

ARE THE INTERNATIONAL NORTH SEA CONFERENCES MAKING PROGRESS?

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Abstract

International Conferences on the Protection of the North Sea have been arranged at intervals since 1984. The first conference in Bremen had a major impact regarding protection of the environmental quality of the North Sea. The following conferences tried to follow up on the outcome and to develop further environmental protection issues. The results of the last few conferences provided in the Ministerial Declarations seems not to provide further impetus to the protection of the North Sea and it can be questioned if further progress can be gained by continuing the row of conferences. By use of a pseudo-scientific method sorting “indicator” words from the Ministerial Declarations into groups according to the “value” of the words this paper tries to assess if the quality of the outcome of the conferences has changed over the years.

Key words – North Sea Conference, Ministerial Declaration, environmental quality, protection measures, priority issues

Introduction

Since the first International Conference on the Protection of the North Sea in 1984 four more conferences at Ministerial level have taken place and a sixth conference is in preparation. The first conference had a major impact by putting the focus on one particular regional sea and providing the forum for international discussions and decisions on how to protect the environmental quality of the North Sea. The following ministerial conferences followed up on the outcome of the first ministerial Declaration and tried to drive further the environmental protection issues. But at the same time it seems that what was intended as an ad-hoc event has been more or less institutionalised. It is understandable that by ensuring a high political profile to the conferences the civil services try to maintain focus on their field of area. But the question can be put if further progress can be gained in this way and if there is a real need to continue. This paper tries in an untraditional way to consider if the quality of the outcome of the conferences has changed over the years.

Methods

A pseudo-scientific method has been use. All words introducing sentences with measures, conclusions or decisions have been recorded from the Ministerial Declarations. Most of these words have been either underlined or printed in bold in the Declaration texts. Afterwards all the words have been sorted into four groups according to the “value” of the words (“indicator words”).

The first group of words (group 1) contains words of a general and neutral nature. The second group of words is characterized by their encouraging but not really committing tone. Correspondently the group-3 words are characterized by their active inclination but they are not binding by introducing well-defined actions which can be controlled. Finally, the group 4 words are characterized by their commitment and implication of action. Measures introduced by group 4-words should in principle produce verifiable results or outputs. Examples of the group of words are shown in table 1.

The above approach may be criticised because of the lack of objectivity when evaluating and classifying the

Table 1. *The division of “indicator” words extracted from the Declarations.*

Group no.	Type of words	Characteristics
1	Accept, acknowledge, agree, aim, appreciate, aware, concerned, conscious, consider, declare, endeavour, express, note, pursue, realize, recall, recognize, respect, use, welcome etc.	Words of a general and neutral nature
2	Affirming/reaffirming, ask/request, call upon, continue, convinced, draw attention, emphasize, encourage, endorse, expect, facilitate, identify, invite, recommend, stress, support, urge etc.	Encouraging but not engaging words
3	Achieve, analyse, commit, conclude, cooperate, coordinate, employ, enhance, evaluate, exchange information, explore, give priority, initiate, intensify, investigate, make available, make effort, participate, promote, provide, review, work together etc.	Words with an active inclination
4	Develop, prepare, ensure, establish, implement, improve, lay down (standards), minimize, prevent, prohibit, reduce, set (objectives), substitute etc.	Words implicating actions which should in principle be verifiable

single word. Certainly, there is a certain degree of individual subjectivity when reading the words but that goes also when the full declaration text is read and interpreted. Still, the approach may help to reveal or identify some tendencies or trends in the series of Declarations prepared over the last 20 years.

Results and discussion

The number of words found in the 5 Declarations allocated to the four groups of words is shown in table 2. For example a total of 24 different group-1 words have been found in the 5 declarations. The single word may be found several times in the text but the 24 words in group 1 makes up 29 % of the different words found.

Generally speaking the group-1 words are used in connection with the description of the situation and the problems faced i.e. when the Ministers take stake of the situation. Group-3 words are used when the wish is to indicate action – that “we do something to solve the problems” while in fact the real, important actions are introduced with group-4 words and the number of these words are less that for the other groups of words.

Table 2. *The number of different words in each group (all Declarations).*

	Different words	Percentage
Group 1	24	29%
Group 2	19	23%
Group 3	27	33%
Group 4	12	15%
Total	82	100%

The most commonly used words are: agree, note/take note, recognize/recognizing and welcome/welcoming (group 1) and affirming/reaffirming, encourage, invite and urge (group 2). For group 3 the constellations cooperate, promote/stimulate, take action/initiative/measure/steps and will adopt/apply/do its utmost are most frequent. In group 4 develop/prepare, ensure, improve and reduce are most frequently used.

Table 3 shows the distribution of different words in the declarations of the five North Sea Conferences.

The table shows that the number of different “indicator words” has been relatively constant over the years even if it is not the same words used from event to event. Secretarial linguistic differences between the conferences might have affected the vocabulary used in the different Declarations but it can be questioned if this is true because the Secretariat basically only drafts the text which is often heavily modified during the discussions at the preparatory meetings where representatives from all countries and other stakeholders participate.

More interesting is the frequency of the groups of word used. The Bremen conference shows an even frequency distribution of word groups. Looking at the London and Esbjerg conference there seems to be an overweight of group-1 words i.e. words of a general nature used with the description of the situation. At the same time the Esbjerg and Bergen conferences demonstrates very low frequency of the “decisive” group-4 words. Contrary the Bremen and The Hague conferences had a relatively higher frequency of this group of words.

Considering the frequency distribution at The Hague and Bergen conferences the impression is that less effort was paid to the general statements and more focus put to actions (low group-1 and higher group-3 and group-4). To that end The Hague was more successful with a high

Table 3. *The number of different words in the Declarations of the five conferences.*

	Bremen 1984	London 1987	The Hague 1990	Esbjerg 1995	Bergen 2002
Group 1	10 (29%)	14 (47%)	8 (28%)	17 (49%)	14 (29%)
Group 2	8 (24%)	7 (23%)	5 (17%)	7 (20%)	14 (29%)
Group 3	8 (24%)	5 (17%)	10 (34%)	9 (26%)	17 (35%)
Group 4	8 (24%)	4 (13%)	6 (21%)	2 (6%)	3 (6%)
No. of different words	34	30	29	35	48

Table 4. *The total number of times the "indicator words" are used in the Declarations.*

	Bremen 1984	London 1987	The Hague 1990	Esbjerg 1995	Bergen 2002
Group 1	34 (46%)	35 (45%)	20 (35%)	79 (62%)	94 (42%)
Group 2	16 (22%)	17 (22%)	13 (23%)	25 (20%)	92 (41%)
Group 3	13 (18%)	17 (22%)	13 (23%)	21 (17%)	32 (14%)
Group 4	11 (15%)	8 (10%)	11 (19%)	2 (2%)	8 (4%)
No. of words used	74(100%)	77(100%)	57(100%)	127(100%)	226(100%)

score of group-4 (21 %) while the Bergen conference increased the group-3 frequency (35 %) but only succeeded with 6 % group-4 words. A general conclusion could be that the last two North Sea Conferences have been less successful regarding decisions on verifiable measures and actions. Several reasons could support this impression and will be discussed later.

If we look at how frequent the words are used (table 4) it can be observed that in the Bremen Declaration the 10 different words in group 1 was used 34 times constituting 46 % of all the "indicator words" used in that Declaration. In Esbjerg and Bergen only two and three different group- 4 words were used and they appeared just two and eight times in the text constituting only 2 % and 4 % respectively of the "indicator words" used.

From tables 3 and 4 it appears that there is a general decreasing trend from group 1 to group 4 both in numbers of different "indicator words" and the frequency these words are used within the individual Declarations. While it seems that important decisions were few during the last two conferences the total number of "indicator" words has increased rapidly giving the impression of action. It can also be noted that the Declarations to an increasing degree "invite" or "call upon" stakeholders like the regional convention OSPAR, the EU or the Oil and Gas industry to "consider", "investigate" or "review" different issues.

When evaluating the outcome of the North Sea Conferences one has to be aware of the political climate at the time of the conferences as well as the priorities of the host of the particular conference. During the late

80'es and early 90'es environment was high on the agenda. There was a large public interest and pressure for improving the environment mainly based on several serious environmental disasters and cases which attracted major attention by the media. This was possibly one of the reasons for convening a North Sea conference.

The focus of the North Sea conferences has developed or changed over the years. Table 5 shows the main issues which have been considered. The issue mentioned first in the Declarations has been considered as having the highest priority even if this may not be true and several issues were regarded as equally important. Anyway, the table is only used to indicate that some issues e.g. hazardous substances have generally received high priority but declining as the urgent problems have been contained and/or new EU legislation has been established. Also, eutrophication has generally had a high ranking even if it was not considered during the first conference. Ecological and nature protection issues arrived late on the agenda just like fisheries did.

Conclusions

Over the years the conferences have made important decisions. First of all, the conferences have established a common forum for and created consensus about the joint responsibility to protect the North Sea. Principles like the "precautionary principle" and the use of "best available technology" have been agreed and comprehensive descriptions of the environmental status of the North Sea have been prepared as well as joint monitor-

Table 5. Priority issues considered by the North Sea conferences.

Issues	Bremen 1984	London 1987	The Hague 1990	Esbjerg 1995	Bergen 2002
Black and grey list substances/ hazardous substances	1	1	1	3	5
Quality objectives and Uniform standards	2				
Radioactive substances/ wastes	3	7	7	7	8
Air pollution	4	3			
Pollution from ships/ environmental impact from shipping	5	5	5	5	4
Waste disposal at sea/ dumping and incineration	6	4	4		
Airborne surveillance	7	9	8		
Oil pollution from platforms/ offshore installations	8	6	6	6	7
Research (technologies, products, substitutes)	9				
Monitoring programmes	10				
Input of nutrients/ eutrophication		2	3	4	6
The Wadden Sea		8	9		
Enhancement of scientific knowledge and understanding		10	10		
Phasing out of PCB's			2		
Coastal state jurisdiction			11		
Sunken ships and cargo			12		
Habitats and species/ conservation, restoration and protection			13	1	2
Fisheries/ sustainable fisheries			14	2	3
Information and consultation			15		
Ecosystem approach to management					1
Promotion of renewable energy					9
Marine litter and waste management					10
Cooperation – spatial planning					11

ing programmes. Also decisions about bulk reductions of input to the North Sea of hazardous substances and nutrients have been agreed. The third conference in The Hague reviewed the implementation of the previous decisions and tried to clarify the political decisions in measurable terms. A range of annexes on hazardous substances, pollution from ships and offshore installations, protection of species and habitats was agreed providing list of priority substances, measures and actions. Again, the fourth conference studied the progress on implementation of previous decisions.

Even if important improvements have been made since the first conference implementation seems to be the problem. It has become increasingly evident over the last 10 years that the implementation of some actions and measures requires expensive or difficult and unpopular political decisions and at the same time the political climate for environmental issues has cooled down. The problematic or slow implementation of previous decisions and lack of visible environmental results is possibly the reason why it seems that the last two North Sea Conferences have been less successful regarding decisions on new verifiable measures and actions. Anyway, it is fair to say that the Bergen conference brought up the concept of an "Ecosystem Approach to Management" which is now under discussion in the regional conven-

tions and forms the basis for the newly proposed European Marine Strategy.

If the North Sea conferences have a future it is necessary to ensure full implementation of adopted measures and possibly to agree on additional measures with may have some unpopular socio-economically impacts and therefore difficult to accept at the political level. In such a situation the conferences are important as a forum for international unity and consensus creation.

Literature

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