

# One bridge too far



It's often said European port authorities assume both public and economic responsibilities and our latest fact-finding survey showed that 90% of European ports are situated in or close to urban agglomerations, writes **Isabelle Ryckbost**, secretary general, ESPO.

**IT GOES WITHOUT** saying that in this context ports are an integral part of local communities and share their societal concerns and engagement towards the environment and sustainability.

Ports in Europe need to secure their "licence", they must assure the people living around the port and society as a whole that their operations and investments are sustainable. But how far should this engagement go?

We could get the impression that policy tends to turn this pro-active voluntary engagement of port authorities and their readiness to invest and help addressing societal environmental problems into an obligation for ports to "contribute" to solving the environmental issues that cannot be tackled at the source.

## Green rewards

Let me give you two examples. Recently, the European Commission published a study on the differentiated port infrastructure charging. A study which definitely has merit in compiling and comparing information on the rebates on the infrastructure charging given by ports to reward "green" ships. When reading the conclusions though, one tends to get a little bit puzzled about the initial intention of the green charging.

Giving ships with good environmental scores a rebate on their port charge is one of the incentives a port can apply to encourage their customers to come with greener ships to their port. Within ESPO we fully support this incentive as a commercial gesture from a port towards their customers and as an effort of the port to engage on sustainability.

However, one should not forget that these rebates come with a cost, that is borne by the port authority. It would be wrong to make the other shipowners pay for these rebates, since after all, they respect the rules and cannot be punished (malus system). Moreover, whereas port infrastructure charges constitute a substantial part of the port income, it represents only a minimal part (five to 10%) of the total cost of a port call. Giving a rebate can thus be a part of a strategy, but should one reasonably expect that the rebate in itself will be enough to trigger the shipowner to adapt or renew his fleet?

Notwithstanding all these facts, the greening of the shipping sector suddenly seems to become a responsibility of the port in the first place.

A second example is marine litter and plastic waste. The NGOs are clear, if we continue with our plastic waste habits, by 2050, the oceans will contain more plastic than fish. A problem that has to be tackled without

further delay and again, everyone should play its role. But what is the role of the port authority?

In 2014, the Dutch sea ports signed an agreement with their government whereby seagoing vessels can discharge clean plastic shipping waste free of charge on an unlimited basis starting 1 January 2016. Such agreements show again the pro-active willingness of ports to engage and help addressing an important societal and environmental problem.

But can we oblige ports to do so or even to do more? Once more, we see upcoming policy turning this voluntary engagement into an obligation. Policy initiatives seem to go in the direction of a "no special fee" for garbage for seagoing ships entering a port.

This would imply that every ship can deliver for a fixed price as much "garbage" (covering much more than plastics) as it wants in a port. Will this solve the problem? EU figures point out that only 20% of marine litter is of sea-based origin, the majority of the waste is land-based arriving at sea through our rivers.

Moreover it seems that with the current EU legislative framework, the waste gap for garbage has become very small.

But even if the merchant ships are not the major source of plastic at sea, we could understand a policy that is demanding an effort from all sectors. However, is it a good policy to give the ship the possibility to discharge in a port unlimited amounts of garbage for a given price? Who is the polluter in this case and who will pay the bill in this case?

Wouldn't it be better to develop an initiative to make the shipowner more aware of the importance of tackling the remaining waste gap and at the same time discourage the sector of generating too much waste.

## Creating awareness

We hope to convince policy makers that this approach should be preferred to one that won't really deliver in environmental terms and will in the end be costly for both ports and shipowners.

In both examples, European ports are very keen on helping to address the issue and to engage and even invest in solutions. Within ESPO we support this engagement, whereby some ports are really punching above their weight. I believe however that this voluntarism should not be abused by turning it into a law. It should not come at the cost of policy options tackling the real causes of the problems and applying the polluter pay principle.