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Small and Regional Ports? An Ongoing Collective Inquiry

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Small and regional ports are often understood in relation to scale, defined by what they lack compared to large, globally connected hubs in terms of volume, capacity, or visibility. This way of thinking, however, tends to overlook how these ports actually function on the ground. Rather than operating primarily as nodes in global logistics chains, small ports are usually deeply entangled with urban form, local economies, ecological systems, and municipal governance. They bring together flows of goods, labour, sediments, and environmental impacts, while at the same time anchoring everyday practices, cultural identities, and place-based economic activities.

To ground these reflections, the blog draws on discussions from a public event organized by PortCityFutures under its [Small Ports, Big Challenges](#) thematic track, held on [17 October 2025](#). The meeting brought together researchers and practitioners to explore how small and regional ports operate within deltas, river basins, and port clusters—not as secondary infrastructures, but as places where questions of sustainability, governance, spatial transformation, and regional connectivity become especially tangible.

A deceptively simple question helped open up the discussion: *which port comes to mind when you think of a “small port”?* When this question was posed to the group, the answers immediately dispersed across geography and scale. Ports such as Vlissingen, Scheveningen, Tallinn, and ports in Croatia were added to the shared Miro board map. This diversity already destabilises the assumption that a “small port” refers to a coherent or easily classifiable category. While assumptions are helpful for the discourse, science, and policies require “operational definitions.” Without a quantitative threshold (e.g., gross tonnage or TEU capacity), “smallness” remains a subjective descriptor, hindering comparative statistical analysis. What these examples share is not size in absolute terms, but their situatedness within specific urban, regional, and territorial contexts.

What is a small port in your opinion? from your prior experiences or any understanding?



Figure 1: Screenshots of the shared Miro board (source: authors).

This observation led to a recurring insight voiced during the discussion: *“Maybe it’s more about how integrated the port is with the city and territory, than the size?”* From a spatial and governance perspective, smallness emerges as a relational and contextual condition shaped by the intensity of port–city interactions, degrees of institutional embedding, and proximity to everyday urban life. In this sense, small ports are not simply reduced versions of large ones, but infrastructures whose relevance lies in their role in mediating relationships between water, the city, the hinterland, and larger ports within the same network.

These differences are not merely semantic. A municipal river port, for example, may handle modest cargo volumes while playing a critical role in regional construction logistics, sediment management, or flood resilience. Elsewhere, fishing harbours or mixed-use ports operate at the intersection of cultural heritage, seasonal economies, and environmental regulation. In such contexts, “smallness” frequently coincides with multifunctionality and heightened spatial sensitivity rather than marginality.

The growing attention to small and regional ports reflects broader transformations in infrastructure systems. Energy transition logistics, climate adaptation strategies, and shifting supply chains increasingly depend on territorially embedded nodes that mediate local and regional flows. At the same time, small ports are often expected to take on expanded roles without corresponding adjustments in governance arrangements or planning frameworks. This emerging tension highlights the need for closer analytical attention to the conditions under which small ports are expected to operate.

Learning from Comparative Perspectives

Looking across contexts helps reveal shared patterns. Drawing on ideas from delta urbanism and watershed-based infrastructural thinking, comparison here is less about identifying models to replicate and more about tracing how similar challenges play out in different settings. In some cases, small ports are the "kidneys" of the river system, as their water quality reflects upstream activity. Issues such as sediment management, infrastructural lock-in, and fragmented governance recur across many small ports, yet their spatial expression and institutional handling remain strongly place-dependent.

Throughout the discussion, participants repeatedly stressed that "*small*" should not be equated with *marginal*. Small ports often engage more directly with their surrounding territories, enabling flexible and locally adapted networks to function. The analytical challenge lies in conceptualising this territorial embeddedness in ways that allow comparison while remaining contextual variation.

Defining Small Ports Through Criteria, Not Categories

A key point of convergence was the proposal to shift from definitions toward criteria. Instead of defining what a small port is, the group suggested identifying the conditions that shape how ports operate and are experienced. These were clustered under four interrelated dimensions: spatial, operational, governance, and visibility.

Spatial characteristics featured prominently. Notes captured formulations such as "*fragmented, non-contiguous port areas along the river,*" a "*smaller footprint, low degree of specialization, integrated in the urban fabric,*" or ports "*embedded in local governance structures such as municipalities or local energy suppliers.*" Other remarks pointed to "*ports located in remote locations,*" the "*size of the locks,*" and the "*cultural identity of the city.*" Taken together, these observations suggest that spatial smallness is less about surface area and more about fragmentation, proximity, and co-existence. Small ports are often interwoven with housing, public space, and ecological systems, which helps explain why conflicts around land use, noise, pollution, or port expansion tend to be more visible and politically charged.

What makes a port 'small'?

- Instead of defining small ports, let's define the criteria. Add sticky notes for: spatial / operational / governance / visibility aspects.

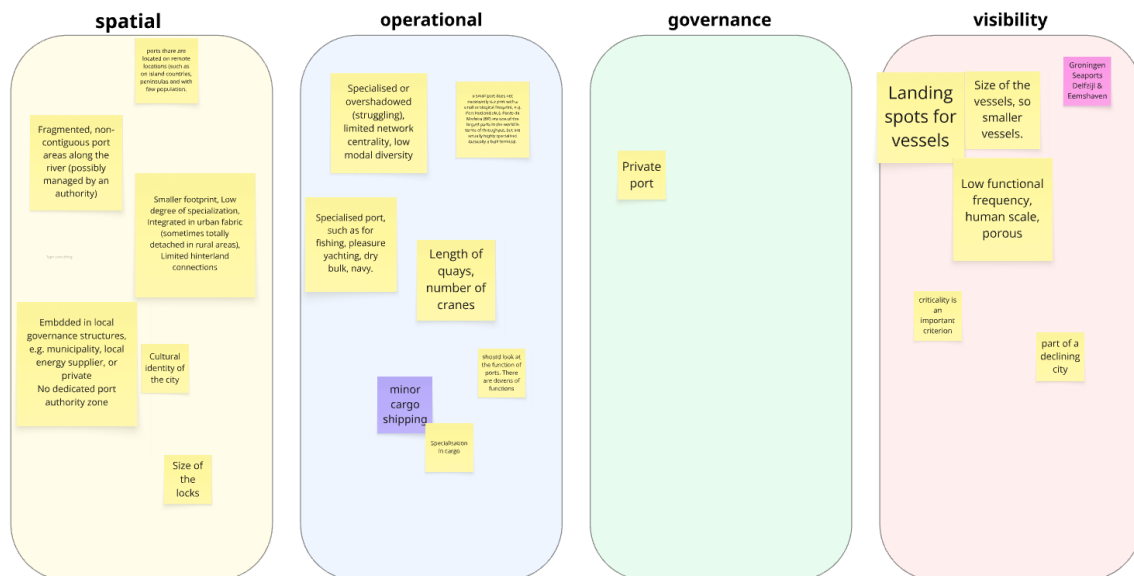


Figure 2: Screenshots of the shared Miro board (source: authors).

Operational characteristics further complicated throughput-based definitions. Notes included “specialised or overshadowed,” “limited network centrality,” “minor cargo shipping,” and references to tangible indicators such as “length of quays” and “number of cranes.” At the same time, participants emphasised that “there are dozens of port functions,” and explicitly asked: “Do they have to be commercial?” These remarks underline the functional diversity of many small ports. A fishing port, a marina, and a small dry bulk terminal may all be “small” in volume, yet their economic, cultural, and ecological roles differ profoundly.

Governance emerged as both a defining feature and a constraint. Notes such as “private port” and “embedded in municipal structures” highlighted the absence of autonomous port authorities in many small ports. A governance pyramid exercise placed ports such as Scheveningen at the local level, Nijmegen at the regional level, and Rotterdam at the national level, making visible that smallness is partly a governance position. As one diagram indicated, “municipalities have more control over small ports.” At the same time, small ports remain affected by national logistics strategies and by larger port systems, revealing asymmetric yet mutually dependent relationships.

Visibility and perception formed a further dimension. Small ports were described as “landing spots for vessels,” operating at a “human scale,” with “low functional frequency” and a “porous” character. At the same time, notes such as “criticality is an important criterion” and “part of a declining city” pointed to how small ports are entangled with broader socio-economic trajectories. Their accessibility makes them more legible to citizens, but also more exposed to scrutiny and contestation.

Port Networks, Territorial Interdependencies, and Urban Life

Small and large ports were consistently understood as part of interdependent networks rather than isolated entities. Diagrams mapped how “*small ports support larger ports and collaborate with them,*” often through outsourcing, buffering, or handling niche functions. At the same time, participants noted that “*large ports can overshadow the municipality,*” producing negative effects such as land-use conflicts, pollution, and noise, alongside positive contributions to the workforce and cultural exchange.

How do small and large ports interact?

- Mention examples with specific interdependencies. Show through the arrow how they interact?

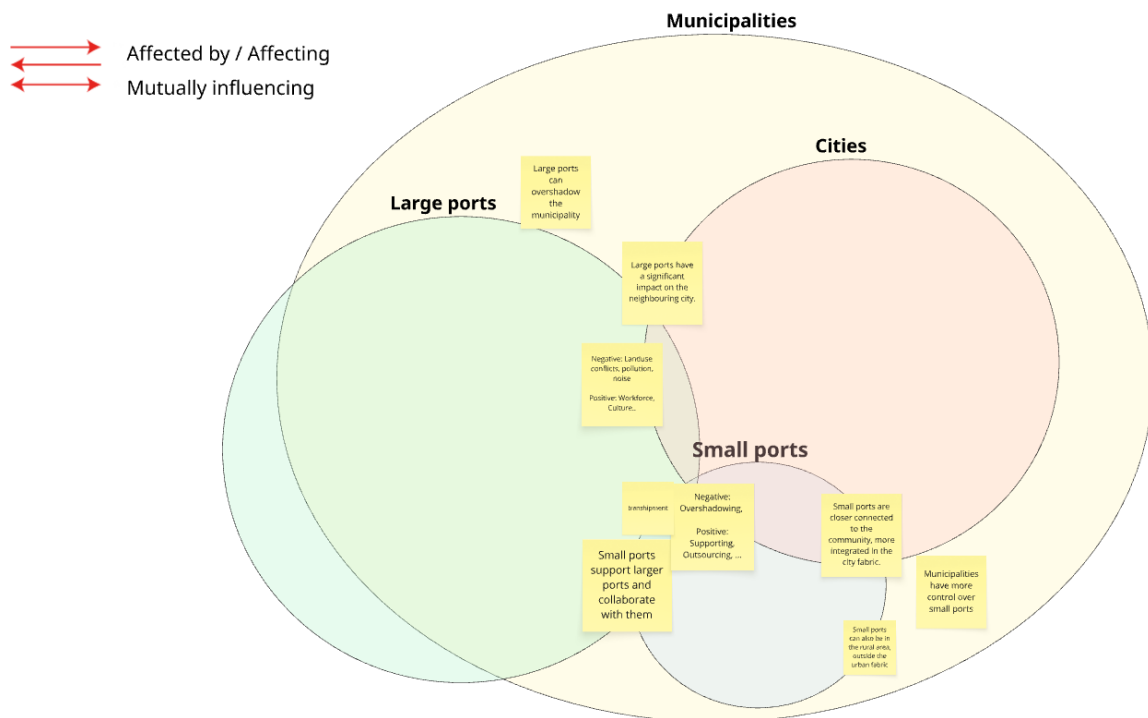


Figure 3: Screenshots of the shared Miro board (source: authors).

These observations reinforce the idea that small ports function as relational infrastructures. They are structurally interdependent, sometimes absorbing or translating the impacts of larger port systems into local realities. Importantly, several notes emphasised that “*small ports are more closely connected to the community, more integrated in the city fabric,*” which can provide forms of influence and visibility unavailable to larger, more autonomous port authorities.

Spatial, Environmental, and Governance Dimensions of Transition

Because small ports are often located close to housing, public space, and waterfronts, their impacts are immediate and visible. Illustrated notes referred to “*selling houses for port extension,*” “*water and air pollution,*” and everyday encounters with port infrastructure such as berths, quay walls, storage areas, and industrial activities. This

proximity foregrounds the lived dimension of small ports and raises questions about how citizens experience port-related transformations in daily life.

In discussions on transition, small ports were identified as potential sites for “*local renewable energy hubs*,” “*integration in urban energy loops*,” and “*flexibility for pilot and demonstration projects*.” At the same time, significant challenges were acknowledged, including “*fragmented responsibilities*,” “*limited long-term funding capacity*,” “*skills gaps*,” and “*limited data infrastructure*.” These lists underline a central tension. Small ports may be agile and adaptable, but they are also resource-constrained. Their capacity to act as transition laboratories depends heavily on institutional support and cross-scalar coordination.

Toward a Research Agenda on Small and Regional Ports

Across all discussions and visual material, one insight persists: smallness is not a matter of scale, but of relation. Small ports are defined by their integration with cities, territories, governance structures, and everyday life. They are porous, multifunctional, and often undervalued, not because they matter less, but because they operate differently.

Seen this way, small and regional ports are not peripheral. They are diagnostic spaces where the tensions between logistics, ecology, governance, and society become visible and therefore researchable. Understanding these spaces more fully requires moving beyond scale-based hierarchies and engaging with small ports as critical sites through which broader spatial and infrastructural transitions are negotiated.

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