



Africa, and the world, need safer seas and shipping

Our oceans are largely ungoverned and unprotected, but long overdue action could improve maritime governance.

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Most of the world's trade is by sea, but this has not made it any easier to achieve safer and environmentally friendly shipping, or good labour standards for all seafarers. The sheer number

of ships on the ocean, the diversity in seafarers and ship owners, and 'seablindness', complicate and marginalise these matters when it comes to policy making and public interest.

Alongside the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal to conserve and use the oceans and marine resources for development, new rules for shipping safety are taking an increasingly environmental focus. For example the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) earlier this year finally agreed on how to halve harmful ship greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

Taking better care of our environment may sound like a truism, but in some cases this is difficult to do. Ships traverse areas in which there is no state or higher authority and no one can claim sovereignty – the High Seas or, rather, Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction, make up 58% of the ocean space.

Most states claim an exclusive economic zone of 200 nautical miles from their coastlines, giving them economic rights to resources in the zone, as well as limited jurisdiction as laid out in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. The area beyond this (the High Seas) is not under the sovereignty of any one state. On board a ship the flag state's laws apply, but overboard, all around and underneath is, effectively, anarchy.

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Until now that is. Diplomats and scientists met at UN headquarters in New York in September 2018 for the first of a series of negotiations. These should, over the next two years, result in a new treaty to protect this ungoverned and largely ungovernable area from exploitation.

The timing of the negotiations is determined by a number of factors. The landmark broadcast of Sir David Attenborough's *Blue Planet II* generated a wave of public interest in the state of the oceans that has reached policy makers. The impact of the plastic 'revolution' on the seas is better understood than ever, and the evidence of its collection in ocean gyres, and in the stomachs of dead sea and bird life, is leading to long overdue action.

Another major driver is the exploitation of marine and seabed resources such as metals, minerals and oil in the High Seas. States and economic actors have a growing interest in benefiting from resources in their exclusive economic zone.

Resources located in the seabed of the High Seas are known as the Common Heritage of Mankind. This means that no one can or should exploit them until such time as we can agree on how to mutually benefit from this common resource.

The free-for-all on the High Seas has harmed and depleted fishing stocks everywhere

