
Every evening, millions of people all over the world will settle into their armchairs to watch some TV after a hard day at work. Many will have a snack or something to drink. Most people will not think about the important role that shipping has played and will continue to play in their lives. Every one of us undoubtedly owes a great debt of gratitude to this unsung industry on which the world relies.

Have you ever considered that the TV probably arrived in a containership; the grain that made the bread in that sandwich came in a bulk carrier; the coffee probably came by sea too, and even the electricity powering the TV set and lighting up the room was probably generated using fuel that came in a giant oil tanker.

The truth is that shipping affects us all. No matter where you may be in the world, if you look around you, you are almost certain to see something that either has been or will be transported by sea, whether in the form of raw materials, components or the finished product. Unfortunately, few people have any idea just how much they rely on shipping. For the vast majority, even on island Nations, shipping is out of sight and out of mind but this does a huge disservice to the industry that, quietly and efficiently, day and night, never pausing and never stopping, keeps the world turning and keeps the people of the world fed, clothed, housed and entertained.

The importance of shipping in supporting and sustaining today's global society gives the International Maritime Organization’s (IMO) work a significance that reaches far beyond the industry itself.

International trade has evolved such that almost no nation can be fully self-sufficient. Every country relies, to some degree, on selling what it produces and acquiring what it lacks. Shipping is the only truly cost-effective and sustainable means by which this can be fulfilled. Today, people all over the world rely on ships to transport the commodities, fuel, foodstuffs, goods and products on which we all depend. Maritime transport is the backbone of international trade and the global economy.

According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), around 80% of global trade by volume and over 70% of global trade by value are carried by sea and are handled by ports worldwide. There are nearly 1000 ships registered in Antigua and Barbuda that contribute to this important aspect of International trade making the country one of the top 25 ship registries in the World. Fleets like this one enable the import and export of goods, on the scale necessary to sustain the modern world.

It is a huge credit to the industry that most of this indispensable work is completed safely and without incident. It is difficult to quantify the value of world seaborne trade and the transport cost element as the shelf price of goods varies from product to product, but is ultimately negligible as far as the consumer is concerned.

Shipping is perhaps the most international of all the world's great industries. The ownership and management chain surrounding any particular vessel can embrace many different countries. It is not unusual to find that the owners, operators, shippers, charterers, insurers and the classification society, not to mention the officers and crew, are all of different nationalities and that none of these is from the country whose flag flies at the ship's stern. There is, therefore, a clear logic in favor of a framework of international standards to regulate shipping – standards which can be adopted, accepted, implemented and enforced by all. To successfully achieve this there has to be a common approach, so that ships can ply their trade around the world and that countries receiving foreign-flagged ships can be confident that, in accepting them, they do not place their safety, security and environmental integrity at an unreasonable risk.

The IMO's main task has been to develop and maintain a comprehensive regulatory framework for international shipping. Its mandate was originally limited to safety-related issues but, subsequently, its remit has expanded to embrace environmental considerations, legal matters and technical cooperation. The direct output of the IMO's regulatory work is a comprehensive body of international conventions, supported by literally hundreds of guidelines and recommendations that, between them, govern just about every facet of the shipping industry.

To a considerable extent, shipping's success in improving its safety and environmental record can be attributed to the comprehensive framework of rules, regulations and standards developed over many years by IMO, through international collaboration among its Members. Antigua and Barbuda has been a member of IMO for some 30 years and plays an active part in its work.

This year, we celebrate the World Maritime Day theme: Shipping – Indispensable to the World – as it gives an opportunity for the shipping community to tell its story: the story of an industry that, in terms of efficiency, safety, environmental impact and its contribution to global trade is unmatched by any other transport sector; the story of shipping – which is, truly, indispensable to the world.