

Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal

Upgrading Durban's port

Durban's port is not on the main world trade routes and a comparison with rapidly growing ports, particularly in the East, cannot be made. "We will not become a Singapore. We will probably not become a Hong Kong. Not in our lifetime anyway," says the planning and development manager of the National Port Authority (formerly Portnet), Noel Ducray, who spoke recently at a meeting of the KwaZulu-Natal branch of the South African Institute of Electrical Engineers.

However, the location of Durban does give the port a competitive advantage as the regional hub for southern Africa. In the port's favour is its location in the economic region of Durban and Pietermaritzburg, its proximity to Johannesburg and the good road and rail routes that link the port with other parts of the region.

These advantages have boosted the Durban port, particularly when combined with the international trend towards containerisation, which has become increasingly popular because the standard units can be moved on and off vessels quickly. In national terms, Durban is particularly significant in terms of container traffic with about 65% of the container traffic - approximately 90 000 containers a month - currently handled by the Durban port. Cape Town ranks second with 20%. Last year the Durban port recorded an increase of 18% in container traffic. The trend has continued this year, with record levels of traffic being registered in Durban's container terminals in July. With the months of September, October and November, usually proving to be the busiest, the port could well achieve record figures again this year. In international terms, Durban ranks within the top 50 in terms of container traffic and is the busiest container terminal in the southern hemisphere.

Such factors have contributed to National Port Authority's decision to invest R1.34 billion in an upgrade of Durban's container port. It is a development that, Ducray says, confirms the port of Durban's status as the premier container handling port in Africa. Since it was commissioned in 1977 - when the last major port development in Durban took place - the container port has seen a healthy growth in containers. Since 1994 an average rate of growth of 8% has been recorded. Although statistics do show Durban to be in line with the international decline in the average number of vessels, this, in fact, does not contradict the growth statistics. Instead, Ducray says that this is due bigger vessels and bigger parcel sizes in the form of containers.

Containerisation has an impact on the port in various ways. First, the turnaround time of vessels is lessened. Vessels used to spend up to three weeks in the port, but container vessels can spend only 24 hours. "Vessels carrying motor vehicles spend as little as eight hours," according to Ducray. These operations demand much land side space to store cargo prior to the arrival of a vessel. In addition, space is required for cargo to be prepared before the arrival of a vessel.

The three-pronged Port of Durban Development 2005 is concerned with the provision of additional equipment and infrastructure improvements to provide more container handling capacity to meet existing and future demand, as well as to consolidate general cargo handling facilities. It will be implemented over four years. The first component of the project involves the exhausting of the

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container handling capacity of the existing Durban container terminal. As a result the container terminal's capacity will increase from 1.3 million 20-foot equivalent units to 1.6 million a year. The second component will be concerned with the conversion of Pier 1 for container handling. On the Point side of the harbour one kilometre of new deepwater berths - the equivalent of six city blocks - is going to be constructed. The quay wall structure will be slightly more than 18 metres high, or the equivalent of a six story high building. Provision has been made for a new passenger terminal is to be integrated into the waterfront development that is already underway.

There are not many opportunities for the expansion of the Durban harbour, partly due to the narrow areas of land surrounding the port that belong to harbour authorities. While some ports reclaim the ocean, Ducray says that this is not feasible for Durban because the coastline is steep and the level of wave energy is high. As a result, authorities are instead considering putting additional facilities into the bay. Further development proposals are under consideration and will be subject to environmental impact assessments. Other research, particularly into the need for additional facilities, is also required.

In the extensive upgrade, the port planning officials have focused particularly on what happens around the port and the compatibility of activities that occur in the port and in neighbouring areas. Says Ducray: "In Durban the port and the city are right on top of each other." Specific locations near the port are increasingly becoming tourism hubs and have to be taken into account in any development, says Ducray.

A "very good" relationship has been developed between the port officials and those from the city of Durban. However, Ducray says that this has not always been the case. "The relationship between the port and the city going back a number of years was never healthy," he says, adding that both sides displayed the attitude that "this is ours and that is yours". In addition, "there were days when more than necessary communication was conducted through the media".

In terms of future developments that would enhance the upgrade of the port, Ducray says that if the port is going to develop, the rail system must also develop.

A significantly longer-term possibility involves the development of a whole new port south of Durban in the vicinity of the airport. Ducray says that a new layout that was good for cargo planning could be developed. It would be suitably placed with access to the N2 freeway and railway systems, next to Toyota, the refineries and Mondi, as well as near to a large labour source in Umlazi. "It is a vision for us."

Total cargo handled by South African ports in 2000

Durban	20%
Richards Bay	57%
Saldanha Bay	14%
Cape Town	5%
Port Elizabeth	4%

Deep sea cargo imported through South African ports in 2000

Durban	52%
Richards Bay	18%
Cape Town	14%

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