

ILO recommendation on the proposed disbanding of the Baltic Sea Network on OH&S (BSN) November 2020

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1. The cumulative ILO experience with BSN activities and the more recent collaboration with NDPHS EG OSH together inform this recommendation brief to the concerned ILO member States. The paragraphs below share general observations, underline the need to support the BSN and what the NDPHS OSH EG could be considering in that regard. The ILO advises to clearly distinguish the two entities, and strengthen their distinctive capacities for them to respond to the needs of their respective constituencies. Discussing the future of BSN comes in the context of the Covid-19 crisis at a time when the need to accelerate OH&S knowledge transfer and exchange by mobilizing all knowledge stakeholders within and among countries can hardly be more pressing.
2. The proposal before the participants is to disband the Baltic Sea Network on Occupational Health and Safety (BSN). The overall assertion is that the BSN would belong to the past, would have achieved its intended purpose, would not benefit from political support and would duplicate with other networks, with the NDPHS Expert Group on OSH in particular. The EG OSH which is mainly constituted of government appointed experts is depicted as a credible alternative to the BSN.
3. Portraying the NDPHS EG OSH and BSN as duplicates translates a misunderstanding of their fundamental differences. If some individuals that have participated in their meetings in recent years were the same, the nature and mandate of these two entities contrast significantly. Their respective membership base also differs. Just as there is no equivalent organization to the NDPHS in the Baltic Sea region, there is also no equivalent of BSN in the region. Other collaborative arrangements such as PEROSH, EU-OSHA or the Arctic Network on OH&S (ANOHS) all having a separate purpose and mandate do not appear to compete nor duplicate with the BSN.
4. NDPHS is an intergovernmental organization equipped with a formal decision-making structure and a number of formally established technical expert groups. These groups should address joint challenges in the area of health and social well-being. Their primary task is to provide policy guidance on topics of priority political interest to government ministries that hold the responsibility for health, labour and social affairs in the region. It is the legitimate prerogative of each member State to appoint their representative to each expert group. Each expert group adopts and strives at implementing a work plan, which in principle should align with priorities set at higher political levels. A designated ministry of a member State (Finland) assumes the Secretariat of EG OSH, and is politically accountable for achieving the expected results.
5. The original mission of the BSN (1995) aimed to support institutions from the Baltic countries to join the Nordic occupational health community, and provide a forum for collaboration for occupational health institutions and experts around the Baltic Sea, including collaboration in research, training, information sharing, and the development of occupational health services. The OH&S scientific community in the Baltic Sea region actively collaborated on a voluntary basis within the BSN framework for more than 20 years. They conducted situational analysis, foresight studies, developed proposals and organized symposia for knowledge and information sharing on topics of priority scientific interest, notably. Together they produced highly relevant material that have informed government policies in various parts of the world, the last of which having inspired the formulation of the *strategic OH&S workforce planning and development* project concept note.

The BSN does not exist as a legal entity, thus its development is somewhat limited to that of being a network for collaboration.

6. An apparent problem challenging the very existence of the BSN is the lack of stable and focussed leadership since FIOH abruptly discontinued its support in 2016 without further consultation with its membership base, nor agreement on a transition plan outlining a strategy for ensuring its sustainability. Instead, the FIOH pushed off the BSN from the organizational nest it had comfortably nurtured in, without prior notification. The consequences of that decision were felt deeply, and still are in many regards. Since then, BSN member organizations in Riga and Vilnius have provided an “emergency landing strip and basic life support” to the network.
7. The proposal to disband the BSN rightly emphasizes that the world of work is changing and with it the needs of workplaces and workers. Knowledge of emerging needs and of the most practical and economical ways of satisfying them is key to achieve prevention. To this day, there has been no discussion addressing OH&S knowledge development needs. BSN member organizations could reassert its mission; diversify and expand its membership; formulate new strategic objectives; organize innovative activities; explore financing options; and review its functioning modalities. The proposal ignores the possibility of revamping the BSN and directly suggests that it is unworthy of support, and thus should cease existing without further ado. Perhaps the BSN member organizations and the EG OSH members could embrace a larger perspective on things.
8. As a working party constituted of appointed experts representing their national competent authority for OH&S, the EG OSH could undertake to assess OH&S systems development needs of the NDPHS member States. In addition to identifying key policy options and advise their respective government, undertaking such work would provide opportunities to share country experience and learn from one another, and possibly identify areas for collaborative action. Accordingly, the EG OSH could notably advise policy changes in relation to: 1) OH&S governance modalities (prevention policy, programming, systemic integration and coordination modalities); 2) coverage of risks, economic sectors, categories of workers in law and practice, notably by occupational health services; 3) national legislation, compliance and enforcement strategies and systems; 4) adequacy of social dialogue on OH&S at various levels (national, sectoral, workplace); and 5) financing strategies for compensation, preventive action and administration. When looking closely into 6) the state of OH&S knowledge development in the region, the EG OSH could potentially identify institutional capacity development needs, notably in research, education, advisory and information services, as well as public awareness raising. Informed by its analysis, the EG OSH could propose to establish some form of scientific collaboration aiming at enhancing OH&S knowledge capacity in the region, and establish a network of OH&S institutions, universities, professional associations and experts, for example.
9. The alternative to that hypothetical scenario would be to already realize how important the BSN and its contribution to OH&S really are, and start advocating— individually and collectively – for governments to foster existing regional scientific cooperation by providing now and for several years ahead the minimal support required to keep the BSN working. The benefit of investing in knowledge largely outweighs the cost of ignorance. With minimal support and leadership, the BSN is capable of enhancing technical capacities in OH&S in the Baltic Sea region by mobilizing knowledge agencies, institutions, organisations and experts in preparation for the future of work, and thus contribute achieving the objectives of NDPHS in the area of OH&S.

10. The BSN and EG OSH are not duplicating as described in the proposal, but there is a confusion of role, and that confusion appears to be originating from the EG OSH itself, notably through the designation of experts participating in meetings. Somehow, the EG OSH is only partly undertaking policy analysis and engaging structured discussions on improving national OH&S systems along the topics listed before. Instead, the EG OSH is engaging in resource mobilization and embarking on joint studies, which echoes the typical work of the BSN. Hence, proposing to disband the BSN in favour of the EG OSH is simply advising to replace voluntary scientific cooperation in OH&S knowledge development (BSN) by government commanded and controlled collaboration (EG OSH). There are valid reasons for enhancing policy and programmatic integration of technical work within an intergovernmental framework when guarantees of purposefulness and scientific independence prevail. However, the demonstration remains to be made that subsuming the BSN into the NDPHS EG OSH will provide these guarantees. The political support enjoyed by the EG OSH is important but insufficient in itself to achieve quality results. On the one hand the EG OSH would gain investing its trust (and resources) in the knowledge the BSN can provide while concentrating on the policy and programmatic dimensions of improving national OH&S systems. On the other hand the BSN needs to regain the support from the governments that are party to the NDPHS by working collaboratively with its EG OSH in addressing priority OH&S development challenges. A clear distinction of their role would facilitate their institutional cooperation.
11. The EG OSH could consider the BSN as its “go to source” for relevant knowledge on priority OH&S knowledge development challenges and issues including but not limited to OH&S research, education, training, information and services. This would require that every EG OSH member acknowledge and protect the value of established scientific cooperation among OH&S knowledge agencies, institutions and organizations in their country and more largely in the Baltic Sea region, and then work towards securing its conditions of existence, development and achievement.
12. To conclude, instead of disbanding the BSN, the NDPHS OSH EG could make it a high priority to enhance the BSN capacity and find ways to ensure its sustainability as a matter of intergovernmental policy. Time may have come to invest strategically in a facilitated organizational development effort of both the BSN and the EG OSH in order to clarify their distinctive roles, constitutions and objectives, and redefine the way they complement, interrelate and mutually support each other.

For all reasons enunciated above, the ILO recommends rejecting the proposed disbanding of the BSN. It further recommends to distinguish the BSN and the NDPHS EG OSH, and to invest strategically in strengthening their distinctive capacities to respond to the needs of their constituencies while ensuring that their complementary roles and functions contribute to advancing OH&S in the Baltic Sea region. The ILO stands ready to accompany its member States in this matter.