

Plenary IV:

Contribution of Maritime Clusters to Competitiveness and Regional Development



Report

Key note speeches by VP Verheugen and CoR President Van den Brande:

VP Verheugen stressed the impact of the economic crisis on EU shipyards. Whilst they had specialised earlier and were not yet fully exposed to the market downturn, they needed to strengthen their position now. The Commission would undertake with industry to review the LeaderSHIP2015 initiative in order to refocus policies. A shipbuilding crisis summit would be held in Bremerhaven on 11 September 2009.

VP Verheugen considered the crisis also as an economic opportunity. Industry should now develop "green ships". A worldwide level playing field in shipbuilding was still essential. Therefore, the Commission would continue to push for an international shipbuilding agreement in the OECD, although he noted that neither Korea nor China showed the necessary commitment. The Commission would also study further (and aim to implement later) a EU-wide shipbuilding financing scheme (for refund guarantees).

Other important policy areas are better IPR protection, for which a number of regional workshops would be organised, an intensified social dialogue, and the strengthening of the cluster dynamics in the sector. The VP noted the creation of the new euro-mediterranean maritime cluster. For the wider maritime cluster approach he specifically mentioned the tourism sector as one of the major maritime economic activities.

Answering to a question from the floor, the VP made clear that the Commission would not seek to restructure the European shipbuilding industry. This should be left to the market alone.

Luc Van den Brande noted that regional bodies are working increasingly together, sharing best practices in economic development. Key working areas were MSP and a modern regional governance in maritime matters. Regional cluster conferences, building on existing structures where possible, should be used to discuss issues.

He mentioned 10 focus areas for the success of regional maritime clusters: spatial planning for ports, advanced logistics, multi-modal connections, centres of maritime excellence, education and skills development, shipping, shipbuilding, tourism, maritime heritage, and upstream/downstream activities. Developing these issues would strengthen the EU's territorial cohesion.

Panel discussion:

The panellists were asked to make 5' statements with regard to their ideas of responses to the economic crisis:

C. Antonini demanded a focus of shipbuilders on innovation and life-cycle management of ships. Energy-efficiency had to be the main challenge. Demand in the shipbuilding volume markets would stay low for at least 2 more years and there was the risk of a total collapse of the sector. Old tonnage, esp. ferries, should now exit the market. New short sea shipping tonnage should be built, and tax lease schemes and EIB financing should be the instruments of choice. Panellists later agreed that a "scrap and build" programme for tonnage operated in European coastal shipping should be explored and the chairman (Niko Wijnolst) offered some initial input.

P. Van Gulpen noted that the clusters are the key to innovation and prosperity. The EU needed to adopt an innovation friendly industrial policy. Access to R&D programmes had to be improved, esp. for SMEs. He stressed the problems resulting from an ageing workforce and the lack of interest among young people to join the maritime industries.

J.-Y. Le Drian reported that in Brittany 10% of all employment was maritime. Concerning clusters he distinguished between the "pôle naval" and the "pôle mer". The former concerned the existing economic activities in shipbuilding and ship repair, and was mainly concerned with questions of public visibility, image, skills development, and optimisation of supply chains. The latter concerned future economic activities (e.g. new wind energy solutions, modern selective fisheries) and thus required an anticipatory innovation policy.

I. Skard gave an overview of the various maritime clusters in Norway and stressed the combination of centralised and de-centralised organisational structures. The Ministry for Industry organises regular meetings and provides a co-ordinating function. Current concern is the modernisation of Norwegian coastal shipping, with focus on more efficient logistics and climate friendly gas powered ships.

J.-Y. Perrot stressed the role of research in the response to the economic crisis, but also saw a risk of "moving in the wrong direction". Focus had to be on living and non-living deep sea resources, bioremediation, selective

fishing techniques, oceanic bio-fuels and aquaculture. The link between research and industry remained too weak and EU funded research required more co-ordination. He also stated that biodiversity is still lacking a major research effort.

A. González Romero saw the need for new innovative products. Geographical proximity was a key asset of clusters that needs to be exploited. For the further development and strengthening of maritime clusters he saw 3 main criteria: Openness (not picking the winners); the mixing of private and public sectors, but on the basis of real market tests; uniqueness.

P. Lefeu reported on his Green Atlantic Sustainable Development project (GASD). The main activity areas are tourism, shipping and fisheries. For each area he demanded a project-driven approach, with a number of big leading projects.