

How Important is Hydrography?

The link between the development of a State and its trade was identified centuries ago. In spite of the efforts of countless projects, the awareness of the importance of charts and maritime safety information to the overall development of some States has been generally unsuccessful. How can this be improved?

The efforts of the IMO, IHO and International Association of Lighthouse Authorities are well known and recognised, but how can anything be achieved when major international funding for purely maritime safety projects is limited. Apart from separate initiatives by the aid agencies of a number of developed States, funding for charting and maritime projects is generally poor. This is illustrated by the fact that both the Marine Electronic Highway in the Malacca and Singapore Straits and the recently approved Western Indian Ocean Marine Highway Development and Coastal and Marine Pollution Prevention Project are both supported mainly by environmental funding.

There is a need for improved maritime information (in the form of nautical charting), reliable aids to navigation and greater compliance with international conventions. Political awareness of these critical needs and national support for capacity building programmes should be funded because of the need to protect life, vessel and cargo and not only to protect the environment as at present.

It cannot be denied that protection of the environment is important and vital to a coastal State, but the need to be proactive in the field of maritime safety to achieve this should be recognised not only by environmental bodies but also by the maritime authorities and international funding agencies. If a coastal State could improve its international maritime trade, its gross domestic product would improve and with this would come overall improvement in all issues of concern to the State and to international shipping. At present, personnel in developing States receive training from various maritime initiatives and projects, yet in many instances there is insufficient administrative infrastructure, authority or equipment for them to put their training to use. In addition, equipment has been supplied and made operative only to find that, after a while, the nearest technical support for that equipment is located an unacceptable distance away.

It is obvious that every project that is considered should stress the vital need for sustainability of both equipment and personnel. This would only be possible if political support from the highest level was given. It has become apparent to many who have tried to improve charting in the developing parts of the world that the importance of hydrography is not fully understood or realised. This issue has been stressed in the past without overwhelming success. The prominence it deserves for its importance to maritime safety and to the general interests of a coastal State is long overdue. It is self-evident that this must be conveyed to the many States in need and, somehow, this issue must be presented in such a way that it becomes obvious to the coastal States that their own interests do not stop at the low water mark.