

INTEGRATED COASTAL ZONE MANAGEMENT IN BELGIUM

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OUR COAST IN BELGIUM

Belgium has a fairly straight coastline, with a length of about 65 km. The Belgian coast is a sedimentary plain, which consists of sandy banks in the shallow sea, sandy beaches and dunes. Behind the dunes the low-lying polders dominate the landscape.

The coast is very important from an ecological, economical and social viewpoint. The natural coastal ecosystem is used for many human activities. It is for example a densely populated living space – in some areas the density reaches 485 persons per km². Other activities and functions include coastal defence, nature conservation, ports and shipping, industry, fishery, agriculture, trade, tourism and recreation.

All these activities demand a place within the coastal zone of Belgium. Providing these activities with the desired space but also sustaining and protecting the coast, demands a capable management structure in which competencies and responsibilities are well defined. It also demands that the different interest groups, which are all present and active in the coastal zone understand each other and co-operate on equal terms.

STEPS TAKEN IN THE PAST

In the Resolution 94/C 135/02 of the European Council (6 May, 1994) concerning a common strategy for ICZM, the concern for biodiversity and the conservation of natural habitats and natural processes was emphasised. It stated that ICZM should be based on the principles of sustainability and good ecological and environmental practices.

In the beginning of the nineties, several administrations and NGO's in Belgium have drawn attention to the need for protection of the coastal natural system. Taking into account these concerns, the Flemish Minister for the Environment took the initiative to set up an inter-cabinet steering group for ICZM in 1994. This steering group is still chaired by the Minister for the Environment, and consists of representatives of the different ministerial cabinets involved in ICZM: spatial planning, landscapes and monuments, tourism, environment, coastal defence and public works, fisheries. Furthermore representatives from different authority levels are present: federal (national), regional (Flanders) and provincial (province of West Flanders).

The Flemish (regional) government and the province of West Flanders have also shown their interest in coastal zone management through participation in several (European) projects, such as the LIFE-nature project Integrated Coastal Conservation Initiative (ICCI), the TERRA

project Coastal Zone Management, and the Interreg IIc project SAIL (Schéma d'Aménagement Intégré du Littoral). All these projects came to an end in 2001.

One of the outcomes of the TERRA-CZM project was a first draft for an ICZM strategy in Belgium, and a proposal for a priority action plan.

THE PRESENT SITUATION

Up till today, some fundamental problems remain to allow an efficient approach of ICZM. Several of these problems are similar in other countries (cf. the results of the demonstration programme on ICZM of the European Commission).

Priority obstacles for the Belgian situation are:

- there is no formal structure (responsible) for ICZM;
- the competences are fragmented between policy levels and between sectors;
- there is no legal framework for coastal management;
- there is a lack of monitoring of parameters in the coastal zone;
- there is a strong sectoral approach and planning;
- there is a lack of co-ordination, consultation and communication;
- there is no planning instrument at sea.

To continue their activities in the coastal zone the Flemish and provincial government will apply for further funding through Interreg and LIFE programmes.

Furthermore, in order to prepare a permanent structure for the co-ordination and follow-up of ICZM, the Flemish government, the province of West Flanders and the Flemish Marine Institute (VLIZ) have submitted a project within the objective-2 programme for the establishment of a co-ordination centre for ICZM. This project started in October 2001.

The role of this co-ordination centre is to:

- stimulate the integration of planning and management of the different sectors and authorities;
- stimulate the co-operation between authorities and sectors;
- be a (international) contact point in the coastal zone;
- follow-up of international and European developments for ICZM;
- develop and monitor a list of sustainability indicators for the coastal zone;
- follow-up and co-ordination of specific activities/projects in the coastal zone.

THE FUTURE

The main goal for integrated coastal zone management is to achieve a methodical, coherent and reflective policy for sustainable development in the coastal zone.

For Belgium the most urgent recommendations are:

1. to develop a **permanent co-ordinating structure** responsible for ICZM.
2. to work out a **legal framework for co-operation between different authority levels**: such framework should help to overcome the problems of fragmented competencies at sea and on land.

3. Develop a **monitoring system** and **datamanagement system** for relevant information for ICZM.
4. Start a **policy cycle** for ICZM in the longer term. This cycle is a never ending process and involves problem analysis, drawing up of the ICZM policy, and especially implementing and evaluating the ICZM policy.

The ICZM process in Belgium is only in its starting phase. It will not be a simple job and difficult choices will often have to be made. However, our ambitions for ICZM should be high, and all sectors and stakeholders should work together towards this common aim: "towards a sustainable coast". Not exceeding the carrying capacity of the coastal ecosystem will be a pre-condition for future development.