

► ILO Sectoral Brief

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COVID-19 and maritime shipping & fishing

The shipping sector carries 90 per cent of global trade and is the main artery of international supply chains. As of mid-April, the volume of global merchandise trade was falling by 13 per cent, and there are estimates of a decline of 32 per cent or more.¹ With 384 sailings cancelled, the first half of 2020 could see a 25 per cent reduction in shipping, with a 10 per cent annual fall in 2020.² The impact of COVID-19 on employment in the shipping sector, with its 2 million seafarers, is therefore substantial. The cruise shipping sector, with 250,000 seafarers, has been particularly badly affected, as certain countries have advised against travel by cruise ship,³ and major cruise companies have suspended operations.⁴

The maritime fishing sector, which employs tens of millions of fishers, is a major supplier of food, and particularly animal protein. Many fishing vessels are unable to leave port and the demand for many seafood products is substantially reduced.⁵

The COVID-19 crisis is affecting the personal safety and health of seafarers and fishers, their conditions of work and their ability to join and leave their vessels, with a consequent impact on their capacity to perform their key role in ensuring transport by sea, serving passengers and harvesting seafood.



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1 WTO: Remarks by DG Azevedo, 8 April 2020.

2 Bowler, T.: [Seafarers in limbo as coronavirus hits shipping](#), BBC News 16 April 2020.

3 United States Department of State: [Cruise ship passengers](#), updated 8 March 2020.

4 CLIA: [CLIA announces voluntary suspension in U.S. cruise operations](#), Cruise Lines International Association, 13 March 2020

5 FAO: [How is COVID-19 affecting the fisheries and aquaculture food systems](#), Rome, 10 April 2020.

▶ 1. The impact of COVID-19

In addition to potentially reduced employment opportunities, seafarers face:

- ▶ considerable problems joining and leaving their ships in port (each month around 100,000 seafarers are involved in crew changes);
- ▶ restrictions on travel, and quarantine restrictions for international seafarers, even after medical screening;
- ▶ the prohibition, or at least delays, in being allowed to return home;
- ▶ restrictions on being able to go ashore for medical treatment;
- ▶ restrictions on the delivery to ships of essential medical supplies, fuel, water, spare parts and provisions, including in cases where ships are refused entry into ports;
- ▶ lack of access to masks, overalls and other personal protective equipment (PPE), often due to restrictions on deliveries;
- ▶ the extension of tours of duty beyond the duration specified in employment agreements or national laws, leading to fatigue;
- ▶ problems in undertaking training or refresher courses for certification of competency;
- ▶ expiration of competency and medical certificates, which are of limited duration;
- ▶ increased stress, isolation and social pressures for seafarers and their families; and
- ▶ restrictions on access to port-based welfare services.

These and other issues related to COVID-19 have also affected shipping operations, for example by preventing specialized staff, including surveyors and technicians, from performing their duties, such as inspecting vessel safety and repairing equipment. There is a need for improved harmonization among port States,

and even between ports in the same country, on the applicable rules and restrictions. There is also concern over insufficient monitoring of visitors to ships (such as pilots and dockworkers) to ensure they are equipped with the necessary PPE to limit the spread of infection. In addition, there have been delays in resolving cases of abandonment, and concern that such cases may increase if shipowners lose the financial ability to support their fleet operations

Cruise ships, which may employ hundreds of seafarers, have been quarantined off the coast of port States after passengers have tested positive for the virus⁶ and face bans on entry into port in several countries.⁷ Seafarers on cruise ships face particular problems. Following the disembarkation of passengers, cruise ships have been ordered to anchorage or remote berths, with seafarers confined on board and denied medical assistance or repatriation. Many of these seafarers remain at sea. Although it has been possible to treat mild cases on board, seafarers with more serious infections have faced restriction on their access to medical care ashore.

Many fishers and fishing vessel owners face similar problems, including the inability to make crew changes, the expiry of medical and competency certificates, the lack of the necessary PPE, restrictions on joining and leaving vessels and on travel, insufficient medical care on board vessels and lack of access to shoreside medical care. The inability to change crews, leading to extended periods on board, is particularly problematic in the case of fishers due to the physical and fatiguing nature of their work.⁸

6 Berti, A: [The impact of Covid-19 on the global shipping sector: Part 2, silver linings](#), Ship Technology, 2 April 2020.

7 Doherty, B., and Phillips, D.: [Coronavirus: Cruise passengers stranded as countries turn them away](#), The Guardian, 16 March 2020.

8 EUROPECHE/COGECA/ETF: [Social partners in the fisheries sector urgently calls for special regulatory measures and actions to secure the free circulation of fishermen](#), Letter to V. Veits, Director DG MARE, 27 March 2020.

► 2. Responses by constituents and partners

There has been considerable activity at all levels by ILO constituents and other partners to address the impact of COVID-19 on maritime shipping and fishing, including by the Officers of the Special Tripartite Committee of the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006, as amended (the MLC, 2006), as indicated below.

Responses by shipowners' and seafarers' organizations

Shipowners and seafarers have been working together through social dialogue to address COVID-19 issues efficiently and effectively.

The International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) and the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), in a [Joint open letter to United Nations agencies from the global maritime transport industry](#), have emphasized the vital importance for all governments of keeping maritime trade moving by continuing to allow commercial ships access to ports worldwide and facilitating the movement and rapid changeover of ships' crews. They have made an urgent call for this to be added to the agenda of appropriate high-level meetings, and for national authorities to engage immediately with national shipowners' associations and seafarers' unions.

The ICS and ITF, working together with other stakeholders, as well as United Nations specialized agencies, are seeking to facilitate the transfer and transit of seafarers, for example through documentation identifying their essential role.

With respect to cruise ships, the ICS and ITF have jointly urged the ILO to:

- make all governments aware of the importance of treating cruise ship workers with equality and dignity and respecting their human rights, in accordance with the principles of the MLC, 2006, and other appropriate ILO instruments;
- emphasize the importance of States permitting/facilitating the access of seafarers to consular assistance;
- call on States to ensure the safe repatriation of the thousands of seafarers on cruise ships; and
- for those seafarers who remain behind, call on member States to keep the ships efficient and safe, including through the provision of all necessary equipment, food and assistance, and unhindered access to onshore medical care.

International shipowners' organizations

The ICS has produced several publications addressing the crisis, including *Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance for ship operators for the protection of the health of seafarers*,⁹ which aims to help shipping companies follow the advice provided by the World Health Organization (WHO), International Maritime Organization (IMO) and ILO, as well as the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). It has also organized a "Coronavirus strategy group", which includes the participation of seafarers' representative organizations. The group meets online each week to identify key issues, exchange information and make recommendations.

International workers' organizations

The ITF has issued a general call for action with demands in five key areas:¹⁰

- protecting workers vital to the COVID-19 response;
- putting health and safety first;
- providing income protection for all workers;
- government-led stimulus measures to keep the economy going;
- maintaining sustainable supply chains.

The ITF has also highlighted the situation faced by seafarers, including those of specific groups, such as seafarers on cruise ships. It has provided information and issued [advice](#) on the virus for workers and assisted its members, ships' crews and individual seafarers with questions and problems related to COVID-19. It has established a dedicated webpage on COVID-19, including a map showing the effect of Covid-19 restrictions on countries and ports around the globe.¹¹

Responses by shipowners' and seafarers' organizations at the national and regional levels

National shipowners' and seafarers' organizations have joined together to raise concerns and propose solutions to COVID-19 issues. For example, the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT), Nautilus International and the

⁹ ICS: [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): Guidance for ship operators for the protection of the health of seafarers](#), Marisec, London, 3 March 2020.

¹⁰ ITF: [Covid-19: ITF global demands for governments and employers](#), 7 April 2020.

¹¹ ITF: [Covid-19: ITF launches global port map for seafarers](#), 7 April 2020.

United Kingdom Chamber of Shipping have made a joint call to the Government and devolved administrations to use all the policy levers at their disposal to protect seafarer jobs and qualifications.¹²

► Responses by regional fishing vessel owners and fishers' organizations

In the fishing sector, the social partners in the European Union have urged the European Commission to adopt special regulatory measures and take action to secure the free circulation of fishers. In their letter, they also draw attention to specific problems related to fishers' health, maximum periods of service and competency certificates.

► Responses by individual shipping enterprises

Individual companies are not only issuing their own guidance to their ships and seafarers, but also helping to share information. For example, the Inchcape Shipping Service has posted "Coronavirus (COVID-19) Port /Country Implications" which, among other issues, tracks the crew change situation in each country.¹³

Government responses

Governments, in their capacity as both flag and port States, have issued circulars and other forms of communication on COVID-19 and the maritime sector,¹⁴ including:

- In China, the Ministries of Transport and of Human Resources and Social Security have addressed the extension of seafarer's employment agreements (SEA) when they expire and the next port of call has adopted prevention and control measures prohibiting crew replacement. They have specified that such extensions should be with the seafarers' written consent, provided that continuous service on board does not exceed 12 months and that the signed supplementary SEAs are registered within one month with the relevant maritime administration.¹⁵
- The Norwegian Maritime Authority, with the agreement of shipowners' and seafarers' organizations, has prepared guidelines for crew changes and for the transport of goods and medicines, including procedures for crew signing

on and off ships, and the necessary documentation for seafarers' and fishers' qualifications, training and medical issues.¹⁶

- The Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore has issued several Port Marine Circulars related to COVID-19. After initially announcing that crew changes were suspended, following feedback from the industry and unions, it has established a prescribed process, taking into account whether the seafarer has served the maximum time on board and no further extension of the employment contract is granted by the flag State; compassionate grounds, such as the death of a family member; or when a seafarer is no longer medically fit to work on board ship.¹⁷
- In the United Kingdom, the Department for Transport, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and Public Health England have published guidance for shipping and seaports on COVID-19,¹⁸ including sections on background, symptoms, what to do with confirmed COVID-19 cases, action for ships and shipping companies, limiting the spread of COVID-19, cleaning and waste, and disembarkation.

Responses by regional organizations

The European Commission has issued *Coronavirus: Guidance on repatriating cruise ship passengers and protecting ship crews*,¹⁹ which includes sanitary advice, recommendations for crew changes, disembarking and repatriation of seafarers and passengers. The guidance refers to other European Union COVID-19 communications, including Communication C(2020) 1897 final on the implementation of Green Lanes. The European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) has also facilitated the exchange of information among Member States and the countries of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA).²⁰

Regional port State control agreements, which seek to harmonize the inspection of vessels in foreign ports for compliance with IMO and ILO Conventions, including the Paris, Tokyo and Indian Ocean Memoranda of Understanding, have shared information and published guidance on ship inspection during the pandemic. The Paris MOU, as a general principle, calls for a pragmatic approach to such matters as allowing the extension of periods of validity of ship and seafarer certificates, including medical certificates.²¹

12 UK Chamber of Shipping: [Government must act to protect shipping jobs](#), 23 March 2020.

13 INCHCAPE: [CORONAVIRUS \(COVID-19\) Port / Country Implications](#).

14 IMO: [Coronavirus pandemic \(COVID-19\)](#), Communications received from Member States

15 Joint Announcement of Ministry of Transport and Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of People's Republic of China on Appropriate Arrangement of Crew Changing for Chinese Ships Engaged in International Voyages during the Outbreak of COVID-19, Announcement No. 16, 12 March 2020.

16 [Norwegian Port Authority: Guidelines regarding change of crew](#), 6 April 2020.

17 [Marine and Port Authority of Singapore: Port Marine Circular No 19 of 2020](#), 27 March 2020.

18 Government of the United Kingdom: [Guidance for shipping and sea ports on coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#), 26 March 2020.

19 European Commission: [Coronavirus: Guidance on repatriating cruise ship passengers and protecting ship crews](#), 8 April 2020.

20 EMSA: [COVID-19 Member States measures: Alphabetical list by country](#).

21 Paris MOU: [Paris MOU guidance regarding the impact of COVID-19](#), 26 March 2020.

Responses by other United Nations specialized agencies

The IMO is facilitating the exchange of information among Member States on its Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) [website](#). IMO Circulars published on the site contain detailed advice for IMO Member States, seafarers and the shipping sector,²² including: information and guidance based on WHO recommendations; advice on the implementation and enforcement of relevant IMO instruments; guidance on the certification of seafarers and fishing vessel personnel; and guidance on unforeseen delays in the delivery of ships.

In April, the IMO Council:

- urged flag and port States to ensure the smooth operation of maritime traffic and the availability of shipping services for world commerce, for the benefit of humanity;
- further urged flag and port States to ensure the welfare of seafarers, in particular the preservation of their right to wages, shore leave, sick leave, access to medical assistance, food supplies and repatriation;
- endorsed a practical and pragmatic approach to repairs, survey and certification and licensing of seafarers;
- encouraged Member States and international organizations to take into consideration the guidance concerning unforeseen delays in the delivery of ships; and;
- further encouraged governments to share best practices in keeping workers in the maritime transport sector safe from COVID-19, while taking into account national circumstances.²³

The WHO has issued [Operational considerations for managing COVID-19 cases/outbreaks on board ships](#) targeted at National Focal Points (NFPs), port health authorities, local, provincial and national health surveillance and response systems, and port and ship operators.

The ILO, IMO and WHO, in accordance with their mandates and capacity to reach labour ministries, maritime administrations and public health authorities, respectively, are working ever more closely together to address the impact of COVID-19 on the shipping and fishing sectors, in line with the call for a coordinated international approach in the sectors.

The IMO and WHO have issued a [Joint statement IMO-WHO on the response to the COVID-19 outbreak](#). The ILO, IMO and WHO have issued a [joint statement](#) on COVID-19 and shipping, with emphasis on medical care for seafarers and the extension of the validity of seafarers' medical certificates²⁴ and of ship sanitation certificates.

Responses by international non-governmental organizations

The International Maritime Health Association (IMHA), on its dedicated website on COVID-19,²⁵ provides guidance for shipping companies on medical assistance for seafarers in ports and testing for COVID-19. It also refers to an interactive COVID-19 assessment tool developed by the Norwegian Centre for Maritime and Diving Medicine (NCMM) and Radio Medico.²⁶

The International Seafarers' Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN) has established a webpage with resources for seafarers, shipowners and ship management companies,²⁷ including a video on *Managing your mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic*.²⁸

22 IMO: [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): Guidance relating to the certification of seafarers and fishing vessel personnel](#), 2 April 2020.

23 IMO: Council, 31st Extraordinary Session, Summary of Decisions, 8 April 2020

24 An issue addressed by both the MLC, 2006, and the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers.

25 IMHA: [Information - COVID-19](#).

26 Norwegian Centre for Maritime and Diving Medicine: [Management of Suspected Covid-19 on Board](#).

27 ISWAN: [Coronavirus \(COVID-29\)](#)

28 ISWAN: [Managing your mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic](#), 25 March 2020.

► 3. ILO tools and responses

The ILO has issued an assessment and a range of policy options to mitigate the impact of the crisis and facilitate a strong and rapid recovery.²⁹ It has developed several guidance and technical notes on the COVID-19 pandemic based on four pillars.

Figure 1: Four key pillars to combat COVID-19 based on international labour standards



Source: based on ILO (2020). [COVID and the world of work: Updated estimates and analysis](#), op. Cit.

The ILO has also issued:

- [New guidelines to help employers support families during COVID-19](#), ILO and UNICEF, 30 March;
- [Social Protection Monitor on COVID-19](#), updated regularly;
- [ILO standards and COVID-19 \(coronavirus\) – FAQ: Key provisions of international labour standards relevant to the evolving COVID-19 outbreak](#), 27 March; and
- ILO Monitor, 2nd Edition: [COVID-19 and the world of work: Updated estimates and analysis](#), 7 April; and
- [Managing conflicts and disasters: Exploring collaboration between employers' and workers' organizations](#), 2020.

²⁹ ILO: [COVID-19 and world of work: Impacts and responses, ILO Monitor 1st Edition](#), 18 March 2020.

The ILO [website](#) provides links to the ILO's work on COVID-19, including regularly updated articles on the impact of the virus on the world of work.

ILO responses specific to the maritime sector

Following formal requests for intervention from the ITF, the ILO has reminded member States of their responsibilities under the MLC, 2006,³⁰ in the context of the virus, including in relation to PPE, medical care on board ship and access to medical care ashore. The Office has responded to questions on the application of the provisions of the MLC, 2006, in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. It has also worked with the Officers of the Special Tripartite Committee (STC) of the MLC, 2006,³¹ on the most appropriate responses to the challenges faced by the maritime sector.

In a [statement on the coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](#), the Officers of the STC draw attention to the severe circumstances created by the virus for the shipping industry and seafarers. They note that daily life in many countries has been heavily restricted, yet societies still need supplies of food, medicine and everyday goods, and factories require materials and logistics to ship their products. This emphasizes the need for robust international supply chains and the critical importance of maritime trade for the global economy. They also call for seafarers to be officially recognized as key workers, granted exemptions from travel restrictions and accorded special consideration so that they can join and leave their ships and return home without impediment, while complying with good practice in infection control.

In response to requests from constituents, and following consultations with the Officers of the STC, the Office issued an [Information note on maritime labour issues and coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#), which provides guidance on addressing the complexities of the current crisis in light of the MLC, 2006, particularly in relation to:

- seafarers' safety and health;
- facilitation of transit and transfer of seafarers and repatriation;
- expiry of seafarers' employment agreements;
- maximum period of service on board and safeguards;

- reduction of minimum manning;
- expiry of medical certificates;
- certification in respect of training and qualifications;
- maritime labour certificate and inspections;
- social protection – seafarers' entitlement to paid sick leave in case of infection or quarantine;
- shore leave and welfare facilities during the pandemic; and
- abandonment of seafarers.

The Note provides links to other information resources and contacts for seafarers' individual claims, which can be used by crews and individual seafarers to obtain information or raise concerns relating to the pandemic.

At the launch of the statement by the STC Officers, the ILO Director-General, Guy Ryder, called on governments "to ensure that, in these challenging times, seafarers are adequately protected from the COVID-19 pandemic, have access to medical care, and can travel to and from their ships, as necessary, in order to continue to play their crucial role".³² The ILO/IMO database on reported incidents of abandonment of seafarers³³ has been updated to request those reporting cases to indicate in the report form whether a case is deemed to be related to COVID-19.

The Office is also examining the pandemic in the context of the application of the Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 (No. 188).³⁴

The ILO's response to the pandemic and its impact on the shipping and fishing sectors is work in progress. The Office will continue to shape its response in consultation with the tripartite constituents and in close cooperation with other United Nations specialized agencies.

³⁰ As at 15 April 2020, the MLC, 2006, had been ratified by 96 member States.

³¹ The STC is the tripartite body established under Article XIII of the MLC, 2006, to keep the working of the Convention under continuous review. The Officers of the STC are appointed by the Governing Body for a period of three years.

³² ILO: [Treat seafarers with "dignity and respect" during COVID-19 crisis](#), News, 31 March 2020.

³³ ILO: Database on reported incidents of abandonment of seafarers

³⁴ The Convention is in force and, as at 13 April 2020, had been ratified by 18 member States.

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