

IHO Input to the Report of the UN Secretary General on Oceans and Law of the Sea

This contribution is provided in response to your letter dated 19 March 2025 as the input from the International Hydrographic Organization to the report of the UN Secretary General on Oceans and Law of the Sea. It addresses developments and issues relating to ocean affairs and the law of the sea, including the implementation of resolution A/RES/78/69.

Executive Summary

The International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) is the inter-governmental international organization whose principal aim is to ensure that all the world's oceans, seas and navigable waters are properly surveyed and charted. The work is done by bringing together the national agencies responsible for the conduct of hydrographic surveys, the production of nautical charts and related publications, and the distribution of Maritime Safety Information (MSI) in accordance with the requirement set out in the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) and other international regulations. The current membership of the IHO stands at 102 Member States.

Although safety of navigation remains a major driver for the IHO, hydrographic products and services are meant to support all activities associated with the oceans, seas and navigable waters. As every human activity conducted in, on or under the sea depends on knowing the depth and the nature of the seafloor and an understanding of the tides and the currents, hydrography is an essential enabler to the development of the Blue Economy. So far only about 26% of the world's oceans are adequately surveyed. Though all main shipping routes are well charted and the transformation to digital mapping has been successfully undertaken, there is a remaining lack of accurate charts for areas which haven't been of interest for navigation and other marine applications in the past. This has a significant impact on what mankind can do at sea today in a safe, economical, and sustainable manner. It is impeding progress and economic development in many, if not most, coastal States and has a major impact on the effective management, sustainable exploitation, and well-informed governance of the seas and oceans. This situation results notably from the fact that less than two third of the States which have ratified the SOLAS Convention have arrangements in place to provide adequate hydrographic surveying and nautical charting services. In this context, it is important to continue to call upon States, that have not yet done so, to consider becoming IHO Member States, actively contribute to the work of the IHO, and urge all States to work with the IHO to increase the coverage of hydrographic information on a global basis. However, whether a State is an IHO member or not, all coastal States should be encouraged to not only ensure that their seas and coastal areas are properly surveyed and charted but also place increased focus on deep sea surveys. The ultimate intention shall be to make hydrographic information available and accessible to all interested groups of stakeholders beyond shipping.

Through its active technical and capacity building programmes conducted in close liaison with other international organizations, notably the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO-IOC and the International Organization for Marine Aids to Navigation (IALA) the IHO supports the development and improvement of hydrographic and nautical charting standards, products, and services, especially in digital formats. These capabilities contribute directly to safe navigation, informed marine spatial planning, coastal management, and marine protected area management in the deep sea as well as the limitation of and recovery from natural disasters. They also provide a technical basis for the implementation of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

General

1. The International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) is the inter-governmental international organization whose principal aim is to ensure that all the world's oceans, seas and navigable waters are properly surveyed and charted, through the coordinated endeavours of national Hydrographic Offices that also contribute to the promulgation of Maritime Safety Information (MSI). The requirement to provide these services is set out in Regulation 9 of Chapter V of the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) and is therefore an obligation placed on all contracting governments. Regulation 9 requires, among other things that States: “... *ensure that hydrographic surveying is carried out, as far as possible, adequate to the requirements of safe navigation*”. Regulation 4 of Chapter V places an obligation on Contracting Governments to ensure that appropriate navigational warnings are issued as part of the MSI services. The IHO has been hosted by the Government of Monaco since its creation in 1921 and its current membership stands at 102 Member States.

The reference to “navigable waters” does not mean that the IHO is concerned only with safety of navigation. Although supporting safety of navigation is a major priority for all national Hydrographic Offices, their products and services, in some way or another, support all activities that take place on, in or under the sea – preferably with contemporary digital means. This has been highlighted in the current theme for World Hydrography Day of 2025: “Seabed Mapping: Enabling Ocean Action”

2. Hydrography involves measuring the depth of the water (bathymetry), describing the physical features of the seafloor and fixing the position of all the navigational hazards that lie on the seafloor, such as wrecks and rocks. This is done mainly with specialized ships and boats operating echo sounders and sonars, but also using survey aircraft fitted with lasers and the processing of satellite imagery. Hydrography also involves measuring the physical features of the water column such as tide and the currents.

3. Hydrographic information is essential for the safe, efficient, and sustainable conduct of every human activity that takes place in, on or under the sea. Without hydrography, no ship sails; without hydrography, no port is built; without hydrography; no offshore infrastructure is developed; without hydrography, no marine environmental plan is implemented; without hydrography, no shore is defended, no island protected; without hydrography, no search and rescue operation is attempted, without hydrography, no maritime boundary is delimited. Thus, hydrography is inherent to the three dimensions of the sustainable development of the oceans, ensuring that the marine environment is respected and that no adverse economic or social impact is incurred.

4. The activities of the IHO in 2024/2025 which specifically addressed the implementation of resolution A/RES/78/69 concerned four areas: developing standards, guidance, products and services; building capacities; raising awareness on the role of hydrography; and contributing to the promotion of the marine dimension in global agendas.

5. The approved IHO Strategy is designed to foster the IHO vision, mission, and objectives for the years 2021 to 2026. The strategy is focused on three main goals:

1. Evolving the hydrographic support for safety and efficiency of maritime navigation, undergoing profound transformation;
2. Increasing the use of hydrographic data for the benefit of society;
3. Participating actively in international initiatives related to the knowledge and the sustainable use of the Ocean.

Developing standards, guidance, products and services

6. IHO standards and guidelines, intended to assist coastal States in meeting their obligations and requirements, fall under five main themes:

- the global ocean map developed and made digitally available through the GEBCO programme (General Bathymetric Chart of the Oceans) operated jointly by the IHO and the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) of UNESCO.
- the conduct and the assessment of the quality of sea surveys;
- nautical charts, issued on paper or in digital format (Electronic Navigational Charts), which are produced by national Hydrographic Offices to support safe navigation in accordance with the requirements of SOLAS;
- the maritime component of spatial data infrastructures being developed at the national and regional levels, which includes high-resolution bathymetry (depth data), water level and surface currents;

The IHO is maintaining an open standard policy which means that IHO publications are made freely available for download for no costs.

7. The current worldwide coverage of Electronic Navigational Charts is now effectively covering all major shipping routes and approaches to ports for international trade. However, numerous remote areas that are far away from the highly frequented shipping routes are still not sufficiently covered by modern up-to-date nautical chart information. The advent of larger vessels and the need for vessels to travel to new destinations, in particular with regard to the expansion of the cruise industry, are not everywhere supported by adequate surveys and charts.

8. The IHO is also developing and maintaining guidelines to assist stakeholders in implementing the requirement of international instruments such as UNCLOS and SOLAS. An example is the Manual on Technical Aspects of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (TALOS Manual - IHO Publication C-51). The TALOS Manual is maintained jointly by the IHO and the International Association of Geodesy (IAG). Its purpose is to provide guidance in order to ensure maximum international standardization of the technical aspects of UNCLOS.

9. The IHO develops and sets standards and issues guidance which ensure that hydrographic information is available and can be delivered to users through appropriate harmonized and interoperable products and services. The current maintenance of existing standards and the development of new ones are driven by the need to continue to satisfy the SOLAS requirements of enhancing safety of navigation and supporting the implementation of “e-navigation”, which is being led by the UN’s International Maritime Organization (IMO). Both elements require easy access to standardized, high quality digital geospatial information that can support marine spatial management. Accordingly, the IHO continues to work on its S-100 framework to support the creation and maintenance of interoperable maritime data product specifications compliant with the ISO-19100 series of geographic information standards. The IHO member states have started to implement the agreed S-100 implementation roadmap which envisions the digital provision of all relevant marine geoinformation themes under this new paradigm. The foundation for will be laid by the start of the provision of the generation ENC’s (Electronic Navigational Charts) in the new S-101 format from 1st January 2026 onward.

10. Numerous IHO Member States currently engage in significant efforts to establish regular and frequent services utilizing S-100 based datasets with national and regional coverage. Since the S-100 framework and the associated web-based infrastructure is not limited to host data product specifications native to the hydrographic domain, the IHO is proactively supporting the expansion of the S-100 concept to related domains such as maintenance of fixed and floating aids to navigation (IALA), weather and sea ice coverage (WMO), route plan exchange format (IEC), inland electronic charting (IEHG) and oceanography (IOC).

Declaration of maritime limits and boundaries

11. The S-100 series also includes a product specification for maritime limits and boundaries (S-121) and another product specification for Marine Protected Areas (S-122). The purpose of S-121

is to provide UN DOALOS with a suitable format for the exchange of digital vector data pertaining to the maritime boundaries, limits and zones of States to meet their respective UNCLOS deposit obligations. As far as known here, DOALOS is receiving an increasing number of the national declarations of maritime boundaries, limits and zones made by means of the digital product.

Authoritative Dataset on the Limits of Oceans and Seas

12. The IHO's responsible technical body is currently taking action to develop a new Product Specification named Polygonal Demarcations of Global Sea Areas (S-130). The objective is to use the S-130 Product Specification as a dataset model for the subsequent production of the authoritative S-130 Dataset with global coverage of all geographic limits of the oceans and seas as maintained in analogue form by the IHO since 1919 by means of IHO publication S-23.

Global map of Marine Protected Areas

13. The adoption of the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ Agreement) on 19 June 2023 has motivated the IHO to invest into the creation in a global map of Marine Protected Areas (MPA) to come as digital dataset in a specific format (S-122). The geographic coverage will be enriched with metadata contain the specific information on the applying regulations for each of the respective areas. This dataset will be created in collaboration with the private foundation *ProtectedSeas* and will eventually become open source with not limitation for reuse. S-122 also aims assist the process of the increased designation of Marine Protected Areas (thirty by thirty) while helping the shipping industry to take true regard of the constraints placed on such areas in terms of passage and other shipping operations.

Building capacities

14. Capacity building continues to be an important component of the IHO Work Programme. The IHO defines capacity building as the process by which the Organization assesses the status of current arrangements and assists States to achieve sustainable development and improvement in their ability to meet hydrographic, cartographic, and maritime safety obligations with reference to recommendations in UNCLOS, SOLAS, and other international instruments. The scope encompasses all hydrographic needs as it underpins every other activity associated with the sea, including safety of navigation, protection of the marine environment, national infrastructure development, coastal zone management, marine exploration, marine resource exploitation (minerals, fishing, etc.), maritime boundary delimitation, maritime defence and security, and coastal disaster management. The IHO Capacity Building Strategy stipulates that the focus should be on achieving enduring output which will benefit safe navigation, safety of life at sea, protection of the marine environment and economic development, rather than on creating enabling infrastructure per se.

15. The IHO Capacity Building programme is funded from the IHO budget and is supplemented by additional support from Member States. Activities included in the 2024 Capacity Building Programme and those not carried out in the previous two years were conducted for the benefit of Regional Hydrographic Commissions and their members in 2024. The total amount of expenditure in 2024 was 1.125.000,0 Euro.

16. Ongoing financial support is provided by the Nippon Foundation of Japan, the Republic of Korea and by a contribution from the IHO budget with in-kind support from Member States and from industry. The Secretariat is continuing its campaign to find additional donor States and funding organizations. Taking into account the growing demands for IHO CB activities, more funds and contributions are required. For this reason, the IHO representatives continuously engage with external stakeholders such as the United Nations, IMO, IALA, the European Commission, funding agencies, academia and industry in general, with priority for the Caribbean, West Africa and South West Pacific regions.

17. Benefit of the full range of IHO Capacity Building activities is accessible only to IHO Member States.

Promoting the marine dimension in global agendas

18. The IHO Secretariat has continued to contribute directly to the UN Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management (UN-GGIM). At its 14th session in August 2024 the report on the *Implementation and adoption of standards for the global geospatial information community* (Agenda Item 15), was brought to the attention of the Committee by the three Standard Developing Organizations ISO, OGC and IHO Group. This group, being an integral part of the global geospatial information management community, agreed to continue the strong liaison on all levels to further support the UN-GGIM process. In a pre-session side event, the Group of Standard Development Organizations (SDO) conducted a side event which the IHO participated in.

19. The Working Group on Marine Geospatial Information, established by UN-GGIM 7 in 2017, reported to the Committee of Experts for the seventh time. The 2024 report to the Committee of Experts three priority areas for the working group: (a) understanding the impact of the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction; (b) implementation of the Operational Framework for Integrated Marine Geospatial Information Management at the country level; and (c) the integration of terrestrial, maritime, built and cadastral domains. The growing membership of the Working Group and expanding knowledge on the value of marine geospatial information reflects the overall growing engagements and how the oceans unite and connect diverse stakeholders across the full spectrum of the marine domain, including the oceans and seas, coastal zones and deltas, inland water bodies and waterways. The Working Group remains engaged with the global geospatial community and with international and regional organisations including the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) and the Open Geospatial Consortium (OGC).

Ocean bathymetry

20. The General Bathymetric Chart of the Ocean (GEBCO) programme is a joint programme that is executed under the governance of the IHO and the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) of UNESCO. GEBCO is directed by a Guiding Committee made up of representatives from both IHO and IOC and is supported by a Technical Sub-Committee on Ocean Mapping (TSCOM), a Sub-Committee on Undersea Feature Names (SCUFN), a Sub-Committee on Regional Undersea Mapping (SCRUM), a Sub-Committee on Communications, Outreach and Public Engagement (SCOPE) and a Nippon Foundation/GEBCO Training Project Management Committee. SCUFN maintains close liaison with the UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UN-GEGN) and with international or national authorities concerned with the naming of undersea features.

21. Through the work of its organs, GEBCO produces and makes available a range of bathymetric data sets and products, including the GEBCO Gazetteer of Undersea Feature Names; the GEBCO world map; the GEBCO Cookbook; Web Map Services and its lead bathymetric product: a global gridded bathymetric data set.

22. A significant source of data for these products is the IHO Data Centre for Digital Bathymetry (DCDB). One of the primary objectives of the IHO DCDB is to provide an authoritative source of bathymetry for ocean mapping requirements. To achieve this, GEBCO proactively collects, stores and disseminates bathymetric data for the world's oceans. GEBCO has worked towards improving its participation in regional mapping activities and has appointed representatives to participate in selected meetings of Regional Hydrographic Commissions that operate under the umbrella of the IHO. Traditionally, GEBCO has focused on waters deeper than about 200 m; however, it is now actively collecting data in shallow water areas to support activities such as coastal zone management and development, and the mitigation of marine disasters such as storm and tsunami inundation. IHO Member States are encouraged to contribute bathymetric data in shallower coastal areas to support the production of higher resolution gridded data products.

23. A new GEBCO 15 arc-second global grid is regularly published every June. The most current GEBCO grid was produced in cooperation with the Nippon Foundation-GEBCO Seabed 2030 Project. The grid uses as a 'base' Version 1 of the SRTM15+ data set (Olson et al, 2014) - a fusion of land topography with measured and estimated seafloor topography. This base grid is augmented

with the gridded bathymetric data sets developed by the four Seabed 2030 Regional Centres and compiled into a global bathymetric grid at the Seabed 2030 Global Center. Information on how to access the grid and the data sets included can be found on the GEBCO web site: www.gebco.net/data_and_products/gridded_bathymetry_data/. The new GEBCO grid released in June 2024, contains significantly more data, and the overall coverage has increased to approximately 26%. Work continues on making additional datasets available and encouraging the IHO Crowdsourced Bathymetry (CSB) initiative to help increase publicly available bathymetric data. The Seabed 2030 regional and global centres continue to work closely with the CSBWG.

24. The IHO initiated the Crowdsourced Bathymetry Initiative aiming to incorporate, manage and use bathymetric data acquired by other than conventional means for the benefit of all stakeholders interested in knowing the shape and nature of the seafloor and its depths. The IHO has published a guidance document named IHO B-12 “*Crowdsourced Bathymetry Guidance Document*”, which includes a maintained list of Coastal States which positively accept crowd sourced bathymetry activities and the provision of resultant datasets in national waters of jurisdiction: <https://iho.int/en/csbwg>

Empowering women in hydrography

25. The IHO also supports “Empowering Women in Hydrography” initiative as a work item in the Work Programme of the IHO Capacity Building Sub Committee (CBSC). The project seeks to initiate and organize activities which will raise awareness about career opportunities in hydrography and work to increase the number of women in leadership positions. The project includes outreach, education, internships, at-sea experiences, on-the-job training activities and a mentoring programme.

26. As part of its mission to induce “transformative ocean science solutions for sustainable development, connecting people and our ocean”, the UN Ocean Decade has endorsed the Empowering Women in Hydrography project as a United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development action hosted by the World Maritime University’s Empowering Women for the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development Programme. The IHO and World Maritime University consult each other on matters of common interest to both entities with a view of ensuring maximum coordination of their respective work and activities. These activities include, but are not limited to, events, mentorship programs, workshops, and meetings.

Awareness of hydrography and the future

27. Increased IHO involvement in the United Nations initiative on Global Geospatial Information Management (UN-GGIM) and the steady support of the UN’s Decade of Ocean Science for sustainable development indicates that there is a growing acknowledgement and awareness of the relevance and the underpinning contribution that hydrographic information can make in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and, in particular, in support of its Sustainable Development Goal 14 - Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development. Proactive contribution is planned for the forthcoming UN Ocean Conference in Nice, June 2025. The IHO will take this opportunity to promote the vital importance of the digital mapping of the oceans presenting seabed topography as the basic information and to advertise for IHO’s S-100 approach to be potentially applicable to all sorts of marine information including chemistry and biology of the oceans resulting in interoperable datasets to form “the digital twin of the Ocean” and its subset “the digital twin of the navigable waters” – the latter focused on the digital support of all aspects of sea traffic.