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According to Van der Plas, the Port Authority, once founded by the municipality to manage the port of Rotterdam, has a wealth of knowledge in-house.

The port manager earns several million euros through advisory work, cross-border training, the sale of digital products ("for example computer programs to plan the arrival and departure of ships") and also the exploitation of ports in faraway places. In the coming years the company wants to expand its international activities and that amount can be much higher.

„ It's not just about the money. It is about creating business opportunities, "says Van der Plas, because in the wake of the consultants, companies from the port of Rotterdam are joining them to expand their activities in emerging economies. „ And that is in the interest of Rotterdam. If those companies are doing well, then we are doing well. "

Boisterous

To clarify the reasons for this, he makes a speech about the changing world economy. The big growth is no longer in Rotterdam, but in Asia, South America and Africa. There, prosperity and trade are booming and new ports are emerging. Rotterdam, the world's top 10 port, offers services to help with the construction. "How we have developed our port and recently constructed the Second Maasvlakte impresses, but an even better example is Sohar."

The port of Sohar in Oman © Shutterstock

Here, in the Gulf state of Oman, a modern port has been created from scratch with the help of Rotterdam. This sister from Rotterdam has been in existence for fifteen years. "During that period, throughput has grown from 4 million tonnes per year to 64 million tonnes." There are refineries, steel mills, container terminals and chemical plants that exchange raw materials just like in Rotterdam. "These are also companies from Rotterdam, such as Vale and Steinweg." "And Rotterdam institutions such as the Shipping and Transport College, the DCMR environmental service and the Rotterdam-Rijnmond safety region have settled."

The Port Authority went a little further in Oman than consultancy work.

Rotterdam is a 50 percent shareholder in the port of Sohar.

Play along

The Brazilian Pecém is fast becoming a second Sohar. The port of Rotterdam has now taken an interest in this for 75 million euros. In addition to bringing money to the table and helping Rotterdam companies to conquer new markets, Van der Plas believes it is also about playing a role in the world. "That is how we are at the new trade flows."

The port of Pecém in Brazil © HBR

The view over the cruise terminal, the bustle on the Nieuwe Maas and the activity in the city speak to the imagination.

René van der Plas

Sometimes the Rotterdam consultants approach a port themselves.

"Because we see potential." Van der Plas mentions north-west India, where maritime activity is important and the people of Rotterdam have been advising the 48 ports of the Gujarat Maritime Board since 2017. Sometimes it is the local authorities who call on the help of Rotterdam to push up their harbor in the speed of the nations. That happens around five to ten times a

year. ,, They come to the name of Rotterdam. They would like to use the knowledge and skills and also the Rotterdam logo. "

After that first contact, a visit to Rotterdam usually follows. Van der Plas' office in the World Port Center, the tower of the Port Authority on the Wilhelminapier, is a permanent stop on guided tours for foreign guests. " The view over the cruise terminal, the bustle on the Nieuwe Maas and the bustle in the city appeal to the imagination." "Most of the time the visitors have already had a round on the Maasvlakte. For example, we are building a port in the Netherlands, the message is on the new land in the North Sea, where the world's largest ships dock under the world's highest container cranes. "That makes an impression."

The next step is to sign a memorandum of understanding, a declaration of intent, in which the visitors and representatives of the Port Authority agree to see if they can help each other. "Nothing more, nothing less."

That's how it started two years ago with the port of Buenos Aires. No matter how free the appointment at the time, the signing ceremony was special. It happened on a spring afternoon aboard the Nieuwe Maze, the Port Authority's representative vessel. King Willem-Alexander was there, Queen Máxima and the Argentinian president Mauricio Macri and his wife Juliana Awada.

On board the Nieuwe Maze, diplomats, under the watchful eye of King Willem-Alexander and Queen Máxima, put their signature under partnerships. © ANP

For a while it was quiet after that ceremony, but in the meantime the Rotterdam consultants were working. Last autumn the Argentinian government presented the ambitious expansion plans for Buenos Aires. According to the transport minister, doubling container throughput is crucial for the development of Argentina, which is in danger of falling economically in South America. Criticism of the mega plan always receives the same response from the Buenos Aires port leader. "It is a good plan because Rotterdam has helped."

If they run off with our brand, we will stop by to say that we think someone is going too far.

René van der Plas

Van der Plas acknowledges that the Rotterdam logo gives plans status - approved by Rotterdam. He does not want to say how big the Rotterdam contribution to the Argentinian port design is. The consultancy work is confidential. What Rotterdam has devised exactly for Buenos Aires is a secret and it is therefore impossible to check whether that is in line with the expansion plans that are now being presented. ,, We will keep an eye on it. If they hit the mark with our brand, we will stop by to say that we think someone is going too far. "" According to him, that is not the case in Argentina.

The head of the Port Authority's foreign activities acknowledges that there are risks associated with marketing the Rotterdam brand. Moral and financial, because it is Dutch port capital that goes to an adventure far away. ,, The importance of Rotterdam is always paramount. Before we get started in a country, we look at the economic situation, at political stability, the environment and of course things like child labor and corruption. "" But it remains a risk, he says. "You may come across your logo on a stage where you would rather not see it."

Allowance

According to Van der Plas, that risk does not outweigh the benefits. Rotterdam is not the only world port that goes to the farmer, he says. Competitors Antwerp and Hamburg are also doing it. And then there is China. The country is rapidly expanding its influence on ports outside the People's Republic. Van der Plas calls the Greek Piraeus, which is now in Chinese hands and where the Chinese have complete control. „ We don't do it like China. They immediately take a bag of money with them. “

According to him, it is about “social value”. “We are a landlord model.” „ That is how it is organized in Rotterdam itself. That is typical of Rotterdam. The model has proven its success. “

The international marketing of the Rotterdam brand has pros and cons, says harbor economist Bart Kuipers. He himself is “very positive” about it, but cites the disadvantage that it can distract from the duties of the port manager in Rotterdam. He also says he has never seen a cost-benefit analysis that makes clear what it actually delivers.

The economist at Erasmus University does suspect that Rotterdam will benefit. In the wake of the Rotterdam advisers, he believes Dutch business is gaining ground in emerging countries. Kuipers even expects foreign activities to benefit the port of Rotterdam. “Partnerships with other ports can accelerate developments such as the energy transition.”

According to Kuipers, the name Rotterdam is worth gold. She owes that reputation to the time she was the largest port in the world and the construction of Maasvlakte. „ Nowhere do they build quays as well as here and they also have so much knowledge. That is not only at the Port Authority, but also at TU Delft and, for example, the dredging companies Van Oord and Boskalis. “” That should not be underestimated, he says. Kuipers refers to the construction of the Jade Weser Port at Wilhelmshaven in Germany, which became a disaster “because no Dutch were involved”. He is also not in favor of a wait-and-see attitude of Rotterdam towards the Chinese desire of expansion.