

Chapter 7

The Impact of COVID–19 on the Sustainability of the Maritime Labour Force

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ABSTRACT

Considering that approximately 80% of the goods subject to trade are transported by sea, it becomes clear how important the role of maritime transport in the supply chain is. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, the delivery of products for basic needs such as food and health to the delivery places has revealed the importance of maritime transportation for combating the pandemic. Among the most important factors of maritime transport are seafarers who play a role in the operation and management of ships. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the closure of the borders of the countries or the quarantine practices created troubles in the embarkation and disembarkation of seafarers. In the study, it was emphasized that seafarers should be considered as “key workers” considering their essential role in the transport of vital goods such as medical supplies and food. In addition, the strategic factors that should be applied to ensure the professional sustainability of seafarers during pandemic periods were also mentioned.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-5950-8.ch007

INTRODUCTION

The new type of coronavirus has spread rapidly to many countries of the world since December 2019. The World Health Organization declared Covid-19 as a “pandemic” on 11.03.2020, and then worldwide precautions were commenced to be taken in the fight against the pandemic. The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on public health, the speed and severity of its spread have put a great deal of pressure on national health systems. This was followed by socio-economic problems arising in the fields of production, supply chain and employment. It is understood that the COVID-19 pandemic has also deeply affected the maritime sector on a globally. Sustainability of maritime transport, which is at a key point, is important in order to ensure the continuity of commercial activities and the transportation of needed basic products, raw materials and medical products. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has adversely affected the maritime sector as well as all sectors.

Maritime transport is very important for the sustainability of international trade. Considering that approximately 80% of world trade on volume basis and more than 70% on value basis is transported by sea (UNCTAD, 2020), it is possible for ship operators to protect their assets with a sustainable maritime labour force. However, when both the literature and the reports obtained from the maritime sector are examined, it is seen that there is a constant supply shortfall especially in the officers and the lack of seafarers is emphasized. According to the “Man Power Report” published by Baltic International Maritime Council (BIMCO, 2015), it is expected that the global demand for the maritime labour force will increase until 2025. It is also seen that the BIMCO/ICS (2021) report emphasizes the seafarers’ shortage until 2026. When the difficulties inherent in maritime nature and the difficulties of working conditions are added to the difficulties caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, it becomes clear that seafarers need to be supported much more to do their jobs. The longevity of the human factor, which is at the center of sustainability, has become an important issue for the maritime industry. For this reason, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) has made multiple calls, in collaboration with a wide range of relevant shipping associations, to designate seafarers as ‘key workers’ who will exempt them from travel restrictions and allow seafarer changeovers (IMO, 2020a; ILO, 2021). Despite this, many seafarers all over the world have faced the uncertainties brought on by the pandemic.

Public health strategies to prevent the Covid-19 pandemic have included the closure of national borders and the cancellation of international flights, which have affected crew changeovers. The measures taken led to the long stay of seafarers on vessel or at home, who should be considered “key workers” in terms of their main role in maintaining the flow of vital commodities such as food, medical equipments and fuel (Slišković, 2020).

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