

Union of the Baltic Cities
Executive Board meeting, Stockholm 10 November 2016

Agenda point 2.2. UBC Strategy implementation

Report of the Task Force by Mikko Lohikoski, chair (list of participants attached)

Introduction

The key goal of the Kristiansand UBC Strategy for years 2009–2015 and its implementation was to ensure that UBC, as the leading city network in the Baltic Sea Region, meets the new requirements in the emerging cooperative structure of the Baltic sea Region, with the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) emerging as the key framework for cooperation. UBC wanted to ensure its relevance and operative capacity and continue to create added value for its Member Cities.

Among the key processes during this implementation period until the Gdynia General Conference in 2015 were the following:

- Comprehensive review of UBC structures, practices and statutes in the form of the work of UBC Task Force on Development of the organization (Conclusions and Proposals to the UBC Executive Board, 25.2.2013, since confirmed by the General Conferences in Mariehamn and Gdynia)
- Re-structuring of the UBC Commissions and their re-creation starting 1.1.2015
- Formulation and adoption of criteria for evaluation of the work and results of Commissions, to be used as basis for their financial support
- Formulation of criteria for cooperation with business entities and companies
- Renewal of UBS Statute to meet the new standards, including limitation of the time of office of the President, Vice-Presidents and Board members to three consecutive 2-year periods.

The Gdynia general Conference in 2015 adopted a new UBC Strategic Framework 2016–2021. It defines the key outline and essential features of UBC and its

work for the coming period including the aim, values and vision, as well as how we can attain the goals of the vision to create synergy and added value by working regionally and across borders. UBC promises to be an effective, proactive and representative organization in service of its Member Cities and the Region.

The work priorities of the UBC for this period are:

- Implementation of the UBC Sustainability Action Programme 2016–2021
- EUSBSR and Blue Growth Strategies
- Towards a New Urban Agenda for Cities
- Promoting Smart Growth and Digitalization
- Stronger, more proactive, goal-oriented and member-driven UBC.

In addition, the General Conference decided to adopt a concrete Action Plan 2016–2017 for the Executive Board and Presidium and member Cities to ensure the following issues, linked to the effective functioning of UBC structures and improving of communication, visibility and outreach (Strategic Framework, Annex 2, Tasks for years 2016–2017). The Executive Board was called upon to ensure their implementation.

Accordingly, the Executive Board nominated a Task Force consisting of representatives of Member Cities (Kaunas, Kristiansand, Lahti, Växjö, chair Mikko Lohikoski, UBC Strategy coordinator), to make recommendations to the Executive Board on implementation. Later, also the preparations of UBC General Conference in Växjö (October 2017) was entrusted to the Task Force which met in Växjö (October 12–14, 2016). Also the Secretary General participated in the deliberations.

UBC Strategy implementation – recommendations by the Task Force

Following is a summary of the deliberations and recommendations of the Task Force to the Executive Board (issues are those listed in the Strategic Framework):

Speedy implementation in practice of all Conclusions and Proposals of the UBC Task Force on development and Organization (25.2.2013, attached)

Speedy implementation of the UBC Communications and Marketing Strategy

Tasks for 2016–2017:

General discussion on “state of affairs”, reality check:

There are strong tendencies in our countries and Europe against international cooperation, even hostility against “everything foreign” and move towards inward-looking behavior, which also affects cities. How can we justify to Member Cities that they should engage in international cooperation and UBC? What is our response? We have to demonstrate, through practical examples, that cooperation brings added value to participating cities.

We have to demonstrate, that UBC cooperation brings increased competence, additional contacts, and benefits, that it is an investment in each city`s own development.

This is a key question, which the Executive Board, Commissions and all Member Cities are called upon to discuss.

Strengthen the capacity of and effectiveness of the work of UBC Commissions

“The backbone of UBC`s practical and goal oriented work is done by the Member Cities through thematic UBC Commissions. UBC Commissions are encouraged to seek partnerships with other stakeholders and participate actively in implementing regional development strategies, especially the EUSBSR.” (UBC Strategic Framework)

The Task Force concluded, after short review, that in general, the reorganization of the Commission structure has been successful and has brought vitality to their work and more Member Cities participate in them. However, many challenges remain and the key goal is to ensure that the Commissions are able to define their goals, attract interest and participation from members and ensure effectiveness. “There is still room for improvement”.

Are we sure that the relevant information from the Commissions reach the relevant persons in member Cities? This is a critical issue to be secured.

Commissions can only succeed if participants feel they get value from participation. Requires well defined common goals and good expertise, as well as involvement and motivation of experts. How to achieve that? Maybe forming an “executive advisory board” in Commissions a good way?

Issue raised: Should we create within UBC a common reserve fund (10–20 000 euro) from where interested Commissions or groups of cities could apply for seed funding to prepare projects for outside funding? They could utilize “internal” expertise from other Commissions or from outside.

Challenge: Experts from Member Cities need permission to use time and resources to participate in UBC Commissions. This requires also political support from leaders. At the moment the participation level of Mayors and political leaders in UBC work, and their knowledge of UBC work, is too low and has to be raised.

Proposal: Should we organize a Mayors Forum/Urban Forum every second year, alternating with General Conferences? Or organize meetings of Mayors/political representatives on occasion of major BSR conferences (could start with EUSBSR Annual Forum, June 2017 Berlin)? Have a Mayor’s lunch/dinner as part of General Conference?

The other dimension: Utilize national meetings of local authorities and organize an UBC side event, with UBC President etc. present.

This work could be linked to our role as EUSBSR Coordinator in HA Capacity with aim to mobilize participation of local authorities.

Proposal: As politicians often do not speak foreign languages fluently, need basic UBC material in local language(s). Could the current member of Executive Board from each country ensure that?

Improve cooperation between Executive Board and the Commissions

Observation: UBC lacks clear guidelines for the work of Commissions and for the internal cooperation (Board-Commissions-Secretariat). Also nomination of EB contact persons with each Commission unfulfilled.

Proposal to Executive Board: First meeting of EB in spring 2017 dedicated to discussion about role of Commissions. All Commissions to be invited to a dialogue with the Board, with enough time allocated to it. Nomination of liaison persons Board-Commissions. Meeting has to be well prepared and interactive. As possible we have to start preparing this already in Stockholm.

Make Executive Board more effective, transparent and goal oriented

Proposal: Implement immediately decisions concerning better preparation of EB meetings (Task Force 2013). This of central importance so members can prepare for meetings and know what is expected from them.

Proposal: Board meetings more interactive and goal oriented. We should choose one topic for each EB meeting for deeper and well prepared discussion, jointly with one of our Commissions. In this way, each Commission will participate intensively at least once on a two year cycle of the Board. And the other way round: Invite Board to Commission meetings.

Improve cooperation between Secretariat and Commissions

Highly topical subject which should be discussed in the EB Spring 2017 meeting. We have to establish what are the expectations from the Commissions towards the Secretariat – project knowledge? Technical support? Communication support? Secretariat as liaison in match-making between cities?

Need evaluation of needs and find solutions to possible gaps in competences within secretariat. Can we establish a system of sending experts to work a defined period in the Secretariat? Other methods? Has to be defined within the evaluation of the Secretariat work, decided upon in the Strategic Framework.

Improve expertise in key policy areas and lobbying capacity to promote UBC goals

UBC role in successful lobbying has achieved some notable successes but is considered rather weak nowadays. We should muse better capacities of our Member

Cities representations in Brussels. Also need to be more proactive towards European institutions – Committee of the Regions, ECOSOC, European Parliament, European Commissions as well as Council of Europe structures like Congress of Local and Regional authorities CLRAE in Strasbourg.

Proposal: Commissions and experts in Member Cities are our large pools of competence. Their role in policy formulation and lobbying is insufficiently defined and needs improvement. We also have to define how we act in Brussels. An annual meeting of the EB in Brussels could be useful, too.

Proposal: Cities could nominate UBC Rapporteurs in various key fields. A City which is keenly anyhow following developments in certain fields (maritime policy, blue growth, cleantech, innovations in health/social field etc.) could represent UBC in these issues and report to the Board when needed. A win-win situation for all.

Develop and systematize UBC expert exchange between member Cities

Good practice and expert exchange are among most valuable gains of UBC membership for cities, according to evaluations. Ad hoc exchanges of experts between Member Cities take place, but in unsystematic way. Can we work out a more systematic exchange system where role of stakeholders are defined better?

Proposal: Executive Board decides that UBC shall work out a plan and feasibility study on how this could be organized and what are the possible funding sources. Interested Member Cities could be invited from the beginning. Then establish a pilot project if feasible.

Increase the capacity of UBC and Commissions in development projects, and role of UBC Secretariat in this

Outside funding nowadays available mostly in form of project support. We have to establish what are the needs and interests of UBC Commissions and what, if any, support they need.

Evaluate and re-define role and tasks of the Secretariat in new circumstances and within the “new UBC”

Evaluation to be made by external experts as to be proposed by the President.

Proposal: A survey of UBC Member Cities priorities has been made long time ago, and should be updated, also taking into account the new Commission structure etc. This could be linked to the evaluation of Secretariat work. However, both processes should be ready for Board discussion by the summer meeting in 2017 to be available well ahead of Växjö Conference.

Improving UBC Communication, visibility and outreach (additional Växjö experts present)

Discussion and general evaluation:

The task Force recognized that the update of logo, website and bulletin have been well received. They give a much more modern impression of UBC now.

Proposal: It was noted that UBC should be more visible in BSR events, and we should create appropriate tools for that. One practical suggestion is to make a UBC portable exhibition wall for major events, in addition to pull-ups.

Discussion: how to combine, as a city`s communication experts, the interests of own city and those of UBC – as “own city goes always first paying the bill”. At the same time, UBC could be used as a channel to promote own city`s achievements.

Emphasized that when setting up digital communication systems, need to concentrate on essential information and good navigation as everyone has little time to read. Also information has to be tailor made to various recipient groups. If things go only, or mainly, through the UBC contact persons, they become “bottle-necks”.

Discussion about better, more focused communications led to a more general topic – how to organize the UBC work better, how to make it more systematic. We need to know better when the deadlines are for publications, when the Board meets, when to submit various reports and applications for funding etc.

Proposal: The Executive Board requests the Secretariat to establish, jointly with stakeholders, a yearly time-table – “The UBC Clock” – starting from 1.1.2017. It

shall include all relevant dates and processes, including Board meetings and relevant outside events, and will be available to all stakeholders.

Recommendation: The Task Force was satisfied with the progress of the communication programme and supportive of the proposals. So we recommend to the Board to implement the tasks included in the Communication Managers report 12.10.2016 which is attached.

UBC membership

The Task Force noted with great concern that the number of member Cities has been shrinking as some cities have been leaving the organization. It was noted, that the reasons may be both general and specific:

- general atmosphere prevailing in many countries, inward-looking tendencies
- economic problems of cities
- big cities have their own specific fora
- existence of many thematic networks
- city-specific reasons, etc.

These considerations – “to be or not to be” – are common in nearly all countries and cities. We have to justify why it is worthwhile to belong to UBC – or for that matter, to any other international network (where similar issues are common).

Situation in Germany and Russia and also Norway is vulnerable, as only a few cities are UBC members.

How to turn this development? And how to improve participation of existing members?

The discussion was initial, and has to be continued in the Board. Various medicine were offered: information material in local languages, involvement of Mayors and other political decision makers, better visibility in events and more effective marketing, events to be organized in various countries (Berlin June 2017?), etc. Better and more active briefing from Presidium/UBC Board members to national member cities and their Mayors could also be helpful.

Also a survey of Member City needs (see above) could be useful to identify the needs and priorities of cities.

Also the possibility of convening UBC Member City contact persons to a joint meeting every now and then was considered as a useful option.

In the end, the only lasting answer is to be relevant for members – to bring added value and to be able to demonstrate/communicate it.

Proposal: The UBC and its Board should not shy away from this topic but discuss it and develop counter-measures – as we know that “UBC membership pays off”. We have to ensure that others know it, too.

Issues and proposals dealing with the Växjö General Conference in October, 2017 will be communicated in separate mail.