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## IMO - the place of understanding

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## INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

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### IMO — the place of understanding

IMO is an organisation much misunderstood. But it is a place where a lot of understanding is done. Because IMO is a forum. A place where nations meet to talk, listen and understand. And it works.

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) is a specialised agency of the United Nations dealing with maritime affairs. The aims of IMO are the improvement of maritime safety, the prevention of marine pollution and the facilitation of marine traffic. It works for these aims by co-ordinating the actions of individual countries through the promotion of international conventions, protocols, codes and recommendations.

IMO is a very democratic organisation. Any member state of the United Nations can be a member of IMO and attend any of the main committees. States which are not members may also attend conferences called to adopt conventions. The result of casting the net so wide, and restricting its programme to technical concerns, is that IMO has not become politicised. Unlike other UN bodies, countries do not speak or vote as political groups at IMO. Each adopts the position best suited to its maritime needs, and a compromise is agreed. Voting is rarely undertaken, as IMO wants consensus decisions. And it gets them.

The main misunderstanding of IMO is the idea that it originates legislation and has some executive power. It does not work like that. Individual governments start the ideas running at IMO. IMO provides the place and means for turning the idea into an international agreement. Individual governments then agree to be bound by that agreement, and enforce it themselves through their own legislation.

IMO has 132 member states which meet every two years as the assembly. The assembly is the highest governing body of IMO. It votes the budget, approves the work programme and elects members to the council. The council is the executive organ of IMO. It consists of 32 states which are elected for two-year periods. There are three groups, eight states

from those with the largest interest in providing shipping services, eight states from those with the largest interest in international seaborne trade, and sixteen others who have special interests in maritime transport and whose election to the council will ensure the representation of all major geographic areas. The council meets as required and supervises the work of IMO.

Reporting to the council are four main technical committees which carry out the work of the IMO. The most important is the Maritime Safety Committee (MSC). With its sub-committees, it typically meets for 12

**In the first of a new series on international organisations, John Guy looks at the workings and character of IMO.**

weeks a year and any member state with an interest in the subject under discussion may participate. The MSC has a broad mandate to consider any matter related to maritime safety. It is here that conventions, codes and amendments are thrashed out and agreed upon before submission to the assembly for formal approval.

The Marine Environment Protection Committee (MEPC) considers all matters to do with controlling or preventing pollution from ships. The Technical Co-operation Committee looks after the technical co-operation projects which IMO co-ordinates. The Legal Committee deals with IMO's legal matters. All these are open to all states and typically meet for 2 weeks each year.

A separate Facilitation Committee reports to that council. It is tasked to cut red tape in shipping. Ten permanent sub-committees report to the MSC or MEPC, dealing with topics such as safety of navigation, carriage of dangerous goods, fire protection and other specific areas.

All of these bodies are supported by a secretariat consisting of 288 staff. Of these, about 90 are professional and managerial, the remainder providing services. The organisation is based in London in its own

building. Funding for the agency is raised by contributions from members. The amount paid by each member is based on the tonnage of its merchant fleet. Budget for 1988 was £10.5m (\$18.25m). Liberia, Panama, Japan, USSR and Greece pay 43 per cent of this between them. Until this year IMO has maintained a balanced budget. This year has seen a number of member states defaulting on payment, leading to a cash-flow problem. The cash shortage has led to a cancellation of several meetings planned for 1989.

Separate to the funding of the organisation itself, IMO co-ordinates the Technical Co-operation programme which is funded by voluntary contributions. The aim of the programme is to help nations upgrade maritime administrations and to so enable them to implement IMO conventions. Budget for 1987 was \$14.4m, contributed by the UN, Norway, Sweden and a number of smaller donors. The biggest project is the World Maritime University, based in Malmo in Sweden.

Eleven other countries received direct assistance towards the establishment of maritime training. The assistance takes the form of expert advisers rather than direct funding.

So a building, committees, money, a secretariat and expert advisers, and a good non-political atmosphere. What has this achieved? Twenty-nine conventions and protocols and 56 codes and recommendations. These provide a comprehensive structure for merchant shipping of all types. Acceptance rate is very high, with conventions like SOLAS (Safety of Life at Sea) and Load Line covering 97 per cent of world shipping. And what are its problems? The difficulty which some of the smaller states have in carrying out their obligations, and the difficulties of industry in keeping up with the technical changes, balanced by a growing environmental pressure. And what is IMO doing about the problems? Concentrating on implementing existing standards, assisting countries to implement them, and continuing to provide a place of understanding.