Partnership Annual Conference 14 December in Tallinn, Agenda Item 6 d)

Barents Euro-Arctic Region
Cooperation in Health and Social Affairs

Cooperation in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region was launched in 1993 along two tracks: intergovernmental (Barents Euro-Arctic Council, BEAC), and interregional (Barents Regional Council, BRC).

BEAC members are Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden and the European Commission. Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Poland, the United Kingdom and the United States of America are observer states. 13 counties or similar administrative entities² form the Barents Regional Council together with representatives of the three indigenous peoples of the Region: the Sami, the Nenets and the Vepsians.

The Barents cooperation has a broad agenda within the overall aim of sustainable development. Health cooperation started in 1999, coordinated by a reference group and assisted by a database. A new programme was adopted by the Barents Euro-Arctic Council in October 2003, with a joint BEAC-BRC Working Group on Health and Related Social Issues (WGHS) and a chairmanship composed of a Nordic country and a

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1 Submitted by the BEAC chairmanship to the Partnership Annual Conference, Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Wellbeing, Tallinn, 14 December 2004.
2 Norway (Nordland, Troms, Finnmark), Sweden (Västerbotten, Norrbotten), Finland (Lapland, Northern Ostrobothnia, Kainuu), Russia (Murmansk, Karelia, Arkhangelsk, Nenets, Komi).
Russian oblast/republic. In 2004-2005 the joint chair is held by Finland and the Republic of Karelia (Ms. Helena Puro and Ms. Klara Shevchenko).

**Cooperation Programme on Health and Related Social Issues in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region, 2004 – 2007**

The new Barents health cooperation programme was adopted with the Northern Dimension Partnership in mind. Priorities of the programme are:

- Prevention and combat of communicable diseases
- Prevention of lifestyle related health and social problems and promotion of healthy lifestyles
- Development and integration of primary health care and social services

The programme has a stronger emphasis on social aspects, multilateral action and coordination than the previous one. In all areas attention will be paid to gender mainstreaming, the health of children and young people, special problems of indigenous peoples, as well as health challenges in sparsely populated areas.

**Activities of the Working Group in 2004**

WGHS has made HIV/AIDS-questions a first priority. An Ad hoc group on Preparing a Multilateral Project on HIV/AIDS has been established. WGHS has met two times in 2004, in May in Helsinki and in October in Petrozavodsk, Karelia. The meeting in October was combined with an expert seminar on HIV/AIDS. Organizing parallel meetings of officials and HIV/AIDS experts was highly appreciated and was considered to be useful.

More than 30 HIV/AIDS experts from the Russian regions and Finland, Norway and Sweden, WHO and other international bodies took part. The seminar concluded that the HIV/AIDS epidemic is spreading in the Barents Region and that there is a lack of expanded and comprehensive response towards the situation. Interventions to improve the health infrastructure and to influence individual and social norms are still not sufficiently effective.

It was widely recognized that the current national HIV/AIDS programme coverage levels were insufficient and that there were gaps in technical, partner and response capacity. Four main blocks of action were identified as key areas in the forthcoming Barents HIV/AIDS programme:

- **Capacity development in HIV/AIDS programming needs to be strengthened**
- **Prevention activities need to be expanded, deepened and supported**
- **Programmes ensuring respect towards socially equal conditions, including persons living with HIV/AIDS, are insufficient**
- **Antiretroviral (ARV) treatment affordability for the public health system and the individuals needs to be increased and supported**

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3 The full text and the mandate of the Working Group are posted at [www.beac.st](http://www.beac.st)
The seminar was preceded by a series of consultations in the regions concerned, carried out by Dr Zaza Tsereteli, project co-ordinator. On-the-spot information and experience was gathered and analysed for the seminar. The aim is to apply a more interactive and decentralized model of project planning than has been done on earlier occasions.

**Planned activities in 2005**

Finalized plans for the multilateral and multisectoral Barents HIV/AIDS project will be presented for approval in February. Later during the year the WGHS will proceed to implement the HIV/AIDS programme and the different projects under it. WGHS has discussed also a possible second multilateral project with social protection as main issue. Child welfare has been mentioned as one important theme. The discussion will continue at the next meeting.

The Barents database is under reconstruction and will be updated in cooperation with the ND Partnership in order to avoid duplication. The Norwegian Barents Secretariat is working further on this.

WGHS at its meeting in October reviewed the overall project activities so far. The same procedure will be continued during the meetings in 2005 in order to achieve a fuller inventory of the activities. This includes also activities to gain control over the spread of tuberculosis within ten years.

**Some other health and social affairs related Barents activities**

The Working Group on Environment, among other things, is actively engaged in efforts to improve water quality, water supply and the combat of air pollution. The Working Group on Emergency and Rescue Services Cooperation promotes cooperation also in emergency health services. Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS are important issues in the field of prison cooperation. The Barents Working Group on Education and Research promotes cooperation and exchanges between medical universities, research institutions etc. Promotion of cooperation in telemedicine is also a relevant issue. The Barents Task Force against Trafficking in Human Beings will elaborate an action plan, including social aspects of the problem. Barents working groups in the field of youth issues are valuable partners in health promotion and social issues as well.