

Commission on Sustainable Development – 15th session
UN Headquarters, New York, USA
10 May 2007

Statement by the International Maritime Organization

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Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates,

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to you today and I do so, on behalf of IMO's Secretary-General, Mr. Efthimios Mitropoulos.

Ladies and gentlemen, the principal function of IMO, a highly specialized agency of the United Nations, is to facilitate the development and implementation of an international regulatory regime for ships and shipping. While its original mandate was to address maritime safety, its role has expanded to embrace many other areas, including maritime security and the protection of the marine environment.

My presentation today will concentrate on two main themes. One is that, in the context of sustainable development, shipping is a very positive force, making a major contribution to global prosperity in a way that has only a relatively small negative impact on the global environment. The second is that, in spite of shipping's excellent environmental credentials – largely the product of internationally-agreed standards developed through IMO – the industry and its regulators are still actively and diligently engaged in efforts to reduce its environmental impact still further, in response to growing world-wide concern about the sustainability of our planet and of the quality of life that we all seek.

More than 90 per cent of global trade – fuel, food, commodities, component parts, finished goods, necessities and luxuries – is carried by sea. Indeed, for the vast majority of cargoes there is simply no viable alternative. Both the poor and the rich benefit from seaborne trade. Moreover, the nature of shipping is such that developing countries can and do become major participants in the industry itself, generating income and creating wealth by so doing. For example, in today's shipping scene, the majority of seafarers are from developing countries whose remittances have a very real impact on poverty reduction at the grass-roots level.

Of necessity, shipping takes place in a particularly precious and vulnerable setting. Not only are the seas and oceans worthy of protection for their own sake, they are also key components in maintaining and preserving human life and the entire planet. As befits a heavy industry operating in such a fragile yet crucial milieu, shipping has developed a clear sense of responsibility with regard to its environmental credentials. As the international regulatory body for the industry, IMO is the focal point for, and the driving force behind, efforts to ensure that shipping becomes greener and cleaner.

Thanks to IMO measures, the amount of oil finding its way into the sea from ships, whether from accidental or operational sources, has diminished to the point where estimates suggest that less than one teaspoon of oil is spilt for every million gallons transported; or, put another way, some 99.9996 per cent of all oil transported by sea is delivered safely and without impact on the marine environment.

IMO's work in this area – which is the focus of World Maritime Day celebrations this year – has covered a remarkably broad canvas. As well as the carriage of oil by sea, it has embraced the transport of hazardous and noxious substances, the discharge of sewage and dumping of garbage at sea, the use of harmful paints and coatings on ships' hulls, the carriage of microscopic aquatic life-forms around the world in ships' ballast water (which can cause immense damage when released in what, to them, are alien local ecosystems) and the dismantling and disposal of ships once their economic lifetime has come to an end. Measures have been developed to deal with these and other possible threats that shipping might pose to the global environment.

But perhaps the most significant threat today concerns atmospheric pollution. And, once again, although the shipping industry is only a small contributor to the total volume of atmospheric emissions – compared to road vehicles, aviation and public utilities such as power stations – IMO continues to work towards further reducing emissions from ship exhausts, through a revision of the treaty that sets the related limits and prohibits the emission of ozone-depleting substances and the installation of any new ship-board system containing such substances. Air pollution and the release of greenhouse gases are interrelated and, in support of our efforts to reduce any environmental impact from shipping operations, the IMO Secretary-General has now proposed a major scientific review of the various proposals currently before the Organization, so that decisions can be taken in the light of the full facts, for it is important to ensure that reducing one source of emission will not increase emissions from other sources.

Although no mandatory instrument has yet been adopted by IMO to cover the emission of greenhouse gases from ships, there is an Assembly resolution on the subject and an IMO study has identified areas in which there is considerable potential for the reduction of CO₂ emissions from ships, through improvements in ship design and engine performance, fuel choices and other measures. Accordingly, in October 2006, IMO adopted a work plan and timetable on the further work needed to achieve the limitation or reduction of CO₂ emissions from international shipping.

And so, to conclude: the huge volume of goods and products transported by sea makes shipping the premier facilitator of world trade and a direct contributor to global economic growth. Without shipping, there would be virtually no international commerce and, as a result, one half of the world would starve, while the other would freeze. Moreover, statistics reveal that shipping is extremely fuel-efficient and the least environmentally-damaging form of commercial transport and, set against land-based industry, it is a comparatively minor contributor, overall, to marine pollution from human activities. Therefore, both the economic and environmental costs of using any form of transport other than shipping, to move more than 90 per cent of global trade, would be unthinkably high.

Nevertheless, while there is an impressive track record of continued environmental awareness, concern, action, response and other relevant successes scored by IMO and the maritime community over many years, we will not rest on our laurels. IMO continues to pursue a long-term strategy to ensure that shipping maintains and improves its contribution to global sustainability, a strategy that involves Governments, the shipping industry, environmental interests, engine manufacturers, oil producers, scientists and all other relevant interests, so that all parameters can be taken into account when the key decisions are made and implemented.

Thank you.
