

B. Huybrechts: "Investment Fund Essential for Maritime Innovation"

Interview, Scheepvaart

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Bart Huybrechts, former manager Maritime Campus Antwerp © ProMedia

Bart Huybrechts, economist and former managing director of Maritime Campus Antwerp, was, as a partner at venture capital fund Ninepointfive, a driving force behind maritime innovation. In an interview with Flows, he argues for a sector-specific investment fund to make shipping more sustainable.

Shipping carries over 80% of world trade but, with CO2 emissions of more than one billion tons per year—3% of the global total—it is an ecological bottleneck. "The challenge is immense," says Huybrechts. "By 2050, more than 2 trillion dollars in ships and 2 trillion dollars in port infrastructure must be replaced by climate-neutral alternatives."

Technologies around clean fuels are crucial, but according to the Maersk Mc-Kinney Møller Center for Zero Carbon Shipping, only about half are market-ready. "These innovations require huge investments, which are harder to scale than purely digital solutions," Huybrechts says. "Traditional fund investors drop out, as unfamiliar means unloved—especially in today's turbulent geopolitical context."

Strict shipping standards, such as the International Maritime Organization's (IMO) target to reduce CO2 emissions by 40% by 2030, and the costs of the European Emissions Trading System (ETS), drive up the cost of fossil-based solutions and create more financial room for clean alternatives. "The challenge is to pay that higher bill," Huybrechts explains. "It slows down investment plans. Geopolitical tensions make investors even more hesitant to commit to sustainable shipping."

Investment Fund as a Driver

Huybrechts, who shaped the Tidal Fund at Antwerp-based venture capitalist Ninepointfive, sees a sector-specific investment fund as the solution. "Maritime innovation requires heavy investment in hardware and infrastructure, such as more efficient ships or alternative fuels." Here lies a fundamental difference with the traditional ecosystem of digital companies that develop apps and further digitize businesses. "In the maritime industry, start-ups and scale-ups alone cannot manage the scale of the international market. Large players such as Cargill, Maersk, or CMB.Tech are needed to share knowledge and bring innovations to the market," says Huybrechts.

Without the Three C's, the Maritime Sector Falls Behind

Successful maritime innovation, as his experience as managing director of Antwerp Maritime Campus shows, relies on three interwoven pillars. “There is a need for a Campus for R&D; with test facilities and labs, a strong Community to connect top maritime companies, knowledge institutions, and new entrepreneurs, and a Capital Fund to accelerate essential new technologies. Without these three C's, the maritime sector will fall behind,” Huybrechts warns

Conditions for Success

A successful maritime investment fund applies strict investment requirements. It must fit within European rules such as the DNSH (do no significant harm) principles, which exclude negative environmental impact. Innovations must be scalable, from the testing phase to broad application. Often, a mix of public subsidies and private investments is needed to spread risks. “Only then do sustainable projects become attractive,” he says.

Even within existing maritime funds, only 10–20% goes to hardware innovations

Still, reality is stubborn. Funds like Tidal Fund and the US-based Zero Wake Fund cannot raise the necessary capital in the current investment climate, due to the global brake on risk investments, the dominance of digital and AI, and fear of hardware investments in ‘new’ sectors such as maritime. “Even within existing maritime funds, only 10–20% goes to hardware innovations,” says Huybrechts. “That must change to achieve net zero by 2050.”

Bright Spots and Opportunities

Despite the challenges, there are success stories. Funds like Motion Ventures in Singapore and TMV in the US focus on niches such as smart ports, sustainable fuels, and cybersecurity for ships. Huybrechts: “A maritime investment fund must choose focus and involve strong industrial partners.” The EU Innovation Fund, with 40 billion euros available until 2030, offers opportunities, but requires seamless coordination with private capital. “That coupling of public with private funds is essential to really get funds like Tidal off the ground.”

The economic opportunities are enormous. According to the EU Blue Economy Report, the blue economy already generated 263 billion euros in added value in 2023, with growth potential toward 1.4 trillion euros in sustainable segments. “It's a powerful story, but industry, financial, and public investors must work together to make it happen,” says Huybrechts.

Collaboration as the Key

He advocates for close cooperation between governments, port authorities, and public investors—SFPIM and PMV in Belgium—with private investors to set up a fund with European and global focus. “By linking experts in shipping and finance, start-ups can reach the market faster.”

According to Huybrechts, European shipping must now live up to its historical tradition. “With 40% of the world fleet in European hands, business has a unique position to make shipping more sustainable. This is a historic opportunity. A maritime ecosystem that drives innovation creates jobs, strengthens the economy, and builds resilience against geopolitical shocks. But without a strong investment fund for necessary new technologies, it will remain just ambition,” concludes Huybrechts.



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