

IHO Centenary Celebrations, Monaco, 21 June 2021.
Speech of Dr. Mathias Jonas,
IHO Secretary-General

Your Serene Highness,
Excellencies,
Counsellors and Ministers of the Government,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Colleagues and Friends from wherever you are watching us;

What is past is prologue.

One hundred years ago, representatives of nineteen nations from four continents founded a new organization focused on the promotion of hydrography.

Based on the positive experience gained with the global ocean mapping programme under the patronage of Prince Albert Ist of Monaco, the foundation of the International Hydrographic Bureau – later the International Hydrographic Organization - on this day in 1921 was inspired by the idea of international collaboration.

The foundation of such an intergovernmental body, only three years after the terrible war, was a sort of a miracle. Half of the world were enemies, economies were down and many lost faith in a better future. But some did take action, arguing that if nations were not necessarily friends, they should at least collaborate for the sake of those who are at sea.

Consequently and with the tragedy of the SS Titanic still fresh in people's minds, the organization's first mission was to make navigation safer. Thanks to a coordinated approach, navigational publications such as nautical charts and sailing directions now use standardized cartographic symbols and expressions to display information identically from wherever they originate.

Now, 100 years later, we can be proud that this concept was also successfully achieved in the digital sphere. All global transportation at sea is based on our standards for navigation.

But surveying and mapping the sea is a never-ending task. Surveys on the shape of the seafloor below the surface of the ocean are complicated. There is still a lot of work to be done to expand coverage and maintain quality of hydrographic data.

And shipping is not the only user of this information. In order to use marine resources while also preserving the marine environment, accurate data are necessary: to develop efficient marine renewable energy, to improve productivity for fisheries and aquaculture by capitalising on oceanic parameters, and the list goes on.

The IHO is an organization focused on technical aspects. But this is only one side of the coin. Qualified people are needed in order to carry out hydrography as a technical discipline. The IHO assists Member States in building capacity. Over the years, hundreds of students have learned the principles of hydrographic surveys and sea cartography thanks to IHO standardized courses. They represent our collective hope for the next generation who face great challenges in terms of population growth coupled with a compelling need for a more sustainable use of our marine resources.

These celebrations offer the unique opportunity to highlight the achievements, the enduring relevance and the future of hydrography. They likewise allow us to emphasize the lasting support of the Principality of Monaco for the Organization. It seems very appropriate to quote here the reasoning for the establishment of the Organization in Monaco from the first yearbook published in 1923:

“One of the reasons connected with the selection of Monaco for the seat of this Bureau was the world-wide activities of the Prince which had raised Monaco into such an extraordinary center for the gatherings of international scientific organizations, and it naturally has been anticipated that this Bureau would share appreciably in the resulting benefits.”

Though time has passed, this judgement still prevails today.

Thanks to the excellent work over generations of office bearers and the ongoing contributions of the now 94 Member States in terms of material and expertise, the Organization is flourishing.

With a team of professional staff from different backgrounds, presenting a good blend of experience and skills, the relevant outputs such as standardization in technical and educational matters is well received; the scope and reach of the Capacity Building programme is still on the rise. Collaboration with relevant organizations in the marine domain such as IMO, IOC, ISA and IALA has reached excellent levels.

Moreover, the engagement into the United Nation´s programme for global geospatial management and the increased focus on Marine Spatial Data Infrastructure enable Member States to adapt their hydrographic services for their future role as national hubs for marine geo-information.

The IHO is a highly respected member of the international maritime community that is looking forward to continuing to contribute the expertise, capacity and vigour of its Member States to the evolving ocean narrative.

It has always done this by keeping one question in mind: What can we do together that we cannot do separately, since no single nation can deliver on its own the hydrographic capacity we need for the oceans we want.

It is exactly this spirit generated by the founders – now one hundred years ago - which was, is and will be the lead line for the work of the International Hydrographic Organization.

What is past is prologue.

Thank you for your attention