

# Identification of the Most Important Sustainability Topics in Seaports

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Preparing a sustainability report becomes more and more popular among a wide range of branches including shipping and seaports. For majority of Polish ports preparing a formal CSR strategy is a new challenge. The aim of this article was to compare the way that selected European seaports chose to report and identify the most important topics of their sustainable activity. In order to answer the research questions the multi-case study of selected European ports was prepared. The strategy and identified topics at seaports that have prepared sustainability reports can be used in benchmarking process. Such a comparison can help Polish seaports avoid mistakes in preparing such reports by themselves in the future. The analysis showed that the most important sustainability topics are connected with employment and air emission. There were also themes specific for seaports activity like maintaining the water depths. Involvement the port stakeholders in prioritization process made the topics order suited all parties concerned in port operations.

**Keywords:** sustainability, CSR, seaports.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Corporate sustainability has become a standard management approach for many companies and an inherent element of building the value of a brand. Stronger presence of sustainability issues can be observed also in Poland. There is a growing number of companies which have decided to include this concept into their managerial framework, create sustainability reports and share their experience publicly. There are examples that not only big enterprises but also medium and small start to assume such practices<sup>1</sup>. Companies which decided to report their sustainability achievements represent a wide range of branches including transport and logistics. Adapting this strategy is inevitable also for Polish companies from shipping and seaport area. For Polish ports it is important to find a role model in the area of fulfilling sustainability aims and preparing sustainability reports. Benchmarking process can be started with analyzing the best practices which have been already implemented in West European ports.

<sup>1</sup> *Responsible Business in Poland. Good Practices. Report*, Responsible Business Forum, Warszawa, 2016.

## 2. THE IDEA OF CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY

The socio-economic growth of the European Union should be pursued according to the idea of sustainable development. This concept covers a wide range of meanings. There are several terms and management approaches which are connected with the same attitude, for example corporate social responsibility CSR, environmental responsibility, social responsibility, sustainable development, sustainability, corporate citizenship, green marketing or triple bottom line. Regardless of the term, the intent is to reflect business responsibility for the wider societal good<sup>2</sup>. They all have been employed to demonstrate business accountability to society.

The growing importance of the sustainability concept created a need to give it more operational character and provide implementation guidelines for organizations and enterprises. Recognized

<sup>2</sup> V. Crittenden, W. Crittenden, L. Ferrell, O. Ferrell, C. Pinney, *Market-oriented sustainability: a conceptual framework and propositions*, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science (2011) 39, pp.71–85.

institutions are involved in promotion of social responsibility. Such a support in implementation is given to one of the most popular concept - CSR – corporate social responsibility. International Organization of Standardization provides guidance on how businesses and organizations can operate in a socially responsible way. ISO 26000: 2010 declares that implementing its guidance should bring benefits for companies. Among other things there are: competitive advantage, reputation, the ability to attract and retain workers or customers, the maintenance of employee commitment and productivity.<sup>3</sup> Financial profits are not enumerated directly, however it can be expected that with stronger comparative advantage they will appear in a long term.

Sustainable matters and management approaches are closely connected. One can find links between them on the global and local level. For example ISO 26000 contributes to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals and it helps to implement sustainable reporting in companies.

One of the ideas connected with sustainability is *triple bottom line* which says that it is necessary to act and make a profit taking into account three dimensions at the same time. These dimensions are: People, Planet and Profit. Together it makes 3P. It means that a result of a company activity should not measure only a financial profit but also environmental and social performance of the corporation over a period of time. All three aspects should be precisely measured and reported in order to inform public opinion about a degree to which a company is balanced. The idea of 3P states that it is important to measure social and environmental impact because if you neither name nor measure them then you do not pay enough attention to these subjects.<sup>4</sup>

In sustainability reports published by port authorities one can find direct references to some sustainability theories. For example such a report prepared by Port of Antwerp Authority mentions 3P explaining that a port is a place where the 3P of People, Planet and Prosperity interact most strongly, in an international context.<sup>5</sup> In a report prepared by Port of Rotterdam Authority there is a direct reference to a set of 17 Goals for Sustainable Development. These Global Goals were agreed in

2015 by the United Nations to stimulate actions in areas of critical importance for people and the planet<sup>6</sup>. Port of Rotterdam divides Global Goals into two groups. The first one consists of 13 goals that Port of Rotterdam can contribute to. The rest of goals are out of its reach.<sup>7</sup>

Social responsibility trends which have been popular amongst industrial and commercial corporations for several years, lately are becoming more and more common also amongst companies from maritime economy. Application of that strategy one can find within ship owners, offshore companies, shipbuilding, seaports etc.<sup>8</sup>

The idea is often not only regarded as a trendy addition to the core activity connected with blue economy but is treated as an important factor in decision-making processes. Requirements in relation to the CSR implementation are also put on partners who cooperate in supply chain or other joint actions. Often a company's commitment to the welfare of society and the environment is a key factor in making a decision about cooperation.

Choosing partners according to their CSR attitude can be observed also in seaport authorities. A good example of such management practices can be the Port in Gothenburg Authority. It is an example of not only creating its strategy towards sustainability aspects but also expecting the same from companies working in the port area. The potential cooperation between the Authority and port-related companies is dependent on the present engagement and declaration for future CSR activity in the port area. During the concession processes for the port's ro-ro and container operations, CSR was a fundamental issue. It was essential if companies wanted to be taken into consideration into the evaluation process. Bidding companies had to report their CSR/sustainability ambitions in general terms.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> [www.globalgoals.org](http://www.globalgoals.org) [access: 01.02.2017]

<sup>7</sup> *Bouwen aan een duurzame toekomst. Make it happen*, Jaarverslag 2016, Havenbedrijf Rotterdam, 2016. p.22.

<sup>8</sup> I. Kotowska, *Short Sea Shipping in the light of the idea of sustainable development of transport*, Scientific Publishing House of the Maritime University, Szczecin, 2016 [in Polish].

<sup>9</sup> F. Landon, *A Key Ingredient*, Port Strategy, 31 August 2012, Available: <http://www.portstrategy.com/news101/port-operations/planning-and-design/csr-a-key-ingredient> [access: 01.03.2017].

<sup>3</sup> *Discovering ISO 26000*, ISO, 2014, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Triple bottom line*, The Economist, 17.11.2009.

<sup>5</sup> *Sustainability Report 2015*, Port of Antwerp, 2015, p. 6.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The paper is concentrated on a research problem of identification the most important sustainability aspects for port authorities and other port stakeholders. The research question was focused on looking for similarities and differences between identified sustainability topics in the selected European seaports. In order to answer the research questions the multi-case study of selected European ports was prepared. The case study data comes from the sustainability reports and information about CSR activity published by seaports. The information obtained from the ports was confronted with reporting principles and standard disclosures published by Global Reporting Initiative (GRI).

### 4. THE ROLE OF STAKEHOLDERS IN IDENTIFYING SUSTAINABILITY TOPICS IN SEAPORTS

Some European seaports have already implemented a cohesive corporate social responsibility strategy and presented their material values on their websites and in their public reports. European Sea Ports Organisation (ESPO) has encouraged ports to be proactive in protecting the environment<sup>10</sup>. In 2016 ESPO conducted a survey concerning CSR information publicized by seaports. The survey was sent to 86 port authorities, which represent more than 200

European ports, among them there were Gdansk, Gdynia, Szczecin and Swinoujscie and several smaller Polish ports. That study revealed that already more than half of the respondent port authorities (up to 54% of respondents) have a formalised CSR policy. Of those, two thirds already report on their CSR performance through measurable objectives. The commitments and achievements are often displayed in the ports' sustainability reports that are published and are available online.<sup>11</sup>

Regardless the way of informing about sustainability strategy and kind of standards used for preparing a report, the paramount importance of dialog with stakeholders is emphasised. The stakeholders opinion is taken into account while deciding about identifying a set of the most important sustainability issues in a port activity. A proper recognising of these priorities play a key role in placing them into managerial framework, performing sustainable everyday business activity and reporting such actions.

The classification of seaport's stakeholders is presented on fig.1. There are four groups, each of which has its own characteristics and the strength of influencing and being affected by seaport operations. Port management is a complex issue because it should take into consideration and actively monitor the concerns of all stakeholders. In taking particular decisions and actions, port managers should give primary consideration to the

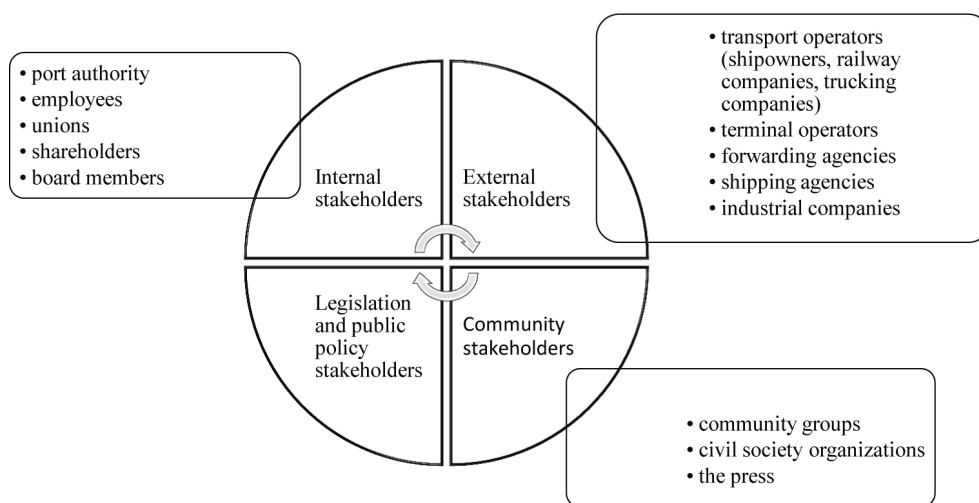


Fig. 1. The main seaport stakeholders groups.

Source: T. Notteboom, W. Winkelmans, *Stakeholder Relations Management in ports: dealing with the interplay of forces among stakeholders in a changing competitive environment*, IAME 2002. Maritime Economics: setting the foundations for port and shipping policies, Panama City, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.espo.be/organisation#key-objectives> [access: 01.03.2017].

<sup>11</sup> *Trends In EU Ports Governance 2016*, ESPO, Brussel, 2016, p. 15.

interests of those stakeholders who are most intimately and critically involved.<sup>12</sup>

Not all of stakeholders are involved in sustainable initiatives to the same degree. It is good to remember that actors taking part in port operations have their own interests and objectives, sometimes not coherent with each other. Besides, it is possible that some community stakeholders may be unaware of their relationship to the port until a specific event - favourable or unfavourable - draws their attention<sup>13</sup>. The research done by ESPO shows that stakeholders that were the most interested in CSR initiatives belonged to a group of internal stakeholders – employees (fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Percent of stakeholders involved in corporate social responsibility initiatives in European seaports  
Source: Trends In EU Ports Governance 2016, ESPO, Brussels 2016.

GRI is an organization which promotes not only sustainable operations, transparency and stakeholder dialog but above all they believe in sustainability reporting.<sup>14</sup> There are several reasons for that. It helps organizations set goals, measure performance, and organize the work of a company in order to make their operations more sustainable. A sustainability report communicate an organization's impacts – positive or negative – on

<sup>12</sup> T. Notteboom, W. Winkelmanns, *Stakeholder Relations Management in ports: dealing with the interplay of forces among stakeholders in a changing competitive environment*, IAME 2002, Maritime Economics: setting the foundations for port and shipping policies, Panama City, 2002.

<sup>13</sup> L. Henesey, T. Notteboom, P. Davidsson, *Agent-based simulation of stakeholders relations: An approach to sustainable port and terminal management*, Proceedings of the International Association of Maritime Economists Annual Conference, Busan, Korea, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.globalreporting.org/information/about-gri/Pages/default.aspx>

the environment, society and the economy.<sup>15</sup> Even if a company acts in a sustainable way, it does not mean that the strategy and indicators are being published in a form of the report.

The layout of a report is precisely given by GRI. Standard disclosures are divided into two main groups. The first – general standard disclosure – contains some basic information that should be provided e.g. strategy, organizational profile, identified material aspects, stakeholders engagement, governance etc. Second group – specific standard disclosures – includes precise indicators that characterise the activity of an organization in three categories: economic, environmental and social during the reported period. The principles and standard disclosures can be applied to organisations and companies from different sectors and branches. GRI created also the Aspects and Specific Standard Disclosures, that can be applied for particular sectors, e.g. for airports.<sup>16</sup> In 2017 there have not been provided any specific aspects for seaports yet.

## 5. SUSTAINABILITY ISSUES IN SEAPORTS

Organizations may choose to use a combination of web and paper-based reports or use only one medium. The Internet plays a very important role in contemporary sustainability reporting practices. Larger ports tend to have higher levels of sustainability communication. Even if port authorities do not publish an official report, they often use their websites to inform about their activities in the environmental or social fields.<sup>17</sup>

Table 1 provides information about the way of presenting sustainability strategy chosen by analysed seaports. The biggest European seaports were selected for this analyse. Most of them decided to prepare a sustainability report and publish it on their website. Table 1 also includes the main Polish ports. The only Polish port that decided to prepare a CSR report is Gdansk. Neither Port of Gdynia Authority nor Szczecin and Swinoujscie Seaports Authority have prepared a sustainable/CSR report yet. Both port authorities intend to develop sustainable objectives in the

<sup>15</sup> *Reporting Principles and Standard Disclosures, G4 Sustainability Guidelines*, GRI, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> *Reporting Principles and Standard Disclosures, G4 Sustainability Guidelines*, GRI, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> S. Santos, L. Rodrigues, M. Branco, *Online Sustainability communication practices of European seaports*, Journal of Cleaner Production, No 112, 2016.

future and have been already involved in such actions however they have not created a coherent report informing and measuring CSR achievements. They only inform on their websites and other social media about their social responsible activity.

Table 1. The way of presenting sustainability strategy by several European seaports.

No.	Name of a port	CSR/Sustainability Report	Information about sustainability operations on a website
1.	Rotterdam	Yes	Yes
2.	Hamburg	Yes	Yes
3.	Antwerp	Yes	Yes
4.	Bremen-Bremerhaven	Yes	Yes
5.	Gothenburg	Yes	Yes
6.	Szczecin and Swinoujscie	No	Yes
7.	Gdansk	Yes	Yes
8.	Gdynia	No	Yes

Source: Own study based on: Review, evaluate, optimise. Sustainability Report 2013/2014, Hamburg Port Authority, 2014; Sustainability Report 2015, Port of Antwerp, 2015; Sustainability Report of Gothenburg Port Authority 2015; Sustainability Report 2015, Bremenports 2015; Bouwen aan een duurzame toekomst. Make it happen, Jaarerslag 2016, Havenbedrijf Rotterdam, 2016; *The Policy of Good Business Practices of CSR in effect at the Port of Gdansk Authority SA*, Port of Gdansk Authority SA, 2016.

Reporting sustainability operations by some big European seaports has been conducted for several years. Table 2 presents information about the first year of the publication of such reports by analysed seaports authorities.

Table 2. The first time sustainability/CSR report was prepared.

No.	Port	Year
1.	Hamburg	2012
2.	Antwerp	2010
3.	Bremen-Bremerhaven	2013
4.	Gothenburg	2012
5.	Gdansk	2016

Source: like in table 1.

West European seaports, which have decided to inform about corporate social responsibility in their operations, prefer using precise GRI reporting principles and standard disclosures rather than ISO 26000 standard. Port authorities intended to measure the achievements rather than only describe the strategy. GRI standards concentrate on identifying the main aspects of sustainability and indices that could measure the company's performance during reporting period (usually two years). These reports focus on past activities. They look back, track and quantify sustainable operations. GRI offers an instruction and guidelines designed as a consolidated framework for reporting performance against different codes and standards for sustainability. It enables to organize the information in a clear layout and make it more accessible and comparable. Such a report is a good source of information for comparative studies. Inside the reports one can find general information (disclosures) about port: organisational profile, strategy, stakeholder engagement, identification of material aspects and boundaries etc. There is also a set of more specific information from organisations.

Preparing a report according to GRI guidelines does not mean that the content is exactly the same for individual organisations. Of course there are required elements. Still, there is a space for indicating port's distinctive character and specific working conditions. It is performed by identifying own material topics on the basis of suggested aspects pointed out by GRI.

One of the first tasks that need to be done while evaluating sustainable operations in an organisation is to identify the core sustainability issues which are the most important. Each port authority had to create their own list of materiality topics. The process of identification is very similar among the analysed port authorities. They had not decided about the importance of sustainability topics by themselves. Stakeholders were involved in that process. Usually a survey was conducted among the main port stakeholders. As a result the reports were prepared by port authorities. However one of the most important parts – the identification of the main sustainability topics - was conducted together with their stakeholders.

In case of each port, the spectrum of questioned stakeholders was very broad. For example in port of Antwerp 60 stakeholders were asked to score the proposed aspects. As a result a relevancy matrix of sustainability topics for a specific port was constructed. It helped choose the essential

topics which were significant for all parties, mainly: external stakeholders, port community and port authority. Only these material topics were taken into account in the report and were precisely evaluated in the body of a report. Reports describe the actions that were taken in relation to these topics and measure the results.

Table 3 presents material sustainability themes which were selected by analysed seaport authorities. In some cases the themes are divided into three dimensions: economic, environmental and social. There were also reports which divided topics into priorities, in such a case the sequence of themes presentation was important. For example the report from port of Rotterdam enumerated altogether 29 topics grouped into three categories. In table 3 only ten, the most relevant topics from the first category are presented.

That is why it is worth comparing the choice of materiality topics. Some themes are more common than others. Employment was the topic that was pointed out as important in all ports. In some cases it was amplified by adding more topics from that area like: fair working conditions, equal opportunities or occupational health and safety. In some cases also education, training and skills development were very important.

All seaports treat environmental issues very seriously. There are issues that are common for every ports like air emissions. However in the reports there were also some topics which were listed only in some of them – maintenance of nautical water depths and sediment management. These topics are especially important for those ports in which accessibility is a matter of major concern. It shows that the choice of the most

Table 3. The most important sustainability topics in selected seaports.

Hamburg	Antwerp	Gothenburg	Bremen and Bremerhaven	Rotterdam
<b>1<sup>st</sup> Priority</b> Stakeholder communication, Sediment management, Energy transition, Allocation of space, <b>2<sup>nd</sup> Priority</b> Prevention of corruption, Availability of infrastructure, Occupational health and safety, Energy efficiency (facilities), Human Rights, Water quality, <b>3<sup>rd</sup> Priority</b> Air quality, Employment, Social commitment.	<b>Economic subjects:</b> Accessibility, Economic impact, Cargo, Indirect economic impact, Investment, Use of the area, <b>Environmental subjects:</b> Biodiversity/Nature, Waste, Emissions to air, Emissions to water, Energy, Nuisance, Environmental quality, Transport, Water consumption, <b>Social subjects:</b> Security, Diversity and equal opportunities, Health and safety at work, Interaction with education, Local communities / Local residents, Employment, Training and education, Commuter traffic.	<b>Financial responsibility:</b> Satisfied customers, Development of the freight hub, A stable economy, Strong business ethics, <b>Environmental Responsibility:</b> Climate, Biodiversity, Air emissions, Efficient use of resources, <b>Social responsibility:</b> Work environment, safety and health, Diversity and equal opportunities, Non-discrimination, Skills development, Reduced exclusion,	<b>Governance:</b> Compliance, Port securing, Sustainable purchasing, <b>Economic performance:</b> Competitiveness and major projects, Economic value and indirect economic impacts, Future-orientated infrastructure and adaptation to climate change, <b>Environmental Compatibility:</b> Use of resources and recycling in port construction and maintenance, Effects of maintaining the water depths, Energy management & climate protection, Efficient land use & biodiversity, Environmentally friendly shipping, <b>Staff and labour Practices:</b> Attractive working conditions, Fair working conditions, Occupational health and safety <b>Social Responsibility:</b> Impacts of the ports of Bremen on the population,	CO <sub>2</sub> emission, Port Safety, Best quality service, Stakeholder communication, New markets development, High growth markets, Digitalisation and cyber security, Efficient and agile organisation, Knowledge and innovations, Employment,

Source: like in table 1

The sustainability themes identified by seaports stakeholders can be compared, closely analysed and used as a benchmark model by other ports.

important topics often depends on the problems that a port has to manage.

There are also topics which were indicated only in one port, for example human rights were pointed out only in port of Hamburg. In West European companies human rights are rarely considered as important mainly because they are regarded as a standard and a right that is taken for granted.

In port of Rotterdam a CSR report is combined with an annual report. It is the best way of presenting sustainable achievements because it integrates port's social and environmental aims with operations' results to the best. Integrated reports are a preferred by GRI form of reporting. It seems that in case of Rotterdam the choice of material subjects reflects more holistic approach to sustainability. A lot of topics have a general meaning and at first do not reveal their connection with environmental or social aspects. In fact, Rotterdam is a good example of combining environmental and economic goals. For example among the most important goals there is one called *new market development*. When studying its content more closely it occurs that these new markets are connected with bio-industry (using natural corps like corn or wheat to product chemicals) or wind energy farms. In case of Rotterdam it is impossible to separate economic and environmental themes. They are a unity.

The list of important subjects placed in the current reports has been expanded comparing to the previous issues and still can be modified in the future. The topics are not fixed, on the contrary they can be extended and adjusted if stakeholders represent such an opinion. The sustainability concerns, methodology of identification the sustainability topics and the range of indicators used for measurement purposes will be evaluating in the future. The approach to verification also changes with time. It is common that the first report conducted by a port authority did not fallow the strict rules of reporting and was not audited by any qualified entities. At present most of analyzed reports have been audited (Hamburg, Antwerp), but there were also reports that has not been reviewed (Gothenburg, Gdansk).

Also ISO 26000 gives support in creating a sustainable strategy in an organization. Among analysed ports only the Port of Gdansk Authority has prepared a report according to that standard. CSR reports prepared according to ISO 26000 are more general and future oriented. It also takes place in case of Port Gdansk Report. The title of the report reads as follows: *The Policy of Good Business Practices of CSR in effect at the Port of Gdansk Authority SA*. It is more about vision of a

port and describing the ways of fulfilling it in the future than measuring past achievements. It explains the rules that an organization wants to obey. Undoubtedly it is the first step towards transparency and measuring and reporting sustainability issues in the future.

The Port of Gdansk is the only Polish port which has presented its sustainability strategy and actions in one cohesive report. The Gdansk Port Authority published its first CSR report in 2016. The main benefits which are expected in applying CSR strategy are as follows:<sup>18</sup>

- increased interest of investors,
- building a positive image of the enterprise,
- increased loyalty of current clients/stakeholders,
- maintaining good relations with the local community and authorities,
- settling permanently in the social environment and winning the favour of its members,
- increased competitiveness
- cost optimization,
- constantly enhancing the company's organisational culture,
- transparency,
- acquiring and retaining the best possible workforce.

The report identifies the main CSR topics which are especially important to the port of Gdansk. The identification of such areas is based on the PN ISO 26000 standard. They are enumerated in the table 4.

Table 4. The most important sustainability themes in Port of Gdansk.

CSR topics in Port of Gdansk
Organisational governance and labour practices
Contracting partners and social development
Environment, protection and monitoring pollution limits
Business ethics

Source: The Policy of Good Business Practices of CSR in effect at the Port of Gdansk Authority SA, Port of Gdansk Authority SA, 2016

The themes are associated with the main CSR issues like transparent and ethical decision-making process in the field of environmental and social responsibility. Such a code of practice can organize and help implement unified procedures and

<sup>18</sup> The Policy of Good Business Practices of CSR in effect at the Port of Gdansk Authority SA, Port of Gdansk Authority SA, 2016.

principles and can be a starting point for reporting port's achievements in that area in the future.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The sustainability development strategy is promoted and supported by many important international institutions and organizations (e.g. UN, EU). That trend will continue to gain its importance in the future. Therefore the implementation of sustainable management approach in companies can be expected to reinforce. It will strengthen its presence also in companies and organizations from shipping and seaport sector.

The attitude and actions undertaken by European ports are varied. Some port authorities and port-related companies have already been engaged in social and environmental matters for many years. More than 50 % of European port authorities have a formal CSR strategy. This paper analyses 5 European port authorities which are strongly involved in adopting CSR strategy among 54 others. There are examples of perfect understanding and realisation the sustainability idea: the concept is not only a trendy addition to port activity but it is incorporated into its core operations. Some ports have been implementing the idea to include sustainable aspects into core activity instead of treating it as an obstacle and cost-making part of additional actions. However there are also seaports where CSR strategy mainly means providing support and assistance to local charities or performing single actions which aim at improving an organization's image.

The strategy, actions and indicators of ports that have prepared sustainability reports can be analysed and, what is more, used in a benchmarking process against other players. Dealing with environmental and social challenges in a pro-active and responsible way can be a competitive advantage towards other ports.

For majority of Polish ports preparing a formal CSR strategy is a new challenge. Many new initiatives which have been taken in Polish ports for a last few years prove that they are interested in changing management approach toward sustainability concepts and reporting. The best example of that is the first publication of CSR report by Gdansk Port Authority in 2016.

For Polish ports, analysing the important topics that have been already identified in West-European ports can be useful for understanding the process of selecting material issues and measuring

sustainability better. Polish ports can act in a similar way when identifying these topics. Involvement of stakeholders in that process is a key element. It is worth remembering that there is no set of identical topics which suit the needs of each port. They represent the same areas however some of them are suited for specific problems which occur in a port. What is more, stakeholders from individual ports identify the material topics differently and give them different priority. This research can help seaport authority's managers create a sustainability strategy. It also draws attention to the role and joins responsibility of stakeholders in that process.

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