Perspectives on maritime clusters

The American author Michael Porter first descripted economic clusters in his 1990s book *The Competitive Advantage of Nations* as the economic advantage of geography. Simply put, industries, businesses and societies benefit from being in relative close geographic vicinity to each other, compared to similar industries, and businesses explicitly not in close proximity to related industries and businesses.[1] The Netherlands is home to several global clusters, of which the maritime cluster is the most prominent, consisting of two major ports, various world-renown shipyards, prominent knowledge institutes, and an advances system of inland ports, and inland waterways.

Since the early 2000s, the Dutch maritime cluster finds itself organized in a single industrial cluster organization, *Nederland Maritiem Land* (NML). An organization including both industrial associations, individual maritime businesses, and institutes, as well as government agencies. NML focusses itself successfully on three main pillars of operations; maritime public affairs for the entire cluster, promotion both domestic and abroad, and the coordination of various project in councils on trade, innovation, and human capital. Key to the success of the Dutch cluster organization NML therefore lies in this triple helix structure of business, knowledge and policy makers. Governing this cluster organization is a board of directors, owners, and captains of industry, capable of steering – through both the cluster as well as via their respective businesses – the entire cluster. In other words does NML as an cluster organization provide a network of all relevant stakeholders in the entire cluster, within the entire geographical scale; enables the sector to closely be involved in maritime policy making at all possible levels, and to cooperate in shared projects on, for example, a healthy maritime job market. In more abstract terms, does a cluster organization enable industries, and businesses to be engaged in all affairs connected to their ambitions, besides their commercial activities.

 The 2017 *Werkprogramma Maritiem en Zeehavens* illustrates the success of the NML cluster organization in which NML facilitated the cooperation between the industrial cluster, in the creation of new, sound policy for future maritime affairs. Cluster organizations also exist on the European level. However, whereas various European member states have their own maritime cluster organizations for over a decade, the European maritime cluster exists only very recently. The European field of maritime interest groups is to a high degree scattered into specific interest groups ranging from European shipbuilders, ship owners, EU port authorities, and port service; no overarching cluster existed for a long time. Only recently, member states' clusters have ambitiously reinstated the European maritime cluster. The process of establishing such an European maritime cluster has recently moved from the creation of an corporate identity, to building partnerships, and taking a strategic position. The premise is clear; an European maritime cluster – EU member states as member – should prove to be an addition to the existing field of maritime interest groups at the EU level, and not replace. Based on common ground, this European cluster focuses on the creation of an EU economic review on the entire European blue economy, hence including the fields of interest of all EU interest groups; from European shipbuilders and owners, to European associations on all harbor related affairs.

The organization of a geographic cluster into a competent cluster organization proofs to be beneficial for the cluster as a whole. The Dutch maritime cluster strongly benefits from the NML; it provides opportunities in shared interests and projects, policy-making, and a informally agreed level playing field via a coordinating and governing board of relevant stakeholders.

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[1] Porter, M.E. (1990). *The Competitive Advantage of Nations*. New York: The Free Press. 1–857.