Port data project gathers steam as 13 new ports sign up

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UNCTAD’s port data project is gathering steam, with 13 new ports signing on in November 2016. This brings the total to 42 participating ports from Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe.

Better data analysis leads to better performance. And in the case of -- the gateway for more than 80% of the raw materials, food, electronics and similar goods that we trade -- improved performance lowers trade costs, meaning families spend less at the supermarket and businesses compete better in the global economy.

"For ports to work better, managers need to benchmark their performance on a wide range of indicators," the project's manager, Mark Assaf, said on Wednesday.

"But there's a lack of reliable data for port managers to use," he added.

Most port data is aggregated at country -- not individual port -- level, and with the exception of containers, few global standards exist.

"Port managers want to know that they can trust the data, and that they're comparing apples to apples," Mr. Assaf said.

"This is why from day one we've made sure the ports in the project agree on the indicators, the units of measurement and the methodology," he said, adding that UNCTAD verifies the data and ensures it remains confidential.

The project, which started in 2013, now covers 23 indicators on financial stability, labour productivity and operational efficiency. The customized assessment -- called a scorecard -- looks at indicators ranging from revenue generated per employee, to average ship waiting times, to tonnage handled per hectare of land.

One port's scorecard, for example, showed that its handling rates are competitive for containers but not for dry-bulk. For another port, it revealed that labour costs are competitive, but that this is due more to lower wages than higher productivity.

"The type of detailed performance analysis the scorecard allows is extremely helpful for honing in
on the weaker links in our operations, and coming up with better strategies," said Hector Miole, assistant general manager for operations at the Philippine Ports Authority.

"As an island nation, we manage hundreds of ports, and not all provide the same data, so the project is helping us harmonize information too," he added.

The ports' scorecards, which currently assess data from 2010–2015, will be updated annually.

UNCTAD has been helping ports improve their management since 1996, working with some 200 ports in 29 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

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