Empowering Ports as Regional Enablers of Collaborative, Smart and Zero-Emission Logistics

European Network of Logistics Competence Centres

OPEN ENLoCC welcomes the EU Ports Strategy initiative and calls for a renewed focus on the role of ports within their regional ecosystems. Ports are not isolated infrastructures; they are embedded in a network of logistics competence centres, SMEs, inland terminals, and regional transport operators that co-shape the European supply chains. Regional Collaborative Logistics must be acknowledged as a core enabler of EU competitiveness, resilience, and decarbonisation.

To unlock the full potential of ports, the EU must foster stronger integration between port innovation and regional logistics capabilities. This includes recognising the role of inland and secondary nodes that support port activities, facilitating seamless hinterland connectivity, and ensuring that funding and innovation programmes address the needs of regional ecosystems, not just core ports.

Innovation in ports must be deployed beyond the port gates. Regional pilots and living labs should test solutions not only for port handling but for the entire logistics chain, including last-mile distribution, urban logistics, and multimodal interoperability. These experiments can serve as catalysts for digital and sustainable transition, generating scalable models for smart, data-driven and zero-emission logistics.

The EU Ports Strategy should prioritize digital and operational integration between ports and inland logistics nodes to support smart and sustainable logistics chains. Interoperable ICT platforms, real-time data sharing, and automated coordination across rail, road, and inland terminals can reduce inefficiencies, waiting times, and emissions. EU policy should promote and incentive digitalisation of ports' administrative and operational duties, ensuring data protection and cybersecurity levels, for seamless, trust and affordable data exchange at both Administration to Administration (A2A) and Business to Administration (B2A) level.

Technology should not be treated as an end but as an enabler of collaborative governance. To that end, ports must act as facilitators of data sharing, coordinated planning, and joint innovation across stakeholders. Yet, without strong regional alignment and space for experimentation, this vision cannot materialise. The strategy must therefore support the creation of regional logistics innovation hubs linked to ports, where public authorities, academia and research institutions, SMEs and infrastructure managers can co-design and test new solutions.

Moreover, spatial and regulatory constraints must be addressed. Regional development plans should be aligned with port innovation roadmaps, ensuring availability of space, access to grids, and joint use of infrastructure. The EU must also promote adaptive permitting and procurement schemes that allow ports and their hinterland partners to jointly procure green infrastructure and test pre-commercial solutions.

Funding instruments should recognise the strategic value of inland ports, small and mid-size seaports, which are crucial for connecting regional industrial systems to European and global markets. Targeted investments in rail access, terminal electrification, and intermodal infrastructure will enhance capacity and sustainability while supporting economic cohesion across the EU.

Finally, we urge the Commission to ensure the EU Ports Strategy includes:

- Specific instruments supporting *regional pilot actions* with port involvement.
- Recognition of ports as innovation enablers *for the entire regional logistics ecosystem*.
- Digital transition of administrative/legal/operational obligations within the door-to-door freight transport flows involving ports, inland freight hubs and multimodal freight terminals
- A dedicated stream of funding to support inland connectivity and *regional port clusters*.
- Inclusion of Regional Collaborative Logistics principles in the TEN-T, CEF, and Horizon frameworks.
- Measures to enhaching security and reslience in integrated port systems against cyber and non-cyber threats

By integrating ports into the regional innovation fabric, the EU can create more inclusive, connected and sustainable supply chains, supporting not only trade flows, but regional economies, SMEs and climate goals.