Key outcomes of “The role of maritime ports at the crossroad of the energy transition’ seminar”

Francesco Catte, Senior Policy Analyst, Francesco.catte@crpm.org

Context

On March 9 2023, the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR) with the support of Murcia Region organised ‘The role of maritime ports at the crossroad of the energy transition’ seminar in Cartagena (Murcia, Spain).

By bringing together, port authorities, regional politicians and technicians, energy producers, industry representatives, and trade associations, the seminar aimed at shedding light on the role that maritime ports have in the energy transition as well as identifying challenges and opportunities.

This paper gives a brief overview of the main points discussed during the seminar and is structured as follows:

- Section 1, the role of maritime ports as energy hub;
- Section 2, the challenges and needs identified;
- Key recommendations to unleash the full potential of maritime ports in the energy transition.

Maritime ports as energy hubs

As shown by the diverse panellists, ports are complex – yet rich – ecosystems comprising a wide array of stakeholders and encompassing many economic activities. Hence, the inherent potential of maritime ports as drivers of the energy transition from energy production to operations’ decarbonisation.

During the seminar, the production of energy – especially renewable – either onshore or offshore within or around ports was mentioned as the prime example of ports as energy hubs. For instance, the development, uptake, and success of offshore renewable energy, both offshore wind and ocean, are deeply intertwined with the ports’ ecosystems.

As renewable energy facilitators and producers, ports are central in the decarbonisation of its ecosystem from the port’s operation, maritime transport (e.g. onshore power supply or sustainable/alternative fuels) to powering with clean energy its industrial clusters. The emerging central role of maritime ports in hydrogen production, storage, import and export was also mentioned in the discussion.

Albeit increasingly commercial players, ports are quasi-public goods having an important role for regional development. As mentioned during the seminar, they can play a major role in supporting the clean energy transition and energy security of maritime regions, especially peripheral, islands and outermost ones. Moreover, the ports contribution is also critical for the social and economic development of their regions in ensuring connectivity and attracting investment and human capital. Moreover, as underlined during the seminar, the contribution of ports, either small or big located in peripheral region, to the EU’s energy and climate goals, as energy producers and exporters, is not to be underestimated but rather harnessed.
Challenges and needs

Among the major challenges identified during the seminar, the uncertainty of the regulatory and legal framework along with unnecessary red tape and large costs were mentioned. The Green Deal Industrial Plan and the conclusion of the Fit for 55 package triologues might address the above-mentioned challenges, as well as counter the United States approach considered to be more agile and business-friendly in supporting the energy transition.

Building new and upgrading existing infrastructure with their associated costs were also mentioned as challenges. Large investments (and space which per se which is a scarce resource in many ports) will be needed to accommodate, for example, new technologies or storage and production of renewable energy. To not be forgotten is also the needed infrastructure (e.g. grids or pipelines) to connect the energy produced in the port with its hinterland. Moreover, adaptation to the impacts of climate change was also mentioned as an increasingly growing concern and necessity.

A conducive environment and funding for innovation were identified as needed priorities along with the recognition of maritime ports as key in the clean energy transition and for Europe’s energy independence. In this respect, an addition of a ‘ports as energy hub’ criterion in the TEN-T could prove to be beneficial, although the difficulty on how to measure it.

Another major point discussed during the seminar, related in general to the energy transition, was to ensure the mitigation of the potential negative socio-economic impacts on the most vulnerable territories, such as islands, outermost and peripheral regions, and on their businesses and citizens.

Key recommendations

- Ensure a clear, agile, and effective regulatory and legislative framework.
- Provide for adequate financing and funding for innovation, building new and upgrading existing infrastructure.
- Add and define the ‘ports as energy hubs’ criterion to the TEN-T.
- Ensure technological neutrality.
- Promote a place-based approach taking into account the specificities of the different ports and territories.
- Untap the potential of islands as innovation laboratories.
- Harness and recognise the strategic role of ports, located in peripheral maritime regions, in delivering Europe’s energy transition and independence.
The Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR) represents more than 150 regional authorities from 24 countries across Europe and beyond. Organised in Geographical Commissions, the CPMR works to ensure that a balanced territorial development is at the heart of the European Union and its policies.

Rond-Point Schuman | 1040 Brussels, BELGIUM
ingo@crpm.org | +32 (0)2 612 17 00

6, Rue Saint-Martin | 35700 Rennes, FRANCE
(siège) info@crpm.org | +33 (0)2 99 35 40 50