

Sustainability indicators as trend-watchers for sustainability on the coast – BE

1. Policy Objective & Theme

- SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC GROWTH: Balancing economic, social, cultural development whilst enhancing environment

2. Key Approaches

- Integration
- Knowledge-based
- Socio-economic

3. Experiences that can be exchanged

Working with indicators to measure whether the coastal area evolves in a sustainable direction.

4. Overview of the case

The Coordination centre on ICZM is working together with several coastal communities to set up, maintain, promote, and evaluate, a set of sustainability indicators for the Belgian Coast.

5. Context and Objectives

a) Context

To pursue effective policies for the coast, a wide variety of high-quality information and data is needed. Decision making and good governance require a sound scientific base in order to assess effects of policies at ecological, environmental and socio-economic levels. A set of sustainability indicators (SI) can provide an answer in a format that is useful for policymakers.

An indicator is a measured or observed parameter that provides information about a system. It makes certain phenomena visible that are not – at least not immediately - detectable. Indicators provide a useful way to improve communication, transparency, effectiveness and accountability. They are a tool that helps to make assessments of, and comparisons between, management measures through time. They also can be used to simplify the description of the extent to which the objectives for the management programs are being achieved.

b) Objectives

- Setting up a balanced set of indicators based on the main principles of sustainability,
- Presenting the indicators in publications, websites and other communication tools,
- Embedding the indicators in local policies and strategies,
- Exchanging information and expertise in workshops and projects,
- Following up and maintaining the data, website and measurements.

6. Implementation of the ICZM Approach (i.e. management, tools, resources)

a) Management

The process to draw up a set of indicators for the Belgian coast started in 2000, under the impulse of the Flemish government and the province of West-Flanders. The list of indicators was the object of critical analysis by civil servants and representatives of coastal actors gathered in 7 workshops. Within the process of communicating the indicators in the biannual publication “The Coastal Compass”, over 60 scientists contributed as adviser, data expert, author or as editorial staff.

b) ICZM tools

The process to draw up a set of indicators was an incentive to discuss the sustainable development of the Belgian Coast. In a preliminary study, the Centre for Sustainable Development (CDO, Ghent University, 2001) proposed long-term objectives and priorities for the coastal area, and a long list of potential indicators that could be useful and efficient to assess whether the area evolves in the desired direction. Local stakeholders were involved in workshops, allowing for discussions and decisions about the final list of indicators. The participants first agreed on a list of 50 indicators, later reducing this to a list of 20. For the top 20, exhaustive indicator sheets have been made and data, where possible over several years, have been gathered.

In order to provide a dynamic and useful instrument, the Coordination Centre brings the indicators actively and repeatedly to the attention of policy makers and potential end users. To this end, an interactive Internet site (www.kustbeheer.be/indicatoren), technical sheets and a recurrent publication: ‘The Coastal Compass’, have been developed. Also, links are established with the popular online ‘Coastal Atlas’ and an indicator is highlighted in each issue of ‘De Grote Rede’, an information magazine about the Flemish coast and the adjacent sea published by the Flanders Marine Institute (3 x per year).

The internet site gives unrestricted access to the data and to the background information. The technical sheets contain detailed information on each indicator, including metadata. These sheets are designed to make the communication regarding the results of the indicators as transparent as possible. The third communication tool, ‘The Coastal Compass’ is a publication in book form which describes the state of the Belgian coast. It identifies and describes trends and phenomena that can be linked with strategic visions and objectives of ICZM, and formulates suggestions for a more sustainable approach. The publication does not give an evaluation of the state of the coast and the effectiveness of coastal policies, but it intends to give objective information to policymakers, environmental experts and the interested public.

7. Cost and resources

Pre-study + selection of the set of indicators within several workshops: €80,000 (personnel included).

Construction Interactive Website + support for maintenance: €10,000 + €1,000 recurrent annual costs.

Staff Costs yearly: €18,500.

All data was freely available. The coordination centre works closely together with Flanders Marine Institute (VLIZ), an editorial staff and several experts on voluntary bases.

8. Effectiveness (i.e. were the foreseen goals/objectives of the work reached?)

A set of 20 indicators has been developed. These together constitute a so-called ‘coastal barometer’. The coastal barometer and ‘The Coastal Compass’ are the result of a participative process, involving the continuing collaboration of about 60 scientists. The process that has preceded every edition of The Coastal Compass turned out to be an instructive experience. The experts who offered their cooperation, exchange opinions about the different themes, which in turn stirred up the discussion again about measuring coastal issues.

9. Success and Fail factors

A ‘living’ set of indicators: the process of working with indicators at the Belgian coast showed that not all the selected indicators proved to be workable or suitable. By regularly evaluating and adjusting the set of indicators, the set will provide a more direct link to current coastal policies. Evaluating and adjusting the set of indicators is useful, but adjustments should not

be implemented too frequently. A good evaluation needs monitoring over several years.

When starting an indicator-based programme, one has to be aware that working with indicators can be very time consuming. A number of indicator programmes have stranded on this issue. To work in an efficient way with indicators and to stimulate their use as a communication device, it is important to bring the indicators frequently to the attention of the target groups. To develop an efficient indicator set, there has to be sufficient time to evaluate the set, update the data and develop communication tools. By further improving the set of indicators, the instrument should fit more closely to the pursued policy and can serve as a better tool for ICZM. Because indicators give a quick scan of the coastal zone, they can certainly help to provide transparent and objective information to support implementation of ICZM.

10. Unforeseen outcomes

The Netherlands followed the Belgian example by developing an indicator approach for their Coast. There was a strong input in the European debate on ICZM and indicators and the same techniques are being used for a project in the Scheldt estuary.

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13. Sources

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