

OPENING SPEACH

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IMPLEMENTATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROJECTS

Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen.

I would like to take the opportunity and start my speech with a short presentation of the Regional Council in Kalmar County, the organisation I represent here today. It is one of four new regional administrations in Sweden included in a national pilot study to test new forms of regional self-government.

One of the reasons behind the pilot study is that the existing Swedish system for county administration dates from the first half of the 17th century. Although a great deal has been modernised and adapted during the years that have passed, without further and more radical improvements we would have found ourselves facing a changing world with an administrative system that evolved long before the emergence of industrialism.

The pilot study has been in progress since first of July 1997, and is based on the idea that decisions should be made as close as possible to the community which they affect, using the unique knowledge of local and regional conditions as a platform. According to the existing decisions today, the period for the pilot study will come to an end thirty-first of December 2002. We do not know at this moment what the future will bring, but it will certainly not be a simple return to the system existing before the pilot study was launched.

The Regional Council in Kalmar is an indirectly elected body in contrary to the regional self-government bodies in the pilot-provinces of Scania and Western Götaland. The Councils decision-making body - the Regional Assembly - consists of forty-five members, who are chosen among representatives for the municipalities in the region (two thirds of the seats) and the County Council (one third of the seats). An Executive Committee consisting of thirteen ordinary members is responsible for planning and implementation.

The main task for the Regional Council is to create interest and commitment to development in Kalmar County. Among all issues connected in some way to regional development, the council has special responsibility for transport infrastructure, and cultural and business sector issues. The most important of all ideas and proposed measures for an improved development are synthesised and presented in a regional programme. The programme is revised almost yearly, reflecting the ambition that the content should focus on topical questions.

Environmental issues are primarily not a task for the Regional Council. In Sweden, the local authorities and the County Administrative Boards have the main responsibility for actions taken against pollution and for improvement of the environmental situation. The local authorities have also taken a leading part in the implementation of the Rio-document Agenda 21 in Sweden.

However, the Regional Council becomes involved in environmental issues by at least two different ways. The first one has a more long-term perspective, and is based on the fact that it is not possible today to form any strategy for development without consideration to the environment. In a region such as Kalmar County, the existing natural and cultural values are actually one of our most important resources. Our challenge on the regional level is to find the optimum way for the future. That is a way

that gives us both a positive development as well as a good management of the environmental resources.

The second way the Regional Council becomes involved in environmental issues is by different initiatives coming from local authorities. This could refer to proposals for, among others, liaison concerning an environmental-related regulation or common actions regarding recommendations in an official report from the government. Tasks like this are typical for an organisation representing the interests of professionals; in this case the local authorities in the region.

But, actually, this was also how our cooperation on environmental issues with other regions and countries in the Baltic area, especially Poland, once started back in the beginning of the 90's. The initiative came from councillors in some of the local authorities in Kalmar County. Up till now, about a dozen projects concentrating on different types of environmental issues have been accomplished. Most of them have been carried through on a twin-ship basis, in Poland with the former Regional Assembly of Local Authorities in the Gdansk region acting as our twinning partner.

The projects have primarily focused on exchange of knowledge and experience regarding the kind of environmental issues that are responsibility of a local authority in Sweden. Treatment of sewage water and handling and management of waste have been popular subjects for this events, but practical experience from municipalities working with action programmes for a sustainable development (Local Agenda 21) has also been the subject of some seminars. Another important item on the agenda for the projects has been to describe how we in Sweden provide funds for all technical systems, for example sewage treatment, waste handling and drinking water supply.

Since January this year, the Regional Council is also running a project together with Voivodship of Gdansk in Poland and Ministry of Environment in Schleswig-Holstein in Germany. The Polish partner is the leading partner for this project named SEMLA, an abbreviation for "Strategies for Eco-Management among Local and Regional Authorities, Organisations and Enterprises in the Baltic Area". The primary objective of the SEMLA-project is to stimulate and facilitate integration in small and medium sized enterprises of different methods and systems that pay regards to environmental issues, especially the European Union scheme EMAS and the international standard ISO 14001. Two training sessions on how to implement the systems form the backbone of the project. During this sessions, study visit will be made to enterprises that successfully have introduced EMAS and/or ISO 14001 on their own organisation.

I think I stop here and try to summarise our experience so far from the ongoing cooperation on environmental issues in the Baltic area. To begin with, I have to stress that the following express my personal views, and cannot be quoted as any official opinion from the Regional Council.

It is best to make an honest start and admit that the Swedish staff involved in the projects has learnt as much as the foreign (Polish) participants. My experience is that increased knowledge about the different historical traditions and their effect on the societies that we see today are one of the most important things to be learnt from international projects. If you cannot understand why your partner say or do something in a special way you will never be able to run a successful cross-boarder project. This means that social and cultural activities, showing and perhaps also explaining the differences between regions and countries, should be a natural and necessary part of the preparatory phase of any Baltic Sea-project.

When working with projects covering participants from different countries and backgrounds, it is necessary to be patient. Everyone has to feel involved in planning, and have the opportunity to give their opinions along the way during the preparatory stages of a project. In other case the risk of failure is high. Differences in the national Acts for environmental protection an management of natural resources have in common only caused minor discrepancies.

However, it is important to be aware of the fact that the same word can mean different things in different languages. "Ground water" and "emission limit values" may for instance have one juridical

meaning in Poland, another in Russia and a third in Sweden. If you are not aware of this, a lot of effort may have to be spent on solving such misunderstandings.

I believe that people who attend a conference like this, and take the opportunity to discuss with people from other regions in the Baltic area, will significantly increase their chances of avoiding such mistakes in the future.

Thank you for listening!