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Seafarers' quest for better auditing regimes

Seafarers' desire to protect the environment is being undermined by a multiplicity of unharmonised audits and inspections which they view as ineffective, says **Mohab Abou-Elkawam** of the Seafarers International Research Centre

SEAFARERS are facing rough seas in trying to comply adequately with international, regional, and local marine environmental regulations in an era of growing environmental concerns. In this quest, they are faced with a rising tide of economic consciousness among shipping companies, a multiplicity of audits and inspections of environmental performance, and reliance on technology for dealing with the problem of marine pollution. The argument I put forward in this article is based on a recent study which involved interviewing seafarers employed on tankers of different shipping companies from various parts of the world regarding their perceptions about marine pollution, and existing and future strategies. I have chosen to focus on the audit culture that currently dominates the shipping sector in general, and the tanker sector in particular.

In the study, I talked to seafarers to establish their attitudes towards current environmental practices and discussed with them ways of reducing pollution and encouraging shipping to be more environmentally friendly. To my surprise, seafarers valued the environmental auditing and monitoring regimes in the shipping sector. However, they regarded audit quality and strategic approaches to monitoring as key to trusting the whole regulatory system dealing with marine environmental issues. Most of those who took part talked explicitly about their will to change the current situation and agreed that transparent and regular audits would improve environmental practices at both the individual and corporate level.

But it became clear that for seafarers to regard audits as credible it was necessary for their goals and purpose to be made clear. This did not seem to be the case. In other words, many seafarers perceived the intended purpose of the audit and/or inspection as either to conduct it for its own sake or as a way to name and shame their ship in a public arena, for example the SIRE database.

In addition, most participants regarded the competence of auditors, port inspectors, and surveyors as inadequate in terms of their knowledge and experience of the complex areas of a ship's environmental audit, especially in relation to inspecting technical discharge-monitoring devices on board tankers. As a result, seafarers questioned the rigour, legitimacy, timing, frequency, scope and purpose of the whole process.

One experienced Nordic master, who had been on the same ships for 12 years, said that he once had three inspections on one day as all the oil companies have their own vetting systems. "'One says 'you can do this'. Another comes on board and says 'this is wrong', so I think the best thing is to have a big inspection once a year," he said.

A US Coast Guard inspector checks the oily water separator system on board a ship in Baltimore. (Photo: US Coast Guard)

One of the most significant audit schemes for the shipping sector is carried out under the International Safety Management (ISM) code. While this code has been implemented for almost a decade (the first phase was introduced on tankers in 1998), seafarers are still disputing the capacity of ISM audits to contribute effectively to pollution control when tankers are currently subjected to so many other audits and inspections. These include vetting by oil companies, port state control and flag state control inspections, class surveys and specific terminal inspections.

Seafarers felt that audit schemes were more effective if auditing entities adopted a systematic rather than an ad hoc approach. To take this further, I believe that such non-harmonised actions also risk being seen by seafarers and ship operators as cosmetic practices which potentially deepen the distrust of the whole audit scheme.

As a result of negative experiences, senior officers on board tankers seem to have dismissed the audit process, treating it as another bureaucratic procedure which entails more paper work for them. Some seafarers reported that in some parts of the world the audit process was done as "window dressing", involving an auditor boarding and recording a number of deficiencies or non-conformities without an actual inspection. They then returned to their employers with a fictitious report that the deficiencies had been rectified. Such occasional fraudulent practices threaten the legitimacy of the whole scheme, and reasons for their occurrence require investigation.

On the positive side, however, some seafarers employed in large, reputable shipping companies saw a role for expert audit groups in identifying what needed to be monitored in order to help seafarers carry out environmental compliance tasks more effectively. They felt that auditing and monitoring, if conducted by specialised auditors, would contribute to the elimination of various deception strategies employed by some of their seafarer colleagues; for example by-passing technical overboard discharge-monitoring equipment in order to dump pollutants at sea using so-called "magic pipes".

To conclude, it is clear that in relation to environmental audit schemes some lessons can be learned from the maritime sector. The different agendas of multiple stake holders such as major oil companies, port states, flag states, and coastal states, may be problematic and can be very confusing for seafarers and ship operators trying to understand the required standards.

Unfortunately, this study suggests that class societies and audit groups do not use the chance of face to face interactions between seafarers and the people they perceive as "experts" to enhance seafarers' trust in the audit scheme and consequently in the legal system. The ad hoc nature of these audits and the variance of audit standards, especially in relation to the environmental aspects, result in the undermining of the whole audit regime, which many seafarers see as illegitimate and ineffective. Moreover, it is clear that some auditors and inspectors contribute to the distrust and to the fallibility of the audit scheme by their unprofessional, non-harmonised practice in developed and developing countries alike.

Despite this, the level of support for an audit regime as a necessary component of environmental practice remains high among all the seafarers interviewed for this research. This, I believe, is because of a wish on the part of seafarers to protect the marine environment from the dumping practices that they frequently witness at sea and in port. This desire provides hope for all stake holders that co-operation can still achieve the effective regulation of environmental pollution via more effective audits across the sector.