

CREATING AN INDUSTRY-LEVEL BUSINESS MODEL FOR SUSTAINABILITY: THE CASE OF THE EUROPEAN PORTS INDUSTRY



Michael Dooms, Mychal Langenus

Arguing that there is a need to improve the dimensions and the sustainability of clean production within the seaport industry through the usage of interorganizational networks, this paper applies a virtual learning model for the setup of an interorganizational network for sustainable development in the ports industry in order to analyze the potential of said networks and provide potential policy recommendations.

APPROACH:

The authors of this piece opted for an action-research methodology with the European port industry as a case study. This was deemed suitable as the research conducted is aimed at creating changes within the industry, with the authors being both practitioners (as part of a mixed academic/industry consortium) as well as researchers involved with the European port industry.

MAIN FINDINGS:

- This paper contributes to the scholarship on interorganizational networks by building on previous research related to the role of the net broker function for triple bottom line transitions through an action research project for the creation of an interorganizational network for sustainable development.
- The trade association was not found to be ideal in taking on the role of net broker. The reason for this is likely due to the fact that:
 - The fact that a trade organization can be influenced by its more powerful members, and also has an operational framework where it must adhere to the consensus of all its members.
 - A trade organization has an operational framework where it must adhere to the consensus of all its members, and members who are the smallest in terms of resources will be less likely to push through their envisaged benefits.
- Nevertheless, due to stakeholder complexity, and distrust issues, the scenario analyzed in this paper appears to be the only alternative. Furthermore, the trade association can take up the role of net broker, but only in a lighter version by only providing industry level recommendations for sustainability, without direct services for individual port authorities.
- The European Commission as a supranational regulatory institution or a new separate organization led to no agreement between industry stakeholders.
- This research indicates the potential of the sustainable development network to act as a virtual learning organization, where systems thinking allows to surpass individual member's goals and work towards a shared vision. However, the case studies of this paper indicate that in time of high conflict with actors with varying levels of influence, high stakeholder complexity and high conflict, these mechanisms might not be able to commence.