

IT'S THE CITIZEN, STUPID! THE RISE OF PEOPLE POWER

Stronger, better informed and more agile than ever before, the 2019 citizen is the new influencer in ports, says ESPO Secretary-General **Isabelle Ryckbost**

No one will deny that the economic, societal and political landscape is drastically changing.

Disruption is one of the buzz words and sets the scene for many conference speeches. Digitalisation and decarbonisation are seen as the big game changers. To that we can add geopolitical instability, other big environmental challenges such as air pollution and the growing world population. But I believe that the increased capability of citizens to voice their concerns is becoming the real game changer in the economic, societal and political landscape.

Digitalisation is not only changing our consumption patterns, it has opened the door to a massive information flow, allowing us, as citizens, with a minimal effort, wherever we are, work or live, to keep our finger firmly on the pulse of what is going on and what is going wrong. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and snapchat have transformed many citizens into occasional news reporters, paparazzi or even war photographers. Moreover, the ongoing 'gilets jaunes' citizen protest movement shows how one Facebook post of the French lady, Priscilla, can mobilise massive protests and even cross borders. No NGOs, no established movement, no unions or organisations are involved – just the citizens.

TOWARDS TRANSPARENCY

Let us take the example of climate change. I believe that citizens might be the ones steering and accelerating the decarbonisation agenda and radically changing consumption and hence trade patterns. The 1999 food dioxin crisis led to a policy 'from seed to table', enhancing the traceability of the food. One could expect a call or movement for more transparency in the supply chain, driven by citizens who want more transparency about the way products have been transported to the shop or their home. The question is whether this will lead to a change in behaviour of the consumer to the extent that he or she will want to buy much more locally and thus move from globalisation to regionalisation.

A large majority (90%) of European ports are urban, many of them situated next to or within big urban agglomerations. Ports understand that more than before, the citizen is watching their actions closely, when things are going well but maybe more often when things are going wrong. Ports are aware of that and respond to it by showing transparency, by involving the surrounding community in their initiatives to lower externalities and improve the environmental performance. But the communication should not only be defensive in nature. More



Photo: ABP

■ Isabelle Ryckbost

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Ports must further explain that it's not only about loading and unloading goods. As nodes of transport and industry, they have to show that they cluster different parts of the production and distribution chain and avoid 'unnecessary transport'. As logistic nodes, they can demonstrate their capacity to be the perfect service provider of the internet shopper. As nodes of energy they must show to what extent they have a role to play in the transition to a zero carbon economy, by facilitating the production, supply and trade of new sources of energy.

A PROACTIVE APPROACH

Many European ports already have a very well established and proactive policy on transparency, communication and exchange with the local and surrounding community. They are not waiting for a Facebook post. As ESPO, we are also encouraging such policies and strategies through our EcoPorts network and through our initiatives in the field of societal integration. The many ESPO award projects show the way. More than ever these best practices and strategies are needed and further steps have to be made to further close the gap with the citizen, to show the port is at the service of the citizen.

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