

FIRST IHO ASSEMBLY TO ELECT SECRETARY-GENERAL AND DIRECTORS

5 Questions to Rafael Ponce Urbina



During the first IHO Assembly taking place from 24 to 28 April 2017 in Monaco, the represented Member States will elect the new Secretary-General and Directors. The nominees present themselves by answering the same 5 questions. This multi-interview is available at www.hydro-international.com/iho-2017. Captain (ret) Rafael Ponce Urbina (Mexico), nominated for Director, answers 5 questions.

Some coastal states are not yet members of the IHO. How do you envisage improving the number of the IHO Member States?

Some coastal states don't see the advantages of being part of the IHO, because they are not well informed. In some cases the national Hydrographic Office is a small component of a larger organisation and doesn't have enough influence. That's why in my position statement I'm proposing to proactively engage and educate higher levels of government about the relevance of hydrography for their economic development. In order to grow their national hydrographic capabilities, the IHO is the best conduit for capacity building, cooperation and guidance among all its members. My commitment is to work with all, and particularly those considered 'smaller HO's' within their administrations to elevate the hydrographic matters to the highest level of government possible, and unlock the hydrographic data potential to the benefit of their national economy and interests, and to build the bridges between well-developed HO's and those that require support to grow.

One of the main objectives of the IHO has, for a number of years, been to foster the hydrographic capabilities of developing countries. How do you envisage continuing and possibly improving the IHO's actions in this field?

Many consider the lack of resources as the main cause for a country's low (or no) hydrographic capabilities. I think the main cause is lack of commitment. While the IHO has been making a great effort in providing capacity building opportunities through its programme, we know there is a lack of funding. Even if there was sufficient funding, that's not the final answer to address the lack of hydrographic capabilities. In some cases we haven't seen enough results because some countries don't assign the staff that will continue developing in the hydrographic field after receiving training; this has many reasons, without blaming anyone in particular. The hydrographic capabilities do not necessarily mean acquiring costly equipment or having a large group of subject matter experts, it could simply be having the staff with the proper expertise to validate hydrographic surveys and products made by others (private industry and other countries) in their waters. Thus, the effort to overcome those challenges must come as a two-prong approach, top down to create the commitment at the right levels of government and bottom up to build the knowledge base within the operational staff. People, not technology, will make the difference, and if elected, I will work in getting people's commitment to fully engage and develop their hydrographic capabilities from the conscience and knowledge perspective first and technology second, ensuring there would be commitment and continuity in their hydrographic programmes.

IHO has established Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) with several other Organisations, Associations and Institutions. In particular, the IHO is a permanent observer of the UNO Assembly. In which way will you coordinate the relations with those entities in order to obtain support in meeting the IHO objectives?

All IHO MoUs and cooperation agreements are essential to achieve IHO objectives. Our approach must start from the UN strategy basis. The IHO objectives need to be aligned and connected with the UN vision and strategy. As a UN observer, the IHO is a consultative and technical body for cooperation and coordination in ocean affairs and marine science activities. For instance, our approach to these matters has to be in harmony with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDG). In this way, we will obtain not only more visibility but also

more relevance and support at both national and international levels. If the IHO goals are aligned with the SDG14 (conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources), we would look at the risk assessment of navigation using the whole stack of information at our disposal, leveraging our relationships and agreements. This would be in line with the IMO e-Navigation initiative and IOC strategy. IHO objectives are not in isolation, and once we make those connections evident, we can expect more recognition and support. We have to be part of the world's ecosystem and not to think we are different and deserve special treatment.

The private industry (PI) participates in oceanographic, hydrographic and cartographic activities with surveys, instruments and software for data analysis and electronic charts production. How would you deal with the PI to optimise its contribution to the IHO?

There is a natural symbiosis between HOs and the PI. The PI also provides training and excellent capacity building programmes, plus their valuable contribution to technical working groups in developing new standards. The PI is a critical component to make the S-100 series of standards a reality. Most of the PI knows they are with us for the long run, as trusted partners; many PIs have former HO employees in their staff, and these are the people that work with our organisation. In that regard, I know (because this is my case) they are committed to fully supporting the organisation. I think it is very important that Member States and the PI understand their interdependence; and among the PI, their mutual cooperation and openness to make HO's lives easier and more efficient in their mission. Because of our new standards and vision to grow our HO's beyond charting and the fast pace of technology development, there are enormous opportunities to grow, and because of my experience and relationships in both the public and private sectors, I would work with our members and the entire PI to exploit our synergies to its maximum potential for our mutual benefit.

Hydrographic data are managed, by the IHO, in a Marine Spatial Data Infrastructure. How do you see their use by the general public beyond their use for ENC's?

A MSDI also includes governance, standards and human relations, but simply put, without hydrography there would not be a MSDI. As HO's, we possess the most important assets to build the foundation of any Marine SDI: the bathymetry and S-57 data. And that is not all; together with hydrographic surveys, we collect a great deal of ancillary data that we use for sounding reduction and seabed analysis, such as sound velocity profiles and CTD casts, sediment classification, tides and currents, that would complement any oceanographic database. Becoming a key player in creating a MSDI is the natural evolution of an HO, from a chart making agency to a true geo-spatial agency. In the 21st century, hydrographic data users are not limited to the mariners (and safety of navigation), but to an entire new universe of marine and maritime activities, from energy management to marine spatial planning to port management and more. The uses and number of hydrographic data users are growing exponentially and our organisation needs to be prepared to address them in a new 'seaeconomics' era. In the not too distant future, the general public will have access to all this data, either through paid services or for free, depending on each country's data sharing policies. And if we, as the national Hydrographic Offices do not evolve, somebody else will do it for us. We must not take the risk of becoming irrelevant; as IHO director, I would work tirelessly in evolving our organisation into the 21st century, fully embracing the geospatial world.

Captain (ret.) **Rafael Ponce** graduated from the Mexican Naval Academy as engineer and professional mariner; Category B and Category A Hydrographer and Master of Science from the University of Southern Mississippi. Voluntary retirement in 2007, working in the private sector in hydrographic matters and participating in IHO HSSC, IRCC and MSDIWG.

