



S GOES PORTS

ed that the dehumanisation of port areas is leading to ports becoming politically and socially alienated.

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pts at a European Union ports proach late last year. As the 'soft law' instruments and l areas, Professor Eric Van ve got it right this time

sions and port dues, clarifying existing case law and of the individual decisions of the commission."

In the environmental field, the European Commission has announced a port-specific guidance instrument on the Birds and Habitats Directives.

"I welcome this proposal, for it was one of the recommendations I made in my 2006 study on this matter on behalf of the European Commission."

Such guidance is necessary because of the "massive legal uncertainty for project proponents that exists now".

There are some caveats however, Prof Van Hooydonk warns. The guidance should be port-specific, that is, addressing typical port management-related difficulties and basic issues of port economics. This presupposes input of port-based know-how in the drafting process and extensive consultation with the sector.

One should also be aware of the risk that, through an environmental Communication, environmental policymakers will set the priorities of port development.

As a matter of urgency, it is good to know that DG Environment has announced it will tackle the matter as a priority in 2008, he said.

"Ultimately, everything will depend on the contents of the guidance. It must be balanced, reconcile environmental constraints with economic imperatives and principles of good port management, restore legal certainty for investors and speed up decision-making processes.

"If that is not possible, a legislative intervention would appear unavoidable."

Prof Van Hooydonk endorses ESPO's proposal to

continue to look into the possibility of a reinforcement of the legal status of port expansion plans and projects anyway. He refers to proposals in his study on the impact of environmental law on ports.

A key element of the Communication is, of course, the announcement of Commission State Aid Guidelines in 2008.

"State Aid Guidelines have been demanded by the port and shipping sector for years. It is time that such guidelines are finally adopted."

In his view, they should simply endorse earlier decisions of the Commission in individual cases, such as the Flemish Seaports case.

Through the Flemish regional government, Belgium was the first Member State to voluntarily adapt its financial regime of ports policy to the trends of the 1997 Green Paper on Seaports and Maritime Infrastructure.

"These new, very transparent rules on public port investment which limited public funding of commercial projects were fully approved by the commission and could serve as a model for other member states.

"In line with the general drift of the new Communication, I would however strongly advocate timely consultation with stakeholders before state aid guidelines are adopted."

The Communication also proposes measures for an improvement of the public image of ports, including a structured dialogue between ports and cities.

"I am proud that the commission proposes to hold an EU open ports day and to issue guidance on the reconciliation of ISPS requirements with tourism and recreation in ports."

These were two of the professor's own suggestions made in his book *Soft Values of Seaports*.

This issue has been picked up in many other places, including the professor's home town, Antwerp, where the port authority will publish a study on it in early 2008.

The Flemish government has also made it a priority and the proposals fit into the new EU maritime policy proposals as well, he stressed.

• *Prof Van Hooydonk was invited by the commission to contribute as the only neutral external expert to the consultation workshops with the industry where the current proposals were prepared, and several of his own policy recommendations were adopted by the commission.*

A new approach is needed to capture vital public support

PORTS often have a very negative image, and the erosion of public support for seaports is a major issue facing port management today.

Soft values can often help overcome this challenge, and the European Union seaports policy communication also recognises their worth, taking up a few of the suggestions made in Prof Van Hooydonk's book, *Soft Values of Seaports*.

Prof Van Hooydonk states that the negative image of ports is often due to environmental pressures and pollution risks that they may cause, the dubious reputation of the shipping industry, the dehumanisation of port areas and the strictly utilitarian design of port facilities.

"Neither public relations efforts, nor better economic underpinnings of new plans and projects, nor the greening of port policies or stakeholder relation management can revive a sufficiently broad public acceptance of ports," he argues.

Instead, such efforts should be complemented with comprehensive plans and strategies for the management of soft values of ports.

"The list of negative feelings surrounding seaports is quite impressive, both in quantity and in intensity," he points out.

Some are inspired by old cultural traditions, others by present-day aspects of port development and operations.

However, ports have certainly become more aware of the erosion of public support for their plans, projects and activities.

"Only four decades ago, port policy had absolute priority in many centres of decision-making and new projects were, quite literally, beyond criticism or debate."

But since the 1960s, ports had lost this invaluable political and societal position.

"The current erosion of public acceptance of ports is not only apparent from the fierce opposition against new projects from groups and individuals, but also from the almost complete ignorance and lack of interest among the general public.

"In the long term, the lukewarm public opinion, or even its total lack of enthusiasm for ports, will inevitably translate into an absence of political interest in and support for new port projects."

After all, since port areas have become uninhabited zones, there is no compact group of voters that might urge politicians to give priority to the needs of the port. Given this waning interest from politicians, there is a danger of new investment and employment being jeopardised and ports eventually becoming unable to meet real economic demands.

"It is a vicious circle: once public support begins to sag, things are likely to go from bad to worse. Therefore, restoring public support is a major challenge for port managers today."

Four "classic approaches" have been adopted



Van Hooydonk: eager to dispel negative views.

to restore public support for seaports, but these alone are not enough, he emphasises.

One possible approach to restore public support for ports is to involve the general public more, which consists of developing public relations and external communications policies and organising public events and festivities.

A second option is for port managers to adopt an even more matter-of-fact and businesslike approach.

Ports should attempt to convince society of their importance by using even more objective socioeconomic arguments and substantiated commercial analysis and forecasts.

A third response to the erosion of public support is the greening of port policy and management. Such initiatives may comprise investments in nature conservation and development measures, co-operation with environmental NGOs, granting rebates on port dues to environmentally friendly ships, and so on.

A fourth means of restoring public acceptance is so-called stakeholder relation management; that is, the development of good relations with all parties concerned.

Ports should make efforts to consult with these stakeholders, even in the preparatory stage of a new plan or project.

For ports and their stakeholders, efficient consultation processes bring about a win-win situation, Prof Van Hooydonk says. This stakeholder management approach is already applied. The Second Maasvlakte project in Rotterdam and the third deepening of the River Scheldt are just two examples.

However, these solutions need to be supported by the management of soft values in ports. These soft values may include historical, archaeological, architectural, landscape, recreational, sociological and other cultural aspects.

"Such assets are, however, often undervalued or even totally ignored in public policies."

Prof Van Hooydonk recommends that comprehensive programmes should be set up to allow ports to exploit and develop these soft values. Managing them is the missing link in port management, he says.

"Soft Value Management for Seaports would be but an additional policy tool and would provide another option for ports to revive public support, to counter-balance excessively negative environmental assessments of ports as well as their development plans and projects and to banish the caricature of ports as money-making machines."

Promoting seaborne traffic, carrying out port operations, deepening rivers and constructing new terminals, ought not to be considered as an essentially harmful, polluting or otherwise negative economic business.

Effective management could help both port authorities and port cities lift the present-day societal taboo on these undertakings.

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Professor Eric Van Hooydonk



Cause for dispute: relations between the government and dockers broke down in 2003.

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