

International Maritime Organization (IMO)

[IMO History](#)

[IMO Process](#)

[IMO Structure](#)

IMO History

Since the mid-19th century a number of international treaties were adopted to improve safety at sea, however several countries proposed that a permanent international body should be established to promote maritime safety more effectively. The Convention establishing the IMO was adopted on March 17, 1948, implemented in 1958, and met for the first time in January 1959. In 1982, the name was changed from Intergovernmental Maritime Consultative Organization (IMCO) to IMO.

The IMO is a specialized agency of the United Nations (UN). The purpose of the organization, as noted in Article 1(a) of the Convention, is “to provide machinery for cooperation among Governments in the field of governmental regulation and practices relating to technical matters of all kinds affecting shipping engaged in international trade; to encourage and facilitate the general adoption of the highest practicable standards in matters concerning maritime safety, efficiency of navigation and prevention and control of marine pollution from ships.” The organization is also empowered to deal with administrative and legal matters related to these purposes. The IMO motto sums up its objectives: “Safe, secure and efficient shipping on clean oceans.”

As a major maritime nation, the United States (U.S.) has always been involved with the development of international conventions to protect the safety of life at sea and the marine environment. The U.S. has been a prime force within the IMO since its inception. Over the years, the U.S. has ratified most of IMO's conventions and takes seriously its responsibility to apply these instruments to U.S. vessels engaged in international trade. Similarly, the U.S. also asserts its rights as a Port State to enforce the conventions regulations on non-U.S. ships calling in its ports.

IMO currently has 170 Member States and 3 Associate Members.

For more information, visit the [IMO homepage](#).

IMO Process

The IMO works under UN working protocol, and all meetings are conducted according to a published agenda. All member countries, associate members, and non-governmental organizations may introduce submission (position papers) to the committees and sub-committees for consideration.

Initial work is done in a sub-committee by their own initiative or under recommendation from a committee. The committees dictate the work program for all sub-committees.

Committees and sub-committees can divide the work into working groups, drafting groups, and correspondence groups.

For conventions or protocol, the work is normally done by a committee or sub-committee. The draft instrument is submitted to a conference, to which delegations from all UN member states, including those which may not be IMO members, are invited. The conference adopts a final text, which is submitted to governments for ratification.

Once adopted, an instrument comes into force after fulfilling certain requirements, which always include ratification by a specified number of countries. Implementation of the requirements of a convention is mandatory for countries that are parties to it.

Any amendments to existing IMO conventions adopted by the MSC would enter into force on a predetermined date unless they were objected to by a specific number of states.

For code, resolutions, or recommendations, the work is normally done by a committee or sub-committee. Work performed by a sub-committee is forwarded to its respective committee. The draft instrument is submitted to the IMO Assembly for adoption. Once adopted by the Assembly, the instruments are not binding on a government, but their contents can be very important.

IMO Structure

The IMO is an agency of the UN that specializes in maritime affairs. It is composed of an Assembly, a Council, and five main committees.

Assembly: IMO's governing body is the Assembly, which is made up of all 170 member states and meets once every 2 years, or more often if deemed necessary. The Assembly adopts the budget for the next biennium together with technical resolutions and recommendations prepared by subsidiary bodies during the previous 2 years.

Council: The Council is the executive body of the IMO, and meets annually. It is composed of 40 member states elected by the Assembly for 2-year terms. The members of the Council are composed of 10 members with interest in international shipping service, 10 members with interest in international seaborne trade, and 20 members with interest in maritime transport or navigation. The Council acts as governing body between Assembly sessions, and prepares the budget and work program for the Assembly.

Committees: The IMO has five main committees: The Maritime Safety Committee (MSC), Marine Environment Protection Committee (MEPC), Legal Committee (LC), Technical Cooperation Committee (TC), and Facilitation Committee (FC). Of these, the MSC is the highest technical body of the organization and consists of all member states. The MSC may consider "any matter within the scope of the Organization directly affecting maritime safety." The MSC operates with the assistance of nine sub-committees, one of which is Standards of Training and Watchkeeping (STW). These sub-committees meet annually.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs): Non-governmental international organizations that have the capability to make substantial contributions to the work of the IMO may be granted consultative status by the Council with the approval of the Assembly. Any organization seeking consultative status with IMO has to demonstrate considerable expertise, as well as the capacity to contribute, within its field of competence, to the work of IMO. The organization must also show that it has no means of access to the work of IMO through other organizations already in consultative status and that it is "truly international" in its membership, in that it has a range of members covering a broad geographical scope and, usually, more than one region.

Intergovernmental organizations (IGOs): The IMO may enter into agreements of cooperation with other intergovernmental organizations on matters of common interest with a view to ensuring maximum coordination in respect of such matters. Currently there are 63 intergovernmental organizations that have signed agreements of cooperation with IMO.