

# BSR INTERREG IIIB PROJECT „SEBco“

Midterm Conference in Gdynia/PL on 19/20 April 2007

---

## Minutes of the panel discussion (19 April 2007, 11 - 12:30)

Chair: Jens Masuch, Landgesellschaft Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (DE)

Members of the panel:

- Karl Schmude, Ministry for Transport, Building and Regional Development Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (DE)
- Radomir Matzcak, Marshall Office of the Pomorskie Voivodeship (PL)
- Juris Asars, Jekabpils Town Council (LV)
- Julia Spirina, Immanuel Kant State University of Russia (RU)
- Silke Alsen, Baltic Sea Solutions (DK)

In the frame of the SEBco Midterm conference in Gdynia, Poland on 19/20 April 2007, a panel discussion with five experts from five countries took place. It aims at the discussion of the draft SEBco strategy paper on the role of medium-sized towns for spatial development, conducted in the framework of work package 5 by Prof. Kunzmann. As an input, Karl Schmude presented the main arguments of the draft strategy paper. He emphasised that medium-sized towns are indeed very important for the South Baltic Sea region due to the absence of large urban agglomerations. There is little chance to profit from developing metropolises.

In the paper four conditions are mentioned to become engines of regional development:

- 1) location matters
- 2) external development factors
- 3) local shortcomings
- 4) cooperation beyond administration

Karl Schmude underlined the need to combat the “metropolis fever” (i.e. the widespread enthusiasm about the growth prospects of metropolises) and to find own ways for making medium-sized towns engines for regional development. For the future it is important to enable the medium-sized towns to decide about their own development. But without a flexible and cooperative municipal administration, the battle is lost before it has started.

During the lively debate, different points were highlighted:

- The four conditions named in the draft paper were put into question. The experiences from the experts showed that it is very hard to say why one town became an engine for development and the other not. Especially the presented examples from Poland illustrated the problem of defining factors. General preconditions such as port location as well as tourism potentials were deeply discussed. The opinions about success factors were discussed differently. However, in general the experts agreed that a clear concept of development and a clear vision for the region is important in order to foster the development in medium-sized towns.
- It became obvious that the location is not as important as described in the draft paper. Examples from each represented country showed that in a clear way. Especially Poland illustrates that towns can develop very well even if they are hard accessible. In consequence, the experts reached the consensus that the factor of accessibility is overestimated. The key could be to turn disadvantages into advantages with a real awareness of own weaknesses.
- In consequence, there was agreement that qualitative factors or soft location factors are important. The experts emphasized people as most important factor for development. One nice Old Town with an interesting night life could attract firms as well as creative milieus. Nevertheless the experts discussed on the role of hard location factors, such as



## BSR INTERREG IIIB PROJECT „SEBco“

### Midterm Conference in Gdynia/PL on 19/20 April 2007

---

infrastructure. People with visions are more important than accessibility, however without infrastructure the development is even harder.

- The draft paper mentions the “metropolis fever” and all experts agreed on that existing problem. The debate concerned on whether this could lead to a (artificial) conflict between metropolis and medium-sized towns or better to search for synergies.
- In that context, the external expert Ms Silke Alsen called attention to regional self-awareness. Regions and their medium-sized towns shall not look always to the metropolis and hope to get “a piece of the cake”. They have to find their own ways and strategies and combine it with their history as well as link it to the global market. The case of Lolland Region in Denmark illustrates that in a good way, but also demonstrates the need for help from outside (e.g. financial support, consultancy). Endogenous factors shall be use to be aware of the own potentials and to increase the degree of popularity.

The audience came forward with the following wishes to the national government:

- To decentralise the financial support to enhance the local capacity to act. To change the tax policy (esp. in Russia) in that way that the money stays in the medium-sized towns;
- To find more ways to cooperate between cities without competition, create together a good climate for investments;
- To find more ways to believe in the capability of people not in infrastructure;
- To support the development of the regions’ own identity;
- To establish a lobby office in Brussels for the interests of medium-sized towns in the Baltic Sea Region.

In summary, one of the most important outcomes of the panel discussion was the opinion that the effects of infrastructure as the key for development may be much weaker as always mentioned. People and especially people with visions are more important than hard development factors like infrastructure.

Most important for medium-sized towns is not to look always to the metropolis, but to find own ways to become an engine for regional development and to concentrate on own capacities.

The discussed draft paper will be further elaborated. A discussion outside SEBco will follow until September. The final policy paper will be approved at the final SEBco conference in November 2007.

