eMSP NBSR
Emerging Ecosystem-based Maritime Spatial Planning Topics in the North and Baltic Sea Regions

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Policy Brief

Strengthening Data sharing for informed decision-making in Maritime Spatial Planning

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Introduction

Data and knowledge are central in effective Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) and for informed decision-making. MSP is complex and adaptive, delimited by spatial or functional boundaries surrounding particular marine space and their context problems. It heavily relies on robust data and the ability to analyse it effectively. Data and information constitute the basis on which informed decisions are made, helping to navigate the complex interplay between maritime activities and environmental restoration and protection. Central to this process is the harmonization and compatibility of relevant data, both quantitative and qualitative, which encompassing a diverse range of information. This includes ecological, economic, social, and geospatial data, all of which contribute to a holistic understanding of the marine environment, marine activities and developments in the marine space. Data is a prerequisite for guiding planners, policymakers, and stakeholders toward rational and evidence-based choices (European Commission, 2016). Harmonization and interoperability will be a critical enabler of "a regional approach to Maritime Spatial Plans" as highlighted by the EU Commission when presenting its Communication of 24.10.2023 on "Delivering on the EU offshore renewable energy ambition" (European Commission, 2023).

• How did the Community of Practice enhance data sharing?

The Community of Practice (CoP) focused on «Data sharing, information, and communication technology supporting MSP» (Data CoP). The Data CoP comprises over eighty participants representing diverse sectors: public authorities (61%), sciences (26%), the private sector (8%), and non-governmental organizations (5%), mostly (90%) from the Baltic and the North Sea Regions. This diverse community was actively invited to promote and share their knowledge and expertise through various means, including hosting regular workshops (in online and hybrid settings), facilitating interactive discussions (including guest presentations and Q&A sessions), and implementing effective communication strategies, such as newsletters, websites, and social media engagement.

• Data context in EU MSP

Directive 2014/89/EU (European Union, 2014) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 July 2014, established a framework for Maritime Spatial Planning (EU MSP). The Directive introduced an obligation for coastal Member-States to develop maritime spatial plans by 31 March 2021. According to the directive, Member States are required to "organize the use of the best available data, and decide how to organize the sharing of information, necessary for maritime spatial plans" (Article 10). Newly created plans should be accessible to relevant stakeholders and publicly accessible (Article 9), coherent, and coordinated across the marine region concerned (Article 11).

Moreover, in the context of technological development and the emergence of digitalization and big data, the EU also promotes and invests in digital transformation and tools throught EU initiatives, such as EMODnet, the Digital Twin and the EU Blue Economy Observatory, marking important ocean data-related developments under the European Green Deal. In the near future, decision-support tools, subject to further research and development, will prove to be excellent aids for data-driven planning.

Key data needs in MSP

MSP relies on robust data from key components of marine ecosystems and social-ecological systems. In the Baltic Sea region, a 2016 study (European Commission, 2016) identified four primary categories of data employed in the existing MSP plans and their planning process:

- Administrative boundaries,
- Geophysical environment and biological/ecological features,
- Relevant human activities and sectors,
- Socio-economic and policy-related data.

The MSP Data Study (European Commission, 2016) highlights differing data needs of transboundary and national planning. Cross-border data and harmonization remain as two key challenges. The Baltic Sea Region MSP Data Group, under the HELCOM-VASAB MSP working group (HELCOM-VASAB MSP WG), defined vital datasets for transboundary cooperation, including 13 planning issues aligned with the EU MSP Directive (European Union, 2014). Building upon the collaborative efforts within the MSP research field and EU-funded projects, the Data CoP within the eMSP project, led by Shom, the French National Hydrographic and Oceanographic Office, developed Reference Data Lists (Lequesne B., and al., 2023a) related to Maritime Surveillance and Ecosystem-Based Approach (EBA) & Sustainable Blue Economy (SBE). In the text provided, the term “categories” refers to specific classifications or groups of essential data that are recommended as reference points for acquiring necessary information for implementing the Ecosystem-Based Approach (EBA) and Sustainable Blue Economy (SBE) within MSP. These categories likely represent distinct types or themes of data that are relevant for these planning efforts.

The Data CoP strongly encourages MSP authorities to consider the following categories as reference points for acquiring essential data for implementing EBA-SBE within MSP:

- Ecosystems and ecology,
- Zonal assessment and/or protection,
- Geomorphology,
- Atmosphere parameters,
- Hydrodynamics and hydrography,
- Human activities,
- Socio-economic data.

Additionally, the Data CoP advocates for the use of the following categories as references for obtaining necessary data to implement Maritime Surveillance within MSP:

- Maritime boundaries,
- Physical characteristics,
- Maritime transport and traffic flows,
- Ports and Infrastructures,
- Nature and species conservation sites and protected areas,
- Submarine cable and pipeline routes,
- Surveillance and security,
- Fishing and aquaculture,
- Pressures and impacts,
- Spatial policy,
- Military,
- Risks.

In collaboration with project members within the eMSP project, the Data CoP conducted an in-depth study focusing on two specific case studies: Blue Corridors and Maritime Surveillance (Lequesne B., and al., 2023b). The comprehensive report highlights the essential data requirements for effective MSP, and it also analyses the challenges associated with data management within MSP.

First Case Study: Blue corridors and Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)

There are multiple ways to define a Blue Corridor. Here, a Blue Corridor is defined as a network of interconnected relevant areas — Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs), Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas (EBSAs) — that facilitate the safe movement and access of a specific species to all its essential habitats and functional areas (Nilsson P., George M., 2008). This definition highlights a few key ideas. Connectivity among protected areas is an essential part of ecological coherence. Blue corridors, i.e., the routes through which different areas are connected, are essential in the network of protected areas in the sea (Andersson A., and al., 2008). Moreover, the concept of a Blue Corridor is species-specific because different species may rely on different habitats within the corridor as their functional areas.

The Blue Corridors case study prompts questions that are relevant to the specific context, and they also have broader implications for data use in MSP. These questions encompass:

- The collection of data, harmonization of data
- The standardization of data formats
- The identification of key stakeholders involved in the process, and
- The integration of the Blue Corridor concept within MSP.

The outcomes of this case study indicate that when that implementing a cross-border Blue Corridor presents a challenge in considering coherent information on habitats, oceanography, and migration routes across the sea basin and from different Member States' databases.

The Data CoP provides (Lequesne B., and al., 2023b) an evaluation framework for Blue Corridors and recommends a protocol assessment to effectively illustrate, share and display the requisite data related to this topic, specifically for a designated "target species" (i.e., the species under consideration for protocol assessment):

1. Consider the existing relevant areas and the presence of the target species in the area.
2. Determine the level of protection for the endangered target species and the integration of its functional areas (Lequesne B., and al.,2023b).
3. Create a map displaying the considered protected areas and the target species' known migration routes and moving patterns.

This protocol provides a comprehensive guide for planners and highlights areas requiring attention to enhance connectivity, protection, and coverage of functional areas for the target species.

Second Case study: Maritime surveillance

Maritime surveillance encompasses a broad range of activities aimed at ensuring maritime safety, security, and control. It covers:

- Maritime safety (protection and rescue from dangerous situations related to navigation),
- Maritime security (protection against deliberate, external threats and criminal activities),
- Border control,
- Marine pollution (management),
- Enforcement of marine protected areas,
- Fishery control,
- Other specific local activities (spatial activities, etc.).

Maritime surveillance shapes the foundation for policies and regulations that enhance navigation safety and maritime security. **It enables the identification and assessment of navigation risks, aiding MSP authorities in developing effective risk mitigation strategies and in revealing vulnerabilities in existing surveillance systems.**

The Data CoP has developed a Reference Data List for Maritime Surveillance (Lequesne B., and al., 2023a), which serves as a comprehensive compilation of data essential for addressing this

aspect within MSP. This dataset promotes coherence in categorizing this type of data into relevant subcategories. This list can serve for all Member States, including those outside of the NBSR partnership area, i.e., the North Sea and the Baltic Sea.

Moreover, this Reference Data List has been enriched with supplementary country-specific details for each Member State in a dedicated table (Lequesne B., and al., 2023b). It includes information about the publishing body (such as agencies or public bodies), official source (indicating the data's mandated source), update frequency, data source (whether it's private or public), formats, direct data access links, metadata links, and contact information.

This table serves for a purpose of enhancing multi-stakeholders dialogue, especially when dealing with publicly available data that can be sensitive. This effort aims to foster effective data sharing, particularly in a cross-border context and between diverse actors involved in maritime surveillance.

Credits : Shom

Data challenges and limitations in MSP

The process towards comprehensive and informed decision-making in MSP is often accompanied by various challenges and limitations inherent to the data landscape. These challenges, ranging from a lack of data and interoperability (i.e., compatibility) to data accessibility and openness, form a backdrop that requires careful consideration and strategic solutions to ensure the success of MSP initiatives. Furthermore, MSP faces the challenge of providing detailed and accurate information throughout all stages, from the initial planning phase to the practical implementation. The following challenges were identified by the Data CoP:

- **National and transnational MSP data**

Transnational MSP data needs are different than the national MSP data needs. Data frameworks are usually easier to implement at the national scale, while ensuring their **coherence and harmonization** across boundaries remains a challenge (European Commission, 2016). The INSPIRE spatial themes (Network Services Drafting Team, 2011)(INSPIRE MIG, 2016) provides a useful data infrastructure for establishing **coherence and harmonization** of spatial data both sub-nationally and between different agencies and at a transboundary level.

Other complementary European initiatives should be considered in the context of transboundary spatial needs for MSP. For example, the European Marine Observation and Data Network (EMODnet), an EC marine data service, delivers harmonized transboundary marine in situ environmental and human activities spatial data for a number of relevant MSP data themes (e.g., bathymetry, geology, seabed habitats, chemistry, biology, physics and human activities) covering all European sea-basins. EMODnet is working closely with the Technical Expert Group on MSP Data to ensure that **the EMODnet data and data products are fully INSPIRE compliant**, a process which has revealed some discrepancies in the data models, which are being resolved (Technical Expert Group, 2021).

All EMODnet themes are relevant for regional MSP and transboundary data exchange, providing access to some of the input data for the plans. EMODnet Human Activities is particularly relevant as it provides access to an expanding range of harmonized datasets covering human activities across all European sea basins.

- **Diversity of country-specific needs**

Each country has different needs in terms of the scale and scope of their MSPs, institutional arrangements and governance frameworks. Ultimately, the implementation of MSP will heavily depend on available resources and local implementation. Underlying issues with transboundary MSP data exchange include **limited data interoperability** due to **different data protocols and formats**, language disparities as well as the need for effective cooperation between local and regional interest groups (European Commission, 2016). One major distinction among countries lies in the level of importance given to data issues, influenced by resources available for data collection and framework development, the progress of countries in their MSP processes, and the availability of suitable data to support their national MSP needs.

Beyond these disparities, other notable discontinuities have to be acknowledged. The Land-Sea Interaction, for instance, emerges as a significant factor, playing a major role in characterizing diverse phenomena such as the release of sediment loads from rivers to marine waters, coastal erosion induced by waves and storm surges, aquaculture (land-to-sea-interaction) or infrastructures (ports, marinas, grid connections) (Bocci M., and al, 2024). Ensuring the standardization of data frameworks on both the sea and land sides becomes essential, facilitating effective monitoring along both sides of the shoreline (ESPON EGTC, 2020). **Furthermore, it is essential to take socio-economic considerations within Sea Basins**, which are scarcely monitored, such as the development of tourism activities in the coastal and marine areas. Cultural aspects, heritage preservation, and the involvement of indigenous communities, tend to be insufficiently addressed in MSPs and should be further monitored in the new plans.

- **Data sources and quality**

Due to the inclusive character of MSP, and in cases where countries are making initial efforts to develop their national MSPs, the data and information used to develop an evidence-oriented planning approach for MSP are predominantly sourced from actors not directly under the jurisdiction of the responsible planning authorities. In this context, diversity adds value by enriching the dataset with a wide range of perspectives and insights, though it simultaneously raises concerns about the overall quality of the data

(e.g., cumulative impacts (Micheli F., and al, 2013)). Data quality refers to the reliability, accuracy, completeness and consistency of data. It encompasses various aspects, including both technical (technical data, metadata, data resolution) and external (the adequacy of data to address an issue or a question) quality (Troispoux G, 2010) (Devillers R., Jeansoulin R., 2006).

Decisions must rely on solid information regardless of its source. According to HELCOM-VASAB MSP WG, the underlying data should be as uniform as possible to obtain coherence in MSP. Similarly, the great importance of proper metadata documentation requires datasets and their contents to be properly and transparently described.

• Data accessibility

Data confidentiality and security issues pose a sensitive problem in the context of data accessibility and availability within MSP. Certain areas (military, defence, private sector investment decisions, etc.) dealing with sensitive information require respect for private rights and proprietary data.

• Data temporality

Seasonal variations significantly impact activities like fishing, tourism, and shipping. In fisheries, for instance, seasonality affects catch volumes, species distribution, and vessel movements. In MSP, having accurate, long-term trend data is vital. Recognizing and accommodating seasonal trends is essential for sustainable resource management and ecosystem protection.

• Digital technologies

Strategies are being explored for using new digital technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, Digital Twin of the Ocean concept, with the aim of accelerating and enhancing the effectiveness of policies to tackle for example climate change and to preserve marine environment biodiversity. **The digitalization process also opens up new prospects for remote monitoring of air and water pollution, as well as for monitoring human activities and optimizing the use of energy and natural resources** (European Union, 2014). Digital technologies can be used to develop and enhance the Maripark concept, a maritime multi-use area (De Beule K., Rabaut M., 2023).

Recommendations and conclusion

The Data CoP has identified the following key recommendations in using MSP data:

1

Adopt international data standards such as ISO, INSPIRE, directives, International Hydrographic Organization's Standards (S-57) and TEG recommendations (Technical Expert Group on MSP data, 2021).

To address the challenges of **data heterogeneity and inconsistency** in MSP and ensure a collaborative effort by involving various stakeholders, including policymakers at both national and international levels, experts responsible for data development and collection, regulatory authorities, and MSP planners.

2

Make MSP output data compliant with FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable) principles (Wilkinson M. D., 2016).

To address **data availability and understandability**, it is imperative for MSP planners, authorities, and scientists involved in the process to apply international formats and harmonization standards. This alignment with FAIR principles ensures that data is not only more accessible but also well-described and then reusable.

3

Enrich the available data sharing platforms to improve the comprehensiveness of available data.

To address the challenges of **insufficiency** and the need for cross-border **coherence** and a holistic view within MSP, and to foster more robust spatial solutions, it is essential to encourage user engagement for data enrichment and seek partnerships with international platforms such as EMODnet or BASEMAPS for the Baltic Sea. This approach greatly facilitates the implementation of these standards and ensures more effective MSP data management. Key stakeholders, policy makers, scientists, authorities, and maritime spatial planners must take immediate action to implement this approach.

4

Actively employ the recommended Reference Lists (see Lequesne B., and al., 2023a) to increase data coherence and harmonization approach, data classification and categorization into relevant and consistent categories and subcategories.

To address the issue of **data heterogeneity and inconsistency** across borders. This recommendation is directed towards maritime spatial planners and authorities.

5

Follow the framework protocol for Blue Corridors implementation (see Lequesne B, and al., 2023b) to increase connectivity between MPAs and species' functional habitats in the planning process.

To become a standard protocol for maritime spatial planners and policy makers in conducting assessments, ensuring consistency and reliability in data sharing and analysis. It shows how available data can be handled effectively, while contributing to meeting the 30% targets for MPAs.

6

Visualize the "invisible": invest in geospatial visualization technologies and resources.

To improve the policy-science dialogue within the context of MSP, embracing innovations such as artificial intelligence and digital twin technology, and involving creative artists and designers, will play a key role in the creation of adaptable, mathematically sophisticated maps. These maps, based on spatial data, serve as effective communication tools, facilitating decision-making for MSP authorities, policymakers, planners, scientists, and stakeholders throughout the entire MSP process. However, one should keep in mind that this strongly depends on the datasets used and how they are represented.

7

Continue supporting transboundary MSP projects and initiatives which are led by and involve MSP authorities.

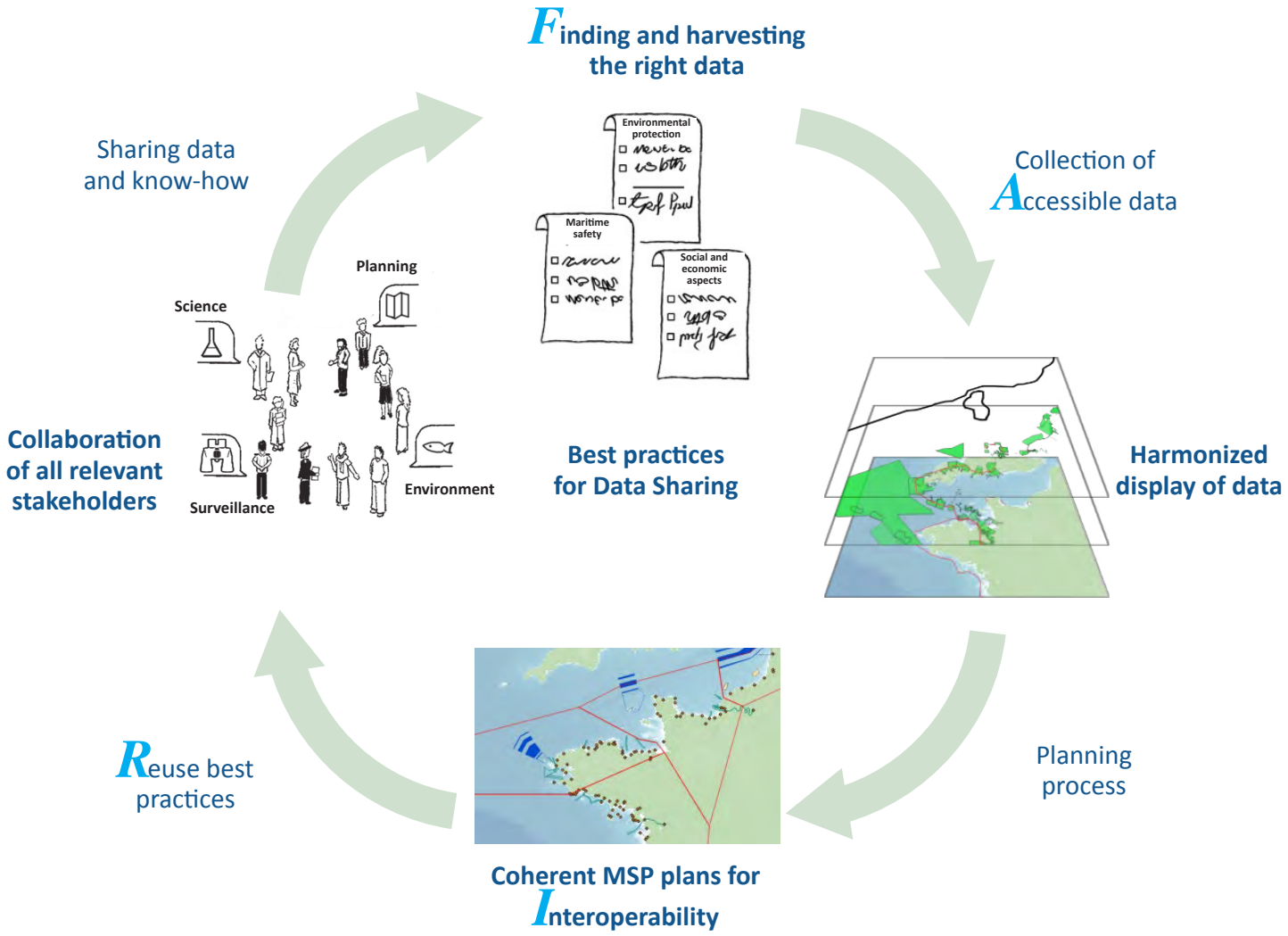
A project approach such as the eMSP-NBSR project, involving the building of networks, organizing exchange of knowledge on data and sharing good practices, is recommended across all sea basins. This should be complemented by funding mechanisms that support longer-term strategic networks, similar to the approach of EMODnet. This provides for a systematic approach, making use of a variety of implementing parties, and catalyzes the transformation of MSP from a theoretical concept into an actionable reality.

This policy brief aims **to provide recommendations for better harmonization and standardization of data within MSP processes in Europe. It is intended for public authorities, policymakers, maritime spatial planners, and scientists.** The document seeks to gain a comprehensive understanding of present and future MSP data and knowledge challenges from various perspectives, including Member States, Sea Basins, and relevant projects and initiatives. This multi-perspective approach aimed to identify practical suggestions for:

- Improving ongoing MSP processes at the Member State level and between sea regions.
- Supporting future initiatives that the EU can undertake to aid Member States in implementing MSP.

Data is the key to effective MSP and is a prerequisite for guiding planners, policymakers, and and stakeholders towards making evidence-based choices. Data constitutes a basis for setting up other policy initiatives, such as the European Green Deal, which encompasses several environmental policies addressing climate change, pollution, biodiversity and ecosystem health and restoration (European Union, 2019). To achieve these objectives, several key recommendations have been outlined here by the Data CoP. Adopting these recommendations will strengthen data sharing within MSP and pave the way for a more sustainable management of marine and coastal resources, the promotion of sustainable economic activities and greater resilience to climate change and other pressures. The long-term health and prosperity of our coastal and marine areas can be ensured by putting data at the forefront of MSP. This enables adjustments of plans and measures, guides future planning processes, and identifies new research, method development, and data needs that may improve the next rounds of MSP. The sea basin dimension of many governance frameworks and initiatives, such as those to protect the environment or to decarbonize the economy, reinforces the need for further harmonization and standardization of MSP Data.

Furthermore, it is essential to encourage policymakers to consider data quality. Even if data quality could be perceived as a difficult to achieve since a significant portion of the data used is generated by various actors, it should be understood as a social process focused on public consultation and participation to reach a common plan that incorporates the contributions of all stakeholders. The various data sources have the potential to involve the stakeholders who generate or own these datasets, enabling them to play a more active role in the MSP process. This increased participation can highlight the complexities of the situation and lead to a more comprehensive and inclusive planning approach, keeping in mind that data is accessible to the general public.



The illustration, designed by Shom, represents optimal practices for MSP data sharing and outlines key steps for effective data utilization within MSP. It begins with the identification and collection of the right data, followed by the harmonization and visualization of data on maps. The process then progresses to the planning phase, resulting in the creation of coherent MSP plans designed for interoperability. The cycle emphasizes the importance of reusing best practices in collaboration with relevant stakeholders before culminating in the sharing of data. This entire process aligns with the FAIR principles, ensuring that the data is Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable, contributing to enhanced integration and supporting data-driven decision-making.

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eMSP-BSR project website: https://www.emspproject.eu/

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Abstract:

This policy brief has been developed by the Data and Knowledge Sharing Learning Strand within the European Union-EMFAF-financed project Emerging Ecosystem-Based Maritime Spatial Planning topics in the North and Baltic Sea Regions (eMSP NBSR). The policy brief aims to provide recommendations for better harmonization and standardization of data within Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) processes in Europe for public authorities, policy makers, maritime spatial planners and scientists. It also provides guidance to efficiently communicate complex data-related matters to planners and decision-/policy-makers working with maritime governance and sectors. Furthermore, the effective implementation of the European Green Deal (European Union, 2019). and the salient mitigation and adaptation to climate change require the integration of comprehensive and up-to-date data in MSP (Cornet, A., et al., 2023). These recommendations enhance data integration and support data-driven decision making to optimize marine and coastal resources, promote sustainable economic activities, and foster climate change resilience for an integrated framework for decision-making.

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This policy brief was developed within the eMSP NBSR project; for more information, please visit the webpage: https://www.emspproject.eu/

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Emerging Ecosystem-based Maritime Spatial Planning Topics in the North and Baltic Sea Regions

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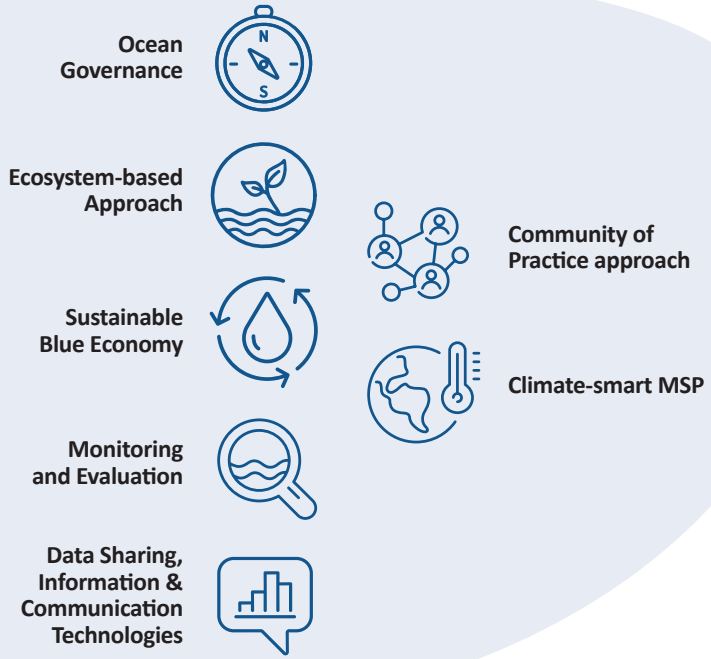

The eMSP NBSR project, implemented from September 2021 to February 2024, provided a platform for marine spatial planners and other experts to collaboratively advance MSP practice. It addressed five urgent emerging MSP topics through a community of practice-based approach that enabled joint learning across professions and across the North Sea and Baltic Sea areas.

Project work took into account the European Green Deal, climate change and how climate-neutrality targets can be addressed in MSP.

The planners and experts were supported by a method mentoring team and a scientific advisory board.

Netherlands Enterprise Agency
Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality of the Netherlands
Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management of the Netherlands
SHOM
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