

A deep-water port less than 300 nautical miles from the north of Mozambique, Longoni offers the capacity to serve the country's emerging oil and gas sector as well as providing a base for trans-shipment in the Indian Ocean. Mayotte Channel Gateway Chairwoman **Ida Nel** describes its advantages to Omar Ben Yedder

Longoni Port: Ideally situated to service Mozambique's oil and gas sector

Ida Nel arrived in Mayotte in 1979. The island, as she recalls, only had three cars back then. She had left South Africa with her husband and then youngest child to go on a long sailing trip to discover the East coast of Africa and its islands. They moored in Mayotte and she has been there ever since.

Little did she know that 40 years later she'd be at the helm of Mayotte Channel Gateway (MCG), a company operating the country's commercial port, overseeing 40% growth over the past five years in terms of traffic and cargo that it handles. MCG is halfway through a 15 year lease and hopes to negotiate another eight-year extension.

The port, nestled between Madagascar and the East coast of Africa is less than 300 nautical miles from the north of Mozambique. With the advent of the oil and gas developments that are about to take place in the country following the massive gas finds, Nel is confident that the Port of Longoni, as it is officially known, offers the ideal location through which to service the oil and gas sector in Mozambique, both on and off-shore, especially as the north of the country currently lacks the infrastructure to receive and handle such a big undertaking.

The port's main client today is the international shipping group CMA-CGM, which principally uses the port for trans-shipment activities, that is to say as a hub to receive cargo in

bulk before redistributing these goods to neighbouring countries in the vicinity – Madagascar, Comoros as well as Kenya and Mozambique.

The growth in traffic (60%) and cargo (40%) has come largely from trans-shipment but as Nel mentions in the following interview, 7% of the growth can be

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attributed to a growth in local demand also. The port's capacity, she explains, has been transformed from extensive works and also the addition of cranes and other port-related machinery.

Mayotte is actually a French overseas territory. As such it follows French law and has to adhere to European standards and regulation, something which Nel says adds a level of comfort to international shipping companies and also multinationals such as those operating in the oil and gas sector.

The island also has a first-class hospital with modern facilities, which again provides peace of mind from companies operating there. Given that other ports on the East Coast and neighbouring islands are congested, and its natural deep port facilities within a lagoon, she feels they are perfectly placed to service the sub-region and support these high growth industries.

What do you see as the USP of the port? And how are you positioning yourselves?

We are effectively a French Island, so we adhere to all the European standards and we are only about 300 nautical miles from the East Coast of Africa. Within our port, we've got three mobile harbour cranes that can lift up to 124 tonnes, and we're going to bring in another crane of 250 tonnes to be able to handle heavier so we are very well positioned [to handle] the cargo needs for the region. Our

geographic location close to Mombasa in Kenya and Mozambique, from Nacala to Maputo, makes us an interesting destination from which to service the sub-region.

What is important we've got a 14 metre draft so a ship can come in out, as well as the fact we're situated in a lagoon, which protects from swell you may have elsewhere. So, we are blessed by nature and have many things going for us to be used as trans-shipment harbour. We're currently working with one major shipping company, CMA CGM, which uses us for trans-shipment. All the containers come from the Middle East to here, and from here they are re-dispatched into the region.

Are you targeting a specific sector such as the oil and gas sector in Mozambique, which we know is being developed at a rapid pace and is looking at starting production at the back end of this year or early next year? Are you targeting specific sectors or are you just predicting a rise in traffic in general and a rise in trade in general which will give your port extra growth?

We are well positioned to help service the oil and gas sector as well as those large companies that need a base for trans-shipment in the Indian Ocean. On the other side of Madagascar and in Mauritius, the ports are all saturated and have harbours that are right open to the sea. We offer a calmer harbour especially during

periods of bad weather and because we have some spare capacity we will offer quicker turnaround times.

You say that you've seen traffic growth of 60% and container growth of just under 40% over the past five to six years. What do you attribute this growth to and in what sectors of activity?

We invested significantly in the port's infrastructure – four gantry cranes, warehousing etc – and as a result we've managed to attract new clients, like I mentioned. But we have spare capacity to absorb more demand and new client.

Going back to the traffic growth and the container growth, has it been mostly organic in terms of servicing the East African coast or from a rise in local demand?

We've seen 40% growth, of which 7% can be attributable to growth in servicing the local market. So the rest yes has been external. But not only the East African coast, we also service Madagascar, the Comoros – all the neighbouring countries.

With regards to the oil and gas sector in particular, do you see yourself developing other activities other than trans-shipment? How will the growth or the on-boarding of gas in Mozambique, what opportunity do you see there? How do you see it impacting the work that you're doing?

As they develop this sector, for the next

four to five years they will be rapidly developing the infrastructure there. So they will be bringing in equipment, materials and other goods to develop the industry and the infrastructure. We see ourselves as a natural port through which to service this, especially as they are lacking the ports infrastructure there to reception and service large vessels. So we see we can be of great help, in terms of marshalling the cargo and providing a solution on their doorstep.

You're saying that we have port congestion in places like Mauritius, and the lack of infrastructure in Mozambique means that they will need other partners through whom to bring their cargo and who can provide port activities such as yours.

The gas projects are in the north of the country. They do have the infrastructure in Nacala and Maputo but they are far from where the developments will take place.

What about your turnaround time? And your competitiveness in terms of costs and port efficiency? How do you rate those?

We do between 16 and 20 moves per hour per crane, so our productivity is very good. The charges are competitive. We've got minor taxes for entering the harbour but these are largely insignificant. What is important to note is that for the trans-shipment part there's no extra custom fee or anything like that.

