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Clusters facilitate business and research networks and open business model

Creating a shared vision and strategy on maritime research

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Today I am here wearing two hats, as chairman of a large shipbuilding company, Fincantieri, and as chairman of the Federazione del Mare, the Italian Maritime Cluster, to speak about the need to create a common vision and strategy on maritime research.

In both situations, the need expressed by the major part of participants turns into the key word to share, to share, to share.

In fact, this is exactly the approach that Fincantieri, together with other European shipbuilding companies, is carrying out since many years through the participation to several European initiatives in the RDI field and, at the same time, this is also the vision that the Italian cluster is pursuing.

As emphasised in the Green Paper, clusters are fundamental to promote the competitiveness of entire sectors. Moreover, exploiting the potential of clustering is relevant in sectors with complex supply chains involving a large number of enterprises, and this is the case of shipbuilding.

In the modern ship construction, where more than 75% of the vessel, as we all know, is produced by a wide network of systems, equipment and service providers, best practices can be spread around only by connecting these actors and developing them into networks of maritime excellence, and this is particularly important to compete in a highly globalised market.

There are many areas in which the enhancement of cooperation would be of a great benefit in order to share knowledge, joint research and innovation, pool education and training; in other words in order to create and develop a common strategy in accordance with the holistic approach which inspires European guidelines.

Improving Research, Development and Innovation is, as well, one of the key pillars of the LeaderSHIP2015 initiative, where it is emphasized that Europe's competitive advantage has been, and will continue to be, based upon its ability to build the most advanced vessels.

For this reason, the key task for European shipyards is “to move everyday one step ahead the technological hedge”.

Starting from this principle, LeaderSHIP2015 has stimulated the targeting of legitimate support to innovation with a discipline responsive to the needs of our sector. The first, tangible result of this work plan has been obtained with the adoption of a framework that offers a support to innovation at a level of 20%.

Germany, France, Spain and more recently the Netherlands and Italy, have already adopted, although in different periods, this state aid framework and set up the National Schemes and other member states are on the verge of adjusting similar schemes.

These new rules are tailored to meet the specific needs of the shipbuilding industry - where one out of four deliveries is based on a completely new and innovative design or prototype and, I want to underline, prototypes of high tech, advanced vessels.

We all know that in our sector the innovation is not recognized by ship-owners with a premium price. Moreover, in the case of a prototype of an advanced ship, the risks inherent not only in the design phase, but also in the construction process, are considerably high.

Well, in this context the mentioned innovation scheme has demonstrated to be a real incentive, permitting to carry out project innovations that would not have been possible in absence of this support.

For this reason we consider very important that this initiative continues to be supported also in the future. At the moment it has been prolonged only until 31 December 2008, as it represents an effective strategic move to sustain the competitiveness of all our sector, versus the more and more aggressive Far Eastern competition.

This initiative occurs in parallel with the safeguard of the Intellectual Property Rights (IPR); to protect IPR means to defend the cultural heritage of Europe and all the progresses obtained in centuries of history in the field of sciences, style, workmanship and so on. We are all conscious that the future of the European industry – particularly in shipbuilding - hinges on its technological leadership, but we are as much aware that now it is fundamental to ensure the protection and the valorisation of the knowledge and experience assembled till now and its future progress.

In this respect the European Commission is working with shipyards, under the CESA coordination. First of all it is fundamental to exploit existing instruments and try to ensure that all our competitors play by the rules.

With this purpose in mind the Commission launched a year long study on this issue in December 2006. In order to get an accurate understanding of the matter, also reviewing the mechanisms by which European shipbuilding know-how is channelled - I have to say legally and not so legally - to competitors.

Furthermore, the Commission intends to include this issue in the shipbuilding Dialogue with China as well as in relevant multilateral and bilateral trade negotiations.

Moving from the institutional level to the industrial level, I would like to underline what happened in this sector in the last period.

A concrete and positive example of a cluster concept implementation involving shipyards and their network of suppliers is the EU supported research project InterSHIP, whose results are highly satisfactory.

InterSHIP, in this sense, represents a breakthrough in the research and development area. Never before it happened that shipbuilders and their technological suppliers joined all together to reach a common objective:

- about 60 technology suppliers from 13 different EU countries belonging to the different realities of the maritime community;
- more than 250 researchers and technicians directly involved, people who are on the front line of the process;
- 7 Partners representing almost all the passenger ships builders in the world.

A real network working together, sharing its experience and knowledge in the field of the shipbuilding process, in order to increase significantly the competitiveness of European cruise and ferry shipbuilding, developing better products and achieving a drastic reduction in building and development cost as well as in time-to-market.

This is the revolution of the process innovation.

Under Euroyards, a further step in this implementation of the concept of the Maritime Cluster is the research project proposal called BESST, that envisages a stronger connection with suppliers and the different actors of the maritime field aiming at developing new concepts and new technologies for the ship product.

This is the revolution of the product innovation.

It is a responsibility of all the partners, coming from the industry and research institutes as well as from National Governments and EU institutions, to address these innovation challenges into a common effort.

Within the frame of the Technology Platform WATERBORNE, the purpose is not only to create a common vision of the future, but also to maintain a strong competitive position of the maritime sector as a whole, through a comprehensive RDI strategy.

In this context, the Italian Maritime Cluster is now involved into the launch of the Italian Technology Platform with the aim of networking all the maritime industry players (shipyards, shipping companies, classification societies, equipment suppliers, ...) within the national research system.

The goal is to boost collaboration, to develop synergies with other neighbouring industrial sectors, to integrate the research system inside the industrial processes in order to speed up the technological innovation, to promote the education and training of the human capital.

In 2000, the European Union leaders, meeting in Lisbon to respond to new challenges of globalization, set a new and ambitious target for the Union: to become, by 2010, “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion”.

Many years have elapsed and it is rather doubtful that this goal will be achieved, in general terms. But as far as shipbuilding and the maritime world as a whole are concerned, I think that we are on the right track to reinforce our technical edge, through the right perception of our role in joining forces to reach the same goal: a technologically advanced, ecologically friendly and economically attractive transport mode.