, building motivation and giving nudges to change behaviour. Within this, there is a place for short-term campaigns, building infrastructure, holding public discussions and various

other types of events. More important, however, is the general inclination to create trust and a shared vision with all interactions between the actors.

The most important aspect for a municipality looking to improve its environmental communication is to start with the analysis of the local situation: what are the problems, desired outcomes, relevant actors, current and desired resources etc. These results will then help to select relevant actions. Identifying the focal points where the local municipality, local citizen and environmental matters currently meet can provide the basis on which to start building new communication activities.

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Related publications

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More information

www.citywater.fi
www.balticseachallenge.net
www.waterprotectiontools.net

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