

# **EMPOWERING LOCAL ACTORS: COMMUNICATION STRATEGY FOR LOCAL-LEVEL WATER PROTECTION ACTIVITIES**

Strategy document

Tallinn 2015

# IMPRESSUM

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# Preface

This document will introduce a communication strategy for local-level water protection activities. The aim of the strategy is to enable and enhance the use of communication as a tool that local level organisations can use to make sense and increase our knowledge of the issues in question, and to activate and inspire people to participate in environmental actions in a responsible manner. This strategy will define six strategic communication goals and discuss possible ways of achieving them.

It is based on the problems and practices identified by two surveys. One of them (Kaal, Olesk, Tampere 2015b) examined 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 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+ programme co-funded project *CITYWATER – Benchmarking water protection in cities*. The objective of the project is the implementation and facilitation of 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 collaborates closely with the Baltic Sea Challenge initiative, launched by the mayors of Turku and Helsinki in 2007.



# Introduction and background

## Objectives

Many water protection activities depend on the support and activity of citizens. Whether we need to allocate resources for building, or renovating waste water treatment systems, or to make environmentally friendly everyday consumer choices, or to encourage active participation in water protection activities, communication plays a major part in the success of these activities. Such success will depend on the awareness, knowledge and behaviour of the people participating. Communication, particularly in the form of dialogue, and education are the main tools used to achieve change in these respects.

This is particularly relevant at local level, where success often depends on grassroots support and activity. This document aims to enable local governments, NGOs and other organisations dealing with environmental issues to develop their activities in order to improve the environment around the Baltic Sea.

The strategy envisions local communities with a shared vision of a clean Baltic Sea and active collaboration between various actors in improving the condition of water systems.

The mission underlying the strategy is to enable and enhance the use of communication as a tool for local-level organisations that wish to make sense and increase knowledge of the issues in question, and to activate/inspire people to participate in environmental action in a responsible manner.

## Theoretical background

In the context of environmental knowledge, attitudes and behaviour, in this paper we discuss strategic communication from the theoretical perspectives of organisational communication and social practices. Organisational communication is more relevant to local municipalities that wish to manage information flows and participate in the communication process as trusted actors. Social practices, on the other hand, deal with

the question of how to achieve behaviour change in the target groups in question (citizens and other stakeholders).

### *Organisational communication*

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

The communication flow is never empty. In the public sphere, there is continuous 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 thereby manage their social or organisational (also personal) relations. The greatest practical problem for any organisation lies in understanding how to fill the communication flow with effective messages and thus maintain control over public relations. In this way, a mutual



understanding of the ongoing environmental, economic and other processes can be achieved between organisations and stakeholders, for example citizens.

To facilitate understanding among people and larger units such as organisations, the public, and society, Grunig (1989) proposed a two-way symmetrical communication model. The key preconditions of this symmetrical model are that communication leads to understanding and that people and organisations must have an interest in the consequences of their behaviour and try to avoid unfavourable outcomes (Sharpe, 2000).

This two-way process (dialogue) enables participants to create a new, shared meaning, a consensus (Van Ruler, 2004). For dialogue to be successful, the key factor is comprehension, which will lead to the integration of information and lay the basis for agreement between the parties.

It should be noted, however, that it is not always easy for an organisation to engage in dialogue when it is accustomed only to informing people and is not ready to apply a two-way symmetrical model (Grunig & Jaatinen, 1999). According to Vos and Schoemaker (1999) "it is sometimes difficult to use

symmetrical communication, for example in situations where the discrepancy between the viewpoints of 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 to public consultations, which have now become a required component in many governance processes at both national and local level. The dialogue in these processes can be successful if it is based on honesty and ethical principles, achieving transparent communication leading to greater understanding and competencies. It is therefore important to obtain systematic feedback and adjust procedures on the basis of stakeholders' reactions.

In turn, an increase in competencies achieves results, i.e. a consensus on certain matters. The pedagogical role played by communication can be expressed by the following key concepts:

- » 1. Dialogue: equality between the parties; the creation, in cooperation, of an interactive programme of action; monitoring the viewpoints of the public; giving constructive

feedback; explaining issues through situations familiar and important to the target group; upholding 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 routinised ways "in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood" (Reckwitz 2002). They connect the individual's physical and mental activities, understanding and knowledge of the world, which results in the conventionalised 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 and Kiisel (2015) defines three key areas of social practices, which are connected via social interaction:

- » Meanings – social norms, rules, understandings,

ideologies;

- » Things – the material environment, infrastructure;
- » Skills and competences.

Moulding these three dimensions at individual (or organisational) level provides a way of achieving social change, for example by inducing environmentally friendly behaviour. According to Vihalemm, Keller and Kiisel (2015: 103) communication is like a glue that "keeps practices together, contributes to their development and dissolution". As emphasised in the previous section on organisational communication, communication should be understood as occurring everywhere and all the time, not only in the context of specific conscious acts such as campaigns.

The development of these three dimensions should be complementary to achieving social change. For example, waste recycling facilities may be useless if people lack the skills to use them. Alternatively, awareness campaigns can increase people's motivation to change their behaviour, but no actual change will occur without a suitable infrastructure.

Vihalemm et al. (2015) consider actual hands-on experience as the most powerful initiator of change. Creating "environments and spaces for trying out new

activities, literally 'hands-on' by observing the actions of experts, are necessary to practical socialisation" (ibid.: 115). Training and personal consultation are effective but resource-intensive methods of achieving change. When taking this approach, practices should also be the centre of networks or coalitions that engage the relevant stakeholders. Such engagement does not necessarily have to be initiated by a central organisation, 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. A communicator must be aware of his or her 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 includes several important stages:

- » defining problems;
- » setting goals for communication;
- » formulating possible messages for different stakeholder groups;
- » selecting potential activities at local community level;
- » identifying potential resources;
- » analysing communication actions to make the communication process more effective.

## Defining problems

This communication strategy is based on the problems defined during research conducted by the Tallinn University Institute of Communication. We surveyed 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 discussed the related issues in several Estonian and international workshops. As a result, we are able to highlight the following problems:

- » People consider water protection to be necessary but have little belief in their own capabilities to achieve water protection. They also have little knowledge of the possible measures that can be taken. When asked "What can you do to protect the local water environment", half of the respondents say either that they cannot do anything or that they "don't know".
- » People consider national governments, the European Union and industry to be the actors with most responsibility for protecting the Baltic Sea. Local

municipalities, however, view themselves and citizens as bearing most responsibility.

- » For people in general, the local municipality is the key point of contact in environmental matters. As a way of influencing environmental decisions, people prefer to notify the local municipality (34%) or media (17%). At the same time, they have little awareness of the water protection activities of the municipality and only a fraction of the respondents had participated in such activities.

- » Because local municipalities view citizen-related pollution risks as substantial, they regard raising the awareness of people as one of their main responsibilities with respect to environmental protection. Such activities are high on their agendas. However, lack of resources – money, knowledge and human resources – often hinders the successful implementation of such activities.



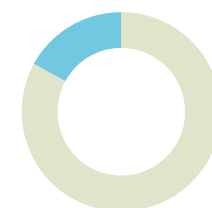
**50%**

say they can do nothing to protect local waters or say that they "don't know"



**34%**

prefer notifying the local municipality about cases of pollution



**17%**

prefer notifying the media about cases of pollution

## Strategic communication goals in the Baltic Sea region

The problems highlighted in the previous section can be summarised as reflecting mismatches between how citizens and the local municipality understand 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 shared vision within local communities is a key element in successful water protection.

We propose six major communication-centred activities that may contribute to creating this shared vision and thereby lead to a healthier Baltic Sea and local water systems. These goals are complementary, meaning that in no cases will the achievement of any one of them alone be sufficient to solve the highlighted problems. Several must be implemented in a concerted manner. For each goal, we list a possible action or actions that may be used to achieve it, including a list of the relevant actors, the required resources and a possible method of analysing their effectiveness.

Empowering Local Actors:  
Communication strategy for local-level  
water protection activities



1

### To raise awareness of the problems facing the Baltic Sea

The Baltic Sea has been called the most polluted sea in the world. However, the related problems are not obvious to the lay persons living on its shores, and the general public's level of understanding of such problems tends to vary. The same is often true of local-level water issues. All local-level water protection issues are related to more global problems, particularly to the state of the Baltic Sea. These problems have an effect on our social, economic, ecological and recreational conditions, among others. Because these connections are often only partly perceived, communication is required to point out the relevance of the Baltic Sea and the benefits of water protection, and to do so in a manner that reveals the connections between these issues and people's everyday lives.

Alongside large, popular events, it is also necessary to integrate these ideas with the municipality's everyday activities and express them in all environment-related communication by the municipality.

**Action 1:** Baltic Sea Celebrations: dedicated days within organisations, municipalities, regions.  
**Involved actors:** Municipalities, activists, scientists, schools, media, local businesses.  
**Required resources:** Municipality budget, sponsors, project funding, volunteers.  
**Suggested frequency:** Once per year  
**Analysis of 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  
**Analysis of 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 it is a potent tool in raising awareness and creating the motivation for people to become active. Various events or educational programmes – exhibitions, lectures, workshops and regular courses – can help people to learn about their impact on the environment (e.g. the Baltic Sea) and about ways of becoming more environmentally friendly, whether at home, in the workplace or on vacation. For example, one focus area would involve giving specific tips for everyday behaviour.

**Action:** Educational programmes 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)

**Analysis of effectiveness:** Media monitoring and analysis, feedback at events





3

### To engage the public in environmental risk management

Public discussions are mandatory prior to various kinds of decisions that will have an environmental impact. When deployed skilfully, these can be powerful tools for empowering the local community and incentivising it to adopt environmentally friendly behaviour. Such events, as well as other acts of engagement, can help to provide the necessary trust and provide a forum for discussing wider environmental issues, while taking account of local concerns. In this case, it is especially important to follow the principles of two-way communication.

Crisis situations (such as pollution incidents 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 the public and stakeholders and engage them in solving the crises.

Empowering Local Actors:  
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water protection activities

**Action 1:** Public discussions prior to decisions, engagement events, engagement skills training events

**Involved actors:** Local government, NGOs, local community organisations

**Required resources:** Municipality funding, volunteers

**Suggested frequency:** Continuous, depending on decision-making

**Analysis of effectiveness:** participation, level of engagement, consideration of community problems in decision making

**Action 2:** Risk and crisis communication plan for municipality

**Involved actors:** Municipality communication team, civil servants

**Required resources:** Municipality, media, stakeholders (potential polluters)

**Suggested frequency:** Continuous

**Analysis of effectiveness:** Response to environmental problems, level of trust in community



4

### To increase citizens' activity and change their behaviour

Translating awareness and motivation into actual change often requires the moulding of social practices. Meanings can be targeted with the help of events or campaigns, for example of the kind that provide people with 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 the likelihood of people engaging in environmentally-friendly behaviour (if supported by the motivation to engage in water protection-related activities and the material aspect, for example relevant infrastructure such as well-placed recycling bins or the possibility of ships dumping waste water for free in ports).

**Action 1:** Active participation campaigns with a range of water/sea/environment-related topics

**Involved actors:** Local municipalities, schools, NGOs, local community organisations

**Required resources:** National budget, local municipal budget, project funding, volunteers

**Suggested frequency:** 1-2 times per year

**Analysis of 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

**Analysis of effectiveness:** Use of infrastructure, observing behavioural outcomes



5

### To engage stakeholder groups

Agriculture, local industry and other groups are both a key part of the local community and can play a major role in supporting water protection. While much of their activity is regulated by local or national regulations, engaging them can lead to their making a contribution beyond this and, for example, exercising corporate social responsibility. With the help of various events and daily communication following the principle of dialogue, the aim is to increase these groups' knowledge of their responsibilities and to provide them with tools that help to shrink their environmental footprint.

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



6

### To build up local networks

Cooperation always works better if people know and trust each other. This is often the key factor at local level. It is therefore vital that people engaged in water protection activities at various levels – officials, NGOs, volunteers etc. – regularly communicate and engage the local community in such activities. If the same vision is shared by key actors in stakeholder organisations or communities, such actors will also become promoters of the same goals. This can enable the messages to reach groups not directly reached by the local municipality or other communicators, and support behavioural change in such groups.

Because the success of such activities is less dependent on individual events and more on everyday communication and engagement skills, the improvement of skills in initiating public activities, promoting environmental

issues and engaging citizens in participation is important. In the development of such skills and learning about best practices, international cooperation networks such as The Baltic Sea Challenge network are useful.

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



# Further comments on implementation

## Key components

The key structural components in the success of planned communication activities include identifying and allocating resources and performing effectiveness analyses.

### *Resources*

Our surveys show that lack of resources is a constant challenge for local municipalities. Any resource allocation should therefore be carefully planned and the need for this should be widely accepted within the organisation or community. Everything begins with awareness among the municipalities themselves.

Financial resources for environmental communication should be built into both local government and national budgets. While free media, such as social media, can be used for regular communication, steady funding will allow the achievement of strategic goals more effectively than single, random campaigns.

Social resources mainly refer to dedicated civil servants in municipalities, good cooperation between different actors, well-organised networks and the participation of volunteers. This term also

covers the communication and engagement skills of the actors. An active local network can also allow the use of the resources available to other actors, whether such resources are financial or social. One example of this would be collaboration with local businesses as part of their social responsibility strategy.

### *Effectiveness analysis*

All activities should be evaluated for their effectiveness, and factors affecting their success or failure should be carefully analysed. The analysis and establishment of different feedback systems should form an elementary part of all communicative actions and educational programmes.

## Messages

Messages are always specific to the local context and stakeholder groups. There are no universal messages that work everywhere. However, we can still offer some examples of use and adaptation:

- » 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 homes will also affect the Baltic Sea and thereby contribute to a better or worse life for us and our children.

If possible, these messages should be accompanied by facts that specifically relate individual behaviour to ecological effects. For example: If you would like to use fishing to compensate for your annual personal load of phosphorus fed into 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 as 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 in formulating the complex of measures that should work best in this particular area. Such measures do not need to be new; efforts should be made to analyse how *existing* activities could be transformed to help achieve water protection aims. This may mean integrating water protection themes with activities whereby local municipalities and citizens or other stakeholders already come into contact on a regular basis, or adopting new approaches to current environmental activities

that might enhance the effectiveness of engagement.

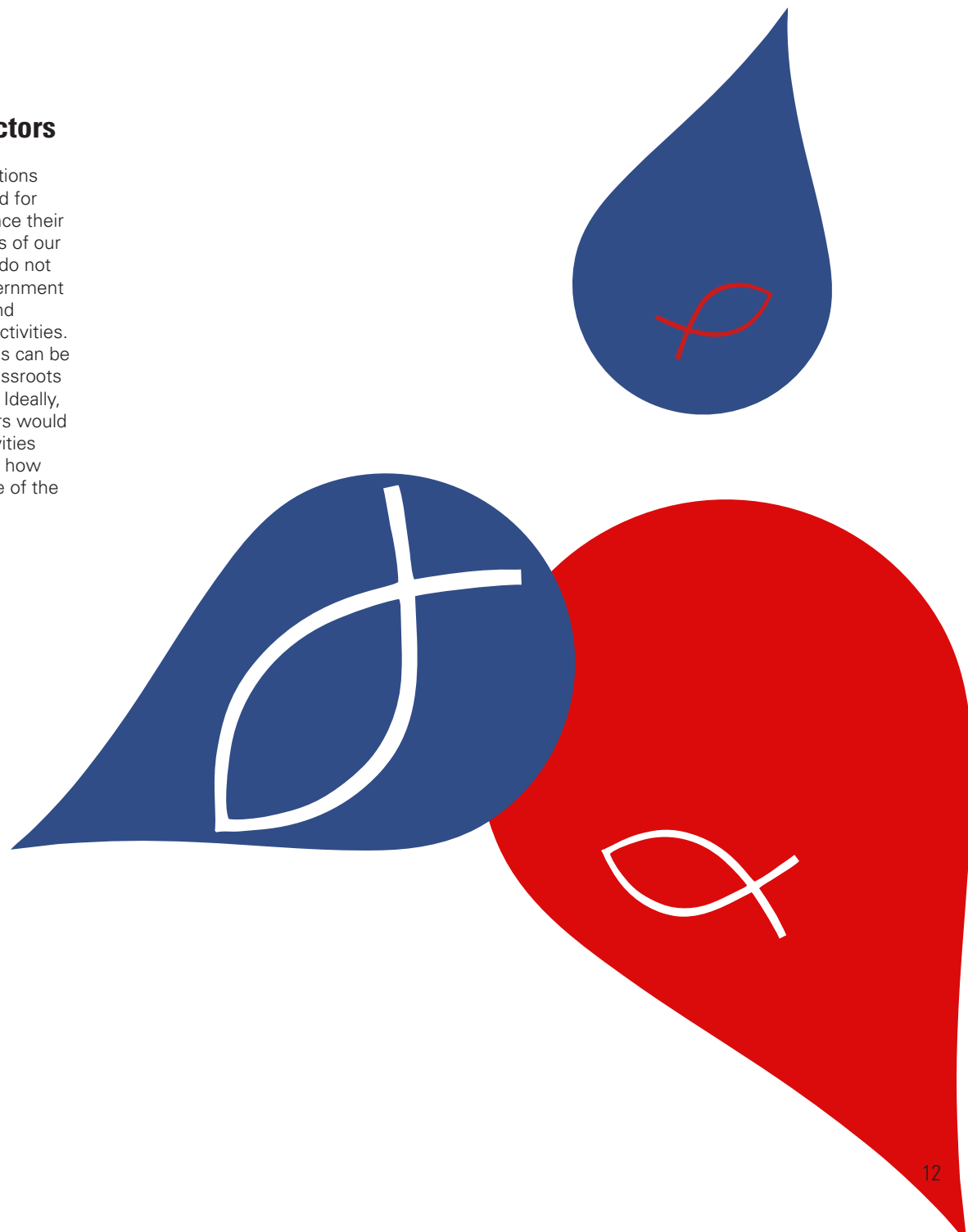
It would be important not to place our hopes on one single activity or to expect fast results. Change tends to need years of persistent work and the use of several, simultaneous activities.

## Role played by education

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

## Role of other actors

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





# Conclusion

This document emphasises the importance of dialogue and strategically planned communication to the successful implementation of local-level water protection activities. We present six communication goals and offer possible activities for achieving those goals.

The theoretical framework describes the principles underlying the planning of relations between an organisation and its stakeholders, and discusses social practices as means of achieving behavioural change. As identified by our previous surveys, problems with local-level water protection largely stem from different visions of water protection, or from the fact that awareness and motivation do not necessarily translate into behaviour. This points to the need to strive towards a shared vision which can help to overcome such barriers and form a basis for effective action to the benefit of the Baltic Sea.

The communication tools presented suggest that a combination of creating awareness, building motivation and 'nudging' stakeholders serves to change behaviour. This leaves room for short-term campaigns, building infrastructure, holding public

discussions and various other types of events. However, a general aim to build trust and a shared vision covering all interactions between the actors is even more important.

For a municipality looking to improve its environmental communication, the key issue is to begin with an analysis of the local situation: what are the problems, desired outcomes, relevant actors, current and desired resources etc? The results of considering these issues will help in selecting the relevant actions. Identifying the focal points at which local municipalities, local citizens and environmental issues meet can provide the basis for building new communication activities.



## Related publications

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## Further information

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