

# **Safe & Sound at Sea: Improving Health, Safety and Wellbeing in Shipping**

## **Workshop Report**

**London, United Kingdom**

**17 September 2026**



## 1. Nature, Purpose and Setting of the Meeting

The *Safe & Sound at Sea – Improving Health, Safety and Wellbeing in Shipping* workshop took place in London on 17 September 2026. It was conceived as a focused meeting between maritime researchers and stakeholders to consider the research needed to improve the health, safety and wellbeing of seafarers, particularly in light of rapid technological, economic, environmental and geopolitical changes affecting maritime work. The premise of the meeting was that considerable research already exists on subjects such as safety, fatigue and human-technology interaction, but that important gaps remain, including emerging issues for which stronger evidence is needed to inform operational decisions, policy and regulation.

The workshop grew out of discussions within Working Group 1, “Maritime Occupations,” of the RethinkBlue COST Action (CA22122). The RethinkBlue COST Action, running from 2023-2027, examines the socio-ecological impacts and opportunities associated with the Blue Economy, while Working Group 1 focuses particularly on the sustainability of maritime occupations and the health, safety and wellbeing of maritime workers. The workshop deliberately brought researchers into conversation with representatives of industry, labour, welfare, professional bodies, international organizations and other maritime stakeholders.

The organizers identified three principal objectives: to strengthen lasting collaboration between researchers and maritime stakeholders; to identify research needs as perceived by stakeholders themselves; and to begin developing joint research projects capable of addressing those needs. The meeting was therefore intended not simply to generate a list of interesting research topics, but to consider how research could become relevant, actionable and capable of contributing to practical change.

The organizers were Birgit Pauksztat of the Nordland Research Institute, Gesa Praetorius of the Swedish National Road and Transport Research Institute (VTI) and Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Jason Zuidema of the International Christian Maritime Association (ICMA), and Khanssa Lagdami of the World Maritime University.



The principal researcher–stakeholder workshop took place on 17 September at ITF House, London. The morning addressed the question “What research is needed?”, while the afternoon turned to “How can research be relevant and actionable?” The day concluded with a visit to the International Maritime Organization (IMO). The workshop was preceded by a seminar on *Contemporary Issues in Seafaring* organized by Birgit Pauksztat and Laura William, as a collaboration between the RethinkBlue COST Action and the CREW/DIG research groups at the University of Greenwich. Researchers returned to the University of Greenwich on 18 September to develop concrete research ideas and possible proposals based on the stakeholder discussions.



The meeting was supported through the RethinkBlue COST Action, funded by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology). The University of Greenwich CREW/DIG research groups and the International Transport Workers' Federation provided meeting facilities and hospitality, while ICMA supported practical arrangements.

## 2. Participants

The workshop on 17 September deliberately assembled people from different parts of the maritime research and practice communities:

- Ben Bailey (The Mission to Seafarers)
- Tom Boddy (International Chamber of Shipping)
- Andy Cook (International Federation of Shipmasters' Associations)
- Helen Devereux (Southampton Solent University)
- Lydia Ferrad (International Transport Workers' Federation)
- Rob Gale (International Maritime Employers' Council)
- Simon Grainge (International Seafarers' Welfare and Assistance Network)
- Garry Hallett (InterManager)
- Katie Higginbottom (ITF Seafarers' Trust)
- Tim Hill (Stella Maris UK)
- Ioannis Katsounis (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens)
- Khanssa Lagdami (World Maritime University)
- Danny McGowan (Nautilus International)
- Mariana Noceti (International Maritime Organization)
- David Patraiko (The Nautical Institute)
- Birgit Pauksztat (Nordland Research Institute)
- Gesa Praetorius (Swedish National Road and Transport Research Institute)
- Hanna Rasmussen (Maritime Research Alliance)
- Çağatay Edgücan Şahin (Ordu University)
- Amit Sharma (Tallinn University of Technology)
- Ana Slišković (University of Zadar)
- Sue Stannard (International Maritime Health Association)
- Olivia Swift (Lloyd's Register Foundation)
- Lijun Tang (University of Plymouth)
- Jason Zuidema (International Christian Maritime Association)

### **3. Opening Question: What Makes Shipping Interesting?**

The stakeholder workshop began not with a catalogue of problems but with a broader question about what participants found interesting about shipping. The discussion highlighted the extraordinary capacity and professionalism of seafarers: relatively small crews operate complex ships, often in unpredictable circumstances, while maintaining the global movement of goods on which economies depend. Participants emphasized the diversity of ships and trades, the multinational and multicultural character of crews, and the considerable problem-solving abilities required aboard ship. Shipping was described as simultaneously highly technological and global while also encompassing operations ranging from exemplary practice to virtually criminal or severely substandard conditions.

This opening discussion also provided an important frame for what followed. Shipping was seen as a particularly revealing microcosm of globalization: it connects economies and peoples, brings people of different nationalities, cultures and religions into unusually close working relationships, and exposes both the benefits and inequalities of the global economy. Participants stressed that seafarers themselves continually find ways of making complicated systems work safely despite unpredictable circumstances. The research discussion therefore needed to avoid treating seafarers simply as the recipients of risks, regulations or technologies. Their professional knowledge, adaptability and agency were themselves important subjects for understanding maritime work.

### **4. Key Challenges and Opportunities for Seafarers' Wellbeing**

The first substantive small-group question asked: What are the key challenges and opportunities for seafarers' wellbeing now and over the next 10-20 years?

A major strand concerned recruitment, retention and the sustainability of seafaring careers. Participants questioned whether headline recruitment numbers adequately describe the health of the workforce. Recruiting cadets is of limited value if large proportions remain at sea for only three to five years and therefore never progress into senior officer positions. Examples from different labour-supply countries illustrated substantial discrepancies between maritime education, access to sea time and eventual employment. Participants cited long waits for berths for many cadets and very large gaps between maritime education enrolment and actual entry into seagoing employment in the Philippines. This raised a deeper research question: what actually attracts people to seafaring, what causes them to leave, and what enables them to build sustainable careers?

A second major concern was the quality of the evidence itself. Participants repeatedly returned to the difficulty of knowing even the size and composition of the global seafaring population. Definitions differ, national statistics are incomplete, and datasets are often held separately by governments, industry bodies, researchers and other organizations. At the same time, seafarers experience considerable "survey fatigue". The challenge is therefore not simply to collect more data but to determine what data are actually needed, standardize important measures where possible, share existing information more effectively and avoid repeatedly asking seafarers the same questions without producing visible change.

The flipcharts reinforced this emphasis on creating a maritime industry in which people would actively want to work. The aspiration was for a safe, secure and fair industry, supported by evidence-based learning and effective regulation rather than simply additional rules.

Grouped thematically, the principal ideas were (with number of mentions):

- **Safety, security and effective regulation (4):** safe and secure employment; enforcement of regulation; closing the gap between regulation and practice; and movement, where justified, from voluntary guidance toward mandatory requirements.
- **Technology, automation and changing competence requirements (3):** autonomous ships; technological development accompanied by smaller crews and higher competence requirements; and the need to build experience before regulatory approaches to Maritime Autonomous Surface Ships become settled.
- **Fair employment and career opportunity (3):** fair wages and employment; internationally recommended wage standards; and ensuring technological and regulatory change opens rather than closes career opportunities.
- **Training and professional development (2):** evidence-based learning and adapting training to changing technological and competence requirements.
- **Seafarer agency and choice (2):** avoiding assumptions that technological developments are inevitable and maintaining a balanced picture of seafaring rather than presenting the occupation as suitable for everyone.
- **Emerging operational environments (2):** Arctic operations and changing search-and-rescue requirements.
- Violence, harassment and decent treatment (1).
- Digital identification and documentation (1).
- Differences in the adoption and implementation of standards (1).

This opening exercise therefore established a theme that continued throughout the day: the research agenda should not begin with technology alone. The workshop notes framed the exercise as putting “people and not technology first”, while acknowledging that maritime transport is nevertheless undergoing major changes through remote operations, shore-based monitoring, autonomous systems, increased interconnectedness and rising skill requirements.

## 5. Suggested foci for research

Across the flipcharts, these concerns expanded into a broad range of suggested research topics (with number of mentions):

- **Recruitment, retention, career progression and attractiveness (9):** retention of qualified seafarers; attraction of young people; career transitions; cadet expectations and access to sea time; turnover; progression into senior roles; job security; workforce changes in labour-supply countries; and defining what a “good” maritime career looks like.
- **Technology, digitalisation, automation and AI (8):** autonomous ships; AI; remote operations; digitalisation; connectivity; surveillance; changing tasks; and the consequences of smaller crews.
- **Training, competence and education (8):** changing competence requirements; continual training; who pays for training; STCW revision; training needs analysis; retraining for technological transitions; career-long learning; and maintaining competence with smaller crews.
- **Geopolitics, conflict and security (8):** conflict zones; seafarers being used as geopolitical pawns; protection of crews; choke points such as Hormuz; sanctions; national security; military implications for merchant shipping; and psychological effects of conflict.

- **Regulation, enforcement and the implementation gap (8):** whether regulation is fit for purpose; discrepancies between rules and actual practice; enforcement; movement from guidelines to mandatory provisions; failure of international governance; onboard barriers to implementation; bureaucracy; and differences in national implementation.
- **Fatigue, workload and working/rest hours (7):** fatigue; workload; hours of work and rest; falsification or adjustment of records; crew levels; reducing workload through technology; and studying performance over an entire voyage rather than at a single point.
- **Mental and physical health (7):** mental health; medical assessment aboard ship; new health risks; resilience; isolation; psychological safety; and better use of health and medical data.
- **Ship and equipment design/human-centred design (6):** defining what produces a safe ship; ship design; equipment; facilities that reflect hierarchy or rank; accommodation and handling of stores; and involving seafarers in design.
- **Fair and decent employment (6):** wages; fair contracts; continuous or stable employment; decent work for seafarers from developing countries; social protection; and reducing employment precarity.
- **Diversity, gender and multicultural crews (6):** gender; women seafarers; multiculturalism; crew composition; inclusivity; and understanding how diversity affects teamwork and safety.
- **Green transition, alternative fuels and climate change (6):** decarbonisation; alternative fuels; health risks associated with new fuels; extreme weather; net-zero transitions; and implications for coastal communities and seafarers' families.
- **Seafarers' voice and participation (5):** research *with* rather than simply *about* seafarers; making seafarers the first voice heard; including them in design and solutions; workshops directly with seafarers; and putting them at the centre of decisions affecting them.
- **Abandonment, non-payment and substandard shipping (5):** abandonment; unpaid wages; unreliable owners; flags and substandard shipping; and conditions aboard shadow-fleet vessels.
- **Shore leave, connectivity and isolation (4):** declining shore leave; onboard connectivity; isolation associated with smaller crews; and the tension between internet access as a welfare benefit and as a mechanism for constant work contact.
- **Criminalisation, organized crime and forced labour (4):** criminalisation of masters and crews; drug-related organized crime; forced labour; and sanctions-related risks.
- **Family and life ashore (3):** family support; the impact of maritime work on fathers and families; and helping prospective seafarers understand both life at sea and transitions ashore.

One particularly important characteristic of this discussion was the degree of interconnection between themes. For instance, the green transition could create new employment and reduce some forms of work while simultaneously introducing unfamiliar health and safety risks from alternative fuels. Connectivity could improve family contact while allowing managers continuous access to crew members. The workshop therefore resisted treating technological or environmental change as intrinsically either beneficial or harmful.

In addition, participants noted some of the challenges regarding the practicalities of conducting research in the maritime industry. Specifically, the discussion highlighted two areas:

- **Data quality, availability and sharing (9):** accurate population figures; definitions of "seafarer"; national statistics; data and research repositories; alignment and comparability of records; transparent data sharing; meaningful survey design; survey fatigue; and creation of centralized research/data resources.

- **Research access and methodology (3):** access to ships; ethnographic research; and longitudinal study of seafarers.

## **5. Next steps**

Taking the insights from the discussions on 17 September as a starting point, the researchers developed a list of potential research topics. These included questions related to the attraction and retention of seafarers to the profession, labour market trends, healthcare, ship design, teamwork, mixed crews, piracy, abandonment and ship recycling. In the next months, each of these topics will be discussed in more depth by a team of researchers, to decide which topics are most relevant and feasible to take forward.

## **Acknowledgement**

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